

*Waxwings* by Jonathan Raban (Picador)

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Jonathan Raban's latest book is that rare thing, a novel that has taken on board a load of post-modern theory without sinking under its weight. Indeed *Waxwings*, unlike, say, Don de Lillo's novels on a similar theme, reads on one level as a very satisfying realist novel, the story of a marriage breaking up in Seattle, an illegal Chinese immigrant who crosses the path of the husband, the husband suspected of abducting a missing child.

Underlying this straightforward narrative is a simple but ingenious notion: virtual reality is the invention not of the information age, but of the realist novel. What is a nineteenth century novel, after all, if not the creation of a parallel universe? And don't we talk of characters from novels as if they were real people?

Raban's way of juxtaposing different kinds of virtual reality is to give us a married couple of whom the husband, Tom, an expatriate Englishman, is a writer and lecturer on the nineteenth-century novel; his best-known novel was an imaginary reconstruction of the tunnels under nineteenth-century London, frequented by various characters from the fiction of the period: "living in the United States certainly hadn't turned him into anything remotely resembling an American." He refers to himself as "an analogue person in a digital world".

The wife, Beth, is a copywriter for a virtual-reality website called Getashack.com, on which the surfer looking for a house can access the neighbourhood of his or her choice and "enter" its houses, its shops, its restaurants, even a Virtual Starbucks. Beth, newly clued up on the jargon and ethos of dotcom, is quietly infuriated at her husband's absorption in his own virtual reality, the world of the books he reads and writes, and the stories he tells Finn, their four-year old son ("all he knew or cared about were his stupid Victorian novels"). Newly enriched by stock options, she leaves her husband and their ninety-year old house, and settles in Ikea-land, the brand-new conglomeration of brilliantly-lit condos in which people live their lives like sitcoms for the consumption of their neighbours.

In the meantime, Tom has employed the illegal immigrant, Chick, to shore up the ever-more precarious structure of the old house; and we recognise that, for Chick, Seattle is another parallel universe of which he very quickly learns the rules and moves. Tom sees Chick as "a creature of pure accident", but in fact he proves totally adaptable to his new environment, and by book's end is well on his way towards making his own little fortune. Tom, on the other hand, is hopelessly out of synch with the world in which he finds himself. "You live in a world of your own construction," his wife tells him, and events bear her out. Going for a walk on a stretch of riverside, Tom is so engrossed in the novel he is plotting that he fails to notice that he has, in a sense, witnessed the abduction of a young girl. Since quite a few people have noticed Tom, he becomes a "person of interest" to the police, which soon translates, amongst his colleagues, his wife's acquaintances and the teacher's at Finn's pre-school, into the conviction that he is a child killer – based, it would seem, largely on the grotesque appearance of the identikit cartoon that the police artists produce of Tom. So parallel universes cross and interfere with each other; this is a world of simulacra, in which everything resembles something else.

Raban is very skilled at extending his theme into the smallest incidents. Finn is taken, by his worried mother, to a child psychiatrist who invites him to play with her dolls – little replicas of adults and children, “anatomically correct in every essential; detail”. The would-be benefactor of Tom’s department, intent upon endowing a chair in creative writing, is an elusive IT millionaire and “prince of the virtual world” who turns out to be the construct of a particularly inventive “fantasist with a cellphone”. Chick, in search of an identity, constructs himself on what he perceives to be the American model of maleness, and ends up unwittingly as a “Castro clone”, a gay stereotype.

Apart from anything else, *Waxwings* is a satire, often very funny, on the megalomania of the strangely youthful dotcom world with its share options and its fabulous wealth. Set at the end of the previous millennium, the novel may anticipate with a certain degree of *schadenfreude* the dotcom crash we, unlike the complacent young entrepreneurs, know is about to wipe out their share options.

Although the title’s parallel with Icarus is presumably intended to comment on the over-ambitions aspirations of the characters, the actual birds of that name appear only in the last pages of the novel: “Tom looked up to see the flock of birds settling on the holly tree – or rather, not settling but fluttering about it, as quick and random in their movements as a cloud of gnats, skipping daintily from branch to branch, trading places, covering the tree so thickly that they appeared to be a kind of mobile foliage ... As soon as one gained a distinct identity, it dissolved into another or vanished into thin air, leaving behind it a momentary fixed image of skittering wings.”

This cryptic passage does not readily translate into a facile metaphor for human behaviour in the novel; rather, it seems to capture the apparently random and yet purposeful patterns of nature, that reality that has a will and pattern of its own, fragile and yet indomitable.

Raban, like his protagonist, is an Englishman living in Seattle, and he clearly shares Peter’s bemused wonder at this brave new world in which nothing is but what is not. He writes perceptively, evocatively, at times movingly and always beautifully about these self-created figures in a man-made landscape.