Observer Review: The Man Who Walks By Alan Warner Essay, Research Paper

Down the panThe Man Who WalksAlan WarnerJonathan Cape ?10.99, pp279In a four-novel career, Alan Warner has created two highly successful and distinct voices: more than many talented novelists manage in a lifetime. It is a testament to his energy and range that he has ditched each of these – the glassy deadpan of Morvern Callar and the hooched-up babble of The Sopranos – to start again.The Man Who Walks inhabits the same constituency as its predecessors: the West Highlands, orbiting the coastal town of Oban (The Port). The dialogue is instantly recognisable, as are many of the recurring topics: poverty, getting mortal on booze and drugs, pishing, shiteing, boaking, extreme sexual behaviours, bodily harm. But the voice is new: ‘The Nephew was lain silent up atop the paper sacks of pony nuts near the roof of the agric supply warehouse, dreaming about ghost bags, when his mobile diddled “Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the Waves”.’In this way, the Nephew (aka the Macushla) learns that his insane uncle (aka The Man Who Walks) has disappeared again, with £27,000 stolen from a pub in The Port; a trail of barbecued budgerigars and bewildered landlords behind him; a series of soon-to-be-desecrated Bonnie Scotland Heritage sites ahead, like stations of the cross en route to his probable destination, Culloden Field. Where, at the end of the book, our hero seems to find himself, now badly maimed, on a film set: ‘Tears came into the Macushla’s two remaining eyes, beyond mere tears of pain. He clawed himself onwards, through the dummy corpses and towards the ruddy murk of another sunset.’Sandwiched between these two tremendous passages – tough and gaudy, lyrical and funny, transformingly intelligent – is nothing, except promise and talent betrayed and the burnt-out ruins of a few ironic ideas. As an experience, The Man Who Walks is comparable to an afternoon locked in a Portaloo with a wino. It makes Warner’s only misfire to date – the surreal These Demented Lands – look involving and fully realised.This is trash without the conviction or passion of good trash. Warner writes like Irvine Welsh on one of his numerous off-days. Everything Warner has successfully excluded from his better books comes home to roost. Far worse things are published, but from a writer like Warner The Man Who Walks is a shock.