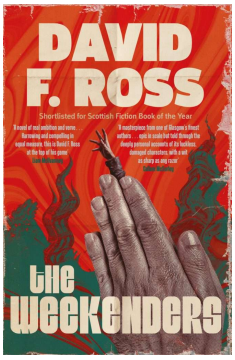
‘The Weekenders’, by David F. Ross

Review by Martyn Colebrook



David F. Ross is a new name to me, despite a back catalogue that already includes several notable publications – works which, on the strength of *The Weekenders*, undoubtedly merit further exploration. The novel’s subtitle, “The Raskine House Trilogy, #1”, indicates Ross’s authorial ambition and going by the first instalment there is a fertile seam to mine and plenty of material from which to draw. In *The Weekenders*, Ross sketches out the history of Raskine House and its status as an aristocratic site with a deeply transgressive past.

The plot is tri-partite, starting in 1966 with Stevie ‘Minto’ Milloy – a former footballer turned reporter who has been offered a job at the local newspaper following a career-ending injury. His former glories are rarely forgotten, and often rewarded with drams of whisky from old supporters, but such plaudits serve only to mask the personal challenges and torment he faces as his relationship crumbles around him thanks to the actions of one of his friends and team-mates. In the newsroom Minto is perceived as ambitious but potentially troublesome, asking questions out of turn to his colleagues and the media following the death of an Eastern European student taken in by a local hostel. Minto’s investigations earn him a savage act of retribution from his former nemesis Geordie McCraken and a stern warning from his editor about the power wielded by the paper’s owners.

The second strand, set in 1943, centres on Jamesie Campbell, a young Glaswegian who, having enlisted in the army to flee abuse at school, is sent to fight against

Mussolini. Following accusations of cowardice and desertion, Jamesie sets about restoring his reputation – and taking advantage of the dubious legal liberties afforded to soldiers. What follows is, at times, a series of punishing and morally reprehensible acts that leave the gut churning and the reader questioning their own sensibilities. Jamesie meets Michael McTavish, an acquaintance who soon becomes both an ally and a tool for manipulation, in and out of the trenches. Once the bonds of dependency are formed, Jamesie works to extract every possible benefit from their convalescence at Raskine House, a supposed safe house that grows darker the longer he stays, revealing a lineage of violence and malfeasance to which he proves all too willing a participant. As Jock Meikle, Minto's colleague, comments when asked about the newspaper's apparent endearment towards Jamesie Campbell: '[he] has nae sense of write and wrong. The cunt's a moral vacuum. If ye were tae look up the word 'venal' in the dictionary, Jamesie Campbell would be beside it.' (p. 62)

It is this absence of morality, this lack of concern for how his actions shape the lives of others, that makes Campbell the ideal focus for a crime fiction thriller. That Campbell is a facilitator and fixer underscores his attempts to profit from the actions of others, distancing himself in order to preserve the veneer of respectability he requires in his bid to become a local councillor. Even Minto wonders whether Jamesie is 'the cog in the wheel? Or the one who makes it turn?' (p. 92).

Returning to the fact that this is the first instalment in a planned trilogy, Ross offers a nod to the Gothic tradition by having his investigative journalist receive a cache of documents and articles about Raskine House – a veritable archive that begins to reveal its secrets. Throughout the novel, the past interweaves colonial exploitation with the legacy of witchcraft and the supernatural, adding to the intensity of the plot.

The third strand concerns Donald 'Doodle' Malpas, whose extraordinary memory for detail supports his work as a courtroom sketch artist. Foreshadowing Minto's investigations, his latest case centres on a young Lithuanian woman who has been murdered. Her ties to both a Glaswegian charity supporting disenfranchised newcomers and to Raskine House draws Malpas into a wider web. He is a complex figure whose internal paradoxes and physical challenges infuse the narrative with an overt religious fervour, complicating the role of the church and its ministers in Glasgow's urban and social fabric at the scrag end of the 1960s.

Crime fiction set in this period often gestures to the pervasive fear inspired by Bible John, and Ross's novel is unafraid to venture into this territory, where religion, corruption, repression and social advancement frequently coexist yet just as often collide with the new, confident liberalism energising those opposed to entrenched convention.

The personal and the professional collide headlong in this fast-paced thriller, in which scores are settled with a violence reminiscent of the masculinities on display in Wiliam McIlvanney's fiction. The dark substrate of Glasgow's criminal underworld bursts through like a rogue striker running amok. The novel's scope and range are plain to see, despite momentary lapses in narrative control – minor areas for refinement – but overall, *The Weekenders* is a satisfying, if not always pleasant, read.

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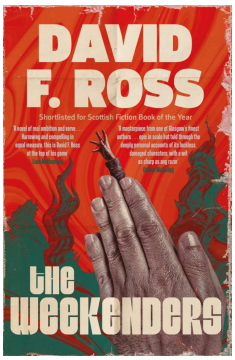

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