‘I knew’

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Pat Barker

NOONDAY
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At night, in doorways, prostitutes spotlight their “exposed breasts or the triangle of darkness at the apex of their thighs” with blackout torches. It is a confusing image for Kit Neville – an artist wounded during the First World War, now a volunteer ambulance driver in London during the Second – because it reminds him of an incident he attended near Kings’ Cross, where a make-shift bomb shelter under a railway arch was hit:

> heavy rescue squads were pulling arms, legs, heads, hands, feet from the rubble, lining them up on the pavement. Somebody had flashed a torch along the line and it was exactly like this. Revulsion and a kind of excitement.

Noonday is, as its title suggests, full of chiaroscuro; light (and life) is harsh. The year is 1940, the Blitz has started and we see Elinor Brooke – a former friend of Kit while the pair were students together at the Slade School of Fine Art – visit her sister Rachel’s farmhouse in the countryside (the windows “wide open in the heat as if . . . gasping for breath”), where everyone is subsumed in waiting – for their sick mother to die upstairs, for a bomb attack to strike them down at any moment. “They were in deep shade: the shadow of a branch fell across Elinor’s bare ankle so sharply it suggested amputation.”

Pat Barker has fast-forwarded the lives of the three central characters – Kit, Elinor and Paul Tarrant, loosely based on the artists C. R. W. Nevinson, Dora Carrington and Paul Nash, respectively – whom we met during their late teens and early twenties in *Life Class* (2007) and *Toby’s Room* (2012). After an on-off relationship in the previous two books, Elinor and Paul are married, but unable to have children. Rachel’s housekeeper calls Elinor “Miss” and “Elinor knew exactly what she meant. *Miss*-take. *Missed* out. Even, perhaps, *miss*-carriage? No, she was being paranoid”. Paul, who had volunteered as an orderly for the Belgian Red Cross in the first war, now works as an air-raid warden, while Elinor is based in the Tottenham Court Road ambulance depot with Kit, who is recently divorced (his wife and six-year-old daughter live in America). Kenny, a child evacuee staying with Rachel, attaches himself to Paul. But Paul’s attachment to Kenny is more or less a way of reconciling himself with his own dead mother. At the boy’s insistence, Paul returns him to his family in the East End of London, and leaves them in a crumbling school along with hundreds of other newly homeless civilians waiting for officials to bus them out to Kent. A few days later, he reads in a newspaper report that the school has collapsed; it is then cemented over as a mass grave. There is repeated stress on Kenny playing with toy soldiers in front of Paul as well as the “never-ending *pop-pop* of guns . . . . Such an inconsequential sound: almost like a child’s toy”, as though, despite this being a clear (and unoriginal) connection, we can’t quite have picked up on it. Barker does manage to nudge some of these stock descriptions in a different direction. At one point, instead of tidying the little figurines away, Paul places them in his pocket – a gesture of protection.

This is Barker’s second trilogy of war novels; the previous one, which began with *Regeneration* (1991), concentrated on the period from 1917 to the Armistice, and took us, with admirable acuity, into the minds of real (Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen) and imagined (Billy Prior) shell-shocked veterans at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Like *Life Class* and *Toby’s Room*, *Noonday* lacks the same seamless blend of history and fiction. One of the longest shadows in this new trilogy is cast by Elinor’s brother, Toby, who served as a medical officer in the First World War. No one in the family, apart from Elinor, knows that he killed himself in no-man’s-land to avoid a court martial for being caught having sex with a stable boy – the denouement of *Toby’s Room*. Nor does anyone know, Elinor assumes, that Toby once committed incest with her – although her mother’s dying words in *Noonday* (“I knew”) bother her. Staring at a not-very-good portrait of Toby in uniform hanging in Rachel’s hallway, Elinor thinks, “*Item: one standard-issue gallant young officer, Grim Reaper for the use of*. There was nothing of Toby there at all”. Throughout the book, italics are well deployed to indicate a wry voice within a character’s own voice. But Elinor’s internal monologue continues: “Nigel Featherstone was the artist: and he was very well regarded; you saw his portraits of judges, masters of colleges, politicians and generals everywhere”. These details give the game away; Elinor slips out of character. Barker’s shoehorning in of a character’s credentials like this is in fact what makes them less believable.

Bertha Mason, an overweight “materialization medium” that Paul is drawn to out of guilt over Kenny, is another example of *Noonday*’s tussle with realism. Her slangy speech is convincing and very funny (“Mucky old woman come to the door, you could’ve planted a row of tatties in her neck”); even better are Barker’s descriptions of her (“chins, neck, breasts, belly – all pendulous – the sagging, wrinkled abdomen hanging so low it almost hid the fuzz of black hair beneath. Like a huge, white, half-melted candle she sat, eyes glazed, a fag end glued to her bottom lip”). Soon, however, a dizzying storyline, in which an aggressive dead soldier called Albert speaks through her, undermines this groundwork.

Art in the plots is pervasive, but it is at the same time something in the past, something lost. Elinor, for one, has given up painting (there’s too much shopping, cleaning, ambulance driving to do), which is exactly what, in the previous two novels, she feared would happen if she ever married or if she acknowledged the war. (“I don’t paint anything to do with it. Because the war sucks that in too. And I don’t think it should be about that, I think painting should be about . . . celebration. Praise”, she tells her old tutor Henry Tonks, the famed historical figure at the Slade, before agreeing to make medical drawings with him of the wounded at a facial-reconstruction hospital towards the end of *Toby’s Room.*) She starts a diary again – another thing she had abandoned – in which she admits, “I’m a pinprick, a speck, a bee floating and drowning on a pool of black water, surrounded by ever-expanding, concentric rings of silence”. This woman is a pitiable shadow of the indefatigable, crop-haired, androgynous one we knew over twenty years ago. A commission from Kenneth Clark and his War Artists Advisory Committee spares her, though what they want are “rosy-cheeked”, merry paintings of land girls and safely evacuated children, “definitely no guns”.

As for Paul, he takes refuge in his studio these days not for painting, but for hiding his affair with a young warden – here, a mid-life crisis blends with a war crisis. When the clocks in his and Elinor’s Bloomsbury home are stopped by a blast, he feels relief, as though “outside time”: “nothing seemed to matter very much. Nothing he said or did now would have consequences”. And Kit, after years of separation, taints his reunion with Paul by showing him Tonks’s pastel drawing and photographs of his war-damaged face before surgery in 1917. Paul had seen it for real back then; nonetheless they shock him (“This was less a face than a landscape”). He used them as a way of reaching out, Paul tells himself later on, to get past their rivalry – over Elinor, over painting – which had always stopped them from being straightforward friends. It is a pallid explanation: Kit still calls Paul’s paintings “vapour trails” (“Why was it, when Neville said ‘vapour’, Paul heard ‘vapid’? Because Neville bloody well meant him to, that’s why”) and resumes his protracted campaign to sleep with Elinor, far easier now that her marriage has been torn apart, Barker seems to say, like London. On his journey to seize Elinor, Kit notices the streets he passes: “here was sunlight streaming through a gap in the terrace, a gap where no gap should have been. All over London, now, were little patches of illicit gold”.

Whether the city and these characters can restore themselves after such carnage is left in vague suspension. Elinor, perhaps, finds hope in drawing again: when the raids end, she is compelled to record the progress of the ruins around her each morning – “There seemed to be no crack so narrow, no fissure so apparently barren, it couldn’t support the life of some weed or other” – as she once did with the mutilated faces during the First World War. The effect is precarious and moving.

Peter Arnott

MOON COUNTRY
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Peter Arnott is best known as a playwright and screenwriter, and that experience is evident in his first novel. The chapters are mini-scenes, each numbered in the style of a film script. This numbering also resembles Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which provides the opening, “The world is everything that is the case”. By “0.0.2.1.1”, wondering what might have been the case had Tommy Hunter still been alive, we are told ‘”the animals would have scattered, sensing something like fire on the prairies”.

The narrator, or observer, is the very reverse of the omniscient, invisible novelist of tradition. He is an unavoidable presence, pondering events while willingly confessing his ignorance of motive, background or likely future developments. His voice is delivered in a style that places Arnott squarely among those writers engaged in a search for a contemporary Scottish vernacular. The language is muscular, dotted with Scotticisms, employing occasional semi-Scottish spellings like “mebbe” as well as cheerfully describing some people as cunts.

Questions of technique and structure force themselves on the attention of the reader. Arnott breaks freely and irregularly away from narration to comment, intervene and ruminate at will. The individual sections consist sometimes of no more than a single line, sometimes of reflections that range beyond the reach of the story, sometimes of extended dialogue, sometimes merely of the amount of money Tommy has left as he careers across Scotland, scattering cash.

However, those who, recalling E. M. Foster, believe that the job of a novel is to tell a story will be satisfied. There is a wide cast and varying centres, but the action is built around Tommy, a man who committed a murder some fourteen years previously and has just been released from jail. He is a native of a place in the west of Scotland identified only as Oor Wee Toon, and while made of the same stuff as the tough, insensitive, hyper-macho males that populate much Scottish fiction, there is something of the dreamer in him. Not a religious man, he encountered in prison a chaplain who introduced him to a more temperate view of life, and his aim on release is not to wreak vengeance on the accomplices in that crime who got off, but to make amends in some way.

Instead, as his nature dictates, he creates havoc. His aspiration is to distribute cash to those who have suffered for his misdeeds, to re-form his family and establish relations with his children, but his instincts lead him to implement this plan by more or less kidnapping his son, still in care, and doing likewise with his daughter, who was beginning to make her way in life. He takes them on a fantasy “holiday” excursion to the Highlands, pursued by the police as well as by his former gangster mates. The writer seems to develop, maybe (mebbe?) reluctantly, a wholly unsentimental fondness for Tommy who has only known a society of crumbling values, permitting Arnott to detect in him a raw intensity and even integrity. This is an intelligent book, original in style and structure.

JOSEPH FARRELL