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Review of *The Ghost of Neil Diamond* by David Milnes

Bitesize: Odd but captivating story of a tribute act trying to wade through the swamp of Hong Kong's exclusive members-only clubs...

About half way through **The Ghost of Neil Diamond**, one of the characters – Iannis - who has previously come across as an irrational and unpleasant type of guy, delivers the following lucid and reasoned condemnation of the eponymous star: “He was always playing a part, and he never really made top drawer because of that. Not in my book’. As a description of the novel’s main protagonist - of what lies within David Milnes’ book - it’s pretty much spot on. **The Ghost of Neil Diamond** is a book about never quite making it; about the yearning for a seemingly attainable dream that’s just beyond one’s grasp. It’s also about aching for a Martini with an olive in it, but more of that later.

Never heard of David Milnes before? There’s a good reason. Whilst the Balkans tore themselves apart, Mr Blair lived out his own rock star fantasies during the first two terms of his Premiership, and the careers of a thousand popular recording artists bloomed and inevitably decayed (Neil Diamond surviving relatively unscathed), Milnes was Head of English at King George V School in Hong Kong. He lived there from 1992 – 2005, thirteen years in a country which uniquely belies its Eastern geography, and in his spare time, he wrote. **The Ghost of Neil Diamond** is a product of both the well-rationed leisure time, and the country of its conception.

Neil Atherton is an English folk musician now living in Hong Kong, having moved there after his wife accepted an attractive job offer. Unemployed for six months, Atherton meets the Travel Agent and part-time impresario Elbert Chan, with whom he accepts an offer – or a type of offer – to have a go at a career as a Neil Diamond impersonator, or rather, to have a go at a career as a successful Neil Diamond impersonator. Sounds simple enough doesn’t it? It’s not. After getting nowhere in this endeavour, but promising himself a Martini with an olive in it when he finally does, Atherton’s relationships with both Chan and his Wife break down, and he finds himself destitute, but with an absolute, fervent desire to make his career as an impersonator successful. Enter Tony Laprisco, rival Neil Diamond impersonator. From here on in, we have a real corker of a tale on our hands.

Milnes’ story-telling isn’t orthodox, but it is inventive and well-measured

enough to render **The Ghost of Neil Diamond** that little bit more special a find. The story doesn't explode into a thrilling chase, a crescendo, but is more like a graph with peaks and troughs. We start with a small peak, a small trough, and then proceed to bigger peaks followed by bigger troughs. Even in the thrilling denouement, there are moments of self-doubt which stop the story running away with itself. It's an almost manic depressive book; the bigger the expectations following Atherton's moments of happiness or perceived breakthrough, the bigger the crushing disappointment of a setback. After Atherton's ups and downs throughout, you resign yourself to thinking '*Actually, you win. I have absolutely no idea what this guy is going to do next*'. This is, of course, an extremely exciting prospect.

The unpredictable attributes of the book also extend to Milnes' writing style which is hard to pin down. A great deal of the novel deals with the boredom and day-to-day meanderings of the main character, spending his days trying to waste his time on the streets until he returns to a Language School in the evening to bed down on the floor for another night. Passages are almost 'Auster-esque' in their obsession with the minutiae of the daily slog of a man with all the time in the world. Yet, these are broken up by flashes of magic –there are snatches of Murakami in some of the more ethereal set-pieces and in Elbert Chan, a character who seems to be half human, half wizard in his actions. Milnes isn't Auster or Murakami though, these are two colossuses of modern fiction whose bodies of work aren't to be compared with just any Tom, Dick or David that writes a book about being bored and lonely in the Far East. It's just that he hints at them, which is a step in the right direction for anyone.

The Ghost of Neil Diamond doesn't necessarily have the right qualities to be an instant classic, but that it mixes with the heavyweights of fiction and holds its own should be complement enough. It's a special find - a story with a uniqueness that makes you wonder what else the author has up his sleeve, but that also makes you worry that he may have played his best hand too early. Enough with the cards metaphors though, pour yourself a Martini Mr Milnes – and don't forget the olive.

Any Cop?: A thoroughly enjoyable and idiosyncratic story that holds your attention until the – rather brilliant – end.

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