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We usually follow the Scrutiny rules of not reviewing works by contributors and not getting friends to review one another. The following review, by a friend, of work by a frequent contributor, is published because in the editorial judgement the favourable opinion is genuine, not log-rolling, and the book in question would otherwise be likely to go unnoticed.

M. B. Mencher, *Jackdaw & Other Stories*

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M. B. Mencher began writing fiction after leaving Cambridge in the 1950s. Many of the stories in his latest book, *Jackdaw*, were first published in long-out-of-print literary periodicals—such as *The Human World*, whose list of authors included F. R. Leavis and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and its successor *The Gadfly*—which are now comparatively inaccessible. The present volume is to be warmly welcomed for making these pieces available to the reader in one convenient place.

Modern fiction, when not merely infantile or escapist, has, unfortunately, all too often tended to be a vehicle for disseminating the modish attitudes of the day through formulaic figures, based on class, race, gender or sexual orientation. What makes this book refreshingly different is that its characters are not the usual counters to be manipulated according to the requirements of a suitably trendy “message”. They are genuine individuals, who become, at their best, the expression of a common and universal humanity. The ability to create authentic men and women does not, of course, make a keen awareness of contemporary social life any less necessary for the novelist or playwright; and Mr Mencher’s people are fully of their age, reflecting all its tensions and complexities, while remaining living human beings.

The interaction of a common and universal humanity with the social life of a particular period is well illustrated by the title story. Its central character, Jackie, is a middle-class woman, living in a provincial town. Her marriage to her late husband, Gerald, has not been unhappy, although the childlessness of the couple has deprived them of a certain potential for development, leaving their relationship relatively static. They enjoy an ordinary but comfortable existence, composed of films, books and television, new clothes and social engagements, cigarettes, cards and whisky. But with the passage of time, Jackie becomes possessed by an overwhelming awareness of the all-pervasiveness of death. The fashionable ethic of charity, which equates virtue with donating to worthy causes, offers no solace for her deep disquiet, and her solution is to deaden it with the aid of gambling and drink. Inexorably, her drinking spirals out of control, and she becomes an alcoholic. Eventually, the stress of coping with her alcoholism proves too much for her husband, who dies in a car accident after suffering a heart attack. This merely increases her dependence on alcohol. The last straw is the death of her cousin, who represents her only remaining connection with humanity. After a series of emergency admissions to hospital, her mind deteriorates and she is institutionalized. She has finally succeeded in liberating herself from her oppressive consciousness of mortality by exchanging her humanity for the life of a jackdaw that merely reacts to eye-catching objects; a creature for which time is always momentary and instantaneous, and experience mindless sensation and reflex.

“Jackdaw” points to a need for significance that a reductively materialistic society cannot satisfy. The awareness of death that haunts Jackie is an expression of her fear that she has never lived in a meaningful way. A barren marriage has deprived her of the natural fulfilments of childbirth and parenthood, and there are no human alternatives—religious convictions, a work ethic, or genuine sense of community and fellowship—that could give her existence meaning. Her response is to openly proclaim the meaninglessness of life in her behaviour, which becomes an extreme expression of an ethos that can only offer endless diversions and distractions to fill an

existential void. It is the experience of the modern world that informs *Crow*; but presented from a mature vantage point, without Hughes's gloating complicity, his adolescent relish, in the dehumanization he depicts. The poise of the narrator is manifested in the simple, unaffected language, which presents Jackie's tragic situation without hysteria or violence.

Although "Jackdaw" is a key piece, its tragic vision is not representative of the whole collection. There are a variety of comic modes, ranging from the genial "Neighbours", with its stylized prose that mirrors the slightly absurd aesthetic bohemianism of the *ménage* next door, to the bitingly astringent "The Smell of Civilization", which describes the intolerable predicament of a man suffering from a gross physical disorder who is unable to live in society or escape from it. In a number of the stories, a delicate balance is struck between pathos and humour. One instance of this is "On The Bus at Sortino", which describes a passing encounter with a wistful female, approaching middle age, who longs for marriage while wanting go on partying with *les jeunes*. Another example is "A Wrong Word", where a couple who have blurred the line between marital and social life find the intimacy of their relationship compromised when the wife casually announces at party that she is pregnant, to the discomfiture and distress of her husband. This ability to move between tragedy and comedy, together with a feeling for character and situation that reveals itself in sharply delineated figures and atmospheric scene-painting, suggests at times a certain temperamental and artistic affinity with Chekhov. The other literary influences at work in the writing include Lawrence and Kafka, both of whom make an appearance in "An Encounter in Riva".

However, it is also possible find places in book where the familiar categories of tragedy and comedy cannot be readily applied. One of these is "The Driver", which presents a compelling human truth, without appealing to attitudes such as pity or amusement. Claughton, the central character, is a lorry driver employed by Morris, a Jewish cloth manufacturer in the North of England. His resourceful, stubbornly independent, energetic personality demands work as a necessary means of self-expression. Although suffering from terminal cancer, he remains an active and indispensable presence in the yard. This is conveyed with a fine economy and concentration, through such details as the description of a delivery, which draws on the poetic resources of language to convey the sounds and movements of Claughton's lorry as he masterfully manoeuvres it down the winding lane to the yard and the wiry strength and energy of the man as he moves about in the loading bay. The dramatic development of the story turns on Claughton's brush with Morris after the latter appoints his incompetent brother as yard manager. Claughton's openly expressed hostility and contempt leads to his dismissal, but Morris needs his capable driver and decides to offer him his job back. He finds Claughton intoxicated and defiant. Under the influence of the drink, Claughton's tongue loosens and he lapses into anti-Semitism in spite of his conservative respect for his employer. Morris wisely persists in his offer to reinstate Claughton, with the face-saving proviso that he must apologize for his insolent behaviour when he sobers up. The apology is never given, but Claughton turns up for work and is accepted without comment. At the heart of this human exchange is a sharply focussed recognition of the astonishing ability of men to transcend their differences, including deep-seated divisions of race and background, on the basis of common interests. The purity and directness of attention registers only what *is* rather than might or should be. Although Claughton succumbs to his cancer at the end, the bare fact is noted without pathos. This toughness underlies the profound realism of the tale.

No book is wholly exempt from criticism, and there are one or two places where the usually sure touch of the author appears less certain. "The Fascist" convincingly presents the uneasy embarrassment of a decent English tourist who has to listen to the odious views of a neo-Nazi he meets at a French petrol station, but his sinister interlocutor remains a slightly unsubstantial figure, who seems not so much a complete presence as a disturbing political possibility. In "Mr Doshi", the characters are uncongenial or inconsequential. Doshi is a slimy windbag, whose self-serving left-wing opinions make him a thorn in the side of his departmental head, Dr Beddoes. His conceited belief in his sexual power over women leads him to make an obscene pass on the dance floor at the wife of a simple-minded colleague who cultivates him, and whom he patronizes. The public rebuff that follows gives Beddoes an opportunity to take his

revenge on his troublesome subordinate with a sneer. The effect is closer to farce than a full human drama, and the sympathies of the reader are barely engaged.

But these are small flaws at which it seems churlish to cavil. Mr Mencher's collection is an impressive achievement, the publication of which deserves to be recognized as an important literary event. In the modern waste land of fiction it is one of those rare things: a genuine piece of imaginative literature, which proves that the art of storytelling in the traditional sense has not been entirely extinguished.

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