

You've made us all proud."

"Are you crying? What are you crying about?"

I'm crying because I'm so, so happy.

The beam of a headlight reflects off my ring. I look at his eyes; his kind, serious eyes. The light shines, and they remain true no matter what.

I see. "No matter what."

"The light..."

"Don't leave me," he says. I search for meaning in his eyes, and find Anna. "Our" gorgeous Anna, has his kind, serious eyes.

He's on the phone. I could listen to him forever, but his words swirl and spill on the grass beside me.

"Hello?"

What is he saying?

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

Are you there? Is anyone there?

The light shines in a straight line.

"Stay with us," he says, "Don't go."

"You. Quit zapping channels. Want me to confiscate the remote again? Leave it on Fox. Everyone likes Fox."

What is he talking about? Who is he talking to? Go Where?

"There, there. It's all right Anna. I'm here. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Go to sleep."

"Let's keep the light on."

"No matter what."

"You are so beautiful."

"You've made us all proud."

I see. I see.

I am so, so happy.

Altitude

Michael Loughrey

The areas of sponge in the concrete floor were artfully camouflaged, and with blinding light flooding the corridor were impossible to avoid. Each time Wren stumbled into one, his knees buckled and regaining his balance was no easy task. It proved to be an arduous passage to passport control where a black official wearing a crisp white uniform and a shabby Father Christmas hat was busy untangling a chain of paper clips. Wren struggled to focus on the man's I.D. badge which he thought read Jesus Johnson.

"Follow me," Jesus said. Content that freedom was within his grasp, the side of Wren's face which wasn't numb grinned as he was ushered into the departure lounge.

"Wait here," Jesus said. "Lemme take your suitcase."

Wren clutched the small red suitcase against his chest. "No, no." He protested. "See, there's a friend of mine inside. A little bird. He's sick. The suitcase is hand baggage. We'll have a cocktail once we've boarded. Watch the in-flight movie."

After Jesus had guided him to a seat, Wren took stock of his fellow passengers.

Gathered around a T.V. set next to a Christmas tree which almost touched the ceiling, some were statue-still, others extremely animated. They all wore lightweight clothing like his, so he surmised they would all be on his flight to Malta, and even booked on the connecting ferryboat to Gozo like him. He felt some alarm at not being able to see aircraft tailplanes through the window, but supposed that was due to the departure lounge being on the top floor of the building.

"Refreshment." Jesus at his side. "On the house."

Wren peeked inside the two paper cups. "No olives?" he said. "I always take my Martini with an olive."

"We're out of olives," Jesus said.

"Are those pills?"

"Olives."

Tentatively, Wren sipped the Martini. A speech bubble floated up from his mouth

towards Jesus. "I get it. The little blue olives are for air sickness. The red and white one is anti-gravity. And that beige one is Viagra. I've heard about long-haul airline stewardesses. This Martini has been watered down. Am I dribbling? Is my flight delayed?"

Jesus chuckled. "Who knows? Why don't you wash those olives down with your cocktail 'till they call you?"

Crushing the empty paper cups in one hand, Jesus strode towards the group gathered around the T.V.

"Hey," He yelled. "You. Quit zapping channels. Want me to confiscate the remote again? Leave it on Fox. Everyone likes Fox."

A thin man who was erratically switching from channel to channel temporarily obeyed until Jesus left the room. Wren's fragmented attention was drawn to flickering images on the T.V., a car being welded by robots, a pygmy eating larvae from a bucket, an orange polar bear skateboarding.

Clutching the red suitcase to his chest, Wren crossed the room, jostled by a bevy of fellow passengers who shuffled a clumsy jig to the scrambled cacophony blaring from the T.V. until an angry Jesus returned.

"Fun's over," He barked. "Gimme the remote."

Drizzling white spittle, Channel Zapper backed away. "No way José." He giggled hysterically. "Josénoway, waynoJosé, noJoséway."

When Jesus lunged at him, Channel Zapper vaulted over tables and chairs to a chorus of timid applause and nervous laughter from the onlookers.

"Think that's funny?" croaked a voice behind Wren. "Hey. Redsuitcase man. I asked if you think that's funny."

She was the wrong side of forty, but neither nature nor time had been kind to her.

Short and plump, she had small green

New Releases

Cake

Sandra Newman
Chatto & Windus

In *Cake*, sentences can end in "but" and "because". Or start again with "to" and "this". All lower case and tremulous, it turns the novel into a truncated tale, the way text messages half tell your intentions. It's a testing ploy; half telling. It made me unsure of my bearings at the beginning, as though I'd slipped into blackout at a party, and come to as the last guest left. I suspect it's intended.

Cake is an off key morality tale of the coaddicted attempting to coexist. Tanya is addicted to sex, but never with the lights on. Eleanor is blessed with a full range of toxic habits, including killing. Theirs is the major entanglement, although played out in a strangely studied fashion, like poker players at the table. But then Sandra Newman was once a professional gambler. It must make plotting mind manoeuvres easier and taking literary risks less formidable.

Her award-nominated debut novel, *The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done*, was a mélange of lists, perverse punctuation and mix and match chapters. *Cake* is a lighter confection, although one still rich in depth and danger. Take it slice at a time and eat slowly.

Kim Rooney

Weekend

William McIlvanney
Sceptre

Weekend is a raw, powerful yet charming character-driven novel focusing on a group of students attending a literature study weekend on the island of Cannamore and the ranging encounters which mark their time there.

With the creative, gifted but alcoholically inclined Harry Beck (writer, *agent provocateur*) and the philandering academic David Cudlipp on site, the attentions of his students are drawn to this strangely eccentric but distinctly intriguing pairing. The two who are particularly interested in these acutely drawn but formidable personalities are Kate Foster, on a quest to lose her virginity and Vikkie Kane, a divorcee and single mother intent on breaking free from the shackles of her past.

Overall this is a masterful return from a writer who embodies the vigour and vita that has come to personify contemporary Scottish fiction.

Martyn Colebrook

