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The Drugs Don't Work

John Kenny

Doctor Salt

By Gerard Donovan

Scribner, 263pp. £14.99

As epigraph to his second novel Gerard Donovan uses the famous last line from Catullus's ode to his dead brother, written on visiting his grave in the Troad: "And so for ever, brother, hail and farewell". That this poignant tuning note, followed by a verbal compactness that testifies to Donovan's earlier work in poetry, is subsequently comfortably sustained by comedic first- and third-person narrative tones is indicative of this author's complex sense of mode and mood.

There were some problems, mainly the occasionally flagging pace, with Donovan's well-received and Booker long-listed first novel, *Schopenhauer's Telescope* (2003), but his talent for a humour too bizarre and philosophically troubled to be simply called tragicomedy was already clear. If only because its themes are not so politically and historically resonant, *Doctor Salt* is unlikely to prove, just yet, a categorical consolidation of Donovan's new career in prose. The sheer distinctiveness of what is still an emergent style, however, will be enough to garner for this second novel its lesser but fair share of plaudits.

Though it might initially seem to lack substantial content, *Doctor Salt* does deal - angularly and hilariously in the early stages, more directly and agonisingly later on - with one crucial phenomenon: the contemporary actuality of, and discursive obsession with, personality disorder and the pharmaceutical industry's chase to be Everyman's panacea.

If *Schopenhauer's Telescope* was better received in Europe because it touched on nerves still smarting from ethnic conflict and civil wars, *Doctor Salt* is distinctly American in its theme and setting. In Salt Lake City, a volatile young man named Sunless has for months been boarding the Pharmalak train to take him to the Pharmalak hospital where television screens simultaneously advertise diagnosis of, and the in-house cures for, the latest mental illnesses (Web-Reflex Disorder; Expanded Depersonalization Syndrome; Chronic Generalised Anxiety Syndrome ...). The central illness is the Paranoid Schizophrenia one Doctor Fargoon has diagnosed in Sunless, and the not-so-good doctor's chemical procedures for curing him are the very pattern of Sunless's current life: "Finding out what's wrong with a person ... is like swinging a hammer in the dark. Sometimes I get it first time, *bang*, one prescription, and other times ... a few months, a few years ... It can even take a lifetime."

The first series of chapters ("Sunless" 1, 2, 3 ...) inevitably bring Kafka to mind in their deadpan paranoiac absurdity. Amidst a search for his mysteriously disappeared father and meetings with inscrutable medical authorities, Sunless wears "vigilance like skin": he is convinced that flies, while potentially angels, are mainly governmental spying tools; he has built a mannequin to convince observers that he is at home when he is in fact out; his stratagems of anonymity involve drinking in bars while heavily disguised.

While there is an inscribed serious critique of the opium of religion and the history of domestic drugs in America ("Laudanum, laudanum, a little bit of morphine, that's all it is, well a lot of morphine, mostly morphine, but this is the thing: your children

will sleep well, your worries will disappear, the future will brighten ...”), these early chapters frequently coruscate with laughter. Cleverly, however, Donovan does not let us away easily with the guffaws and he has a conference on new drugs lapse into a satirical set-piece on the anxiety cures of a charismatic Christian “laughing” movement.

The second series of chapters (“Salt” 1, 2, 3 ...) slowly explains the curious virtual nature of Sunless. It turns out that he is himself a kind of damaged angel, an incarnation within a character named Salt of a dead baby brother. Before the merging of Salt and Sunless in the fantastically cruel denouement of the final series of short chapters, we discover that Salt and his parents have been decimated by sickness and by consequent drug experiments. With some brilliant phrases (“Twelve years passed like a bandage”), the novel becomes the tale of a young man’s drug-induced disintegration in the face of a tragic life and, by the end, Sunless’s initial story demands to be reread for a full understanding of an intricately devised character.

Donovan, a Galway man living in the US since 1989, has heretofore been intent on avoiding what he calls the “flavour of overt Irishness”, and this has produced two convincing existential fables. His impending collection of stories, however, will apparently be infiltrated with some of this Irishness and is nonetheless to be equally anticipated.

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