

Irish Elegies

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Chris Arthur, *Irish Elegies*, (New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature), London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. xi + 184 p., ISBN 0-230-61534-1 Cloth, £52.00

- 1 The power of the essay lies in its ability to pluck fragments from the mundane details of ordinary life and elevate them by deep examination. In this collection of essays (the fourth in a series that began in 1999) Chris Arthur wholeheartedly takes up Bourdieu's challenge to "evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is" (4), bringing to the reader a clear-sighted, contemplative account of personal history and memory. We can add to that task a special challenge for the Northern Irish writer: to write about the ordinary – the domestic, the intimate and the everyday – in the face of sometimes extraordinary circumstances. It is a testament to Arthur's skill that he manages to write about his family life in a manner that both acknowledges and sidelines the "Troubles", reducing them to their proper scale in the face of the rich textures of life.
- 2 The essays in this book, each one of them an elegy of sorts for a Belfast childhood, range from an account of a neighbour's suicide that is simultaneously a cultural history of the rose, to an archaeology of his father's library. The only essay devoted to the form of the essay is equally devoted to an account of the Esse, a stove that gave life to Arthur's home outside Belfast. The stove, we learn, was the heart of the house in the way that the essay is the heart of Arthur's writing life. This is a deeply insightful, yet humbly presented, contribution to essay criticism, which seeks to foreground, as all the essays do, personal experience in the face of abstract critical pronouncements. Though this is the only explicit reflection on the essay form, all the essays are, in fact "wonderings and wanderings" (163) about form. "How's the form", for example, is ostensibly a reflection on a Northern Irish greeting, yet it is also a discussion of the

consolation of life and the pleasure of the now – a pleasure not dissimilar to the pleasure I felt when reading Arthur’s essays.

- 3 This book is best read by savouring each essay separately than attempting to absorb the book whole. Arthur repeatedly returns to certain themes (in a meditative rather than a repetitive way), looking at his object of study from multiple angles. This method is writ small in the essay “Thirty-six views”, which describes the shifting moods and moments of a maple tree thirty-six ways, while simultaneously reminding us of “the richness of narrative and the comparative poverty of images” (57). The Aristotelian theme to which Arthur constantly returns, and that bears repeating, is that “mystery lies just beneath the crust of the quotidian” (21). He has successfully not only unearthed some mysteries of his own, but also awakened in this reader a new excitement for the future of the essay in the landscape of Irish writing. In including this book in Palgrave’s Irish and Irish American Studies series, Clare Culleton has made a brave and exciting editorial decision.

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