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Portrait of a Schoolboy

The Anatomy School by Bernard MacLaverty.
Jonathan Cape, 355pp, £15.99 in UK.

Despite the cruelties of his two most famous works, the filmed novels *Lamb* (1980) and *Cal* (1983), Bernard MacLaverty has over the past three decades established himself as one of the kindest voices in Irish fiction. After his first book, *Secrets and Other Stories* (1977), his reputation grew steadily via his work in fiction, screenplays and radio drama, and his labours peaked with *Grace Notes* (1997), a novel that gained him warranted international attention by appearing on the Booker short-list. As notable a male delivery of an Irish female voice as, say, those of Brian Moore and Roddy Doyle, *Grace Notes* sounded out some big themes: family, childbirth, depression, and, most resonantly, the matter of the creative imagination's search for transcendence and reconciliation in the face of the Troubles.

MacLaverty is, at least on the evidence to date, endemically a short-story writer, and has issued four collections in all. *Lamb* originated in a short story, and *Grace Notes*, in its early stages, was a melding of two stories with the same character. *The Anatomy School* appears to have gone through a similar composite process; this time, it has not worked.

Set in Belfast in the late sixties, the novel is divided into two parts. Part one, roughly two thirds of the whole, is subdivided into eleven titled chapters that tell the story of Martin Brennan's final year at a Catholic school. Martin, an amateur photographer, has already failed his finals once, has lost a scholarship, scrapes by with his mother and her widow's pension, and has the memory of a devout father to live up to. His predicament on a cusp in life is used by MacLaverty to play thematically with two hardy conkers, Catholicism and Sex, while the historical specifics of the then emergent Troubles form only a minor backdrop.

'It's very good for a writer to have been reared within Catholicism', MacLaverty once said in interview: ' – that wonderful sense of imagery ... it taught you growing up that things can have learned meanings; so that when you sit down to write things can have one, two, three meanings and you try to layer your work like that'. *Lamb*, with its central figure of a troubled Brother, is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this sense of Catholicism, though MacLaverty has regularly returned to the subject. While such stories as 'Death of a Parish Priest' and 'The Beginnings of a Sin' are direct and particular in their related treatment however, *The Anatomy School* borders on sub-Joycean cliché, and this first part reads like a diluted version of *Portrait*, complete with a weekend retreat, a young man on the brink of convincing himself he has a vocation, a gaggle of bright students who prate on endlessly about life and learning in the shadow of religious impositions ('They would *become* disciplined because they had *been* disciplined').

The passages of schoolboy conversation in particular seem elongated and frequently sound inauthentic: the boys' vocabulary and attitudes appear more suited to undergraduate minds, and would any teenager ever really risk his life with a declaration to his peers like 'Aren't photographs astonishing?' On another level, nevertheless, if approached in leisure and patience, the conversational passages may read less like 'novelistic' filler than a kind of formal reflection of the chitchat of ebullient youths.

MacLaverty is a solid realist, and it is thus a surprise that he makes a gesture or two here towards another standardised variety of imitative formalism. Shrunk and

jumbled type, block capitals and blank paper, are used to reflect the state of Martin's mind when snoozing at devotions or when trying to finish an essay in which he has no interest. MacLaverty can be smartly innovative, as in the unusual collection *Walking the Dog* (1994), but this kind of typographical trickery has long been outmoded in fiction and it appears all the more facile in the midst of a typically steady plain prose style.

The observational power of that style is reflected in MacLaverty's cumulative picture of everyday schooldays. From sports and fights to classes and stolen cigarette breaks, Martin's mundane routine along with his right-hand mates is perfectly itemised, while a subplot concerning stolen exam papers adds a splash of adventure. There are also some fine touches regarding Martin's solicitous mother and her cronies who sit in the background drinking endless cups of tea. The most successful aspect of the novel is the sexual theme. While Martin shows the standard symptoms of rampant adolescence, his shy experiences with girls and his emotional yearnings are insightfully and empathetically shown. MacLaverty is also at his funniest in dealing with the vagaries of young hormones and anatomies.

Part Two proves deflationary in this respect however. Comprised of a single chapter that has all the appearances of a stretched short story, this part focuses on Martin a year or two after school. He now works in a university science laboratory and is really given only a solitary scene concerning an encounter with an Australian girl while on a night shift. The sexual theme and a stage in Martin's development culminate here, but lapses in characterisation destroy the credibility of his brand of 'Welcome, O life' finale (a 'strewth' or two does not an Aussie make).

Overall, the two parts of *The Anatomy School* sit very uneasily together. Interest in either part may be aided by the fact that MacLaverty has spent considerable periods of his life both as a teacher and as a laboratory assistant. Whatever the biographical input, further plain inventiveness and a more deliberate formal cohesion would have lent more life to a story that relies too heavily on isolated moments of energy. MacLaverty is a more stimulating writer than this novel would suggest, and, especially, readers should not allow it to dissuade them from attending to his short stories.

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