

# The Guardian

## Salvage by Robert Edric

Maggie Gee finds a striking vision of dystopia is not matched by its execution

*Maggie Gee*

Sat 22 May 2010 00.06 BST

**T**his is Robert Edric's 19th novel. His previous work has received considerable critical praise and two fairly recent Booker long-listings, so I began it expecting good things. And there were some: Edric has constructed a carefully thought-out picture of a bleak future that works as a critique of the present. But film has raised the bar for storytelling: novels have to be faster, lighter, smarter than before. Language cannot simply be there to give us directions or underline the action. Words must have intrinsic style or dash, wit or beauty, otherwise why would people not prefer images?

In Edric's vision, one hundred years hence, flooding has changed the face of the UK, there are vast, unpopular programmes of resettlement and the Gulf Stream's benign influence has failed. Quinn, a middle-aged government auditor, is sent north by his rival and superior, Webb, to write a face-saving report vindicating the managers of long-ago environmental disasters in a region where a huge new building project is planned. Slowly Quinn and the "chief vet", Anna Laing, discover the truth - a landscape riddled with half-buried human and animal remains, toxic pesticides and cyclical floods.

*Salvage* portrays a 22nd century where the natural world is a cesspit and the human world is choked by centralised bureaucracy, its moments of optimism the fruit of bare-faced political lying, its glimpses of sky and flowers reserved for massive hoardings promoting better days to come. Edric is questioning the inertia that allows environmental degradation to go on unchecked: Quinn and Anna, though basically decent, are trapped in a network of yes-men working for a distant, faceless "Executive". The few characters who really know the area - Owen, once a local farmer (all the animals have long since succumbed to viruses), and Winston, a campaigning journalist pushed out of a local paper wholly devoted to advertorial - are driven to alcohol or suicide by the destruction of the land they love.

But the language and narrative structure are just not up to the powerful ideas they are asked to carry. The more I read, the more frustrated I felt. It's partly a question of sheer repetition - rarely one abstract adjective or noun where two will do. Nothing is left to the reader, everything is signposted. A fairly typical exchange between Quinn and Anna goes like this. Anna asks: "Is this it, do you think, the brave new world everyone tried for so long to avoid thinking about?" "It may well be," Quinn replies. Stop there - precisely where Edric should have stopped - because Anna's speech is already too long a deployment of a clichéd idea, and Quinn's reply is enough. But no, Edric has to re-explain that Quinn is "wondering what might be considered truly brave or new, necessary or even desirable about it". Elsewhere, when Quinn is accused of something and does not respond, we get more words than if he had actually spoken: "Quinn said nothing to abut the accusation, choosing instead - as he always did these days - to navigate alone and unaided through all other suspicions, beliefs and considerations."

If this novel had been half as long it would certainly have been twice as enjoyable. Under the heavy cladding of words a political intelligence shines, but it cannot survive pages of implausible dialogue; and when it comes to the climax, the tension simply leaks away. *Salvage* made me wonder about the glowing reviews of Edric's earlier books. In the current publishing climate, could he perhaps be writing - or being edited - much too fast?

Maggie Gee's *My Animal Life* is published by Telegram.

#### Topics

- Fiction
- Maggie Gee
- features