

**"I do remember terrible dark things..."**

2 May, 2008  
The Telegraph

One of psychiatry's sad commonplaces is that while men usually direct anger outwards, women often turn it against themselves.

In Sebastian Barry's novel, *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), the protagonist joins the Royal Irish Constabulary in Sligo after the end of the First World War, witnesses the murder of a fellow RIC policeman, is wrongly accused of identifying the executioners, and is forced to wander abroad in exile, like Virgil's Aeneas. A decade later, Barry has returned to Sligo between the wars, but this time there is a wrecked female life at the heart of his book.

Roseanne, an extremely elderly patient in Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, begins her personal testimony claiming: "Sligo made me and Sligo undid me, but then I should have given up much sooner than I did being made or undone by human towns, and looked to myself alone."

Her reminiscence is haunting. She dwells especially on her father, "a passionate, I might almost say celestial-minded Presbyterian man", who prized John Donne's Sermons and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, and proudly worked as the superintendent of a Catholic graveyard.

When she was about 10, Roseanne watched her father perform an educative experiment from the top of the graveyard tower, "one of those beautiful, lofty slim buildings made by monks in a time of danger and destruction". He dropped feathers and hammers out of the tower to prove that "all things fall at the same rate, in the realm of theory". But in practice they don't. Roseanne remembers standing on the ground, straining, looking up, not being certain what she had seen, just sure of loving her father.

Roseanne's testimony is interwoven with her psychiatrist's "Commonplace Book". Dr Grene is fond of his vulnerable patient and needs to assess her state of mind before the old mental hospital that has been her home for many years is demolished.

The paper record of Roseanne's history has disintegrated but, eventually, Dr Grene manages to trace the local Catholic priest's account of her family's decline. Fr Gaunt gave Roseanne's father his job, but then took it away after a violent episode in the graveyard. He suggests the graveyard superintendent was a drunkard and ex-policeman, whose mouth was stuffed with feathers by assassins who beat him with hammers at the top of the tower, before hanging him in a derelict house nearby.

Alternating between Roseanne's writing (secreted beneath the floorboards near her bed) and Dr Grene's reflective notes, *The Secret Scripture* assembles a disquieting portrait of a woman destroyed by politics and misogyny.

After her father's death when she was 16, Roseanne remembers Fr Gaunt explaining to her, "you are a very lovely young girl, and as such I am afraid, going about the town, a mournful temptation, not only to the boys of Sligo but also, the men, and as such and in every way conceivable, to have you married would be a boon and a rightness very complete and attractive in its - rightness."

She marries a Catholic: Tom McNulty, brother of the wandering Eneas. Roseanne is soon suspected of infidelity, then accused of nymphomania, and Fr Gaunt arranges for an annulment in Rome so that Tom can be free to marry again.

The authorised claim that her marriage never existed sends Roseanne mad. She lives alone in a hut outside Sligo, tending her roses, a danger to no one. Eneas returns from his travels, sleeps with his brother's never-was wife, then flees Ireland again with a death sentence on his head.

In normal circumstances, to reveal so much would be plot-spoiling. But these events are already recorded in Barry's earlier novel. The two books are deliberately and intimately linked, right down to the tiny detail that before Eneas reappears, Roseanne has watched two rats co-operate in stealing the egg she had intended to eat for supper.

In the Sixties, Eneas's family traced him to a hotel on the Isle of Dogs, but the hotel burnt down and he disappeared again before contact was made. In contrast, the whereabouts of Roseanne are never in question. She was first admitted to an asylum in Sligo, later moved to the establishment in Roscommon.

Her wandering adventures are all internal. The only person she has ever harmed is herself: "I do remember terrible dark things, and loss, and noise, but it is like one of those terrible dark pictures that hang in churches, God knows why, because you cannot see a thing in them."

Her psychiatrist comments that this is a beautiful description of traumatic memory. The same can be said of Barry's novel, which is dark, awkward and exceptionally finely written. "Morality has its own civil wars, with its own victims in their own time and place," Dr Grene concludes. If men and women fall at approximately the same rate in troubled times, they fall differently.

*This story was found at:*

**<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/05/03/bobar103.xml>**