

Thrice-peripheralised

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John Newsham, *Killing the Horses*, Wrecking Ball Press, 123pp, £14.00 ISBN: 978-1903110782

John Newsham's first novel, *Killing the Horses*, follows two teenage boys, Ryan and Liam, as they spend a day skipping school and wandering the woodlands and fields that border their home estate. It is a novel about nature, about working-class childhood, and about the boundaries between the rural and the urban. But it is also a novel fundamentally about the question of the periphery, and its place in modern society.

Peripheries are at the centre of this story. First, the landscape around which the story turns, and with which the lives of Liam and Ryan are intimately bound up. "This place", Newsham writes, "was on the edge". Liam and Ryan inhabit a rural-urban fringe that is every bit an edgeland. Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley, in their book *Edgelands*, have suggested that in these places can be found "a kind of Arcadia . . . formed in some of the wider spaces of dereliction and waste left behind in the aftermath of industrialisation". Aptly for this reading of *Killing the Horses*, Roberts and Farley suggest of these edgelands that "children and teenagers, as well as lawbreakers, have seemed especially at home in them, the former because they have . . . instinctively treated their jungle spaces as a vast playground".

In Roberts and Farley's hands, the edgelands are mostly a romantic and nostalgic set of places that evoke the relationship between childhood and wandering. Newsham complicates this by foregrounding the violence of the edgelands, showing them to be more than mere playgrounds. In the opening pages, Ryan and Liam perpetrate great violence against the natural world that provides them with their respite from school. Along a muddy bank, the boys shoot a pigeon with an air rifle, wounding it. Ryan swiftly and decisively dispatches the bird from

its misery, and the boys take it upon themselves to carry it to the woods for a formal burial. We follow their journey as they reconcile themselves to the violence they have just enacted. But as they walk, and talk in the characteristically violent, jibing tones of northern teenage boys, their friendship couched in such affectations as "Fuck d'you do that for?" and "Thick bastard", we also come to sense something of the violence that the boys themselves are subject to.

Violence

From whence comes this violence? Primarily, the story suggests, from the peripheral nature of this particular edgeland - an urban edgeland precariously positioned at the edge of society, and of society's concerns. The story takes shape in a fringe area inspired by the east-Bradford home of Newsham's youth. The estate on which the boys live "floated alone along the furthest reaches of the city's imagination". The roads here are "desolate and grey". Liam and Ryan live lives that are remote from the concerns of metropolitan society. At one point in their wanderings a plane passes overhead, barely audible and unobserved by the boys on its journey "from somewhere to somewhere . . . each somewhere a somewhere neither boy would ever know". Newsham here channels the words of the geographer Neil Smith, who responded to Thomas Friedman's clarion call that "the world is flat" by noting how "the world may be flat for those who can afford a business class ticket to fly around it", but "for those in Bombay's shanties, or for that matter in New York's Harlem or London's East End, the price of the same business class ticket to see the world as flat is just as prohibitive". Bradford's edgelands are also capitalism's edgelands.

Ryan and Liam are themselves peripheral in an already-peripheralised place. Too young yet to

inhabit the world of adults, they talk in naive bravado of the violent acts they've seen and heard tell of. But they also fear the violence of the adult world. As their discussions normalise the violent actions of older siblings and others, the boys themselves recoil and find a sense of safety in one another's company. At one point, they contemplate whether to make their way back to school for the afternoon. "What else are we gunna do?", Liam suggests. "Just stay up here", implores Ryan as he looks out from the hillside across the estate, the school, the city and the world beyond. "Shit all down there anyway".

What of the eponymous horses of the book's title? They too inhabit a life at the edge of that for which their forebears were employed. On their first appearance, they look to the boys "like a painting from centuries before". Newsham describes them looking "as though they still wandered in some long-dead world where horses helped haul sandstone out of the earth". A world "long-dead". Killed, in fact. No longer working horses in that industrial sense, these creatures instead dwell in the fields beside the estate. But the legacy of those industrial times, or perhaps of some post-industrial chemical malpractice, haunts the banks and fields, as well as the boys' imaginations. Within living memory the horse-inhabitants of these edgelands had fallen victim to some mysterious ailment. The landscape itself gestures towards this past, with the boys coming across a sign that reads "*Entry prohibited! . . . Control Measure Protection Zone ahead*". "What's that mean?", asks Liam. "Means stay the fuck out or horses'll eat you", Ryan replies. And with that, the boys press on over the threshold into the field, haunted all the while by their memories of the council arriving to exterminate the previous unwell inhabitants of this land.

Periphery

Nature may appear alienated at the periphery, but it is not alone. The boys talk of family members who took their own lives, of parental relationships gone awry. "The alienated subject", Rachel Jaeggi has written, inhabits "a world that is not one's own . . . a world in which one is not 'at home' and over which one can have no influence". Bradford's industrial skyline arose at the heart of a mode of production that has since forsaken it. Liam and Ryan inhabit this alienated world of capitalism's edgelands. But their small act of "wagging" school can be read as a resistant act, a refusal to acquiesce to their alienated subjecthood. Through this act they build their bond, and find their space in the world, a space from which to reflect on the circumstances of their

existence. In the friendship of working-class youth, Newsham finds a semblance of hope. Yet it is a hope arrayed on all sides by violent forces. The simple beauty of Newsham's *Killing the Horses* is to be found in the way it vocalises, rather than ventriloquises, the experiences of Liam, Ryan and countless others like them, those thrice-peripheralised by dint of their age, their class, and their geographical location.

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