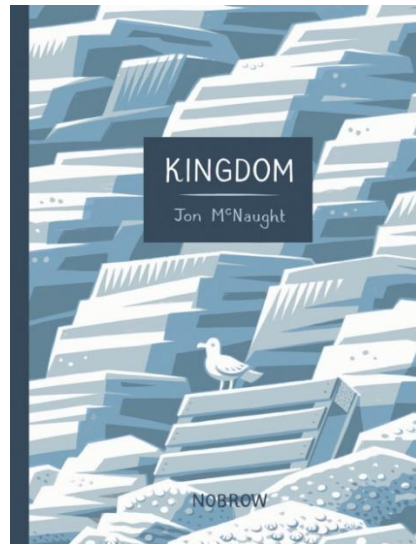




Kingdom by John McNaught

[Contemporary Fiction]



This is sublime. And it will resonate with so very many of you, for it's the most skilful evocation – through light, colour, precise pacing and that which sometimes left sullenly unsaid - of sights, sounds, sensations and behavioural moments during a key time common to us all: the British summer holiday!

Sunshine, sea and exploring new places on the annual family were the best weeks of the year! Right up until you turned mid-teen, then you desperately wanted to be back at home with your mates.

Mum, son Andy and younger daughter Suzie set off in silence, though you can hear motorway traffic drone. McNaught nails the temperature and time of day through the angle of shadows cast, the cars gliding over asphalt as pitted in the light as it is pock-marked in the shade. And, oh, the colours!

"Stop kicking my chair!" complains Andy.
"I'm not!" She is.

They take a break at a service station. "Suzie, don't waste your fries."
"I'm not." She is. She's flinging them at the crows.





Remember the lull-time of long journeys, gazing out of the window, catching glimpses of sheep or horses between monumental overpasses or gigantic pylons overhead? As inured-to-it-all adults we forget that so much seemed stranger and more exotic to our less travelled selves. I vividly recall the back seat of our car quickly being cluttered with empty sweet packets and juice bottles lolling about on the floor, and so it is here. Then there'll be rain, of course there'll be rain! It's a staple of every British holiday, holed up in a tent, caravan or rented cottage! The windscreen wipers reveal what they can rhythmically, episodically, then eventually there's drowsiness, sleep.

Their destination is a coastal caravan park, their Mum's favourite place in the world when she was their age. She's excited to show it off! But much has changed in the last three decades; for example, a mobile phone signal wasn't exactly a priority back then. It's an absolute deal-breaker to a teenager.

As the sun sets tiny lights are switched on one by one like intimate orange heat sensors below the vast purple heavens, rendered magnificently with a majesty or melancholy – you take your pick.

Next morning Mum takes Suzie on An Expedition because Andy's "being awkward".



"If we keep heading this way, we'll get to the Mermaid's Cave! That's what your Grandpa used to call it! He used to tell us about the mermaids who lived there, guarding the treasure. He said you could hear them singing at night. If you listened carefully..."

The Mermaid's Cave will surprise you. Twice. KINGDOM is very poignant and bitter-sweet.

But some moments of magic are both universal and immutable, like sparkles of sun on wavering water when the sun lies low in front of you. McNaught's diamond-shaped spangles of light capture that very specific, sensual beauty to thrilling perfection, along with whole sheets of white when the brilliance becomes blinding. It is oh so familiar, all of this – an almost impossible task given the different configurations of diverse family dynamics and destinations, but McNaught has succeeded through a keen eye, judicious selection and an uncanny ability to render with exquisite precision what to most of us would be fleeting and ephemeral, until we're reminded.

For example, visiting an elderly relative whom you've never met, with their drab rooms and fuddy-duddy ornaments; your Mum chatting away to her about people you've no clue nor a care about. You're left to look idly round the room. Ah, but a tin of biscuits will be opened to go with the tea! "There we go... There might be some chocolate ones in there... if you dig down deep enough."

Few creators outside of Chris Ware pack the page with this many panels, but then there's so much to see when you make time to look around you, or when time passes so seemingly slowly that you're honestly bored out of your wits. Nature is forever getting on with its own thing, whatever you're doing, or not. There are also some spectacular full-page phenomena which I won't give away for fear of spoiling surprises. But you mark my words: you'll remember it all.