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## Curiouser and Curiouser

JOHN KENNY

**Shamrock Tea.** By Ciaran Carson.  
Granta. 308pp, £14.99 in UK

Issued in Granta's neat hardback format, Ciaran Carson's new novel is not a novel. As with his two previous prose works, *The Star Factory* (1997) and *Fishing for Amber* (1999), the publishers advise a cataloguing of the book as "Fiction"; yet to accept the applicability of that term would be to pass too easily over the intriguing inter-generic project Carson has recently adopted. His innovative credentials have long been acknowledged by readers of the poetry for which he was first noted. Whatever the extent of language and metre idiosyncrasies or inter-textual punning and japing in that poetry however, it always remained recognisable *as poetry*. In terms of prose, Carson's straightforward earlier works on traditional Irish music have given way to a highly individual kind of full-length book that can best be appreciated in the absence of conventionalised expectations.

Even more so than the two preceding quasi-fictions, *Shamrock Tea* is a giddy mix of autobiography, folklore, myth, tall tale, anecdote, scholarship and the recognisably novelistic. The plot line is thin and incidental. A boy called Carson relates the story of a small period of his youthful education in and around Belfast and of his gradual edification in the ways of a peculiar herbal concoction called 'shamrock tea'. The essence of the book lies more in the meanderings and divagations within this basic story, provided largely by Carson's uncle Celestine, provider of lantern shows, smoker of strange tobaccos, and repository of the arcane knowledge of the eponymous tea.

Hanging in Celestine's study is van Eyck's "Arnolfini Wedding" portrait, around which discussions of Flemish life and art are built. Since it enables time travel and a shifting of dimensions, the shamrock tea, once imbibed by the triumvirate of Carson, his Alice-like cousin Berenice and his schoolfellow Maeterlinck, allows them to enter van Eyck's world in order to perform certain tasks ordained by Celestine. Logic or any sense of realism is displaced by the mysterious symbol of the van Eyck which, at one level, provides structural pattern for the book. It is observed at one point that van Eyck had "an eye like a microscope", and parallels between writing and painting are thusly developed. Sensuousness is paramount in Ciaran Carson's writing, with smells, sounds, and the tactile obsessively documented; the ocular, however, is primary here. A line from Matthew ("The light of the body is in the eye") solidifies the theme, and, following on a fascination with his paint-box, the boy's narrative takes the form of a hundred and one two-page chapters with colours for titles. At this level, the book, with its attention to minutiae of all kinds, is a story of the eye - "Painting" (and, by analogy, precise prose), Celestine advises, "is the art of making things real, because you have looked at how things are".

At a further remove again, the encompassing theme of a complex book replete with references to Augustine and a range of saints, to Arthur Conan Doyle, Wittgenstein, Wilde and Hopkins, to a veritable herbarium, is perception and its accoutrements - from the senses to memory to language - and the fashion in which cerebral activity can alter it. This is a matter of intended effect. Reading the detail of *Shamrock Tea* is like stumbling on a worm hole that allows access, not to some new world, but to a

more lucid, more colourful version of our own, and the reader is left standing there like Kaspar Hauser, whom Carson mentions towards the end, looking round wondering why everything now looks that little bit stranger.

The cerebral activity Carson is most fascinated with is the very process of making story, of making books, and his Chinese-Box segueing from one storyline into another is testament to a general faith in the paradoxical art form of serendipity. “There’s a thing called a ‘library angel’ when you’re hunting for something and you don’t know what it is”, explained Carson regarding his research for *Fishing for Amber*: “You go to the library and your hand goes to a shelf. The angel is standing at your shoulder and leads you there.” Even if ostensibly weighted by intellectualist ballast, there is a true *jouissance* in *Shamrock Tea* whereby lovingly and gleefully delivered learning unsettles received ideas and perceptions. While there is a certain vertigo involved in having to be one’s own bibliophilic Holmes here (a range of “sources” are acknowledged in the final pages), at the heart of the story is the simple and almost sacral curiosity of the child, reflected in the studious shamrock boy’s most beautifully self-reflexive image: “I find I can lift the books from the shelves without touching them. ... One by one, they glide out from the bays and stacks and cubicles, hovering spine upwards, their covers fluttering, drifting along the laddered aisles and corridors, congregating at the intersections, some already arriving from annexes and lower levels, shaking off the dust of centuries, creaking their leather-bound wings, all homing in on me, who am their saviour”.

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