

8 Review

8.1 Flemmich Webb on *Boxer Handsome* by Anna Whitwham

This is a review of Anna Whitwham's novel *Boxer Handsome* by the freelance editor, presenter and journalist, Flemmich Webb.

Arts + Ents > Books > Review

Book review: 'Boxer Handsome' by Anna Whitwham

FLEMMICH WEBB Friday 10 January 2014

Boxer Handsome is Anna Whitwham's first novel and was inspired by her grandfather, John Poppy, a young featherweight boxer at the Crown & Manor Boys Club in Hoxton. This familial connection gives this exciting debut an authenticity, which allied to a confident writing style, suggests Whitwham has a promising future ahead of her.

The story opens with Bobby fighting childhood friend Connor over a girl. Both amateur boxers in the same boxing club in East London, they are due to fight each other in the ring in a divisional competition in a week's time, but this flurry of fists takes place by the canal, bare-knuckled and brutal. Bobby wins but can't resist a victorious act of brutality that drives subsequent events.

Whitwham acknowledges the value of boxing in society – giving wayward kids a focus, trainers acting as father figures to young men – through Derek, who runs the Clapton Bow Boys Club and keeps an eye out for Bobby and his other charges.

But she doesn't shy away from its brutal side and the thin line that separates regulated fighting in the ring from unfettered violence outside it. Casualties of this world lay strewn throughout the world Whitwham creates. Joe, Bobby's father, was once a decent boxer himself, but is now a sad alcoholic, a broken shell of a man with none of the respect that his fists once commanded. Bobby's mother, a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of Joe, sees history repeating itself as her son follows in his dad's footsteps, a slave to the code of honour that this macho world demands. There's something of Shakespeare's emotionally stunted warrior, Coriolanus, in Bobby. When he meets a local girl, Chloe, he suddenly glimpses an alternative to the world he has inhabited since birth. The tragedy is that he lacks the emotional skills to seize this chance.

Whitwham's writing is as sharp as a one-two combination, short punchy sentences that capture effectively the brooding atmosphere of the East End, the threat of violence at every turn and the savagery of fighting. "Then [he] cracked the bridge of his nose wide open. Skin split. Blood spat. Connor stumbled about headless."

But the book is tender, too, a change of pace that deepens the emotional resonance of the characters. Bobby is uncharacteristically unsure of himself when he first takes Chloe on a date: "She had a grip on him, a spell that held him in awkward moments he couldn't get out of." This is a promising debut, and it will be interesting to see how Whitwham handles subject matter in subsequent novels that is more distant from her own experience.

8.2 Martin Hoyle on television drama *The Bridge*

This is a review published in the *FT Weekend* magazine of the television drama *The Bridge* by the TV, radio and film critic, Martin Hoyle.

Pick of the Weekend: The Bridge

By Martin Hoyle

Saturday is complete again: Scandinavian noir is back. After the civilised machinations of Danish politics in *Borgen*, we plunge into the dark world of terrorism, mass killing and poisonous grudges underlying humane, orderly Nordic society.

The second season of *The Bridge* (BBC 4 9pm) resumes thirteen months after the story of the first ended, with an opening less gruesome but just as eerie when an apparently unmanned coaster crashes into the Øresund Bridge. The five drugged youngsters found chained on board trigger more joint Danish–Swedish police cooperation. Hoorah for the chalk and cheese combination of frowsy, easy-going Martin (Kim Bodnia) and the unsmiling, briskly robotic Aspergerish Saga (Sofia Helin).

Things have changed, of course. Martin is still recovering from the murder of his son by last season's mass killer who, though safely imprisoned, haunts him to the point of obsession.

Saga's antiseptic, angular, pre-eminently logical psyche is disturbed by her efforts at normal relationships. She has learnt to detect when people are making jokes and laughs heartily if unconvincingly, hurt when Martin gently points out that this is unnecessary. 'I acknowledge their attempts to be amusing,' she explains earnestly...

Saturday's brace of episodes is rich with subplots, vivid subsidiary characters and a reminder that even mass terrorism can be rooted in the skewed world picture of one unbalanced human. There emerges a common theme: connection, the failure to connect, the fear of abandonment and isolation, and the Nordic thriller's paradoxical juxtaposition of high principles and violent action, efficiency and murderousness. The dark is all-pervasive.