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Detective Laidlaw investigates a case that hits home-his brother's seemingly random death.

Strange Loyalties Details

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Author : William McIlvanney

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Leah says

Moving the stars to pity...

In the third and, to date, last outing for Jack Laidlaw, he is grieving for the death of his brother, Scott. Although Scott's death was accidental – he was knocked down by a car – Laidlaw believes that his brother's state of mind played a major part in his death. And so as the story begins, he has taken some time off work to try to find out what had led Scott into the depression and heavy drinking that marred his final months. As he talks to the people who knew Scott best, Laidlaw finds there were things he never knew about his brother and begins to realise that the answers he is seeking may lie far back in Scott's past...

Nobody had said 'crime'. But that dying seemed to me as unjust, as indicative of meaninglessness as any I had known. And I had known many. For he had been so rich in potential, so much alive, so undeserving – aren't we all? – of a meaningless death. I knew. I should know. He was my brother.

The first book in the trilogy, Laidlaw, would certainly be in contention on any list I might draw up of best crime novels, possibly even best novels overall. The second, The Papers of Tony Veitch, came very close to matching it in quality. So for me, this one had a couple of hard acts to follow, and it was with some trepidation that I began to read. And, although this is undoubtedly an excellent novel in its own right, in truth it didn't reach quite the same heights for me, though only by a small margin.

There are a couple of reasons for this, one of which is very much a matter of personal preference. The Laidlaw brothers grew up in Ayrshire so, unlike the previous books which were very firmly set in the Glasgow of my youth, this one takes place mainly away from the city. McIlvanney himself was an Ayrshire lad so for him the emotional connections are just as strong, perhaps stronger, but for me, there wasn't the same resonance as in the other two. It also meant there was very little of McIlvanney's wonderful use of Glasgow dialect which so enhanced the earlier books for me. The other reason is that this one is written in the first person from Laidlaw's perspective, whilst the first two were third person. I found Laidlaw a more believable character seeing him from the outside, as it were. Being told his philosophical thoughts in his own voice meant I found that, just occasionally, he came over as a little pretentious.

However, slightly less good from McIlvanney is still about a zillion times better than excellent from most authors, so I certainly wouldn't want either of these quibbles to put anyone off reading this one. McIlvanney's prose is wonderful – there is a poetic edge to it that makes the reading of it an intensely pleasurable and often emotional experience. I don't usually use such long quotes as this but I feel this gives a true flavour of the deep understanding and love of – pity for – humanity that pervades these books:

But, imagining Scott's nights here, I populated the emptiness. This had been one of his places and some small part of his spirit had been left here. Holding my own brief séance for my brother, I conjured vivid faces and loud nights. I saw that smile of his, sudden as a sunray, when he loved what you were saying. I saw the strained expression when he felt you must agree with him and couldn't get you to see that. I caught the way the laughter would light up his eyes when he was trying to suppress it. I heard the laughing when it broke. He must have had some nights here. He had lived with such intensity. The thought was my funeral for him. Who needed possessions and career and official achievements? Life was only in the living of it. How you act and what you are and what you do and how you be were the only substance. They didn't last either. But while you were here, they made what light there was – the wick that threads the

candle-grease of time. His light was out but here I felt I could almost smell the smoke still drifting from its snuffing.

His characterisation is superb – each person flawed but believably so, and he writes them with a sympathy that makes it hard for the reader to condemn. He is very much of the school that believes criminals are made, not born, and for his characters there is always the possibility of redemption. Some of the most moving scenes in this book are of a petty criminal back in Ayrshire to look after his dying mother in her last weeks. No McIlvanney character is black or white – they are all multi-shaded and multi-layered, and Laidlaw has the empathy to see them in the round. And it is Laidlaw's empathy and understanding that makes these books special, because through him the reader is also brought to feel a sorrow and a pity for the way the world is.

One of my favourite quotes is Flaubert's "*Human language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.*" In this trilogy, McIlvanney's writing surely moves the stars.

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Silverblue says

A great book! Very decent writing, loved it very much. Great start and loved the explanation of Lawyers on page 6. There were pages that made me forget where I was...can't wait to read the first 2 books.

Paul Higham says

My favourite Laidlaw, a more fully realised character and the transition to first person narrative helped this. Beautifully rendered prose as always from McIlvanney, a writer deserving of much greater recognition.

Joe Kosarek says

The writing is still just amazing.

Tom Hogg says

Sneaked in a swift Laidlaw whilst struggling with two more intense books. However this is not a book to be underestimated. As with the entire Laidlaw series, it's very well written despite its simple framework. Recommended

Peter Pinkney says

Well that's the trilogy finished. A pity he wrote no more crime thrillers. Still his non crime is excellent too.

Unlike the other books, this is written in the first person. That means we get deep inside Laidlaw's head. We listen to his moral dilemmas, and they're plenty of them. As always great characters, and great plot. A real roller coaster ride through the emotions. From deep anger, to some of the best puns ever written

Gregor says

First laidlaw book ,excellent,the second one , even better , this one I struggled with at times , I like it best when he's chasing baddies with harkness and alienating other cops. there was too much messing about with his brother. I see how that mattered but al, the soul searching stuff got in the way of the story . Jan is a cow. Still beautifully written and the language he uses is addictive to read. Without sounding too arsey, his descriptions are perfect and evoke all sorts of feelings. Hope he writes another one .

Ian Mapp says

A series of diminishing returns, I'm afraid. Laidlaw (#1) got 4 stars, Tony Vetch Papers (#2) got 3 stars and this will get 2 stars.

Just found it too tricky to keep on top of as a crime thriller and despite the great philosophical musings of a more intelligent than average detective, I was once again hopelessly lost in the story.

Jack Laidlaw's brother is dead. He investigates. Whether in his own time or on the job, it's not really clear, but he gets no pressure from any seniors and is free to discover the world his brother inhabited.

And that world, is of course, Glasgow.

Worked my way through, with the sentences just going past in a blur with the occasional deeply profound paragraph. No idea who killed his brother or why. I know the book has a fine ending.

Jack wishes he had more whisky. Don't we all.

Sandra says

I had to break my own rule about leaving a decent gap between books by the same author. Laidlaw is a man who gets into your head and lodges there, making you want more and more. And more this one was. I shall need soon to start at the beginning and re-read the whole trilogy again.

A personal quest this one, steeped in sadness and retrospection, pondering on relationships, moralities and the way one lives ones life. But with a search for truth. A multitude of characters being drawn together to form a fractured whole. Unguessable ending (though in a way it should not have been).

May Mayberry says

Fantastic!

McIlvanney writes about the people I grew up beside. The bad ones as well as the good ones. His prose is so believable when you live in the West of Scotland - you can actually hear the voices talking, and understand where the characters are coming from. It's by no means a simple read. I found myself looking up words and terms in the dictionary - not because I needed to to make sense of the book, but to learn and try to incorporate them into my own vocabulary. I love a bit of Philosophy and McIlvanney obviously does too. I can not recommend this series enough. Enjoy!

Harry Allagree says

"...For although I admired loyalty, I reflected, it could have some strange side-effects...In our haste to get to the places to which our personal and pragmatic loyalties lead us, we often trample to death the deeper loyalties that define us all--loyalty to truth and loyalty to the ideals our nature professes...Each of the people I was dealing with had presumably more than one loyalty. Let's strike one against the other and see if a spark of truth came out of that. Let's force them to a choice of loyalties...When the world decides to take away from you, without explanation, a part of what matters to you most, you'd better challenge its indifference, some way or other..."

I'd have to describe this wonderfully written third novel of McIlvanney's which I've read a sort of "sad intellectual noir". Jack Laidlaw, the principal character/narrator, has lots of issues which don't make him very attractive (as do many of the novel's other characters). Nevertheless, he has strong principles & the capacity to work out in his mind solutions to real & messy situations.

McIlvanney's command of language & turn of phrase is superb. I've truly enjoyed his Laidlaw trilogy.

William Koon says

Strange Loyalties is straight forward bad. Move along, no redeeming values here. Jack Laidlaw is a disaffected Scottish cop who dropped out of university but still reads philosophy. I am reminded of Sherwood Anderson's "I Want To Know." That should have been the end of this type of writing.

That is, I want to know why this happened. Here Laidlaw is trying to find out why his brother was killed in a hit and run accident. Along the way he brings in far too many characters and muddies the ploy with much philosophical dibbles. And there's drinking.

And an awkward sex scene that would give Morrissey a run for his money.

True, the local color is fairly good, but nowhere near as keen as Benjamin Black does with Dublin.

In the end we double down on the cliché with, "I have a letter!" Actually it's a note and it explains everything. The end.

Works like this make me angry. Critics who cannot see through such tripe as poor plotting, excessive characterization, and no action infuriate me even more. Strange Loyalties makes *Girl on A Train* look like *War and Peace*.

Justin says

A fabulous end to an enthralling trilogy. A deep story, punctuated by intricate characters that revolve around the central character, who is likeable, complex and vivid. Great, great stuff.

Tuck says

police detective takes some time off from work to see why his little brother suddenly dies. what he finds is the stinkingest human nature we come to expect. here is a nice quote illustrating 'laidlaw's' outlooks
From pg 132 “Those who love life take risks, those who don’t take insurance. But that was all right, I decided. Life repays its lovers by letting them spend themselves on it. Those who fail to love it, it cunningly allows very carefully to accrue their own hoarded emptiness. In living, you won by losing big, you lost by winning small.”

Karen says

The opening of this is like meeting someone you've known for a long time and you notice something different about them. *They look great... What's changed?... Ah, it's the glasses!.. No, wait... Did they always wear glasses and I never even noticed?... WHAT IS IT?!!*
It's the first person narrative, that's what it is. And it suits Jack Laidlaw right down to the ground. Completes him. I loved this, and felt it was even better-plotted than the previous two, but with the same profundity about the human condition: its fragility and futility. And it was heartbreaking reading the interview at the end, to see that McIlvanney wasn't quite finished with Laidlaw, but was also contemplating his own mortality. The latter, tragically, prevailed.
