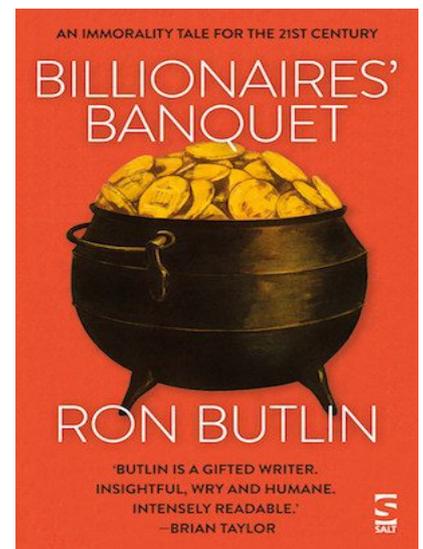


# 'Billionaire's Banquet' by Ron Butlin

Review by Alistair Braidwood



A new Ron Butlin novel is always eagerly awaited, so his latest, *Billionaires' Banquet*, is most welcome. Described on the cover as "An immortality tale for the 21st century", it sees Edinburgh's former Makar at his most playful and devilish, looking once more at human nature and finding it fatally flawed, but not without hope. You just have to look hard to find it.

For those whose reading habits include philosophy as well as literature this novel is a joy from start to finish as Butlin name checks, among others, Seneca, Plato, Kant, Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell. His central character is also called Hume, a philosophy student who uses what he learns to make points and win arguments. Those named provide aphorisms to help him through his early life, but this is not a modern take on *Sophie's World*; quite the opposite as no lessons are learned despite Hume's education, or if they are they're soon forgotten.

Butlin is constantly making comparisons between the ideal and reality and finds that philosophical theories and concepts unfailingly fall down when real people are introduced. Characters in the book may have high opinions of themselves and profess strong moral values, but when feelings such as desire, jealousy, greed and

vanity appear they are found wanting. Aren't we all?

The section where Hume sees his first beggar on Edinburgh's streets is telling. There always has to be a first and the unasked question is when did society decide that such a situation was OK? There is a collective social culpability, but what does that mean for the individual? Hume's 'natural benevolence' leads him to offer "support and comfort", while all the while he is weighing up the best course of action, the one which will have the most positive outcome.

It is reminiscent of a similar scene in Robin Jenkins' *The Changeling*, where Charles Forbes, who would also describe himself as 'benevolent',

comes across a man begging in Glasgow, and how best to deal with him becomes a "complicated business" for Charles, whereas his fellow teacher, Todd, "just drops two pence" into the man's cup. The question posed is what the man prefers, money or sympathy.

Both scenes ask us to consider the nature of morality. Is the end result more or less important than the original intention, in this case money over sympathy, or is there something important about empathy and at least an attempt at understanding? Somewhere along the line Hume chooses the former over the latter, and that comes to define his future.

As well as Hume, *Billionaires' Banquet* introduces us to St Francis, the Cat, and DD (which had originally stood for Darling Diana but comes to mean Diana the Damned). We initially meet them all at a building called Barclay Towers, which itself comes to represent the change in fortunes of its inhabitants. Butlin rarely names people and places lightly — there is more often than not a meaning there. That's one of the admirable things about Ron Butlin's writing: you get as much out of it as you are willing to put in, as it works on different levels.

Events take place in Edinburgh in 1985 and 2005. It would have been nice to know more about what happened to these characters in the intervening years, but Butlin is asking the reader to fill in the gaps for themselves and leaves enough clues as to what has occurred. Without giving any spoilers, the change in everyone's circumstances and world-view is marked and eudaimonia is in short supply.

*Billionaires' Banquet* does not quite carry the emotional heft of Butlin's best

writing, such as *The Sound Of My Voice* or *Ghost Moon*, but it still packs a punch. I've tried to pinpoint why his fiction in particular strikes such a chord with me and have come to the conclusion that he doesn't just write books I want to read, but books that I wish I had written. He puts into words thoughts and beliefs with a clarity which is rare, and then challenges you to think for yourself, philosophically speaking.

## References & Further Information

[\*Billionaires' Banquet\*](#) by Ron Butlin is published by Salt Publishing, 2017.

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