

News from nowhere

Colm Tóibín's latest collection of short stories appears to pre-emptively signal a return to the familiar coordinates of Irish life that have long structured his fiction. In a sense, that expectation is not *per se* mistaken. The familiar elements are all present, albeit only in the form of the familiar. A muted, nihilistic undertone of death and malaise looms large. The stories are inscribed within a logic of *differance* and cast in grief-tinged hues.

Comprising nine stories over 253 pages, a panorama of voices coalesce, pulling the reader onward with a forward-leaning anticipation. Tóibín disperses his characters across a network of locations, from provincial towns to international cities, thereby dislocating any stable sense of 'home'. The collection maps vignettes of lives situated in Catalonia, Dublin, Wexford, the United States of America and Argentina. Geography thus becomes an active grammar of displacement and belonging.

In the opening story, "The Journey to Galway", set in the backdrop of World War I, the narrative is pared down to a suspended instant: a mother travelling to Galway to deliver the news of the death of her son, Robert, to his wife, Margaret. The news is enveloped in that fragile air, an interstitial, pre-articulatory interval where the event has occurred but has not yet entered language.

In this poignant passage, Tóibín lulls death at

THE NEWS FROM DUBLIN

By Colm Tóibín,
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the threshold of occurrence, holding it in a precarious state of becoming. "In Margaret's mind, she thought, Robert was still alive. Maybe that meant something; it gave Robert some strange extra time... Until she appeared in the doorway of that house, there would not be death. But once she appeared, death would live in that house." The language oozes with a sense of dread and inevitability, undercut by a lilting lyricality.

Right from the outset, the stories are imbued with a matrix of historical consciousness and cultural memory, thereby positioning them in an ostensibly coherent relation with Ireland's past which, in turn, belies an incorrigible plurality of deterritorialised individuals negotiating (often in mutually antagonistic and deeply divisive ways) oppressive historical metanarratives.

Tóibín's narrative method eschews what the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, would term "emplotment" (*mise en intrigue*), remaining entrenched in a narrative present that continually withholds the comfort of closure. Tacit traces of desolation and affliction prevail ominously across all the stories. Each sentence bears a disproportionate weight, stripped of all rhetorical flourish.

The collection reaches its apogee in the title story, "The



News from Dublin". The plot follows Maurice, a Christian Brothers teacher, who travels to Dublin to petition a health minister for access to a new tuberculosis drug for his ailing younger brother. As much as the story concerns the political deadlock and the new consumerist ethos in Ireland, a hitherto overlooked aspect of the story is love under duress, tracing how far an individual will go, against the grain of institutional inertia and secular disenchantment, to secure a chance at saving a loved one's life. Tóibín writes of Maurice "... feeling with each step he took that he was leaving a ghost trailing behind him, hovering in the darkening air, a solitary figure asking him if there was any news, if there was any hope."

The book cover of *The News from Dublin* has a materiality that squarely reifies its preoccupation with deferred hope. It is foreground-

ed through elements of its design, most notably Stuart Wilson's cover design in melancholic shades of blue, which itself functions as a chromatic ekphrasis of the story's affective world. Also, numerous *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) are strewn across the narrative fabric. In departing from convoluted language, Tóibín manages to make the intangible tangible.

The final (and the longest) story in the collection, "The Catalan Girls", is an apt denouement, apropos to the collection's thematic trajectories. The story centering on three sisters and their mother deploys a shifting focalisation that instantiates Tóibín's subtly *avant-garde* narrative praxis through its expansive form; at over 100 pages, "The Catalan Girls" assumes the amplitude of a novella. Time, here, is recursive, with the inheritance of the Catalan house reintroducing the past as an anachronistic presence,

dismantling any stable notion of forward movement.

The imagined return to the homeland is destabilised by the unease distilled in their fear that they will be "... still outsiders. Even if we're not". The chronotope of return it promises is thus founded and emptied of restorative meaning, underpinning instead a reiteration of loss rather than recovery.

The collection as a whole is rife with decontextualised (dis)figurations of disquiet and dissonance, underpinned by an undertow of love and loss, reflecting a generation shaped by memories and postmemories of historical conflict in a country still writing itself.

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