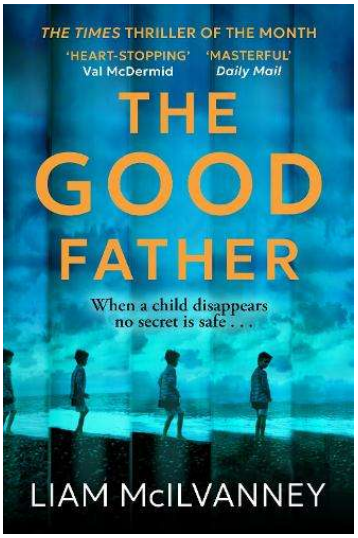
‘The Good Father’, by Liam McIlvanney

Review by Martyn Colebrook



For this reviewer a new novel from Liam McIlvanney heralds a new opportunity to explore one of the major talents and practitioners in contemporary Scottish crime fiction. It also means that for the next few days the mind will be traversing pastures new in terms of learning about an aspect of Scottish culture which may have been hitherto overlooked and the way in which it can be blended or transformed into a modern day-scenario.

Gordon Rutherford, the reluctant protagonist and the veritable ‘good father’ of the title is a Scottish academic whose current research project involves the Scottish ballads. He is married to Sarah, a partner in a law company in Largs, and has a son, Rory, aged seven, who he discovers is missing after going to the beach one afternoon. Rutherford begins his tale by explaining to the reader: ‘I AM NOT A VIOLENT MAN, but if you use that word to me I will find it hard not to punch you in the mouth. You know the one I mean’ (8). Whilst we presently are not aware of specifics of the word in question, it is apparent that Gordon is a troubled man with a history and the pain he has experienced has not yet been given ‘closure’ (8). His threat of injury to accusers indicates that public perception around his activities has not yet ceased and he desires (rather than seeks) an end to the personal torment. Rutherford admits that this closure may not occur until

they ‘lay me down in a satin-lined box’ (8) and the reader is left questioning whether death may present relief or redemption.

As he seeks to find Rory he initially deflects Sarah’s concerns and returns home, telling her that their son is fine. After he is announced to be missing and a police investigation is taking place, it transpires that Rory is a miracle baby – conceived after three attempts with IVF. Sarah, a steely and reserved Scottish mother, silently chastises her husband as she sits in judgment. When she eventually speaks, the brutality of her blame echoes throughout the remainder of the novel: ‘All you had to do was watch our son. And you fucked it up. And now he’s gone. And he’s probably never coming back. And I won’t forget. I will never forget’ (21). Her determination not to forgive and the unapologetic focus of responsibility which is trained lens-like on Gordon forces him back to his books, the withdrawal to the academic world is the only sanctuary he currently possesses. McIlvanney’s preface to the novel invokes the poem ‘Grimoire’ by Robin Robertson and the ‘spell, an incantation’ (22) which has inserted itself into Rutherford’s now fractured world is the cadence of the lost, the grief of the bereft which cannot be articulated in the face of the banalities offered by those who do not know what to say or, indeed, why they are saying it.

It is possible that the remainder of the novel could explore the faltering relationship between Gordon and Sarah and I can think of certain writers who could pull off such an ennui-laden masterclass but McIlvanney has a formidable reputation in the crime genre to maintain and so it comes as no surprise (and is not really a spoiler) when the first plot development emerges. Fresh from the ‘permanently dizzy’ state that Gordon finds comes with his grief, as well as accusations as to the level of complicity the family have with the disappearance. As is characteristic of a case where a child disappears, the levels of suspicion run high and accusations against the nearest and dearest of friends and family are laced with barbs opening feuds one had hoped were long since forgotten.

He and Sarah manage to conceive twins and bring them up with the memory of Rory as the brother who will eventually return home from travelling away. Years later, he walks into a police station and hands himself in. Hagan, the Inspector in charge of the case, informs the family and their world implodes once more but with a whirlwind of relief combined with estrangement and the unsettling, uncanny sense of knowing someone as they once were rather than who they purport to be.

Rory’s process for re-integrating to his surroundings and his family offers a series of tensions between the personal and the professional. The feelings of needing to know how their son suffered must be offset against the natural time it takes for a boy in his early teens to open up the darkness of his former world to the current circumstances. Where McIlvanney excels in this deeply engaging psychological profile is the continued emotional and psychosocial collisions which occur between Rory and Gordon as the son begins to participate in daily activities involving his peers and, naturally, his detractors.

What begins as competition on the football pitch and then typical teenage teasing and roughhousing provokes a calculated, vicious, dark and violent response from Rory which leaves even his doting parents aghast. Torn between condoning his behaviour as that of a retaliation to significant antagonism from his peers and privately vacillating between condemnation and acceptance, Gordon begins a spiral into more and more desperation as his sets out to ensure his lost son does not have the motivation to leave them again whilst the ever-pragmatic Sarah challenges her husband to ensure they are protected.

Told through the eyes of Gordon throughout the narrative, the reader is perpetually torn in their own assessment of the situation and hearing the innermost thoughts of a father who refuses to surrender his son to the police. McIlvanney handles this dichotomy and internal monologue with control and precision, ensuring we are perpetually teetering on the cliff edge of Gordon’s madness or rationalisation. Hearing the most intimate moments of a grieving and struggling father who is driven by an almost evangelical determination to see his boy gain justice makes this a compelling psychological crime thriller.

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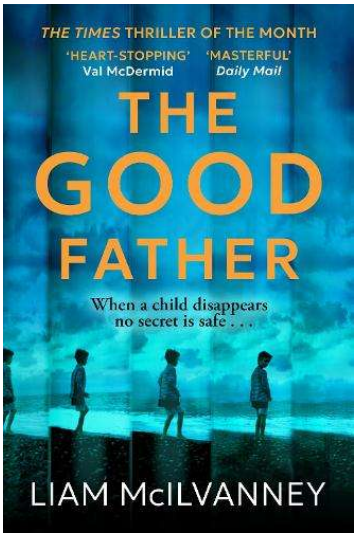

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