

Love Is Blind

William Boyd

William Boyd is one of my favourite novelists, but I do rather worry about him. His books have a habit of ending with the death of his hero, usually following a lifetime of either unrequited loves or turbulent ones. That the man can write is beyond question. Questions of authorial technique are beyond my competence to comment upon, but Boyd's invariable readability is again displayed here. The book, though elegant, is not on the same scale as *Any Human Heart* or *New Confessions*.

Alone of his family, the hero, Brodie Moncur, manages to escape the familial orbit of his truly horrible father. The setting is rural Edwardian Scotland where Moncur senior is a famous hellfire preacher – utterly false and in it (surprisingly) for the money such preaching could harvest. Brodie has one great gift – perfect pitch and an artist's skill in piano tuning. By this convenient device he has an intro to characters more elevated, either in wealth or talent. The plot sees Brodie all over Europe, tuning pianos commercially or bespoke for virtuosi. One such is the multiply-addicted but brilliant John Kilbarron (the Irish Liszt).

The fulcrum of the plot is Brodie becoming besotted with Russian singer, Lika Blum. Am I allowed to say that Lika was rather a whore? Is this to what the blindness of the title refers? Brodie begins his affair with Lika (more accurately, she begins it with him) when Lika is living with Kilbarron. What we do not know at first is that Lika is also conducting a strange liaison with Kilbarron's saturnine brother, Malachi. So Lika projects herself, voluntarily, into a triple affair with three men who are living or working with each other in close proximity. Lika's talent is but small, her voice is weak, and she obtains work in productions only through the good offices of the Kilbarron brothers. We wonder whether her predominant employment prior to joining the Kilbarrons related more to music or l'amour.

When John Kilbarron discovers Brodie's affair with Lika, a pistol duel ensues (no, Brodie couldn't believe he was serious either, but he was – and determined to kill him). Spoiler alert! Brodie kills Kilbarron in a distressing violation of duelling etiquette. The rest of the book has Brodie desperately trying to keep one step ahead of Malachi's revenge as the latter pursues him around Europe. Lika, at first on the run with Brodie, leaves him – for Malachi. For many years she remains with Malachi whilst Brodie, his obsession unabated, sends her endless letters. Finally, Malachi dies in an "accidental" fall from a bridge, and we presume some assistance from Lika was involved.

Meanwhile, Brodie, increasingly desperate as Malachi keeps finding him, has moved to a remote island where he is living a primitive existence. After Malachi's death, Lika arrives on the island, but too late as Brodie has died days before of a massive TB haemorrhage. Poor Lika, she's lost all three men now, and two of those deaths could be attributed to her in greater or lesser degree. To what, then, do you think the blindness of the title refers?

The book is full of literary references to other novels which I confess largely passed me by but which you can read in [Alexander Larman's review](#).