

*How to Be Good* by Nick Hornby (Penguin/Viking, R119.95)

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If, in Jane Austen's day, it was a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife, it is nowadays a truth no less universally acknowledged that a married woman in possession of a family must be in want of a divorce.

Nick Hornby's latest novel announces this plot line in its opening sentence: "I am in a car park in Leeds when I tell my husband I don't want to be married to him any more." Since the husband is in London at the time, this is clearly one of those technologically-sussed break-ups, *You've Got Mail* or *Sleepless in Seattle* gone wrong. Indeed, Hornby's novels are nothing if not sussed, whether on football (*Fever Pitch*) or vintage rock (*High Fidelity*). This time round, the knowingness is less specifically focused on an area of expertise, but none the less sharp for that. Hornby's subject – or target -- is the liberal conscience in post-Thatcher Britain (hence the only partly-ironical title), the dilemma of "people who seem angry enough to call for the return of the death sentence or the repatriation of Afro-Caribbeans, but who won't, because, like just about everybody else in our particular postal district, they're liberals, so their anger has to come out through different holes." No less than anger, goodness has to find "different holes" to express itself, the traditional structures of virtue having become obsolete.

The book's narrator, an early-forties medical doctor Katie Carr, has a slightly aggrieved sense that as doctor she needn't agonise too much about *How to be Good* ("Listen: I'm not a bad person. I'm a doctor.") When her hitherto misanthropic husband, David (author of a column in the local newspaper called "The Angriest Man in Holloway"), meets and brings home a miracle healer called DJ GoodNews, her notions of goodness get shaken up, or at least challenged – goodness, it seems, requires sacrificing whatever one has too much of (her husband gives away one of their three computers) and sharing with those who have nothing (he initiates a scheme to install homeless young people in all the spare rooms in the street). "I'm a liberal's worst nightmare," David announces, not unsanctimoniously, "I think everything you think. But I'm going to walk it like I talk it."

Maddeningly, GoodNews really does seem to have healing powers that call into question Katie's skills as a doctor, and the rehousing scheme is at least partly successful, give or take a burglary or two. In addition, their daughter Molly gets converted to the cause and becomes an insufferable little prig, and the son, Tom, resentful at having had his toys given away to the under-privileged, starts stealing from his friends at school.

The situation gives Hornby plenty of scope for satire, and he avails himself of the opportunity with gusto, at times hilariously. The book's set pieces are wonderfully orchestrated: the party at which David announces to his neighbours that they are expected to take in non-paying lodgers, a pathetic church service at which the female vicar sings "Getting to Know You" from *The King and I* at the dispirited congregation.

Katie is an engagingly perplexed narrator, flummoxed by her husband's abrupt conversion to the cause of universal love. Goaded into screaming "FUCK THE HOMELESS!" at David, she withdraws in horror from her own response: "Fuck the homeless? Is this what has become of me? Has a *Guardian*-reading Labour voter ever shouted those words and meant them in the whole history of the liberal metropolitan universe?" And though Katie's universe, as she recognises, is pretty much confined to her own prosperous North London postal district, the contradictions of liberalism are universal enough to make for good reading in less snug parts of the world.

*How to be Good*, in short, is an immensely readable book, sharp, funny, wise to all the evasions and rationalisations its readers are prone to. How well it deals with the serious aspect of its title is open to question. Concluding that "a life without hatred is no life at all, that my children should be allowed to despise who they like," Katie relinquishes the search for the "rich and beautiful life" that she has been attempting to live ("rich and beautiful lives seem to be a discontinued line"), and settles for vicarious riches and beauty: "Maybe I can't live a rich and beautiful life, but there are rich and beautiful things for sale all around me, even on the Holloway Road, and they are not an extravagance, because if I buy some of them I might be able to get by, and if I don't, then I think I might go under. I need a Discman and some CDs and half-a-dozen novels urgently, total cost maybe three hundred pounds."

It's not quite clear whether this salvation-through-consumption is intended ironically – if *How to be Good* turned out to be matter of buying books and CDs, Hornby's readers are halfway there simply by reading his book. But then again, this may be only a wry recognition that if we are to be good in a bourgeois liberal world, bourgeois liberal amenities are a necessary if not sufficient condition --as Katie concludes ;"Can I be a good person and spend that much money on overpriced consumer goods? I don't know. But I do know that I'd be no good without them."

*How to be Good* is short on the stern Victorian values of fiction-writing – structure, characterisation, narrative resolution. Katie's lover conveniently disappears when bidden to do so, the homeless young people are disposed of in a paragraph, Katie's problem brother comes and goes without much apparent purpose, either on his or Hornby's part, GoodNews's healing properties remain unexplained and unresolved, GoodNews himself is cursorily shuffled off by

the plot. All of which may mean only that this is not a Victorian novel; but if so, the novel, like its characters, doesn't quite know how to put its freedom to good use.