

## A Brave New Voice

One of the more refreshing delights of bookselling and of reading is when a new voice makes itself heard for the first time. There is a natural tendency for cultural life to become stagnant even moribund. Indeed, an essential premise for the survival of any culture is its ability to reinvent itself, to regenerate new talent, to allow new voices space to flex their muscle and to take on board a whole new generation of creativity.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, despite its inherently conservative ethos (or because of it as some might maliciously suggest), Ireland has been extraordinarily lucky in that every generation has brought with it a fresh wave of creative writers, painters, sculptors, actors and musicians who have each contributed their talents in no small way thus giving us a vibrant and exciting culture that rarely fails to stimulate and inform us or enhance our quality of life.

This is something not easily achieved. Indeed it has too often happened that many writers are published long before they are ready resulting in immature work being presented as the great new novel, poem or play and the authentic voice of the next generation. When, however, in the midst of all this dross a new work of quality and promise does appear, somehow or other the inferior work is forgotten and the literary palate is refreshed and re-energised.

Such a new work of quality and promise is Paul Soye's first novel *The Boy in the Gap* just published by the Liberties Press. A relatively new name, Soye was born Dublin, but moved to Westport in 1986 with his wife Finn. He has worked as a social worker in Cork and Dublin before moving West where he now works part time with the HSE.

The author of a number of plays one of which, *The Birdcage*, won the Esso New Irish Play Award in 1996, *The Boy in the Gap* is his first published work in prose that has come to my attention. The blurb on the back of the book suggests that the novel is evocative of John Banville and John McGahern, a claim that is unfair to all three writers as, while Banville and McGahern have long established their own unique voices, there is no doubt that Soye has his own independent style that is as enthralling as it is absorbing.

Opening with the confident and intriguing statement "I remember the first night on remand watching the news", we are immediately introduced to the central character in the book, *The Boy in the Gap*, one Jack

Sammon who has just been charged with a horrific crime that has scarred the rural community where he was born and raised and which he left under something of a dark cloud.

The narrative alternates between the story of Jack's life and his time on remand. Soye's use of this technique is deft and assured. Jack's story is told with compassion and great skill. Growing up in a small West of Ireland rural community with his mother, older brother and younger sister, our hero never comes to terms with the untimely and suspicious death of his father. His difficulties are compounded by his mother's disastrous choice of a second partner, a choice that alienates the support of their closest neighbours and friends but is eventually accepted by the status quo of the community.

Sammon finally leaves the community and creates a life for himself in England but the past never leaves him and he is gradually lured back to his native Mayo with tragic results. As a first novel, Soye's *The Boy in the Gap* is an extraordinary Tour De Force. Once started, it is a most difficult book to leave down. Let us hope that this writer's ink never stops flowing.