

BONEHEAD'S UTOPIA

by Andrew Jordan

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This is an important as well as an excellent book. Jordan was writer-in-residence (that pompous title) at Haslar HMP at the start of the century. Haslar is a prison but it isn't. It holds no criminals. No-one has been tried. There has been no due process. Yet men are held there and treated as if they are criminals. Pure Kafka: not the guilt seeking the punishment but the punishment seeking the fault. Haslar is a little enclave of fascism in ostensibly democratic Britain. A Gosport gulag. It is an experiment: if they can do this to asylum seekers maybe they can do it to us. *A prison is, by its nature, a totalitarian regime*, writes Jordan in the postscript. So is a school. So a workplace can be. To treat people as criminals when they have done nothing wrong is the perfect prelude to insinuating a fascist culture in the workplace. No-one has any rights in Bonehead's Utopia: "*The acts of power are good. If power acts and you feel the pain then you were wrong / and if you feel no pain then you are innocent.*" A society in which there is only power and those who must submit to it or connive with it is what Haslar adumbrates.

Jordan evokes the twisted sensibility, corrupted values, distorted thinking and thuggish behaviour behind the institution. The writing is strong, clear, clever and witty; but there is another quality here almost totally absent from contemporary poetry: an insistence on a hierarchy of values. Jordan implicitly rejects the post-modern idiocy which claims there is no distinction between Aeschylus and *Eastenders*, Asil Nadir and Camille Desmoulins. It is this cultural assumption which is doing the dirty work not only of neo-liberalism but also speculative fascism. Jordan is heartening in his subtle assertion of democratic rights, his insistence that institutions have no right to dispose of the lives of individuals. Yet if that suggests this collection has something of the tract or the rant, nothing could be less true. The imaginative rendering of his subject matter in and through the poems is as slant as Emily Dickinson would have liked. We're supposed to get excited about Hilary Mantel's historical irrelevancies, the most boring fiction for two centuries, or to believe that Maeve Binchy left us something worth reading, while books as important as this go begging. Such is the complicity of our literary culture with the rich and powerful and their project to destroy our rights and liberties and turn us into modern-day slaves. It is precisely because this book is so good and so important that it will be kept out of the hands of millions who are offered instead sub-Mills and Boon depictions of bondage parading as feminine liberation. It's our responsibility to make sure it gets into as many hands as possible. It is more important than anything our so-called *leading poets* have written over the past quarter of a century.

Alan Dent

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