

Subterranean bond between predator and prey explored

The Bedroom Secrets Of The Master Chefs
Irvine Welsh
(Jonathan Cape, \$32.95)
Reviewed by James Lasdun

IRVINE Welsh is in a class of his own. Whatever the flaws of his books, they have a seething life in them that rivets attention and an inventiveness with story and language that continually amuses and amazes. The elaborate choreography of his predators and victims as they circle each other through the bars, offices and "fitba" terraces of Edinburgh seems powered by inexhaustibly rich reserves of desire, rage, guilt and scabrous humor.

The Bedroom Secrets Of The Master Chefs may not be his best novel (parts of it are not very good at all), but it shares the same rolling chorus of hard men, old jakeys and biddies as its predecessors, builds with the same logic of escalating perversity, and leaves one with the same reeling sensation of having got quite a bit more than one's money's worth.

The hero is Danny Skinner, a restaurant inspector for the Edinburgh council. Good-looking, ambitious, cleverer than anyone around him (he reads Schopenhauer between drink and drug binges with his mates), he's a type at which Welsh excels: the slick chancer whose prospects are imperilled only by his own self-destructive appetites and impulses.

The explanation offered for the latter is his mother's refusal to tell him who his father is; a mystery that propels half the action of the book. The other, more interesting, half is set in motion by the appearance of a teetotal virgin, Brian Kibby, who attends Star Trek conferences and plays childish video games. Kibby gets a job at the restaurant inspectorate, entering Skinner's derisive orbit in the unfortunate possession of a toy train, purchased on his way into work. Almost immediately he awakens a demonic hatred in Skinner. The two find themselves in competition for the same office promotion, and the old dance begins.

As in earlier books (the intestinal parasite in *Filth*, for instance), a fantastical zoomorphic conceit is introduced, raising the stakes from mere bullying to a more apocalyptic persecution. By sheer power of loathing, Skinner puts a hex on Kibby, whereby the heavy toll of his bingeing is exacted not on his own body, but Kibby's. Skinner goes out on the town, but Kibby gets the hangover; Skinner gets beaten up, but Kibby wakes up with the bruises; Skinner attends an orgy where he's drugged and sodomised, but Kibby... etcetera.

In his thoroughgoing way, Welsh pummels



Picture: MURDO MACLEOD

the conceit to yield the maximum possible narrative and metaphorical mileage. As poor Kibby grows mysteriously fatter and iller while Skinner bounces merrily from bar to bar and bed to bed, the device serves as a kind of

Nietzschean glorying in the vigour of pagan indulgence over the sickness of puritan repression. Then, as it dawns on Skinner that if he actually drinks Kibby to death, he'll have killed the goose with the golden liver, the metaphor shifts to one of symbiosis: the subterranean bonds between predator and prey.

The two become steadily obsessed with each other to the point where they begin to converge. And then as Kibby, half-dead, grasps that his only hope of salvation lies in unleashing his own dark side, the contrivance becomes the vehicle for a characteristically melodramatic act of revenge.

This kind of baroque high concept can be both a stimulus and a burden for a writer. There are moments when you feel Welsh struggling to hide its inherent hokiness: an intermittent attempt to elevate Skinner's abuse-by-proxy into a symbol for Bush and

Blair's war in Iraq – "they get other people to deal with the shit they make through their own twisted vanity" – seems especially forced.

Most of Welsh's novels unfold through the beautifully individuated voices of their characters, usually Scottish. A sign, perhaps even a cause, of something comparatively slight or less densely imagined about this book is that much of it is written in the third person, and in a surprisingly conventional English that few of the characters actually speak.

There are phrases that come at you as if fresh from elocution class: "his attire, a tastefully blended mix of quality designer clothing..."; others seem sampled from old Penguin Balzac translations – a room "with huge ceilings, impressive cornices". It isn't that Welsh can't do omniscient narrative or "English" English – he's actually very good at both – just that here they seem haphazardly applied, with a corresponding impression of a slightly haphazard engagement with the characters themselves.

I suspect Welsh found himself wanting to write a more picaresque book than his premise allowed.

> THE BOOKS THAT CHANGED ME



Picture: MICHAEL AMENDOLA

Claire Scobie

For Whom The Bell Tolls

> Ernest Hemingway

I remember as a child being taken to the World War I cemeteries in the Somme. As a teenager I became fascinated with the literature and art engendered by the two world wars and then read Hemingway's masterpiece. Based on his experiences as a foreign correspondent (which I had dreams of becoming) it brought home the human impact of war. I recall savouring each page of his realistic, sparse prose packed with visceral emotion.

On The Road

> Jack Kerouac

A friend at university gave me this classic Beat novel. At the time it was a revelation. I've always devoured travel memoirs but this was something fresh, zany, exciting. I loved the breathlessness of Kerouac's style – his self-described "spontaneous prose" – and [Neal] Cassady's urgency to know everything and everyone. It took me on more than just a road trip across America, suffused with smoky jazz tunes, lashings of apple pie and hot romance – it showed me a new way to write.

Clandestine In Chile

> Gabriel Garcia Marquez

I came across this slim non-fiction work in a dusty bookshop in Kathmandu. It tells the story of Miguel Littin, a Chilean film director who fled his homeland after the military coup and returns 12 years later under a false passport to shoot the grim reality of life under Pinochet. Littin is a somewhat bumbling, incompetent figure who nonetheless takes huge risks and works closely with the underground resistance groups. He even has the audacity to shoot inside General Pinochet's private office. Marquez re-creates the story brilliantly from taped interviews with Littin and writes it in the first person. Not long after reading it I went to Tibet on a secret filming assignment – much less risky than Littin's but it was his courage that inspired me.

The Hero With A Thousand Faces

> Joseph Campbell

In this dense, widely researched book, Campbell takes a wide angle to the world's myths and legends. Based on psychology, Jungian dream work and archetypes, he compares the philosophies of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad with fairytales from around the globe, exploring the prevailing themes, similarities and symbols. Campbell illuminates the common humanity shared by all, which I find deeply appealing.

The Bhagavad-Gita

This Sanskrit epic is a poem that explores the spiritual struggle of the human soul. Written as a battle between Krishna and Arjuna, the underlying theme is a vision of life based on the values of joy and love. I admit I've never read it cover to cover, but each time I pick it up, another "aha" truth is revealed.

Last Seen In Lhasa by Claire Scobie is published by Rider

Interview by Danielle Teutsch



> FANTASY

Forest Mage
Robin Hobb
(HarperCollins, \$32.99)

ROBIN Hobb has devised an ingenious way to torture her hero in the second book of *The Soldier Son* trilogy. Cadet Nevare has recovered from the Speck plague that devastated the King's Cavalla Academy, but where others are now skin and bones, Nevare is fat. And not just slightly overweight, he's puffed up like a human balloon. This goes down very badly when he returns home for his brother's wedding, particularly with his fiancée. Yet gluttony is not to blame – Nevare's body is swollen with the sensual tree magic of the Speck people. With more action, less scene setting, this series really takes off in book two.

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> HISTORY

Pilgrimage
Garrie Hutchinson
(Black Inc, \$44.95)

IF we have to put a figure on unimaginable bravery, the \$1 million for Captain Alfred Shout's Gallipoli VC would seem appropriate. The redoubtable Shout is among the many Australians honoured in this extraordinary book. It's a comprehensive and well-illustrated travel guide to the battlefields where Australians fought and died. But it's much more too. Hutchinson recalls the action in great and awful detail, describes the scenes and memorials today, and suggests ways to explore and pay tribute to the sacrifices made. He gives real dignity to gallant lives that too often had a shambolic and miserable end. **Tony Grantham**



> CHILDREN

Jack Jones And The Pirate Curse
Judith Rossell
(Little Hare Books, \$14.95)

IT'S a perfectly normal school day for Jack Jones until the people around him start turning into pirates. Jack is the 10th direct descendant of Blackstrap Morgan and bears a terrible pirate curse. If he doesn't find a way to end it, he may be on the run forever. Rossell delivers a lively, gripping tale that is also very funny. Despite the wicked antics of the pirates, there is never any real fear that Jack might meet an unhappy end. Jack's curse-affected world is a fun place to visit and readers aged eight to 11 should enjoy spending time immersed in this tale. **Amanda Holohan**