Sleeper's Wake by Alistair Morgan (Penguin) R180
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The Bishop of Wakefield was reportedly so outraged by Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* that he threw the book into the fire. There were times, while reading Alistair Morgan's disturbing debut novel, that I felt like following the Bishop's example. I was prevented from doing so by the reflection that *Jude the Obscure* outlived the Bishop's outrage, and that *Sleeper's Wake* will probably outlast my squeamishness.

Sleeper's Wake is, then, a violent and disturbing novel. It is explicitly written to a thesis, derived, along with the novel's title, from John Steiner's "sleeper" theory which maintains that "within violence-prone people there are aggressive personality traits [or 'sleepers'] that remain latent until awoken by particular conditions." Morgan adopts Ervin Staub's elaboration of this theory, namely that "given certain circumstances, it was the norm – not the exception – for cruel deeds to be carried out by regular people like you and me."

It is not a comforting thesis, but it has animated fiction, fable and religious narrative since time immemorial. It is beyond the range and competence of this review to pronounce on the validity of this theory: what is at issue is the success or otherwise of its incorporation into the fiction.

Morgan prepares the ground with some care. His protagonist, John Wraith, traumatised by the death in a car accident of his wife and daughter, retreats to recuperate in Nature's Valley, a beach resort deserted in winter. Here he meets a similarly traumatised family, one Roelf and his teenaged daughter Jackie and son Simon, who lost wife and mother in a brutal robbery.

The novel trips us up: starting with a protagonist hardly able to cope with the demands of ordinary life, it would seem to promise an upward trajectory, of new hope and purpose. Instead it traps us in a downward spiral of degeneration and dissolution, as John develops an obsession with the precociously provocative Jackie, with disastrous results.

The location is brilliantly chosen. Apart from being the kind of isolated spot that the story demands, the name – Nature's Valley – reminds us that nature is as often violent as she is benign. Looming over the valley is the Pig's Head: affording a beautiful view of the valley, its name yet carries disquieting echoes of *Lord of the Flies*.

John Wraith is set up as someone with an ambivalent attitude to women's bodies, irresistibly attracted and yet faintly repelled too: "this fascination with women's bodies has never ceased to torment me" he says. The ambivalence is central to the novel's vision, in which sex is a source of obsession rather than of pleasure. Thinking back on his dead wife, John recalls that "I actually preferred coming on my own, rather than with her… It was all about control."

Control is what is about to be challenged in the isolation of Nature's Valley, and the tale hurtles to its bloody climax with grim inevitability. There is no doubting the power of this novel or the competence of the author. One might want to question the authenticity of its vision, however. It is the danger of a novel written to demonstrate a thesis that the autonomy of the characters will be sacrificed to the demands of the thesis, and I don't think this novel altogether escapes that pitfall. John too often seems to be a personification of the sleeper theory rather than a character in his own right. Thus, as he follows his naked nymphet from the forest into the sea, "naked and semi-erect," he

reflects, “Is that not the sorry story of man: able enough to walk out of the forest, but unable to leave behind his base desires?”

Never can a hard-on have been as self-conscious as this without collapsing. In keeping with this metaphorising strain, by the time that, in the gruelling climactic scene, John buries his face in baboon shit, he has ceased to be a character in a novel and become the exponent of a thesis.

But how representative is John really of “regular people like you and me”? Apart from being traumatised, he has, by his own account, never exactly been Mr Nice Guy. Witnessing his wife’s devastation in the wake of his infidelity, “I realised that I was deriving a cruel pleasure from seeing the destruction in Deborah’s face” and proceeds to exploit her grief. He is fond of questionable aphorisms extending his own moral nature to all of humanity, such as “It’s a truism that we love other people only to serve our own needs” or “Moral navigation is not so much an instructive device as it is a diversion from our true instincts.” Really? We? Our?

Morgan would seem to be having it both ways: on the one hand John Wraith is a warped personality with a very partial view of human nature, as witness also two dream sequences of surpassing repulsiveness; on the other hand he is an instructive and representative specimen of humanity. But this is a contradiction he shares with some of the most powerful creations of literature, from Shakespeare’s Macbeth to Conrad’s Kurtz: the view from below claims its own validity through the power of its presentation. Accepting then that Wraith’s view is partial and flawed, we can still admire the skill with which this novel embodies that vision. Otherwise we find ourselves of the Bishop of Wakefield’s party.