

The Critic

James Robertson

It had to happen. Somebody had to say, eventually, 'But they're not very good, are they?'

'In what way?' he said, reminding himself that everybody was entitled to an opinion.

'They're all the same. I thought each one would be different.'

'They are different.'

'But so many of the words crop up again and again.'

'I think that's inevitable with words, don't you? '

'You make the inevitable sound like something one should feel relaxed about.'

'Well, there doesn't seem much point in getting stressed about it. It depends on your expectations.'

'That's the problem,' the critic admitted. 'It's my own fault. I'm always looking for the best and so I'm always disappointed.'

She fell into contemplation, then resumed. 'I used to know a painter, very successful in a commercial sense, and a man who could actually paint, which very few painters can. He painted fishing villages. That was what he was known for - little old houses and brightly coloured boats, lobster creels and fish boxes, and nets hung up to dry. Some of the villages he painted were in Fife, some were in Cornwall, and others were in France or Spain, but the thing was, after a while they all looked the same. He had to start putting in clues, like signs written in Spanish, or a Cornish flag. But they still sold. In fact he couldn't paint them fast enough. I visited him once in his studio. He had six canvases set up in a row, and he was going from one to the next putting in red bits, then back in the other direction putting in blue bits. He seemed quite optimistic but it made me despair. Do you feel optimistic?'

Up until this point he hadn't wanted to engage in the conversation, he'd wanted the critic to take her opinion somewhere else, far away. But this question got under his skin.

'No, not really,' he said. 'Most of the time I don't. There isn't a lot to be optimistic about.'

Her mood suddenly brightened. 'I agree. That painter couldn't see that. I shall have to read these again. Perhaps there is more to them than I'm seeing.'

'Perhaps there is,' he said.