

Short Stories

Irish Girl

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Bold, exact, and unflinching, Tim Johnston's second book-length release is a display of adept, agile storytelling. Winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in short fiction, judged this year by Janet Peery, this book omits superfluously clever quirks and turns-of-phrase to foster a density of image and psyche.

Each story engages with an underworld of its own. A body is disinterred, and it leads to the unearthing of memory's secrets. Physical wounding occurs repeatedly, but the violence to the body is not for shock value. Rather, it illustrates that the body's vulnerability is also the mind's.

The corporeal is underscored in these pages. Johnston is perpetually conscious of the blood pulsing through his characters; their blood's movement becomes as individualized as a voice's unique timbre. Blood is self-defining. And metaphors of blood identify objects—the furnace pumping in the house, a cinnamon candle's dripping. The sum effect is a fiction that is as convincing and substantial as flesh.

Another focal point of the book is how we signify one another, and names influence how one character responds to another. They are concise messages of identity. Much is at stake even in the capital letter of a name: "Seriously, buddy, she said (or was it Buddy?): you need to get a grip." To call Colleen what her name means in the Gaelic—"Irish Girl"—creates a wild secret rush in the story's protagonist.

That rush is what the best story titles bring about. The eponymous story "Irish Girl"—which was previously anthologized in the 2003 *O. Henry Prize Stories* and David Sedaris' *Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules*—is a tour de force. It reveals Johnston as an assiduous student of point-of-view; he sees the potential in this element of craft. The story is reminiscent of Michael Cunningham's "White Angel" and warrants the same renown.

Like the characters on the last page of the story, the reader can only "sit there, having no

choice, and watch for its end”—and this collection’s end is one that comes too soon. Readers will be eager to hear what’s coming next from Johnston. (November) *Janelle Adsit*