

The Wrong Boy

Willy Russell

Dear Morrissey,

I am sorry to bother you again. I know you have your own troubles. It must be desperately traumatic breaking up with Johnny Marr, especially since he was the only one with any talent. Don't worry, I'm sure there will be a big market for your droning for many years to come.

The book must be seen as essentially a Public Service Broadcast. Albert Goldberg could not flytrap for lack of a foreskin. The book is a dire warning to us all of the possible unexpected consequences of smearing honey on one's member. You have been warned. Do not try this at home, children, especially if there are wasps about. It's also a bold socio-political stand against male genital mutilation. No one had actually told Albert yet that he was the victim of genital mutilation. They never would. It's OK to do it to boys. It's not mutilation at all. It's for health reasons, don't you know (or perhaps God wants it, I forget). Anyway, I digress.

Raymond (a loser's name if ever there was one) fails to elicit our sympathy as much as his appalling history would warrant. This is essential. Comedy is killed by real pain. Real pain is a real turn-off. So a serious issue is made palatable to the casual reader by rendering it comedic. This is not a bad thing. A serious dramatic treatment of being falsely accused of child rape could hardly avoid gender-political controversy (ask Michael Le Vell) - a subject much, much, much too heavy for cool cats. Instead we see in the storyline the easy transition from ordinary boy, to Filthy Beast Boy, to child rapist. The only requirement on Raymond's part is to be a boy. The rest is done for him by a couple of quirks of fate and a society which stands ever ready to see the worst in everyone - well, every male, anyway.

No one listens to you when you are 11 years old, wails Raymond. But we know the awful truth is worse: no one listens to you when you are older either - not unless, that is, you have absolutely nothing to say. Then there's a big enough audience.

It is rather a triumph to include a sympathetic gay character, and moreover to include his 'partner'. In a technical move of some astuteness, the 'partner' (Gonzo *aka* Norman) is not gay and the relationship is platonic. This avoids the messy business of the two of them actually *getting up to anything* (shhh...that's the sort of thing that only Filthy Beast Boys do).

We have some delightful, Dickens-esque villains such as Mr. Horrible the Headmaster, the Greasy-Gobbed Get truck driver, Uncle Bastard Jason, and the lovely cameo of Moronic Mark and his sister Simpering Sonia. (One almost feels that a little light child abuse might be justified). But surely we must weep salt tears for the cruel caricaturing of those tireless public servants, Psycho The Rapist and the So Shall worker. We must? Ah, but cruelty is what comedy is made of, and we do so enjoy pricking these types a little, don't we?

Were I a writer I would undoubtedly be terminally jealous of the Transvestite Nativity Breast Feeding Incident. Darn, I could have written that. However, this is as nothing compared with flytrapping. Double darn, I could *not* have written that. This brilliant invention (and I am doing Russell the courtesy of assuming the practice is not

autobiographical) is perfectly aligned with the needs of the plot. That is, the incident must be within the orbit of normal 'mucky' boys, but capable of invoking the effect it does in Mr. Horrible the Headmaster and the rest of the prurient, small-minded bigots whose simulated disgust expiates their vicarious guilt.

The chestnut eyed girl wafts through the plot in soft focus, her beautiful long hair blowing fetchingly in a non-existent breeze. She'd come a long way from child abuse. An unrealistically long way, in fact. Still, it would be churlish of me to let too much reality intrude on a good story. And I'm a sucker for chestnut eyed girls¹.

However, the undoubted hero character is Gran, at least she is second only to the all too brief, magnesium bright appearance of Dr. Janice. Gran is the social refusenik with her frustrated urge to experiment with recreational drugs, to slouch around talking about Simone de Beauvoir, and to explain Wittgenstein's opinions on the price of sausages to check-out girls (OK, I'm elaborating). The technical function of these characters is to provide contrast with the dreadful menagerie of ghouls that otherwise populate the story. By their reasonableness and good sense they amplify the opposite nature of the ghoulish contingent. Without the good guys (women, in this case) the reader would become grim-accustomed and the story would fall flat and drab. The good guys hold out the possibility of redemption despite the slings and arrows of outrageous Grimsby. The ultimate example of this is Ralph who does actually deliver the redemption, aided and abetted by the chestnut eyed girl. Corny? Of course it is. But, hey, I like happy endings.

In summary: brilliant. I loved it. There's only one thing wrong with Willy Russell: he hasn't written another book. Pull your finger out, man!

¹ This is a literary device and in no way to be taken seriously by anyone of wifely status.