



Pig Iron

Benjamin Myers

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***Winner of the Gordon Burn Prize.

Pig Iron is the story of John-John, a young man wrestling with the legacy of brutality left by his bare-knuckle boxer father, King of the Gypsies, Mac Wisdom. His new job as an ice cream man should offer freedom, but instead pulls John-John into the dark recesses of a north-east town where his family name is mud.

As he attempts to trade prejudice, parole officers and local gangs for his 'green cathedral' - the rural landscape in which he seeks solace - Mac's rise and bloody downfall threatens to engulf John-John's present.

A far cry from the recent media stereotyping of travellers, Pig Iron is a sensitive portrayal of Britain's most marginalised and misunderstood ethnic group. More than anything, it is about the redemptive power of nature and the landscape of post-industrial northern England.

Pig Iron is the story of a traveller who hasn't travelled; a young man fighting for his surname and his very survival.

"Pig Iron is an important book because it tells a story that has shaped all contemporary Western humans, but is routinely, inexplicably overlooked – the great move from agricultural life to industrial life. The respect in which that shapes human culture and individual humans was something Gordon Burn was always thrummingly alive to." – Judge Deborah Orr, the Gordon Burn Prize 2013

"His poetic vernacular brims with that quality most sadly lost – humanity." - The Guardian

"Benjamin Myers's influences are clear — David Peace's northern brutalism is evident and there are suggestions of Salinger and Golding but Pig Iron's savage vision is his alone." – The Morning Star

"A novel that resists mere classification as a 'traveller' book. This is yet another singular portrait of an outsider from Myers. And delivered through authentic characterisation, a monstrously compelling plot, and frequent humour – a rare combination of such successfully crafted elements – Pig Iron deserves to find itself on many a reading list, if not the National Curriculum." - 3:AM Magazine

"Original and urgent, exciting and uncompromising" – Loud & Quiet, Books of the Year

Pig Iron Details

Date : Published May 31st 2012 by Bluemoose Books (first published May 1st 2012)

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Author : Benjamin Myers

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From Reader Review Pig Iron for online ebook

Sue says

I really enjoyed this novel. A really refreshing read, beautifully written. Lovely to read a book set in my part of the UK. Yes there is some brutality and violence but I didn't find it overdone or unnecessary. I will definitely be looking out for more by this author.

Stagger Lee says

A brilliant debut novel from a very promising author. Brilliant on the character and nature of its setting, hopeful but brutal, really original.

Andy says

I enjoyed consuming Pig Iron in one sitting. Comparable in darkness, humour and realism to some rather good Harry Crews I recently read. Pig Iron is a sort of North-Eastern Gothic.

The dialogue among travellers and estate dwellers was very well done and credible. A lot of traveller words were familiar from the local sites from my youth in Surrey. I hadn't heard about any churring or bifters for years. There is nicely observed and accurate nostalgia in both storylines if you're British.

Despite the clearly despicable father, I felt the travelling community were treated with uncommon fairness and understanding. A refreshing change.

This would make a great Shane Meadows film.

Philip Turner says

Rounding the halfway bend in PIG IRON last weekend, I found myself more and more gripped by the fate of its narrator, John-John Wisdom, a young man whose hardscrabble history is steadily revealed to the reader through the course of a twined narrative that braids together parallel first person accounts by he and his mother. The investment that I'd placed in the novel paid double as I finished the book, at last learning the whole truth of the Wisdom's family story. In the parlance of England, they are "Travellers," not exactly ethnic Roma but wandering tribes nonetheless, similar to Europe's long-shunned gypsies. The inventiveness with language and vocabulary was reminiscent to me of what Russell Hoban did in Ridley Walker and Anthony Burgess in Clockwork Orange, albeit without quite the same futuristic-apocalyptic intimations. Young Wisdom's late father was a bare-knuckle boxer, while his son's a fighter of a different kind. John-John, at the start of the book recently released from a five-year sentence in prison, is determined to put his life back together following a deed that he only hints at when a new girlfriend asks him about his time away from the rural climes he cherishes, his "green cathedral." The references to a rural idyll reminded me of when a terminally ill Dennis Potter, creator of "The Singing Detective" TV series, expressed a deep

connection for the Forest of Dean in his courageous 1994 interview with Melvyn Bragg. I also see Myers' work in a line of connection with English writer about landscape and wild places, Robert Macfarlane, whose *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* I loved so much. I loved reading *PIG IRON*, and recommend it most highly. Also posted here on my blog: <http://bit.ly/1mkENZM>

Rod says

John-John Wisdom is a Traveller (aka "gypsies" or "pikers"), a young man of about 20, recently released from a five-year stint in a juvenile detention facility for a crime that we'll learn more about as the book progresses. He relates his own story in the first person in a northern English vernacular, and his travails as he attempts to stick to the straight and narrow are paralleled by his mother's reminiscences of John-John's father, brutish, tough-as-pig-iron bareknuckle boxer Mac Wisdom. John-John is a winning character, small and wiry, yet with his father's toughness, a scrapper, but possessing wit, intelligence, and few illusions about life, which he knows full well he is stuck on the shit end of. On parole, he merely wants to stay out of trouble and earn enough money driving an ice cream truck to return to the countryside where he was raised and start over, but of course things are never that easy. I admit that does seem rather cliched, a trope we've seen in movies and books umpteen times before, but *Pig Iron* is elevated by terrific, terse prose and characters, and a very well-executed parallel narrative structure.

The alternating narrative between John-John and his mother (who may or may not be talking directly to John-John) really made it for me. Both narratives are compelling on their own, but it is the way they interrelate and play off each other that makes the novel come together as a cohesive whole, and the results are riveting. It's a brutal book at times—few punches are pulled either literally or figuratively—but absorbing and rewarding. Benjamin Myers is a writer to watch.

Tina says

As a reader, you may occasionally stumble across an undiscovered masterpiece. This is one such book. Although dark and disturbing, this novel is also beautiful and poetic. A novel to make you gasp, groan, weep and smile, it takes you to the darkest of places, but there is always a small glimmer of light in the distance. I will not forget this book.

Joanne says

Not a book to pass on to your mother afterwards. I'd never have read it if I'd known what scenes I'd come across. It's brutal, violent and disturbing but at the same time really quite brilliant. In one word it's about Freedom.

JJ Marsh says

I'm very glad I read this book. It's a story that drags you into a world all too readily prejudged and forces you to look at life another way. The character of John-John Wisdom is sympathetic, deep, dignified and

endearing, even when he's pounding another man to a pulp.

It's hard and brutal and contains several graphic scenes of violence or cruelty, but these are not gratuitous. Shocking, yes, but crucial to both storyline and character. There are also tender moments, where we see the hope and love creeping through the cracks in both toughened facades.

The split narrative is an intelligent device which compounds one of the novel's themes, that of the inescapability of the past. The second narrator, whom I won't name for fear of spoilers, gradually reveals what happened in the past. There is a tragic fatalism in this for the reader, as we know how it ends up. Or think we do. Whereas John-John's story is just beginning, and we're willing him to sidestep all the traps.

The weaving of the two stories to the climax is perfectly done, and although horrifying, feels right and strangely satisfying. It explains a lot. The final image is one of optimism, albeit tinged with inescapable despair.

The author uses a rich vernacular for both the voices, which on the whole, works well. The accent and localised expressions take a while to get used to, but are not overdone. The 'mebbes', 'povvy get', 'gadgie' and 'summat' root the story not only geographically, but also in its community. However, I wasn't keen on John-John's use of 'whatsit', before coming up with the correct word. That felt a little contrived and reminded me he was a character.

Overall, this is not an easy read but it's fascinating, well-constructed, intelligently written and absolutely worth the effort.

WndyJW says

Pig iron is a brutal book, it opens with an act of shocking violence that lets us know that Ben Myers will spare the reader nothing, nor should he since the violence is what shaped the characters. But there is nothing gratuitous in the story, we can trust that Mr Myers only asks us to witness what is necessary, and he tells the story with language that is startlingly beautiful for such a tough tale. The characters speak in the vernacular of the northlands, something that in a lesser writer could feel like a gimmick, but in this book serves to makes the characters that much more real so that they reach into your heart or mind and stay there.

As in *The Gallows Pole*, Myers so thoroughly evokes the northlands of England: the gritty council estates, and the mystery and solitude of the woods and moors, especially of the woods and moors, that we are held spellbound and are momentarily disoriented when we look up from the page and discover we are in our own home.

To review the book would give too much away, so I will only say that it is the story of young John-John Wisdom who might be 19, he doesn't know his age because he doesn't know his date of birth, when we meet him. He is alone in the world as he begins a new life, one in which he hopes to leave the violence of his childhood behind. His mother tells us the story of John-John's life in a series of letters or diary entries addressed to John-John, and John-John shares with us, in first person narrative, his attempts to live a good life in spite of the barriers that continue to be placed in his way and because of his family name. We learn what sustains him and gives him hope in the face of a world that is unfamiliar to him: he doesn't know how to use a mobile phone or what email is; and people that are too familiar to him: desperate people trying any way to survive a life with no opportunities and no easy options.

John-John is a traveler and the son of the infamous Mac Wisdom, king of the gypsies, a bare knuckle brawler who never lost a fight, until he did, and who taught his son how to fight, not out of love for his son, there was no love in the Wisdom home, at least none that wasn't crushed and twisted into something awful and ugly, but because fighting and brutality was the only thing Mac ever shared with his wife and children.

I won't say more about John-John's fate except to say that John-John is not his father and that one can overcome a hopeless beginning. It is only slightly hyperbolic to say that my heart soared with John-John.

I heartily recommend this book.

Richard says

One of my books of the year. Intense, brutal, focussed and immensely readable.

Benjamin Meyers digs deep in 'Pig Iron' to uncover the seedier side of the lives of a handful of characters. They lead the sort of lives that most of us know exist but never experience.

John-John Wisdom, a traveller who's served time, leaves prison with the intention of rebuilding his life. Of course, it was never going to be that easy, but I didn't think it could be as hard as it turned out.

An enthralling read that deserves to be widely read. How I wish books like this were given major coverage rather than the usual suspects.

Andy Larter says

Couldn't decide on how many stars to give this novel. It's convincing in many ways but leaves a bit to be desired too. There are two parallel stories, told in the first person by John-John, a traveller who has not long got out of prison, and Vancey, his mother. John-John's tale is told in the now while his mum's is a series of memories. This technique helps to create suspense and tension.

There are some very unpleasant scenes of sexual or sadistic violence in the novel which I thought were not necessary and I found John-John's enjoyment of literature a bit far-fetched. However, I thought it was an effective novel which was a bit unusual.

Debs says

Great book, gripping, sad, uplifting wonderfully written.

Lisa Bower says

Brutal story fantastically written. This is the reason indie publishers should exist. To make sure the Mills and Boone ladies' book clubs go to bed with nightmares!

William says

I make a point of never including spoilers in reviews. In the case of 'Pig Iron' by Ben Myers, that means that I can hardly mention any event from the narrative at all, because everything, no matter how apparently disparate at the beginning, turns out to be woven into one, unified strand. Since I can't mention anything that happens, I will have to tell you about voices, places, and themes.

You could pick many controlling ideas out of this book, not because it is confused about itself, but because it touches many universal themes, which means that different readers will derive different things from it. To me, this book is about how violence begets violence, which is a terrible thing. The main character came across to me as philosophical, contemplative, and learned, despite having had no formal education. I have been to four universities, and I empathised with John-John because he has the same belief as me that you have to outthink your opponent first in order to outfight him. John-John is what I would call an Epicurean, in the philosophical sense of the word: he believes that the way to a happy and fulfilled life is through learning to enjoy simple pleasures.

Practically everything that happens to John-John, or has ever happened to him, is bad, or malicious, or unfortunate. It is a measure of the accomplishment of Ben Myers as a writer that he manages to create an uplifting story out of such seemingly oppressive material.

The story is told alternately by two narrators: John-John himself, and Vancy, John-John's mother. John-John speaks in the first person and the present tense. Vancy speaks in the past tense. I have asked Michael Stewart to tell me what you call the narrative mode that Vancy uses. It might be first person direct address, but sometimes it seems almost like third person omniscient. The gap between what John-John talks about, and what Vancy talks about, gets smaller and smaller, in terms of both time and causal relationship, until they are both telling the same story. The way this is resolved is very adeptly handled, and does the job that good story-tellers are supposed to do: to make seemingly unrelated things connect, in a plausible way.

John-John, who has more lines than Vancy, speaks in dialect. The fact that I finished this book quickly without the dialect annoying me or getting in the way of the story is an indication of the consistency in the way the dialect is used, and also the page-turning quality of the story. John-John uses dozens of dialect words that I had never seen before. These include "dimp" (cigarette butt), "scut" (anus), and "povvy" (disreputable, impoverished). None of these are explained. There is no glossary and no foot-notes. The reader gets the meaning from the context.

I have decided to rate this book 5 stars. This is because of the economy of the narrative: everything that is there is so for a reason, even if it takes nearly to the last page for that to become apparent. It is also because of the way the book's hopeful message arises unexpectedly out of a repulsive slime of violence, prejudice, cruelty, betrayal, exploitation and injustice.

Jorjun says

It's been a while since I've read a fiction almost continuously. I couldn't put the book down: gripping story, hard-hitting in places, important anthropologic truths - on how bent out of shape modern primates have

become.

Interesting thesis: that travellers retain some important values, like the Fair Fight. But by no means a whitewash of travellers. Very well constructed narrative, and your heart does go out to the protagonist who really does not want for much but finds himself captive in a world that no longer knows how to leave people alone, or at least to allow people the freedom to pursue their own happiness, in their own way.
