Ring Road: Theres No Place Like Home by Ian Sansom

Reminiscent of Garrison Keillers Lake Wobegon Days, Ian Sansoms Ring Road is a warm, humane, and sharply observed tale of small town life. Big Davey Jones is coming home. Hes been gone almost 20 years now, but nobodys forgotten him. Daveys a local hero, his miracle birth as the seventh son of a seventh son brought fame to this little town and theyve been grateful ever since. But Daveys home town has changed much in the intervening years. The traditional family business like Billy Finlays Auto-Supplies and Caltons Bakery and Tea Rooms have been replaced with Exciting New Housing Developments! and even a nightclub called Paradise Lost. The locals havent changed much though. Bob Savory who always had it in him, has made a million with his company Sandwich Classics, and hes branching out now, with an Irish themed restaurant on the ring road. Francie McGinn, the divorced minister at The Peoples Fellowship, is still trying to convert the town through his Fish-and-Chip Biblical Quiz Nights and his Good Friday Carvery & Gospel Night. And Sammy, the towns best plumber, is depressed as ever and looking for solace at the bottom of the whisky bottle.

My Personal Review:
I read an earlier edition of this great book under the title THE IMPARTIAL RECORDER. Here is the review I wrote of it:

How does a mere "customer review" deal with a novel by a professional reviewer? Like avoiding a fight with a professional boxer -- by saying only nice things. Fortunately, I have only nice things to say about THE IMPARTIAL RECORDER. The author, in his Preface, offers the book "for you to enjoy" and I urge everyone to take him up on the offer.

This is a novel with an Index. This is a comic novel with an Index and footnotes. This is a comic, poignant novel with an Index, footnotes, a wry Preface, droll Acknowledgments, even an amusing dust jacket photo of the author seemingly trying hard not to look like he is a funny fellow. This is an
awful lot of fun for what is essentially a lament—a lament for the continuous passing of The-Way-Things-Are.

The title itself is clever: the original British title RING ROAD might not mean much to American readers, so we get "THE IMPARTIAL RECORDER" which happens to be the name of the local newspaper in the small town that is the story's setting, but which really refers to the story's good-natured and nonjudgmental narrator, who chronicles in detail the everyday thoughts and actions of the town's ordinary citizens, as they simultaneously cause and cope with the changes that sweep (or creep) through their small town life. We read equally of their strengths and their faults, their failures and their achievements, even as we read equally of the fairness or foulness of the weather. Meanwhile, the plot develops, barely glimpsed behind the streams of detail. Or, according to the Index, "Plot: thickens, the, 129."

Because Mr. Sansom is, to me, an unfamiliar author, I keep finding similarities with those who are familiar. The amiable narrator, for example, reminds me of Van Reid and his Moosepath series; others mention a resemblance to Garrison Keillor. The focus on mundane mental minutiae, while not as extreme or obsessive, is somewhat like Nicholson Baker's in THE MEZZANINE, or John Lanchester's MR. PHILLIPS. The sort of backhanded plot development recalls the first half of Lanchester's THE DEBT TO PLEASURE. The author's knack of fitting opposing emotions into a single thought rivals that of Sherman Alexie, though Alexie's combination of grieving with bawdy hilarity (TEN LITTLE INDIANS) is more extreme than Sansom's combination of grieving with gentle drollery (as a recent widower spends his days doing all the things he never did with his wife—watching soaps, window shopping at the mall). The author's ability to look out from within his various character's minds is reminiscent of Ursula K. Le Guin's SEA ROAD, also set in a small town. THE IMPARTIAL RECORDER's small town is presumably in Ireland, but could easily be Mayberry RFD or Pickax City USA. Some of those mundane, everyday thoughts are somehow very like my own, and the whole story is somehow very like this story I'm living right now in my own small town, and maybe like yours too, in your town. And maybe—even if it seems that "Here we are lived by our lives rather than the other way around," maybe, like the impartial recorder, we just can't see the theme for the details (the Index lists "themes: disowning of, xi" but also "themes: residual evidence of, 1ff").

Read it for the laugh-out-loud details, though, and let the theme take care of itself. I'll be looking for an opportunity to read the author's TRUTH ABOUT BABIES.

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