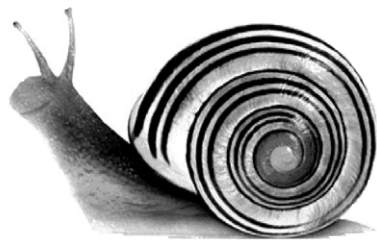


Follow the Snail Trail



A Welcome Return?

You're an animal, Viskovitz!

book review

JAMIE WILLARD

Hmm, all I can say with any certainty about this book is that I'm confused, correction, baffled. The author, Boffa, bases his novel on, shall I say, an amusing yet bizarre premise.

Viskovitz is a persona (perhaps not the most apt word) who metamorphoses into different animals, be he a dormouse who has erotic dreams, a sex-obsessed snail, a preying mantis who suffers from premature ejaculation or an ex-police dog who's renounced his career to convert to Buddhism and a heroin habit. Still following? Each chapter Viskovitz is manifested as a different creature the only constant being his undying love for Ljuba the sexiest, sassiest female he's ever set eyes upon. This constant transformation allows Boffa to construct each chapter as a self-contained satirical fable – a modern day Aesop who creates a soap opera with all the foibles and vanities of mankind enacted by a cast of animals.

The subject matter of some of the chapters might seem trite and tired and yet with clever twists and the use of animals they somehow seem fresh and novel. The 'Romeo and Juliet' forbidden love plot is transposed to the Serengeti. Romeo (or more accurately Visko) this time is incarnated as an old, haggard lion who has long grown tired of the constant monotony of life on the plains of Africa, posing in front of the documentary-makers' lense. He longs for there to be something more to his life. His stupor is finally broken when he commences a passionate affair with a young nubile gazelle (Ljuba). Once it's consummated though we watch the painful despair as the pair of lovers realise their relationship is destined to fail. In an un-

anticipated dénouement worthy of Albert Square though Viskovitz literally finds her good enough to eat...

The frustrations of a sponge's sex-life, a seven and half inch worm with a tiny penis, a May beetle with an identity crisis who ends up as a Mafia-style hood shovelling shit, and a narcissistic hermaphrodite who ends up having sex with himself - all their stories are explored here. Boffa's imagination undeniably appears boundless – but well, is it any good?

Something which becomes abundantly clear as you read the book (apart from the fact that the author must have been under the influence of something for long periods of time) is that Boffa knows his biology. In fact at times the narration resembles an over-enthusiastic David Attenborough figure – who earnestly documents the mechanics of snails having sex with themselves and the ins and outs of the female dung beetle's exo-skeleton. Presumably the Russian author's degree in biology he did in Rome came in handy. However, this should not discourage the reader (I found adopting the 'lets skim read this passage its not particularly important to the story' tactic particularly useful).

This book has at turns baffled me, amused me and yet, ultimately, endeared itself to me largely through the fact that the conceit just about works. I think this is a good book - I'm certain it's a novel novel, but on reflection, well I'm not sure. Maybe I've fallen for some elaborate hoax trying to read more into it than the author intended - that's certainly plausible.

Downright odd and weird or enchantingly imaginative? on reflection I'm inclined to go with the latter.

the return of britpop

comment

JENNIFER LEE When I started this piece, it was with the premise that the mid-90s Britpop phenomenon was undergoing a revival. But the more I've thought about it, the more revival seems like the wrong word. A slight hint of nostalgia would be more appropriate, but nonetheless the last year

has seen the release of docu-film *Live Forever* (screened on BBC2 this August) and an accompanying soundtrack with all the Britpop classics from Blur, Oasis, Sleeper, Pulp, et al. More recently, there has been a book, "The Last Party: Britpop, Blair and the Demise of English Rock," by John Harris (published by Fourth Estate, May 2003). Both of these make it clear that as much as Britpop was about great, ballsy, sing-a-long music, it was all about politics.

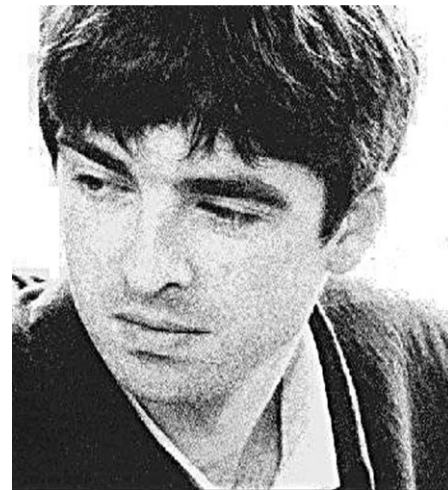
Britpop emerged in post-Thatcher society as an antidote to Conservative rule and dole culture, brimming with optimism and naturally aligned to the (at that time) fresh, vibrant Tony Blair and New Labour. Understandable, then, that Britpop died on its arse shortly after Labour's victory in the 1997 General Election, when people like Noel Gallagher started

going for champagne at No. 10, and, beneath the glossy, spin-doctored surface, Blair and his pals turned out to be no better than the Tories.

Another reason for the birth of Britpop was the death of grunge. The musical ball had been in America's court for much of the early nineties, but

Kurt Cobain's death in 1994 left a void in the music scene in the UK, which Oasis came along and filled, and British music once again came to the forefront. Of course, after a couple of years the pendulum swung back to American music, and seems to have stayed there ever since. So the time is right for a revival of British music, but there doesn't seem to be "scene" that the music industry can package and the NME can sell to us. Yes, there are a lot of great bands breaking through – The Libertines, The Darkness, The Coral, to name just a few – but they are such a disparate

bunch that no-one could put them together and give them just one label. So perhaps that is why there is such nostalgia for Britpop right now. Twenty-somethings recall a time, not so long ago, when Britannia ruled the (air) waves, and with American r 'n' b acts now dominating Radio 1, and no sign of any real change, this is the best we can do..



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