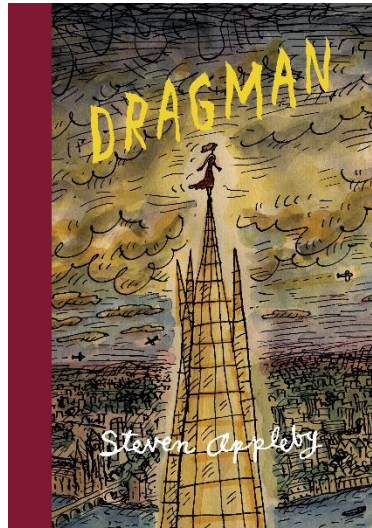




Dragman by Steven Appleby

[Comedy]



"Did I mention I can fly? Oh. Sorry. That's rather important.
"When I put on women's clothes I can fly."

Only dear Steven Appleby could or would lob in such a profound statement of elevating and individualistic empowerment disguised as a superhero sub-plot.

But then I swear that this is something so much more mischievous and demure than American four-colour fisticuffs. It's a very British book, in part about how we treat each other, ourselves and our souls, and the insidious way in which the corporations ain't half taking over.

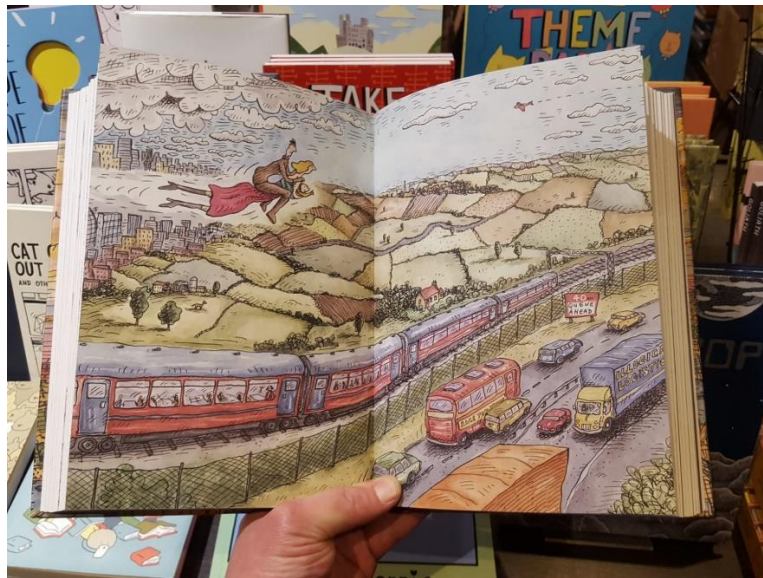




Drawn in what Posy Simmonds refers to as Steven's "nimble, nubby line", then washed over by Nicola Sherring's warmest watercolours, Appleby's infectiously affectionate art leaves one feeling as safe as under the protection of an English village's road-straddling lollipop lady. Freed from the confines of panel borders, the gentle, fluid forms and wibbly-wobbly gesticulations don't so much control your reading as liberate it from harm. Even something as far-out as flying full-pelt from a cloud-covered London to race trains past the sunlit, hedge-seamed, patchwork farmland of bucolic Britain is rendered as regular as popping down to the local corner shop for a packet of PG Tips.

This becomes comparatively clear during the dozen interspersed pages which are stark prose, unadorned and so unmitigated by Appleby's dainty doodling. There we slip into something a lot less comfortable which will fester queasily below the surface until its relevance becomes all too terribly clear. At one point the prose and comics criss-cross so tantalisingly close – no further apart than the width of a club – but the fleeting opportunity for detection goes unnoticed for what it unexpectedly is.

"No one at Pretty Pretty can work out if they knew any of the victims or not, because all the trans-girls and most of the guys in the room... use scene names, meaning their secret lives and their real lives, or whichever way round you want to think of it, don't connect up." Equally, it's more difficult for the police to connect the smudged trail of bloody dots and, so, much easier to get away with murder.



Many moons ago a teenage Augustus Crimp – and his creator, Steven Appleby – found a stocking down the back of a sofa and put it on without thinking. Immediately they felt that they were floating on air, but in Augustus's case the effect was far from just figurative for yes, he found he could fly! Neither looked back but they did look over their shoulders because, you know, society... And some mothers.

For August the second pivotal point came while enjoying a quiet cup of tea, several floors up in the local art gallery, only to spy neighbour young Cherry Mingle playing on the balcony outside. While Augustus is fretting about being recognised in a wig and women's clothing, over the railing Cherry goes! And in leaping selflessly after her, that's how Augustus became the reluctant superhero called Dragman. Briefly. Things didn't work out. It was a territorial issue. Some people are dicks.

Since then Augustus has retired, got married and had a baby boy. But he kept from his missus his secret past, and now Cherry needs Dragman's help once more because people are selling their souls.

It's no Faustian Pact for the few but an equity-freeing opportunity for the many: the masses are selling their souls to corporations for cash. "Souls are valuable. You can get a great deal of money for your soul," observes Augustus. "Better to have a new car than something ancient and invisible. Only, when your soul was gone, nothing made much sense any more. Except jumping out of a plane." They're doing that too: buying plane tickets then jumping. And Cherry's parents have just sold their souls.



Improbably, every single element I've mentioned ties together apart from the lollipop lady. It's so deftly done and so diverting that you won't spot it creeping up on you. Plus the central concern couldn't be more topical because every day we make decisions about money and who we give it to, all in the knowledge of what they're likely to do with it and how that will come back to haunt us.

"It's so much easier to run a business without scruples.

"Principals are painful. Without a soul the pain simply fades away."