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Title	A Long Way with Trips, if Airy
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Publication Date	2001-03-31
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2001, 31 March) 'A Long Way with Trips, if Airy.' Review of 'Juno and Juliet', by Julian Gough. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 15.
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1049

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The Undergraduate

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Juno & Juliet. By Julian Gough.
Flamingo. 293pp, £9.99 in UK

Eighteen, beautiful, and definitely not shy, Tipperary twin sisters Juno and Juliet alight in Galway early for their first university-year flat hunt. Julian Gough's first novel quickly settles these into a romantic comedy of ill-manners and education, drawing a detailed picture of contemporary Galway while concentrating primarily on the interior life of Juliet, who performs as narrator. Socially adventurous, but also diligent, Juliet entertainingly manifests the "confusion, anger, angst" of her generational academic set while relating her individual tale of how her relationship with her sister changes in new surroundings. Juno, whose name has no real mythic import here, quickly finds herself a regular appetitive young man while Juliet spends the entire novel pursuing her English tutor, David; after a little bed-hopping, all more or less progress towards a signalled happy ending.

Composed of short - frequently very short - chapters, some of which seem structurally superfluous, three sections move the action from Galway, to Tipperary, then back to Galway again. Section two is largely comprised of a Gough story included in the *Shenanigans* anthology (1999), and its self-containment disjoins it somewhat from the main body of the novel. On the one hand a classic account of the undergraduate's seasonal visit home, complete with parent baiting, this short Tipperary episode has at its centre a fairly standard report of Juliet's first (bad) trip on acid. An authorial self-consciousness that intermittently mars the other sections is at its most grating here where the worst kind of idiomatic excess is committed: "He said 'thick' as 'tick'. And 'mistake' as 'mishtayk'." Potentially convincing documentary regionalism thus lapses into a kind of de-realised, anthropological preciosity.

Eventually, the novel turns into a diluted mystery tale with the final chapters providing revelations on an obscenely poisonous letter writer. Though there is no real sense of violence or threat, a good pace is finally built up and there is a dramatic climax with a grisly death. One-liners aside, Gough is diverting enough on university life; he is good on the nature of the English tutorial, on the "underworld" and "half-light" of exam time, on the follies of student drama societies. Some curiosities are included along the way: a crazy landlady, a shadowy and alcoholic writer-in-residence, and a sinister lecturer who insists there is an apostrophe in *Finnegans Wake*.

Despite constant references to books and authors, this is not a literary novel, nor does it have any particular gravamen. There are some intermittently serious and wise moments amid Gough's implicit comments on modern Ireland, as when one character argues: "now we have a generation of young bucks who have respect for the culture of Muslims, or the culture of blacks, or the culture of gays, but have no respect for the culture of their parents". Gough may prefer to continue in the mainly lightened mode he has adopted however. Determined accessibility is patently the ethos behind *Juno & Juliet*, and there is a widening market for such fiction - youthful, stylistically light, thematically airy. The novel will especially appeal to those of the undergraduate status it so buoyantly delineates.

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