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EW review: Hornby novel needs depth

By Mark Harris
Entertainment Weekly
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(Entertainment Weekly) -- Nick Hornby's "A Long Way Down" is a pleasant and ingratiating novel, and it shouldn't be.

Nobody does ingratiating like Hornby, the Yank-friendly Brit whose compulsively likable books ("About a Boy," "High Fidelity," "Fever Pitch") feature winning, rueful, self-aware boy-men who cry out to be incarnated by the charming likes of Hugh Grant and John Cusack.

"A Long Way Down" is, however, about suicide (or, at least, deep depression); it's narrated in alternating chapters by four people who meet via authorial contrivance one New Year's Eve on the roof of a notorious London farewell spot nicknamed Toppers' House, ready to jump to their deaths. And guess what? They all turn out to be Nick Hornby characters -- garrulous, colloquial, eager to explain themselves, and far too full of life for any reader to fear for them for even a minute.

"A Long Way Down's" grim subject would denote a departure for Hornby -- except that, notwithstanding his dark premise, the author, like the troubled foursome he's invented, has no real interest in taking a transformative leap. It gives nothing away to reveal that, early on, his characters pull it together enough to march down to ground level.

Once there, the four of them -- Martin (middle-aged subject of a self-made tabloid scandal), Maureen (exhausted caregiver to a vegetative son), Jess (depressed, angry, off-the-rails teenage girl), and JJ (failed American musician whose taste for wide-ranging pop-culture references marks him as such a Hornby archetype that there's no way the author is going to kill him off) -- make a temporary non-suicide pact that extends their joint lease on life until Valentine's Day.

Hornby's writing has always been tenderhearted -- there are few novelists better at suggesting the redemptive power of using precise, self-deprecating wit to articulate one's own failings -- and his generosity toward his characters is almost always an asset.

Here, though, his appetite for kindness results in a novel that could not feel less like a matter of life and death, one in which the buoyant tone often seems to be apologizing for the content. The sitcom contrivance of his set-up (four demographically complementary people on the same roof at the same time? Really?) becomes a writing trap; so does his decision to rely on the first person in a story that cries out for some objectivity, since his narrators aren't very insightful about anything but their own bad moods.

Hornby knows how to darken a moment with a well-turned line, and he struggles vigorously against the sentimentality of his own idea -- the perfectly reasonable belief that human connection can save us -- by having one protagonist verbally body-slam another whenever possible. ("You thought you were going to be somebody, but now... you're nobody," Angry Girl tells Failed Musician. "You haven't got as much talent as you thought... and there was no Plan B.")

His deftness almost conceals the strenuous puppeteering it takes to get these characters onto the roof, off of it, and into one another's lives. But a novelist using so much skill to write his way out of a mess should ask himself who made the mess in the first place. And suicide -- or thoughts of it -- probably shouldn't be this painless.

EW Grade: B-

'The People of Paper' by Salvador Plascencia

Reviewed by Channing Joseph

The residents of the small flower-farming town of El Monte, California -- "people of paper" because they exist only on the page -- are engaged in a cosmic battle against the writer who created them and the readers who invade their lives for entertainment.

Salvador Plascencia's surrealist metanovel, styled a la Garcia Marquez, is a charming meditation on the relationship between reader, author, and story line, filled with mythic imagery ("their necks still cocked to the sky, finally a small piece of Saturn fell: a blue flake floating down...") and unforgettable personalities: a war commander who burns himself to cure his sadness; a Baby Nostradamus whose vast knowledge leaves him as limp as a vegetable; and a woman made of paper, whose sharp, origami edges cut her many lovers with deep gashes.

Though El Monte literally hides under tortoise shells to evade voyeuristic gazes, readers will find it hard to turn away from "The People of Paper."

EW Grade: A

'Make Love!' *The Bruce Campbell Way' by Bruce Campbell

Reviewed by Adam B. Vary

It's a great, goofy what-if: Suppose stalwart B-movie star Bruce Campbell, of "Evil Dead" fame, found himself cast in a crucial supporting role in a \$35 million A-movie rom-com starring Richard Gere and Renee Zellweger and directed by the peerless Mike Nichols.

Well, if you're Bruce Campbell spinning this story in your first novel, "Make Love! *The Bruce Campbell Way," you adopt a faux-Southern accent that no one takes seriously, run afoul of Colin Powell's Secret Service detail while researching your character, convince Zellweger to "stuff a few gel sacs into a larger bra," and induce Nichols to amp up your scuffle with Gere into a full-on Hercules-and-Xena-style brawl. You also have so much fun spinning your own career into a hypothetical toilet that your readers hope Nichols is also reading and hungry for a new project.

EW Grade: B+

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