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Sister Act

What Are You Like?

By Anne Enright.

Jonathan Cape.

259pp, £10 in UK.

Though her title may initially be taken to be the colloquial phrase of jokey exasperation, a distinct sadness is attached to the question ‘What are you like?’ in Anne Enright’s first book in five years. Almost mythical in its basic scenario, this novel is structured by two separate but convergent stories: Twin sisters, Maria and Rose, are separated at birth following the death of their mother, Maria remaining with her father, Berts, in Dublin and Rose being adopted by an English family, and their individual dissatisfactions and dislocations are recorded as they move, over the course of twenty five years, towards eventual reunion. Divided into eight large sections, Enright’s sometimes ferociously paced prose ranges widely in time and place and covers the girls’ birth in 1965, Maria’s life in Dublin in the seventies and in New York in the eighties, Rose’s life in Surrey and London, and also some episodes from the lives of Berts and his second wife, Evelyn. These characters, timeframes and locations are intermingled in fairly short segments that do not conform to any easy logic of alternation, making this one of the more structurally complex Irish novels of recent years.

The twin motif has a venerable history in fiction and, other than in the hands of someone like Nabokov, it can be difficult to carry off. While such matters as the mutual empathy of twins is successfully, if a little too predictably, illustrated, the parallels in the girls’ lives are sometimes established through forced and unlikely coincidences, particularly when Maria in New York in 1985 falls in love with a man called Anton whom Rose happens to also have been in love with when he was fostered by her adoptive family in 1977. The treatment of the matter of incompleteness, of lack of identity, is also variably creditable: As a journey to her roots, Maria is taken to the Donegal farm of her Mother’s people, a trip not always convincing in its details (in agricultural matters, it’s a baler—not a “bailer”), and Rose’s developing sense of Irishness is generally overplayed (“So I am Irish”, she thinks at a restaurant table with her boyfriend, “... So this is what it means. Perhaps he wants me to order potatoes ...”).

Rose’s story, nevertheless, constitutes a decent effort at identifying the dilemma of the adopted, and Maria’s breakdown due to general emotional anxiety makes for perhaps the most believable personality delineation in the novel. The import of Enright’s title is effectively signalled through repetition, from the scene where Maria addresses herself in her mirror in New York to the section where, in what is essentially the climax of the book, the girls’ mother speaks as a ghost and yearns to tell us what she was like. While it tapers off in a surrealism that appears too consciously designed to shock, this occultism is a challenging move and in its more direct moments (“I am not dead. I am in hell. And I blame the feet that walk over me”) it prompts a rereading of the entire story from the strange point of view of a revenant. This perspectival variation, where apparently incidental players occasionally report on central events, is the real strength of the novel and Enright’s use of the omniscient narrator as convenor of her different voices is a welcome change to the ‘I’ beam that dominates modern fiction.

Certainly richer than the typographically tricky *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), it must be said that this novel, equally, does not quite measure up to the promise shown by Enright in her first volume, *The Portable Virgin* (1991), a collection of quick, streetwise, impressionistic stories. At a time when innovative and persistent writers in the short form are lacking in Ireland, any return she might make to the area of those stories would be welcome. For the present, a new work at this price from an established author is, in terms of the competitive shelf business of novels, something of a bargain.

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