

Irish Family Stories: The Gathering

'I WANTED TO EXPLORE DESIRE AND HATRED'- Anne. ENRIGHT

By Uma Anyar

The Booker Prize, along with all the other coveted awards that writers stalk, is a magical, curious thing, like a fairy wand that instantly transforms mundane reality, grants renown, money, and status upon an individual writer who only a week before was just another writer trying to tell her truth, while hoping sales would pick up. Indeed, this was the situation Anne Enright was in prior to the Booker Prize announcement.

In fact, **The Gathering** had sold only 3,553 copies in Britain before the award. Sales shot up to 350,000 after the winner was announced. Anne Enright author of three previous novels and a collection of short stories was the dark horse in the race, she did not expect to win. But win she did, and now even her old school friend has confessed she would have to “read it,” although she was “dreading it.” Enright laughed off this response as she had grown use to the book being described as ‘grim’, laconic, “darkly rich, having no consolation.” The Guardian announced: 'Outsider beats favorites to scoop prize for tale of dysfunctional family life set in Ireland.' There is more such praise but I will depart from the mainstream opinion experts and say I am glad I knew none of this when I read the book. I did know it had won the Man Booker Prize for 2007. This sort of knowledge affects the intimate experience of reading.

The strongest aspect of **The Gathering** is not the actual story, which wanders into memories of events that could have happened, but maybe did not, and then into the present crises in the narrator’s marriage: should she leave or should she stay? The Hegarty clan’s tale of possible sexual abuse by a distant family member is not unique, in this time of confessional memoirs and the child sexual abuse scandal currently raging in the Catholic Church. The actual facts the grieving narrator works so hard at remembering do not save her from pain or depression but it does lead the readers into questions about desire about hatred of loved ones that are not part of less well written novels.

The thing that makes you stay with the book is the narrator’s voice. It is compelling. Veronica is an angry, grieving, modern woman who cannot come to grips with the ridiculousness of living and dying. It is a unique impolite, hard but authentic voice, that compels you to see it her way. “Why bother?” she wonders. Her mother had 12 children, 7 miscarriages, some went on living, one killed himself. We are all here to just ‘feed the grave.’ This is one of the grim observations of the purposelessness of life that the narrator spews out in her grief and hatred of her father and mother, whom she thinks over procreated and couldn’t keep their hands off each other. Veronica is angry, very angry, but she is also smart, honest and brave in her merciless view of the horrid shenanigans life doles out to innocent children. She is pitiless in her anger at her vague, distracted mother who sometimes forgets her daughter’s name, ‘How are you Darling?’

'Veronica!' I feel like shouting it at her. 'You named me Veronica!'

It is clear that, Veronica, the surviving sister of Liam who committed suicide by filling his orange vest with stones and walking into the ocean drunk and determined to do 'this thing', loved her brother more than anyone else in the family. His body was pulled from the sea and saved in an English morgue locker for Veronica to identify. She was informed that he was not wearing underpants under his jeans. This information, curious as it is, explains Liam's frame of mind. He didn't want to be found dead in dirty under pants. Veronica deduces this about Liam and it shows us how much she understood him. It also reminded me of the way a whole generation of Irish and Italian Catholic working class kids were raised, constantly being reminded that cleanliness was next to godliness and that they wouldn't want to be caught in a situation like death or a fire in which we could be perceived as unclean.

Veronica clearly loves her brother but he was 'a messer', a 'chaos maker', someone who never 'pulled it together' and made a 'go of life'.

The book has been praised for its muscularity, agility and witty perceptiveness, as well as hallucinogenic, dark, lyrical prose. Interesting to find such manly terms applied to a woman's writing.

For me it was all in the voice. about the narrators coping version of her grief., imprecise and dysfunctional as it may seem it is a version of the truth worth listening to. in the voice. ,

Anne Enright has also written *The Portable Virgin*, and *Taking Pictures*, collections of short stories as well as four novels, *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are you like?*, *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* and a work of non-fiction, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*.

Anne Enright will be participating in The Ubud Writers and Reader's Festival (October 6-10).#