

Some thoughts on ‘Hotel World’ by Ali Smith.

I have recently been reading a selection of novels that I would not normally have selected based on my usual criteria of pure reading pleasure. My goal is to broaden my knowledge of different styles, forms and techniques. Hotel World is one such selection. The novel centres on the death of Sarah Willoughby, a chambermaid in the Global Hotel, and the effect this has on a number of characters who are also loosely connected to that hotel. I found elements of this work to be at times thrilling, absorbing, frustrating, satisfying, confusing, tiresome, distressing and engaging. Ultimately, I think my overall reaction was one of fascination rather than enjoyment.

The book is divided into six sections, each with a temporal title. The first five sections the novel moves about in time (“Past”, “Future Conditional”...) describe the overlapping perceptions and response of each of the five characters to the events in the hotel or the environment around the hotel. The final chapter (“Present”) achieves some sort of closure by drawing in other ghosts of London (including Princess Diana somewhat bizarrely) yet ultimately leaves the storyline open, as the shop assistant in the jewellers where Sarah left her watch for repair, places and watch on her wrist. The assistant does not know that Sarah is dead and we are left with the impression at some time in the future the assistant will eventually seek Sarah out to return it.

This is a multi-layered novel. At its heart it deals with the passage of time and how life is fragile, transitory and ephemeral. It also focuses on grief, relationships, love and death. Sarah may be dead but she isn't gone yet. Indeed, she finds: "Because now that I'm nearly gone, I'm more here than I ever was." It demonstrates how life is shaped by brief moments, only partly under our control. The hotel, a solid, imposing building representing permanence, unchanged by the seasons outside, is actually a vehicle for constant change and variation as guests check in and leave. Throughout the book there is the constant sense that time is of the essence, moments happen, experiences occur, memories are made and then later forgotten. “What a life. What a time. What I felt. Then. Gone.”

Each section uses a different styles and approach, with varying success. In the opening chapter, Sarah is already dead and slipping away from her earthly existence. This is a convincing depiction of what a ghostly spirit might feel and do as it loses contact with the physical world. It often uses a stream of conscience style which I found involving, thrilling in parts, giving a real visceral sense of the ghost's distress and sense of loss. Other sections use fairly normal prose, though one chapter (“Future in the Past”) which describes Clare's memories of her sister Sarah, is written without punctuation, sentence or paragraph formatting. This rapidly becomes tiresome and eventually so tedious it distracts from the emotional content of the chapter.

Overall, this a deeply compelling book, that takes risks by using a variety of prose styles. This has made me feel I need to take similar (though maybe not quite as excessive!) risks in broadening my prose style too.