

Zouch Magazine

Review of *The Ghost of Neil Diamond*, a novel by David Milnes

Charles Pitter Interviews, Writers

And an interview with the author.

Milnes has a light touch making this an effortless read, so that the central character, Neil Atherton, not the reader, puts in all the work to make a success of the story.

Milnes must have a curious but intuitive mind because he chose Neil Diamond as the star who Neil Atherton takes on to impersonate; these days tribute acts are a well-known trend but Neil Diamond is definitively, in my view anyway, quite an unknown quantity – maybe his fans know all the ins-and-outs of his life and career but my own perception of him as a public figure is as someone who always remains slightly in the shadows. That's not to say I don't know what I'm talking (or writing) about, although often I don't, but more that Neil Diamond, the star who appeared in "The Last Waltz", possibly the best live music film ever, always seemed slightly out of place to me. It may be that Milnes had this perception too and decided to use Diamond as a central motif for what is a rather clever novel dealing about identity and its loss.

Neil Atherton is a stranger in a strange town. Things get even stranger as he splits up from his wife and tries to become someone else to make a living. In itself this is a story of a rootless nightmare, with the ultimate irony being that the hero initially starts out on the roots music scene in England, before things go wrong. The setting of Hong Kong is well chosen because Neil's circumstances clash against the idea of the ex-pat living in luxury, and the originality is that we see the darker side of travel and globalisation. As well, in rather a subtle way, this novel raises the very human question of what it is to be authentic and true to yourself. Depressingly it turns out that everyone encountered by Neil Atherton during the course of the story is a fake, but as a third person narrative this may almost be inevitable.

Neil Atherton can only see things from his own perspective and because of this fails to connect with others; he becomes an anti-hero, or in the parlance of our times, a loser. Despite this the reader still has an element of sympathy for him and this in itself demonstrates successful writing because a complex world is being set out. The anti-hero experiences no personal growth and yet the reader is likely to continue to turn the page because the plot drives the character on into further misery. The story itself is not fast-paced or particularly complicated, so you have to ask how the reader is drawn in.

I think the answer is that TGOND has a self-contained construction of mystery for no particular reason that can be pinned down, just like Neil Diamond himself. Maybe it has something to do with leaving enough space between the lines. Sometimes space is an essential requirement, especially if you're impersonating a rock-star.

Charles Pitter: TGOND is very easy to read but was it difficult to write?

David Milnes: I'm very glad you found it easy to read. I want my books to be easy to read. Writing 70,000 words is not necessarily a very difficult thing to do. Willpower is easy and cheap. But editing and rewriting the 70,000 words so that they are easy and enjoyable to read is for me a very difficult and very time-consuming business. This book took me eleven years, but I wrote the first drafts of two other novels in that time too.

Charles Pitter: What does Neil Diamond mean to you?

David Milnes: I'm not a Neil Diamond fan and I know very little about him. I suspect some of the few people who have bought this book have done so to give it as a present to a Neil Diamond fan – probably a middle-aged son or daughter. That's tough for all concerned and I'm very sorry.

Charles Pitter: Are you a music fan? Do you write to music or do you need absolute silence when you're on the job?

David Milnes: I love music, particularly when I'm drunk, but not the kind of music mentioned in this book. I can't concentrate on anything without silence. Earplugs at 3 a.m. is best.

Charles Pitter: Who are your literary influences?

David Milnes: I don't really know! But I'm very flattered to be asked. I like The Harold Pinter of The Birthday Party, The Lover and The Caretaker. Not The Homecoming so much, or anything later. I think Kafka had the greatest literary imagination of the last century, even though much of it is boring because it was never properly edited. He didn't have time. Beckett couldn't create a fully imagined world in the way Kafka could, only rooms or cells in the castle. Apart from extremists, my favourite five reads are Othello, The Pardoner's Prologue, Middlemarch, In Cold Blood and The Sun Also Rises. The Pardoner and Iago have lasted more than 1000 years between them. They make a far more memorable impression than most people you meet.