

Cooperation Strengthened. In spite of its thorough-going method of little concession to rose-tinted views, the book maintains a breezy, even musical tone, supported by the unshakable faith that cooperation positively enhances the quality of social life. 'Could community itself become a vocation?', Sennett asks (p. 273). Critically inspired by Hannah Arendt, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, he imagines community as 'a process of coming into the world, a process in which people work out both the value of face-to-face relation and the limits of those relations' (ibid.).

The book ends with a coda on Montaigne's cat ('when I am playing with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me?'). Musing on the mysterious life of others (we don't know what goes on in their minds, be they cats or humans), the final pages call for a social and political engagement from the ground up. Here the supreme value is empathy, and the greatest art conversation. These values and practices are not envisaged by the social and political order but happen at grass-roots level. There is great hope, Sennett implies: it lies in the fact that 'as social animals we are capable of cooperating more deeply than the existing social order envisions' (p. 280). ●

Send Me Shivers

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing: A Novel

By: Eimear McBride

Faber, London, 2014, 224pp

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Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint.

(Julia Kristeva)

What happens if a piece of writing does not stoop to the Book Club qualifications of biography, grand historical yarns, plush rehabs sagas and adultery tales in even plusher surroundings? What if it refuses to slog along linearly redemptive 'psychological portrayals' and 'nature descriptions' served in either journalistic, sub-Nabokovian or third-rate populist plodding prose justified by that staggeringly insolent conjecture called 'This Is What the Public Wants'? What if the writing itself summons us readers to crawl out of our absorption in managerially redemptive tales, and reminds us that the very fact that we have bought the book might

hint at the fact that we are, at heart, adventurers of the spirit rather than consumers? What if the book presents us with a disquieting blend of illness, early death, sex, religion, rape, suicide, incest, the general fucked-upness of a society crushed under the yoke of a stultifying morality? What if all of the above is heart-breaking and tenderly suffused in elegiac, lyrical fraternal love and loss?

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing has all of the above traits and more. And this is what happened to it: (a) it was thoroughly ignored for a decade, rejected by all of the publishers in the land; (b) it was taken on by the audacious Beggar Galley Press in Norwich; (c) it began to be reviewed positively by some reviewers, including Anne Enright, who first murmured the words 'genius' and 'old-fashioned'. Also around this time, the pathetically inept label 'stream of consciousness' began to stick, a term which in England is destined to any non-Dickensian or non-Orwellian novel that does not plead allegiance to either Saint Charles or Saint George and to any writer who dares to use (i.e. Virginia Woolf) free indirect speech; (d) it won one literary prize after another, and was praised for its imaginative and linguistic daring; (e) it got 'Fabered', i.e. crowned by one of the most prestigious publishers; (f) its novelty, as well as its intractability as a dangerous object, was 'understood' and canonized as an imaginative if hybrid offshoot of Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien.

If your reading diet consists almost exclusively of journalistic, hyper-conventional prose or, worse, of the staggeringly dreary clichés churned out in the majority of psychology and mental health 'literature', then this book will be a shock: in turn, the apparition of a numen or the sighting of a monster – or both. Once you decide to stay with its syncopated, truncated rhythm and with its pre-cognitive, pre-conscious idiom, the work shines through as a kind of short-hand naturalistic tale.

The language may be atypical, but the narrative is straightforward, depicting a young woman's relationship with a brother affected by a brain tumour. In the tradition of the naturalistic tale, it traces a downside trajectory towards annihilation, in this case via the route of *abjection*, i.e. 'the state of being cast off'. The term 'abjection' belongs to the European tradition, and was most notably articulated by Julia Kristeva. Yet as far as I can tell, only one reviewer, Kerryn Goldsworthy in the *Sydney Review of Books*, was alert to this association. I wonder why that is: could it be that there is more to Euro-scepticism than populists in tweed jacket, corduroys and brogues holding a pint of bitter? There seems to be a palpable terror to get one's insular 'cultural values' and literary taste soiled by perilous unorthodoxy. It's just about OK with the Irish, in spite of all their dangerous liaisons with thwarted

religiosity and perturbed sexuality. After all, it's been quite a while since Joyce and Beckett, canonized by academia, finished off by copious footnotes, and duly patronized by every scribbler in the land. But *abjection*? This is simply outside the cultural radar of the *bien pensant*. Like it or not, the literature of abjection comprises of the best of modern literature: Dostoevsky, Proust, Artaud, Céline, Kafka, all echoed in the novel (at least to this reader) alongside the 'Continental' (and equally Catholic) sensibilities of Bataille, Genet, Pasolini and the post-Sadean tradition. If this is too daunting, too 'foreign' a proposition, it may then be easier to head for the Yorkshire moors and the world of Emily Brontë. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is Brontëan in its unceremonious appeal to chaos, to a decentring of characters and a strong hold on *affect*. Reading it, I was reminded of Andrea Arnold's remarkable 2011 film rendition of *Wuthering Heights*.

McBride evokes an impersonal world of pain and exuberance – what lazy religious people call 'evil'. Here, all 'characters' eventually fall, whether seized by death or wheezing in the mesmeric syntax. The Girl's repeated attempts at baptism are the unholy enactment of everyone going down, isolated and alone, their descent punctuated by Hail Marys and Lord's Prayers. Early in the novel we find the first plunge in the lake, an anticipation of what is to come:

I step there. Cool and cold and colder. Outside the leather. Coming in over my white socks. Feel it rising. Catch my ankles. Send me tremors. Send me shivers. I know what I'm doing. Mud suckering round my toes. If I stand. Still. The reeds glass bend a little. Shiver winter. There's a soft cold breeze. I search the quiet out for footsteps. For the armies. Coming. To slither under water here with me. Those spirits smell and see them I do in my sleep. In dreams of all the things that in my life will come to me. Take hold. I fear not. Hear not. See not. Feel the rap on my knuckles of the water going in. It soak my coat up. Up my leg up. Feel it there inside my thigh. So cold. So ice and glass and see though things and friendly hands. Between my secret tight shut legs the water. Lurking brownly seep inside me. Drag me down. I do not. I know not. I know not what I do. It is not that. It is not drowning I have come for. Not for death or any other violent thing that I could do to myself. I am here this hour for. Storage I think. Cleaning and cold storage. I will gust myself out between my legs. Whoever let the poison in. The dirt retreat. The thing I want I should not get. I'll put my head in for discreet baptise.

The above scene comes just before the Girl's first sexual encounter with her uncle: abuse, no doubt, but detailed along an intricate arc that does not allow for knee-jerk moral responses: the space of literature (and art), from which psychotherapy can learn in nuance and complexity.

In writing about Genet, Sartre listed abjection as one of the

ways of experiencing the world, as legitimate, in his view, as the Stoics' refusal of the world, as Cartesian doubt and Husserlian *epoché*. He saw it as one methodical conversion lived in pain and pride which does not lead to the transcendental consciousness of Husserl, the abstract thinking of the Stoics or the *cogito* of Descartes, but to an individual existence lived at a high degree of tension and lucidity. His suggestion was scandalous at the time he wrote it. It is even more so now, in a psychological landscape arguably saturated by dreams of control, sanitization and a general pathologizing of ordinary humans by other humans in the 'caring professions'. Sartre's (as well as Kristeva's) articulation of abjection is crucial to therapists who aspire to work beyond the cosy domain of cognitive reprogramming and ersatz religion and are not shy to work within areas where the suspension of judgement and cultural prejudice are paramount.

The ending (I won't spoil it for the reader) got me thinking: easy denouement, baptism into infinity through muck and slime, towards a redemption of sorts? At any rate, it represents a sombre step away from the bigotry and pain and narrow-mindedness of an Irish upbringing. The other option? Getting the hell out, like Joyce did. Or Beckett, who petulantly said he preferred occupied Paris to narrow-minded Dublin. Like McBride herself, who went to live in Norwich. Yours truly knows what it's like, since he left bigoted Southern Italy first for the world, then for London town. 📍

Erratum

From the last issue, Volume 41, No. 3, Manu Bazzano's paper, 'The poetry of the world', page 10, column 2, lines 34–5: where it says 'given the latter's sincere amazement...', it should have been '**the former**', i.e. referring to Montaigne rather than Descartes.