
In this carefully researched novel Scottish author Andrew O’Hagan delivers a seamless blend of facts and imagined conversations from the point of view of a Maltese terrier of impeccable pedigree. The pup was a gift to Marilyn Monroe from Frank Sinatra in November 1960 and she named it Mafia Honey, Maf for short. Unlike his ‘fated companion’ (83) Norma Jeane Mortenson, whose childhood was spent in a series of foster homes and orphanages, Maf’s lineage can be traced back to the aristocracy of Malta.

Born at Aviemore in Scotland, where Maf’s breeders were tenant farmers and avid readers, thinkers with an admiration for socialism, he attributes his lifelong adoration of Trotsky to them. His second home was with painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant at Charleston: ‘a perfect haunt of light and invention’ (1). He considers himself blessed ‘to paddle about on those Sussex flagstones … turning slowly into lovely me, the sort of dog … set for foreign adventures … ordained to tell the story’ (2).

With that sense of destiny, Maf uses well what he considers to be ‘A dog’s biggest talent, that of absorbing everything of interest … the best of what is known to our owners … we retain the thoughts of those we meet’ (2). He’s well-versed on literature, philosophy, art; is a lover of fine décor and designer shoes, psychology and the history of dogs in literature. He quotes from Proust, Kafka, Plutarch, Descartes and Freud. Indeed one might consider him a canine savant, well suited to the task of narrator.

‘People have no head for miracles. They are pressed into shape by the force of reality, a curse if you ask me’ (1). Thus Maf invites us to suspend our disbelief and dive into a world where dogs discourse on the classics and philosophy, cats speak in poetic verse, birds chatter as they gossip the news of the day and bed bugs expound on the Cold War.

Through the eyes of this hilarious, thoughtful and sometimes satirical canine we are given commentary and opinions on the space race, segregation, the civil rights movement, immigration, the blacklisting of artists during the ‘American versus Un-American’ witch-hunt are woven into a colourful tapestry recreating 1960s America.

The opening chapters set the scene of California, ‘a kind of paradise … a place where the bare truth was seldom sufficient and seldom reliable’ (23). It’s not until Chapter Five that Marilyn appears on the scene. ‘Marilyn was late for everything: it was her creed, her prerogative, her style, and her revenge’ (161).

As Marilyn’s constant companion Maf has opinions on: Lee Strasberg – ‘Here he was, the guru, the magician, the mangy old cartoon cat’ (115); Frank Sinatra – ‘He did have a touch of style, that man … Frank’s neat row of teeth rhymed perfectly with the white line of handkerchief cresting the top pocket of his suit’ (33); Sammy Davis Jr at the Copacabana as ‘he came bojangling his way downstage’ (72).

At a prestigious New York book event when Lillian Hellman reveals she opposed Trotsky’s request for asylum in America, ‘Everything went blank and I just launched myself from under the tables and sank my teeth into her nylon-clad ankle’.
(182). Later at the same event, as Edmund Wilson criticised the British, ‘those second rate painters, academics’, Maf grabbed the opportunity to bite Wilson’s fingers in protest (194). ‘Your little dog has the most exquisite critical taste. We must find a place for him on the faculty,’ said Mrs Trilling.

To President Kennedy at Peter Lawford’s party discussing fame Marilyn responds, ‘The thing concealed by fame is self-knowledge’ (217). Of Marilyn, Maf tells us she ‘was a strange and unhappy creature, but … had more natural comedy to her than anybody I would ever know. … It didn’t take long for her to become my best friend’ (62-63). ‘The Marilyn I knew was smelly and fun and an artist to the very end of her fingertips’ (65). During the last two years of her life Marilyn struggled to be taken seriously as an actress ‘But I put my mind into tight sweaters instead’ (252). Maf was with her on her last trip to Mexico and he tells us ‘This is heaven. … My first owners told me Mexico is the home of freedom and peyote’ (230).

Marilyn’s depression, insecurity, overuse of pills and alcohol are hinted at, but the book avoids the darker seamier side of her life. Maf sums up his friend as he and Mrs Murray watch the televised celebrations in Washington and Marilyn sings Happy Birthday to President Kennedy: ‘My fated companion looked as if nothing real had ever touched her … She was unearthly’ (279).

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