

*When We Were Romans* by Matthew Kneale (Picador) R140  
20 January 2008

Child narrators offer writers a technical challenge: how does one deal with the awkward fact that children, by and large, don't write very well? Dickens dodged the problem by having his childhood narratives told in retrospect from an adult perspective; Mark Twain, in *Huckleberry Finn*, exploited the problem to comic effect through the sheer outrageous inventiveness of Huck's illiteracies. Mark Haddon, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, simply ignored the problem and gave his narrator perfect spelling and syntax.

Matthew Kneale opts for the Mark Twain tactic: his nine-year old narrator, Lawrence, spells and punctuates as one might imagine a nine-year old would. The effect is disconcertingly Adrian Mole-like, and at first detracts from the interest of the story, which is not at all Adrian Mole-like. For Kneale's Lawrence, like Twain and Haddon's narrators, like indeed most child protagonists, sees more than he understands: it is left to the reader to decipher the adult drama filtered through the uncomprehending child. The drama, again as Haddon's novel (and as in Henry James's classic *What Maisie Knew*) hinges on an unhappy marriage of which the child is the product and the victim. Lawrence and his three-year old sister Jemima are staying with their mother, Hannah, somewhere in England; their father is in Edinburgh, though Hannah is convinced he's spying on them and setting the neighbours against them. Vowing to escape his attentions, she packs up the children and Lawrence's hamster Herman, and decamps for Rome, where she lived before her marriage.

Kneale lets us into Lawrence's mind so convincingly that it takes the reader a while to register exactly how disturbed Hannah is. On the way to Rome she is overtaken by depression and Lawrence has to persuade her to carry on; once in Rome, we see, though Lawrence doesn't notice, her erstwhile friends exchanging worried glances.

One of the best things in the novel is the skill with which Kneale conveys to the reader, behind Lawrence's back as it were, the various tensions under the apparently cheerful surface of Hannah's Roman circle: there clearly is a back history here that has not been altogether resolved, and not everybody is equally overjoyed to have Hannah back. Lawrence, on the one hand, feels he has to take responsibility for the whole family, and take charge when his mother threatens to collapse: "I can't get upset too actually or there will be nobody left," he tells himself, or "I must help her or she will fall into a big hole." But nor is he implausibly altruistic: Kneale doesn't sentimentalise his child narrator, and knows that a child with power will exercise that power: "I don't much like this treat actually," he thinks, after he's forced his mother to buy him a toy she can't afford, "maybe I will let us stay in Rome, maybe I won't."

When the family moves into yet another friend's crowded flat, Lawrence, having thrown a violent tantrum in the previous one, reflects with some self-satisfaction that "it's not very nice but it's better than horrible Cloudios house. All right I will let us stay here." The two sides of Lawrence nature, his insecurity in the face of forces he can't understand and the related urge to have unlimited power, are embodied in his fascination with astronomy on the one hand, and the Roman emperors on the other. Thus each chapter starts either on Lawrence's version of the mysteries of the universe or on a synopsis, taken from *Horrible Histories*, of the blood-drenched career of some emperor.

These digressions, like the childish writing style, are at first distracting, but with the gathering momentum of the story they form an ironic counter-point to the increasingly creepy behaviour of Hannah, as she becomes convinced that her ex-husband has followed them to Rome and is trying to poison them.

A lesser writer might have wanted Lawrence to be a voice of sanity trying to disabuse his mother; Kneale rather more plausibly has Lawrence entering totally into his mother's delusion. It is clear, though not spelt out, that mother and son are clinging to the delusion because it locks them together against the rest of the world: from Lawrence's point of view against men like "horrible Cloudio" who are sexually interested in his mother, from Hannah's point of view against her ex-husband who, we gather, is in fact a gentle and loving man.

Indeed, if there is any voice of sanity in the novel, it is the three-year old Jemima's, impossible as she is much of the time. As Hannah tells her of her father's supposed plot against them, "Jemima started, it was like the car was full up with her, first it was just a scream and then it turned into a word, it was 'nooo' she said 'dads nice, he didn't do that.'" That it takes a three-year old to spot the truth is some reflection on just how far gone mother and son are by this time.

*When We Were Romans* courts, through its juvenile style of narration, the danger of cuteness, and doesn't altogether escape it. But the story is gripping enough and chilling enough to overcome this; indeed, as the tension increases, the childish style becomes more and more eerie. Kneale knows only too well that there are few things as terrifying as an angry child with a mission.