

BOOK REVIEW

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***The Rachel Incident* by Caroline O'Donoghue**

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Literature from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the twentieth century was multitudinous in its range of thematic concerns, formal experimentation and contemporary relevance. The Irish literary revival and Gaelic revival were closely tied to the burgeoning Irish nationalism of the time. Alongside the formation of a canon of national literature were also growing currents of experimental writing, like that of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. While the earlier part of the twentieth century was defined by the war of independence, the Irish revival and nationalism, the latter was marked by ethno-nationalist conflicts, like the Troubles, which ended as the millennium came to a close. The concerns of the nation-state and its boundaries, national identity, and ethno-religious conflict defined the latter half of the previous century. However, once the Troubles were officially declared over, the nation and its people had to turn inwards to a society that was left in shambles economically and politically owing to the long history of colonial struggle and civil war. The new millennium, therefore, brought its own set of issues, including a huge economic boom, the Celtic Tiger, and the consequences of its subsequent fallout.

The defining features of post Celtic Tiger in Irish society was unprecedented unemployment amongst a highly educated youth population, inflation, emigration due to lack of jobs and an overall extremely precarious economic environment. This social scenario combined with the dynamism of increasingly changing social systems and values has come to define a lot of the literature being written about this period. With the fallout of the Celtic Tiger now safely almost two decades in the past, retrospective writing about life during and post that time has become a prevalent thematic issue in popular literature coming out of the region. A

prominent example of this is perhaps Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), which in recent times, owing to digital media exposure, has gained immense popularity. Rooney's success has thrown light upon other authors from Ireland who have come up with their own ways of articulating what life in Ireland in the early twenty-first century meant for them. One such work is Caroline O'Donoghue's *The Rachel Incident* (2023).

Rachel Incident is a coming-of-age story of two best friends, Rachel and James, both in their early twenties, who navigate life in post Celtic Tiger recession era in the city of Cork in Ireland. Rachel attends college in the city but has to work for a considerable part of every day in order to be able to pay her college fees which her father's failing dentistry job cannot afford. James, on the other hand, works multiple jobs while studying scriptwriting on his own in order to be able to migrate to New York as soon as an opportunity comes his way. Both meet at the bookstore as part-timers and quickly become an inseparable duo. The novel is a bildungsroman for both these characters and other young people around them in similar predicaments. The structure follows that of a typical bildungsroman with the characters undergoing periods of loss, conflict, personal growth and eventual maturity.

Intricately linked to the two protagonists are characters, some adults and others their age, who play pivotal roles within the bildungsroman structure of the novel. Rachel and James's relation to Rachel's professor, Frederick Byrne and his wife is one of the primary conflicts within the novel. Alongside this is also James Carey, Rachel's future husband and yet another young man looking for opportunities in a country with not much to offer. Post the events of 2010, when the novel is set, all of these young characters end up moving out of the country where they find work, which finally gives meaning to their lives, thus concluding the bildungsroman.

Conflict and growth within the novel are closely tied to the social world depicted in it. The refrain of there being no money and no resources is heard throughout in various contexts. Despite the risk of sounding repetitive, this grounds the novel in its socio-political ethos and makes O'Donoghue's commentary pertinent. The protagonists come to terms with their careers, gender, sexuality and social relationships against the backdrop of the recession. The peak of this crisis is reached when Rachel finds herself in the midst of an unwanted pregnancy, lacking funds to travel to England for an abortion. The thematic discussion on unwanted pregnancy brings to the fore important commentary on the question of womanhood in modern Ireland, where abortion remained banned until as late as 2018. The right to abortion is something the author herself, along with other women of her time, fought hard for and hence its centrality in the work. While the country had seen unprecedented economic growth during the previous decade, the novel clearly lays out how issues such as those of reproductive rights, marriage and sexuality were seldom addressed by state policy. The novel's addressing of these issues, even if in the context of past events, lends it contemporaneity and adds to its overall adaptability.

Within the bildungsroman structure of the novel is a fair share of transgressions and experimentation. The timeline of the story is not spread out in terms of years but is compressed within the eventful time period of a single school year. Despite not showing the characters' progression over a long time period, the narrative, as told by Rachel in the present, dives into their lives with such interiority as to heighten the readers' familiarity

with them. This is done to the point that as a reader one feels the suffocation, heartbreak and relief as intensely as Rachel, the narrator does. One of the ways this affective intimacy between the reader and character is built is through satire. Rachel the character, despite being well-read, smart and hardworking, is also young, chaotic and troubled. Rachel, the narrator, with the benefit of hindsight, is introspective, mindful of her words and extremely witty. She looks back at herself and asks questions as narrative intervention at points where she seems to converse with the reader, drawing one into the world of the text. Additionally, the text's use of a meta-narrative within the narrative in the form of James's scripts is an interesting exercise in self-reflexivity and occasional satire that, I believe, most readers would appreciate and find enjoyable.

The sense of familiarity with the text is also furthered to a large extent through references to popular culture. The novel references 90s and early 2000s popular culture, and more particularly global popular culture as it was experienced in Ireland, in abundance. Rachel and James make it a habit and a rule of the house to consume popular 90s entertainment together. They binge on Cher and *Absolutely Fabulous* and write film scripts based on their own lives hoping for James's big break. For readers who have been equally exposed to the same, these references bring the characters closer. Furthermore, Rachel and James's involvement in the concert and gig culture of the time is also a distinct marker of how forms of entertainment are consumed in different periods. While they have no money to buy tickets, they know enough people to be able to attend events, which points to newer ways of connecting and having what Rachel calls 'contacts' in Irish society. Interactions with popular culture and other forms of cultural and artistic expression, including writing and satire define a unique way of navigating life in crisis that the book captures extremely well. As Rachel talks of consuming week-old magazines and experiencing despondency about finances, a large section of young readers find their own life situation mirrored in hers.

Lastly, through the precarious conditions under which the two protagonists come to terms with their lives and society, what O'Donoghue predominantly underscores is the importance of human relationality. The novel is a testament to friendship: not just friendship as emotional attachment to another, but friendship that is radical in its capacity to care for another. James and Rachel have each other's backs, despite at times one being "merely extra storage" for the other's anxieties. It is the selfless and permeating nature of these two characters' friendship in the face of all adversity that makes the text an important read for our times. Without succumbing to overtly didactic tropes, satire or judgementalism, the novel presents the joys, follies and troubles of youth to audiences of all age groups. The writing is clever and funny when required. It ultimately testifies to the lasting potential of human bonds and literature's capacity to preserve such stories for time immemorial.
