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John Kenny

Send in the Devils.

By Robert Cremins.

Sceptre/Lir.

214pp, £10.99 in UK

‘What is John Paul Mountain, of all people, doing in Maverick, Texas?’ For two years around Dublin this question has been put to one Peter Dagg, and he now narrates the story of his trip to Texas to discover the answer in person from his friend, to whose sister he is engaged. Framed at either end by short sections set at home, Dagg’s narrative is mainly delivered in two large middle sections that cover his ten-day stay in Maverick and that, in their detail, suggest that *Send in the Devils* is designed as an ‘emigrant novel’.

This, Cremins’s second novel, seems the flipside of his first, *A Sort of Homecoming* (1998). There, a narrator who has a cameo role in *Devils* delivered a tale of trendy modern Dublin while touching on the matter of emigration; here, the Dublin middle-class milieu serves as a backdrop to coverage of the simultaneously anaesthetised and hectic Texan world of planned communities and shopping malls. Mountain, it turns out, has married into a wealthy car-sales business and has ‘bought into some notion of normality that only someone deeply disturbed could think of as being normal’. He is, in Dagg’s eyes, dying in the lap of luxury, a fate suggestively hinted at by Cremins with a nod towards Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less than Zero*. Convincingly, Dagg quickly takes to the world of Maverick’s mod cons and he spends a few enjoyable days in rural Texas with Mountain and his wife, Kristen, with whom a complicated love interest develops.

Though there is too much ‘novelistic’ filler in these sections, mainly by way of pointless dialogue, the unfamiliar setting sustains reasonable interest as matters move towards a threatening climax. The Dublin sections and the novel’s general ‘Irish’ thematic, however, while more restrained than in *Homecoming*, adhere to what is at this stage a stereotypically self-conscious view of contemporary Ireland. The fictionalisation of the lives of the twenty-to-thirty-something Irish middle class (Dagg is a successful barrister, Mountain is the ‘son of pundits, scion of Ireland’s first media family’) is a worthy project; but fiction can quickly lapse into boring journalese when it is a matter of facilely instantaneous historicizing (Mountain’s politician father has been involved in something called the ‘MacVerry Tribunal’) and of trite sociology (‘we got onto a stretch of motorway – no longer a novelty in Ireland’).

It may be, as Cremins himself said of his previous work, that the lifestyles he represents here are a deliberate ‘comic exaggeration’; if so, a little more comedy would be in order. This said, Cremins shows propitious signs of seriousness. He is a graduate of the highly regarded full-time creative writing course at the University of East Anglia and a studied personal style is nascent here: at times, Cremins’s prose is effectively direct and economical, and his plotting can be grippingly paced. Apprenticeship is still being served with *Send in the Devils* but the approach to development seems business-like.

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