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At home with the short story

John Kenny

The River Field

By John MacKenna

New Island

316pp, €13.95

Save Our Short Story is the banner of the worthy campaign in the UK these past few years to nurture the form in the face of disinterest from publishers and the apparent disinclination of the reading public to help them meet requisite sales figures. In Ireland, we and our fiction should send out an SOS to, not for, the short story. In testament to a peculiarly enduring aesthetic colonisation, we continue here to think of the novel as the acme of achievement in fiction, and yet our shelves are strewn with its wreckage. There are fine exceptions, and so we cannot necessarily hold to any easy postcolonial ideas about native indisposition to the genre. It is simply that even beyond sales ambitions our writers too often seem to feel that only the length of the novel is adequate to the largeness of our world now. We are so in thrall to topicality, to the idea that fiction should talk to us expansively about our society that most of our novels are virtually indistinguishable from journalism and are thus as much at risk of the bin in the evening as the daily newspaper.

We seem to miss the point that while the novel has been with us now for five centuries, the short story, conceived as a literary art form, is a child of the nineteenth century and in that basic sense could arguably be more attuned to our modern sense of ourselves. Our present insistence that our fictions explore our public world is in an ironically inverse relationship to the isolation and privacy, whether enforced or embraced, that is rapidly becoming our typical human experience. And it is within this kind of experience that the short story traditionally makes itself at home.

John MacKenna's fiction has never been especially innovative, stylistically or thematically. But neither has it ever lost sight of the possibility that a fictional world is the more enduringly relevant the more confined it is. Relatively quietly, MacKenna has built up a substantial oeuvre since the 1970s, composed of story collections, novels, biographies, edited volumes and a memoir, and these are all fundamentally centred on his beloved native county of Kildare. In all forms, he is good on both male and female internalised joys and worries and on one-to-one romantic urgencies; in his short stories he excels at such privacies, and *The River Field* is his finest demonstration of this to date.

These fourteen stories have temporal settings ranging from the eighteenth to the present century but they are all geographically linked by the eponymous Castledermot field. Renewed here by the press material and the blurbs, it has become conventional to liken MacKenna's work to John McGahern's. It is a sign of our increasingly blithe distancing from the actuality of our countryside that its multiplicities, its complex social and economic and ecological realities, are regularly homogenised and reduced into a few ciphers that any Revivalist idyllist would have envied. Ah, fields, animals, crops, tractors, farmers, we say: this therefore is "rural" fiction, the sort of thing

McGahern used to write about you know. As if mere setting is sufficient to denote the nature of the writing in a particular case; as if there are no on-the-ground differences to be observed – or, more importantly, *imagined* – between, say, Leitrim and Kildare.

No one has made Kildare their own in the particularised way MacKenna has. Though the communal coordinates of towns and town-lands are intoned at length, and though the short descriptive overtures to each story may prove overly pastoral for some, the places of these stories are always real places because they are rooted in a character's plain sense of self and of loved ones, as in the 1763 setting of *The Woman at the Window*: "I sit in a red boat on a sea that's green, beneath a sky that's blue and a sun that's white and hot. Water laps the side of our wooden boat and James sets the sails and takes us out from the shore and we drift in the stillness of a world away from the world".

That is the quintessential mood here: this is fiction content with the idea of fiction as its own world. Its wide range of often haunted subjectivities has more an effect of general truth than any number of notionally objectifying novelistic pages because it does not grasp at a contrived discursive portrayal of the public world and does not make easy retrospective judgments in recounting moments of our common history. This collection is as comfortable with its own private courses as is the river at its centre. No rush. No over-excitement. Steady as he goes.

John Kenny lectures in the English Department, NUI Galway. He is Academic Coordinator of the John McGahern International Seminar and Summer School and is currently editing the first number of *The John McGahern Yearbook*.