

The Shock of the Fall (Nathan Filer)

Hmm....well, uplifting it wasn't. I'm tempted to describe the book as an accurate description of the onset of schizophrenia. But how would I know? How would Nathan Filer know? Being a mental health nurse doesn't give you an appreciation of what it's like on the inside of the tormented mind - does it? A closer view than most, though. I guess that it is testament to the skill of the author that he convinces us that the account is an accurate one. How do we know that Dickens's description of a Victorian boot-black factory is accurate? The same applies: the quality of the writing convinces.

Dramatic direction is provided by the dead Simon, ably assisted by the living Annabel. Can someone explain the significance of the doll burial to me?

Given that this is not actually a documentary about madness, a dramatic element there has to be. But I found the interplay between the two themes, madness and Simon's death, to be problematic. The inevitable impression is that the two are causally linked. But it does not require a traumatic event to trigger schizophrenia, and, indeed, schizophrenia is not triggered by traumatic events. True, the schizophrenic will obsess about something and a previous traumatic event might provide a focus. But if Simon's death did not cause the schizophrenia, then we are left with this tragic episode being strictly incidental. I'm being too pedantic, I know. Dickens (or Shakespeare) never worried about a plot relying crucially on coincidence.

I think what I'm getting around to is that drama about madness does not work, because madness is not dramatic. Mrs Havisham and the first Mrs Rochester were dramatic, right enough, but they weren't real mad people were they? They were dramatic mad people the like of which have not been acceptable in literature since the 19th century.

The book slips along quite painlessly. I enjoyed it, despite the above criticism. But it did seem rather begging to be thought worthy. To be fair, it probably *is* quite worthy. The nut house scenes are, I presume, accurate - given Filer's knowledge of the subject. And suitably chilling they were. The same goes for the description of the social services and the inevitable bureaucracy. What are we supposed to take away from this? Is it a criticism, or an acceptance of the limitations of the real world, best intentions notwithstanding?

I liked the incidents of kindness displayed by Matthew, for instance towards The Pig and towards Thomas re the Bristol City shirt. By his own admission, the schizophrenia makes Matthew horribly self-centred, but nevertheless he still has these flashes of feeling for others. He's still a person.

The self-medication by marijuana had the ring of truth about it too. So did Matthew's 'project' with all those jam jars and tubes and bags of damp earth. Somewhere in his head it made perfect sense. I know that feeling.

So, do we feel that Matthew is a real person? Do we care about him? I'd say so, yes. And that's success for a novel. And it is also a success to have offered a convincing account of schizophrenia, whether it happens to be accurate or not.

Well, that's enough engaging in writing behaviour...

Worth a read. 7 out of 10.