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Pictures of Emergency Dublin

John Kenny

Fillums: A Novel

By Hugh Leonard

Methuen, 232pp. £15.99

One of the standard explanations for the relatively late development of the novel in Ireland is that the long steady view necessary to sustain full-length fiction can be disabled by a native preference for the more short-sighted containment of the anecdote. Despite our almost compensatory current obsession with the saleable novel, there is nothing endemically amiss with anecdotes in prose; they have their own aesthetic possibilities, as evinced by writers from William Carleton, to Somerville and Ross, to Benedict Kiely.

A collection of anecdotes, however, even if interrelated, even if populated by the same main characters and narrator, will never a novel make. Despite his sub-titular banner, this third full-length work of fiction from Hugh Leonard is not a novel; while it seems to have fallen uncomfortably between generic seats, it comes closest to a loose collection of fictionalised anecdotes inspired by the author's own established passion for the related domains of stage and screen.

Fillums is a promisingly idiomatic title (for the linguistic record, the “u” here, aiding the movement from tongue and teeth to lips, is called an epenthetic vowel), and Leonard carries through in the sense that this book combines an almost overwhelming love of movie lore with a stylistic dedication to Irish phraseology. The story begins well: In a preliminary chapter or “Trailer”, an unnamed narrator provides a quick account of the life and work of one Peregrine Perry, a Dublin playwright and film buff whose “cosiness and parish pumpery” has fallen out of critical favour. Perry dies in 1972, having donated his papers to the National Library, and the remainder of the book is the narrator's “cobbled together” collection of these.

While Leonard's last novel, *A Wild People* (2001), was a *roman à clef* about film and 1980s Ireland, the well-worn book-within-a-book device is used here in a more direct way to talk about Dublin's cultural scene during the Emergency: there are references to Seán O'Faoláin, Patrick Kavanagh, Behan and Flann, and, especially, to Mac Liammóir and Edwards. The action centres on the “betwixt-and-between” town of Drane, a thinly disguised version of Leonard's hometown of Dalkey, where Perry and his wife, Babs, have recently arrived and where a series of more or less humorous incidents occurs.

Though these tales of amateur dramatics, of a sexually dubious embassy German, of an overly zealous Canon, of film smuggling and wireless sabotage, are generally organized into chapter clusters, the book lacks overall novelistic cohesion to the extent that, by the unrounded ending, it is difficult to care about Perry or any of his retinue. Whether in drama or prose, Leonard has frequently drawn heavily on his own life; indeed, when he has been most patently self-reflective - in the autobiographies *Home Before Night* and *Out After Dark* (1979, 1989) - he has produced his best prose. But, the

author's warranted personal fondness for his subject matter aside, *Fillums* maunders on too much in the belief that sheer enthusiasm can justify endless potted film summaries and that linguistic folderol, or "overdone Dublinese", can support a plotless cast.

Surely deliberately light in style, this book of elongated anecdotes is a harmless diversion. It is equally light in its thematic engagements, and those interested in Ireland and cinema during the 1940s can read it without fear of intellectual damage.

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