

The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan -Guardian Review - Justine Jordan 20.9.2013

Set in recession-struck Ireland, this virtuoso debut novel pieces together a fractured portrait of a community in shock

The recession has hit rural Ireland, and "the sky is falling down". Through 21 different voices, Donal Ryan's virtuoso debut novel pieces together a fractured portrait of a community in shock. The local building firm that was the motor of its former roaring prosperity has collapsed, and crooked boss Pokey Burke has fled the country, leaving his employees betrayed as well as broke: here, the global crisis wears the face of your neighbour. His foreman Bobby, once the village's golden boy, is now "filling up with fear like a boat filling with water"; Pokey's father is too ashamed to level with the men his son let down.



We hear from builders and their wives, anxious mothers and fathers, young people looking to London or Australia for a future (like "a modern incarnation of the poor tenant farmer", as sarcastic Brian puts it). Dissatisfied single mother Réaltín is trapped on a ghost estate with a crippling mortgage, the houses around her unfinished and unsold; Siberian Vasya, one of Pokey's workers, is stuck much further from home. A child mimics her parents' rage and fear; a ghost sets down the things he couldn't say in life. With each internal monologue we deeply inhabit the speaker's confusion and uncertainty, yet also gain a new angle of perspective on the other characters. There's a powerful sense of place and shared history binding Ryan's many voices, their inner and outer selves, distilling a linguistic richness comparable to *Under Milk Wood*.

"You can kind of lose yourself very quick, when all about you changes and things you thought you always would have turn out to be things you never really had, and things you were sure you'd have in the future turn out to be on the far side of a big, dark mountain that you have no hope of ever climbing over." What Ryan catches so well is the internal response to external disaster: there's a queasy, fatalistic lack of surprise among the villagers that the bubble of good fortune has burst, twisted up with "the whole mad Irish country thing" of fearing being taken for a fool, and the bitter pleasure of being proved right by disaster. Bobby is so lovable to the other villagers that some of them almost hate him for it, but the darkness at the centre of his life is a poisonous father willing him to fail, just as the father's boyhood joy was crushed by his own father before. (He got his revenge by "drinking out the farm" he inherited: literally pissing the money up against a wall.) The violence of disappointed hopes and of dysfunctional families become fatally entwined.

Damage is everywhere, from abuse passed down the generations to the shadow of schizophrenia. Ryan reaches back to the archetypes of Irish literature - the terrible father, the wanton country girl; the peat-black comedy of Flann O'Brien and dramatic rhythms of Yeats and Synge - as well as more recent traditions. There's a strong flavour of Patrick McCabe to the least successful plot strand, about a child kidnap.

Each character is halting and uncertain, puzzling out their place in a changed world: each heart is spinning. "Why can't I find the words?" asks Bobby, struggling to articulate his hatred for his father and his love for his wife. He has been silenced repeatedly throughout his life, and as the book ends is lost for words again, in the worst possible circumstances. What is so special about Ryan's novel is that it seems to draw speech out of the deepest silences; the testimony of his characters rings rich and true - funny and poignant and banal and extraordinary - and we can't help but listen.

Was It Any Use? Donal Ryan's 'Spinning Heart', Daphne Kalotraymarch, 21.3. 2014 NYT

In Donal Ryan's compact debut novel, "The Spinning Heart," effects of the economic downturn ripple through an Irish village whose laborers, flush during the boom, have been left in the lurch now that the local developer, Pokey Burke, has skipped town.

The spinning heart of the title, a decorative ornament on a cottage gate, "skewered on a rotating hinge," is an apt image both for the town's collective heartache and for the narrative progression, which moves continuously from one villager to the next, 21 narrators (and chapters) in all. Each speaker has been wounded – by the economy as well as by grim parents, cruel lovers, violence, mental illness and the grief of accidental loss.

At the book's figurative heart is the construction foreman Bobby Mahon, a young husband and father whose moral decency anchors the story. Both his goodness and his brogue lend the novel an old-fashioned, storybook quality ("He drank out the farm to spite his father") that overlaps convincingly with mentions of Facebook, "prefab" doors and dubious investments in Dubai to create an affecting portrayal of contemporary rural Ireland.

With the barest thread of a story line, the book suggests an intimate oral history of a moment in time, its rotation of voices – sharing regrets and desires along with town gossip – reminiscent of William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying" and Edgar Lee Masters's "Spoon River Anthology." Instead of Masters's cemetery, these individuals populate a metaphorical ghost town, haunted by the dead, the departed and phantom prospects that have vanished overnight. Indeed, one character, the young single mother Realtin, lives in a "ghost estate" – an empty residential development where she is stuck with a hefty mortgage and an unfinished house.

The extensive cast spins variations on a theme, "sodden stories" of fathers who terrorize their wives and children, and mothers who rack up pregnancies for the government's monthly 150 euros per child. While the material often feels familiar (we even meet the kindhearted town floozy, now aging and abandoned), Ryan writes with compassion, honesty and an appealing deadpan humor, as when one unfortunate character confesses, "The biggest mistake I made when I was younger was getting tattoos all over my face."

These are men and women with hard lives and soft hearts, many speaking in lively, unaffected idiom. "My tear bags are fierce close to my eyes these days," the father of Pokey Burke says. When the vernacular risks wearing out its welcome, Ryan intersperses more plain-spoken narrators like Vasya, a laborer from Siberia now left to scrounge for work. We hear Vasya's fully articulated thoughts rather than the broken English he speaks, allowing for wonderful descriptions of, for instance, "a city that was spreading outwards like a dirty puddle."

I felt some alarm when I realized I would continue to meet one new narrator after the next for the entire book, like a long receiving line at a party – but it is to the author's credit that I rarely had to check back to keep everyone straight. There is also the pleasant anticipation of wondering how each new character will fit into Ryan's mosaic.

Most chapters are brief and hit similar notes, each speaker summarizing what has occurred, with predrawn conclusions that quell dramatic tension and limit the story's elasticity. Even when a kidnapping and a murder are introduced, the information arrives secondhand, so that we witness few actual scenes and little dialogue or action. But perhaps this lack of true forward motion is the point. These people have been left in a rut, spinning their wheels as well as their hearts. Depression has caused them to lose their former sense of themselves. One older character, longing for "a time when killing was for good, for God and country," reflects: "That time is long gone. But aren't we still the same people?" <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/books/review/donal-ryans-spinning-heart.html>