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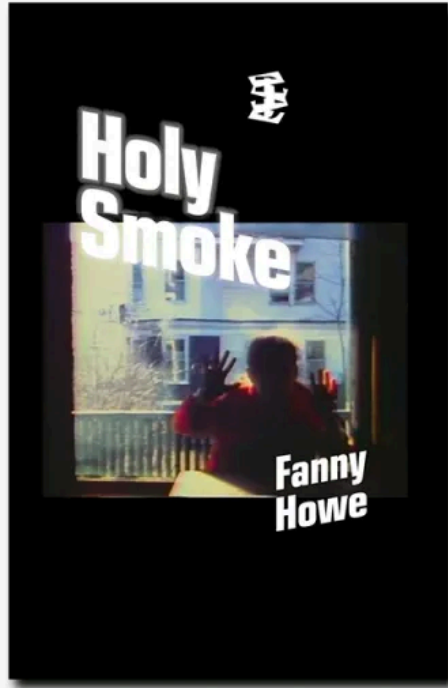
In Brief | *In Brief Review*

### Circling the drain

A hallucinatory vision of the US in fiction

By **Walker Rutter-Bowman**





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**IN THIS REVIEW**

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**Holy Smoke**

116pp. Divided. Paperback, £11.99.

Fanny Howe

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**F**anny Howe died last year and, though she was primarily known as a poet, the posthumous appraisal of her career also brought rightful attention to her prose. Her second novel, *Holy Smoke* (1979), is a worthy example of this. It is as lyrically fresh and kinetic as the fiction of Denis Johnson, and boasts a similar fluency in terms of both the slapstick and the sublime.

The narrator, sometimes called Anon, is a hard-drinking single mother who lives in New York and is blessed (cursed?) by visions of the Virgin Mary. Her daughter is Pepita, also called Pepsi. Anon's ex, Pepsi's father, is J - aka Jimmy, James, Jimbo, JB and Juan. A fugitive, an informer and an ex-revolutionary, J keeps turning up dead, but cannot seem to stay that way. When a possible government agent arrives and asks for J's personal effects, the narrator refuses. Then Pepsi disappears, triggering a search across state lines and national borders. The government is involved, maybe the Cubans, plus revolutionaries of unspecified radical politics.

*Holy Smoke* channels an American legacy of political violence, with references to the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Lee Harvey Oswald arrives in a dream and beats up the narrator.

A residue of paranoia, comic and sinister, clings to the narrative. Anon brings to mind Oedipa Maas, the heroine of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* - a similarly hallucinatory vision of the US.

Like Pynchon's procedurals, *Holy Smoke* is not meant to be read for plot coherence, but for its intrepid and energetic language. The book is visually adventurous, too, its compressed narrative making room for other forms: prose poems, images, illustrations, charts. The writing can be clipped and glinting, discursive and very funny. After the narrator bites a man's thumb, she observes his method of first aid: "[He] stuck it in his mouth and sucked on it, first for the pain of my bite, then, let's face it, for pleasure". Sometimes Anon can be found in aphoristic mode: "The couple that reads together may stay together. But the couple that drinks together has a bond that surpasseth human understanding".

*Holy Smoke* is a spiral, winding and widening out only to curl back; it ends where it began. (Several times it specifically invokes Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty", a monumental work of land art.) The narrator finds her Pepsi: "Hello, baby bitch" is how she greets her lost daughter. Despite the success of her mission, she ends on a note of wistful defeat: "Daily we anonymous many lose more and more, including our children, our jobs, our lovers, our health and trust ... Spiralling inwards, I know the end is near, a void more natural than nature itself". A narrator, and a nation, circles the drain. Without resorting to cynicism, *Holy Smoke* captures a deep-seated, patriotic sadness that feels no less pertinent today than five decades ago.

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