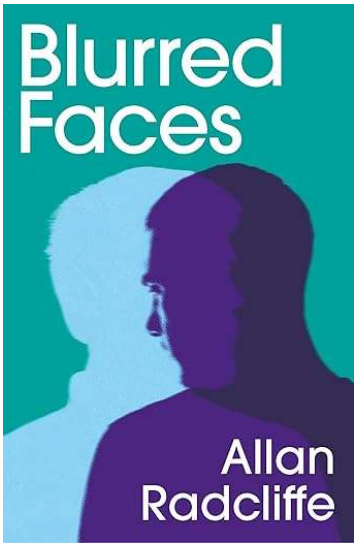
‘Blurred Faces’, by Allan Radcliffe

Review by Domenico Di Rosa



Allan Radcliffe’s second novel, *Blurred Faces* (2025), revolves around two men who become reacquainted on a gay dating app, narrating an unexpected emotional turmoil brought about by memories, intimacy, and heartache. The plot follows Jordan, back in his home city of Edinburgh to revive a complicated rapport with his family, and Davie, who is recovering from a painful breakup. What appears to be a seemingly casual and discreet encounter between two strangers turns into a rekindling of a past familiarity under a different guise. Davie recognises Jordan from their shared school days when Jordan was relentlessly bullied, Davie himself being one of the oppressors. Yet, Jordan’s mind seems to have erased these memories about him.

From its premise, the novel concerns itself with narrating queer intimacy and the resounding influence of choices made in adolescence into the present. Following his debut novel, *The Old Haunts* (2023), Radcliffe explores how past and present intersect in unpredictable ways. The dual narrative, which alternates between Jordan and Davie’s points of view, demonstrates Radcliffe’s skilfulness in building distinct fictional characters and their narrative arches. The stylistic choice to divide the novel through separate monologues, in fact, facilitates a careful illustration of the two characters, simultaneously thwarting their perceptions of themselves and one another. Radcliffe excels at character building, deploying his introspective vision to interpret detailed understandings of human nature.

Jordan's experiences of being bullied shape his vulnerability, while Davie carries the weight of regret and complicity. Radcliffe handles their voices with an astounding deftness that conveys feelings of empathy without dispelling harmful behaviours from the past. His observational acuity transpires throughout the novel, ensuring a balanced harmony of affinities and frictions between the characters and their narratives. He is attentive to the subtones of gestures, the silences between lines, the ways in which queer men negotiate love, grief, and intimacy in the margins of societal expectations.

> *A feeling came to me off the faux leather, something I couldn't name, collecting in the air and wafting towards me. Excitement and sadness, both. (p. 36)*

The constant interweaving of narratives and voices foreshadows Jordan and Davie's casual yet almost predestined reconnections, further helped by the novel's environments. While *The Old Haunts* centres around queer experiences in a rural Scottish setting, *Blurred Faces* sketches Edinburgh as a lively city where queer encounters can happen more easily. Radcliffe traces the more fluid and often transient meetups happening within dispersed urban communities. The novel grounds itself firmly around queer pubs and their regulars like the Regent with 'Auld Reekie's branch of the Friends of Dorothy. They should all have to wear a wee badge or something' (p. 18) and CC's with its mix of young queers and '[r]efugees from a wedding reception' – '"We're mainstream now. We've assimilated."' (p. 93).

Yet, the haunted city of Edinburgh also preserves its memories, manifested through fleeting photographic shots:

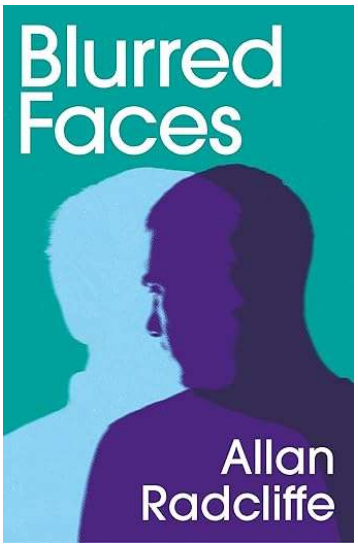
> *indiscriminate close-ups of buildings, gates sparkling with frost, graffiti on walls, pigeons eating out of bins, spiderwebs stretched across railings. (p. 71)*

Radcliffe invites his readers to consider how the past is never fully buried: it lingers in cityscapes, gestures, and in the faces of people we once knew and have later become blurred. The literal title thus becomes metaphorical, evoking familiar yet repressed faces and the awareness that they reawaken. The novel particularly addresses how two queer men live through shifting personal circumstances and homophobic social contexts from growing up in the 1980s to (re)living prejudice in their forties.

> *I look at his face, trying to remould it, make it take on a younger shape, but I can't find anything of our shared past in all those jutting bones. (p. 14)*

As Jordan and Davie confront unresolved feelings, Radcliffe implicates tangential narratives on previous love stories, family connections, and the stains of alcoholism which shed light on their respective trajectories and the reasons behind their resolutions. The author's skill in conveying complex emotions and cultural dynamics through a dual narrative fiddles with the narration's reliability, which is further complicated by the trope of lost, and at times retrieved memories. *Blurred Faces* is ultimately a moving novel that does not suggest an easily achieved redemption, but rather weighs questions about accountability, memory and resilience.

Blurred Faces is published by Fairlight Books



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