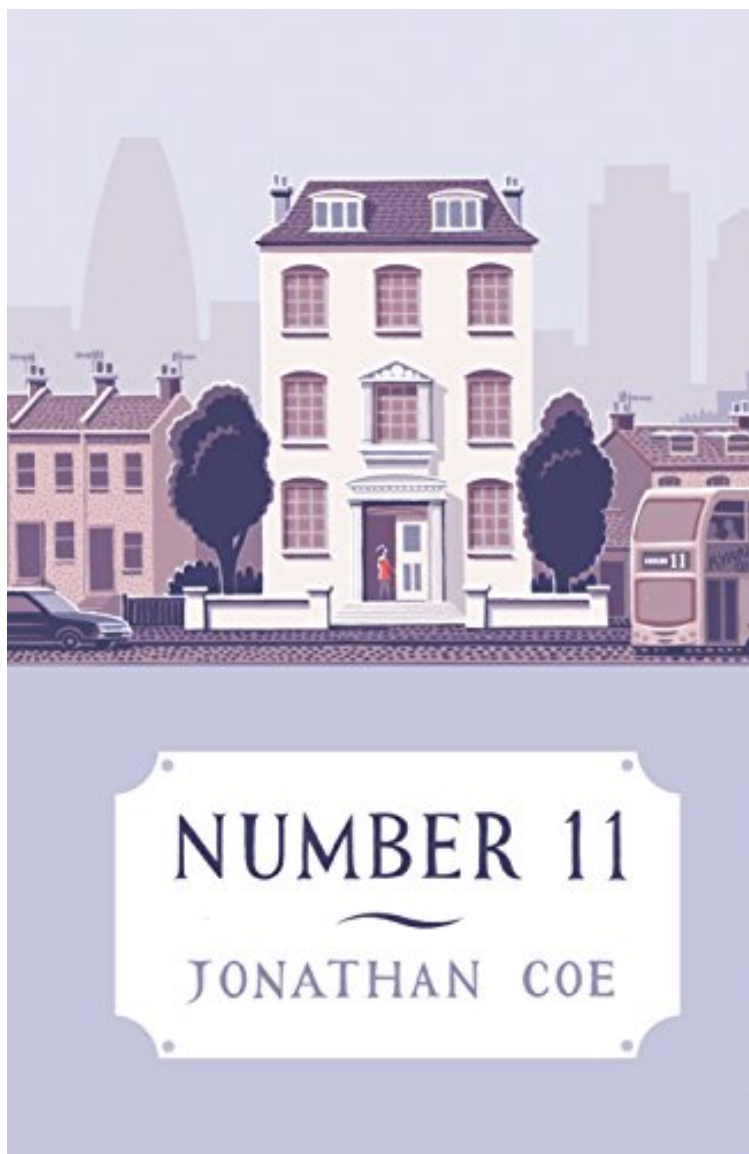


(Online library) File size: 63.Mb

Number 11



Par Jonathan Coe
**Download PDF | ePub | DOC |*
audiobook | ebooks

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les
ventes : #48015 dans eBooksPubli le:
2015-11-11Sorti le: 2015-11-
11Format: Ebook Kindle

(Online library) Number 11

Par Jonathan Coe : Number 11 before
purchasing it in order to gage whether or
not it would be worth my time, and all
praised Number 11:

Download

Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThis is a novel about the hundreds of tiny connections between the public and private worlds and how they affect us all.It's about the legacy of war and the end of innocence.It's about how comedy and politics are battling it out and comedy might have won.It's about how 140 characters can make fools of us all.It's about living in a city where bankers need cinemas in their basements and others need food banks down the street.It is Jonathan Coe doing what he does best - showing us how we live now.'Coe is among the handful of novelists who can tell us something about the temper of our times' ObserverNumber 11 is Jonathan Coe's eleventh novel. His previous ten novels are all published by Penguin and include the highly acclaimed bestsellers What a Carve Up!, The House of Sleep and The Rotters' Club.ExtraitCoe /

NUMBER 111 The round tower soared up, black and glistening, against the slate grey of a late-October sky. As Rachel and her brother walked towards it across the moor, from the east, it was framed by two leafless, skeletal ash trees. It was the hour before dusk on a windless afternoon. When they reached the trees, they would be able to rest on the bench that stood between them, and look back towards Beverley in the near distance, the neat clusters of houses and, rising up in the midst of them, the monumental, answering greyish-cream towers of the Minster. Nicholas flopped down on the bench. Rachel then only six years old, eight years his junior did not join him: she was impatient to run up towards the black tower, to get close to it. She left her brother to his rest and scurried onwards, squelching her way through the cow-trodden mud that surrounded the foot of the tower until she was right up against it, and could lay her hands upon the gleaming black brickwork. The flat of both hands upon the tower, she looked upwards and could not comprehend the size and scale of it, the perfect, lucid curve as it arched itself, like a sway back, against a threatening sky through which a pair of rooks were now skimming, cawing and circling endlessly. What did it use to be? she asked. Nicholas had joined her now. He shrugged. Dunno. Some kind of windmill, maybe. Do you think we could get inside? Its all bricked up. There was a circular wooden bench running all around the base of the tower, and when Nicholas sat there, Rachel sat beside him and stared up into his pale, unresponsive blue eyes, which for all their coldness only made her feel how lucky she was, how blessed, to have an older brother like this, so handsome and confident. She hoped that one day her hair would be as blonde as his, her mouth as shapely, her skin as downy and clear. She nestled against his shoulder, as close as she dared. She didn't want to be a drag upon him, didn't want him to become too aware that, in this strange and unfamiliar town, he was the only thing that made her feel safe. You cold or something? he asked, looking down at her. A bit. She inched away slightly. Will it be warm where they are, do you think? Course it will. There'd be no point going on holiday somewhere where it's cold, would there? I wish they'd taken us with them, said Rachel feelingly. Well, they didn't. So that's that. They sat for a few moments in silence: each of them, once again, trying to wrestle as best they could with the conundrum of why their parents should have chosen to go away for half-term without them. Then, as soon as the cold started to bite, Nicholas jumped to his feet. Come on, he said. Are we going to look at this cathedral before it gets dark? Its a minster, not a cathedral, said Rachel. Same difference. It'll just be a big old church, whatever you call it. He set off quickly, with Rachel running up behind him in an effort to keep pace, but before they had got very far along the path back to the main road, they were halted in their tracks by the sight of two people approaching them in the distance. One of them was in a wheelchair: it appeared to be an old, old woman, swaddled against the afternoon chill by layer upon layer of thick woollen blankets. Her features were scarcely visible: her head was bowed, drooping tiredly, and she was wearing a silk headscarf which screened most of her face from view. In fact, the longer the children looked at her, the more likely it appeared that she was fast asleep. Her chair was being trundled roughly along the path, meanwhile, by a young-looking man wearing motorcycle leathers and balancing something on his left forearm as he pushed. The something could not, at first, be identified: but as the figures came closer, it looked as though it might however implausible this seemed be some sort of bird; a suspicion which was then suddenly and dramatically confirmed when the creature spread its wings to an amazing width, and flapped them languidly, in black silhouette against the grey sky looking, at that moment, more like some fantastical hybrid creature from mythology than any real bird Rachel could remember having seen before. Nicholas did not move, and as Rachel stood beside him she clasped his hand, relishing his weak responsive grip, sensing the coldness of his bare hand even through the prickly thickness of her woollen mittens. Unsure what to do next, they watched as the man in leathers settled the wheelchair in place and then spoke a few words to the bird, which reacted by hopping obediently from his arm to one of the chair's handles. With both arms free now, the man busied himself making sure the old lady in his charge was warm and comfortable, adjusting her blankets and tucking them in around her ever more snugly. Then he turned his attention to the bird. Rachel inched forward, trying to pull her brother with her. What are you doing? I thought you wanted to get on. I do. But I'm not sure that it's safe. The man had taken out a length of twine with something attached to the far end, and had begun to swing it around his head in long, slow, circling movements. There was no traffic on the main road at the moment, and the afternoon was so still that the two children could clearly hear the regular heavy SWUSH of the twine as it swept through the air. They could even hear the beating of the kestrel's wings (it was clear that it was a kestrel now) as she took off in pursuit of the lure, training herself on the lump of meat at the end of the twine with lethal accuracy, and yet always just missing it, as the man swung it out of her reach in glorious, repeated feats of strength and timing. Every time the bird missed the meat she would dip, swoop lower and then climb steeply again, pushing swiftly up into

the sky until she reached the limit of her parabola, hung suspended there for the briefest of moments, whirled and then dived again, rushing down towards the coveted lump of meat with preternatural speed and precision, only to have it snatched from her questing beak at the last possible instant. After this exhilarating ritual had been performed two or three times, Nicholas and Rachel began to move forward cautiously. The man was standing slap in the centre of the path as he swung the lure about his head, so that they found it necessary to deviate from the track a little at least far enough to stay out of the way of the circling twine. But this was not good enough for the falconer, who, without taking his eyes off the bird for a second, shouted at them in a voice filled with fury: Keep out of the way, cant you? Keep out the bloody way! But it wasn't the note of anger that surprised the children. It was the pitch of the voice: high, shrill and unmistakably feminine. And now that they were only a few yards from the taut, concentrated figure in motorcycle leathers, their mistake was obvious. It was a woman: a woman of around thirty-five, perhaps, although neither of them was very good at guessing the age of grown-ups. Her face was pale, her cheeks pinched and sunken, her hair shaved down to a severe and uncompromising crew cut. Her ears and nose were pierced and decorated with multiple silver rings and studs. A livid, dark blue-green tattoo of some indeterminate shape seemed to cover most of her neck and throat. She was the most terrifying woman, without a doubt, that Rachel had ever seen. Even Nicholas seemed taken aback. And if her appearance was not startling enough, there was the rising note of rage in her voice at the temerity, the insolence of these children for encroaching upon what she must have felt to be her own and the birds territory. Go on! Piss off! she shouted. Keep out the way! Use some bloody sense! Nicholas tightened his grip on his sisters hand and turned a sharp left, so that they were heading directly away from the danger zone. They sped up until they had practically broken into a run. Only when they were at twenty yards safe distance from the scene did they stop and turn to take one last look. It was a tableau, a moment in time, that would remain forever stamped on Rachels memory: the Mad Bird Woman (as she would always be called from now on) twirling the lure around her head with ferocious energy and concentration; the unimaginable swiftness and sureness of the bird as she plunged towards her prey and then soared upwards again, thwarted but dauntless; in the background, the black tower, tall, implacable and lowering; and in the foreground, the old lady in her wheelchair, fully alert now, her eyes bright and shining as they followed the movements of the bird, her vividly rouged lips parted in a rapturous smile as she called out to the plunging kestrel: Come on, Tabitha! Come and get it! Dive for the meat! Dive, Tabitha, dive! Rachel did not like the look of the Minster at all. As they approached the main entrance from Minster Yard North, it was almost a quarter past four and dusk was already beginning to settle on the town. The thin shreds of mist which had been creeping along the streets and between the houses all day were turning bluish in the fading light, coiling and twining around the streetlamps with their blurry yellow coronas. And now a darker, more muted, blue-black light was starting to descend and spread itself, so that the walls of the Minster, as Rachel dragged her reluctant feet towards them, became hard to make out: no more than a whisper, an intimation, of the churchs looming and ominous bulk. The cold which had first begun to grip her out on Westwood pasture, as she sat at the foot of the black tower, had now entered her bones, and taken such a pitiless hold that it felt as if these very bones were themselves made of ice. However tightly she pulled her duffel coat around her shivering body, however deep she plunged her hands into those sweet-wrapper-filled pockets, nothing could protect her from that cold. Soon the mixture of cold and apprehension had slowed her footsteps to a halt, only a few yards from the Minster doorway. Now whats the matter? said Nicholas, crossly. Do we have to go inside? Why not? Weve come all this way. Still Rachel held back. Inexplicably, her unease at the prospect of stepping through the Minster doorway was intensifying, mutating into something like dread. Nicholas took her by the hand again but there was nothing comforting about the gesture this time; he was pulling her towards the door. In a moment they had passed through, into the darkness. Or at least, they were through the doorway, and into a small vestibule, but before they could get any further a startling thing happened. They had assumed they were alone in this narrow space but suddenly, quite silently and without warning, a figure stepped out from somewhere: from one of the pools of shadow, presumably, in its furthest corners. He appeared before them so unexpectedly, his footsteps so absolutely noiseless on the flagstones, that Rachel could not help but let out a scream. Sorry, he said, to the little girl. Did I frighten you? He was a small man of somewhat striking appearance: his hair was albino white, his complexion so fair that his skin was almost transparent, and he had no eyebrows that Rachel could see. He wore a shabby fawn mackintosh over a light-grey suit, with a very wide brown tie of the sort that might have been fashionable about twenty-five years ago, back in the 1970s. Can I help you? he asked. His tone was friendly but somehow intimidating. He spoke with a slight lisp which made Rachel think he sounded like a

snake. We just wanted to go inside and have a look round, said Nicholas. Minsters closed now, said the man.

It closes at four o'clock. The warmth of relief flooded through Rachel's body. They would not have to go inside. They could turn, and go home; back to the relative sanctuary of her grandparents' house anyway. She would be spared the nightmare. Oh. OK then, said Nicholas, disappointed. The man hesitated a moment or two. Go on, then, he said, with a smile and a sinister wink. You can have a wander around for a few minutes. They won't be shutting up just yet. Are you sure? That's ever so kind of you. No problem, son. If anyone asks, just say Teddy told you it'd be all right. Teddy? Teddy Henderson. The assistant warden. Everybody knows me here. He watched as the children continued to hesitate. Go on, then. What you waiting for? All right. Thanks! Nicholas was off through the main door in no time, leaving Rachel with two options: to follow him, or to remain in the vestibule with the smiling figure of Mr. Henderson. It was no choice at all, in fact. Without glancing once at the discomfiting stranger, she took a deep breath and followed her brother. It had seemed quiet outside the Minster, and inside the vestibule; but once Rachel had stepped inside the church's actual, vast interior, she found herself enveloped by quiet of an entirely different order. The silence was overpowering. She paused for a while, listening to it, absorbing it, holding her breath. Then she took a few steps forward towards the central aisle, and even those gentle, tentative footsteps sounded intrusive in that vaulted and silent space. She looked around for Nicholas but couldn't see him. The cold and the dark pressed down upon her. Dim electric bulbs threw feeble light over some of the walls, and there were a few candles flickering in the candelabra up towards the pulpit. But nothing could really palliate the sense of overwhelming gloom and unearthly silence. Where had Nicholas gone? Rachel walked quickly up the aisle now, looking anxiously to her left and right. He couldn't have gone far: she would see him in a second or two, surely. She had walked almost as far as the choir stalls when a sound suddenly made her freeze: a crashing sound, long and reverberant and horribly loud. The sound of a door being closed. She wheeled around. Was that the main door? Was that Mr. Henderson, locking up and going home? This was one of her keenest, most primal fears—the fear of getting locked in somewhere, after dark, and having to spend the night in a strange and lonely place. Was that what was happening now? She wanted to run towards the door to see, but stayed rooted to the spot. Indecision paralysed her. Tears sprang to her eyes and her body began to contract, turning in upon itself, seizing up with terror. She sensed a movement behind her; she heard voices, murmuring. Turning round sharply, she thought she could make out two figures, talking in the shadows beyond the choir stalls. She took a breath and, in an act of desperate courage, called out: Whos that? After a couple of seconds the voices stopped and one of the figures stepped forward. It was Nicholas. It was all Rachel could do to stop herself from letting out a yelp of happiness. She ran towards him and threw her arms around him. He embraced her, too, but there was something cold, preoccupied about the gesture. He did not look down at her, barely seemed to notice that she was clinging to him. Soon he eased himself away, pushing her from him and then he glanced back towards the spot where he had been talking, a frown upon his face, as if something he had been told there was still puzzling him. Where have you been? said Rachel, her voice loving, accusing. And, when he didn't answer: And who was that? Who were you talking to just now? She's one of the wardens here. Nicholas continued to stare back towards the rear of the church. Then he shook his head, and in a tone both brisk and nervous said: Come on, I think we should go. This wasn't a good idea. He hurried on towards the main door, Rachel padding along behind him, struggling yet again to keep up. Nick, wait! Slow down, can't you? The door of the vestibule was still open, but the main door, the door leading to the outside world, was now locked. Its shut! Nicholas said, unnecessarily, after twisting the handle a few times. I know. I heard him close it. That man with the funny hair. Come on. He strode off again, back in the direction of the choir stalls, and she scurried after him. Where are we going now? How are we going to get out? There's another way. A little door down a passageway here. The lady told me. Even for Rachel, now, there was no mistaking the note of panic in her brother's voice; and this was what scared her more than anything. She knew that if Nicholas was frightened, something must be very wrong. Can't you find her again? She could show us the way. I don't know where she is. The candles had been snuffed out, and now with a click which itself echoed around the Minster walls, stretched and amplified a hundredfold, most of the lights were abruptly switched off. Darkness engulfed them. There was just one pinpoint, glimmering faintly, on the northern side of the nave. Come on, said Nicholas. That must be it. She tried to grab his hand again but he was already on his way. This time she broke into a sprint in order to catch up. In a matter of seconds they had reached a little arched doorway that led into a narrow, low-ceilinged corridor, at the end of which was a door marked Exit only in emergency. Phew, this is it, said Nicholas. We're going to be OK. She followed him as he entered the tiny corridor, but instead of opening the door he leaned against the wall for a moment or

two, breathing heavily to calm himself down. What's wrong? Rachel asked. Her brother didn't answer and so, following a hunch, she made the question more specific. It was something that lady said, wasn't it? What did she say to you? Nicholas turned to her, and his voice sank to a conspiratorial whisper. She asked me what I was doing here, and I told her Mr. Henderson had let us in and said it was OK for us to have a look around. But she said that wasn't possible. She said . . . He tailed off. Rachel herself was too petrified to speak, but her eyes, fixed unmovingly upon her brother, demanded that he finish the explanation. At last Nicholas swallowed hard and concluded, in a whisper that was softer but more urgent than ever: She said, It can't have been him. Teddy Henderson died more than ten years ago. He looked down at her, waiting for her reaction.

She returned his gaze, her eyes steady and without expression. It was clear that she did not, at first, understand the full meaning of what he had just told her. It was too terrible for her to absorb. But slowly it began to happen. Her eyes widened and she put her hands to her mouth in horror. You mean . . . You mean he . . . ? Nicholas nodded slowly and then, without another word, he grabbed the handle of the exit door, pulled it open and was off: away, out into the freezing October air, down the path which led towards Minster Yard North and then back to the shops and safety. He outpaced Rachel easily and it wasn't until he stopped to recover his breath in a sweetshop doorway that she was able to catch up with him. Her own sprint through the streets had been, up until that point, a thing of panic, confusion and heedlessness; already she could remember nothing about it. Now she stood and watched as Nicholas doubled over in the doorway, his shoulders heaving. As usual she wanted to hug him, to cling on to him, but this time something held her back. Some creeping element of suspicion. She looked at him more carefully. Her capacity for rational thought started to return as the pounding of her heart relaxed into something more measured and regular.

And then the realization hit her. It wasn't the fear, it wasn't the exertion that was causing his shoulders to heave like this: it was laughter. Nicholas was laughing silently, helplessly, unstopably. Even then, she could not think what was making him laugh like this. It seemed an inexplicable reaction to the experience they had just been through. What is it? she asked him. What's so funny? Nicholas straightened himself up and looked down at her. He was laughing so much that his eyes were running with tears, and coherent speech was almost impossible. Your . . . Your face, he spluttered finally. Your face when I told you that story. What story? Oh my God. God, that was priceless. His laughter subsided, and he became aware that his little sister was still staring at him in bewilderment. The story, he repeated. About that guy who let us into the church. You mean the ghost? At which Nicholas burst into laughter again. No, you dumbo, he said. He wasn't a ghost. I made that up. But that lady you spoke to said She didn't tell me anything except how to get out. So what about . . . ? And then, finally, she understood. She understood, and she saw the full cruelty of the joke he had played on her. The boy she had trusted, the one person from whom she had thought she could seek comfort, had only wanted to upset and torment her. Of all today's horrors, this was the worst. She did not scream, though, or burst into tears or shout at him. Instead, a sudden numbness overcame her, and all she said was: You're horrible and I hate you. She turned and walked away, not having a clue where she was heading. To this day, she has never been entirely sure how she found her way back to her grandparents' house.

Revue de presse Thank goodness for Jonathan Coe, who records what Britain has lost in the past thirty years in his elegiac fiction (Scotland on Sunday) Everything a novel ought to be: courageous, challenging, funny, sad - and peopled with a fine troupe of characters (The Times (on 'What a Carve Up!'))