

Hanif Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift* (Faber, R109.95)

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In Hanif Kureishi's previous novel, *Intimacy*, the protagonist, hard pressed to find something to believe in, declares "I believe in individualism, in sensualism, and in creative idleness. I like the human imagination: its delicacy, its brutal aggressive energy, its profundity, its power to transform the material world into art. I like what men and women make."

In *Intimacy*, this credo remains a mere wistful hankering after a redemption not offered by the novel, a theoretical belief powerless to dispel the bleak reality of a failed relationship. In *Gabriel's Gift*, on the other hand, creative idleness comes into own; indeed, the eponymous Gift arguably is the human imagination, serving here exactly to redeem and restore.

This is to say that in *Gabriel's Gift* Kureishi has returned to the more hopeful whimsy of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, his Oscar-nominated screenplay, in which a racist skinhead and a young Pakistani man find love together. On the face of it, the cast of *Gabriel's Gift* offers less of a challenge to human powers of compatibility: the central relationship is, for Kureishi, almost exotically ordinary: a man, woman and child. But the novel negotiates with some skill Tolstoy's famous dictum that whereas all happy families are alike, all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.

The quirky inventiveness of the novel is greatly helped by having as protagonist and focaliser the fifteen-year old Gabriel; whereas *Intimacy* is told from the perspective of a father about to walk out on his partner and their two sons, here the departure of the father is observed through the laconic gaze of the resilient and resourceful Gabriel: "Now Dad had gone and was living somewhere else. If the world hadn't quite been turned upside down, it was at an unusual and perilous angle, and certainly not still."

Gabriel's world, thus disturbed, has to regain its poise and equilibrium; apart from the usual distractions of adolescence, hovering perilously close to the brink of criminality, he has to sort out the noisy, abusive relationship of his self-indulgent parents, trying to avoid the fateful stereotype of failed marriages around him: "He had noticed, in his friends' parents too, that there were different styles of madness for men and women, fathers and mothers. The women became obsessive, excessively nervous, afraid and self-hating, fluttering and blinking with damaged inner electricity. The men blunted themselves with alcohol and cursed, blamed and hit out, disappearing into the pub and then into jail."

Not, on the face of it, a hopeful scenario. What saves Gabriel's family from this squalid fate is, largely, Gabriel. Dealing adroitly with his demanding, self-dramatising mother, the lugubrious

Eastern European au pair who is supposed to look after him, and his not-very-reliable ex-musician father, Gabriel brings out the best in all of them, while pursuing his own ambition of making a film.

He is helped in his reconstruction of his family by the angelic interventions of his dead twin brother Archie and by the unlikely agency of one Lester Jones, a 70s rock star presumably modelled on David Bowie: "Like most pop heroes, Lester contained the essential ingredients of both tenderness and violence, and was neither completely boy nor girl, changing continuously as he expressed and lost himself in various disguises." Apart from embodying the shape-shifting androgyny which readers of *The Buddha of Suburbia* will recognise as Kureishi's favourite thing, Brown features in the novel as the personification of the successful imagination:

"Ponderously Dad explained that Lester had the one thing that everyone wanted, something rarer than rubies or even the ability to make money, the force at the centre of the world which made precious and important things happen. This was his imagination or talent. This was his gift."

"I write songs," Lester tells Gabriel, "but I don't know how. When something occurs to me, I write it down and put it in the song. What does an imagination do but see what isn't there?"

Gabriel, a graphic artist and aspiring film maker, of course literally sees what isn't there; indeed, as aspect of his gift is to create, in the sense of giving material reality to, the objects he draws.

An intrigue around the painting Lester Jones gives to Gabriel, and which both his parents want for reasons of their own, leads the plot, with some deft machination on the part of Gabriel, to a complicated but entirely satisfactory resolution, in which the motley denizens of Kureishi's London, a mix of media types, drop-outs, upwardly mobile show biz hustlers and downwardly mobile has-beens, almost all act with generosity and good humour. Gabriel's father is even cured of the limp he incurred in his youth when he fell off his platform shoes while playing in Lester's band.

As in all good fairy tales, there is a wedding to clinch things: "Everyone who mattered was there, apart from Archie, who came in spirit. Zak was amazed and furious with envy. There weren't many kids who got to attend their parents' wedding. Speedy had set up some instruments on a dais, and dad and his friends played tunes from the old days, everyone dancing till the morning."

If there is something disturbing about the ending it is that it seems too much made-for-Hollywood, or at any rate for distribution in the USA: the feel-good finale that sustains the audience after the popcorn has run out, the bright-eyed cheer that blunted the gritty edge of

British films like *Beautiful Thing*, *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*. After the grim desolation of *Intimacy*, *Gabriel's Gift* has something of wish-fulfilment about it ; but by Kureishi's logic, it is the imagination's power and privilege to make possible the unlikely, and to give substance to the flimsy stuff of dreams. If we're not altogether convinced, we may nevertheless be charmed into a willing suspension of disbelief.