

The Reporter, by R. Francis

WRITING is a small world; so is publishing. Chances are, if you read reviews, the reviewer knows the author, or knows someone who knows the author. On the rare occasions that a reviewer faces up to this, it seldom goes well. Julie Burchill (remember her?) once recommended her 'Christmas reads' and admitted that all the books she'd picked were by friends. She got in a great deal of hot water, but all she'd needed to do was not say anything. It's the honesty that is the trouble. If you are *Private Eye* readers, you might read the anonymous 'Books and Bookmen' column, with its often excoriating reviews of new books; I know who writes this column, and regard them as an ally. A major literary critic is a very good pal of mine; I blush when they give me a good review, but I'm assured that they always mean it. What's more, I'm with a small indie publisher, who have just been taken over by a larger, but still independent publisher. I would never dream of giving a fellow September/Duckworth author a bad review – just as well, because two of them live in Presteigne. And so on.

So I could just tell you how much I love *The Reporter* by R. Francis, and have a high percentage of Broad Sheep readers raise their eyebrows; or I could own up to our long friendship. If you are asked to review a pals book, and you hate it, you should tell them that it's interesting, but you are unable to say a word because of your personal integrity. If you love it lots, and are writing a review for the *Times*, for example, you can get away with it. But for Broad Sheep? Rachel Francis was for many years the Green correspondent for this august organ, and is a trusted friend. We met in Devon on a writing workshop, twenty years ago. We moved to Presteigne at pretty much the same time, we wrote plays together, we stayed in touch when she moved back to Devon, and when she dedicates this wonderful book to her family and her dog, I have to face up to the fact that I'm very fond of both her family, and her dog. But I wasn't prepared to let anyone else do a review, because Rachel is a really wonderful and unique writer, whether or not we are old pals, and I wanted to say this aloud.

The Reporter concerns the arrival of a new journalist at a local newspaper in Mid-Devon. Abel is of indigenous Australian descent, and knows something of what it is to lose your land. He's sent to investigate the disappearance of an Exmoor woman, Olive Gladfield, which is, shall we say, not unrelated to the arrival of a giant agri-business corporate on the moor. It's an exciting story, well told, but that's not why I'm here to rant about Rachel Francis. She is, in my view, one of the best fiction writers about contemporary rural existence, about the farming life, about the countryside. Dan Brown might have exciting stories, but he couldn't write



bum on a wall. Story (and, as I say, this is a great story), is not everything, far from it. Rachel is a really special writer. Listen to this – *'By May, the lanes around South Town are green and the swallows swoop down the high street and there's a pair of dippers fishing under the bridge again. In the evening, bats fly over your head, so close you can feel the beat of their wings and on a Sunday morning, early and before the traffic starts, the air is clean even in the town.'* That's sentence making, that is. So clean and clear. Read it aloud as it is written, and know that there is something special going on.

Rachel describes one of her characters as coming from a punk hippy rebel background, which perfectly describes Rachel Francis herself. Rather than jump through the hoops of agents and publishers, she chooses to self-publish. As the punks used to say of putting out a record, it was cheap, it was easy, go and do it. But please don't let this put you off. It is as good as anything being published today. She needs a wide readership, not just her friends, and family. And dog.

Review by Ian Marchant

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