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Variety Pack

New Writing 11

Ed. Andrew O'Hagan and Colm Tóibín

Picador

£8.99stg.

JOHN KENNY

The latest instalment of the annual *New Writing* series has two esteemed editors. Andrew O'Hagan has been widely read since the publication of his first novel *Our Fathers* (1999), and the latest evidence of Colm Tóibín's ubiquity is the simultaneous publication of his books on Lady Gregory and on gay artist's lives, both recently reviewed on these pages. Necessary cooperation was no doubt facilitated for these editors by their association in work for the *London Review of Books*.

New Writing opens with *LRB* editor Mary-Kay Wilmer's "My Cold War", a piquant selection of short pieces from a book she is writing "about her family and its role in Trotsky's assassination and other episodes in twentieth-century history". The Trotsky interest is a good start, but the single generic disservice of the collection is committed here. The "Contents" describes the piece as an "essay" which it manifestly is not, and such non-specificity does no justice to a genre that these days needs careful protection in book form.

Thereafter come thirteen stories, twenty unevenly distributed poems by ten poets, four extracts from novels in progress, one novella, and one extract from a non-fiction book in progress. The national range of the thirty writers is impressive: German, Irish, English, South African, Welsh, Dutch, Scottish, Greek, Brunei. The editors do not reveal which of these contributors were commissioned and which submitted work; almost all have had books published and many names will be reasonably familiar. Ruth Padel is represented by "Black Coral", the longest poem included; Jane Rogers excerpts a new novel provisionally titled *Voyage*; Jenny Diski's new travel book, *Stranger on a Train*, is sampled.

Readers of Irish fiction will be pleased with the signs that Anne Enright, Claire Keegan and Sean O'Reilly are continuing the clever short-story work begun with their celebrated first collections. And Desmond Hogan resurfaces with a story called "Winter Swimmers" which at first seems like directionless impressionism but which, in a peculiar way, is the piece that most rewards rereading.

While some may find the "Introduction" facile in its brevity here, the editors are gleefully resistant to homogeneity: all those anthologised, they insist, "have nothing obvious in common, representing no groups or movements or nations or provinces, representing only the primacy of the imagination and the power of language". The promise of absolute diversity from new work by old and new writers will ensure that *New Writing*, like all such anthologies, will be usefully kept near travel bags and bedsides for intermittent and emergency reading.

John Kenny teaches in the English Department, NUI Galway.