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Cold Comfort

Antarctica

By Claire Keegan,
Faber and Faber
209pp, £9.99 in UK.

Despite our reputed native proficiency in the genre, the short story does not currently hold an assured position in Ireland. Only a handful of fiction writers persistently return to the shorter form and, though interest in the area is encouraged by numerous prizes and by ubiquitous thematic anthologies, the work involved tends to be regarded by authors as merely a preliminary to the more serious, and usually more lucrative business of novel writing.

The story collection as *début* is an established device for young writers to indicate some potential future directions. The fifteen stories of Claire Keegan's first book constitute the kind of promise made in the auspicious launching volumes of the likes of Bridget O'Connor, Colum McCann or Mike McCormack, and she comes armed with the Martin Healy Prize, the Francis MacManus Award and the William Trevor Prize. Varying in length from eight to twenty-five pages, but largely uniform in quality, seven of these stories are set in Ireland, six in America and two in England, and they utilise, on occasion, some deft touches of relevant idiom. Many are about extreme situations: The title story tells of the horrifying consequences of a married woman's decision to sleep with a total stranger; "You Can't Be Too Careful" is a story of murder and of how "strange shit happens when you've finished a bottle of bourbon"; and the volume concludes with a story about the bizarre and cruel fallout when a couple's child disappears. One piece, "The Singing Cashier", is particularly eerie in the way it incorporates the Fred West story.

With a carefully measured iciness, all the stories steer a sound course between, on the one hand, the laddish cynicism that passes for knowledgeability, and, on the other, the *faux* effeminacy that passes for empathy in so much contemporary Irish fiction. The integrity of emotion Keegan achieves, her combination of male and female personas and perspectives (significantly, the finest story here is titled "Men and Women"), is at times reminiscent of Carver or Annie Proulx. While incongruous lyrical phrases occasionally damage the homology between the personalities of her first-person narrators and their vocabularies, most of the stories are told in the third person, allowing for the use of a fairly spare and objective authorial voice.

Keegan is proficient at lengthy descriptive passages and scene-setting, something that will no doubt prove useful in the novel she is currently writing. It would be a pity if she didn't further develop the equal facility displayed here for quick portrayals of human obsession, if she were to henceforth leave the short story out in the cold.

John Kenny teaches in the English Department at NUI, Galway.