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Writing on the body

John Kenny

Watermark

By Seán O'Reilly

The Stinging Fly Press, 152pp. €25/€10

It hurts nicely in the head now to read Seán O'Reilly. The brain reels with impressions and evocations barely hinted at before receding in the agglutination of new ones. The temples pulse from tracing verbal hints, plot outlines and character silhouettes. The eyes strain from imagistic short phrases and headily descriptive long lines that roll on without the brakes of proper punctuation. It all amounts to a kind of you-fill-in-the-gaps vertigo generated by a devotee of innovative and complex prose who is simultaneously one of our least condescending writers.

O'Reilly has written three almost universally well-received books of fiction under Faber & Faber's venerable wing, and it is thus a publishing feat that the fledgling Stinging Fly Press has chosen as its first volume a novel that is, though relatively short, perhaps O'Reilly's most daring book to date. From the stories of *Curfew* (2000), through the somewhat autobiographical *Love and Sleep* (2002), to last year's *The Swing of Things*, O'Reilly has developed a style which strikingly combines the sensory and sensual (*Love and Sleep* was subtitled *A Romance*) with the fetid, the manky, and the vaguely obscene. With *Watermark*, however, we are entering a wholly different realm of the full-frontal.

The epigraph, a piece of what might be called poetry-trouv e from some Dublin graffiti, sets the tone exactly: "my hand between my legs/cover you with my wet warm pulse/feel how high I am/then my silent lips suck you til/you float back down". The eponymous watermark is the face of an absent man named Martin, and the watermarker and rememberer is Veronica whose pandemic desire for Martin and other men is related, with occasional first- and second-person breaks, in an intimate third-person voice.

Even with concentrated reading, the sequence of events and settings this voice might be constructing remains elusive. This is immaterial. O'Reilly's fiction is always embedded in an exterior world, but his foundational interest in the half-awake, half-hallucinatory state of consciousness that carries the same existential yokes around with it regardless of environment dominates here. The best way to approach the story is to keep in mind Veronica's account of her visit to the opera with Martin on her thirtieth birthday: "There was no need for names or words or explanations. Words were little jewels and brooches and cufflinks ... the weight of those magnificent brocaded curtains suspended in the great arch – it had to conceal a place where only passion was real".

In the fantastical account of Veronica's passion, some useful points of comparison are suggested by the mixture of masochism with psychosexual inflictions that stop short of outright sadism, particularly as these are featured towards the end where an orgy in a limousine turns to poeticised carnage: with shades of James Kelman, we are somewhere in the darkling territories of such works as Bataille's *Story of the Eye*

(1928), Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1954), J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) or Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

The singularity of *Watermark*, particularly in the Irish context, should not be leavened however. Sexy, erotic, risqué, lecherous, salacious, pornographic: these are the appropriate yet approximate assessments. Participatory - in the detailed accuracy of observation - rather than voyeuristic, calculated rather than facilely abandoned in its depiction of the conscious prostrations the sexualised human is capable of, this novel is lusty rather than simply lustful. While sex is to some extent portrayed as a creeping distraction, wants and needs that are "deeper than dreams" are granted a de-sublimated, flesh-affirming actuality ("Love is not a story"). At no point in the voracious rutting does Veronica appear more animal than human; despite the transports of bodily excitement ("We wanted out of our skins") the yearning is never allowed to take flight from the corporeal female moment.

In all his fiction O'Reilly is serious to the bone in conception and execution. There is no vanilla writing in the sex-scenes here; equally importantly, neither is there the older wink-and-nod nor the newer tickle-me-bollix sex of some Irish fiction. At the more tame scenes, Molly Bloom would blush. In even her down moments, Veronica's earthiness is in full seed: "With a cup of tea, Veronica sits in the garden and waits for the grass to eat her, the birds to peck out her eyes, the slugs to slide between her toes. The autumn is coming, the wind and storm and rain that were supposed to mark his return. The thick jelly summer heat has sprouted little tails and swam away, all her dreams turned into frogs lost in the mucky back lanes and hopping stupidly across the motorway."

O'Reilly has never been concerned with endearing his characters to readers, but, while Veronica is as emotionally fraught and messy as his other principals, this phantasmagoric piece of prose-poetry is ultimately, despite a searing end, a moving celebration, beyond mere exoticism, of one woman's bodily appetites. Read and reread and reach for your superlatives: in all senses, *Watermark* is a sheer physical experience.

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