

Trapped in a bizarre world



In a novel whose plot is prompted by a betting problem, it seems apt that Norwich-based Canadian Barrie Sherwood should have gambled heavily – not only by taking on

Japanese youth culture but also by making his characters Japanese, too. Yet any concerns about authenticity are soon buried by the sheer pace, humour and vivacity of *Escape From Amsterdam*.

The 'escape' element is genuinely odd. Dryly comic, utterly laconic university student Aozora has to find and set free his sister since she literally holds the key to the inheritance he needs to pay off his gambling debts. However, she is trapped (or has she been brainwashed into blankly 'working'?) in a spectacularly clichéd theme park based on Holland – which is actually being run by yakuza-style bosses. As she is the star turn at the theme park's daily show, said bosses are naturally none too impressed by Aozora's increasingly bizarre attempts to free his sister (including dressing up as a Native American and paddling her

FICTION OF THE WEEK *Escape From Amsterdam*

by Barrie Sherwood
(Granta, £9.99)

★★★★☆

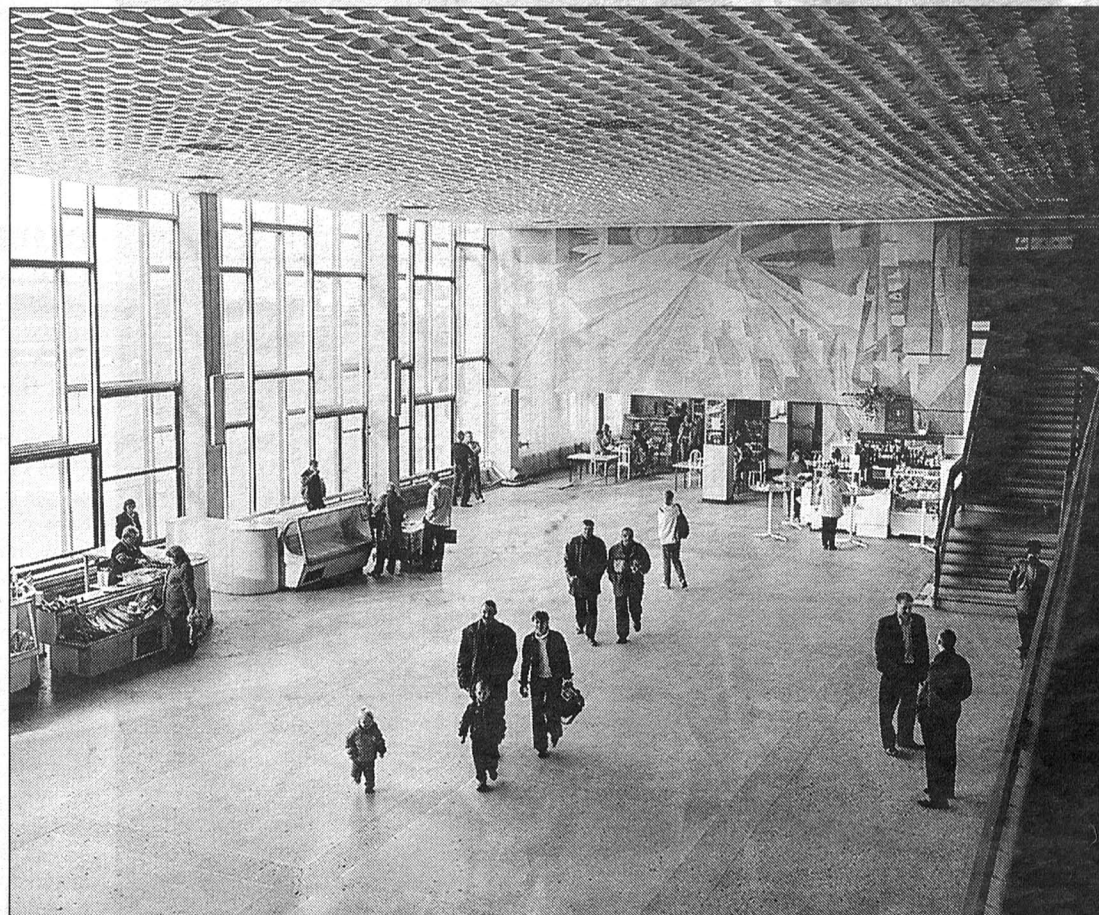
down a canal); their underlings even less so when he tries having sex with their women.

That sex scene is depicted via a hilarious illustration – a nice touch – and there are photographs dotted throughout *Escape From Amsterdam* which lend an air of realism and faded grandeur, and also make subtle nods to blog culture.

It does have that first-person, diary feel which perhaps deliberately confuses; Aozora isn't actually a traditionally loveable hero – there's one particularly nasty set-piece with a broken lightbulb – but somehow you end up rooting for him. Sherwood is just as happy to reference the bizarre world of a Murakami novel as he is the ridiculously OTT gun-fests of *Pulp Fiction*. Crucially, though, he shapes these modern ciphers into a strange – and engagingly literary – coming-of-age novel, too.

A great escape.

Ben East



Rising British photography star Simon Roberts distilled his year's travels around Russia between 2004 and 2005 into *Motherland* (Chris Boot, £25) – an extensive photo-essay which captures something essential about this vast, complex nation. Rather than focus on Russia's deterioration since the

collapse of the Soviet Union, Roberts's images have a brutal seductiveness and are surprisingly optimistic, showing a proud people who share an innate sense of the history of their homeland and an ability to appreciate beauty in the most unexpected places (airport departure gate, Magadan, pictured).

THE BIG PICTURE

VERY INTERESTING
JOB, WLTm a well balanced
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