

*Engleby* by Sebastian Faulks (Hutchinson) R208  
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Sebastian Faulks specialises in recreations of the past: the First World War in *Birdsong*, the Second in *Charlotte Gray*, the period in between in *The Girl at the Lion d'Or*, the Cold War in *On Green Dolphin Street*. In his previous novel, too, the over-researched *Human Traces*, he returned to the early twentieth century, focusing on the early history of psychology.

*Engleby* has something of the same delight in the recreation of an earlier period, but here that period is closer in time, namely Cambridge in the 1970s. As in earlier novels, the recreation is meticulous –indeed, so exact are the topographical and topical references to Cambridge of the 1970s, its pubs and colleges and coteries and societies, that one suspects Faulks is relying largely on memory here (Google confirms that Faulks was indeed a student at Cambridge in the 1970s).

The hyper-realist surface is more than an end in itself, though: it serves as ballast, as it were, to a mind that is seriously unhinged. The fact that that mind belongs to the narrator of the novel makes it all the more difficult for the reader to understand, initially, just what kind of nightmare we are trapped in.

*Engleby*'s deceptively simple style, we gradually realise, conceals about as much as it reveals: he is the ultimate unreliable narrator. He does tell us, on the second page of the novel: "My memory's odd like that. I'm big on detail, but there are holes in the fabric." One of the larger holes in the fabric is the absence in Mike of any expression of feeling: we know (most of) what he does, but we don't really know what he feels about it, if indeed he feels anything.

Coming from a poor family with an abusive father, winning scholarships to a horrendous military-style public school and to Cambridge, Mike has learnt from an early age to arm himself against an environment which he feels to be at worst actively hostile (school), at best politely indifferent (Cambridge).

At school, subjected to the usual cruelties of a system of institutionalised brutality, he bears the torments of others with apparently stoic resignation. He discovers, though, an unexpected aptitude for rugby; what he particularly likes is bringing down one of his tormentors: "and then he might accidentally get trampled at the bottom of the ruck that followed. I swapped boots with McCain, who hated rugby but had metal studs; sometimes there was blood on my laces."

The deadpan narration almost enables us miss what we're reading: that Mike's anger, not being expressed in any other way, tends to get violent.

At Cambridge the ostracism is more genteel. It takes us a while, in fact, to realise that he has no social life, because the way he tells it tends to suggest that he's at the centre of a lively social circle.

Gate-crashing a filming expedition to Ireland, he makes himself useful by buying booze, selling grass at a cut rate, and cooking meals. After one particularly sterling effort, he reports, expressionlessly but heart-wrenchingly, "A guy called Andy said, 'Great sauce, man.' Maybe he thought I was a caterer."

Describing the group of people enjoying his meal, Mike says: "It looked really good with all the candles and everyone gathered round." It takes a double take to realise that Mike is not part of the circle, is looking on from outside. He is, in fact the eternal outsider playing

at being an insider; and given that the novel is supposed to be his journal, convincing himself, too, that he belongs where he yearns to belong.

His yearning is focused on one young woman, Jennifer; indeed, she is probably the main reason why he has come to Ireland. Having told us about his interest in her, he informs us a bit later: "It's going well with Jenifer. I see her at the Soc. Meetings and I've started going to history lectures with her."

One would deduce from this that Mike is on easy social terms with Jennifer, may even be, as he claims at times, her "boy friend". Gradually we discover that he has not spoken to her, that he is in fact stalking her.

To say more would be to spoil the story. Suffice it to say that Faulks gives us a fascinating case study of a stalker, told by himself, the emotional life of someone overwhelmed by "the inexplicable pettiness of being alive".

Only at the end of the novel, which takes place in the present ("It's 7 March, 2006 and I understand that a film about gay cowboys has just won an Oscar"), are we given other people's perspectives on Mike, enabling us at last to see how much we've missed in Mike's narrative.

Here, too, we are given various analyses of his condition – including, perhaps most interestingly, his own. Recalling seeing a desperate mother in a supermarket slap her child, he predicts: "And that child would slowly ascend toward full awareness in a world whose sky was violence and whose horizons were fear."

Here, tentatively, Faulks offers his tale of an unhappy stalker as representative of a society, modern Britain, in which lovelessness is, to many, a condition of being, a condition that breeds fear and violence. It's an engrossing tale and a profoundly thought-provoking conclusion.