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William Boyd

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One cold winter's morning, Lorimer Black -- insurance adjuster, young, good-looking, on the rise -- goes out on a perfectly ordinary business appointment, finds a hanged man and realizes that his life is about to be turned upside down. The elements at play: a beautiful actress glimpsed in a passing taxi . . . an odd new business associate whose hiring, firing and rehiring make little sense . . . a rock musician who is losing his mind -- and a web of fraud in which virtually everyone Lorimer Black knows has been caught and in which he finds himself increasingly entangled.

Armadillo Details

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Author : William Boyd

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From Reader Review Armadillo for online ebook

Melody says

A loss adjuster with an insurance company, who goes by Lorimer Black but whose birth name is Milomre Blocj, discovers his world is coming apart and he is not quite sure why. His car is torched, his job is threatened, his father dies, he is saddled with a horrible house guest, he can't sleep and the woman who he falls in love with (and who is being abused by her husband) insists that she is not interested in him and demands that he leave her alone. He collects ancient Greek helmets (I think this is supposed to be our link to the name of the book). The book is amusing - but even after things are all wrapped up I am still unsure what happened and why.

Laura says

*From BBC Radio 4 Extra:
Contemporary London satire read by Stephen Critchlow.*

Kristina says

I found this to be completely delightful. Lorimer Black, who is a bit of a head case and a total stalker, is someone I would surely go out of my way to avoid in real life, but on the page, I loved him and rooted for him every step of the way. Well, mostly every step. The stalking was creepy, even though he thought he was being sweet. I loved all the ridiculous stuff that kept happening to him; by the end, I was laughing out loud as things got more and more crazy. Torquil and Hogg (and their various hangers-on) were hilariously awful people, and Lorimer's family was simultaneously goofy and sad. When it ended on a somewhat ambiguous note, I was at first outraged and wanted more, but in retrospect, I understand it was much better to end it that way. I can't think of an outcome that would have made me happier; this way I can imagine it however I want. I almost wonder (and maybe I should read the end again more closely before saying something dumb here, but oh well) if the whole end portion with Flavia was just a lucid dream, rather than reality, and he's just going to wake up to find someone is in the process of torching his house or something. I don't know, I have no idea what the author had in mind with the ending, but it doesn't matter. I just loved the whole thing, and will try to check out more from this author.

Akin says

(First read February 1999)

Entertaining and engaging, but doesn't quite leave the impression on me that it did first time around. Times have changed, and so have I, I suppose. Lorimer/Milo's character feels more much more flimsy second time around. Also, the farcical elements of the fiction seem more forced. (As does, come to think of it, the whole mask conceit.) On the other hand, Boyd describes London's essential soullessness presciently. Plot wise, the book now feels like a more mature, restrained counterpart to London Fields-era Amis. Which isn't a bad

thing in itself, but since one read 90s era Amis for his hyperbole...

Anyway, back to the shelf. Not sure I'll come back to this again.

Robert says

Armadillo is a superb novel about a young man making his way through London and modern life, starting with his origins in a displaced "Transnistrian" family living in Fulham, going through his higher education in Inverness (as far away from his family as he could go and stay in the U.K.), and then working his way into the misadventures of a "loss adjuster" for an insurance company always looking for ways to pay less than the face value of its policies.

Lorimer Black, not his original name, has no great pretensions in life except to collect ancient pieces of armor, be kind to others, defend himself from others, and deal with his susceptibility to romantic attraction, notably to an actress he glimpses, at first, in a passing car, Flavia Malinverno.

Boyd weaves the weather, household nuisances, bullying bosses, pissed-off insurance claimants, and secret passions together in a story that leaps genially forward in lively, agreeable prose. This is a novel that suggests, in gentler terms, Martin Amis. There's a hint of Jim Crace here, too, but these are affinities, not questions of influence--Boyd is his own writer, to be sure.

The major insurance scam at the center of the story doesn't overwhelm it in procedural manner, which is good. It's also amusing that Boyd finds a way to engage in a detective story summing up/explanation without the tedium of a full recapitulation. And then the loose thread, Flavia, is pulled in with a light deft touch that embraces, rather than quashes, its fundamental ambiguity.

We know why Lorimer pursues her, but we don't know why she lets herself be caught, or if, as it seems, that she really is caught, or how long she will remain caught.

Nigel says

I really enjoyed this book, as I do most books by William Boyd, one of my favourite writers. In this, his talent for comic writing, first seen in "A Good Man in Africa", entertains, with brilliant character evocations as well as some truly funny scenes. The story itself is not a comedy though. Sort of a coming of age novel in someone who is already mid-30's - perhaps more of an awakening. The main character, Lorimer Black, lives a somewhat boring, conventional life as an insurance 'value-adjuster'. He comes from an Eastern European family (he has changed his name in an effort to flee his old life) and always struggles to fit in. His world is slowly turned upside down by a series of events including an infatuation with an actress, the death of a client, and the unwanted friendship of a colleague. Amusing, and, at times, poignant, this is highly recommended. Only real downside was the lack of a really cohesive ending, but this is likely a fault in my reading taste (I do like a nicely wrapped up satisfying end to a book). 4 stars 8/10

Marcus Hobson says

I really enjoyed this book.

If you told me that I would enjoy a book about a London loss-adjuster quite so much, then I would have laughed at you. It was excellent. The young man in question, Lorimer Black, recently morphed from someone called, less conveniently, Milomre Blocj, is both savvy and likable. He has good taste in clothes and a particular passion for a 3,000 year old Greek helmet.

It is the plethora of little facts that make this novel, lots of little things happening, small insignificant everyday things being pointed out all over the place that makes it work for me.

William Boyd catches the feel of London, the host of oddball characters it contains, and that period of time when everything from the East of the city was on the up.

There are some wonderful pieces of description among the strange events of Lorimer's life. Here is one I liked

"He lay in his bed listening to the growing quiet of the night, always approaching silence but never achieving it, it's progression halted by a lorry's grinding gears, a siren or a car alarm, a taxi's ticking diesel, until, in the small hours, the first jumbos begin to cruise in from the Far East - from Singapore and Delhi, Tokyo and Bangkok - the bass roar of their engines like a slowly breaking wave high above, as they wheeled and banked in over the city on their final approach to Heathrow."

Lorimer is a bad sleeper - never able to get more than an hours or two, and I loved the way this sentence picked up that lack of quiet in the city as it almost reaches silence but never quite makes it. All the things that the poor sleeper would notice.

Have a read, enjoy the richness and the variety of the characters and puzzle your way through the changing fortunes of Lorimer Black.

Lydia says

Any book that makes me imagine Daniel Craig as the protagonist has to be good. Our hero is a loss adjuster for the insurance industry but still dapper, gorgeous, mysterious, tidy -- and heterosexual! He has a secret past and a double life AND a sleep disorder. While the nonstop action is what really drives the plot, this book is strangely moving (despite the subject matter). Lots of British detail and slice-of-life info.

Anna says

Last week I read a blog post that articulates my response to 'Armadillo' better than I can. I'm just so angry and tired. The only possible way to enjoy this book is to overlook the fact that every male character is an asshole who treats women like shit and every female character (barring one) is a sexy body with no personality who exists to please men. The one female exception is an elderly lady who says practically nothing other than that she's ready to die, presumably because she is no longer sexually attractive to men and therefore has no reason to exist in the world. Whenever a woman appears in the narrative, not just her general attractiveness but specifically her breasts must be judged. This is by no means every example, just those I found with a quick flick through:

Dymphna's breasts were momentarily visible as she stooped to stub out her cigarette. Small with pale pointy nipples, he noticed. She really shouldn't wear such low-

Page 110.

She was an ungainly girl, made more lumpy by pubescence, with dark hair and a sly, pointy face. Her small, sharp breasts caused her huge embarrassment.

Page 151.

A cheerful-looking matronly young woman bounced out of the French windows that gave onto the croquet lawn. She had a big shapeless bosom beneath a baggy bright jumper...

Page 177.

Finally she removed her jacket and scarf and finally he was able to look, guardedly this time, at her breasts. From the pleasing convexities and concavities of her vermilion polo-neck he calculated they were of perfectly average size but flattish, more grapefruit-halves than anything particularly conic.

Even when breasts aren't the focus, there's this garbage (page 189):

There was something grubbily attractive about the sullen girl who opened the door to him at DW Management Ltd in Charlotte Street, Lorimer had to admit. Perhaps it was her extreme youth - eighteen or nineteen - perhaps it was the deliberately botched peroxide job on her short hair, or the tightness of the leopard print t-shirt she was wearing, or the three brass rings piercing her left eyebrow, or the fact that she was simultaneously smoking and chewing gum?

The main character, Lorimer Black, could possibly have been interesting if I hadn't viscerally hated him for his constant cruelty, disdain, and objectification of women. He cheats on his girlfriend and leers at her teenage daughter. He treats every girl and woman he meets as a sexual object. He claims to fall in love with a woman he glimpses in a taxi, then proceeds to stalk her in a profoundly creepy way. He uses work contacts to find her phone number, drops in unannounced at her place of work, lies to her, lurks around outside her home, follows her around, ignores her saying that she's not interested & married, and generally acts like a predator. Choice quote: "You do know, you must be aware, that I'm passionately in love with you. I'll never take no for an answer." **That is not fucking acceptable!** What is worse, and I'm spoiling the ending for your own good, this profoundly wrong and indeed illegal behaviour is rewarded by the object of Lorimer's

affections leaving her husband, turning up naked in his bed, and inviting him to run away with her. Given that earlier in book she does briefly call what he's doing stalking, I can only hope in vain that the final scene is a prelude to her having him arrested. Or perhaps murdered. Every other male character is portrayed as even worse towards women than Lorimer, seemingly to make him seem sympathetic by comparison. It doesn't work, but naturally I hated all of them too. It was exhausting.

This review is intended mainly as a warning. I cannot assess the merits of the plot, setting, and writing of 'Armadillo' as I couldn't get past how profoundly, unremittingly, relentlessly sexist it was. This is some Hemingway-level shit. The idea that male novelists might actually think women are this far from being people absolutely horrifies me. My initial hopes of satirical intent were crushed long before I got through all 370 pages. For fuck's sake, men, stop it.

Brian says

Armadillo is the story of Lorimer a.k.a. Milo, an insomniac loss adjuster with a personality crisis and an obsession with collecting antique helmets who simultaneously falls in love with an actress glimpsed briefly in a taxi and becomes inadvertently embroiled in an elaborate fraud perpetrated by his own company. There's a straightforward narrative and a parallel set of excerpts from Lorimer's journal which provide a commentary on the action.

I chose to read this book after reading two of Boyd's later works and enjoying them because they seemed unpretentious and entertaining while still achieving a depth of field that made them qualify as bona fide literary thrillers.

Unpretentious Armadillo is not. One Amazon reviewer described it as 'the literary equivalent of bad Jazz. Incredibly self indulgent and so cloaked in over wordy description without hint of any story.' Another reviewer wrote, 'Every supporting character felt fake, one-dimensional, a function of the need to construct a filmable narrative.' I couldn't agree more, though I should point out that many more Amazon reviewers thought it was wonderful.

In my opinion the writing is monstrous, the characters totally unsympathetic, the milieu implausible and the whole thing reads like a study in egoism. I struggled to get to the end of it and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

Judi says

I love William Boyd. This book was quirky, I liked it.

Bettie? says

Bettie's Books

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in December 2001.

The world of insurance is not really a very exciting one, but Boyd has managed to make it so in his novel about fraud and pretence. It concentrates on the profession which clearly has the greatest propensity for drama within the field, the insurance adjuster (who checks whether big claims that worry insurance companies are valid - leading here to suicides, death threats and assaults).

The central character is Lorimer Black, who starts the novel by discovering the body of a hanged man, driven to suicide by an insurance company's unwillingness to pay, is perhaps the most honest character in the novel, and he has created an entire new background for himself, disassociating himself from his Romanian origins. The plot is very complicated, but not too much so for enjoyment - the novel has made it to TV in a virtually unsimplified form without being impossible to follow.

Armadillo is a very well written, darkly funny novel, hopefully typical of Boyd, who is now going on my list of authors to read more from.

Lauren says

Just discovered a group of fabulous British authors. This book is so well written with a Vonnegust-esque sense of humor but more action. A great read!

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Thinly Disguised Transnistrian Lad Lit

But for the last 50 pages or so, I would have concluded that this was just a piece of well-executed Lad Lit.

However, the last pages persuaded me that there was something more happening beneath the surface of this novel.

William Boyd shows us nicely judged glimpses of the life of an East European migrant trying to integrate into the English business and social world. The novel never takes itself too seriously and proceeds at an agreeable comic pace.

Serendipity or Zemblanity

I decided to read the novel, when I was reading Nabokov's *"Pale Fire"*. It came up when I found an antonym of the word *"serendipity"*, while searching for the meaning of Zembla. In *"Armadillo"*, William Boyd writes:

"Serendipity, the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident. So what is the opposite of Serendip, a southern land of spice and warmth, lush greenery and hummingbirds, seawashed, sunbasted?"

Think of another world in the far north, barren, icebound, cold, a world of flint and stone. Call it Zembla. Ergo: zemblanity, the opposite of serendipity, the faculty of making unhappy, unlucky and expected discoveries by design. Serendipity and zemblanity: the twin poles of the axis around which we revolve."

So Boyd is responsible for coining the word "zemblanity", named after a fictitious country in "Pale Fire".

"Disturb All Anticipations"

The protagonist, Lorimer Black (an Anglicisation of his original Transnistrian name, Milomre Blocj), is a loss adjuster in the insurance industry. Boyd provides enough detail about how the industry works to convince us that he knows what he's writing about. However, what impresses most is how, by the end of the novel, he has used insurance as a credible metaphor for life:

"Insurance exists to substitute reasonable foresight and confidence in a world dominated by apprehension and blind chance."

"To our Savage Precursors, all life was a lottery. All his endeavours were hazardous in the extreme. His life was literally one big continuous gamble...But times have changed, civilisation has arrived and society has developed, and as society develops and civilisation marches forward this element of chance, of hazard, is steadily eliminated from the human condition..."

"However much we seem to have it under control, to have every eventuality covered, all risks taken into account, life will come up with something that, as the good book says, 'disturbs all anticipations'."

"And this is what we, the loss adjustors embody. This is our vocation, our métier, our calling: we exist for one reason alone - to 'disturb all anticipations'."

"[Loss adjustors were] the people who reminded all the others that nothing in this world is truly certain, we were the rogue element, the unstable factor in the ostensibly stable world of insurance...When we do our adjustments of loss, we frustrate and negate all the bland promises of insurance. We act out in our small way one of the great unbending principles of life: nothing is sure, nothing is certain, nothing is risk-free, nothing is fully covered, nothing is forever."

"I do not mind contradictions, paradoxes, puzzles and ambiguities. What is the point of 'minding' something as inevitable and entrenched in our nature as our digestive system is in our body? Of course we can be rational and sensible but often so much of what defines us is the opposite - irrational and nonsensical."

"Adrift in Uncertainty and Chaos"

This plunge into the irrational and the nonsensical describes the dramatic arc of the novel:

"From a position of steady normality - steady job, steady prospects, steady girlfriend - he now found himself adrift in uncertainty and chaos: no job, no car, no girlfriend, insolvent, fatherless, sleepless, loveless..."

The Removal of the Integument

Just as some people seek insurance cover, we arm ourselves with armour to keep ourselves safe from spears,

arrows and bullets, both real and metaphorical. This is the source of the title of the book (in Spanish, an armadillo is literally a little armed man):

"Every living organism is separated from its environment by a covering, or integument, that delimits its body. It seems to me that the process of adding an extra integument is unique to our species and easily understandable - we all want extra protection for our soft and vulnerable bodies. But is it unique to our species? What other creature exhibits this same sense of precaution and seeks out this kind of protective armour? Molluscs, barnacles, mussels, oysters, tortoises, hedgehogs, armadillos, porcupines, rhinos all grow their own. Only the hermit crab, as far as I can recall, searches for empty shells...to serve as shelter and protection of the body."

Only when Lorimer removes his treasured Greek helmet, abandons his armour, and takes a romantic risk does he become a rogue element (plot-wise) and his life escape its bounds to become a genuine adventure. You could say the same thing about the novel itself. For much of it, it's too controlled and almost formulaic (if never less than competent). Only towards the end does William Boyd rev up the zemblanity and unleash the beast that is within Lorimer, even if he doesn't destabilise our anticipations. In other words, he honours the compact with the reader and more or less gives us a happy ending.
