Tales from the Mall consists of a varied set of stories, some entirely made up, some supposedly true and some purely factual, all directly related to this key institution of contemporary capitalist societies known as the mall. Morrison’s typical transparency with titles is here made slightly ambiguous by the ambivalent use of the word “tale”, which, as we will see, is at the core of the aesthetic and artistic raison d’être of the book.

The book is made up of no fewer than 34 prose texts, ranging from factual information, socio-economic analysis and more general historical accounts of the development of malls to entirely fictional short stories. There is yet a third category of texts in between these two seemingly opposite poles, a category that tends to blur the clear borders between the fictional and the actual, the social history and the urban legend. This category is mostly composed of short pieces, typically entitled “Incident in a Mall” followed by a number and a subtitle. For example, “Incident in a Mall #33. The Daily Terrorist” tells us about a Syrian woman wearing a hijab who wanders around a Scottish shopping centre for hours every day, not doing anything other than walking, from nine-thirty to eleven in the morning, and from seven to eight-thirty in the evening. This unusual habit in a social context characterized by terrorism and fear arouses suspicion within the security team who ultimately decide to interrogate the woman, only to realise that this daily routine of “mall-walking”, common in America, is simply a way for her to stay fit and safe:

She likes to be fit of mind and body, as is the way. She lives in the scheme and does not like to walk in the streets because they shout and throw things. She comes here because she thinks it safe, and likes the temperature.

This is just one instance of the gallery of gently eccentric characters that can be met in Ewan Morrison’s mall. Readers will also learn about Pope Jim, a chatty car park employee, or Beethoven, a half-deaf cleaner who was caught cleaning the floor with his own urine. These “Incidents in a Mall,” Morrison tells us, are true. True in the sense that he has collected them by interviewing many members of staff (cleaners, cashiers, security guards) in shopping centres across Britain and America. Whether they are really true or not can be doubted; was a man who was about to commit suicide in a car park really saved by a bigoted and racist cleaner shouting racial abuse at him? It does not seem very likely but the reader finds himself wanting to believe it, the same way we secretly think (and hope) that all these urban legends, this contemporary folklore holds a part of truth in it.

The factual section of the book, however, leaves no doubt about its reliability. Covering a wide range of aspects such as the etymology of the word “mall” to the naming process of shopping centres, via lighter and more playful texts such as “Twenty Top Tips for Brightening your Day in the Mall”, Tales from the Mall provides the reader with the satisfactory feeling of learning about the topic in an entertaining fashion. Thoroughly researched and well written, the “Brief History of the Mall”, divided into eight parts is particularly instructive and enjoyable. Some readers might wonder at the absence of mentions of key-texts on this topic, such as Jean Baudrillard’s comments, as early as 1970, on the Parly Mall in France (in The Consumer Society, Myths and Structures), or the seemingly anecdotal reference to Benjamin’s The Arcades Project (which Morrison quotes at the very end of the book). Likewise, one might regret the absence of a selected bibliography listing the many studies and relevant documents used by the author during his research (some basic information being provided within the text), but that cannot be considered a major flaw, as Tales from the Mall should not be read as a historical account, a sociological study or any other type of academic work, because it is primarily a work of fiction, as is stated by Morrison in the foreword (here playfully renamed Disclaimer/Reclaimer):
Tales from the Mall is a collection of short stories intercut with (1) facts about the history and global spread of shopping malls and (2) stories I’ve been told by people who work and shop within malls, in my home country, Scotland, and in the United States.

Thus, the fact that the analysis of the mall phenomenon sometimes seems like it could have been backed up more effectively, or simply more detailed, should not be attributed to the author’s lack of knowledge on this topic (as there is little doubt that Morrison is indeed familiar with Baudrillard’s work on this issue). Indeed the nature of Tales From the Mall reveals the most meaningful and relevant analysis of malls’ effects on our contemporary lives at the very core of the collection: the short stories.

All stories are not actually entirely set in malls, but are at least strongly related to them. Going against what Morrison perceives as a tradition to use shopping centres as settings for extraordinary events (murders, kidnappings, zombie invasions and the like), the book confronts the reader with seemingly normal characters, some quirky, some angry, some happy, but all slightly neurotic in their own ways. The stories vary in tone and atmosphere, giving the collection a refreshing variety of moods and situations. “Top Man” is probably the funniest and least serious; the story of a socially awkward young man who finds himself involved in a grotesque flirting competition with other, much more motivated, men. The aim of the game is basically to chat up random female customers in the centre: a task that the hero Dave finds difficult, so pressing is his craving for Starbucks. The story is amusing and mildly absurd despite a relatively sad but sweet ending.

Most stories have a graver tone though, such as the impressive and heartrending “Recycling”. Lizzy, a Scottish young woman working at Tesco as a cashier, is stuck in a daily routine that led her to develop a strange condition; she seems to suffer from chronic déjà vus, which she calls her “déjas”: “Ye’ve mibee no had them since ye wee, but ye might mind.” This curse, or gift, is such that she can guess what customers will be like just by looking at their purchases. From cans of Redbull on the conveyor belt, she knows she will be facing a student, a smoothie and low-fat chicken tell her the next one will be “some poor single lass in a suit.” So she waits for the moment when her routine will be disrupted and her curse broken:

One day, she starts prayin she’d get it wrong, just the once, really wrong, like some lass’s come up and lay down some sirloin steak and a g-string and a fishing rod, just to put a wee sparkle in the day. Not that they sell fishing rods, but most things, more than most places, cos o the size o the place.

The depressingly sober ending of the story, as Lizzy visits her mother in hospital cruelly echoes this hope that one day, she will be wrong in her predictions. The demotic Scots used in this story (and some others) is reminiscent of James Kelman or Irvine Welsh, and so is Morrison’s concern to write and tell the stories of those that tend to be forgotten by literature’s narratives of progress.

The recording and (re)telling of minor stories that are part of the official history of such societal developments as malls can clearly be identified as the main motivation for the book. The short story is commonly thought of as a suitable form to represent marginalised people, what Irish writer Frank O’Connor has famously coined “submerged population groups”. This is present in Morrison’s mall, where lonely and excluded people from all ethnicities, ages, and classes come and meet, hoping to escape their dull, dreary and hopeless lives for a moment, or simply to be surrounded by human life, like the father in the first story who after his wife left him, is so eager for company that he has to have lunch in Burger King almost every day not to feel lonely:

“Over the months he has learned that there are other regulars in the food court. They are not there to shop, only to eat. They are old men. They never learned how to cook, perhaps, and have now lost their wives, to cancer, to old age, to things unspeakable. They sometimes nod their heads to him, as they eat, as if they know.”

Morrison’s commitment to the short story form allows him to focus on one aspect of the genre that is as important to the whole coherence of the collection as the structuring theme of the mall; that is the short story’s inheritance to oral forms and the focus on voice. That might seems paradoxical insofar as in his foreword, Morrison positions himself against what he identifies as a form of nostalgia that makes us “dig out our old ‘authenticities’ and celebrate the parochial pasts that existed before the advent of consumerism.” The paradox lies in the use of a form of fiction focusing on oral tradition and folklore, taking us back to the very roots of the modern short story as we know it, originating in oral storytelling and
folktales, in order to document an epoch that is indeed very contemporary. This blending of a postmodern world (of which the mall is one perfect illustration) with a certain nostalgia that seems to be looking back at ancient forms of storytelling makes *Tales from the Mall* an experimental work of postmodern fiction that is both traditional and innovative, both conservative in its attraction to past models and *avant-garde* in its combination of factual, fictional and pictorial information.

The collection is not about a mall, it *is* a mall, its table of contents becoming a “store / story guide” and all the texts being spread over categories (“Car Park”, “Customer Information”, “Staff Areas” …) referenced on a mall-type map. What Morrison does in *Tales from the Mall* is recreate a contemporary mythological space, in the Barthesian sense, peopled with creatures who survive by telling their stories, and having them re-told. This recording of an oral history works through anecdotes, urban legends, a whole network of storytelling that gives its rhythm to the existence of the Mall’s inhabitants, such as Pope Jim, the “tale-teller of the mall” from “The Price of Life”: “storytelling breaks his day into events with beginnings, middles and ends, and saves him from the constant cyclic onslaught which never progresses”.

While, like in any such collection, some stories are more striking than others, *Tales from the Mall* enables Ewan Morrison to confirm his status as an important Scottish short-story writer. His debut collection, *The Last Book you Read and Other Stories*, displayed unquestionable storytelling skills and inspired comparisons with A.L. Kennedy or Irvine Welsh, but this new collection places Morrison in a class of his own and should be praised not only for its intrinsic literary value but also for its significance in contemporary literature thanks to the new and exciting directions for Scottish short fiction that it indicates. Quoting one character from the final story, it can be argued that Morrison has made the short story form “a space open for possibility”.

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