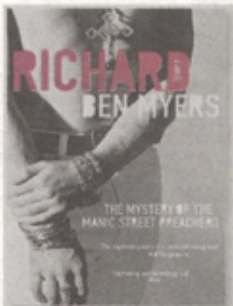


Depressing tale of a real gone kid



Richard
by Ben Myers

Picador, £12.99 ♦ £11.69; 412pp

Mark Hodkinson

The legend of Richey Edwards, pictured, was cleaved into modern culture when he cut "4 Real" into his own flesh and then, in February 1995, went missing, never to be seen again.

Dressed in spray-on jeans and wielding a guitar in Manic Street Preachers, Edwards' story is — regardless of the contemporary framing — a study in alienation. Ben Myers relates the self-harming, the anorexia, the depression and the solipsism largely in the first person, effectively "becoming" Edwards. The technique has drawn acclaim for writers such as Gordon Burn and David Peace, even if, at times, it feels over-stylised and a prescribed exercise in creativewriting.

In fictionalising a real person, alive or dead, a writer immediately spikes interest but, thereafter, is fastened parasitically to his subject. And here lies the problem. Edwards, in this portrayal at least, comes across mostly as a humourless bellyacher and spending 15 minutes with him, let alone 412 pages, would feel an ordeal. "Life is short and pointless and everything I have ever said or done is worthless," is one of his joyless offerings and "Despair has always been our muse", another. Even as his band is paid to travel the world and fêted for its music, Edwards' response is almost comically bleak: "Everywhere is a shit-hole."

Only the interplay that Edwards has with his family and dog, Snoopy, has an endearing soft focus. There is flickering warmth and kindness too between the members of Manic Street Preachers and their crew but they are more usually a sneering, sarcastic bunch, flattering themselves that the world



is against them, when it really doesn't care. Their showbiz-as-nihilism stance is more dead weight on the pages.

Myers is finest when relating the mechanics of life in and around a rock band; never once is there a dropped beat. He understands the reactionary nature of the post-punk diktat, the people it attracts and its importance to lives given up to it. He has researched his subject assiduously and speculates on Edwards' movements after leaving a London hotel at 7am on the day he was supposed to travel to the United States on a promotional tour. While Edwards is mooching around service stations, hopping on buses or into taxis, bedding down in the undergrowth or conversing with a backpacker he mistakes for God, there is a constant overwrought self-dialogue. He loves himself; he hates himself. He is king of the world; he is a speck of dust. He is beautiful; he is ugly. Myers is a fine, respected prose writer but the attempted reach is too expansive and laboured — sun, sea, sky and soul but stuck in the mud of verbiage. A sharper edit would have been a kindness to the reader, and a young author of talent.

No one, of course, knows what happened to Edwards, although he was declared "presumed dead" in November, 2008. Most believe he drowned in the River Severn after his car was found near by. The ending here is ambiguous and closes with "Richey" staring down from a Welsh hillside, still pondering. After having endured his every "love me-hate me" thought, this feels an anticlimax. We want more for our forbearance with this messed-up, loquacious man-boy who was clearly very, very ill.

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