

Praise for *Nicholas Royle's* first novel, *Quilt*

'A book of mythological power. *Quilt* is unforgettable, like all those great pieces of fiction that are fed by our immemorial root system, the human dream of metamorphosis.'

Hélène Cixous

'It is quiet, lapidary, and teases out the tangled filaments that link figuration to fact and insight to feeling with the unnerving stealth of a submarine predator.'

Will Self

'An intense study of grief and mental disintegration, a lexical celebration and a psychological conundrum... Royle explores loss and alienation perceptively and inventively.'

The Guardian

'Royle's baroque, athletic prose... confers a strong sense of the "strangeness" of English, "which, after all, belongs to no one" and should be continually reinvented... Moments of delightfully eccentric humour and impressive linguistic experimentalism.'

The Observer

'A work of remarkable imaginative energy.'

Frank Kermode

'It is in those commonplace moments at the end of a life... moments which Nicholas Royle describes with such piercing accuracy, when this novel is truly at its strangest.'

Times Literary Supplement

'What deceptively begins as a more or less realistic piece of autobiographical fiction evolves into an astonishing narrative that puts into question the very notion of everyday reality. A highly readable and stunningly original experiment in literary form.'

Leo Bersani

'Captures the absolute dislocating strangeness of bereavement. While the novel is bursting with inventive wordplay, Royle's use of language is most agile and beautiful in his descriptions of rays... The shifts in point of view have a sort of fairground quality to them, suddenly lurching, demanding your compliance, but it is the way the storyline ultimately develops that takes the breath away.'

New Statesman

'*Quilt* is one of those books I long for but come across rarely... It is strange, surprising, *sui generis*... with its overturning qualities, its ability to stick in the head while resisting resolution, and its determination not to leave the reader feeling that the end of the text is the end of the reading experience. What my reading life needs – what the literary world needs – is more *Quilts* and fewer comfort blankets.'

John Self, *The Asylum*

'An experimental and studied look at mourning... Playful, clever and perceptive.'

Big Issue

'Subtle and eloquent writing... an intelligent and lyrical account of mourning, madness and manta rays.'

Times Higher Education

'An inventive, risky piece of writing, which succeeds because of the way in which it combines flights of imagination with the sense of a powerful emotional reality.'

The Hungry Reader

'An experiment, a curiosity... a stirring manifesto addressing the future of the novel itself.'

Booksquawk

AN ENGLISH GUIDE TO
BIRDPWATCHING

An
English Guide
to
Birdwatching



Nicholas Royle

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Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus

In loving memory of
Simon Royle (1960–86)
painter and bird-lover

*Happier of happy though I be, like them
I cannot take possession of the sky,
Mount with a thoughtless impulse and wheel there
One of a mighty multitude, whose way
And motion is a harmony and dance
Magnificent. Behold them, how they shape
Orb after orb their course still round and round
Above the area of the Lake, their own
Adopted region, girding it about
In wanton repetition, yet therewith
With that large circle evermore renewed:
Hundreds of curves and circlets high and low,
Backwards and forwards, progress intricate,
As if one spirit was in all and swayed
Their indefatigable flight. 'Tis done,
Ten times or more I fancied it had ceased,
And lo! the vanished company again
Ascending – list again! I hear their wings
Faint, faint at first, and then an eager sound
Passed in a moment – and as faint again!
They tempt the sun to sport among their plumes;
They tempt the water and the gleaming ice
To show them a fair image. 'Tis themselves,
Their own fair forms upon the glimmering plain,
Painted more soft and fair as they descend,
Almost to touch, – then up again aloft,
Up with a sally and a flash of speed,
As if they scorned both resting-place and rest.*

William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*

PART ONE

The Undertaking

Woodlock & Sons

Silas Woodlock was the end of the line, so far as he was concerned. There would be Ashley, of course, but then that was it. The entire tradition since 1869: *kaput*. Not that the same building had been home all that time. Still, the sense of history was there. Order, continuity, passing on the baton: one generation to the next. Now it was over. Enough was enough. Things had taken their toll, especially after the scare with Ethel last winter.

If you could call it winter. Primroses popping up in November, spring warmth at Christmas. Catch it in the corner of people's eyes. Day after day *unseasonably mild*, as the forecasters liked to say. Imagine the fellow on the weather coming clean: Good evening, once again it was a worryingly unnatural sort of a day, nothing any of us are used to, a day out of sorts with the days we used to think of as days. *Daze and confuse*, ha-ha. Day after day clement without clemency. Try that. Followed by downpours and flash floods, then bitter weeks of ice and snow, then plunged again into days too mild to be remotely realistic.

Sunday family roast back in the day, coal fire flickering, windows foggy with condensation, clip round the ear if they caught you finger-writing. Dad at the head of the table and Mum bringing in the dishes one by one, steaming hot, and everyone settled and the rest, even the cat and dog,

An English Guide to Birdwatching

appreciating the order of ceremony. Then the moment impatience became acceptable, the mutt's eye-whites under the table, the plaintive, semi-smothered yelping for a bone, and pussy in the well's tortoiseshell arched back and as-if-electrocuted tail curling stiffly through the blind spinney of human legs. And after saying the grace, which never failed to happen at that repast, his old man very formal, as if he had never enunciated the words before, asked would someone be so kind as to supply the seasoning. And Silas and his sisters never thought to wonder what the seasoning was, only something they had to pass down the table for the father to shake out over his roast lamb and veg. It was the old man's own special mix their mother wouldn't have touched with a bargepole: salt and black pepper, rosemary and thyme, and other stuff that got stuck in your teeth. Always had to have it with his roast. But Silas couldn't see what seasons had to do with it, until the last year of school when they studied Shakespeare and Lady Macbeth says to her husband: *You lack the season of all natures, sleep.*

He could imagine that on his headstone, as a matter of fact. Not that he'd have Ash or Ethel know. But he could picture it, quite poetical, better in the last resort than a line of Latin, fond as he was of that dead tongue. Did Macbeth have the first clue what his worse half was saying? You need some shut-eye is what you need, darlin'. The drift was obvious enough. *You lack the season of all natures.* Did it matter that no spouse in real life ever uttered such words to their soul-mate? The important thing was that it sounded simple and said more than you could easily ponder. The important thing, he remembered his English teacher saying, was that Shakespeare might have meant *season* in the sense of a period of time or he might have meant *season* in the

sense of salt or spice and the rest, but it didn't matter what he meant because we were never going to find out, and in the meantime there was life to live and this magnificent line: *You lack the season of all natures, sleep.*

Fit for a headstone possibly, but a bit screwball, Silas eventually conceded. Like a message from the dead to everyone still living. A blanket statement to the effect that everyone is suffering from sleep-deprivation. Or as if sleep were the name of a person, as if it were an inscription addressing Sleep itself. As if Sleep lacked all due season. Sleep, you're out on a limb, mate, you've lost all sense and reason. Or then again the statement could be referencing the one who had passed on, inverting the soporific stereotype, called away, at the end of the day, exquisite corpse, the ultimate night-night, gone to sleep and the rest, no, you in the ground there, you lack the season, it's so far past your bedtime you're never going to sleep again, this is it, from now on in, sleep no more, no more shut-eye forever.

In any case it was over, pass the seasoning, seasons passed on, farewell Vivaldi, seasons no more. And Ethel being rushed into hospital was the wake-up call. He never quite put it like that to her. He never needed to. It was a wake-up call for them both. They would hand on the business to Ashley and get out of town, retire while the going was good or at any rate still had legs, move out of the giant rats' nest of London down to the sea. Of course, when they'd been growing up, him and June and Pat, Croydon hadn't been London at all. Now it was all joined up, crept house to house, street by street, a couple of fields here, a patch of woodland there, overrun, mile after mile filled in with what were a bit sinisterly called *developments*: retail and industrial parks, car parks, underpasses, flyovers and high-rise sprawl.

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It wasn't that business was bad. Indeed they had done rather well, despite all the change and new competition. Such as the *Lady Funeral Director*. That was funny. He and Ethel wondered initially was it just for hoity-toity women or what? And then there was the expansion of the black community and other ethnic groups, and different religions coming into the picture. Bespoke parlours of different sorts sprang up. But Woodlock & Sons, convenient in proximity to the register office on Mint Walk, was not like the others. They prided themselves on not having departed from the original family name in all these years. It was still Woodlocks, father and son, on hand to serve all, assisting the bereaved since 1869. As the executive director of another *bona fide* local family company was on record for remarking: *Some large corporations in the '90s purchased many family funeral businesses, maintaining the family name, thus deceiving the general public.* Woodlock & Sons was not like that. It was in the old tradition: International Order of the Golden Rule and the rest.

But no longer. Ashley would keep the business on, of course, but the family-run nature of the thing was coming to an end. Such transformation in so few years! A couple of decades previously, no funeral director in the land had a computer, let alone a website and databases and laser-printers and all the other paraphernalia. With the increased pressure to provide *specialism* services, from high church to secular, from horse-drawn carriages which the Woodlocks gave up in the early '80s to the 4x4 and motorcycle events, from gangland to eco-friendly, what a commotion it had all come to seem, what a palaver in the parlour and parlous state of things. Especially with Ethel having had that scare. Rushed into the Mayday or whatever they call it these days,

Woodlock & Sons

the Croydon University Hospital, and there she was, on the brink, seven days and nights, what with pneumonia and life-support and the rest. The longest week of his life, not to mention hers. Flaming terrible it was, she said, you won't see me in a hospital again. So they set up a trust arrangement and handed the business over to Ash, lock stock and casket (as his old man used to say), and with the monies released bought not a stately home exactly but a decent little property nevertheless, down in Seaford, East Sussex, in the heart of the old town.

Silas and Ethel had been visiting this stretch of the coast for years, mostly on occasional days out, and once not so long ago for three nights in a local bed and breakfast. They'd developed a soft spot for the town. Compared to its larger neighbours on either side, Brighton and Eastbourne, Seaford was tacky, old-fashioned and unpretentious. It had nothing, besides the elements, that you could call grand. Neither of them had ever lived by the sea and this was a remarkably quiet spot, all things considered. There was a long but walkable esplanade and a shingle beach stretching for a couple of miles in one direction to the port of Newhaven, then trailing off in the other to a golf course and impressive white cliffs. The main row of shops could have come straight out of the '70s. You could easily get fooled with thinking *was that* Keith Richards coming out of Bob's Retro Market, or just an eerie lookalike? The high street had the aura of being stuck in time, placidly indifferent, still in black and white. A couple of the bigger chains had wormed their way in but, by and large, the usual suspects had evidently deemed Seaford just not worth the candle.

Woodlock was drawn, too, by his fondness for second-hand books and vinyl records. The little town had a bustling

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trade in charity shops, bric-a-brac and antiques, junkshops and old bookshops. It was a great place to spend a few hours, stop for a cup of tea and slice of cake in one of the numerous cafés, mooch about the shops on Broad Street, have lunch at the Old Boot or the Old Plough, the Cinque Ports or the Wellington, then a stroll along the seafront, before heading back to the Great Rats' Nest.

As the exchange date drew closer, the reality of the thing became almost too much. Ethel fretted:

— What about Ash? Do you think he'll be alright?

— Of course he'll be alright. He won't be all on his tod, after all, there'll be Jim and the other lads.

— Oh, yes, Ethel vaguely said, Jim.

Their son remained something of a conundrum. He seemed entirely uninterested in getting married or having children of his own. They never aired the matter, but Ethel did wonder if Ash was not of the other persuasion and yet to realise. He was close to Jim. They'd known each other since they were toddlers. Jim had joined them as a pallbearer before he was even out of school. Ethel had her suspicions about Ash and Jim. Not unpleasant suspicions: it can be hard, after all, being a mother and having your only son leave you for another woman. Not that this was much of a topic of talk in the public arena, it seemed to her, but one good reason in her books, why, as a doting mother, your son being gay had its attractions. And Jim was such a nice fellow, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, big but gentle, a bit mentally AWOL at times but flaming heck and pyjamas, who wasn't, these days? In any case, when it came to working, he was always reliable and courteous.

Of course it's difficult to be in the funeral parlour game without something to lean on, whether God or drugs or

the bottle, and she had more than once caught the whiff of marijuana as they came in on a Saturday after a match (Ash and Jim were ardent Palace supporters) or a night out down at the Green Dragon. But, whatever they got up to, it never interfered with work, and that was good enough for Ethel. She and Silas also liked a drink, it was true. Time was when Silas could really put it away (but not these days). Whereas she would down a couple of glasses of wine and know when she was squiffy and stop. Wouldn't want to forgo it though. Stem of a glass of cold chardonnay in your hand at the end of the day – few things nicer. In any case, no harm in a pallbearer being pale in the chops and dreamy if that was what it was, in their line of business, from going a bit heavy the previous night. No one ever raised any eyebrows on the subject. Different world from when she and Silas were growing up. Not that she especially liked to imagine her son naked with another fellow. The thrusting and groaning and expletives and everything. Best to let things take their course. So long as they were clean, tidying up properly after themselves. Frankly it was a boon not to know. Even worse, most probably, in the case of another woman.

That was the problem with the world these days. Transparency and accountability, recording and confessing everything. Whatever happened to privacy in all its common decency? The way people share their thoughts and feelings without batting an eyelid with anyone who cares to listen or sign up to their whatever they call it, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, their screensaving social life. Bad enough the amount of paperwork running a family business, doing everything on a screen enough to make you lose your eyesight. And then managing the website. Manage this, manage that. Everyone's managing. Not. Mostly she left the website to

An English Guide to Birdwatching

Ash. Not to mention the way everyone was being spied on left, right and centre, every message sent or received, interrupted, intercepted, interception management. What was it all coming to? Somewhere or other down the line, most probably, we're all on the wrong bus. If her son liked to snog Jim Phillips, far be it from her.

But then one Friday evening, just a month before the exchange date, Ashley came in through the front door of the flat with a pretty young girl. He didn't seem remotely shy or embarrassed.

— Mum, this is Rhoda, he announced, grinning broadly. I said it would be alright for her to come up.

It was quiet in the Woodlocks' living room, besides the tip-top, tip-top of the old clock on the mantelpiece. Ethel had thought of it as *tip-top* ever since her husband once uttered the phrase, a half-tipsy semi-slur that somehow seemed right. Silas disliked television, its tyrannical chewing-gum-for-the-eyes, its endlessly complacent glow. He could tolerate only the news and weather, and even then was inclined to keep up a hostile commentary. She only got to watch when he was out for one of his walks or had gone to his bed. Not that there was anything much on these days. Nothing but soaps full of bad language and unpleasant people. Or whatever they call it, reality shows, same difference. And Silas, though it used to be more regular, now only occasionally listened to his records, usually jazz and blues or, to pep up an evening, David Bowie or the Rolling Stones. But mostly, like tonight, he took to reading after dinner, if there was no job on. He would read for an hour or so, give himself time to digest, before retreating to his bed.

— How nice! exclaimed Ethel, getting to her slippers feet. She felt at once stung and flustered, seeing as she was

in her house-clothes, a frumpy top and old slacks. Silas, on the other hand, at first was slow to react at all, caught up, apparently, in an Agatha Christie. *Peril at End House* it happened to be, and he must have read it at least three times before. What's the flaming point, she wanted to ask him (but had stopped doing so years ago), reading a whodunnit when you know full well who?

The discombobulation of Rhoda's arrival got buried in the move, a cold day in mid-January. It was a momentous thing, after all, to up-sticks and start anew down by the sea in the twilight of their years.

— They do say, Ethel said to her husband, as she rummaged for a battered box of Earl Grey teabags on the first morning after, that moving house is the most traumatic thing, apart from death and divorce.

Silas was standing a few feet away in their new living room, surrounded by boxes of books and records, everything feeling displaced and, if truth be told, a bit choked.

— I know, dear, you've said that several times in the past month.

— Things will settle soon enough, she observed, as if the retired undertaker had not even addressed her.