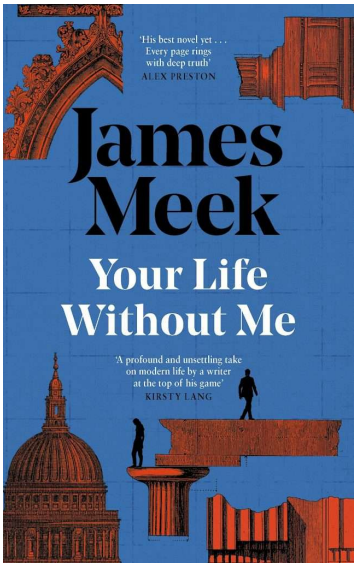
‘Your Life Without Me’, by James Meek

Review by Martyn Colebrook



James Meek’s novel is a *tour de force* condensed into the trappings of a short novel which addresses a canvas that spans generations and well as cultures. It is a testament to the author’s talent that there is a Dickensian quality to this writing but it still manages to balance an economy of style with an appreciation of scale. In many respects it is often what is not said or deliberately left unsaid which has more of an impact than the conversations and encounters which take place.

Mr Burman was married to Ada, recently deceased, and they have a daughter, Leila, who has rejected the prospect of further education and moves through a series of service-industry roles in retail and show homes before she shows a desire to pursue a career in in the City of London. Since Ada’s death, Leila has become more detached from her father and remains stubbornly incommunicado for many of their encounters. This is not a typical teenage sulking period, it’s rather reflective of the gap between relatives that accompanies the double whammy of an aging parent and a bereaved daughter.

Burman returns home to find a locksmith securing his daughter’s bedroom door at her request – for privacy rather than security reasons – and this fierce and unapologetic creation of a world that is separate from Burman’s becomes a

recurrent motif throughout the text: ‘The day before he went south to see Raf in prison, Mr Burman came home to find the door of his house on the latch and a grey, scuffed pair of men’s trainers dropped in the hallway.’ (1) It is significant that one place of incarceration holds a person who has been imprisoned because of his actions whereas the home has become a willing prison for someone who has made their decision. Significantly, both of the proverbial inmates choose silence as their weapon and technique for holding on to the last vestiges of power in their respective relationships.

Raf, a school-aged child with a gift for the humanities, meets Mr Burman at the school and slowly begins to finagle his way into the English teacher’s family life, making overtures towards Burman’s wife, Ada, and eventually forming an intimate relationship of sorts with his daughter. His confident, borderline cocky mannerisms make him something of a hit with his fellow students and Mr Burman sees a significant amount of potential in the young man, encouraging him to undertake further study in English Literature and Philosophy. Raf’s own path takes a more self-determined route and he begins a PhD which leads him to a profession working on structural capacities in heritage buildings.

Raf’s motives for his move into this particular field of study are by no means altruistic and as the novel progresses we witness him develop from a charmer and seducer to an individual with a highly manipulative streak who plays on the kindness that is afforded to him by a well-intentioned family in order to achieve his ultimate goal – a terrorist attack on a symbolic building in central London.

Raf’s imprisonment on suspicion of an attempted bomb attack has led to him refusing to speak to anyone other than Mr Burman – he writes letters which move from being serious, scholarly and articulate in their manifesto to a sense of the immature and childlike in his understanding of the society which he has attempted to attack. As Burman waits for his appointment, he considers the world outside: ‘He watched heavy rain washing the black roofs and roads, sending people running, heard it beating on the train roof, and was simultaneously interested in the spectacle and disturbed by his own interest, as if he hid in the audience of his own self, like a fugitive hiding inside a cinema’ (221). The theme of hiding from oneself is presented in multiple elements of the characterisation – Leila disassociates from her father following the death of her mother, his wife and communication is simply a tool for providing the basic information required to maintain the semblance of any fatherly relationship between them. Burman

silently grieves the loss of his familial structures and there is a pervasive sense he is marking time until the inevitable break up occurs and Leila also leaves him. As a student in his class asks: 'What if the world is art, but you aren't?' said someone at the back. 'What if you don't fit in the picture' (18). The spectacle planned by Raf is his attempt to insert his own narrative into a society where he does not feel he fits.

Meek's approach to this subject is a balance of insight and emotion handled with a deft eye for detail and ear for dialogue. The plot is told from the perspective of Mr Burman and moves effortlessly between the present and the past, reflecting on the interactions and events which lead to him being summoned to speak to Raf's solicitor in London and his suspicions that the police may have an ulterior motive for requesting his presence. When Burman offers an observation on a topic, his thoughts and decisions are debated and commented on by two voices which function as the processing conscience – a coffee in Starbucks leads to an internal debate by two entities aptly called Comfort and Rigour whose witty observations combine scathing and scabrous, able to turn even the most asinine considerations into humorous disquisitions which appear contentious or divisive. At one point Rigour observes that: 'You could justify anything by appealing to posterity for a licence' (115) and when ordering a pain aux raisins with his flat white, the hilarious retort: 'Oh, yeah, of course, the fucking industrial pastry' (115). It is this humour which offers a delightful interlude amongst the seriousness of the topics that otherwise fill this unsettling and provocative read.

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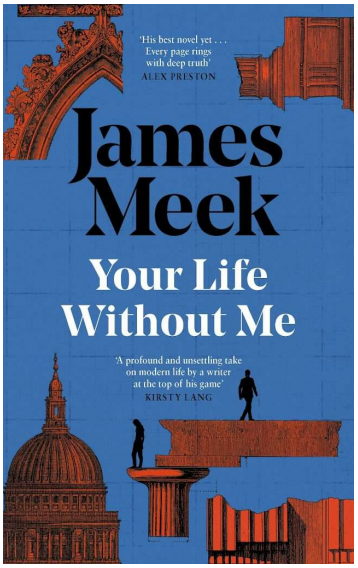

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Burman returns home to find a locksmith securing his daughter's bedroom door at her request – for privacy rather than security reasons – and this fierce and unapologetic creation of a world that is separate from Burman's becomes a recurrent motif throughout the text: 'The day before he went south to see Raf in prison, Mr Burman came home to find the door of his house on the latch and a grey, scuffed pair of men's trainers dropped in the hallway.' (1) It is significant that one place of incarceration holds a person who has been imprisoned because of his actions whereas the home has become a willing prison for someone who has made their decision. Significantly, both of the proverbial inmates choose silence as their weapon and technique for holding on to the last vestiges of power in their respective relationships.

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