

'His Bloody Project' by Graeme Macrae Burnet

Review by Caroline McCracken-Flesher

Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* has already achieved well-deserved fame. In 2016, it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. So it needs no recommendation. It does, however, merit analysis, for this is a novel that manages to interrogate the complex banalities of everyday life through the horrors of a crime and vice versa.

This is a volume in which every piece matters. No skipping over the preface here, for in it the modern editor Burnet takes all the surprise out of the book. Sort of. Burnet quotes the introductory paragraph from a murderer's memoir. Roderick Macrae stresses: My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself. Burnet follows up: So begins the memoir of Roderick Macrae, a seventeen-year-old crofter, indicted on the charge of three brutal murders.

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important, because they helpfully make clear that this is in fact a fiction however factual it may appear.

One of the great virtues of this novel is how it manages to echo the forms and discourses of nineteenth-century criminal cases. Moreover, despite its fragmented structure, as we move from statement to memoir to report, Burnet maintains an accurate yet lively rendition of Victorian language and cadences. Fragmented the form may be, but you'll read this book at one sitting.

We read compelled by the question Roddy poses to himself early on – what if life had been different; what was the point at which things started to go wrong? Was it the death of his mother? Or the oppressions of a neighbour? Viewed from a distance, Roddy realises, it's hard to imagine anything important happening in Culdie – and the places, by the way, are real. But clearly, little things add up to big things.

The question is, what is big enough to matter? We hear from the neighbours' statements and by reading Roddy's narrative that he is difficult to categorise. He is either sullen or given to fits of sniggering; he is either dim-witted or unusually gifted; he is either a child or sexually charged. Every speaker gives a different perspective. And every speaker also reveals something of their own biases or potentials – but not enough to categorise their opinions as entirely true or false.

Compounding the problem is that Burnet encourages his readers to bring twenty-first-century sensibilities to bear on nineteenth-century discourses. Surely the problem lies in the crofters' (inevitable) mysticism and fatalism? Class antagonisms must play a role. Rural poverty has to be the explanation. Early anthropologists are covert racists so of course they miss the point. Burnet teases with possibilities that appeal to our superiorities as readers.

And yet, as we discover late in the book, there is a horror. And that horror makes finding Roddy's motivations problematic. What good will it do to understand motives?

It turns out that the trap is sprung not under Roddy, but under the reader. Editor Burnet closes with an epilogue that tracks the publishing history of various trial-related documents. The lawyer who tries to save Roddy on grounds of his mental incapacity hopes to build support for the condemned man by

publishing the memoir. What is published instead is the sensationalised *HIS BLOODY PROJECT: the RAVINGS of a MURDERER* to the effect, in Roddy's case that we might imagine. But the use to which Roddy's supporters hope to put his memoir should give armchair detectives pause.

Roddy's is claimed to be a work of literary merit. To put to death an individual with the sensibility and intelligence to produce an extended literary work, would,

How can every piece matter if the book can hold no surprise? Well, it does hold a surprise – and more of that later. But in a whodunit where we know perfectly well who did it, the question is obviously why? That is the motivator of this very writerly text – a book that puts its readers on the spot.

The book provides numerous perspectives on Roddy Macrae's act. We read the neighbours' statements to police, Roddy's own narrative (which takes up a good half of the book), medical reports on the victims, the opinions of a Perth prison surgeon, an account of the trial, an epilogue about the publishing vagaries of Roddy's text, and acknowledgements. The acknowledgements turn out to be important, because they helpfully make clear that this is in fact a fiction – however factual it may appear.

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