

***Fresh* by Mark McNay**

(Canongate. 278pp. £10.99)

Review by Andrew Drummond

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Here, they said: you're a vegetarian from leafy Edinburgh - why don't you review this book about a chicken processing plant just outside Glasgow? You may find it entertaining. Indeed no, I sighed, turning back to the latest gripping instalment of *44 Scotland Street*. There's drugs, violence, coarse language, and a bit of rough in it, they added. Dear me, I thought: but isn't that just how things are, along the M8 ?

Mark McNay's debut novel *Fresh* does prove to be a whirlwind tour of an Edinburgh chap's every prejudice about the Wild West: debt, despair and drink-fuelled bloodshed. Life in the housing-estates of Royston, where every "big man" is a drug-dealer, every "wee man" a connoisseur of the art of "batterin", and all, bar none, in the grip of loan-sharks - it all springs up from the page, fully-armed and ready to stick the heid in. McNay couches his descriptions in the pithy vernacular of the working man, and his use of short sentences keeps the pace tight.

The plot is easily told : the hero is Sean, product of a broken home, and younger brother of Archie. Archie quickly goes bad, and then from bad to worse: drugs, car-theft, stabbings, male-rape - alas, what do you expect? - it's Glasgow. Sean does his best to keep his nose above the coursing tide of crime and punishment, gets married, and settles down to a job in the chicken plant, where fowls are slaughtered, pulled apart and packaged up as the titular "fresh" chickens. Archie, doing time for a one crime too many, gives Sean some money to keep safe while he is inside; Sean misguidedly spends most of it; Archie gets out of jail early and comes looking for his money. With considerable difficulty, Sean gathers together the amount owed. In gratitude, Archie gives his loved ones a good battering. The scene is set for a dramatic denouement.

The entire story takes place in a single day, darkness to darkness. If all days were as interesting as this one, working in a chicken plant might be no bad thing; Sean certainly packs in many and varied activities in his desperate attempts to collect sufficient funds to avoid "a good kicking" from Archie. He manages an outing in a clapped-out white van, to Falkirk and back, two trips to the bank, a lunchtime bevvy, and a full day's work, numerous fag-breaks and phone-calls not included, all before the end of the day-shift. McNay retains our interest during the passing moments by throwing in some flash-backs to troubled times in Sean's depressing youth. The evening of the day is spent in a high octane criminal spree. The sheer quantity of this activity seems, somehow, unlikely. But what do I know? - they obviously do things differently out west.

McNay's descriptions of the production-line within the chicken plant seem - to one who would not venture inside such a place - splendid. As is his creation of a general air of hopelessness: "*Three tons of chicken wings for Doncaster. How the fuck do they expect us to have that ready for the morra?*" - two sentences, I would argue, that neatly encapsulate the state of the western world. As with any large-scale food-production facility, with a swift through-put and a disenchanting workforce, there are certain breaches of accepted standards of cleanliness; one hears of such things, even in Edinburgh; but this is a review for all the family, so I will not trouble you with such details as McNay delights in providing.

There are some false notes in the book. Some of the characterisations are unsettlingly disjointed - or are they just shallow? - I couldn't decide. There are a couple of curious temporal inconsistencies - which are probably not deliberate. And if there's one really annoying device in the book, it is the frequent interruption of the narrative by Sean's childish fantasies about being a cowboy, or an army NCO, or a miner, or boxer, as he battles with the daily grind. I got through the book in rather less time than I should, by skipping over these largely irrelevant passages.

The novel is considerably less demanding than its physical thickness would suggest - it could perhaps have been a taut short story, rather than a novel.. But McNay's energetic evocations of how to process several hundred dead chickens, and the almost farcical hopelessness of Sean's enthrallment to Archie, offer much to admire. This book will probably not put you off eating chicken; but, if you have something of the Glaswegian within, it should entertain you.

And now, I begged, may I return to something more genteel? I do live in Edinburgh, after all.