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The Pack

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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The Pack is for those who can take it. They'll need strong stomachs, for the story is harsh in both action and setting, though the courage of its protagonists, human and canine, is equal to their predicament. Readers will find some optimism in the final pages, but no certainties. This is no didactic tale, but in the spaces left by the lean narrative, Pow invites sombre reflection; not least because the author's Foreword reveals his sources and the evolution of the book. First there were newspaper pieces about Ivan Mishukov, the 4-year-old Russian street boy who became a leader of a pack of dogs. Those articles led Pow to website information about the brutalities of Russian orphanages. Then, more immediately, there were the grim tragedies of James Bulger, Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor. Such was the impetus behind this mythic adventure of abandoned kids living like, and with, ferocious yet faithful dogs in an unnamed country. Their dystopic land is divided into poverty-ridden Zones, Forbidden Territories ruled with brute cruelty by ruthless warlords, and the Invisible City where privilege, corruption and suppression maintain a kind of order and luxury for the few. The tension of the plot derives chiefly from the dangers endemic in such a world rather than the events which befall our heroes - an unlikely term for such damaged creatures living at the edge of physical and mental desolation. When they rescue a kidnapped member of the pack they succeed perhaps too easily. Nevertheless, this novel is difficult to put down and difficult to forget. Those ready to make connections will see that we are not dealing with an Africa-at-arm's-length, though there is the savagery of genocide (the elimination of thousands of inconvenient children) and widespread hunger. Pow's sources lend the story echoes from contemporary Russia and, less obviously, from much closer to home. For the central character is no Ivan; his name is Bradley, and the home he revisits in tortured dreams belongs to our familiar, affluent West. So too does the adult betrayal of which he is a victim. Disturbing reading.

Running Order:

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