

The Gargoyle

by

Andrew Davidson

Canongate, 468pp, £16.99

Review by Andrew Drummond

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As an admonition not to take drugs and drive, this novel starts very well: the narrator, a successful pornographer stoned on cocaine and bourbon, encounters a flight of burning arrows, veers off the road into a ravine, and is burned, on Good Friday, to a crisp. Happily rescued, he is rushed to hospital where he spends the next few months - and his fortune - being completely rebuilt. Completely, that is, apart from the one part which launched his previous career.

While in hospital, the narrator is befriended by a sculptress named Marianne Engel who claims to have met and fallen in love with him in 14th century Germany. She tells him the story of her previous life as a nun, and of his as a mason-cum-mercenary. After he is discharged from hospital, he moves in with her (conveniently, she has a huge house and wads of cash) - and after that - well, I won't spoil what little there is to tell.

For the first third of this lengthy novel, things go well for the reader. The story is interesting and well-told, there are enough detailed descriptions of major burns and the treatment thereof to satisfy the most morbid of readers, there is oddity and implausibility in equal measure. It seems that, in Dantean manner, the pornographer is getting his deserts in Hell; he descends a Circle or two.

Then, rather annoyingly, he re-ascends, and here plot and character stagnate. Despite his appalling accident, his recovery, and the love of Marianne, the narrator - paying no attention to the blurb on the cover promising 'love, miracles and redemption' - does not change convincingly for either better or worse.

It is the job of a novelist to make the implausible seem plausible, for at least an hour or so, preferably longer. Andrew Davidson fails to do this. Part of the reason is his inability to distinguish characters or find voices - both the main narrative and Marianne's narrative read almost identically. Partly to blame also is his failure to make a credible historical case for the 'medieval' strand of the story: there is, for example, considerable shakiness in his knowledge of 14th century Europe. If this book is ever translated into German, I can foresee some public consternation: in one rather crucial episode, the mystic Heinrich Seuse, while travelling from Strassburg to Cologne, stops off for a night at the Engelthal nunnery, which lies east of Nürnberg, "because, although it was not directly on his path, he could not pass up the opportunity of visiting it". Perhaps the detour would be a short one in these octane-fuelled days of the Autobahn; but not in the 1320s - it would be like taking a detour via St Andrews when walking from Edinburgh to Glasgow. There are a couple of similar plot-twists, which seem perfectly avoidable, basing themselves as they do on a misunderstanding of simple geography.

And if there was a literary prize for the most unconvincing declaration of love - and why not? - then here's one for the short-list: it comes with no prior warning and leaves the reader blinking - where did that come from? This passage should mark a turning-point in the narrator's life, but is unfortunately devoid of any credibility.

However, it would be unfair to say that there is nothing good about this book. Davidson's use of language is deft and witty. The narrative works well for a while. There are some attractive peripheral characters (the burns specialist, the physio, the psychologist). Embedded in the novel, like raisins in the dough, are four engaging short tales of tragic love (one concerning a gay Viking, a character much under-utilised in fiction) - but these really do not serve to drive the plot forwards.

Disappointingly, *The Gargoyle* does not cohere, it has no character-development, it misses several opportunities to take a twist and a turn down a side-road to the dark and light places, it ultimately goes nowhere: it left this reviewer flat. The author has set out to write a book to demonstrate that 'love is as strong as death, as hard as Hell' (Eckhart), but has tripped himself up by being rather too clever: love, even what is termed 'great love', is not a cathedral requiring gargoyles or the dubious buttresses of mysticism and re-incarnation, it is a very simple construct, built of humanity and mutual trust and commitment - of which there is no evidence here.

There's much to entertain the reader in this book, but, for a hardened pedant like myself, just as much that is annoying and poorly thought-out. This is Andrew Davidson's first novel - it will be intriguing to read his second.

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