

BOOKS

So long, Hollywood

Dave Eggers's new novel, about an alcoholic dentist driving through Alaska, is defiantly unfilmable, says *Duncan White*

HEROES OF THE FRONTIER

by Dave Eggers

400PP, HAMISH HAMILTON, £18.99, EBOOK £9.99

Dave Eggers has just arrived somewhere near the cultural mainstream. Two of his novels have now been turned into big-budget films, both out this year, both (as it happens) starring Tom Hanks. So has Eggers, staunch defender of his creative independence, finally sold out?

Heroes of the Frontier makes short work of that theory. It's a mark of the author's admirable cussedness that his latest novel is about a semi-alcoholic dentist having a breakdown in a motorhome in Alaska. Josie is in search of pioneers, heroes, the frontier, and pursues the sacred land of her imagination on a kind of mock epic odyssey through shabby tourist towns – one of them called Homer – while trying to protect her two children from libertarian gun nuts, raging forest fires and the consequences of her own disastrous decisions. By turns tawdry and touching, it is an episodic catalogue of small failures. It is not the stuff of Hollywood.

But, then again, nor was *A Hologram for the King* (2012), Eggers's lament on the decline of American manufacturing told through the story of an American salesman's midlife crisis amid the foundations of a yet-to-be-built city in Saudi Arabia. Even so, Hollywood jumped at it, watering this novel of concentrated brilliance down into a disappointing film, out earlier this year. Perhaps *The Circle*, Eggers's 2013 Orwellian thriller about a sinister digital firm that has bought up Google, Facebook et al, to hit screens later this year, will better weather the transition into film – or maybe Eggers just won't go to Hollywood.

Ironically, it was the failure of a film adaptation that gave Eggers his creative independence in the first place. He sold the rights to his 2000 debut, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, for \$2 million. Then, much to his relief, despite a Nick Hornby script and PT Anderson's interest in directing it, the movie never



The final American frontier: Alaska

went into production. The money, on the other hand, was put to good use: Eggers set up writing labs for children and McSweeney's, a not-for-profit publisher in San Francisco.

That social conscience, that anger at the way the world is going, runs through Eggers's various novels, and *Heroes of the Frontier* is no exception. Josie runs away to Alaska ostensibly because her "invertebrate" ex-boyfriend – a "loose-bowelled man named Carl" – is getting married. Despite his failure to support their children in any tangible way, he wants them to visit him in Florida so that his new

Josie takes her children to Alaska in search of purity, light and heroes

in-laws will be persuaded he's a responsible type. Josie's blood boils at the prospect. She absconds to Alaska with the children in secret.

But it's more than Carl she's fleeing. There are "a thousand reasons" for her to "leave the Lower 48, leave a country spinning its wheels, a country making occasional forays into progress and enlightenment but otherwise uninspired, otherwise prone to cannibalism, to eating the young and weak, to finger-pointing and complaint and distraction and the volcanic emergence of ancient hatreds". America, or at least a part of it, is destroying Josie. After being sued by a patient who claims she missed a tumour, Josie has been forced to give up her dental practice; poor though this leaves her, it comes as something of a relief, after years spent enduring disgruntled employees

and anonymous online critics. Her hippie Ohio town is being gentrified; the new residents are entitled and angry, the organic market a pit of aggression. A Lycra-clad cyclist beats an innocent driver almost to death with his pump.

She wants to escape to a place that offers purity and light, away from small-town cruelty and cowardice. Alaska is the farthest she can go, because her daughter doesn't have a passport. It "was at once the same country but another country, was almost Russia, was almost oblivion, and if Josie left her phone and used only cash – she'd brought \$3000 in the kind of velvet bag meant to hold gold coins or magic beans – she was untraceable, untrackable".

But Alaska, the final American frontier, disappoints her. Everything is expensive: "it looked like a cold Kentucky but its prices were Tokyo, 1988". Her velvet purse soon empties. Even nature refuses to play along with her fantasy. At a tired animal park, Josie is thrilled that her children can watch bighorn sheep picking their way along a mountainside, symbol, to her, of "unadulterated bliss", of an "uncomplicated life lived high above everything." Then an eagle swoops in, plucks up one of the sheep and drops it off the cliff.

This becomes the pattern for their peripatetic road trip. Each chapter begins with fresh hope, and a moment of transcendence; then it is undercut, and the family has to move on. *Heroes of the Frontier* is a shaggy dog story in which the kids find an actual shaggy dog – but the unpleasant owner turns up to reclaim it.

The children are drawn with Eggers's typical warmth and wit, an antidote to the bleakness: Ana, five, is joyously destructive; Paul, eight, is mature and hypersensitive. Josie is well-realised, too: anxious, but a terrifyingly reckless mother. She is earnest, though, in her desire to be a better parent than she ever had – hers were psychiatric nurses addicted to their patients' drugs.

The novel's very unpredictability soon becomes predictable. As a structural motif, each chapter begins with the three of them, on the road, driving aimlessly toward some fugitive destination. You end up feeling a bit like Paul and Ana, in the back of the RV, asking plaintively: "Are we there yet?"

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PHOTOGRAPHY

By 1935, America was deep in the Great Depression. Long spells of heat on cleared prairie had also brought about the Dust Bowl. To document the social upheaval caused by these twin disasters, one economic, one

environmental, the new Farming Security Administration hired photographers and writers. Their mission was to record the lives of the rural poor: "To introduce Americans to America."

While press photographers took their shots to illustrate specific news stories, the FSA

photographers wanted to capture a mood. Roy Stryker, the man behind the project, said: "News pictures are the noun or the verb; our kind of photography is the adjective or the adverb."

The best of the FSA's library are brought together in *New Deal Photography: USA 1935-1943*.

This photograph, taken by the Ukrainian-born Jack Delano on a spring day in 1943 in Clinton, Iowa, depicts the women who worked as "wipers", cleaning the machinery, in the roundhouse of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. *Taschen, £12.99*

'I felt like an amiable sheep, straitjacketed on the inside'

Horatio Clare thinks this memoir explains what madness feels like better than Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

TRISTIMANIA

by Jay Griffiths

224PP, HAMISH HAMILTON, £16.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

We hear more about depression these days but mania – manic depression, or bipolar disorder – remains a silent land, fogged with shame and fear. A bout of madness will never look good. Fortunately, Jay Griffiths has passed through that land and emerged with a lucid map of the territory.

The most recent trigger for her mania was a bizarre sexual assault. She had suffered the onset of a bipolar bout before (some elements of which are pleasant – you are tempted to feel more, think faster). Then, she had climbed Kilimanjaro on the up and retreated to the Amazon on the down. This time, however, she decided to survive the trough by capturing it in words. First, she names it: "Tristimania" – coined by 18th-century psychiatrist Benjamin Rush – tells it true to me. [He] may have meant it as a precise shading of melancholia, but it works perfectly for the tristesse, the distress coupled with mania, which a mixed-state

bipolar episode provokes.'

Although writing about madness is predisposed to be harrowing, Griffiths's ferocious, exploratory intellect makes her book shine. "This condition may be seen as a form of illness, but it is not only an illness; it also hurls the mind into a world of metaphor, and to regard it solely as a medical issue is to demean it," she writes. "Because this condition is a bittersweet privilege, a paradox of insight and madness [...] there is honey on the razor's edge."

She tries taking the pills, but feels "like an amiable sheep... straitjacketed on the inside." She personifies her torment as Mercury, "the god unbound who keeps no promises". If she keeps the doses low, he gives her poems, written during her most dangerous period: "Nature's easy, psyche not/ Being both its own/ Predator and prey". Her verses recall Sylvia Plath's posthumous *Ariel*, the best book on madness I knew, before I'd read *Tristimania*.

Readers may take Griffiths's intense prose in sips or they may down it in a single draught. For

her, feeling and thought join in ecstatic dance: "Words were a slender thread to logic, which was a stronger rope to lucidity." But this is far more than a diary of madness. Griffiths finds a delicate mode – funny, honest, iridescent with scholarship.

Very close to suicide, she is saved by friends, by a doctor and by reading – Coleridge, Byron, Cowper, Clare and Manley Hopkins, fellow manics all. When she sets out to walk to Compostela, without the props of pills, tobacco and liquor, her friends are furious. Other people's terrible journeys can make marvellous reading, and this section is a peach: vile pilgrims, sex-hungry fake monks, rivers of tears, gushing periods, disintegrating boots. But somehow she completes the course.

Griffiths makes us see through her mad eyes when she laughs, lumatic, at her woodstove, or when she is affronted by a blundering psychiatrist. Such rare lucidity and honesty make *Tristimania* a gripping book, and an important one. Mania is still little understood, and suicide rates are still climbing.

Is it just hair?

Tim Smith-Laing on a poet's novel about Rastafarianism

AUGUSTOWN

by Kei Miller

256PP, W&N, £12.99, EBOOK £6.99



★★★★★

Literally panoramic, Kei Miller's latest novel is narrated by something in the air that hovers high above a cityscape with an "uncanny resemblance" to August Town, a former plantation village turned violent Kingston suburb. The narrator's elevated eye takes in the lives of a few of the town's inhabitants on a single day in 1982.

In a device familiar from movies such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Crash* and *Amores Perros*, the characters are knit together by a catastrophe – or "autoclaps", in the Jamaican patois. There is a historical dimension, too. As in the real August Town, Miller makes this the spot where, in 1920, the preacher Alexander Bedward came before a vast congregation drawn from across Jamaica to prove that he could fly. His flight was crucial to the birth of Rastafarianism, which, in turn, is the crux of the plot.

Like a wide-angled lens, Miller's novel fits much into a small frame – Augustown itself, Rastafari, gang and police violence, religious opposition to colonial rule – but still gives an impression of space. It never feels cramped. In an age that indulges the giant novel, it is a joy to read an author who can do all that, economically.

Dialogue is the novel's greatest satisfaction. As in his most recent poetry collection, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, which won the 2014 Forward Prize, Miller mingles standard English with patois, embracing the music of each. There, the "Rastaman" figure, equipped with a Glasgow PhD, skips from one to the other – one moment saying how the cartographer makes "invisible and wutliss/ plenty things that poor people cyaa do without", the next moment noting the "viral spread of governments".

In *Augustown*, the dialogue, punctuated by "chus" and "nuhs", sits more comfortably next to the narrator's graver phrasing. For instance, we hear that the "shadow of the unsaid things grew thicker and darker" as Ma Taffy draws breath to say: "Listen. Mi know what them did do to Petye."

Ma Taffy, blind and ancient, is the closest we come to a central character.

'There shall no razor come upon his head... he shall be holy and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow'



To order this book from the Telegraph for £10.99 plus £1.99 p&p call 0844 871 1515

Musical: Kei Miller won the Forward Prize in 2014



Eloquent, euphonic, wise and funny, her speech stands for all the complexities of the novel. Different strata of the past are folded into her patois. "Autoclaps", her favourite word, is dense with layers of etymology. It is something one brings upon oneself (auto-collapse); it is also heavenly *force majeure* ("afterclap" is thunder); and it is prophetic (the "unveiling" of apocalypse, with Ma Taffy as its blind seer). English, Middle English and ancient Greek all at once, "autoclaps" is unmistakably and entirely Jamaican.

Miller relies heavily on theme and variation. Flight, for instance, comes up again and again, ambivalently: the ethereal narrator, Bedward's walk, Rastas floating on clouds of ganja, the struggle for liberation, a suicide dangling from a tree. Each is a different story and part of the same story: the dream of "Flying Africans" who pray for the "wings of a dove" or that they might "fly away to Zion", singing songs that "at the right moment, can lift a man or a woman all the way to heaven" – even if, as the narrator suggests, that means nothing more than being "another nameless thing in the sky".

It's fortunate that Miller can conjure meaning into things like this, as his plot hangs on a belief that will most likely be alien to many of his readers. Rastafarians prohibit cutting one's hair because of the "Nazarite vow": "There shall no razor come upon his head... he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow." Hence, dreadlocks.

As more than one character notes, it's just hair; and, then again, it isn't. The Rastas of Augustown hold their locks as dear as anything in the world; to have them forcibly shaven by "Babylon" – in the person of a policeman or teacher – is enough to cause suicide or a riot, or worse, an "autoclaps".

The Nazarite vow admits of no scepticism – and the reader has to follow with that in mind. As the narrator says: "Look, this isn't 'magic realism'. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs [...] You may as well stop to consider a more urgent question, not whether you believe in this story or not, but if this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken time to believe in." If the denouement of the "autoclaps" stretches credibility a little, Miller also wants us to ask what we find incredible: the book's plotting or the beliefs behind it.

Augustown is by no means a faultless book. Miller can be heavy-handed. He is fond of a direct address telling the reader what to think, too keen to pre-empt and guide what one does with his words. Even "autoclaps" is explained, eventually, in a section meant to emphasise its richness, but which renders it more sterile. It seems odd that someone so adept at setting up multiple meanings should also want to shut them down. Fortunately, though, the novel beneath the interjections is able to take flight on its own.