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The Art of Language

John Kenny

All Summer

By Claire Kilroy

Faber & Faber, 237pp, £10.99.

Claire Kilroy's first novel opens with an epigraphic definition: "**fugue:** *Psychol.* Loss of awareness of one's identity, often coupled with flight from one's usual environment". Kilroy isn't tempted by the obvious musical pun, but readers will be: *All Summer*, a story about pathological amnesia, is positively fugal in the rhythms and patterns developed over the course of its five sections and twenty-seven chapters.

A mellifluous prose style can too often be mere camouflage for novelistic inabilities; but Kilroy, while certain of her structures, motifs and themes are unoriginal, has strikingly combined a poetic sense of language with a commitment to the narrative thrills requisite for good storytelling.

Anna Hunt, the narrator, has inadvertently landed on an Irish island in winter, confused, uncomfortable with the locals, and certain of only one thing: that she is "waiting". After brief introductions to a delightful cast of island characters, most notably a solicitous priest, Anna takes us back over the course of the preceding nine months, the gestation period of a crisis of memory brought on by her participation in a grand theft.

Anna has a talismanic piece of canvas cut from one of three paintings stolen by her and menacing accomplices from something called the "PIOTR LUDOWSKI COLLECTION". As she tries to remember the recent past, sections written in the present tense describe the work carried out on a recovered Dutch painting, titled "Girl in the Mirror", by the conservator at the National Gallery. A parallel is sustained between the authentication and restoration of this damaged painting and Anna's attempts to make sense of things through retrospective narrative.

The events surrounding the theft, as they are steadily recollected, are pure cloak-and-dagger. Guarding a case of loot, Anna stumbles into a job at some livery stables before fleeing after an attempted strangling. She holes up in a hotel room with the violent Kel who may be her lover or brother. As she recovers after an apparent car crash at a suspiciously attentive stranger's house she tries to decide whether or not she has murdered someone. A mysterious key appears; there are revelations courtesy of newspaper cuttings; a vital safety-deposit box complete with alias-confirming passport is found; we finish with a stash of loot and a return to Anna's island.

The painting analogies that Kilroy develops are, in a way, even more familiar than her thriller-like design. Whatever her influences, she adheres to what is at this stage the well-established sub-genre of the painting-novel. Within this sub-genre, there is a preoccupation with the Dutch Golden Age: Gary Schwartz, Katharine Weber, Deborah Moggach and Tracy Chevalier, among others, have all written like novels in this area. Kilroy's version of the painting-novel is potentially tired; many of her passages seem to echo the *loci classici* of John Banville's *Frames Trilogy*, and her concern with the occult possibilities of paintings is particularly standard: "Are the paintings left in darkness when the gallery is closed? I image [*sic*] they must be. I would not like to be locked up with them when the lights are out".

It is a testimony to Kilroy's talents, therefore, that *All Summer* yet feels extraordinary. The material and the treatment may not be especially memorable, but the precision of the mood, the atmosphere, created by Kilroy is rare in Irish fiction. It is pointless seeking the effects in her choice of nouns, adjectives or adverbs. Somehow ineffably, Kilroy gives a palpable air to the world of her story, and there is a sense at the end that this world's smells, sounds, sights and textures have been experienced rather than simply read. We have here an unusual enough phenomenon: a novelist who knows the occult powers of descriptive language.

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