

the leisure manager's library

An occasional series offering a guide to leisure-related literature

No 4: Headlong by Michael Frayn

What's it about?

Martin Clay, philosopher and budding art historian, leaves London for an extended stay in the country with his wife and young daughter. His intention is to write a book concerning the impact of nominalism on Netherlandish art in the fifteenth century; instead, he finds himself staring at his "triumph and torment and downfall", hoisted out of the fireplace in the breakfast-room of a boorish neighbour. The object in question is a painting which, for reasons best known to himself, Clay feels certain is the hugely valuable missing link in a series of paintings by Bruegel. Well, almost certain. Most of the time. Rather than inform the owners – or even his wife – of the momentous discovery, Clay instead descends into a maze of obsession, deception and an awful lot of research, veering wildly between cliff tops of certainty and chasms of doubt, knitting himself into a complex nest as he thunders towards his ruin.

What's it got to do with leisure?

It's got art in it. A lot of art. Frayn has somehow managed to construct an entire novel – not just a novel but a wholly engaging and darkly comic one – around what is essentially a fat little man reading an awful lot of books. It's a page-turner about page-turning. As a result, every paragraph Clay reads about sixteenth century Netherlandish culture, every five hundred year old atlas he studies, every classical dictionary he consults, we read, study and consult right alongside him. Cancel that course of evening classes; you need never buy another Teach Yourself Bruegel book again. The one thing you're unlikely to learn much about is the impact of nominalism on Netherlandish art.

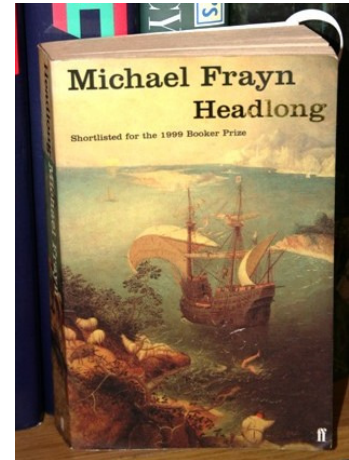
Why should I read it?

If you ask a class of nine year olds (or the Daily Mail) to review a book for you, the one word you'll read time and again is 'unputdownable'. It's a vile word, a hateful little neologism to be ranked with 'Brangelina' and 'spork'. Unfortunately, the closest we can get to describing Headlong is either 'gripping' – tepid at best, verging on insipid – and 'untearawayfromable', which just sounds insane. The fact is that Michael Frayn's writing is such that these ugly, graceless words seem almost justified by their pure accuracy. 'Headlong' is unpriseyourselfawayfromable. And in this fact lies the blunt answer to the question of why you should read it: you won't be able to help yourself. You'll finish this review and forget about it until you stumble upon a copy of Headlong in a bookshop or a library or on a friend's bookshelf, when you'll suddenly remember something written in an online magazine. You'll pick it up, scan the first few pages and succumb entirely to the sheer unbloodyputdownableness of it all.

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