

THE SHORT REVIEW



IN ALL PROBABILITY BY STEVE MORRIS

PNEUMA SPRINGS PUBLISHING
2009, PAPERBACK
FIRST COLLECTION? YES

STEVE MORRIS is a Maths teacher with a love of English Literature. His own success began in his school days, causing him to cherish a dream of publication. A wide range of hobbies including football, horticulture and bookbinding occupy him in rural South Cheshire, where he lives with his dog.

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"I remember it was one of those miserable murky nights in December. The only thing that stops people becoming any more miserable than they already are at that time of year is the thought of Christmas. Then, when it is all over with; it is back to the murk until spring. One of these years I'm going to hibernate all through."

REVIEWED BY SHEILA CORNELIUS

Fiction has comforted travellers since the days of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Nowadays the daily commute's most likely to demand distraction, and Steve Morris's diverse collection of short, quirky tales seems purpose-made. Foreshadowed revenge, driven characters and bizarre happenings quickly engage the reader's imagination. At the same time they encourage empathy with all-too-common setbacks in ordinary working lives.

Many of the 30 stories' effects depend on off-key interventions in otherwise low-key, situations. Remarkably, two or three pages manage to convey time passing, as Morris's introverted heroes worship women from afar, brood on regrets or embark on prolonged investigations. Then events take a sudden turn, usually for the worse.

Morris's urban milieu is populated by men trapped by boring routine, plagued by bad weather. Typically, his narrators, whose troubled pasts motivate their actions, are long on memory, short on forgiveness. Luck is never on their side in these tales of failed romance, frustrated careers and unexpected downturns.

A woman glimpsed on a TV screen will be tracked down to a surprise conclusion; a police officer allows a killer to escape at the last minute because of a childhood incident, a false identity is unmasked by a forgotten acquaintance.

Within these downbeat tales swindlers and greedy overreachers meet ironic justice. In *The Remainder*, for instance, a dishonest financier is ruined by his conscientious protégé.

That said, there's a wider social awareness evident in stories about subliminal advertising, press hysteria, climate change and ecological issues. For me, the futuristic stories are the most remarkable. In *Memories are Made of This*, for instance, a machine converts memories into photographic images, Winston Churchill has experimenters reviving dead celebrities, while the apocalyptic *Signal* features messages from a distant planet. Dreams, confused identity, ghosts and odd imaginings bring the reader close to the underlying surrealism of everyday life.

In recommending this collection from a writer with a distinctive, often disturbing, imagination, I have a reservation: Morris is ill-served by his editor/publisher. These stories could have had more thorough proof-reading. Occasional repetitions or awkward sentences, uncorrected spelling mistakes and even a change in the main characters name in one of the stories are distracting.

Despite this, readers will be beguiled by Morris's vision of an everyday world where probabilities turn out to be different from the ones expected.

SHEILA CORNELIUS is a reviewer based in South London. A graduate of Goldsmiths' College and author of a book on Chinese film, she also reads widely and writes fiction.

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