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Tough Topics, Tough Style

Everything In This Country Must
by Colum McCann
Phoenix House
141pp, £9.99 in UK.
ISBN 1 897580 39 8

In Colum McCann’s first book, the extraordinarily mature short-story volume, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), Raymond Carver’s laconic style was an occasional though well-assimilated presence, particularly in one or two of the pieces set in America, McCann’s adopted country. In his two subsequent novels, *Songdogs* (1995) and, particularly, the widely acclaimed *This Side of Brightness* (1998), McCann went on to combine that terseness with a curiously ascetic lyricism which, while potentially a contrariety, confirmed the individuality of his style and marked him as a writer as much dedicated to the craft of prose as to its plain tale-bearing instrumentality.

Now, with renewed Carveresque rigour, McCann has made the move—an exceptional one, especially in an Irish context—of returning to the short prose form. *Everything In This Country Must* contains, in this order, two short stories of more or less equal length and a novella of just over a hundred pages. The unifying thematic factor is that all three pieces are focused on the contemporary society and politics of Northern Ireland. In the central action of the title story, some British soldiers help save the horse of a resentful farmer; in ‘Wood’, the young son and wife of a stroke-stricken and sceptical Presbyterian secretly prepare marching poles for the local Lodge; and in the novella, set in 1981 and baldly titled ‘Hunger Strike’, the new Galway life of a young widow and her son is documented as, in the background, the boy’s uncle goes on hunger strike.

While McCann has not heretofore shown himself to be overly concerned with current Irish political imperatives, preferring instead to deal with intense emotional privacies, the final story in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* did incorporate the matter of the Troubles as a discrete element. It was always likely that McCann would at some point focus heavily on the area since he has recalled spending many childhood summers in Derry, near Garvagh, and remembers such consciousness-raising moments as being stopped by the RUC or having to turn his anorak inside out because he wore ‘Free State’ badges. Few fiction writers tread this territory sure-footedly. The predominant pitfall is a variety of what Raymond Williams called ‘the false commitment of the inserted political reference’, where the literary artist is displaced in favour of the bland reporter or where precise realities are registered only through a few in-the-background-the-bombs-were-going-off sentences.

Mc Cann’s novella, to a considerably damaging degree, stumbles into such false commitment. There is no denying the bravery of approaching the subject area of the 1981 hunger strikes in such a determined way, but McCann goes out of his way to detail in one or two passages the nature and function of the strikes when it should either be presumed that readers (especially Irish ones) would have a basic knowledge of such recent history or that readers unfamiliar with that history would be moved towards research more by suggestiveness than instruction. ‘Hunger Strike’ is on one level about the dawning adolescence of thirteen-year-old Kevin, from whose point of
view the story is told, and, as ever, McCann is excellent on the mind’s grappling with exteriorities. While Kevin’s close scrutiny of his uncle’s progress on the strike is creditable however, the boy’s mind is weighted with an unconvincing political selfconsciousness (‘He thought to himself that he was a boy of two countries’) and, in the most rankling aspect of the entire book, he is attributed images, metaphors and similes which, while resonant in themselves, damage his integrity as a child character (‘As she yanked the door open it seemed to the boy that she was pulling at the side panel of a coffin’).

As evinced in, for instance, the foolish conclusion to Bernard MacLaverty’s Cal (1983), perhaps the most difficult thing in any fiction on the Northern problem is to conclude, to find a way out. At the ending of ‘Hunger Strike’, McCann avoids any pronouncements on the political element and employs, instead, a reflective scene in which the boy’s apprenticeship in a kayak reaches a powerful nadir. It is enough to suddenly rescue the entire story.

Other than the careless use of the odd Americanism like ‘toboggan’, McCann’s two short stories are flawless. In both, the bareness of his style has an apposite mouthpiece in a child narrator. In ‘Everything In This Country Must’, Katie, presumably from a Catholic family, begins simply with ‘A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river’, and she goes on to relate how her mother and brother were killed, and why, when British soldiers arrive to help with the rescue, her father wants the horse to drown. In ‘Wood’, Andrew’s narratorial function, as he works with his mother in the family mill, is to reveal the personality of his sick father (‘Daddy says he’s as good a Presbyterian as the next, always has been and always will, but it’s just meanness that celebrates other people dying’). With an elemental feel reminiscent of Eugene McCabe’s work (the nonpareil in the area of the short story on the North), these two pieces suffer no bad conscience in their dealings with a troubled society; the human moment is all, and McCann avoids the denaturalization of his humans by excluding any kind of news-bulletin politics.

A welcome salve for the hordes of over-written Irish novels that seem incapable of presuming reasonable intelligence in readers, McCann’s aesthetic, particularly in these two stories, would seem to be something like John McGahern’s, insistent that a story is always better shown than told. McCann’s world view is considered and calm and there is never a hint of condescension towards his own characters, never a trace of the smirky, overweening humour of certain other novelists of his generation. And that seriousness also translates into form. At present in Irish prose writing, few have such an ear for the sentence: ‘The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in the world and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draft horse, his favourite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie’s jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain.’ The alliance of such mellifluous cadences with a robust topicality allows this unusual volume a density well beyond its physical slightness.

John Kenny