

Eleven Intimations of Genius

Cliché or not, it is extraordinarily difficult nowadays to understand the bombshell caused by the publication of Edna O'Brien's first novel *The Country Girls* in 1960. By today's standards the book is totally harmless but in the stifling atmosphere of 1950s and early 1960s Ireland, it was tantamount to a moral Armageddon.

It is bad enough to begin with that it openly discusses domestic violence – the fact that the young girl smells rashers cooking upon waking means the HE didn't come home the night before and that it is safe to venture forth – but then it goes on to suggest that two young girls in Holy Catholic Ireland might have a mind of their own and actually be interested in sex.

That this was written by a young girl (O'Brien was thirty in 1960) from County Clare was bad enough but that this girl had been educated by the holy nuns from Loughrea only exacerbated the sin and showed – God between us and all evil this blessed night – the depths of depravity to which this shameless hussy had descended.

In effect, the publication of *The Country Girls* – along with that of John McGahern's *The Barracks* three years later – sounded the dawn of the real Renaissance in Irish Literature and brought a whole new vigour, dimension and honesty to Irish writing that, thankfully, remains with us today.

In retrospect, what is more extraordinary is that neither writer, despite the social ostracism and vilification they both suffered, ever waived from that honesty in search of literary truth to the point where it became the hallmark of their work.

This honesty was feared, hence the odium in which both authors were, and in the case of O'Brien is still, held. Parallel with this, gradually a grudging – in true Irish fashion – respect for the authors emerged and now they can claim their true place in the Pantheon of Irish and International Literature.

What is more extraordinary is that some fifty one years later this young girl from County Clare now in her eighties could produce a volume of short stories that are imbued with an even more energetic honesty and

power. *Saints and Sinners* is a book that smacks of literary genius.

In these eleven stories, O'Brien gives a wonderful display of her incredible skills as a writer. Each story has its own individual energy. In every one she catches the rhythm immediately and holds the pace effortlessly and seamlessly to the end. She is equally at home with the long time failed emigrant on the streets of London as she is with the "would-be" lovers on the streets of Manhattan or the simpleton of the village in the west of Ireland.

One of the more charming elements of the book is the deep empathy O'Brien has for her characters and their station. From the moment we meet Rafferty — "In one lapel was a small green and gold harp, and in the other a flying angel" — this compassion is evident. Again our "Inner Cowboy", Curly (who doesn't notice the scenery about him.... used to it as he was....."But he does notice the mist through the window when he got up early, everything blurry, the pots and the wheelbarrows in the backyard the magpies lined up in the chimney stacks, and the cat, pleased with herself after her fill of mice and bats in the night — black night they call it") has a deep humanity that only sharpens the tragedy that befalls him. This compassion also expresses itself in the tight moments of humour that dot the narrative.

Saints and Sinners is a collection of short stories that leaves the reader breathless. It is the work of a literary genius, a master of the short story genre and a book to be savoured sentence by magic sentence.