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The Cloister and the Heart

John Kenny

The Love of Sisters

By Eugene McCabe

New Island

112pp, €13.99

The long and the short of the novella form is that it has always defied definition. Though it has been with us in various guises since the middle ages and has occasionally flourished within national traditions and in the hands of individual practitioners, it has rarely had a confident reputation. Currently, the only certain thing about the novella is its uncertain saleability. That underestimated commentator on the craft and selling of fiction, Stephen King, in his introduction to his own novella collection *Different Seasons*, famously lamented its seeming status as “an ill-defined and disreputable literary banana republic”.

Negative assessments often suggest that novellas are either short stories that have run away from the writer’s compositional control, or half-trained narratives that have managed only a few laps before dropping out of the real crowd-pleaser that is the novel. Novellas can have the worst of both worlds. They don’t so readily have the unity of impression, event and design, the implosive power that confer on the short story its high artistic – if not monetary – status. And yet they are too quickly read to immerse us comfortably in escape for the daily commute and the train and plane, or to perform properly as the book in bed that eases us to sleep with the promise of an ongoing story that will mind us till morning. They simply do not have the involving elaborations of character, location, time-schemes and subplots that the novel can provide.

As ever with literary forms, novella writers themselves are thankfully free to invent or redefine what the novella can be each time they decide on writing – or *find* themselves writing – a new one. And by the evidence of McCabe’s career, some literary sensibilities do find that the novella especially suits them. Having first established himself as a playwright, McCabe’s first book of fiction was the novella *Victims: A Tale From Fermanagh* (1976), and the title piece of his second, *Heritage and Other Stories* (1978), was also of novella proportions, at least when compared to the shortness of its accompanying pieces. His single and justly celebrated novel *Death and Nightingales* came in 1992, and then he returned to the short story with *Tales from the Poorhouse* (1999).

McCabe’s pace has been comparatively slow and his output small, and he now reads like a stately and still literary centre amid the frenetic Ireland of the past fifteen years. He has remained gloriously impervious to new high-octane imperatives while continuing the pattern he established from the beginning of dealing in fiction with the crucial actualities and legacies of Irish history and politics. Perhaps naturally for a borderland writer, he has regularly focused on the theme of religion – his 1993 trilogy of previously published work was titled *Christ in the Fields*, and the one new story in his 2005 compendium was the title piece “Heaven Lies About Us”. Though it is much more forgiving in approach than his other fictional critiques of zealotry and skewed

holiness, *The Love of Sisters* is a full-scale return to the religion theme and, despite its smaller scale, it will measure up to his novel as one of his key works.

Defying received wisdom about the novella's inability to convincingly treat with time, within the first three pages here we have been skilfully moved from 1947 and the death near Cork of the mother of young Tricia and Carmel Carmody, to twenty-six years later when Carmel has left her beloved Carmelite order because of the "scruples" it will be the story's function to uncover. Tricia, whose own intervening life is subtly delineated, insists that Carmel come to live in Spanish Point with her and her daughter, Isabel. Thereafter, with a smoothness and occasional subplotting that are extraordinary for a novella, the narrative moves back and forth in time to recount Carmel's experiences as a novice and contemplative, her relationships with her fellow sisters (especially the gardener, Martha), her unsure re-entry into life and love outside the convent, and her eventual marriage to a Cavan undertaker which culminates in a hard lesson involving her biological sister.

McCabe is occasionally poorly served here by the editing – some dialogue lines are missing closing quote marks, and, amusingly, among a range of references to Carmel's religious reading, there is mention of one "Thomas A. Kempis". McCabe himself occasionally falters – "Blasht!" hardly warrants exoticizing as "dialect", and the sentiment of *Amhrán na bhFiann* hardly constitutes "Anglophobia" exactly.

Overall, however, this is a formidable and immediately re-readable engagement with a theme and setting that are all the more intriguing for being unfashionable. McCabe has deployed the best of both the short story and the novel: he combines depth with narrative speed, stylistic control with structural complexity, unity of focus with an involved storyline. He has brilliantly portrayed a kind of therapeutic unveiling for one person of the world's intertwined cruelty and beauty. Tastefully produced, *The Love of Sisters* holds like a hymnal and reads like praise. Welcome, O life! says McCabe. Welcome, novella, say we.

John Kenny is John McGahern Lecturer in Creative Writing at NUI Galway. He is academic director of the John McGahern Seminar & Summer School and founding editor of *The John McGahern Yearbook*. His book *John Banville* was published recently by Irish Academic Press.