

review – review – review - review – review – review – review- review

## *Three Friends and a Bad Thing*

by

Mads Rage

In the past two years, Mads Rage has – apparently out of the blue – come to occupy a place at the centre of a literary field that diverges rather dramatically from the idea of ‘Norwegian contemporary literature’. On the heels of a post-apocalyptic seafaring novel and his tale of the man with an enormous cock comes ‘Three Friends and a Bad Thing’, the story of a man who gets his head shot off with a rifle and has it replaced with a boat radio.

The ‘three friends’ are Kjørvald, Guri and the narrator Rånnien, who plan to ‘talk crap and drink liquor and mess around on Playstation forever’. However, during a bout of heavy drinking a couple of pages in, Kjørvald and Guri manage to shoot Rånnien’s mug off with a rifle. In the ensuing panic, technical wizard Kjørvald manages to install a boat radio where the head should be – and Rånnien is reborn as a strange cyborg.

I must confess to having a soft spot for this kind of yarn; the idiotic scenario provides considerable potential for both situation comedy and existential musings. What’s more, Rage takes the premise to its logical extreme. The novel is written in a single long stream of words – not a comma, not a full stop, not a paragraph, just a driving monologue (which Rånnien explains thus: ‘I could even talk faster than ever before because I was no longer limited by the capacity for movement of the sort of muscle fibres usually to be found in the tongue and mouth region before they were blown away’). It is an ambitious concept that could quickly come to feel like an enervating writing exercise. But one could also see it as a way of overcoming the slightly stiff and schematic formal principles to which ‘the novel’ can often feel bound: the flat form (and-and-and) demands writing that chants, resonant and musical, giving the novel its breakneck pace.

Despite its transgressive form, the novel’s plot is strikingly prosaic, consisting of Rånnien’s attempts to understand what his life will now look like. Is he actually disabled? Will he be able to have a life with a wife and children? Do we even need a sense of smell? Rage’s world has some traits in common with that of Matias Faldbakken’s ‘We are five’: the village community that the novel portrays, its eccentric inhabitants and, funniest of all, their instant acceptance of the fact that there’s a person wandering around with a boat radio for a head, talking in the crackling tones of a cinema newsreel.

Although I laughed out loud repeatedly while reading the book, there’s an underlying gravity to it: about friendship, community – and about people drifting apart from one another. The shot in the head leads to an inevitable schism

between the friends. The existential pain of experiencing loss of friendship, as well as loss of trust and a sense of belonging, becomes a core point in the book.

These sorts of delicate realisations – that irremediable events do happen in life – are what give the novel its unexpected depth. And it is this capacity to take the ludicrous premise seriously, combined with Rage’s sometimes extremely striking imagery – as well as his willingness to stretch the form of the novel – that makes ‘Three Friends and a Bad Thing’ into a strong book.

What’s more, it is an important reminder, in a broadly serious literary landscape, of how liberating a good laugh can be.

**Review in the daily: Klassekampen (in Oslo)**