

REVIEW

Ana-Karina Schneider. *Understanding Anne Enright*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. Pp. 136. ISBN: 978-1-5275-5028-5.

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Understanding Anne Enright is a first of its kind: it is the first monograph devoted to one of the most challenging and original contemporary Irish female writers who achieved international recognition after her 2007 novel *The Gathering* was awarded the Man Booker prize and was subsequently shortlisted as Irish Book of the Decade (2010). However, despite the success the writer has enjoyed, apart from articles included in various scholarly journals, and a collection of essays edited by Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill entitled *Anne Enright*, published by Irish Academic Press in 2011, no other volume devoted entirely to the Irish writer has appeared to date. It is true that another monograph, *Anne Enright: Excavating the Present*, was announced by Anne Mulhall, but it has never been published. This says it all about the difficulty of grappling with a highly-demanding writer who surprises the reader with each new title, who changes from volume to volume but remains fresh and exciting.

This is why Ana-Karina Schneider's endeavour is all the more meritorious, especially given the unitary character of her book. She provides the reader with a compelling read, which combines harmoniously an insightful analysis of formal matters, stylistic features, as well as thematic concerns characteristic of Enright's six novels published until 2019, from *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995) to *The Green Road* (2015). The monograph also covers Enright's short fiction comprising three collections of short stories, her memoir of pregnancy, parturition and motherhood, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004), as well as her non-fictional essays which reflect on her craft.

What runs like a red thread all through the monograph, and what we consider to be one of the main strengths of this fascinating book, is the analysis of Enright's relationship to language and the subtle ways in which it has changed in the course of time. As one reviewer quoted by Schneider puts it, "Enright treasures words; she polishes them, puts them on display" (72). The monograph aptly traces Enright's love-affair with the English language, a love she shares with Joyce, to whom she was greatly indebted. Schneider convincingly points to the inventiveness and playfulness, but also the unreliability of language, hence of representation, in general, features which

are all evident already in Enright's first novel, where the background is represented by the world of television, of which the novelist had first-hand experience as she had worked in it in her youth, before becoming a full-time writer. In *What Are You Like?*, Schneider identifies a peculiar relation to language figured as aphasia, which affects the absent (dead) mother, Anna. *The Forgotten Waltz* is scrutinized from the perspective of its experimental structure and language which is "steeped in the colloquial style of our times, from the snappy, brand-name dropping dialogues of chick flicks to the business lingo of young professionals in fields as diverse as real estate, IT and finance" (88). Furthermore, Schneider points to the characters who are communicators and are, consequently, passionate about calling things in a precise manner. This fascination with language culminates in *The Green Road*, which seems to be all about language and about novel writing. The critic competently sheds light on Enright's "gift of the memorable phrase and a distinctive sense of how language works on us" (122), but also on "her keen understanding that language is constitutive of the reality it communicates, personal identity included" (122).

This skilfulness with language is, obviously, the mark of an exquisite novelist who knows how to use words in order to create memorable characters who engage the reader profoundly, but also to approach issues which are of topical interest. Highly relevant and engaging to the international reader is, definitely, the Irish theme, which can be traced, at various levels and in multiple forms, in all the Enrightian novels. Thus, Schneider masterfully dwells on the way in which the 1980s and 1990s of Ireland's liberalisation are depicted in the first two novels and the manner in which the Celtic Tiger emerges in *The Green Road*. *The Forgotten Waltz* is rightly seen as the novel of the Crash, chronicling the two and a half decades of economic growth leading up to the Crash, with an emphasis on social rather than economic circumstances.

The historicist approach Schneider deploys when analyzing Enright's fiction offers her the opportunity to interpret themes with a mind to their cultural, historical and political contexts. In this remarkable *tour de force* through Ireland's recent history, Schneider gives ample space to the representations of women, arguing that Enright "has put together a feminist aesthetic of disjunction and imperfection in which anything is possible and the only certitudes are the inescapability of the body and the instability of identity" (114). The manner in which Enright re-articulates the feminine and the maternal while tackling highly-confining gender ideologies is very convincingly illustrated.

While analyzing the way in which Enright represented women, their corporeality in particular (a topic to which Schneider had devoted several scholarly articles, prior to this monograph), the critic comments on the themes

the novelist has dealt with, time and again, indicating how these themes resurface in her fiction under various guises. However, the relation between gender and voice remains Enright's central concern, which is viewed either against the background of history as is the case of *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, or in relation to Irish migration, the processes of memory, the construction of identity, consumerism and globalization, otherness and difference. Schneider tactfully steers clear of generalizations or relativism by resorting to close reading which gives her a chance to point to Enright's distinctive merits as a writer, chief among them being the project of making women's voices heard, challenging in this manner some of the taboos that have traditionally silenced them.

In order to illuminate Enright's multi-layered narratives, Schneider skilfully combines diverse critical approaches, from psycho-analytical to feminist or trauma readings, juggling with highly used and abused concepts such as postmodernism, post-feminism and post-nationalism, which have been variously applied to Enright. Schneider also assesses Enright against the larger current literary background, expanding it from Irish, British to world literature, an endeavour which deepens the reader's understanding of Enright's literary gift.

Worth mentioning is also the chapter devoted to Enright's short fiction, which rounds up a monograph evincing a lot of empathetic understanding as well as solid knowledge of Irish culture and civilization. Enright's debut fictional endeavours, which took the form of short-stories, whether included in Faber's anthology *First Fictions: Introduction No. 10* (1989), or published as a volume of short stories, *The Portable Virgin* (1991), are analyzed from a thematic perspective, as prefigurations of future evolutions. The introductions Enright has written for various books are also analyzed and regarded as chances to voice the writer's literary preoccupations. Ample space is given to Enright's fragmented memoir, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, all the more so as it focuses on some of her central concerns such as pregnancy and maternity, which will inform *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* and will continue to surface in both novels and short stories, though from a different perspective and with a different twist.

Schneider knows how to reveal the merits of a writer she is very passionate about, a writer who is, both in her fictional writing and outside it, responsive to social change, compassionate and active. Enright's constant commitment to the fate of Irish literature is traced in the support she has given to young writers, in her teaching creative writing, and, chiefly, in her "praising women writers in a culture that was traditionally very stingy in bestowing praise" (122). Schneider also engages sensitive issues, pointing to the ethical dimension as well as the agenda of Enright's choices.

To conclude with, *Understanding Anne Enright* is not only a first but also a must for any reader who takes an interest in contemporary Irish literature, scholar or general reader alike. It is a book written with passion and authority, which fills a void in literary scholarship and offers state of the art research on one of the most interesting and engaging contemporary Irish writers.