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# Review of Colum McCann's *Everything in This Country Must*

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Colum McCann was raised in Dublin, but has lived in the United States for most of his adult life. His writing is trickled with the anguish and desire that often stems from a young Irish writer's pen; one of confusion and longing, of questions and ideas. He sets himself as a young exiled writer and after jumping from job to job, (not to mention a two year bike trip around the States) he settled into New York City and hacked out a life of writing while looking towards the east, across the vast Atlantic Ocean.

His latest book is no exception to these rules. After winning many prizes for his collection of stories called *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and following it up with two novels *(Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness),* he returns with *Everything in This Country Must,* a collection which seems to be trying to meld the novel and short story mediums. The collection includes two short stories and a novella which all try to relay the anguish of political turmoil in Northern Ireland through the eyes of a working class family. It is Ireland as a whole that McCann seems to be interested in. He wants to show us an Irish family straight out of the Ireland that he knows and holds dear. In order to achieve a certain reality, the writer feels he has to physically leave Ireland in order to write about it. In an interview, McCann said of his exile, "I just felt I had to move in a different direction. Now, in retrospect, I can think of it as a conscious decision to break away, but at the time I didn't know why I was leaving." [1] Like Joyce and Beckett before him, McCann also preferred to look to Ireland from another shore.

"I was wearing Stevie's jacket," writes McCann "but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die since everything in this country must." McCann often uses the struggles of Ireland as a backdrop to add to his quite real and telling portrayal of characters thrown into situations which are

often beyond their control. Instead of telling us about the political and urban travails of bloody IRA confrontations, he writes on a more personal level and allows the subtle intensity to increase as the stories wind themselves into sudden climaxes and stylistic departures.

In the title story a young Irish girl and her father try to rescue a prized horse from a rushing river. When many attempts to save the horse fail, British soldiers come to the aid of the Catholic man and his gracious daughter. The room becomes silently charged as the father recalls the time when his wife and son were struck and killed by an army truck and now that same enemy had saved something that could also have been lost.

Father sat down on the riverbank and said, Sit down Katie, and I could hear in father's voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy's and Fiacha's coffins, more sadness than the day after they hit by the army true down by the glen, more sadness than the day when the judge said, Nobody is guilty it's just a tragedy, more sadness than even that day and all the days that follow.

McCann has a tremendous knack for combining something as simple as the silence and sanctity of tea time with a religiously charged instance of fear and pain. After the horse has been rescued and everyone is sipping their tea, the real story begins. The relationship between the girl and her father is quite honest and comes in the form of glances and descriptions of a subtle yet unique respect. For example, after the horse has been saved from the rain and rushing water, the father is almost too shocked to speak. He slowly dries his lone soaked daughter off in the curtains of the front window because the army men have used all the towels in the house. All the while the tension is slowly mounting; a devastating silence.

In 'Wood" a mother and son mill logs for a Protestant march, needing the money because the father or wage earner is lying in bed, recovering from a stroke. Again the silence comes into McCann' s world. The mother and son sneak behind the father's back even watching that their footprints and tractor marks in the snow are cleared behind them. Again the tension begins to mount as the father is slowly nursed back to health and the time comes near when a man will visit the barn and pay for the logs for his political rally. McCann's use of tension to display a certain mood is quite interesting. His stylistic movement towards the climax is understandable, yet often quite unnerving. There are moments When we see the father almost beginning to understand the deception around him that the reader wants to somehow warn the other characters. McCann wants us to also realize that those characters already know of such plot points and are now trying to decide how to take action, if any.

In the novella (which literally translates from the Italian as "a little new thing"[2]), "Hunger Strike," the young protagonist is compelled to mimic the experience of his uncle, an IRA prisoner on a hunger strike. The mother of the story moves her young son, for obvious security reasons, from the north to the south, a maneuver which creates a sense of resentment in the boy. The narration is direct, but is filled with beautiful language in order to create another tension between the boy's thoughts and his mother's desire to hold her boy from the fray.

This novella seems to be the most politically charged work in McCann's collection. After many years of trying to protect her son from the world of his uncle, the adolescent is drawn to the courage of the man starving himself in protest. The hunger strike goes on and the relationship between the boy and his mother becomes more and more strained almost to the point of deterioration. McCann shows a gut-wrenching immortality tale filled with violence, but countered with a mother's smothering love.

McCann tells us these stories in simple, almost minimalistic prose, reminiscent of early Raymond Carver. The tension that is created is similar to Carver's anti-heroes, but the political anguish rages outside. There is a haunting, tragic style of prose at work in these tales. I feel that this is a major reason for the popularity of McCann and how it has grown in recent years. I also attribute this popularity to the state of the Irish writer living in exile gazing back at his birth nation and recording his thoughts. In an interview, McCann responded to this

question of the popularity of Irish writing in America. "I think it's dangerous how 'contemporary' and 'hip' Irish writing has become. Everywhere you tum Irish writers are talking about big advances, and everyone is writing screenplays."[3] It seems that this new found popularity is something that many Irish writers question. Again we see a world of questions and ideas, confusion and longing; fodder for a new book of Irish fiction.

## Notes

1 Atlantic Unbound: Interviews. "Some Strange Vessel." Katie Bolick Interview with Colum McCann. July 16, 1998.1-9. www.theatlantic.com/ unbound/ factfict/ ff9807.htm

2 Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 7th edition. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999. p. 190. McCann's use of the novella style brings up many interesting points for the "shape" of his fiction considering that his first book was stories and his next two were novels. There may be a desire' to bridge the gap between these two similar forms.

3 Atlantic Unbound: Interviews. "Some Strange Vessel." Katie Bolick Interview with Colum McCann. July 16, 1998.1-9. www.theatlantic.com/ unbound/ factfict/ ff9807.htm