

Vincent Delecroix's *Small Boat*: Sympathy for migrants spiked by misanthropy

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Vincent Delecroix's International Booker Prize shortlisted *Small Boat* (English translation by Helen Stevenson, published by HopeRoad, 2025) is based on the November 24, 2021 drowning of 27 migrants in the Channel—the worst single loss of life recorded in that stretch of water. Among their number, mainly Iraqi Kurds, were a pregnant woman and three children.

A major factor in their deaths was buck-passing between the British and French authorities, both trying to wash their hands of responsibility for the rescue. More than a dozen calls were made by one of the migrants to the French regional monitoring and rescue centre in Calais over the course of two hours of the early morning. In France, a scandal erupted over released recordings of these conversations.

Depicting the tragedy opens a window onto the crimes committed against migrants all over the world. Delecroix produces many evocative passages addressing this. His description of “the sea with its guts glutted with women and children” is a rightly sickening evocation of these horrific events.

Over 330 people have died in the Channel alone since 2014; more than 31,000 have died or gone missing presumed dead in the Mediterranean, over 4,000 in the Atlantic, over 1,000 in the Gulf of Aden and close to 1,000 attempting to reach the United States from the Caribbean, or the Caribbean from Venezuela.

The book returns to the same imagery a few paragraphs later:

Every night we feed that gaping maw, and stuff into it little pieces we've scraped off the edges of the coast, spoonfuls of twenty, thirty poor people—men, women and children—and the monstrous maw gulps it all down, foaming at its mouth.

Migrants are described in dehumanizing terms because they are dehumanized in reality. The passage is particularly affecting considering the ongoing genocide in the coastal enclave of Gaza, in which millions of people are to all intents and purposes being driven into the sea.

The middle chapter (of three), from the perspective of the migrants in the Channel, narrates the hours of agony and fear, leavened by dashed hopes, that accompany each recorded death. Delecroix's restrained third-person description, and the brevity of the chapter, adds an extra level of horror, denying the reader much

of an emotional connection. We are forced towards the indifference of those responsible for these deaths.

But whose indifference is being invoked? This is the main subject of the book, and its central flaw.

Chapters one and three are told from the perspective of the French Navy official who handled the interactions with the migrant boat, who ultimately told a British ship to respond when a French vessel under her direction was far closer.

She is a brutalised person, scolding people at risk of drowning “I didn't ask you to leave”, finding their calls for help “annoying”, accusing them of “simply... want[ing] their own car” and wishing they would give “a second thought before they put their lousy nutshells in the sea”. But she is still haunted by what has happened, still hearing voices screaming for help, seeing the dead.

It is sometimes difficult to tell how much irony is implied—how much distance she tries to take from the system she helps to operate—when she describes people “who think we owe them something because they're dying of hunger in their own countries,” or their “refusing to understand the difference between being in French waters and being in British waters”.

We are led to see that whether the cruelty of her actions comes from her or from her shaping by the institution she works for, it is the inhumanity required of the people implementing French (British, European...) border policies.

Finding herself scapegoated—the bulk of the book is a conversation with a police officer, and with herself—she defends her actions as “the last link in the chain” of events which saw the migrants “sunk long before they sank... washed up well before they drowned.”

Who, she asks, “is banishing them... sweeping them towards the sea where they vanish like dust shaken from the coat tails of humanity”? Another thing “we might talk about, the means available, or rather the lack of means available, for carrying out” rescue missions. Why “not migration policy, not the trafficking mafia, not the war in Syria, not the famine in Sudan,” why me?

Of course, she is lying as far as she suggests she has no responsibility. But she also speaks a truth, in that the 27 dead were only in a position to be the victims of her actions because of circumstances which indict the French government and the whole imperialist world system. None of the official outcry over the drownings is interested in these factors. It is not really interested in her actions either, as she comes to realise at successive, pivotal points in the book.

What troubles her accusers is “Not my actions but my words,” although she “couldn’t see what it would have added if I had spoken elegantly,” which “most certainly would not have saved them”. But “What mattered was not that they were saved; it was that I should be saved, and the whole world with me, through these words,” the words “people would have liked me to say: You’re not going to die, I’ll save you.”

As an indictment of the rank cynicism of bourgeois public opinion—the politicians and the corporate media who bemoan the “tragic” consequences of their own policies—this is razor sharp. For them, her crime is not in carrying out their programme, but in not keeping up the humanitarian fiction.

Even this has fallen a step behind the times. US President Donald Trump, together with all the European leaders, is junking the handwringing and protestations of concern for human rights which formerly accompanied attacks on migrants. Nevertheless, there are enough “liberal” opponents of Trump and his ilk still at large to warrant the critique.

The real problem is that, in *Small Boat*, it is not just these targets in the firing line: it is “the voice of the whole of humanity reassured to hear itself saying... I will save you... not actually saving, no one cares about that, not acting, not even helping.”

These are the protagonist’s self-excusing thoughts, but Delecroix takes no distance from them, and instead has her stand for the views of all of society: “I am not here alone on the shore; I’m not alone watching the ‘drama at sea’ from a safe distance... You are all there.” He makes clear in explaining the book his belief that we are all “spectator[s] of the wreckage”.

This is too generous by far towards those in power and deeply unfair towards those they rule over.

The threat posed by Europe’s politicians, media and corporations is not their supposed inaction, but their active maintenance of the system of global inequality, climate crisis and war responsible for mass migration and the erection of the repressive system of border controls surrounding “Fortress Europe” this necessitates. It is grotesque to place joint responsibility for this system on Europe’s working-class population who are also its victims.

Delecroix’s protagonist sees a European society suffering from a “universal” failure to accord other peoples’ lives their “*due weight*,” which is simply the weight of reality”; which even believes that “one person has to drown for another to breathe properly... any place we occupy is stolen from someone we have thrown into the sea.”

Shock and moral outrage are substituted for an exploration of social reality. It is not the case that for some to keep their heads above water, others must drown; they drown in order that a few can live on Olympian heights, while the great mass of society is forced to spend their lives struggling to stay afloat.

A society like this creates the potential for individualism and divisions among workers, competing for resources and opportunities made scarce by their monopolization by the rich—all fuelled by a steady flow of official nationalism and xenophobia. But it also provides a more fundamental impulse towards workers’ collective struggle, including solidarity with migrants and refugees, against their common exploiters and oppressors—an

impulse which already animates millions around the world and is expressed in the outraged response to imperialist crimes such as the Gaza genocide and sustained protests against the mistreatment and scapegoating of migrants that finds no place in Delecroix’s skewed narrative.

The development of such a unified struggle is a political, historical process—the unfolding of which expands the possibilities for “jump[ing] into the water to help.” It is not a choice available to each person at any given moment, which is their individual moral failing not to make.

Small Boat’s highly introspective narrative could be used to place this dynamic and contradictory reality under the microscope of an individual’s experience. But its function here is to exclude altogether, to make room for the morality tale the author wished to tell. The result of which is anything but the novel which “unapologetically confronts the greatest moral question of our time,” as the Booker judges describe it.

By dissolving a complex social problem into a sea of uniform guilt, a book written to put people on the hook releases those who ought to be up there. Or rather, by placing us all on that level, it hides the culprits in the crowd. Delecroix even writes at one point that “one could only conclude that all of us are monsters, that is to say, none of us is.”

The best *Small Boat* can offer is the small change of individual good deeds, the idea that “the human race survives” through “everyone saving each other all the time.” But Delecroix is clearly sceptical: “What a nice thought! After all, it might even be true.” And anyway, “Even if you saved all of them, there would always be one left... And the one that you save will perish tomorrow.”

The novel ends up voicing the apologia made increasingly often for so discredited a social system as capitalism: not that life can be made better, but that it can’t because “we” selfish humans can’t. Delecroix simply replaces the happy myth of bourgeois public opinion he skewers—“You will be saved”—with the misanthropy of bourgeois intellectuals—the closing words of the book, “you will not be saved”—to the same hand-washing effect.



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