

The Paper Man

Billy O'Callaghan

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In Billy O'Callaghan's haunting historical novel *The Paper Man*, decades-old wartime secrets are revealed.

Rebekah died of tuberculosis when her son, Jack, was a boy; the identity of Jack's father was never disclosed. In Ireland in 1980, grown-up Jack finds a cardboard box, hidden away and "bearded in dust," that belonged to Rebekah. It contains letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Jack's father-in-law translates the letters and articles from their original German, and a story of love and displacement develops.

Jack learns that his father was a famed Austrian soccer player, Matthias, whose remarkable athletic skill seemed to make "shreds" of his opponents. But his partner, Rebekah, was Jewish; she fled Austria to live with relatives in Ireland while Matthias remained in Vienna. When their child was a baby, Matthias died in a suspicious manner—a fatality perhaps prompted by his contempt for Adolf Hitler's regime.

The narrative shifts from World War II Vienna to post-war Cork to develop its ill-fated romance via measured revelations. Matthias's prowess on the soccer field is tempered by his pragmatic humility and quiet ardor for Rebekah. Jack is startled to see a photograph of his parents together as a couple; though he remembers his mother as being meek and anxious, with Matthias she smiled with contented intimacy, her long hair flowing in a loose, "wild spill." And Cork's Jewish quarter is revealed as a place where refugees who'd fled from the Russian army or Nazi brutality took shelter in small houses and tenements, settling into a dockside neighborhood that seemed to teeter on the "edge of the world."

Via fragile historical remnants, the poignant and passionate novel *The Paper Man* covers lost love, anguished lives, and the discovery of an enduring heritage.

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