Schroder: A Novel by Amity Gaige (Faber & Faber)

Ernest Hemingway famously maintained that all American novels could be traced back to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn.* That may have been an overstatement, but it is true that the basic pattern of Huck's story – a raft trip down the Mississippi with a runaway slave on board, in flight from 'civilisation' and its constraints – is a recurring one in American fiction and film. The road movie – *Easy Rider, Thelma and Louise* – and the road novel – Kerouac's *On the Road,* Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* – have become a genre unto themselves; and nearly always the protagonists are outlaws on the run– think of *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

Movement, in American fiction, is freedom, or gives the illusion of freedom, no matter that the flight more often than not ends in capture or death. Ultimately, keeping going is more important than any destination that may at some stage have lent some spurious illusion of purpose to the flight.

Amity Gaige's wonderful novel is squarely in this tradition, though the specifics are entirely original: Eric Schroder, a first generation refugee from East Germany, involved in a heated custody battle for his six-year old daughter, Meadow, resorts to the simple expedient of abducting her, ostensibly to show her Mount Washington, but in fact because he can't stand being without her. The endeavour is of course doomed, as we know from the very first paragraph of the novel, which is written from jail, as a letter to his estranged wife, Laura.

The novel's achievement is in the creation of Eric Schroder – or Eric Kennedy, as he reinvented himself at age fourteen. Quite aware of his own failings – irresponsibility, impulsiveness, duplicity – without being abject about it, he nevertheless manages to make the reader root for him unreservedly: we want him to have the daughter he loves to distraction, and we resent his prosaic, unimaginative, conventional wife for her lack of generosity. (I should mention that not all reviewers have been as easily charmed by Eric Schroder.)

Of course, since this is a first-person narrative, it is hardly surprising that we side with the narrator against The Opposition, as he calls the combined forces of his wife, her parents and her lawyer. Eric himself, however, is generally fair to Laura, or tries to be: "You were prompt," he tells her, "You were responsible. You were deliberate. You were health conscious. … You were easily offended. There was a whole list of social issues over which you took quick offense."

In short, Laura has every virtue except warmth, generosity and humour, and if she sounds like a bit of a prig, that is not because Eric thinks she is one. To him she is the model young American woman, and, as a first generation immigrant, he admires all things American – to the extent of adopting a false identity as Eric Kennedy. This fraud is perpetrated at age fourteen, at summer camp, when he decides that in order to be fully American he must have an American name, and selects for himself the most illustrious America name he knows. He also invents a childhood near the Kennedy enclave at Hyannisport to go with his distinguished surname. When people assume he is related to Those Kennedys, he denies the assumption only vigorously enough to seem modest. "I had chosen my own childhood," he reflects. "I had found a past that matched my present."

But Eric does not reinvent himself only in order to be an American: he is also trying to divest himself of his East German past, and of the mother who, he suspects, obtained an exit visa from East Berlin for him and his father through services she rendered to a Communist functionary: "All I knew was that for as long as I was Eric Kennedy, she was neither living nor dead." Creating a new identity, he opts for a past in which his mother "did not exist at all" – and if it also involves negating his gentle, patient father, that is a price Eric is prepared to pay.

But, as the novel makes clear, an invented identity, no less than an inherited identity, brings responsibilities, in particular the need to keep having that identity validated by others: "I was Eric Kennedy only inasmuch as I could secure a consensus that I was," he says, and if for a long time he succeeds in that, it also means that he cannot afford to invite any investigation of his past – as, for instance, in a custody battle. And, ironically, his assumed identity becomes a major factor in the media frenzy that accompanies his pursuit and capture; as one of his fellow-inmates says to him: "You wouldn't even be in here if it wasn't for your famous name. If you weren't a Kennedy, nobody would have bothered with you.'

And, of course, an America identity, hardly less than an East German one, brings with it certain cultural coercions. The novel takes a long hard look at that hallowed institution, the American family (it comes with a commendation from Jonathan Franzen, that ruthless dissector of the institution). In particular, it traces the imperceptible but relentless progression (or retreat) from the enchantment of young love to the disenchantment of a marriage of irreconcilable traits: "your increasingly fervent Catholicism, my laziness, your need for order and structure, my lack of discipline, your martyred reticence, my tendency to talk too much."

What Eric lacks is true American rectitude, as practised by his wife and parents-in-law, a quality in which his young daughter finds security, even while she enjoys the adventure of the unregulated life he offers her. And it occurs to him that by introducing Meadow to the freedom of life on the road, he may be alienating her from the regular life, from "her deadening education, and her conventional grandparents, and her merciless mother".

With, possibly, a twinge of guilt, he asks himself: "Might her familiarity with people like me … consign her to their company, so that she would be drawn to them and would travel with them in their VW vans or the sidecars of their motorcycles, forever along the edges of things, until she would be, in the end, more comfortable with freaks and eccentrics than with the main army?" Given those two choices, which is preferable, the freaks or the main army? The novel leaves that question with us without suggesting an answer.

Gaige's style, or the narrative style she creates for Eric, is easy, free-wheeling, idiomatic, but highly articulate, somewhat reminiscent of Saul Bellow's Augie March, that other great traveller. The simplest action is described, without any display of virtuosity, in a direct, fresh way that marks it as an individual observation: "April shoved the gearshift into park, took a tube of lipstick out of her purse, and ran it back and forth across her lower lip."

Only rarely does the style over-reach itself and become self-conscious, as when Eric describes his first experience of a plane taking off: "Until the plane tilted back, as if in prostration to the sun …The plane seared the sky …" This is both over-written and inaccurate (in effect Eric is saying the plane is tilting back to fall flat on its face), its awkwardness somehow helping one to see how extremely natural and flexible the rest of the novel is by contrast, how easily it reads, and how likeable this unlikely anti-hero is. Eric Schroder-Kennedy is a worthy successor to a whole line of American outlaws, rebels and travellers without destination.