

*A Week in December* by Sebastian Faulks (Hutchinson) R215

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Sebastian Faulks has hitherto tended to recreate past eras: the turn of the twentieth century (*Human Traces*), the First World War (*Birdsong*), the Second World War (*Charlotte Grey*), the Cold War (*On Green Dolphin Street*), Cambridge in the seventies (*Engleby*). He now chooses to go contemporary, more specifically London Contemporary, venturing onto territory colonised by Martin Amis (*The Information*, *Yellow Dog*), Ian McEwan (*Saturday*) and Nick Hornby (*A Long Way Down*), to mention only its most prosperous citizens.

Faulks pitches his novel somewhere between the ultra-realist surface of McEwan and the satirical exaggeration of Amis. He describes contemporary London in loving or at any rate meticulous detail (it's at all times possible to plot his characters' whereabouts on an *A to Z*), but then shapes events in accordance with his agenda or central theme: the tension between the 'Real World' and the various alternative realities his characters choose to inhabit or are constrained into inhabiting.

The novel is populated by an interestingly diverse selection of Londoners: Sophie Topping, wife of the newest MP in Parliament; John Veals, a dour hedge-fund manager and his put-upon wife Vanessa; Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish football player and his Russian porn star girlfriend Olya; Farooq al-Rashid, a chutney millionaire about to receive the OBE for his services to industry; R. Tranter, a hack book reviewer; Gabriel Northwood, an underemployed barrister; and Jenni Fortune, a Tube driver on the Circle Line. Above ground the characters are joined by the fact that they have all (except Jenni) been invited to an inaugural dinner party by Mrs Topping; below ground they are connected by the Tube.

There is plenty of scope here for social commentary, and Faulks exploits it to the hilt. At the centre of his novel, like Sauron in Mordor, is John Veals: his alternative reality is the Market, which he manipulates with a ruthless disregard to consequences in the real world; for if modern financial transactions for the most part have reality only in cyberspace, they do ultimately have consequences in the real world, as witness the meltdown of 2008. Veals (the name a brilliant combining of Venal and Evil) is the villain of the piece, as, according to Faulks, the modern banking system is at the core of our woes.

Other characters have alternative realities of varying degrees of toxicity. Fin, the neglected if indulged son of John Veals, is addicted to skunk and a "reality" show called *It's Madness*, in which mentally disturbed people are placed in a Big Brother situation (the "Barking Bungalow"), with fatal consequences. Jenni is addicted to Parallax, a computer game in which the player adopts an alternative identity; R Tranter is really only at home in the nineteenth century and vents his spleen at the present through his vituperative reviews; Gabriel relatively harmlessly wiles away his excess leisure time with crosswords.

Another central plot line concerns Hassan, the son of Farooq al-Rashid, who is drawn into an Islamist bomb plot: his alternative reality is the teachings of the Koran, with its contempt for the actual world and its promises of paradise. Like Veals's market manipulation, Islamist theory is shown to be a fiction that has real and catastrophic consequences in the actual world; in the book's metaphorical structure, indeed, it is paralleled with the certainties of Gabriel's schizophrenic brother who "hears voices which give him instructions" and whose "cosmos is fully understood". As Jenni says, "I suppose we all live in our different worlds, don't we?" Faulks, shows, though, that in the meantime we have to coexist in this one – a coexistence that is unfortunately more often a matter of competition than of cooperation. Veals's immense riches are derived from the poverty of the multitude: as one dinner guest explains, "The misdemeanours of the bankers will be paid for by

millions of people in the real economy losing their jobs.” Tranter is “interested only in bad reviews”, and is eaten up with envy when a fellow-reviewer publishes a successful book; as for Sophie, the society hostess, “there was a virtual league table from which people were promoted and relegated.” Even the poor denizens of Barking Bungalow are competing for the grand prize of treatment in a luxury sanatorium. And Hassan is involved in a plot to blow up the mental institution housing Gabriel’s brother.

It’s a potent mix, and Faulks stirs it with his usual vigour. If reader interest flags occasionally, that may be because, as before, Faulks can’t bear not to display the extent of his research. The mechanics of market manipulations are explained in exhausting (and to the layman unintelligible) detail, and the novel as a whole is perhaps too transparently an indictment of the author’s pet gripes (modern education, mass media, celebrity culture). Also, the satirical exaggerations are at times at odds with the novel’s predominantly realistic surface, and come to seem merely implausible. For, of course, the novel itself is an alternative reality in which we need to believe for at least as long as it takes us to read it.

Still, for much of the time *A Week in December* grips and entertains quite sufficiently to keep us reading – and refraining from reality television, skunk and market manipulation. That in itself justifies buying this book.