



[Home](#) > Joe Quinn's Poltergeist

Joe Quinn's Poltergeist

Books Reviewed:

[Joe Quinn's Poltergeist](#) [1]

Issue:

[235](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Clive Barnes](#) [3]

[New to the Choice](#):

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This is the third collaboration between David and Dave, but the first that could be properly called a graphic novel, a form that Dave has made his own. Any fan of David, and I am one, will recognise the visionary themes he returns to here: the light and darkness in which we all live; in which miracles and hauntings can still be found; and in which desolation and exaltation are never far away. And this story is preceded by a preface in which he acknowledges the story very much as his own, rooted in his past, the Tyneside world he grew up in, and the loss and longing that he recognises in his youthful reading and that have shaped his writing. The haunting this time is a poltergeist, a spirit that has long been associated with the turbulent emotions of adolescence. It is in Joe Quinn's house, throwing plates and slices of bread, breaking chairs and screaming. Idly fascinated at first, Davie's friend Geordie dismisses it, 'It's just Joe bliddy Quinn being Joe bliddy Quinn.' But for Davie, aching and silently raging at the loss of his younger sister, it becomes a compulsion, causing him to seek out the new young priest in the parish, who is himself in the grip of a loss of faith, and leading him back to Joe Quinn's house, where, beside the poltergeist and Joe, there are chip butties and Joe's seductive young mam, dancing to underground music from California. It is a wonderful brief tale, in which so much is contained and in which the heights and depths of experience are conveyed by a characteristic delicate balance of reticence and eloquence: the quiet sadness of Davie's conversation with his mam about his sister; and the roaring, anything is possible, excitement of a wild kick-about: 'In dashing through the field and playing with the ball we change ourselves. We change the world. Yeeess!' And then there is Dave McKean. This is, once more, a tour de force of illustration, in which the page comes alive. Faces change before our eyes: Davie is sometimes the boy he has been, sometimes the youth he is, and sometimes the young man he will be. The priest's hair and forehead seem to grow higher and heavier so that it is not just the drink but the weight of his doubt that makes him droop and sway. McKean's illustrations speak where Almond's text remains silent. In Almond's text, Joe Quinn's mam, discovered sun-bathing, quickly slips her dress straps up on to her shoulders again. In McKean's illustrations she has only one strap on, and the movement of the single strap comes in three slow stages and seen over her shoulder, looking at the young priest's face, it is clearly to be seen as an act of sexual invitation. Almond and McKean are so well met you wonder that they have the same first name. What uncanny forces might be at work? Is it a marriage made in heaven or hell? Or is it just one of those marvellous events that sometimes happen on this earth and for which we should give thanks.

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Links:

- [1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/joe-quinn?s-poltergeist>
- [2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/235>
- [3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>