

## **Not all knives and axes**

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Roseanne McNulty, forgotten centenarian, long-time resident of the Roscommon regional mental hospital, is facing an imminent upheaval. The decrepit Victorian institution is soon to be demolished, leaving its residents displaced in a starkly changed modern Ireland that has all but buried its violent origins. Attempting to organise her memories, some reliable, others shifting, she embarks on the writing of a chronicle.

Her account forms the main part of Sebastian Barry's compelling new novel, in which Roseanne's testimony interweaves with that of her psychiatrist, Dr Grene. A man who feels fatherly, "even motherly", towards his patients, he is plagued by memories of an uneasy marriage. He and his late wife were "like two peoples that have once committed grave crimes against each other, but in another generation".

Barry writes about loss, broken promises, failed hopes. This novel of crippled perspectives and ducked responsibilities comments on his 1998 book *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, a story about "scraps of people, blown off the road of life by history's hungry breezes". In addition, *The Secret Scripture* offers itself as a kind of thematic cousin to his Booker-nominated masterpiece *A Long Long Way* and his award-winning stage play *The Steward of Christendom*.

Barry, in effect, is making one operatically extended fiction comprising discrete but interrelated novels and plays, often inspired by his real-life ancestors. It is an astoundingly ambitious body of work, which establishes that family trees, like national histories, sprout "the strange fruits in the cornucopia of grief".

He writes with a dramatist's timing and a poet's exactitude. (One character, a priest, is "cleaner than the daylight moon"; panic is "blacker than old tea".) The result is a richly allusive and haunting text that is nevertheless jagged enough to avoid the anaesthetic of high lyricism. This is a novel in which swans enduring a rainstorm are "like unsuccessful suicides" and the accents of Sligo corner-boys are "like bottles being smashed in a back lane". The setting is the western Ireland of traditional literary depiction - subtle Yeatsian references abound in the novel - but Barry's destabilising of inherited images gives the book a punkish energy as well as fiery beauty.

Roseanne's voice is urgent, colloquial, strange, a song of insinuations, non-sequiturs and self-corrections. It sifts the troubled memories it purports to be organising while always keeping faith with the impossibility of the task. Shards of stories intrude; fragments of lost narratives jostle. Half-forgotten quotations and scraps of ancient folklore blow around her mind like old leaves. Is she chronicler or creator? How much is reliable? "No one has the monopoly on truth," she points out. "Not even myself, and that is a vexing and worrying thought."

Her turn of phrase is bleakly funny and there are warm, vivid reminiscences, for a girlhood in rural Ireland "is not all knives and axes", but as recollection coheres into a devastating story the nature of her sufferings becomes clearer. Dr Grene is both detector and hider of truths, and he finds himself in paradoxical reversal with his baffling patient, speaking to her of his own losses and hurts. But the book is arranged and imagined with immense tact, so that it is never unbalanced by its ironies. Roseanne and Dr Grene, though hardly ever described, are incarnated with such commitment and narrative astuteness that you feel you are standing in the rain of their lives. You are reading them, not reading about them.

As often in Barry's work, Irish history is a malignant omnipresence, its antediluvian hatreds and innumerable betrayals forming not so much a backdrop as a toxic sludge through which the characters must wade, as best they can. The terrors of civil war have led to incurable enmities, the "sad, cold, wretched deaths of boys on mountainsides". Innocence is murdered and idealism compromised by the dirty truths of sectarianism. The newborn state professes fealty to republican slogans but its bitterest irony is that liberty, equality and fraternity have

proven so viciously incompatible. Trust is unaffordable. Love is a risk. The neighbour is the assassin, the former comrade the enemy.

In this territory of "murders so beyond gentleness and love that to be even in propinquity to them was ruinous", identity itself is contested. Roseanne, as a working-class Presbyterian and a woman, is presented both as traumatised outsider and intimate commentator, a spectator of warring men whose allegiances and concomitant hatreds will have woeful consequences for her own family. Perhaps the act of telling her story is in some sense redemptive, but behind the mistrust of patriotism are more elemental questionings. This is a novel of masculinities; the damage done by men, to women, but also to themselves.

Students of militant Irish nationalism may be tempted to read Roseanne as a sort of personification. Certainly, the image of Ireland as a forlorn old woman has for so long been central to republican iconography that the novel can be filtered through the lens of those meanings even as it cleverly subverts them.

But Barry is doing something darker and more daring than image-breaking. He makes enthrallingly beautiful prose out of the wreckage of these lives by allowing them to have the complication of actual history in all its messy elusiveness. "History, as far as I can see, is not the arrangement of what happens," he writes, "but a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses held up as a banner against the assault of withering truth." His achievement in this magnificent and heart-rending novel is a kind of restitution.

*This story was found at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/24/fiction1>*