



Dirty Tricks

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Karen and I on the sofa, Karen and I in the back seat of the BMW, Karen and I at the river, up the alley, down the garden, round the corner, in the pub. Our movements are furtive, frantic and compulsive. Our pleasures are brief and incomplete. Our frustrations are enormous. Because if you look closely at the background of every scene, you'll see Dennis.

Dennis and Karen lead a pleasant life in North Oxford until the day one of their dinner guests seduces Karen in the kitchen, setting in motion a chain of events which will destroy the thin veneer of their respectability and lead to ruthless murder.

Dirty Tricks is a brilliant thriller set in contemporary Oxford: a gripping story of sex, ambition and violence with a wickedly humorous twist.

Dirty Tricks Details

Date : Published June 7th 1999 by Faber Faber (first published January 1st 1991)

ISBN : 9780571165308

Author : Michael Dibdin

Format : Paperback

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Crime, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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From Reader Review Dirty Tricks for online ebook

Roderick Hart says

Though this first person narrative does contain some crime it is essentially a satire on Oxford society at the time it was written (round about 1990) and takes the form of a farce. There are numerous barbed shafts and a great deal of wit. The narrator is not a likeable person, but he is observant and claims he is trying to be honest, though as with any first person narrative we would expect him to be least honest about himself and his motives.

He is given to dispensing judgements on others, which provides an outlet for his unflattering take on society. Of the many I could quote, this is my favourite.

‘Let’s face it, those who can, have fun. The others, too poor in pocket or spirit, have children. Any parent who says he enjoys it is a liar. You might as well say you enjoy being crippled.’
(Vintage edition, page 102)

The book is entertaining and well written. How much of the social observation still holds good today I cannot tell without spending some time in Oxford, which I don’t intend to do.

Tony says

DIRTY TRICKS. (1991). Michael Dibdin. ****.

This is not an Aurelio Zen novel by this author, but a stand alone book that is full of crime and surprises. Dibdin has a sly sense of humor, much of it on the blue side. In this case, we have a mixture of an over-sexed wife who is not being served by her husband, the presence of a great deal of insurance money, and a rogue who is interested in both. Although the killings are not true murders, one can still profit by them. This is a light-hearted romp that is very enjoyable. I would also recommend that you look for a copy of the BBC production of this story. I was able to find a copy through our library system. Don’t miss it. Recommended.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in January 1999.

I'm in two minds about Dirty Tricks. On the one hand, it is excellently written and occasionally very funny. On the other, the character of the narrator and the events he describes are so convincingly unpleasant that I found it difficult to bring myself to read more than a few pages at a time, and am distinctly dubious about whether I would want to read other books by Dibdin.

The scenario is that the book is basically a transcription of an address made to a court in South America opposing an attempt by the British to have the speaker extradited to stand trial for a double murder. The narrator begins by claiming that he is going to tell the truth throughout - but then he would, of course. He admits to a variety of other crimes, but his aim is to persuade the court that he may not have committed the murder, as that is the only crime covered by the extradition treaty.

He started out as a teacher of English in a seedy language school in Oxford, one basically set up to make as much money as possible without regarding the standard of the education passed on to its students. There he is ground down by Clive, his employer and owner of the language school, his aspirations and ideals engendered by being a student in Oxford in the hippie era gradually abandoned in the realities of life in Thatcherite Britain. Then he meets a couple from north Oxford, Dennis and Karen, and is seduced by Karen at a dinner party.

Dennis and Karen have something the narrator does not - money - and he has something they do not - culture - and so their acquaintance ripens, along with his affair with Karen. Then Dennis dies, apparently in a boating accident - or rather, say the police later, a carefully pre-meditated plot by the narrator, who marries Karen after a barely decent interval. It is not until Karen herself dies, with evidence pointing at her new lover, Clive, that the police become interested. (The interrogation carried out by Chief Inspector Moss, a parody of Morse, infuriatingly more interested in the crossword than the crime, is another funny touch.)

The whole account raises an issue, which has been of importance to several influential twentieth century writers - the question, of how trustworthy a first person narrative is. It is abundantly clear from the way that the narrator here expresses himself (and the circumstances in which the story is set) that he would have no qualms in falsifying events if it would make him look better and save himself from a return to England and prison, and the reader certainly has no way to know whether or not he has done so. Gide is the master at casting doubt on a narrative, particularly in *The Counterfeiters*, but his doubts are aimed at overturning the traditional omniscience of a third person narrator rather than at deliberate falsification. The way in which people colour their perception of a scene even in their own mind is of course a major concern in stream-of-consciousness narratives. *Dirty Tricks* is using a technique which is closely allied to that of the epistolary novel, where a variety of correspondents give their own viewpoint on events, or novels like Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or Pears' *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, where the same events are told from different points of view, so different in the first case that it takes the reader some time to realise that they are the same events. These comparisons to other literary experiments in narrative give an idea of the quality of Dibdin's writing; nevertheless, the narrator's character is so repulsive as to be distinctly off-putting.

Anne says

This novel reminded me very much of Nabokov's "Lolita," not because there's any pedophilia in Dibdin's "Dirty Tricks" (there isn't), but because its narrator, like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, is so cruel and humorous, simultaneously witty and sadistic. In other words, this novel, much like "Lolita," starts out pleasantly enough, a social satire, on the lines of the *Way We Live Now*, as told by a man on trial for murder (which may or may not be justifiable homicide), and quickly turns into a nightmare, in which the reader finds him/herself complicit in the very worst crimes imaginable, if only for the reason that we started out sympathizing with this seemingly very likable person, the narrator, who instead has turned out to be the most appalling person imaginable. The shock of recognition -- evil made flesh -- is horrific, when it comes. So I'm not surprised that many people found this book unreadable in the end. I find "Lolita" unreadable, too, now that I know what it's really about.

Mark says

This was my first Dibden novel (I chose a stand-alone, not the first Aurelio Zen, since I didn't want to commit to another series right now), but it certainly won't be my last. *DIRTY TRICKS* comes across like some bizarre combination of Graham Greene and Roald Dahl, with a few splashes of mid-'80's Martin Amis (brutal class satire) and Vladimir Nabokov (delightful verbal play--of course, that's Amis too) thrown in for extra zest. Fans of traditional "pulp fiction" may not like this novel, because it's so well-written (or, the damning descriptor, "literary")--in fact, it's so well-written the prose almost embarrasses the subject matter, and at times made me wonder why Dibdin is writing this kind of stuff and not Booker Prize candidates. (The novel is a fairly archetypical adultery-becomes-murder tale, the kind Cain nailed nearly a century ago, but redeemed by a dazzlingly deranged unreliable narrator.) I think this novel will also be more appreciated by readers who have some understanding of late 20th Century British society--e.g., the failed, snarky Oxford don; the overachieving management consultant who has lots of money but no real taste; the vapid but self-improving upper middle class trophy wife. BUT, all that said, *DIRTY TRICKS* is a roaringly entertaining read: surprising, funny, intelligently mean, and (as the title suggests) both tricky AND so dirty I found myself at times almost uncomfortable reading it. But in a good way.

Katie says

Hilarious and sad and, yes, very, very clever. RIP Margaret Thatcher.

Howard says

Clever stuff, very funny. The book takes the form of a long statement to the court as a polished, well-educated cad explains how through no fault of his own he came to be accused of two murders and assorted mayhem. Set in and around Oxford, there's a lot of close observation of class and climbing, which would be entertaining enough on its own, but the book is both tightly plotted and well-wrought on a sentence level, and the ongoing revelation of the narrator's self-serving nature is as delightful as it is nasty.

First book I've read by Dibden; I will surely read more.

Libby Smith says

So disappointed with this book. I have always enjoyed Dibdin's writing in the Aurelio Zen series and was looking forward to this book, but found it so unreadable that I couldn't finish it. The Zen series have humour and sharply observed characters, and Zen's cynical view of the world and his attempts to navigate the complexity of the Italian beurocracy are a joy. The first person recount of the sordid story didn't work for me, maybe because the character was so unlikeable and shallow. Just a bleak, humourless tale. Disappointing.

Priyanka Mukherjee says

Fantastic little book. This is my very first Dibdin, and I'm floored by both his style and his narrative, as well as his amazing vocabulary. The things that happen over the course of the book are both dirty as well as immensely enjoyable, and I greatly enjoy intelligent protagonists caught up in a world of mediocre, sub-par characters. Witty, sarcastic, brilliantly plotted and just enough twists and turns to keep the flow highly interesting. Certainly not for those on moral high horses. I'm going to take a shot at Dibdin's Aurelio Zen series now.

Margaret1358 Joyce says

Despite the cleverness of the writing, the structure, plot and the use of language, the content was not pleasant, and the humor, though present, was not enough to balance out the unsavory tone. Granted, this was intended as a satire on conventional mores, but that said, the end is no justification of the means. Nevertheless, I did finish reading it, something I wouldn't have done had the bk been without merit. It did have merit: the astute observations of the rampant prevalence of self-serving motives in post-Thatcher UK were formidable, as were the descriptions of class-consciousness. Let's just say I found the book a rather interesting but disturbing read.

Meredith says

An enormously clever book with some very beautifully drawn characters. The protagonist is a first rate cad, adventurer, opportunist, shameless and cynical exploiter of women. He has a contempt for the English upper middle class, their mediocre Readers Digest minds, their snobbish aspirations and the like. However, this doesn't stop him from wanting to have what they have. He is prepared to use his skills in flattery and seduction to gain advantage. Having a lack of genuine feeling is no barrier to him. The kinds of people that he is dealing with himself are themselves often not very genuine. They are also trying to better themselves through association with brands, schools, affiliations that lend status to their positions in society. The results are quite hilarious. He is a difficult character to warm towards, for want of any good qualities in his nature. And being a wheeler and dealer he is smart enough to come out relatively unscathed. Looking back on the trail of adventuring, it seems that the one redeeming thing that makes such actions somehow forgivable is that he is playing others at their own game.

Richard Beasley says

Finished it quickly and it was enjoyable / funny in parts, and certainly diverting. But an odd mix of farce, social commentary and then crime / thriller. The narrator is unpleasant, a sort of wannabe intellectual snob, but also a conniving, sexist egoist. He can't be wrong, despite frequently being so. The sex cents, with an affair being carried out in secret feet from the husband seemed unreal (surely Karen would have told) was funny in way described, but not real. The way he

lied about wanting children to con her into marrying him was shocking and the best bit in the book. The reveal of the earlier vasectomy was brilliant. But the marriage to Karen was unreal in terms of his social climbing, and he appeared to have no plan to get rid of her, just exploit. At this point I went past suspended disbelief to incredulity, but actually starting liking (or at least appreciating) the narrator more.

I felt the social climbing was a bit out of date for when it was written - seemed a bit Kingsley Amis (a writer I've never really got on with) which is a decade or two earlier when I think the social need barriers were stronger

I wouldn't recommend it to people I don't know really well as they might not like it at all, but I would be interested in their opinions.

Tom Steer says

Enjoyably wicked, for a crime story set in Oxford it couldn't be FURTHER from an Inspector Morse novel. Dastardly deeds and plots unravel as the narrator struggles to stay ahead of his own Machiavellian game. Good, dirty fun.

Kim says

I can't seem to put less than one star and since I didn't get past page 37, I shouldn't have to rate it at all. From the first page, I disliked the narrator. And on page 37 there was a sentence so vulgar that I just tossed the book on the floor and said "the hell with this". I am NOT a prude and cuss like a sailor, but the combination just turned me off. At the ripe old age of 55, I finally allowed myself the freedom to just stop reading a book I plain didn't like.

Una Tiers says

This book has some clever attributes and some overly bawdy parts. The story line is different and clever.
