WRITER BEHAVING BADLY

Launch speech of *Three Houses in Rome* by Órfhlaith Foyle

Speech by Alan McMonagle

Hello, hello, you’re all very welcome and I’m delighted chuffed honoured to be here lending a hand launch Órfhlaith Foyle’s new collection *Three Houses in Rome* into the world. What a beauty it is. Love the cover artwork by Tríona Walsh. Hats off to, once again Lisa Frank & John Walsh from Doire Press, an indie press with a big heart producing stellar work.

I have a title scrawled on this introduction: writer behaving badly. It’s a phrase I offer out tentatively and cautiously lest it be completely misconstrued and Órfhlaith end up accused of all sorts of nefarious shenanigans at her book launch: drinking herself silly, thrashing the townhall bar; and when it’s her own turn at the lectern, having a go at everyone here present.

I remember Órfhlaith saying to me on one of regular get-togethers in Sheridan’s or Ground & Co or whatever den we were currently retiring to in order to make right the literary ails of the world, Alan, she said to me, writing is about taking risks. And really this is what I think the ‘writer behaving badly’ comment alludes to.

I’m also talking about Órfhlaith Foyle’s writerly sensibility; and how she sets about her craft; the startling array of characters she creates; how she enters the worlds of these characters; and how these characters behave, or to put it more accurately, misbehave. I’m talking about Órfhlaith‘s imagination; it’s ferocious and fearless, and I for one am terrified of it. I’m talking about the way she uses language – a wonderful blend of the familiar and the surprising; I’m talking about the skewed and off-kilter ways in which she approaches story. I’m talking about the tone that emerges. Let me put it this way:

If a very early-career Ian McEwan got together with Franz Kafka and Flannery O’Connor and somehow a lovechild resulted, and that lovechild grew up to be a writer, I think that writer might be Órfhlaith Foyle. Throw in the loneliness of Jean Rhys, the twisted fairytale atmospheres of Angela Carter, the harum-scarum of Shirley Jackson, the sass of Grace Paley, and the picture is more or less complete.

The French essayist Montaigne said the ideal marriage is between a blind wife and a deaf husband. However, there are very different varieties of marriages, unions, encounters, coming-togethers at large in this honeymoon-come-nightmare suite of stories by Órfhlaith Foyle.

Because the writing is not for the faint-hearted. In these stories you will find no cleansing of the soul, no alleviation of a tortured conscience. Straightforward redemption? Forget it.

Foyle delights in bending and re-shaping and subverting reality; she delights in allowing the extraordinary invade the ordinary. It’s as though she has a stated mission to upend what is taken for granted. The Italian-American poet and Dante translator John Ciardi believes a poem should be allowed fib its way into the truth, and obviously this can also be applied to prose. Foyle’s is an extreme version of the truth; that is to say, an extreme form of search for the truth. And a valid search, nonetheless.

Some of these stories read like confessions; haughty and brazen confessions, loaded with self-justification. The author conjures unforgettable images. Take this image from **Well, Then**, a story involving a confession that unravels inside the Basilica in Knock:

Two old women accosted Sadbh and she gazed at their white hair under old-fashioned hats while their necks reminded her of screws twisting into their old, smelling, tweed coat collars. Flannery O’Connor would have been most pleased to fashion such a sentence.

Or this from: **Life or Theatre** – a story in homage to artist Charlotte Salomon:

Over the days, I sat on my bed and looked through my window. Grosspapa went for many walks. My mind was blank white, hot white. From my bed, I imagined how my foot would feel on the window’s ledge, the scratch of wood on my instep. I would have to crouch a little, hold my breath, catch my breath, then fall. I imagined the slam of my body on the hard ground. My teeth would jump from their gums! (right there: that blend of the familiar and surprising)

Sentences such as these are everywhere in this collection. To me, it feels like the prose is determined to shave to the bone and then keep going. And yet one of the great achievements of the collection is enlisting sympathy for what is essentially a not fully formed, warped, and broken cast of characters.

Many of the stories take place – or at least begin – in the grounded past and far flung geographical locales. But you quickly get the feeling that Foyle isn’t really interested in time and space per se; rather the where and when of her stories provide convenient departure points for the troubled landscapes (literal, figurative, metaphysical) within her characters. Her disparate locales serve to facilitate more pressing concerns as we edge ever closer to the deep well of her writing. Stories such as **Love in Moscow,** **In Lorient** and the title story itself being cases in point.

The short story thrives on concision, brevity, implication, intimation. At times we – the readers - are invited to complete scenes, fill in the endings. Of course the last thing Foyle wants to do is charm with tidy wraps and cosy conclusions. We are never allowed sit back in comfort. These are unsettling trips, and more often than not, we end up in places we might rather avoid. Such is Foyle’s confidence (and/or faith) in her reader, however, and in her own linguistic abilities, here masterfully suggestive, here like jolts of shock therapy cranked to eleven, we find ourselves filling in the white spaces, and completing the dark canvases. These are nightmare stories and as can be the way of nightmares, what we conjure ourselves is always going to be more frightening than what can be depicted by another.

You don’t have to read beyond the opening story **A Bit Bold But Nice Really** to get a demonstration of Foyle’s abilities. On the surface, a story of two young sisters at their grandparents. There is chitter-chat, humour, a vague sense of unease. Yet, when it comes, the narrative swerve has the impact of a wrecking ball. Deft as it is sinister, the unfolding nightmare then proceeds masterfully, giving us just enough as the author puts her faith in the reader to complete the picture.

The wonderful British mythologist, Martin Shaw, talks about story not so much in terms of what is it about or what has happened; the important question for Shaw is where do you find yourself in a story. The exciting thing about an Órfhlaith Foyle story for me is that you can never be fully sure where you are. It’s that prevailing unease, that sense of mystery, that particular energy she manages to conjure that endows the writing with urgency, intensity, and makes it so captivating.

Imagination is doing so much work in Foyle’s writing. And it is almost always in service to story. The prose has an emotional economy that is utterly beguiling. The characters are, to a man, woman, and child, damaged, broken, shattered people. They have been dragged, stripped bare, ripped apart and must forage in the scrap heap for what little remains of their fragile psyches. Altogether then, it makes for a set of encounters, relationships, situations and circumstances that pares back the skin, open flesh, and exposes a dark heart or what has once passed for one. These are raw, strange, necessary stories, deep immersions into the psyche replete with narratives deployed with an energy as persuasive as they are inevitable. And if there is something to be gleaned from Foyle’s broken characters it is that, for some of us anyway, every day is the first day.

It’s not all doom. There’s a wonderful note of possibility, of hope, in the tender exchanges that conclude **It Can Be Good**. Foyle’s trademark mischievousness is very much to the fore in the Dylan Thomas-inspired bar story **Dear Dylan**.

And a breezy tone steps right up to the gates of hell as Eva Braun dares to defy in the sublime highwire act of a story that is **Frau Hitler**.

Time and time again this is what Foyle manages. A highwire act. Ache and edge. Humour and pathos. Vigour and sass. The exalted and the base. The spiritual and carnal. The tender and the grotesque.

And I cannot go way today without mention of food. Every time I took up this book within a few pages, as well as being terrified, I became very hungry.

Here is the merest sample from the goodies in store for the food-loving reader:

Roast poultry, fatted cow, coffee mousse, raspberry trifle, baklava, nougat, halva, dates, almonds, honey and cardamon; shortcake, haggis, boiled meat with potatoes. A spatchcocked cub, roast carrots, a bed of nsima porridge. Tomatoes; aubergines with fresh mint and cheese; sardines and wine; plates of eggs; morello cherry jam… Interested readers should direct themselves to the story **Hail the Great Samosa** for more.

Foyle’s characters hover in a no-man’s land between being and not being; captivity and release; departure and return. It’s almost as though they do not know how to possess themselves, and it is within these ambiguous states of uncertainty and isolation and not-knowing that Foyle conjures remarkable fictions…

All of which sends me back to a line used to describe someone in a very early Órfhlaith Foyle story: a someone who is described as having pathos and a shiver of gore.O Foyle is not a well-behaved writer and I applaud and admire her for it. Go on, then, take a risk. Dare yourselves to seek out these intriguingly rendered stories. **End**