



After Tomorrow

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Dystopias are getting darker. This time, five banks have crashed, food is short, a chicken costs £90 at the supermarket. There are riots and robberies. When young Matt's lorry-driver Dad left with a load of potatoes one day, he never came back; his body was found in a ditch. Matt's Mum has remarried the kind but ineffectual Justin. Their store of food, carefully saved for the family, attracts an assault on their home which they are helpless to resist. Grandpa, trying to support them all, dies of a heart attack defending his allotment. In a later raid, the horrific implication for the reader with eyes to see is that Mum is raped by armed thugs in balaclavas.

After fifty pages of this, Matt, his small brother Taco and Justin flee, hiding in a truck belonging to his Dad's streetwise former employer, Bob. They head through the tunnel to France, leaving Mum behind to care for demented Grandma Grace. Any respite for Matt, and for us, is soon tempered since things are not much better across the Channel; refugees are offered no more than basic rations in a tented camp, where the rest of the novel is played out. Matt, who tells the story in an anxious narrative voice unrelieved by humour, meets some kindness from a nearby woman farmer and makes a friend of Paige, a girl posing as Bob's daughter, since only the presence of a child persuades the French authorities to allow adults a place in the camp. As the days go by, Matt discovers reserves of ingenuity and resourcefulness in helping his family to survive.

He also meets hostility and treachery, sometimes from those he thought he could trust. Bob, for example, sends Matt off on a desperate chase around the French countryside to find penicillin, at huge cost, to save Taco's life; it's a money-making scam - all the time, Bob knows the tablets are no more than aspirin. The basics, food, water, shelter, are in short supply and there is no safety net. These are the kind of conditions we might see on television on some distant border, the sufferers safely somewhere else. Except here, Gillian Cross will not let us switch off. This could be us. The adults have no more answers than the children, because there aren't any.

Any ways forward at the end of the book are of the young people's making. As Matt and Paige stare across the fields, they know they can trust each other, their own mental and physical toughness, but 'the road went on and on, into a whole, unknown country'. That road looks relentlessly uphill from where Matt and Paige, and the reader, are sitting.

The writing is uncompromising and strong, the young voices and fears entirely credible, the situation all too possible if

everyone else in Europe is on the slide, out of the control of any government. So what will serious-minded young readers, their lives in front of them, make of it all? Years ago, children's book people would insist on a happy ending for young people. How naïve that looks here.

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