



I Predict a Riot

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

We know it's all over from the first sentence: 'It's been a year since everything happened, but I still have bad dreams.' Almost all over, as things turn out. 14 year old Maggie lives close by the sea in the anonymity of a witness protection programme. Those dreams are of flaming buildings, looters ravaging stores, moaning sirens, rioters racing through the streets; and the flicker of a knife. 'It's like a movie running through my head,' she tells us 'and well it might be, for in her earlier life, her camera is always running. The great film directors, she's been told, watch and listen. So she does, but when she's filming, she's also escaping 'into other people's stories so I don't have to think about my own rubbish life at all'.

Explosive tensions pulse through this disturbing novel: power/helplessness, affluence/poverty, black/white, trust/betrayal. The edgy idiom of the South London streets clashes with the Westminster soundbite; and the knife and gun are met by the turning of the other cheek.

Maggie is the daughter of a politician 'perhaps one of Blair's Babes'. Her mother's photogenic beauty masks a domestic vacuum. Maggie's Dad has jumped ship and gone off to New York, receding day by day from her memory. Mother's career dictates Maggie's life; term-times, she's away at boarding school, but in the summer of this novel 'maybe the summer of the 2011 riots' she is roaming the local streets, camera running; which is how she comes to film a stand-off between Shiv, the leader of the Starfish Gang, and Tokes, the New Kid on Coronation Road, who steps in to protect a diminutive Year 8 called Little Pea from Shiv's slashing blade.

That's how it all kicks off. Maggie thinks she can remain detached behind her lens, safe in her parallel white universe. The rest of the novel, which begins at a leisured pace, despite that stand-off, gathers speed relentlessly through to the burning streets, until Maggie realises that she cannot separate herself from Coronation Road. What's more, she doesn't want to, though wanting is one thing, doing is another. Little Pea is the attractive catalyst for much of the action; desperate and friendless, terrified at every turn, he can only live on his wits, playing both ends against the middle to preserve what little he has.

This is restless, violent stuff, but threading through it all is a developing

tenderness between Tokes and Maggie, surprising both of them in the creative joy they share, working together to craft a coherent film from the snippets of daily life Maggie records. You might think this is an unusual way to make a film, but it's a handy metaphor for the struggle to make sense of chaos. Catherine Bruton's CV includes spells working with street children and in schools in South Africa and projects in Peckham, so she surely knows what she's talking about. Her prose has a keen edge, serving well for vivid action and the dialogue of the streets. You'd like to listen in to a school book group discussion of this one in South London; and then again in suburban Surrey or rural Devon.

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