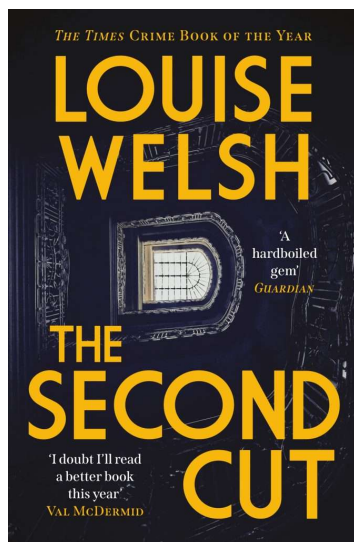


'The Second Cut', by Louise Welsh

Review by Martyn Colebrook



Louise Welsh's sequel to *The Cutting Room* (2002) is as blistering a comeback as the reader could wish. The reader is returned to the grind(r) and glitz of Glasgow with everyone's favourite auction house employee, Rilke, based once more in the Bowery and engaging in characteristically adversarial clashes and moments of tenderness with his formidable boss, Rose.

Rilke is one of crime fiction's protagonists with a paradox - like his predecessors in John Rebus and Jack Laidlaw he is a man for whom the principle is key even if the manner by which he achieves this is not as clear cut as the legal boundaries which he straddles. He drifts between hook ups, preferring the temporary and fleeting encounters over a longer dalliance, working by day and cruising by night, a bachelor and a night walker.

Welsh's opening line - 'Some things change, some things never change' - may seem benign yet it anticipates the contrasting aspects of *The Second Cut* in which numerous familiar faces appear to undertake new and darker challenges in a city which has definitely come to be redefined since 2002 and our last visit. The novel opens with Rilke attending the wedding of 'the two Bobbys', Bobby McAndrew and Bobby Burns. He spots his friend JoJo, in funereal clothes and intoxicated after a days-long bender involving booze and boys, at the celebration and promptly steers him to a café bar where his sobriety would be conspicuous for

being out of place among the clientele. As they part company, JoJo offers Rilke a tip off about a potentially lucrative house clearance sale and a vial of sexual enhancement chemicals for the newlyweds. The next time Rilke encounters JoJo, he is dead in an alleyway and there the intrigue begins.

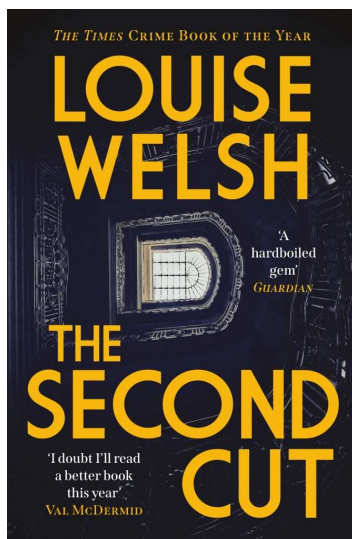
Never one to forget his friends, his creditors and his enemies, JoJo leaves a memento in his flat for Rilke to discover and, separately, during the course of Rilke's exploring the aristocratic estate and its contents, he unearths a most bizarre object. When it transpires that the sale is being orchestrated by two cousins with whom the local villagers have a querulous and challenging relationship, the tensions and suspicions intensify. Aptly Rilke describes himself as a 'living memento mori', alluding to both his profession and his approach to life. Both plotlines (JoJo's death and the estate sale) are skilfully constructed to ensure the reader is continually questioning whether they are overlaps or clues to the outcome. In order to bring resolution to the murders and violence that are witnessed, Rilke must act as the unofficial officer in this more non-procedural of narratives. Welsh gives her protagonist a line which must stand out for the consummate manner in which it summarises his position: 'Illegality I can cope with, cruelty I can't'.

Welsh's eye for detail comes to the fore once more in her depiction of contemporary Glasgow and queer culture more broadly. References to Grindr and Covid respectively date the technology and contemporary challenges faced in recent years. JoJo introduces Rilke to a more visible scene where homosexuality is intertwined with mass drug-fuelled orgies and those who place less emphasis on aesthetics are still accepted. The graphic scenes where Rilke witnesses the flesh-filled orgies reads with the same dehumanising tone and imagery you'd read in the Earl of Rochester's poetry or find in a Francis Bacon painting, a mass of entangled limbs and anonymous, dehumanised fucking without concern for pleasure and where the boundaries of sexual acceptance are routinely transgressed and blurred. A community thriving in the wake of the post-lockdown freedoms and enabled by the access provided by dating apps is summed up by Les, a cross-dressing Queer friend of Rilke's, who quips: 'We can be anything we want to be'.

This visibility and prominence of the queer spaces is aptly acknowledged by Welsh in her afterword to the novel and her foregrounding the topic front and centre. She observes 'equal marriage, increased visibility, access to hate laws,

improved awareness of queer and trans rights, more nuanced identity politics', but her approach to this is one of subtlety and assimilating the changes and improvements into her writing rather than overt activism or politicisation and demanding change through the novels she writes. Welsh successfully navigates the challenges associated with returning to a classic and writing the sequel but in this case the Gothic crime thriller goes above and beyond expectation. Far from rehashing familiar tropes and plotlines, *The Second Cut* takes the reader down into the darkness and resists arrest in terms of trying to pigeonhole the novel as a straight sequel. From Glasgow with love it most certainly is not but it is clear that Welsh has found an open, fertile seam with Rilke and is determined to mine it. I for one look forward to the trilogy.

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