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M.J. Hyland. *This is how*. Text, 2009.


M.J. Hyland is a sorcerer. Her characters squirm off the page and into your dreams. In the simplest, most direct language, writing in the first person and the present tense, she takes you into a troubled mind and it is not a comfortable experience.

*This is how* is the title of her third novel. Patrick Oxtoby is a young man who knows himself imperfectly. He yearns for friendship and love but something always gets in the way. He fails to realise what the reader can see – that the impediment is within himself. Uncertain and ill at ease in every relationship, he lacks the gift of happiness which, as his father rather unkindly points out, his older brother possesses, and his behaviour, despite his habitual self-control, is radically unpredictable. Hyland builds up the sense of threat superbly as Patrick moves fitfully about the small seaside town he has chosen for a new beginning after a broken engagement, and to escape from his stifling home life.

The title of this book is ‘This is how’, not ‘This is why.’ Patrick doesn’t seem to be a victim of any external abuse or trauma. His beloved grandmother died when he was twelve but his reaction then shows that his nature was already formed. His parents, seen only through his own eyes, are strange, ambiguous beings, but they have apparently done what they could with this odd creature they have spawned. He was clever at school, but university confounded him and he is happier using his mechanical skills, despite the feeling of failure that dogs him.

As the taut and horrifying tale proceeds, Hyland, while never for a second leaving Patrick’s consciousness, manages to provide glimpses of him through the eyes
of others, registered in their reactions to things he says and does. A prison guard – yes, inevitably he ends up in prison – asks him, ‘Do you always talk to yourself like a nutcase?’ In court,

The judge calls for order, asks the prisoner to stop shouting.

I hadn’t known I was shouting,
says Patrick. A cellmate, wallowing in suicidal despair, says, ‘I don’t know why you’re so surprised people don’t care about you.’ Patrick learns, in the hardest possible way, what he has destroyed and what he can salvage. Eventually he comes to accept that life in prison might suit him: ‘I’m under no pressure to be better and life’s shrinking to a size that suits me better.’

Patrick will wring your heart. His usual answer to aggression, put-downs and unwelcome information is the single, self-protective word, ‘Right’. Dangerous as he is, he is pathetic and even appealing. Occasionally someone addresses him by name – he insists on Patrick, not Pat or Paddy – and he is always touched when they do.

Hyland’s second novel Carry Me Down was a devastating portrait of a pre-pubescent boy struggling with the bewildering demands of his changing world. Patrick in This is how might be this boy grown older – a boy who thinks of himself as special but can’t quite get the trick of connecting with other humans. Read it to be disturbed, haunted and enlightened.