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Bridget O'Dwyer. *Celtic Night*. Uniontown, Ohio: Fresh Writers Books, 2006. viii + 160 pp. ISBN (paperback) 1-932802-94-0.

This first novel by a seventeen-year-old, first-generation Irish American is being marketed by the publisher as a modern version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one that will help teenagers to gain an entry to the challenging complexities of Shakespeare's play. What the reader will find, however, is something rather different. When she was fifteen, O'Dwyer went to Thurles in Ireland for six months to live among the extended family that her father had left to emigrate to America. *Celtic Night* is essentially a fictionalized account of those six months, which O'Dwyer has had the wit, the commercial savvy to manipulate so that it ties in to a degree with Shakespeare's play. But a "version" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is not.

To consider how the novel does relate to the play, first: O'Dwyer takes the first 138 pages to establish something like the romantic entanglement that Shakespeare lays out in the first act of his play. Soon after Sarah Ryan arrives in Thurles, the uncle she is staying with makes it clear that he'd like her to spend time with Declan, a young man in whose welfare he is particularly interested. Sarah quite likes him, but no more, while Declan, with Uncle Jack's encouragement, thinks himself in love with her. Meanwhile Sarah falls in love with Liam, who shares her feelings, but whose father is persona non grata with Uncle Jack; Jack's hostility extends to the son. He forbids Sarah to see Liam — "My house, my rules" — and his arbitrary assertion of power approaches that of Egeus. Meanwhile, Sarah's friend Kate fancies Declan, and Sarah tries unsuccessfully to forward the relationship. Thus far Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander.

There remain, however, only twenty-two pages to illuminate the rest of the play. Up until this point the narrative has been carefully realistic — Sarah learning school, friends, life in provincial Ireland, working as a waitress, going shopping to Dublin. The only hints at the supernatural are a school class on Irish folklore and Sarah's grandmother's belief in fairies. When, late in the story, Sarah's claddagh ring disappears (it is one of the production values of this little book that the page numbers are all enclosed in the claddagh clasped and crowned heart), her grandmother is sure it has been taken by the fairies as earnest against their working magic in order to untangle Sarah's love-difficulties. The teacher (rather coyly called Miss Dwyer), who has been talking about Irish folk-lore, takes the class on an overnight camping trip to a hilltop called the Devil's Bit, where, in the span of half a dozen pages, takes place a fairly exact but pretty perfunctory version of the

bewitching and counter-bewitching of the play. Sarah, unable to sleep and attracted by a highly mobile splinter of light, wanders into the adjacent woodland:

Before my very eyes stood Declan, Liam and Kate. The flicker of light was spinning around them hastily. However surreal, it had entranced them with its vibrant colors and graceful movements and I stood in awe watching it engross them. It flipped, dove, and flew in every which direction forcing them to spin around. Sparks of light flew from the miraculous creature's body as it landed upon their heads. (O'Dwyer 2006, 147)

This is more Tinkerbell than Puck, without even the intermittent materiality of Julia Roberts or Ludivine Sagnier. It is a pity that O'Dwyer did not have the courage or the imagination to go for Shakespeare's wholehearted magic realism, for as they stand these few pages are strangely mechanical, and have none of the accurate life of the rest of the novel. She quotes from Yeats's fairy play, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and she might have taken the hint from the poet and introduced the *sidhe* into the fabric of her narrative from early on. Niamh and the rest might have been the subject of one of Miss Dwyer's classes, and they could have provided effective parallels to Shakespeare's elementals. Perhaps it is significant that in an interview with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (2006), O'Dwyer makes it clear she does not believe in fairies. It is perhaps also a failure of imagination that prevents her from discovering a reason for the presence of the two boys in the hilltop wood at the Devil's Bit in the middle of the night.

In the morning the two girls are marked as missing from the camping group, and after they return with the appropriate boy's kiss on their lips are marched by a grim-faced Dwyer to the school "principal" (it is a copy-editing oversight, presumably, that has Miss Dwyer as the principal earlier in the novel [35]). Sarah tells a severely edited version of the truth, and to her and Kate's amazement, Miss Mulroney's response is:

This isn't the first time I have heard a story like the one you have told, however, you must realize that sleeping under the trees of the Devil's Bit, on a starry, moonlit night in the woods, can often lead to magical dreams. (157)

She is markedly less skeptical than Theseus.

It seems likely that, if fifteen-year-olds need gently to be led into Shakespeare, there are more substantially helpful ways to do it than this novel provides. On the other hand, as an account of an American girl coming to terms with a friendly but quite foreign environment, O'Dwyer's narrative has its pleasures. It might be thought that at least there would be no language barrier for Sarah to

overcome, but of course this isn't the case, and there is quite a lot of translating of Irish idiom in language and custom into American:

"I think I've met him before," Kate said.

"Met him?" I asked.

"Yea, like kissed him. Pulled him," she explained. "What do you call it in America?"

"Hooked up," I said. (42-3)

I particularly liked Sarah's response to Irish wedding cake:

"What the hell is this?" I asked the girls who were devouring their pieces. "Do you four have the same cake I do, because I'm having a quite different reaction to my first bite." . . . It was a heavy dark brown cake with raisins, currants, and other little pieces of fruit with thick white icing. It was neither soft nor fluffy and it tasted as though there was some alcohol in it. It was nothing like an American cake. I handed my piece off to Aisling who gladly took it. (91)

On the other hand, she does conceive a passion for Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate.

Anyone who knows Thurles will appreciate the specificity of the picture of the town that O'Dwyer builds up, and this verisimilitude of representation provides a secure basis for Sarah's experiences (the cover of the book has a group photograph, presumably of O'Dwyer's class at the Presentation Convent Secondary School). The novel's cast list is long, and there is not a great deal of individuation among Sarah's relatives or her school friends, but O'Dwyer has a good ear for dialogue, which lifts the narrative beyond the souped-up travel-diary that it sometimes threatens to become. She does well, too, with the growth of Sarah's feelings for Liam, finding the right level of intensity without overwriting.

One last note: it might perhaps have been a good idea to provide for young American readers a pronunciation guide to names such as Aisling, Grainne and Eoghan, or indeed Thurles itself, since they turn up fairly often. Though I cannot recommend the novel as a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it has the brat-pack appeal of movies of the 1980s such as *Pretty in Pink* or *Sixteen Candles*, and should entertain its intended audience.

Online Resources

Thurles Town Council: Thurles Interactive Map [cited 25 October 2006]. <http://www.thurles.ie/map/320/>.

References

O'Dwyer, Bridget. 2006. *Celtic Night*. Uniontown, Ohio: Fresh Writers Books.

Snook, Debbie. 2006. "A Dream Come True: Contest Makes an Author out of Shaker Heights Teen." *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland). Friday, 14 April [cited 10 May, 2006]. <http://www.cleveland.com/cooking/plaindealer/index.ssf?/base/living/1145004139175980.xml&coll=2>