Title: A Girl of Many Words

Author(s): Kenny, John

Publication Date: 2003-11-08


Publisher: The Irish Times

Item record: http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1006
Enigma of a Girl

John Kenny

Story of a Girl
By Tom MacIntyre
Lilliput Press, 176pp. €16.99

One must always lick one’s dictionary fingers before sitting down to Tom MacIntyre’s prose. His continued delight in unfamiliar but precise language sends the reader of the first of the compact sections that make up his new book flicking to OED’s R: “Rebus: an enigmatic representation of a word (esp. a name) by pictures etc. suggesting its parts”. Directly, this word hints at the design of Story of a Girl; inversely, it describes MacIntyre’s whole fictional style.

That Story of a Girl cannot be measured in any standard novel dimensions is neither accidental nor necessarily worrisome. MacIntyre’s only other full-length prose work, The Charollais (1969), disregards straight plotting in favour of fantasy and gab. Even the sometimes very short stories he has issued since Dance the Dance (1970) are driven less by moments of action than by an imagistic and frequently static concentration on word arrangements. His representations are essentially symbolist, gradually suggesting a solid picture of the actual world through an idiosyncratic and seemingly evasive style.

MacIntyre’s fiction is determinedly intellectual and verbose in the way of early Beckett, but his playfulness is paramount (he is in the running for best ever Irish book title with I Bailed Out at Ardee), and this seems the most enticing thing to look for in a first reading of Story of a Girl. While the eponymous young girl is immediately introduced (“Caress her hair. Hold her. Make her the centre of the room”), her nature (ethereal, clairvoyant) is thereafter generally refracted through pictures from the more or less contemporary life of her small Irish town. A series of exuberant characters and scenes (grandmothers who live in trees, sluts and ghosts, suicidal fiancés, typographically variant stories within stories) is laid on with a gusto that laughs in the face of logic and plain sense.

Any writer could play with mixing tenses, omitting definite and indefinite articles, fracturing syntax and clauses the way MacIntyre does here. But only a rooted and clever native could do this while giddily melding literary allusions with snippets of songs and folklore in Irish and English, with new words and phrases organically based in rural demotic.

The language here does so much work that even after two readings, MacIntyre’s book still proves regularly opaque and annoying, fundamentally difficult in the traditional labour-inducing avant-gardist way. The enigma of this dense and, overall, story-less book compels nevertheless. Exit reader, head-scratching but going back slower to look for the girl.

John Kenny teaches in the English Department at NUI Galway.