

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The Debt to Pleasure

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: The Debt to Pleasure

Author name: John Lanchester

Genre: Literary Fiction

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: Nigella Lawson is well known for her celebrity cook series on television. Her opening remarks in the first episode of 'Simply Nigella' gushed to the effect that life is worth celebrating in every single meal that one prepares. It's as easy as popping round to your local deli in Belgravia and filling a basket with mouth watering products which have been flown in from all corners of the globe that very morning. Just as one does in most parts of urban Scotland.

If you watch Ms Lawson as a TV fantasy rather than a plain source of recipes, why not 'simply' go for pure fiction entwined with food appreciation? This is to be found in John Lanchester's (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lanchester) 1996 crime narrative 'The Debt to Pleasure'.

The novel revolves around the appalling character of middle-aged gourmand and scholar Tarquin Winot. It is in his voice the story is told. As he writes, Tarquin is on a journey from the Hotel Splendide in Portsmouth to his house in Provence. He is travelling incognito, with shaven head and dark glasses, though it is hardly likely he will not be recognisable, or at least remarkable, since a typical outfit consists of "green-and-ochre checks ... complemented, or perhaps that should be complimented, by my shirt, a pale-cerise cotton number with a fine texture showing – though only at close range and to the discerning eye – a diagonally shading pattern; I also wore a bow tie with yellow polka dots against a light-blue background, a matching display handkerchief, a fob watch and chain and a superbly conservative pair of hand-made brown brogues". We hear of his parents' demise in an accident involving an exploding gas canister, of their Norwegian cook "falling" under a tube train, of his brother's death from "accidental" poisoning, all of which misfortunes occurred in his immediate vicinity; he is also responsible for the suicide of his "Cork-born, Skibbereen-raised nanny, Mary-Theresa". On his journey through France he is shadowing a honeymoon couple, the female half of which, we discover, is Laura Tavistock, who is writing a biography of Tarquin's late brother, Bartholomew – Barry – a world-famous sculptor whose work Tarquin dismisses as tiresomely vulgar trash. Finally, in Provence, he manoeuvres himself into an "accidental" encounter with the honeymooners, and invites them to his house where they will have dinner, stay the night and partake at breakfast of generous helpings of wild mushrooms on toast. All very obviously sinister. Soaked with a love of food, sprinkled with actual recipes and howlingly funny in many parts, this is chef's literary choice for the season. Lanchester may be something of an 'acquired taste', but you may well go on to sample other offerings of his.

What you liked: An author who relishes the enjoyment of food and wraps this fascination around a tale of dark crime.

Who should read this book?: Anyone who savours dark literary crime

Any additional comments?: Enquire at your local library for this salivating prospect or consult <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Debt-Pleasure-Picador->

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