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# Creatures of Inner and Outer Space

John Kenny

## **Life in the Universe**

By Michael J. Farrell

The Stinging Fly Press

169pp, €12.99

When the digitisation revolution is complete and we can ask our software to discover at the twiddle of a touchscreen what it would hitherto have taken multiple lifetimes of reading to even guess at, it will surely be found that climatic phenomena are mentioned in the first lines of almost all our written fictions. We are creatures of the weather, of the seasons, of degrees of light and dark, all still in thrall to our old god the sun. The natural allies of the fiction writer in promptly establishing *atmosphere*, or what is often referred to as the “emotional climate” of a work, are therefore atmospheric conditions themselves. Sometimes, as in gothic fiction, a conscious fetish is made of the prevailing atmosphere, but in fiction generally the sheer recurrence and obviousness of the tactic as often as not makes for dull work, or for inadvertent comedy, as in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s legendary “It was a dark and stormy night” opening to *Paul Clifford* (1830).

Samuel Beckett warned about all this in 1938 in his brilliantly withering first line of *Murphy*: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new”. With a simultaneously puckish and intellectualist sensibility that would be at home in the worlds of early Beckett, and of Flann O’Brien, Michael J. Farrell embarks in *Life in the Universe* on a kind of probing trip to find out if there is life yet in the light up above, and light in the life here below. Such a title in other hands might be facilely grandiose, but in Farrell’s hands it is a glory.

There are eleven stories in this collection, and once the first, *The Rift Valley*, has quickly told us that “The sun was a wonder in the mind-bending vault of sky”, each returns directly or angularly to this celestial centre-point. The effect is often as devastatingly funny as in Beckett: “The only thing worse than night is day” begins the second story, cannily titled *Self-Portrait* in a volume that alternates between a serious treatment and a send-up of the writing and artistic life. Nietzsche is quoted in *By the Book*, the tale of a librarian who, tired of waiting, takes her books to the people: “One must have chaos within oneself to give birth to a dancing star.” In the first paragraph of *Catharina*, a glamorous artist bent on reanimating a small village wears a sunshade, and “sure enough the sun edged inquisitively over the horizon”. In the hilarious *Writer-in-Residence*, a farmer wakes up one eye-opening morning: “Sleep abandoned him. The sun came up fresh and demanding”. And in *Dandelion* a widow buys her first computer and really goes for the skies through NASA’s astronomy website.

The point to this singularly determined concentration on the firmament is that these stories keep you looking up in a philosophical sense, looking beyond the immediate material world to speculative dimensions that are partly religious (one story is titled *Pascal’s Wager*), and partly scientific (another is titled *Gravity*). Farrell, originally from Longford, is an ex-priest who also has a career in American

journalism behind him, and the talents necessary to these fields stand him in good stead in his fiction (it should also be mentioned that he is in his mid-seventies, an accumulation of years which has clearly brought with it an instructive perspective on what is important, and what is not). In his one previous book, the novel *Papabile: the Man Who Would be Pope* (1998), he thematically combined the worldliness of politics with the existential quandaries of faith and idealism. *Life in the Universe* has this same facility for equally confronting the bluntly real and exploring the possibilities for man's mind of the possibly unreal.

On the one hand, Farrell's stories stand solidly in a real and idiomatically credible contemporary world, mainly Irish, where such matters as immigration and new technologies are recognised as plain facts, but without the gleeful counterpointing of dispensable tradition and self-congratulating modernity to be found in so much of our recent fiction. This is a world of youthful confusion, ageing, death, obsession and suicide. On the other hand, these stories are ethereally inclined, unashamedly confident in the life of the mind and in the empirically unmeasurable benefits of stargazing and head-scratching. The one possible reservation about these stories is thereby arguably integral to their design. Most of the endings are unresolved, puzzling, somehow askew – not unlike the people therein heading towards their own mortality.

"The sun came out", we are told in the final story, *The Written Word*: "doubtless an accident of clouds and wind currents, but I sensed life was making some statement". The statements of *Life in the Universe* are lightly delivered yet resolute. Be not habituated: the heavens are there as a permanently mysterious observable delight if not an eternal life, and what a beautifully daft thing it is to be here, to be our own favourite aliens. And be not afraid: fight your fights and stand your ground; young or old, you can light out for your own territory and find that the expected is only a satellite of the unexpected. In the fictional universe of Michael J. Farrell, the sun shines, having every alternative, on the everything new.

**John Kenny is John McGahern lecturer in Creative Writing at NUI Galway and academic director of the John McGahern Seminar & Summer School. His book *John Banville* was published recently by Irish Academic Press.**