

The Silver Mist

Michael Treanor

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From award-winning Irish author Martin Treanor comes a poignant, lyrical debut novel, *The Silver Mist*. Like his protagonist Eve, the author grew up in Northern Ireland in the 1970's. On July 21, 1972, Bloody Friday, bombs explode in Belfast turning Eve's world upside down. A blast renders her mother comatose in a Belfast hospital, while Eve's sister Martha survives but returns to the family home in a small village. In the wake of the bombing, twenty-three-year-old Eve must deal with a depressed Martha, an absent mother, the presence of her older sister Lid and Lid's toddler Robert. As if these events weren't enough, Eve must also cope with the recent loss of her father to leukemia, and her own disability, Down syndrome. Lid decides she has to come help Martha take care of Eve now that their father is dead and mother is indisposed. Ironically, it is Eve who ends up taking care of her family, as she learns the purpose of the silver mist that connects all life. A mystical personage called Esther guides Eve on her path from grief to ultimate understanding.

Previous knowledge of Northern Ireland in 1972 is not required because Treanor deftly immerses readers in everything—routine life in Eve's village, the horror of death and tragedy, the intricacies of familial relationships, and the beauty of nature—through the wise and observant first-person musings of the protagonist. Eve knows she is short and obese and has a tendency to drool because of her "mental dysfunction." She learns from Esther, however, that her disability allows her to see universal truths.

Most readers will find it refreshing to see a person with a cognitive disability tell her own story. In fact, all characters leap off the pages of *The Silver Mist*; the reticent astute protagonist who delights in simple things, ethereal Esther, cantankerous yet caring Martha, frazzled Lid and her pre-verbal toddler Robert: each character has their own distinct arc. Even absent characters—Dad, Mam, and a dissolute sister named Becky—come alive through Eve's recollections. Nature, too, becomes a character as Treanor personifies the surroundings with exquisite poetic prose: "Wildflowers, their petalled heads nodding in the breeze, like an army of tiny fairy heads ... and fragrant honeysuckle, the walls of a huge sweet scented castle...."

Eve's repetition of certain phrases, her love of routines, her obsession with one book, and the repeated reminders of Eve's appearance all serve to convince readers that she has Down syndrome, despite her philosophizing. Treanor paints an honest and disheartening picture of special education in the 1970's; at twenty-three, Eve attends school in a segregated environment with mostly recreational programming. She and her peers are called "mongols" instead of Down syndrome sufferers. Within the singularity of its characters and its setting, the novel presents profound lessons about happiness, sorrow, and fear. Readers who enter *The Silver Mist* will emerge forever changed.

JILL ALLEN (August 25, 2011)

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