ForeWord Reviews

The Keeners
Maura D. Shaw
Medallion Press
978-1-932815-15-3
(March 2005)

In Ireland, a “keener” is one who sings at a wake, but these aren’t pretty songs to guide the dead to their immortal rest. Rather, they are wrenching laments, crying for a future cut short and family left behind, before the song softens to a wish for a spirit’s peace.

In her story of Margaret Meehan, a keening apprentice, Shaw unfurls the despair of the potato famine and the brewing anger of a hungry Ireland. The novel begins in 1846, when a 17-year-old Margaret has sweetly innocent visions of her future, tending the home fires for her beau, Tom Riordan. It isn’t long before her reverie is broken by a series of difficult events that send her spinning. The famine sparks evictions, hatred against the English, and tragic deaths. Margaret’s teacher, Nuala Lynch, decides to keen for Ireland, but Margaret is forced to choose a different path. Having to leave her homeland for America, she has to abandon what she believed her future would become in order to survive, but such hardship deepens her character and gives her a sense of quiet resilience that is beautiful to witness.

Shaw’s writing, lilting and lyrical, has a gorgeous flow that elevates even seemingly prosaic moments, such as when Margaret holds her shawl close against the chill wind, or when she describes men downing pints at the local pub. Although these bursts of detail are rich, it is in dialogue that Shaw really shines. The interactions between Margaret and Tom, as well as the dozens of other characters populating Margaret’s world, give a sense of forward momentum that’s in line with Margaret’s journey. As in keening itself, no words are wasted. In the end, Shaw has written a kind of glorious lament, a keening for what the Irish lost during the famine, but also it’s opposite. Through Margaret, she offers a story of the living in the midst of the dying. That is a more difficult song to perfect, but Shaw shows great range and pitch through every fictional scene.