

*To Heaven by Water* by Justin Cartwright (Bloomsbury) R190  
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It takes courage, after Monty Python et al, to write a novel dealing unabashedly, and largely unironically, with the Meaning of Life. Justin Cartwright, in his latest novel, does not shy away from the big themes: family, love, sex, death, transcendence. Even God is in there somewhere, smuggled in through Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose sonnet "The Windhover" forms something of a leitmotiv in the novel.

Cartwright's distinction is in embodying these abstractions so effortlessly and entertainingly through the entirely convincing set of characters that he sets in motion. The Cross family, depleted through the death of Nancy, the loving, simplifying, controlling mother, is somewhat at sea: David, the father, retired television anchorman and reporter, spends much of his free time in the gym getting thin and fit, and suspects that he may miss his wife less than his children assume. He has "an urgent need to get rid of everything and to tread lightly on the surface of the earth... to strip himself bare of distraction, to make himself naked, to open himself to ... to what, exactly?"

David's son, Edward, has been made a partner in his legal firm, but he suspects this is mainly because the senior partner is an old friend of his father's. He and his ballerina wife, Rosalie, are somewhat grimly "trying for a baby"; he convinces himself that a fling with Alice, a sexually predatory trainee in his office, is just the thing to keep his sperm count up and running.

The daughter, Lucy, is emerging from an abusive relationship with the mentally unstable Josh; she feels that, given her father's apparent detachment from family matters, she and Edward "have suddenly been promoted beyond our competence, handed the responsibility for tending the family flame." She also suspects her father may be vulnerable to the advances of forty-something divorcees.

As a polar opposite to this North London family with their citified tastes and metropolitan know-how, is Guy, David's brother, living a near-hermit's existence in South Africa, immersed in his somewhat eccentric study of Bushman rock paintings in the Kalahari, which, he believes, "reflect the thought processes of the prehistorical world, when people had psychic abilities we have lost."

Negotiating an uncertain course between these contending claims and appeals, haunted by his own ghosts, David clings to the memory of the happiest days of his life, a few weeks spent in Rome on the set of *Dr Faustus* (a filming of Christopher Marlowe's play), with his old friend Adam, his new girl friend Jenni, and the star of the film, Richard Burton, newly married to the transcendently beautiful but ultimately earth-bound Elizabeth Taylor.

To David, Burton "had dissolved the barriers between the immanent and the transcendent worlds" through his supreme talent, which represented "all the promise and possibility of human endeavour". But like Dr Faustus himself, Burton had overreached himself, sold his soul to the world and become "in thrall to something else, a fame which caused people to lie and fawn and disparage, sometimes in the same breath." Together with Hopkins's poem, Marlowe's play provides a central text in the novel's exploration of the vexed relation between immanent and transcendent, the human and the divine. For if Hopkins aspired to a vision in which the divine is revealed through the humble details of

daily life (“Sheer plod makes plough down sillion shine”), then Marlowe’s play dramatises terrifyingly the estrangement from God through human ambition.

Anchoring David’s somewhat bemused groping for certainty is a small and gradually shrinking circle of friends, the Noodle Club, which meets once or twice a year in a Chinese restaurant in David’s beloved Soho. The Noodle Club is rather reminiscent of Julian Barnes’s *Lemon Table*, referred to in his eponymous collection of short stories and also in his recent reflection on death, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*: a table in a Helsinki restaurant frequented by Sibelius and friends, at which the diners were required to talk about death.

The Noodle Club has no such rule, but consciousness of death now colours all their meetings: “Although none of them talks about their own deaths, these meetings have a subtext: we may be ridiculous and out of time, but we represent something, even if it something our children don’t see and the world doesn’t require.”

What that something is, is never named; but in the novel’s carefully balanced offering of values, what the Noodle Club represents is friendship: “But now, David thinks, here we are, the ones who scrambled into the lifeboat together, and yet we never allow our intensity of feeling to show except in small considerations which stand proxy for love.” Cartwright’s novel is amongst many other things, a moving but unsentimental paean to friendship, that stalwart proxy for love.

A review runs the risk of reducing a novel to its bare bones. Cartwright’s novel is wonderfully fleshed out by his characters, defined both by their inner musings (we have access to the thoughts of David and his two children) and by their dialogue, which is rich, pungent, semi-witty without being wise-cracking, and unflaggingly readable. Of course, there are a few sexual encounters too, nicely pitched between the ironical and the erotic: as always, the consciousness of death sharpens the sexual appetite. There is even, mercifully off-stage, a suicide by elephant.

*To Heaven by Water* is both enjoyable and thought-provoking, an unsolemn exploration of serious themes, erudite but never pedantic. It is also at times very funny and ultimately intensely moving.