'This boy's love letter to the world made me laugh and tremble all the way through' Emma Donoghue

'A powerful and impressive novel ... Utterly convincing and deeply moving' Clare Morrall



PIGEON ENGLISH

STEPHEN KELMAN

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For the traveller

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance
E. E. Cummings

MARCH



You could see the blood. It was darker than you thought. It was all on the ground outside Chicken Joe's. It just felt crazy.

Jordan: 'I'll give you a million quid if you touch it.'

Me: 'You don't have a million.'

Jordan: 'One quid then.'

You wanted to touch it but you couldn't get close enough. There was a line in the way:

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

If you cross the line you'll turn to dust.

We weren't allowed to talk to the policeman, he had to concentrate for if the killer came back. I could see the chains hanging from his belt but I couldn't see the gun.

The dead boy's mamma was guarding the blood. She wanted it to stay, you could tell. The rain wanted to come and wash the blood away but she wouldn't let it. She wasn't even crying, she was just stiff and fierce like it was her job to scare the rain back up into the sky. A pigeon was looking for his chop. He walked right in the blood. He was even sad as well, you could tell where his eyes were all pink and dead.

* * *

The flowers were already bent. There were pictures of the dead boy wearing his school uniform. His jumper was green.

My jumper's blue. My uniform's better. The only bad thing about it is the tie, it's too scratchy. I hate it when they're scratchy like that.

There were bottles of beer instead of candles and the dead boy's friends wrote messages to him. They all said he was a great friend. Some of the spelling was wrong but I didn't mind. His football boots were on the railings tied up by their laces. They were nearly new Nikes, the studs were proper metal and everything.

Jordan: 'Shall I t'ief them? He don't need 'em no more.'

I just pretended I didn't hear him. Jordan would never really steal them, they were a million times too big. They looked too empty just hanging there. I wanted to wear them but they'd never fit.

Me and the dead boy were only half friends, I didn't see him very much because he was older and he didn't go to my school. He could ride his bike with no hands and you never even wanted him to fall off. I said a prayer for him inside my head. It just said sorry. That's all I could remember. I pretended like if I kept looking hard enough I could make the blood move and go back in the shape of a boy. I could bring him back alive that way. It happened before, where I used to live there was a chief who brought his son back like that. It was a long time ago, before I was born. Asweh, it was a miracle. It didn't work this time.

I gave him my bouncy ball. I don't need it anymore, I've got five more under my bed. Jordan only gave him a pebble he found on the floor.

Me: 'That doesn't count. It has to be something that belonged to you.'

Jordan: 'I ain't got nothing. I didn't know we had to bring a present.'

I gave Jordan a strawberry Chewit to give to the dead boy, then I showed him how to make a cross. Both the two of us made a cross. We were very quiet. It even felt important. We ran all the way home. I beat Jordan easily. I can beat everybody, I'm the fastest in Year 7. I just wanted to get away before the dying caught us.

The buildings are all mighty around here. My tower is as high as the lighthouse at Jamestown. There are three towers all in a row: Luxembourg House, Stockholm House and Copenhagen House. I live in Copenhagen House. My flat is on floor 9 out of 14. It's not even hutious, I can look from the window now and my belly doesn't even turn over. I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast.

It's proper windy at the bottom like a whirlpool. If you stand at the bottom where the tower meets the ground and put your arms out, you can pretend like you're a bird. You can feel the wind try to pick you up, it's nearly like flying.

Me: 'Hold your arms out wider!'

Jordan: 'They're as wide as I can get 'em! This is so gay, I'm not doing it no more!'

Me: 'It's not gay, it's brilliant!'

Asweh, it's the best way to feel alive. You only don't want the wind to pick you up, because you don't know where it will drop you. It might drop you in the bushes or the sea.

In England there's a hell of different words for everything. It's for if you forget one, there's always another one left over. It's very helpful. Gay and dumb and lame mean all

the same. Piss and slash and tinkle mean all the same (the same as greet the chief). There's a million words for a bulla. When I came to my new school, do you know what's the first thing Connor Green said to me?

Connor Green: 'Have you got happiness?'

Me: 'Yes.'

Connor Green: 'Are you sure you've got happiness?'

Me: 'Yes.'

Connor Green: 'But are you really sure?'

Me: 'I think so.'

He kept asking me if I had happiness. He wouldn't stop. In the end it just vexed me. Then I wasn't sure. Connor Green was laughing, I didn't even know why. Then Manik told me it was a trick.

Manik: 'He's not asking if you've got happiness, he's asking if you've got a penis. He says it to everyone. It's just a trick.'

It only sounds like happiness but really it means a penis.

Ha-penis.

Connor Green: 'Got ya! Hook, line and sinker!'

Connor Green is always making tricks. He's just a confusionist. That's the first thing you learn about him. At least I didn't lose. I do have a penis. The trick doesn't work if it's true.

Some people use their balconies for hanging washing or growing plants. I only use mine for watching the helicopters. It's a bit dizzy. You can't stay out there for more than one minute or you'll turn into an icicle. I saw X-Fire painting his name on the wall of Stockholm House. He didn't know I could see him. He was proper quick and the words still came out dope-fine. I want to write my own name that big but the paint in a can is too dangerous, if you get it on yourself it never washes off, even forever.

The baby trees are in a cage. They put a cage around the tree to stop you stealing it. Asweh, it's very crazy. Who'd steal a tree anyway? Who'd chook a boy just to get his Chicken Joe's?

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Stephen Kelman was born in Luton in 1976. After finishing his degree he worked variously as a warehouse operative, a careworker, and in marketing and local government administration. He decided to pursue his writing seriously in 2005, and has completed several feature screenplays since then. *Pigeon English* is his first novel; he is currently working on his second.

First published in Great Britain 2011

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin and New York

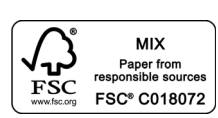
36 Soho Square, London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 1063 7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.bloomsbury.com/stephenkelman