

The final instalment of Rachel Cusk's freedom-seeking trilogy

Collective thought

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Rachel Cusk

KUDOS

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Largo do Carmo, Lisbon

Some way through *Kudos*, the narrator, Faye, encounters a man called Eduardo in her hotel lobby in an unnamed European capital identifiable as Lisbon. He tells her that she's lucky in visiting the city when the jacaranda trees are in cloudy, violet bloom. His compatriots are proud of these trees, but they're also a source of frustration. When people plant them in their gardens, they're disappointed by the slow growth, and are dismayed to learn that it will be thirty years before they will yield their flowers.

They almost come to hate their jacaranda tree, he said, sometimes even digging it up and replacing it with something else, because it reminds them of the possibility that it is patience and endurance and loyalty – rather than ambition and desire – that bring the ultimate rewards. It is almost a tragedy, he said, that the same people who are capable of wanting the jacaranda tree and understanding its beauty are incapable of nurturing one themselves.

This story, at once a throwaway anecdote and a piece of moralism, is so representative of *Kudos* that its moral (and lack of it) could characterize the tales told by almost everyone Faye encounters. We plant roots in one spot, only to find ourselves unable to believe that we'll stay. The question – and this novel is set in the time of Brexit – is whether to leave or remain; underpinning it is the fear that it may make no difference which we choose.

With the publication of this final instalment of Rachel Cusk's trilogy, it is time to ask ourselves not so much what these peculiar books have been about as what they, more essentially, are. I suspect I'm one of many readers who have applauded their strangeness, admiring without quite understanding, while seeing that in the amassed perfection of her sentences Cusk knows what she is doing and that it may turn out to be more important than much else that's being done now. Looking back, I found that the scenes that remained with me – the boat Faye swims into the sea from in *Outline* (TLS, October 3, 2014), propelled by “a desire for freedom, an impulse to move”; the building site, the sodden literary festival, the macabre dinner party in *Transit* (TLS, October 14, 2016) – were those from the narrator's own life, yet the novels are dominated by the stories of others. Now, rereading the first two novels and then *Kudos*, I've found that the stories of others have, in this trilogy, attained equal weight, becoming as intense in their depiction as Faye's own experiences. In *Kudos* we're pushed further into a zone where character is irrelevant but the need to learn from the proliferating stories feels urgently necessary.

Here, stories splinter into other stories and it's often hard to remember who we're hearing

about. The characters are more similar to one another than in the previous novels: we encounter one middle-aged divorced literary figure after another, all describing versions of the same struggle to live decently in the face of casual injustice and brutality. And far less happens. Faye flies to a cultural conference where she has a series of lunches at which little food is consumed and a series of interviews that are cut off before she has a chance to answer a single question.

This is a world characterized by fissure. For the many divorced characters, the challenge is to find new structures by which to live. This was explicit in *Outline*, where Faye was “trying to find a different way of living in the world”. Mourning the way of life she'd taken for granted, she shared the view of her neighbour on the aeroplane who looked back on his first marriage as a kind of home, not because he missed his ex-wife but because he missed believing in the reality of the events in his life as you might be absorbed by a book.

In *Transit* this lack of belief became a source of bitter amusement for Faye, made more alarming by the felt reality of her sons and their needs. Now in *Kudos* the unreality can be taken more easily for granted, rendered simpler by the backdrop of flamboyant hotel architecture that precludes even the expectation of the real.

Nonetheless, Faye is becoming more certain that, even in a state of unreality, ethical questions remain crucial. In *Transit* the characters were preoccupied by the question of freedom. At the end of the novel Faye described freedom as “a home you leave once and can never go back to”. Earlier, she'd observed that all people seem to do with their freedom is to find another version of imprisonment. The alternative to freedom was presented as an acceptance both

of duty and fate. Faye was contacted by an astrologer, pleading for the “kindness and responsibility and respect” we would bring to our dealings with one another if we could believe ourselves to be at the mercy of the planets. There was a sense in *Transit* that the drives that usher us out of marriages might be more destructive than redemptive, though this didn't undermine the necessity for Faye's own act of abrupt dislocation – itself a kind of cosmically fated given within the novel's structure.

In *Kudos* freedom remains the subject of scrutiny. Why not plant those jacaranda trees, Eduardo seems to ask, and commit to the long haul, waiting for them to bloom? A fellow delegate, Sophia, wonders if she's made too much of the distinctions between men, when at the time of her divorce “the whole world had appeared to depend on whether I was with one, rather than another”. With Brexit lurking quietly in the background, this idea gains a political force. “You British are thinking of asking for a divorce”, says Gerta, adding that “it will be a great mistake”, as “perhaps it always is.”

The danger is that in choosing to leave we will be less free than when we began, and this seems to be because we overestimate the possibility of justice. Near the end, Faye has a long, powerfully revealing encounter with a woman called Felícia, who has just lost the final battle of her marriage, for the custody of her car. Now, cycling exhaustedly across the city, impoverished, mocked even by her mother (“look at what all your equality has done for you”), Felícia accepts that she has not “found freedom by leaving him: in fact what I had done was forfeit all my rights”. The law, it seems, is more likely to instil suffering than justice.

How can we live in the absence of justice, or indeed of kudos? Felícia, with her bicycle and her stoicism, becomes a symbol of the dogged-

ness and dignity that can counter the assaults of the world. She hasn't gained the freedom that she sought in separation, but it is also clear that she could not have remained with a man prepared to treat her as her ex-husband now does. The need for divorce has not been invalidated alongside freedom: it is a need to live in good faith, and this is what all these characters are struggling in their different ways to do.

This conflict is also conducted at the level of the prose. It is significant that the sentences, by being so even throughout, flatten the characters, making them all appear to speak in the same voice. The feeling of unreality that many of them describe is thus brought back to life in a medium itself unreal, but also perhaps more real (because not attempting verisimilitude) than the novel usually is. The consistency of Cusk's prose also introduces the possibility of our collective interchangeability, and makes this the starting point for an investigation of our relations with and responsibilities to each other. One way to act with integrity may be to relinquish the struggle for individuality, and for the free will that this implies.

Perhaps the most moving conversation in the book – and it's a fitting end to the trilogy – is when Faye's youngest son calls, as he has done throughout, to describe what he bravely announces as “a bit of a disaster”. There has been a fire in the pool house of a friend's block of flats. Faye's son has been blamed for starting it, and for smashing the window to the building, but in fact the cause was a faulty radiator: by breaking the glass he put it out and saved everybody in the flats.

Together they get through this injustice, separated by distance and divorce but bearing with each other in the new, imperfect life Faye has patiently created for them. Up until now the book has been glacially calm; but at the end, for the first time since those freedom-seeking swims off the boat in *Outline*, Faye makes her way to the sea.

I went down to the water, pressing quickly forward through the barging waves. The beach shelved so steeply that I was quickly sucked out into the moving mass, whose density and power seemed to keep me effortlessly on the surface so that I rose and fell along with its arms and undulations.

For all her dismissiveness of freedom, Faye seeks it still. But she's not left alone, even now. A man comes to stand facing her, and urinates deliberately in her direction. Waiting patiently for him to stop, Faye becomes Felícia, Sophia, Paola – all the women she's encountered along the way, unsure whether they are seeking pleasure, freedom, or suffering. If there's hope here, and there is, then it's the hope that we can learn through and with each other, that in giving up on the individual psychology we expect to find in the novel, we can find something stranger but in its way more generous in the collective. It might be years before it becomes clear what exactly these strange books are. But they seem likely to live on, inflecting our thoughts, offering an experience that feels closer to thinking than to reading.

The protagonist of Blake Morrison's new novel is the deputy literary editor of a semi-ailing broadsheet some time in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. This is familiar territory for the author, who was literary editor of the *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday* in the late 1980s and early 90s, having worked on the *TLS* before that. Well he knows the minor bitchinesses of the reviewer and the small vanities of the author. Well he remembers the agreeable smell of the books cupboard and its usefulness as a place to nap. And well he knows the dramatic bust-ups that arise when an ad for deckchairs threatens to force the crime round-up to be held over until next week.

Given when the novel is set, Matt Holmes gets away with being quite an old-fashioned sort of literary hack. He seems to have escaped the necessity of writing web headlines, producing listicles and doing podcasts, though a sign of changing times comes when it is suggested he write a piece seeking to "out" the pseudonymous author of the Elena Ferrante novels. He declines, high-mindedly. After all, his pages still run poetry reviews at length. He is working on a never-to-be-completed novel in his spare time. And he'll still have a bottle-and-a-bit lunch with a reviewer in a likeably shabby Soho restaurant.

It is at one such lunch that his guest – a middle-ranking poet called Rob Pope, an old friend and sometime mentor to Matt – asks him if he'll serve as his literary executor. Rob's a decade or so older than Matt, but – discounting Rob's self-aggrandizing gloom – Matt has no expectation of having to discharge these duties any time soon. Then, of course, Rob pops his clogs and we're off.

This sort of book sits in a small but distin-

Pale imitation

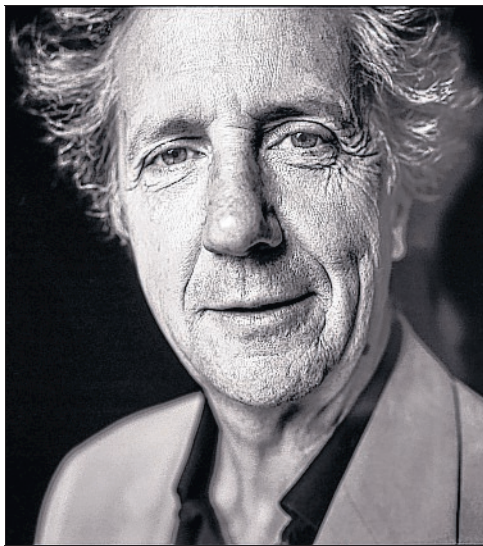
A novel of literary posterity

SAM LEITH

Blake Morrison

THE EXECUTOR

291pp. Chatto and Windus. £16.99.
978 1 78474 214 0



guished mini-genre dealing with literary posterity – you might think of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* or, erm, Stephen King's *Lisey's Story*. And the familiar touchstones are duly hit: Max Brod rescuing Kafka,

John Murray's bonfire of the Byrons, the post-humous dent to Philip Larkin's reputation when his letters were published. Morrison describes well the sort of minor ethical and psychological issues that the executor faces – the lingering doubts over how important the writer actually is; the buried rivalries and resentments you often find in male friendships and literary ones in particular; the questions of how your duty to the living competes with that to the dead. Early on, with a little bit of a clunk, Matt quotes Rob: "he reached a conclusion, with a phrase that still resonates: 'The life's irrelevant. Being alive on the page is all that counts'".

Going about his duties, Matt has to contend with a slightly prickly widow, the resentments of his own wife (who, with some justice, never much liked Rob), and the imagined voice of Rob bantering acidly with him as he goes about his work. There's a minor academic with an interest in Rob's work emailing in the hope of seeing new material; there's Rob's agent, hoping for a posthumous collection; Rob's publisher, who has a similar agenda. And, of course, there's the stuff: boxes of folders, documents, drafts, letters sent and unsent, tax receipts – and a desk drawer that seems to be jammed shut. Look in the desk drawer, Matt, shouts the reader. But of course he doesn't listen.

I don't think it counts as too much of a spoiler to say that he eventually gets round to that drawer. And in it he unearths a new collection

that seems to cast Rob's love life in a different light. Was Rob a secret philanderer? Or did he just write poems in the voice of one? And how – the key – do these questions make Matt feel? Do they worsen his sense that he has led too timid a life by comparison with his more charismatic friend?

Matt's middlingness is front and centre here: "I was middle-aged – forty-five – and middling in height (five foot ten), weight (eleven and a half stone) and appearance (brown-black hair, hazel-green eyes, ochre-white skin). I thought about my middlingness a lot". Whether Morrison is fastidiously representing the dullness of everyday reality, or having a very dry laugh at his protagonist's expense, *The Exectuor* is full of moments of what is now known (after Steve Coogan and Armando Iannucci's most famous creation) as "Accidental Partridge". Matt even met his wife on a speed-awareness course.

So we are solemnly told: "There was a break halfway through the afternoon – tea and biscuits". Or we learn in some detail about Matt's trip to Homebase after he spent ages disentangling the Christmas lights only to find they didn't work. Towards the end, as tension rises, there is a crisis about socks:

The morning began badly. My socks have coloured stripes with the days of the week on them, but I couldn't find a matching pair, and superstition makes me reluctant to wear odd ones . . . I settled on a combination of "Monday" and "Thursday", and went downstairs to make coffee.

But the pods for the machine had run out and the grains in the instant jar were a solid purple mass. Signs and portents! If this is Blake Morrison's *Pale Fire*, it is a very pale fire indeed. But that is, perhaps, the point, and it's rather a winning book for it.

As a chronicler of fortune and folly in close-knit Irish towns, Donal Ryan has received consistent praise. His three previous novels – all slight but assured – nod to one another like people on the street; old names and places crop up in passing, giving a welcome sense of familiarity. A departure from those well-loved communities, then, ought in part to be read as an act of authorial urgency – an impulse to look outwards.

In the moving short story "Long Puck" (*A Slanting of the Sun*, 2015), Ryan described the short-lived friendship between an Irish priest based in Syria and a young local Muslim. The two connect – as several of Ryan's other characters do – over hurling; their games win the attention of locals and slowly bring people together, with no heed paid to race or religion. This idyll, though, is interrupted by rumblings of war: "Halim's hurley arrived in town on the same train that brought two dozen dark-eyed, laughless men with guns of unreflecting metal". Sharia law is implemented, apostates are gunned down, and Halim turns against his friend. "How swiftly", the priest laments from the pews of his sacked church, "men are robbed of the light."

In *From a Low and Quiet Sea*, Ryan's devastating, beautiful new novel, the author returns to Syria, telling the story of Farouk, a doctor whose life and family are threatened by the new wave of Islamist zealotry. With no choice but to flee, Farouk enters into a deal with a trafficker, a "dealer in flesh", who offers them passage to Europe. Promises of comfort and safety are broken as soon as their boat passes from view of the shore: they are bundled onto

All His pious furnishings

GEORGE BERRIDGE

Donal Ryan

FROM A LOW AND QUIET SEA
192pp. Doubleday. £12.99.
978 0 85752 534 5

Dan Sheehan

RESTLESS SOULS
304pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £14.99.
978 1 4746 0585 4

a larger, crowded ship and set adrift in a storm (an event prophesied in the dreams of Melody Shee, the protagonist of Ryan's *All We Shall Know*, 2016). Washed ashore, Farouk finds himself in a refugee camp, insistent that his wife and daughter will soon be returned to him. When he learns of their fate, he returns to sea, which offers nothing but further insult: "He waited for the water to carry him down, and fill him, and slough his flesh and salt his guilty bones. But the water wouldn't take him".

The narrative then shifts back to Ireland, to Lampy, a twenty-something, prospectless care-home worker who lives with his quiet, lenient mother and affectionate but difficult grandfather. Lampy's heart has been plucked out by a girl, and his mind is caught between a duty to his family and the desire to make something of himself; he struggles to recognize

himself, "this strange, quiet man, this regretful person he didn't really know".

The final main character we meet is John, an old man whose life of sin is ending with a confession: "I feel the breath of angels on my neck. Their breath is foul. They're from the other legion, I'd say". As John reflects on his violations of the Lord's commandments, Ryan displays his talent for balance, lending a sympathetic ear to this most egregious of offenders, whose brother died young, leading their father to exile God from their home: "He was cast out, evicted, and all His pious furnishings destroyed".

The lives of Farouk, Lampy and John share little commonality, and their stories only reach a point of meaningful confluence in the novel's short but brilliant conclusion – and therein lies the sign of Ryan's grand ambition: to illuminate those important human bonds we are often blind to. The reader recalls Farouk's bedtime conversation with his daughter from the book's opening passage: "If a tree is starving, its neighbours will send it food. No one really knows how this can be, but it is . . . They know the rule, the only one that's real and must be kept . . . Be kind".

Rather less stoic is the traumatized figure at the centre of Dan Sheehan's striking first novel *Restless Souls*. A sombre but idealistic adolescent, Tom leaves Dublin to become a war reporter ("it's what I'm meant to be doing"). His friends, Karl and Baz, hapless but entertaining layabouts, argue against the decision:

"Why can't you be happy just being a useless sack of shite like the rest of us?" Undeterred, Tom sets out to Bosnia and returns, years later, a broken man. Those journalistic ambitions were quickly quashed, and he was left to discover the horrors of Sarajevo under siege, an experience that costs his mind and an eye. Later, reflecting on this experience, he characterizes himself as "a vulture. A fucking war tourist, travelling across a continent to gawk at half a million skeletons in a cage".

Leaving a psychiatric facility after exhausting the available treatments, Tom is signed up to a New Age-sounding experimental clinic in California: Restless Souls, "where the wounded come to heal". Karl and Baz find themselves unable to deal with the magnitude of Tom's PTSD, which leaves him frenzied and "yelping in the night". The two friends are forced to come to terms with their own failed ambitions and the suicide of Karl's surrogate brother Gabriel, the group's missing fourth. When Tom is finally placed on an ambitious but dangerous new procedure, designed to blur the edges of traumatic thoughts, he chooses to retain his most painful recollection: the death in Sarajevo of a young nurse with whom he'd been in love. "The things that haven't dimmed mean more", he later tells her at her graveside. "You'll always mean more."

Sheehan deals deftly with these sensitive subjects, tempering his prose with a darkly comic streak that never feels misjudged. As a study in how young men process and express their grief, *Restless Souls* is a highly promising debut.