

Crash Land

by Doug Johnstone

Faber & Faber

Reviewed by Paul F Cockburn

An iconic character seen in much Western literature, but especially crime noir fiction, is the *femme fatale*—‘the beautiful, sophisticated, seductive woman who walks into the hero’s life and turns it upside down. It’s not an archetype Doug Johnstone has used before—many of his novels have helped map out the edges of ‘domestic noir’, their focus on all-too-ordinary people whose lives are forever changed by one single, criminal act. Nevertheless, his approach to this potential cliché is both effective and intelligent;

The ‘femme’ in question is Maddie—full name, Mrs Madeline Pierce—who steps into the life of jewellery student Finn in the departure lounge of Orkney airport. ‘Sometimes life is dramatic,’ she tells him, although neither anticipate the horrendous plane crash that leaves seven dead, three—including Finn—injured and Maddie initially unaccounted for.

Johnstone is never an author who wastes time or energy with literary throat-clearing; it’s clear from the start (to the reader, if not to the increasingly gin-addled Finn, who is our one and only point of view character throughout the novel) that Maddie is fleeing more than just the lecherous interest of some oil terminal workers. Quite quickly we realise that Finn is a somewhat self-centred character (not least shown by his lethargic lack of enthusiasm for his supposed girlfriend back at home in Dundee); Johnstone’s skill as a writer is to ensure that, even if we might not even initially like him, there is enough to hold out interest and we come to sympathise with ‘in extremis’—even though, ultimately, many of his problems could’ve been avoided by him simply thinking with his brain rather than what’s in his pants.

Crash Land is just as assured and sharply written as anyone familiar with Johnstone’s work would expect, though it is nevertheless something of a gear-change, given that his last few novels have been decidedly set in Scotland’s urban central belt. Here, we are once again among the kind of unforgiving rural landscapes which featured in his earlier novels, with the added isolation and sense of claustrophobia of the Northern Isles. As is his way, Johnstone drip feeds details of the Orkney landscape, and the elements which shape it, building up a disturbingly all-too-real sense of the beautiful rawness of the place and its people.

Not that Johnstone isn’t above a little literary play, by referencing arguably Orkney’s most famous author, George Mackay Brown. This isn’t just with an apposite epigraph, however, but by the delightful conceit of having Finn named by his own, now-deceased mother after one of Mackay

Brown's main characters, with Finn concerned by what that might actually mean about himself and his life. It's neither showy nor pretentious; nevertheless, as a way of gently anchoring his novel onto the literary heritage of the island on which it is set, it simply confirms Johnstone's lightness of touch. Johnstone has produced a gripping read which thankfully never underestimates his readers' intelligence.