

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

By Morag Joss

Alma Books

REVIEW BY CAROL McKAY

Never judge a book by its cover. Isn't that what they say? Well, despite Alma Books' reputation for quality literary fiction, those who look for depth in their reading matter might glance at the cover of Morag Joss's latest novel and reject it as a love story or, worse, a 'women's book'. The soft focus cover illustration shows the undulating auburn hair and delicate neckline of a young woman gazing at a bridge which spans blue water. Sandy foreground colours imply this might be a romantic beach read but this is a very wrong impression of Morag Joss's work.

Flip the book over and the back cover suggests something different. 'Ticking time bomb' and 'psychological dazzler' hint much more at the kind of story this is, yet it's subtler than that, too.

Thousands of people disappear in Britain every year and Joss has entered imaginatively into the mindset of three such individuals. Taking three narrative strands, she plaits the perspectives of characters who, for their own reasons, have become disconnected from society. There's Silva, a young economic migrant with no official status, who lives in a derelict caravan on the shores of the river. She runs the local shop on behalf of her perpetually drunk employer who regards her with contempt. Ron, a middle aged man, travels Scotland in a second-hand Land Rover, punishing himself for the fatal accident he caused years earlier. Annabel took care of her father until his death then, at forty-two, married a man she knew only through a computer forum. As the book begins, Annabel finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and just as unexpectedly an uncomfortable fit with her plodding and startled husband whose ultimatum – that she should choose between the baby and him – tips her off the path she expected her life to follow.

All three characters find themselves in the area around Inverness. When, after heavy rain, the great bridge spanning the river collapses, Annabel's hire-car is seen disappearing off the edge but only Annabel knows she wasn't in it. At the same time, Silva's partner and child go missing and Ron sees his chance for grace and self-forgiveness by helping in the aftermath. All three are drawn together yet even now,

they hold back, not confessing their connections or divulging the secrets. For they do still have secrets.

Like the bridge of its title, this novel is in two halves. In the first, things fall apart. In the second, the bridge undergoes a process of reconstruction. Set against this, do things begin to get better for the characters? It's too simple to say that in their haphazard and clumsy togetherness, they find reconciliation and a new sense of identity because Joss is far too accomplished a novelist for that and she teases every nuance from their relationships and individual development.

Joss's portrayal of the torment and disintegration of the human psyche is excruciating and compelling. As the bridge is rebuilt, Silva, the one best adapted to coping, becomes the most brittle, and it's this that leads to the protracted anxiety of the book's climax.

This book is lyrically written and it's enriched by its introspective characterisation. Some of Joss's previous novels have won or been short-listed for serious competitions and one was filmed for UK television. Far from being dreamy and romantic, or an ultimately empty-headed fast-paced page-turner, 'Across the Bridge' builds meaningful observation of the fragility of ordinary people on top of a plot that, unlike the bridge of the title, is soundly structured from end to end. It's a novel that keeps the reader uneasily expectant all the way to its final pages and it's definitely not a book to be judged by its cover.

Carol McKay's fiction won her the Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship last year. She teaches creative writing through the OU and is on the Scottish Writers' Centre management committee.