

BONIFACE

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.21

Boniface Mather, a friend of mine, was born in Paris in 1981 to French parents but grew up in Brighton in a house filled with books. 'They belonged to my husband,' Mme Mather told me when I visited her. 'I was never interested in them myself but Boniface picked one up when he was four and from there...' She shrugged in a very Gallic way when she said this; I liked her for it.

I met Boniface for the first time three years ago when he introduced himself in the student bar of the university where I was teaching. 'To be honest, I've only read one of your books,' he told me that first night, 'and I really didn't like it. You wear your research on your sleeve. But you're a published writer and I respect that. I'm interested in what you think of my work.'

During those first few weeks he irritated and entertained me simultaneously. In class, when he spoke of the other students' fiction, he could be incredibly scathing, even cruel, but I found myself agreeing with every word he said. By the time he submitted his first story, his classmates were ready to tear him apart but when they read it, they changed their minds. It was called *Homework* and concerned a conversation between a schoolteacher (male) and the father of a troublesome boy. The father was a gruff middle-aged no-nonsense type and it was clear by the end of the story that his sexual identity had been challenged by this teacher – they had fallen in love in five minutes effectively – and it left me wanting to read more.

'There is no more,' Boniface said when I remarked on this in class. 'What happens afterwards is their business, not ours.'

Despite themselves, none of the students had anything but praise for the story and the ones that followed. Towards the end of the year he said he was working on a novel and he sent it to me, in draft form, almost a year later for my opinion. 'It needs work,' I told him, which was true; 'I'm not sure you fully understand your characters,' I added, which wasn't.

He sent the novel to an editor at a London publishing house and they hesitated for quite some time before rejecting it. Their reasons for saying no were sound and they meant it when they said they'd like him to get in touch as soon as he finished his next manuscript, but he never started it.

When I heard of his death by self-asphyxiation earlier this year, I was devastated. He was a real writer, someone who understood the connections between language and emotion, who was concerned for neither readers nor reviewers but for truth and the poetry of a well-turned sentence. His stupidity in being unable to accept rejection makes me angrier than I can say.