

FOR SOME REASON I PLUNGED INTO THIS TASK fired with (in hindsight) an unhealthy enthusiasm. I think the *something wicked this way comes* aspect of foreshadowing appealed to my hunting instinct – and I took to my role of Witchfinder General with zealous ardour.

And indeed, inevitably, I was soon sniffing out all manner of sulphurous hints that *History of Wolves* was shaping up to be a study in evil, a work that might find its place in the canon somewhere between *The Shining* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Linda, I immediately intuited, represented a malign force.

I decided, for instance, that she had been holding Mr Adler's hand as he'd slipped away in a pool of his own drool and she'd observed his slow death with a cold curiosity rather than with compassion.

And what were the words to the Doors' song she was humming minutes later? It wasn't, by any chance, *this is the end, my only friend the end?*

And of course the paramedic recognises something about her is not quite right – and there's a complicity here – she knows that he knows there is a sickness in her that should, in the best of all possible worlds, be driven out.

Then more broadly there is a coldness about the whole place, the setting writ large, this dead-end corner of the universe: the school and the town, its pupils, its inhabitants, in physical and emotional limbo, like it's some vast metaphysical waiting room, desolation row, death's drear antechamber.

Even the first page, though glowing on the surface with a warmer intent, a happy memory to set against all that may follow, is unsettling. For instance, the notion that Paul hadn't yet quite learned the etiquette of minding where his body stops and another begins – this is surely going to be a book about boundaries and the crossing of boundaries, the boundary between life and death, subject and object, physical and metaphysical; a book in which the most comforting manifestations of fleshiness – a kid, say, plopping into your lap – may soon turn cold, and your soul, dislodged in a breeze, may float off “silent and weightless as air.”

Even the very first sentence “It's not that I never think about Paul” (note its telling double negative) is surely, when you assess it properly, rather chilling.

OR SO I THOUGHT IN A FIRST RUSH of smugness. And then, Praise Be, I had a pause for thought. I had a cup of coffee. I went for a walk. Was I perhaps overcooking this?

And I'm almost ashamed to say that I cheated. I looked at a couple of online reviews, wherein I discovered that Linda isn't the epitome of innocence infected with evil, *History of Wolves* really isn't that sort of book, it turns out it's an exquisitely-nuanced liquorice-and-cigarettes coming-of-age novel.

Oh.

And it turns out that the death of Mr Adler isn't really all that important after all. It's significant only insofar as it creates space for the arrival of one of the book's major characters, Mr Grierson.

Ah. OK. But why, then, make the death scene so damned weird? Why so psychologically charged? So... unrealistic?

It made me think about how I'd have written it – and I realised almost immediately I'd have gone about it in a rather business-like fashion. I'd have drawn on two incidents from my past – one, at school, when a classmate had an epileptic fit in class; and secondly, when an older colleague collapsed (a seizure I think it was eventually described as) at work.

In both cases, managers whose careers depended on doing the right thing immediately did the right thing – they cleared the area and called in the right expertise. In neither case was there a crowd of comically incapable onlookers, no Greek chorus meets the cast of *The Simpsons*. And perhaps these incidents from my past live on in my memory partly because I didn't witness an outcome.

Who can say? But this speculative diversion has, in the end, made this exercise hugely fascinating. It's a new departure for me – the first time I've taken "reading like a writer" to mean "having the audacity to attempt a rewrite, even a superficial one."

I don't know if this represents progress or not. But in any case, I'm double or trebly confused now. I've just read the longer sections of *History of Wolves* foreshadowing extracts. And guess what? One of the

cultural references is *The Turn of the Screw*. Someone somewhere is messing with my head.

So, what have I learned? What can I steal?

Well, we have the by-now-familiar cut-away, at crisis point, to a trivial observational detail. This one's rather effective, underlining the fragility of life, all our lives; underlining, too, the banal randomness by which this gift can be snatched from us. I've made another mental note to make every effort to use this technique.

Then there's the evocation of warm human contact (and therefore the broader concept of humanity's fundamental animal nature) on the first page. I've made a faltering start (Harold and Miss Harman holding hands) with this sort of thing but I can and should and will do more. It's a balancing of the *Hamlet* equation: even my most morally unappetising characters are really Fallen Angels; I must remember a more basic truth, that we are all Great Apes.

And lastly, the inclusion of surreal detail. I absolutely love the three fish with Mohawk haircuts. There's a ridiculous aspect to most human activity, found in even the most ostensibly serious of scenes. I think I tend to filter this out, even if I perceive it in the first place. I shouldn't.