

Future shock

Neville Shack

TREVOR HOYLE

Vail

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At a time when depictions of life after the nuclear holocaust inflate in our imaginations, it is easy to discount the terrifying potential that lies around, whether or not we include the Bomb's climactic moment. *Vail* takes it for granted that the social and physical terrain of England in the not-too-distant future resembles a slag-heap. Of course, everything is oddball, turning suffocatingly unwholesome. Pollution flourishes everywhere, an endless putrescence of consumerism; showbiz, media garbage and warfare dominate the streets of London. The topography has been hit by future-shock. Harrods has an average of ten bomb alerts and three actual blasts a week. The popular reflexes of blitz patriotism and cheque-book journalists' voyeurism jump off the page. The extremism of all this serves a comedy which is even blacker than the diesel and grime with which the eponymous hero covers his head for his appearance on television, fronting a programme called *Bootstraps*.

Vail has ended up in the capital after his wife and daughter have both met bad ends during a motorway journey. Soon after his arrival he becomes a pawn for nefarious interests, and is sucked into a whirlpool of grotesques, nymphomaniacs and pseuds. Huge vices outface commonplace careerism. Vail indulges both his paranoia and the illusion of serendipity. These give rise to the funniest scenes.

Episode follows episode, interspersed with some reassuring, tongue-in-cheek pre-existentialism. Vail still professes, *more than half-way* through the book, a touching faith in the ordered mechanism of the universe and in the opposing poles of the electromagnetosphere. Entropy finally catches up with him. The scenario collapses into total anarchy, and its earlier thrills are overwhelmed by a mayhem of espionage and mad opportunism.