

A Belfast Girl

Maggi Kerr Peirce

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Maggi Kerr Peirce presents vignettes of life in Belfast before sectarian violence. With a penchant for well-turned observations and charismatic humor, she crisply details childhood encounters in the years after the Great Depression, with a few stories taking place on the brink of, or during, adulthood. Kerr paints a close-knit, domestic world that often appears gentle, but does not shy from darker realities like World War II and a neighborhood house rumored to be haunted by an abused child. These piercing recollections combine youthful wonderment with hindsight to provide eloquent insights on family.

Raised in a Protestant home as the youngest daughter of a mother who was “difficult to live with” and a “sober” father, the author portrays her parents with affection and admirable restraint. Stories seldom dwell on the family’s shortcomings, and instead reveal members as distinct, rounded individuals. Kerr’s mother, in particular, emerges as a woman with a flair for lively language, advising the author to “Love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe.”

Stories that consider beloved objects, from a bisque doll in “The Most Beautiful Doll in the World” to a drawing room curio in “A Little China Figure,” skillfully capture period details through everyday moments. More richly layered stories widen in focus to consider disillusionments, including “The Large Stuffed Rabbit,” in which an adult’s promise turns out to have been a lie, and “The Secret Place,” in which an older child’s cruel comment ruins the magical ambiance of an outdoor hideout. Comedic events—such as the author’s impersonation of an Italian woman at a dance, and an ungrateful young American visitor’s stay with the author’s family—coexist with serious considerations of human behavior, as in “John Knox, Odd Jobs Man,” a story that recounts a scene of potential danger.

A Belfast Girl shows traces of the author’s background as an oral storyteller. Stories unfold with brisk timing, and often conclude with succinct wisdom gained long after the events depicted. Kerr handles such moments with natural ease, avoiding the didactic or epiphanic revelation. Many stories hinge on an image that eventually becomes a memorable hook, including a painstakingly embroidered apron in “Two Gifts,” a shocking bridal gift in “The Awakening,” and a highwayman’s hat in “Mein Hut Er Hat Drei Ecken.”

The personable, colloquial quality of the writing, however, should not be mistaken for simple entertainment. These stories are quickly absorbed but not quickly forgotten; each contains moments that leave one nodding in recognition, while opening windows on a singular city.

KAREN RIGBY (November 25, 2013)

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