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Over There, and Over Here.

The Water Star

By Philip Casey

Picador

434pp, £14.99 in UK.

In fiction, it is entirely possible to be in at least two places at the one time. Having fantastically superimposed the worlds of Spain, Germany, Wexford and Dublin in his successful first novel, *The Fabulists* (1994), Philip Casey has now written a story set in post-war Britain that shuttles back and forth to Ireland in real and imaginary ways. Developed from a short story, 'The Mountain', *The Water Star* takes Croghan Kinsella, already mentioned in *The Fabulists*, and turns it into a symbol of the home Hugh Kinsella and his father Brendan wish to return to from a dilapidated London they are helping rebuild. Separating belligerently for a time, father and son gradually come together again after Hugh marries Elizabeth, a Londoner, and becomes a father himself, and Brendan takes up with Sarah, a Clare woman disowned years previously due to an illegitimate pregnancy.

Though there are some clangers ("Sure we're all the one lost tribe since the Famine"), and though Irish phrases are used in weighted and sometimes careless ways ('Eibhlín a rún' / "Eibhlín a rún"), Casey achieves a reasonable sense of Irish life in London. By including material on Elizabeth's family as well as Hugh's he manages to divert attention from many of the clichés of the subject of the ghettoed Irish abroad. He also nuances his sense of the post-war city generally by including an exiled German character called Karl.

The plot runs from July 1950 to August 1956 and each chapter is given a specific time frame along with a character-name heading which signals different viewpoints on the storyline. While allowing for concentrated character development, this multi-perspective machinery can prove problematic if it isn't properly oiled. Casey's structural ratchet is frequently too visible, and he ends up doubling on scenes without any significant variation and even single sentences are repeated. At times, the conglomeration of details appears directionless and formless, and the book generally could have done with tighter editing. Also, the exact sidereal import of the title and the intermittent references to astronomy is unclear.

The surprise of the book, however, is that it manages to succeed generally despite its particular failures. Even in his main poetry volume, *The Year of the Knife* (1991), Casey relies mainly on narrative line rather than on a specifically literary style, and *The Water Star* progresses not through any attention to mots justes but through the exponential effect of dialogue, characterisation, and finely observed milieu. There is something at once tough and endearing in Casey's predominant concerns with making his creations seem like real people, with delineating intimate human relationships, with being, essentially, emotive and compassionate. Even though melodrama rears its queasy head at times, the epilogue, titled 'Ireland', where we are moved to Wexford for a funeral, is touching and the final scene is the best in the entire story.

No one should read this book in search of lapidary sentences or shock tactics. Instead, the peculiarly quiet power of its tale should be enjoyed at the leisurely pace demanded by its length. It is perhaps a good thing to be sometimes driven to a blurbish cliché: *The Water Star* is, somehow, haunting.

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