Title

By Aran Ward Sell

Since 2007's *The Gathering* won the Booker Prize, Anne Enright has been hoisted aloft the shoulders of the literary establishment, for example becoming a member of the UK's Royal Society of Literature in 2010, and winning both the UK's Orange Prize and the American Carnegie prize for 2012's *The Forgotten Waltz*. This ascendancy has been even more marked in her home country of Ireland, where her status as the nation's literary elder stateswoman became surely uncontested with Edna O'Brien's death in 2024. Enright was elected to the Aosdána, the Irish artists' academy, in 2021, and in 2022 she received the Lifetime Achievement Award at An Post's annual Irish Book awards. Most strikingly, the Museum of Literature (MoLi) in Dublin, opened in 2019, leaves visitors quite certain that while James Joyce remains the biggest beast in Irish letters overall, Enright is that title's custodian among living writers. The museum presents Irish writing as a national current that flows from Swift, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, past the popular-fiction tributaries of Stoker and Wilde, and through Heaney and the O'Briens—Flann and Edna—to the present day. At the latterday end of this continuity, it is Enright's image that coolly appraises the visitor from numerous displays and exhibits. Beckett and the rest may be gone, but Enright's steady gaze informs us that Irish writing has lost none of its power to see you for all that you are, and to find you wanting.

Anne Enright.
The Wren, The Wren
W.W. Norton & Company, 2023. $27.95

The watch she has been given is, as readers of *The Gathering* know, a well-deserved honor. Enright is both craftswoman and steely-eyed psychoanalyst. She skewers human foibles and unpleasantness with forthright competence. Sure enough, it is quickly apparent in her latest novel, *The Wren, The Wren,* that Enright's prose has lost none of its muscular torsion. This is a woman who can work observations and hesitations with the precision of a metalworker, and render tense intrafamilial drama into the hard-wrought certainly of a cast-iron gate. It is disappointing, therefore—it feels almost like cheating—that Enright uses craft so powerful on matters so slight as several of the key plotlines of *The Wren, The Wren.*

The story which opens the novel, the twenty-something narrator Nell's tempestuous relationship with a hot-but-dim farmer's son named Felim, wanders the perimeter of sexual abuse, but goes nowhere. Eventually, Nell moves on and finds another guy, who is also hot but less dim, and less abusive. The suspicion lingers that Nell's story exists to give this book some millennial-sex spiciness, as Enright parks her tanks on Sally Rooney's lawn. In terms of pure literary ability, Enright can write rings around her junior compatriot. But to Rooney, will-they-won't-they transactions between modernity-bruised young lovers are her stock in trade. Rooney, and her fellow entanglers of millennial romance such as Naoise Dolan, are not Enright's equals as prose stylists, but they care about this subject matter. Enright doesn't seem to, but in *The Wren, The Wren* she writes it anyway. Hence, we get by-the-numbers mentions of all the awful things that young relationships might suffer in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Here is Felim choking Nell during sex, and forcing her to watch porn, and taking non-consensual sexual pictures of her to which she, feeling dully beholden to her increasingly lustless need for him, responds by sending him more such pictures. Most baffling is that Enright has chosen to open with her book's weakest act. This decision is reminiscent of another recent heavyweight, Paul Murray's Booker-shortlisted *The Bee Sting*, which is front-loaded with an inauthentic youthful voice—in Murray's case, one wracked with anachronisms—before the writer permits themselves back into their own milieu to write characters who they understand. Some books flourish at the very end of their author's tether, when the work is sent spinning into the dark with abandon and experiment, but not *The Bee Sting*, and not *The Wren, The Wren*. Enright, these pages remind us, is a writer of emotional intelligence. Her powers are wisdom, observation and scalpel-sharp cruelty. When it comes to wisdom and observation, you don't want to be spinning in the dark. You want the calm-on-the-surface, seething-underneath prose which this preternaturally assured, if sometimes stolid, writer produces when at her very best. She attains that best when on, not off, her home turf. Rooney, meanwhile, responds to Enright's sortie with a gushing front-cover quote. The victor can afford to be magnanimous.

That home turf is, thankfully, reached once Enright switches from the two-dimensional Instagram addict Nell to her mother, the sore and bitter Carmel. The novel also, fleetingly, gives us the perspective of Carmel's father's, the poet Phil McDaragh, allowing the bright green dustjacket to claim that this is a story of "three generations." "Phil's" nature poems, studded with names of birds and plants, punctuate the narrative often. Yet it is clear where Enright's interest, and thus her powers, lie. It is Carmel, the middle generation, who gives us the Anne Enright who we know from *The Gathering.* That clear-eyed gaze watching down from the museum walls. Carmel, like *The Gathering*'s Veronica, is tetchy, regretful and inconsistent. She is unsure why her ties of love are so often ragged, so often unsatisfying. She is compelling and capable of violence, and capable of abjection. Her evanescent relationship with a slightly useless upper-crust boyfriend called Ronan, like Nell's with Felim, fades from the page, but here the fading is itself resonant.

Cruelty, as mentioned above, is Enright's sharpest knife. In wicked judgement, Carmel thrives. Her icy view of her female friendships is especially delicious. Her friend Aedemar is having a baby, but "Aedemar did not seem to realise that this thing would happen to her body whether she was stupid, or clever, or in a coma," states Carmel, deadpan: "She thought it was in some way about her." Later, she summons equal contempt for her sister Imelda (perhaps named for the conflicted nun in Edna O'Brien's "Sister Imelda," which Enright anthologized in her 2010 Granta Book of the Irish Short Story): "For Imelda," Carmel—or Enright—sneers, "information was like money. She didn't want you to have it, in case you spent it in the wrong shop." Carmel is less wary of men than of women, but when the novelty of dating Ronan wanes, she summons similar antipathy. "Ronan was getting a bit annoying," she observes, placidly. Then, upon finding herself Ronan's emergency contact when he requires an operation, she wonders "How had she ended up with this job, for which she had never applied?" Shortly after this, her relationship with Ronan quietly ends, barely to be mentioned again.

Carmel quitting the "job" of tending for an unwell partner is a pointed gender-inversion of Phil—her father, Nell's grandfather—walking out on his wife when she was diagnosed with cancer. This abandonment was inspired by a real conversation. "Many years ago," Enright writes in her "Author's Note" in the endpapers, "I met a writer who talked of his custody arrangements with his young son. 'My wife got sick,' he explained, almost incidentally, 'and we split up.'" This underexamined injustice—the lauded male writer discarding his family life once illness rendered it laborious—motivated the creation of Phil McDaragh, and consequently his arch, damaged daughter Carmel, herself only intermittently capable of maternal warmth. The section from Phil's perspective is set in his youth; a brutally enjoyable, self-contained story about first love and a badger fight, set in rural Tullamore in the semi-distant past. Enright acknowledges her debt to Patrick Boyle's *"Meles Vulgaris,"* another story in her Granta anthology, and one from which Phil's backstory borrows freely, down to the breed of dog—a Kerry Blue—unleashed in the badger-baiting. Phil's interlude also permits Enright's Author's Note to repeat the cover's assertion of a three- enerational structure. The dustjacket's wording, however, that the novel is about "three generations of women" is a stretch—we only see Carmel's mother, Terry, through her daughter's eyes.

The same Author's Note justifies the existence of Nell, whose voice returns to stall the novel after every fifty pages or so of Carmel's far more richly-rendered quasi-loneliness. Enright declares that Nell's voice is "full of verve and wit," an extraordinarily needy self-review for a globally lauded author to place within her covers. One suspects that Enright knows that her anxious, vapid creation is "full of" neither attribute. Ultimately, like *The Bee Sting*, this is a well-honed novel of middle-aged love, regret and parenthood, needlessly bloated with awkward renderings of contemporary youth. It is hard not to sense the dread hand of the market, and Rooney's outsize influence on it, hovering in the background of the authorial and editorial decisions which have led to these novels—the class of 2023—emerging in the form which they have taken. It is likewise hard not to wish that the anointed chief enforcer of the Irish literary tradition had given, in her latest novel, a little bit more of Anne Enright, and significantly less of the tastes and styles of others. •

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