

*A Long Way Down* by Nick Hornby (Penguin Viking) R150.

26 June 2005

Nick Hornby specialises in thirty-something, articulate, temporarily unattached, self-sufficient but emotionally available heterosexual males. Two of his novels featuring the type have been filmed: *High Fidelity* starring John Cusack and *About a Boy* starring Hugh Grant. The choice of actor gives a fair idea of the emotional range of the genre: laddish charm, wry but tolerant self-criticism, puppy-dog sex appeal. The issues arising out of the interaction of this type with his female counterpart tend to centre on the relation between the heart and the sexual organs, wittily mediated by a sharp intelligence. In *A Long Way Done* Hornby extends his range, both in terms of protagonists and of the choices confronting them. The novel starts at midnight on New Years' Eve on the fifteenth floor of a building in London known as Toppers' House, where four people meet by chance, all of them having come to do what gave the building its name: jump. Apart from their suicidal intent, the four have nothing in common: Martin is a forty-something former breakfast show host, publicly disgraced and separated from his family after a spell in prison because of sleeping with a fifteen-year old; Maureen is a fifty-one year old single parent, whose nineteen-year old son can neither walk nor talk nor even recognise her; eighteen-year old Jess is the ditzy, illiterate, druggy daughter of a junior minister of Education; and JJ is a thirty-one year old American rock musician who has lost his band, his best friend and his girl friend, lamented in that order. The four characters take turns to narrate, giving Hornby plenty of opportunity for the kind of humour arising from different perspectives on the same event. .

The four get talking, and whereas it would be an over-statement to say that they establish a rapport, they do feel a certain affinity with one another. Recognising that, as Jess says, "The moment's gone", they agree to come down from the roof and look for Jess's boyfriend, Chas, the man responsible for her being up there in the first place. As Maureen says, "It wasn't much of a plan, really. But it was the only plan we had, so all we could do was try to make it work."

At moments like these one suspects Hornby of passing on his problem to his characters: he has invented four people who want to jump off a roof and then decide not to: now what do they do? I suspect most people would either go home or find another less over-populated building, but Hornby has a novel to write, so his characters must stick together, implausible as this is, even while they comment on its implausibility. Thus Martin says about the project of finding Chas: "The whole Jess and Chas thing was ludicrous, of course, a waste of time and energy, a banal little sideshow; but it absorbed us, got us down off the roof."

Well, yes. But having got his characters off the roof, Hornby has to keep them moving. His main ally in this is Jess, who is hare-brained enough to come up with far-fetched ideas of things for the foursome to do together; and because Jess originated the idea, the other characters are free to comment on how far-fetched it is, thus forestalling the reader's objections.

One of Jess's ideas is selling their story to the media; only, in order to make it more newsworthy, she tells the world that they were prevented from committing suicide by an angel that looked like Matt Damon. This earns them the ridicule of the tabloid press, but

it also earns them enough money to take Maureen, who has never had a holiday, on a week-long break to the Canary Islands.

The holiday is mildly eventful: Jess, predictably, gets trashed; JJ, unexpectedly, gets laid; Martin, characteristically, gets pissed off with everyone else; and Maureen, unusually, gets a rest from looking after her son. But mainly it fills twenty pages pleasantly, and if one suspects that that may be its main purpose, it does not necessarily spoil the pleasure. And so on: the four characters more or less obligingly participate in events mainly contrived by Jess, and it is difficult not to feel that behind Jess's contrivances is Hornby's own labouring of a plot which has very little internal momentum.

Of course, all plots are contrived: the trick is to make them appear otherwise. If Hornby hasn't altogether mastered that trick here, he has plenty else going for him. The interchanges between the characters have real edge to them, and the dialogue is consistently interesting. The four characters all have a brand of humour rooted in their situations. Martin has the cynical put-downs of a clever man who has failed ("I couldn't even jump off a fucking tower-block without fucking up"); JJ has the self-conscious irony of a man better-read than almost anybody he has met ("Suicide wasn't invented for people like this. It was invented for people like Virginia Woolf and Nick Drake. And me"); Jess has the naïve over-confidence of a very young person who rather prides herself on her maturity ("Men think women are like fucking laptops or whatever, like, My old one's knackered and anyway, you can get ones that are slimmer and do more stuff now"); Maureen is unintentionally humorous in her earnest attempts to understand a world of which she has no experience ("Being gay was a bit like the Olympics: it disappeared in ancient times, and then they brought it back in the twentieth century"). These characters may not be particularly complex, but they are likeable enough to spend a wet week-end with. They are, like all Hornby's characters, fundamentally decent and not so much despairing as disappointed. *A Long Way Down* is Depression Lite, and we never really expect that anybody will jump. But by definition that is the closest any of its readers will have come to suicide, so there is quite enough to identify with here.