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Sudden Times

By Dermot Healy

Harvill

341pp, £15.99.

When reprinting his first novel, *Fighting With Shadows* (1984), Dermot Healy included a note to clarify the book's treatment of the impact of history on Fermanagh's border area: '*Sciamachy* ... A sham fight, a visionary fight, a fight with shadows ... *Sciomancy* ... Divination through the Shades of the Dead. This has always been an Irish way with history.'

It might take a lengthy theorem to prove that ethnic generalization, but the point certainly holds true for Healy himself: In his subsequent prose works, he has continued to treat with the accessibility and significance of the past, whether that be the recent national history he dealt with again in *A Goat's Song* (1994), one of the best Irish novels this decade, or the more personalised past he confronted in *The Bend for Home* (1996), one of the more creditable instances of the recent spate in Irish autobiography.

His resurgent suggestion that the past is as much reinvented as recollected, that 'the authentic is a trick', is given new voice in Ollie Ewing, the narrator of *Sudden Times*, a young Sligo man traumatised after a vagrant stint on the London sites where both his best friend and brother have been murdered through involvement with protection racketeers. Ollie's documentation of the life of exiled labourers while he tries to (re)establish a relationship with his disturbing memories of the dead and with his present surroundings back home, is interesting in itself; but more fascinating perhaps are Healy's Victorian conception of narrative time and his ambiguous realism.

The basic circular movement of *A Goat's Song*, which entices the reader towards immediate rereading, is given added impetus here by the omission of a full stop in Ollie's final sentence. This 'Finn, again!' quality, though potentially a facilely imitative trick, is entirely seductive since the realisation at the very end that the real time of the story has halted almost exactly halfway through assures the reader that the initially recalcitrant first sections can now be returned to with a knowledge of their part in the overall structure.

While Ollie's story holds together as a fictionally 'true' plot, Healy appears to aim mainly to capture the *processes* of a consciousness trying to sift the real from the imagined. It is thus tempting (and not simply because of a lengthy section on a court case) to see Ollie's activities as a Kafkaesque parable, a reflection of intense and possibly drug-induced paranoia, of the state of mind of a narrator who is, by his own admission, quite 'off the head'. The circular narrative pattern reflects the nature of Ollie's 'mental stutter', his incapacity to make any progress through his guilt-ridden thinking, his languishment in a frequently funny, Beckettian converse with himself: 'I've got to stop this. I'm away. I'd be obliged if you'd lay off, will you? Thank you. Thanks awfully. Wait a moment. Has the whole bile surfaced? We musn't away while there's more wretchedness to be uncovered.'

Though this is not Healy's deepest work, it is, like his poetry, deceptively simplistic. Half the attraction of Healy's wily colloquial prose, even of the more terse style he has lately developed, is that it remains errant, and high polish could only

have damaged the tough veracity of *Sudden Times*. Harvill's fine production standards continue to be matched by the quality of its chosen writers.

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