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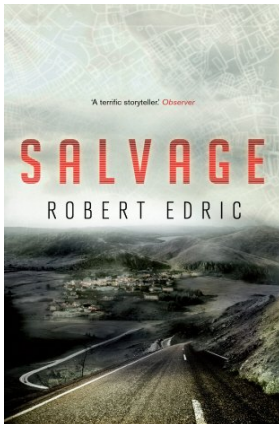
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Salvage by Robert Edric (<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/salvage-by-robert-edric/>)

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(<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Salvage-Robert-Edric/dp/0385617623/ref=nosim/strangehorizons>)

The concept of a near-future world affected by climate change has, of late, produced some fascinating works of science fiction. Two fine—and quite different—examples from 2009 that spring readily to my mind are Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (<http://www.strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-year-of-the-flood-by-margaret-atwood-and-the-rapture-by-liz-jensen/>), which teeters on the precipice of showing the most transformative change; and Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (<http://www.strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/far-north-by-marcel-theroux/>), with its focus on individual survival. Robert Edric's *Salvage* (his twentieth novel, though the first I personally have encountered), however, takes a more political tack in its portrait of the future.

A hundred years from now, flooding has changed the landscape of Britain, new towns are being built to house the displaced, and much of the political power lies in the hands of the Development Ministry. Quinn is an auditor, sent to the north of England (exactly where is never named, but internal evidence suggests North Yorkshire) to assess the development of a model town there. What he finds is deep-rooted corruption: as he learns from the project's chief veterinary officer, Anna Laing, anthrax and other toxic materials lurk beneath the site—but the development must go ahead, however many inconveniences there are to brush aside.

One of the most immediately striking things about *Salvage* is the impression one gains of the setting. As noted, the area to which Quinn travels is never named, nor is the country's capital (it is apparently in the south, but may not be London, as there are hints that the Thames barrier has failed). This removes the standard geographical markers we might use to orient ourselves within the text, and is a particularly effective point of contrast with a present-day world in which pinpointing one's exact location can be done with relative ease; as Quinn notes early on, the print-outs from a GPS are no longer fit for purpose:

. . . [They] were misleading reassurances, straightening the road, offering no scale, and removing all true sense of distance and direction, and destroying completely any idea of the nature of the landscape through which the road ahead passed. (p. 14)

The descriptions of the physical environment in the text carry through this idea of characters being divorced from their surroundings. This is not a novel full of poetic images of landscapes; rather, the passages describing the countryside, the roads, the town, seem often to have had the specific, striking detail wrung out of them, leaving behind a bleakly anonymous core. Here, for example, is Quinn viewing a river in the town:

The water was dark and slow, its depth impossible to guess, though he imagined this to be no more than a few feet. To his right was a weir, over which the river flowed in a smooth brown curve, foaming and eddying where it landed. Downstream, the water was channelled even more narrowly and then lost to his sight. A succession of thick silver pipes, each with a spiked collar, crossed the water from one blank wall to another. A thick scum had formed on the water below the weir, and this and other flotsam snagged against the walls. (p. 37)

There are enough details here—the dark, sluggish water; the layer of scum—to underline the unpleasantness of this place, that life is churning along without much hope; but it could be anywhere.

So it's rather disappointing, a few chapters in, to hear characters mentioning specific places ("look at what's happened to Liverpool," p. 50); part of the effect is inevitably lost, as suddenly this world that demanded effort for us to reach is brought that bit closer, loses a part of its mystery. More than that, it starts to make the continued decision to leave the capital and the area Quinn visits unnamed feel rather too much like a gimmick—if the basic geography of the land is still known to the characters, then it just doesn't ring true to have key points of it concealed from us.

As we move further into *Salvage*, we discover more about the town's political situation; we find corners being cut and little empires built, with scant regard for the town's inhabitants. The notion of public service has eroded: Greer, the town's mayor, is also its Chief Executive, and it seems pretty clear which of those titles is more important; "He's everything else," says one character, "so he might as well be mayor too" (p. 32). It's quite clear to Anna Laing that political expediency means that the development will go ahead, whether or not the toxicity problems are sorted out ("What, and disappoint all those tens of thousands of dispossessed people already looking forward to mowing their new lawns and building their new patios? I honestly doubt if that's an option," p. 69); and any further complications will . . . well, there won't be any further complications, whatever the evidence to the contrary. Yet this is not simply a case of corrupt political leaders—there are also people at the bottom of the food chain who depend on the works going ahead. As one worker tells Quinn:

I've got sixty men up on that hill. Guaranteed work for a month . . . And if we do what's necessary—what's being asked of us—up there, then there'll be another contract after that. That's how these things work. Short-term contract after short-term contract . . . Do you imagine this place is going to get any less busy over the next ten years? (p. 164)

In other words, it's rather naive of Quinn to expect that everything will be fine if someone just calls out the malpractice.

What's happening in *Salvage* seems to me to be less the result of deliberate malice on the part of the political leaders than of *inertia*: bureaucratic practices have continued, which has compromised the safety of the people, and allowed self-interest to move clearly to the front and center of political power, both locally and nationally. It's a rather chilling possibility, that a situation like this might develop with no intention for it to do so.

However, I don't think Edric's depiction has all the impact it might, because of the way he handles characterization. A majority of the characters, Quinn included, stand "at arm's length" from the reader; they're referred to by surname only, and we never really get under their skins. This can lead to some effective moments, such as the halting way in which Quinn falls for Anna:

He watched her go, wanting to follow her, but kept in his seat by all those half-watching others. He felt suddenly and briefly drunk, but knew this was impossible. He waited where he sat for a further twenty minutes before he too left the room. (p. 116)

There's a feeling that Quinn doesn't really want to admit to having, if indeed he even recognizes it for what it is. That works well, but too often, elsewhere in *Salvage*, the distancing approach to characterization reduces characters to ciphers (most typically, the power-hungry official), which in turn has the effect of making the issues under examination seem simplistic, because we can't see the nuances.

The novel is called *Salvage*, so what exactly is to be salvaged? Anna talks about the possibility of being able to pick up her work again after the events of the novel, but one can also interpret the title as a question for the book's wider world: what can be salvaged from a society apparently locked into a downward spiral? It's a tough question, and—commendably, I think—Edric offers no easy answers; but his depiction of the world is not as subtle as his examination of its issues.

David Hebblethwaite was born in the north of England, went to university in the Midlands, and now lives in the south. Along the way, he has read a lot of books, and has plenty more to go. He blogs at Follow the Thread (<http://davidhblog.wordpress.com/>).

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David Hebblethwaite was born in the north of England, went to university in the Midlands, and now lives in the south. He has reviewed for various venues, including Vector (<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa-publications/vector/>), The Zone (<http://www.zone-sf.com/>), Fiction Uncovered (<http://www.fictionuncovered.co.uk/>), and We Love This Book (<http://www.welovethisbook.com/>). He blogs at Follow the Thread (<http://davidhblog.wordpress.com/>).

One comment on "Salvage by Robert Edric"

Alison (<http://communicator.livejournal.com>)November 5, 2010 at 9:34 am (<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/salvage-by-robert-edric/#comment-2612>)

I think Robert Edric is a very underrated writer. I'm glad to see him moving into SF. Most of what I have read by him is historical. His vision is very bleak. It seems that in most of the books by him I have read there is a bursting out of horror and death in the last few pages, which retrospectively explains or illuminates the grey oppression of the rest of the book - what was being not-said.

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