**Nethergate Writers**

**Fortnightly Meeting: Wednesday 17 August 2022**

at St Andrews Brewing Co, and on Zoom

*Chaired by Roddie, Minutes taken by Mike*

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**1. Present**: Daniel, Dimitar, Faraz, Mike, Peter, Rhoda, Roddie, and Zusana via Zoom

**Apologies**: David C, David F, George, Sandra, Richard

**Previous Minutes** of 3 August 2022 were approved and commended.

**2. Work Presented**

1. Daniel Gilbert: *A Marsh Arab’s Story* (short story)

Daniel recounted the background to the writing of his story, briefly describing the history of the volume of 34 short stories in which it appeared. The collection, titled “Life Plus 2 Metres”, is the second volume of a project aimed at getting readers to envisage how we might (or might not) adapt to life in a climate-changed world where sea levels are 2 meters higher, weather patterns have shifted, storms have grown stronger, food systems are strained, and so on. It can be purchased on Amazon, and also downloaded as a PDF here:

<http://kysq.org/lp2m/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Lp2m2.pdf>

Roddie liked the descriptions of the Marsh Arabs’ culture. Mike found the story very authentic, as if it had indeed been written by the titular character, and several members commented that the story was well-nigh perfectly written. Faraz liked the details given and the contrast between the dry desert and the relative wetness of Fife, with encroaching seas brought about by climate change. Peter thought the mention of the River Eden (in Fife) and its use as a symbol of edenic life very apt. Zusana noted there were layers of meaning yet the story was very lyrical. She felt the multiple causes (war, discrimination, climate change) of tragic situations including the narrator’s own, were all brought out very well. Daniel’s wider family has members of various religious persuasions, including many who are Muslim, and so he was familiar with Islam. However, he did a lot of research into the Marsh Arabs in particular.

2. Mike: *Way of the World* (short story)

Roddie wondered if the characters had no names to give a sense of distance. He found the depiction of their relationship very believable, and thought the husband’s dream (and the wife’s subsequent attempt at a story) was reminiscent of J.G. Ballard’s “High Rise”. Themes (dissatisfactions, dysfunctional relationships, the functions of fiction) recurred in “a series of concatenations”. Rhoda noted resemblances (?) to Congreve’s 18th century play “The Way of the World”. She appreciated the ironies (buying a second car, an electric model, to “do her bit for the planet”, while the husband happily drives a Range Rover) and the sadness of the couple’s life. Peter thought the story left it ambiguous whether the dystopian vision of the story within a story was imagination or reality. Daniel wondered how desperate the wife’s life really was, given she didn’t have to work and could afford expensive purchases. He wondered if the story could have put more emphasis on the civil servant sub-theme (suggested going “full Gogol”, as in “Dead Souls”). Rhoda thought that to maintain the “hyper-realism” in the rest of the story, the woman should go for a pee upon waking up. Peter wondered what the story would be like if the characters’ genders were flipped. Dimitar thought it was going to be a perpetual loop (until Mike mentioned there was a sequel). Zusana liked the story for its multi-layeredness. It reminded her of Patricia Highsmith’s writing, as exemplified in “Little Tales of Misogyny”.

3. Dimitar: *NY Chronicles* (chapter extract)

Dimitar explained his conception of the overall novel to which the present chapter belonged. His starting point was to write a story based on, or influenced by, a book: in this case, The Da Vinci Code. Accordingly, themes included relations among religions and the solving of puzzling crimes. The story will be a mix of crime, thriller and action genres. The New York city setting was discussed, with suggestions of how this could be made more vivid. Peter suggested more description of external, street settings: e.g. the atmosphere of street noise in NYC. Dimitar agreed, given that Sharon, one of the characters, has only recently come to NYC and might not yet be used to the city’s bombardment of the senses. Rhoda suggested removing many of the direct speech tags, to make the story smoother and more sophisticated. Zusana said the dialogue in itself was very successful, and that there was a good sense of the characters involved: she was very engaged with them from the start. Rhoda and Roddie agreed that the characters are very good and believable.

4. Zusana: *The Homophonist* (short story)

Peter found this story delightfully imaginative and “spellbinding” – a reference to how the story involved the casting of magic spells (recounted in magical realist style). He found it very funny and read it smiling throughout. Roddie enjoyed the clever puns peppered throughout the text (Zusana said there are about 20 of these – the story has a “cryptic” element). Roddie found the narrator’s voice, in its “proper English” style, very convincing. But he queried whether some of the expository paragraphs (e.g. the last paragraph on p.5) were needed, since much of the content of these was exemplified by the actions of the characters. But Zusana argued that the rather analytical narrator would want to spell out his opinions and analysis of British society. She also noted that there’s sometimes a conflict between a story and its characters, and that it can be hard to decide which should win. Mike thought the story, apart from the keen humour, showed, by its description of the characters and their behavior, a lot of what amounted to serious social commentary on how perceived minorities (in this case, “foreigners”) are treated. Rhoda thought this was a reason for not needing these aspects to be spelled out.

Roddie, chairperson, invited new member Faraz to say a bit about what he is writing. Roddie explained to Faraz that members circulate stories or contributions to the mailing list in advance of a meeting, on a “first submitted, first discussed” basis. There was time for everyone present (including Zusana on Zoom) to take a turn to summarise their writing history and current projects.

**3. Matters Arising / Other Business**

Mike mentioned that he’d like someone other member, sometime, to use their laptop for the connection to the conference microphone, and for such a person to keep the new mic/speaker at their home, on those occasions when Mike himself does not attend a meeting.

*Date of Next Meeting*

The next meeting will take place on Wednesday 31 August 2022 at St Andrews Brewing Co. at 7 pm. Chairperson and minutes-taker to be confirmed.