

I t should matter all, but there is a small arithmetical slip towards the end of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*: "we sat, seven of us, six . . . re-enactors and two drivers, in two cars". Whether seven or eight people occupy these two cars is incidental to the story. The detail stands out, however, because this novel depicts a whole sequence of "re-enactments": meticulous reconstructions instigated by the novel's narrator, which his staff must carry out with repeated, robotic perfection. The dirtiness of the floor, the shape of an oil-stain, the warping of glass in an old window, the volume of a distantly heard piano – everything must be just so. A lot of planning and material preparation goes into re-creating even the smallest incident. Yet mistakes sometimes catch the narrator's eye – aberrations that are incorporated, in turn, into the repeated pattern.

It seems likely that this obsessive character would know whether seven or eight people were sitting in the two cars. One half-suspects McCarthy of inserting a deliberate ambiguity, inviting the reader's involvement in an equivalent process of reading, rereading and re-absorption. *Remainder* is that sort of book. Its coolness, with McCarthy's deadpan prose nicely matching his narrator's closed-off state of mind, is itself pleasurable. All we know to begin with is that this young man is recovering from a serious accident, one that he is legally obliged not to discuss. (Clues are of the order of "It involved something falling from the sky".) He has had to learn how to walk and think all over again, breaking down every physical action into its constituent parts, so that spontaneity takes on a certain significance for him. Robert De Niro's nonchalance in the film *Mean Streets*, whether "lighting up a cigarette or opening a fridge door or just walking down the street", fascinates him. His own life seems unreal next to this perfect simulation of unconscious ease.

Compensation for the accident comes in the form of £8.5 million, riches that the narrator

Déjà vu again and again

MICHAEL CAINES

Tom McCarthy

REMAINDER

274pp. Paris: Metronome. Paperback, £6.
2916262 008

does not know, at first, how to spend. Indulgence and altruism hold equally little appeal. Then he goes to a party, and sees a crack in the bathroom wall. For some reason, this fissure emits a spiralling sequence of memories, of the déjà vu variety, from the smell of liver cooking, to an encounter with a neighbour putting out the rubbish, to the general environment of a large block of apartments. Inside this "remembered building", in the rooms and on the staircase, in the lobby and the large courtyard

Phil Hogan's third novel examines the effect that a number of legacies have on a family. Stuart Duttling owns a carpet firm in East Anglia, which he inherited from his father. For such a solid, traditional man, Stuart's domestic arrangements are the stuff of daytime television. His first wife left him for his best friend and business rival, taking his eldest daughter, Emma, who is now a successful financier. He then married Diane, an ex-hippie with a child, Oscar, from a previous relationship, and together they had Rachel and Luke. Two of these children fancy one another:

All This Will Be Yours begins with Stuart handing over the running of the business to Rachel. Shortly after, Oscar, whose life is one of soft drugs and half-hearted political protest, is bequeathed £4,000 by his biological father, who ran a genealogy business; he then

between it and the building facing, "all my movements had been fluent and unforced": "Not awkward, acquired, second-hand, but natural". His gestures had been "seamless, perfect". "I'd merged with them . . . They'd been real; I'd been real – been without first understanding how to try to be: cut out the detour."

This, then, is his motivation: to try to cut out the detour of thought. He is rarely asked why he is doing what he is doing. His chief helper, for one, derives his own different thrill from the increasingly daunting logistical challenges he is set. Interior designers who take his instructions as cues to go off in their own cute direction are sacked. The results are strangely gripping. He begins with that apartment block, working in reverse now, from finding the right location to duplicating the crack in the wall, lavishing

Phil Hogan

ALL THIS WILL BE YOURS
308pp. Little, Brown. £14.99.
0 316 72734 2

discovers that he may have inherited something else from him: Long QT – or Sudden Death – Syndrome. The novel's narrative switches between the lives of its three main characters. Rachel, desperate to prove herself more capable than Stuart and more glamorous than Emma, sinks the firm into debt in order to modernize it, and embarks on an affair with a sweet-talking supplier. Stuart, newly excluded from his former occupation (Rachel won't let him near the office), feels directionless and old. Oscar, meanwhile, has better luck; while he frets about the possibility of dying young, he also takes up his father's old business, so

attention on trivia – the angle of a re-enactor's head, the banisters on the stairwell. Further re-enactments – a couple of shootings in Brixton, for example – necessitate even more work and a raising of the stakes. It may make McCarthy's narrator happy to know that certain re-enactments are incessantly under way in his absence, but his ambitions are actually taking him in a more dangerous direction.

Tom McCarthy's novel might derive from Huysmans's *À Rebours* ("Après les fleurs factices s'ingentaient les véritables fleurs, il voulait des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses"), with the compensation money substituting for the inherited wealth of the duc Des Esseintes. Both novels portray perilously isolated eccentricity. The idea of a thoughtless grace also recalls Heinrich von Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theatre", but then the contemporary setting and the thoroughly modern trappings conspire to keep such influences at bay. *Remainder* should be read (and, of course, reread) for its intelligence and humour.

gaining a sense of purpose, which has up to now eluded him.

Phil Hogan is generally bracketed with "relationship novelists", such as Tony Parsons. The comparison ignores the fact that his prose is better than that of most writers in the genre: though undemanding, his is readable and occasionally acute. Where this novel falls down is in its tendency to appear staged; the characters seem to have been chosen for their convenient diversity, and they change drastically in a short time. The result is a decent enough novel, but its conclusion is reached in the opening chapter and then unswervingly affirmed over 300 pages; that conclusion itself will be familiar to anyone who has read Philip Larkin on what your mum and dad do.

SIMON BAKER