

Review of Luke Jennings, *Blood Knots*

(Atlantic Books: London, 2010). £16.99

The dust cover of *Blood Knots* tells us that the subject of the book is “Of Fathers, Friendship & Fishing”, and though this is accurate the net is in practice cast wider. While the heart of the book is concerned with his father, who was a distinguished King’s Royal Hussars tank commander in the 1939-45 war, and with Captain Robert Nairac, GC, the Grenadier Guards officer tortured and killed by the IRA in 1977, the circumstantial text is made up of a series of interlocking memoirs, in which many other incidental but never irrelevant figures appear, for instance René Berg, the minor glam-rock guitarist and obsessional fisherman, and the communist publisher Ernest Wishart and his scandalous wife Lorna Garman. The author’s own life is sketched with indicative episodes of narrative, these mostly being concerned with his schooldays, or composed of glancing asides sketching his day to day life in contemporary North London.

Most of these elements are connected by longer or shorter filaments to fishing, and several with angling for pike. Indeed, these fish both open and close the book, and break surface frequently throughout, though eels, perch, roach, rudd, carp, and trout all appear. Fortunately, there is no technical advice offered and all the tackle described is antique or obsolete, so the bad odour of product placement does not sully the pure ceremonies of homage that are the larger purpose of the book. Indeed, far from being an advertisement of any kind it seems unlikely that *Blood Knots* will make anyone want to venture, rod in hand, to the waterside.

The author’s father did not fish, but Robert Nairac, we learn, was an angler of a very high standard and some considerable subtlety. There are further distinctions, and these two dominant figures are presented as partial opposites, one being the undemonstrative yet deeply affectionate parent, making silent sacrifices for his children, while the other passes over the book’s stage as an hypnotically compelling personality whose example is never quite free of self-satisfaction; both are admirable soldiers, though with styles of courage so different they appear to emerge from entirely different psychological groundworks. This father-friend axis is the measure of all others for Jennings, Berg being revealed in comparison as a sadly wrecked and incompetent personality whose sole redeeming feature seems to be his interest in and understanding of England’s largest predatory fish. Nevertheless, desert and reward are barely lashed together here, for though Nairac still holds the record for the largest pike from one of Ampleforth’s lakes, a modest mid-double, it is the drugged rocker in mascara and latex trousers who draws leviathan out, a Thamesmead forty

pounder, in which, however, as fitting reproof for his transgression of the rightful order, few believe.

Indeed, virtue seems often punished in these pages, or only ambiguously acknowledged. The astounding cast to an almost inaccessible rising fish yields not the great trout it merits, but a dace; medals are posthumous. Throughout the text we see an agonised religious conscience toying with evidence of universal malice or indifference, and while Sartre is mentioned and dismissed as the juvenile enthusiasm of over-sophisticated schoolboys, the *néant* is never far away in Jennings's own geography lesson, the Catholic church having abandoned the field altogether, singing "Domine vobiscum" as their recessional but to the tune of "Bobby's Girl".

This frustrated will to faith finds its outlet in a mysticism derived in large part from J. W. Dunne's speculations on the philosophy and parapsychology of time. That Dunne was also a fly-fisherman is a gift to Jennings, who can thus attempt to tie his scattered and perhaps disconnected memories into a pattern implying the existence of coherent stream of thought, each element not only individually profound but coming together to offer a synthesis suggesting something altogether deeper.

The result is entirely satisfactory as a literary artefact, the mechanics of the text being neatly engineered, while the juxtapositions and transitions rarely, if ever, result in redundancy and the component elements are fascinating and often moving in themselves. Yet the resolution towards which Jennings marshals his material is idiosyncratic and specious. Forgetting Keats' observation that we hate all art that has too obvious a design upon us, the book closes with an interpretation of angling which is also offered as a *summa* of everything else that has been discussed: "Deep down, something is moving, and I know that this is the moment, this is why we do it. For that heart-slammng infinity. For the knowledge that, this time, it might not be a fish at all."

This is clever and striking, thought-provoking even, but unfortunately it isn't even remotely true to the experience of most other fishermen. The nervous anticipation of what precisely has been hooked in the viewless water, eel, pike or perch, minnow or monster, is real, but it goes no further. Our uncertainties are about the practical and the physical, not whether the tight line leads to the Great Fish Jesus Christ himself. Ask the common angler for an explanation, and they will say that they fish to "get away", that fishing is both relaxing and exciting, and leave it there. Such remarks may seem incurious, anaesthetic and superficial, but perhaps the average man-on-the-bank is right; fishing is simply trying to catch fish, an activity through which you escape to some degree, not only from the family, from work and colleagues, but also from any sense of wider or greater

significance and the oppressive existential responsibilities that are bound up with such thoughts. Perhaps it is perverse to wish it any other way.

In one of the passages on the author's school-life we learn that he was an enthusiastic actor in a production of Marlowe's *Edward II*, and over-reaching is a recurring theme throughout the text, and even embodied in it. In small things, angling and even the literature of angling, as well as in grand adventure, it is possible to go too far; one ends in tragedy, of course, but the other only in a slight touch of bathos. No one who reads *Blood Knots* will be disappointed, but it does confirm the view that philosophy and field sports should not be braced together in the hope that one will teach the other.

But, metaphysics aside, this is a splendid book in its elements and in so far as they are focused by the author's own experience. No god or para-deity is needed to redeem the accounts of fishing or falconry; they stand up for themselves. No one else could write about Michael Jennings or Robert Nairac in this way; the observations and the feelings are peculiar to son and friend, and their expression is not only elegant but entirely convincing and sincere. These are unique and compelling tributes decently made, and they may stand as honourable memorials to both men.

John Constable

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