

Last Bus To Coffeerville

J. Paul Henderson

Yes, I liked it. It took me a while to get on the right wavelength. Is there a genre tragi-comic? Yes, I suppose so. Still, I'm not entirely sure how I'm supposed to react to a man's wife and daughter being killed by a falling giant doughnut. The incident is supposed to have given the Doc a permanently misanthropic view of life which colours his attitude to everything thereafter. But at the same time how can it be anything but comic? Is there a deep message here - that human life is too farcical to be truly tragic, perhaps? Or that it's all too dreadful to be taken seriously? There surely must be an element of that in a book whose driving narrative is the promise to kill someone with Alzheimer's.

The book is engagingly written, but seemed oddly disjointed at first. New characters were introduced in a manner that entailed going off on wild tangents, which left me confused at times. Midway through the Che Guevara and Fidel Castro episode I realised I'd no idea how I'd got there from the Doc and Nancy. Similarly, having first introduced Eric we were treated to a chapter entitled 'Eric', ostensibly an explanation of who, exactly, he was. But instead we find we are being told about his father, or rather, no, his father's herbalist. Or was it his father's herbalist's next door neighbours gardener? Perhaps I just wasn't paying attention.

Also, whilst every episode was entertaining and well written, many played no part in the plot sequence. Am I being too fussy? Probably. Lots of it is quite bonkers, but amusingly so. Eric's parents disappearing into a multi-millennial hole in the ground was, one is tempted to think, the best place for them. One wonders how true the Che Guevara and Fidel Castro sketch might be. Silly though it was, I suspect probably quite realistic. These old revolutionaries were silly, after all. Certainly Castro's ability to talk forever is true. Not sure I can see Bob as an assassin, though. And explosive constipation release in church is perhaps a little derivative. Talking of which - I liked the Jeff sketches with him unwittingly reinventing famous plot lines. Also the bit with Jack and the luvvies-in-the-media was entertaining in a comedy show type of way. We like to see those TV types being mocked.

The main characters were quite nicely drawn, I thought. The Mississippi Delta background adds colour, as it were, to the relationship between Nancy and Bob. The three-cornered relationship between Gene, Bob and Nancy is the pulse of the story, and quite touching really - in as far as tragi-comedy allows it to be. The acid test is whether, when the anticipated dénouement arrives, we actually care. I found I did, and the closing scenes were really quite effective.

Score: 80010

