

The Fantasy Family

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APRIL 17, 2008 ISSUE

The Gathering

by Anne Enright.

Grove/Black Cat, 261 pp., \$14.00 (paper)

The Gathering, title of the winner of the 2007 Man Booker Prize, refers ostensibly to the assembly of a large family for the wake and funeral of one of its members, but we might also consider the book, the fourth novel by Irish writer Anne Enright, as a gathering of powerfully unpleasant images involving the superimposition of sex, death, and decay. Early on, the narrator and main character, Veronica Hegarty, imagines Lamb Nugent, a friend of the family and long-thwarted suitor of her grandmother, masturbating over memories of his dying sister:

The room they grew up in was full of the wet rattle of her chest.... His own puberty going unnoticed ... as her little breasts swelled under the nightdress. She moved towards death and womanhood at the same pace, the nipples like a spreading bruise, the breasts growing, and failing to grow, over lungs hard with disease.... When he holds his penis in the nighttime, it feels like her thin skin; always damp, never sweating. Because, in those days, people used to be mixed up together in the most disgusting ways.

Such unsavory mixing, however, is not only a thing of the past. At thirty-nine, a mother of two young daughters, Veronica often feels a profound revulsion on finding herself in bed beside her successful businessman husband, Tom:

I wake to a livid tumescence on his prone body; a purple thing on the verge of decay... a cock so purple and dense it was a burden to him.

Waking in general in this novel means waking to horror, or “the slow, slick, screaming heebie-jeebies,” as Veronica puts it. So the funeral wake that prompts the gathering of the Hegarty family becomes an extended opening of the mind to ugly images. At the top of the stairs of her old family home Veronica encounters, or imagines encountering, the now long-dead Nugent in an embrace with the corpse of his sister—“the tangle and slither of their tongues is endless and airless and cold”—while further down the stairs she runs into her deranged Uncle Brendan, buried years ago with other sufferers of mental illness in a mass grave:

Brendan’s bones are mixed with other people’s bones; so there is a turmoil of souls muttering and whining under his clothes, they would come out in a roar, were he to unbutton his fly....

Afflicted by these unhappy fantasies, Veronica is ever on the verge of retching, or gagging, and at one point recalls a “choking sense” that “I would die, my face jammed in filthy gabardine... a stranger’s cock in the back of my throat.” Death itself is a “rapist,” sex often “like killing someone or being killed,” and the female pubis takes on the pathetic, punished appearance of “the breast of an underfed chicken” or, again, a “spreading bruise.” This because “men fucked women—it did not happen the other way around.”

It’s not surprising, then, that Veronica wishes to “call for an end to procreation with a sandwich board and a megaphone,” that in her late teens she went through a phase of inflicting wounds on herself with a pen (the “inner leg” is mentioned—“Such disgust.”), and that during another fantasy in which she imagines the elderly Nugent finally having his way with her grandmother (“the drag of his private skin against her private skin... something martyred in the lift of [her] chin”) she tells us:

I would love to leave my body. Maybe this is what they are about, these questions of which or whose hole, the right fluids in the wrong places, these infantile confusions and small sadisms: they are a way of fighting our way out of all this meat (I would like to just swim out, you know?—shoot like a word out of my own mouth and disappear with a flick of my tail).

The word “swim” is carefully chosen since the novel opens with someone who has indeed swum out of existence, or rather drowned. Veronica’s alcoholic and ne’er-do-well brother, Liam, the one family member she felt close to, has

killed himself by swimming out from Brighton beach on an autumn night, his pockets full of stones. It is his decision, aged forty, to escape the “living, with all their smells and holes” that provokes a crisis in Veronica: prior to his suicide she was leading what would generally be described as a successful middle-class life in a new, five-bedroom, free-standing house in the suburbs of Dublin, a choice Liam had always and aggressively criticized. Now, experiencing a “grief that is almost genital,” a feeling “somewhere between diarrhoea and sex,” she internalizes his criticism, experiencing a loss of faith in her partner, whom she continually supposes is betraying her, and in the family project in general, which is routinely described in disparaging if not sarcastic terms, to the point that “sometimes I look at my nice walls and, like Liam, I say, ‘Pull the whole thing down.’...As if the world was built on a lie and that lie was very secret and very dirty.”

Of course this cast of mind and the disquieting imagery it gives rise to is not new. A confusion of corpses, kisses, and pox was the stuff of Jacobean theater; Hamlet’s hysterical attack on his mother for mixing up funeral feast and wedding banquet (“stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty”) is a memorable example. In another place and time Dostoevsky has the narrator of *Notes from Underground* encourage a young prostitute to imagine her inevitable death from TB while avid clients have their way with her to the last breath. Back in Ireland, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, instructed by his Jesuit tutors to think of sex as a gross, corrupt, and mortal sin, is thrown into a state of confusion that causes him to oscillate between righteous renunciation and lascivious indulgence in a pattern psychologists have taught us to associate with obsessive-compulsive disorders.

The genius of these classics, however, lies not just in the vivid description of disturbed psychologies and their unhealthy imaginings but in the dramatization that sets character in action, giving credibility and urgency to the individual’s predicament while placing his or her negative vision in perspective. Plotting is crucial. In this regard *The Gathering* takes an unusual approach. It opens with Veronica, who, to avoid sleeping beside her husband, stays awake at nights and writes, announcing:

I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me—this thing that may not have taken place. I don’t even know what name to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones.

Despite the urgency suggested by “roaring” we are not to be told what “this thing” is for 143 carefully contrived pages, since Enright has first to prepare the ground by giving us the Hegarty family history and some account of Veronica’s and Liam’s infancy and adolescence. When we do arrive at this “crime of the flesh” we find that it is not so “uncertain” after all, though much of what surrounds it in Veronica’s speculations is.

Veronica is the eighth of twelve children (her mother also had seven miscarriages). Liam was the seventh.

There were eleven months between me and Liam. We came out of her on each other’s tails; one after the other, as fast as a gang-bang, as fast as an infidelity. Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside.

Evidently, this, as Veronica sees it, irresponsible reproduction on her parents’ part (“the stupidity of so much humping”) has predisposed her to think negatively about sex. The crowded family home and, later, any crowded public scene tend to be described as filthy and disgusting. Unsurprisingly, Veronica has a fixation for cleaning; she sets about scrubbing in the middle of her insomniac nights and, in an image that neatly conflates feelings of guilt and expiation, we hear that she is “stealing the dirt off the walls.”

The underlying cause of her brother’s suicide, however, she traces back to her grandparents’ generation, not her mother’s, and in particular to Lamb Nugent and his relationship with her maternal grandmother, Ada. Since, however, she has little hard information on the nature and history of that relationship, she invents, indeed novelizes it over many pages, all the while admitting that despite the lavish period detail the events she describes are fantasy. To underline the point, key elements in the story are occasionally altered; at one moment she imagines Ada as a servant before marrying, at another as a prostitute.

Though never openly declared, the question Veronica appears to be posing through these imaginings is: How is it that her grandparents’ home came to be frequented by a man who, despite being fatally attracted to Ada and himself attractive to her, had not managed to marry her, nor to become her lover, the husband’s role being taken by the bland, unsuspecting Charlie? The question is important, because when Veronica was eight and Liam nine they were sent to live for a while with their grandparents, the frustrated Lamb Nugent thus becoming an important figure in their lives.

Accounts of large families may excel in establishing a range of characters who, moving together from infancy to adulthood, gradually differentiate themselves in prolonged interaction with each other and with the collective ethos in which they grow up. One thinks of David Plante's excellent *The Francoeur Family* or Christina Stead's masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*. Such books patiently dramatize the enigma of how, starting from the same roots, brothers and sisters can have such different but always interrelated, even complementary, destinies. This is not Enright's ambition in *The Gathering*.

While, in the opening chapters, Veronica informs her siblings of Liam's death, then travels from Dublin to Brighton to recover her brother's corpse, she also gives us snippets of information, rapid caricatures, sharp memories of the family home and family habits. This is efficiently done and the evocation of an overcrowded space full of busy life is one of the book's achievements:

Daddy was a lecturer in the local teacher training college, so, between the long holidays and the short hours, he was often around; marshalling, ordering, directing traffic; carrying in boxes of winter vegetables from the early morning market like he was running a summer camp and not a family. Though all this must have stopped sometime too—by the time I was in secondary school we lived on sending the twins down to the corner shop for rashers; Ernest or Mossie jingling the change in his pocket to see if there was enough there for a fry-up. None of the Hegartys was mean. Even I, the coolest of the Hegartys, am not stingy.

There is no attempt, however, to build up a detailed picture of the brothers and sisters or how they acted together, nor are they actively engaged in the funeral preparations for Liam. Readers will struggle to remember more than a name or two or distinguish between them. Detailed anecdotes are given about Liam and Veronica's younger sister, Kitty, but even the beloved brother remains a shadowy figure. We hear that he was a daredevil child and in adolescence a rather callous sexual predator. Later he left Ireland for London where he was happy to do menial work in a hospital. He was handsome and feckless, eager to expose the lies behind bourgeois life and ever ready to bite a helping hand; in particular he missed no opportunity to disturb friends with accounts of the cancerous body parts he delivered to the incinerator. But we do not see Liam involved in anything that might be called plot and he is never vividly present. "Liam was prone to boredom and decline," we are told; "he was too vague and restless to make a tragic object of himself." Of his alcoholism, his fathering and abandoning a child, and the events, if any, that led to his suicide, we are told almost nothing.

Instead Veronica puts considerable effort into imagining the passion-at-first-sight encounter between her grandmother and Lamb Nugent. We hear about their clothes, attitudes, and social status, their expectations of each other, and the stirring "in the deep root of [Nugent's] penis"; we are told how their budding relationship was compromised by the arrival of Charlie and about the two men's interest in cars and horses and betting. All this in an attempt to conjure up the circumstances in which Ada chose to marry one rather than the other:

I do not know why Ada married Charlie when it was Nugent who had her measure. And though you could say that she did not marry Nugent because she did not like him, that is not really enough. We do not always like the people we love—we do not always have that choice.

Maybe that was her mistake. She thought she could choose. She thought she could marry someone she liked and be happy with him, and have happy children. She did not realise that every choice is fatal. For a woman like Ada, every choice is an error, as soon as it is made.

Veronica is no enemy of the portentous and melodramatic. Mixed with imaginings of Ada's and Charlie's wedding night and first sex, then Ada's eventual (and hypothetical) succumbing to Nugent, we have a detailed, this time presumably historical, account of the wake for grandfather Charlie at which the young Veronica (aged eight) and Liam (nine) were encouraged to view their grandfather's corpse. At which point we are told:

...I think we both knew, as he leaned forward to touch Charlie's poor dead hand, that Liam would die.

He was on his way.

Grandmother Ada apparently shared this ominous premonition; in fact, Veronica now realizes,

this is why we were hauled up those stairs [to see Charlie's corpse]...because Ada had seen this day [Liam's suicide] coming. She knew all along. She wanted us to be prepared.

Liam's death is understood to have been inevitable. Why? Finally, Veronica decides to "put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams... and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was

barely nine.” One day, feeling bored, the little girl had opened the door of the sitting room, “the good room,” and saw this:

It was as if Mr Nugent’s penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man’s member... but a shocked...boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy’s bare forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. His hand was buried in the cloth, his fist clutched around something hidden there.

Enright has spoken in interviews of her decision to keep key elements of her novel ambiguous, and no sooner do we discover that Liam was molested as a child than the narrator is doubting her memory: surely Nugent wouldn’t have risked this abuse in the sitting room; it must have happened in the garage. Veronica also concedes that, even assuming it occurred, we cannot be sure that this outrage is the direct cause of Liam’s wounded psyche and eventual suicide.

Once the idea is mooted, however, it carries conviction, if only because no other account of Liam’s life is offered. On an emotional level the qualifications are empty rhetoric. Indeed, Veronica now wonders if she herself was molested, if Uncle Brendan’s madness was the result of his being molested, if her brothers and sisters were likewise damaged, all by the pedophile Mr. Nugent acting in bitter revenge for being rejected and teased by Ada. After a lurid fantasy, or perhaps repressed memory, in which she sees herself holding Nugent’s “old penis” in her hand and sucking it, Veronica wonders if it happened to her too:

I add it in to my life, as an event, and I think, well yes, that might explain some things. I add it into my brother’s life and it is crucial; it is the place where all cause meets all effect, the crux of the X.

Still toying with simultaneous affirmation and denial, she goes on:

[Nugent] could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still—that we did not have to be damaged by him in order to be damaged. It was the air he breathed that did for us. It was the way we were obliged to breathe his second-hand air.

In this scenario Nugent is responsible even if he did nothing but breathe. Either way, the events of Liam’s later life, how he conducted himself between the ages of nine and forty, count for little. So when, toward the end of the book, his body is brought to Dublin and the Hegarty family at last gets together for the wake, rather than shared recollection about the dead brother’s recent doings, or some revelatory drama between the siblings, we have the detective story of Veronica searching her family home for some proof of what happened in the distant past and powerfully tempted (since “I owe it to Liam to make things clear”—“The truth. The dead want nothing else”) to announce to her mother: “Your dead son was interfered with...and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs.”

Sure enough, rummaging in cupboards, Veronica comes across the rent books for her grandmother’s house and discovers that Nugent was Ada’s landlord. We can now imagine that the man had an economic hold over the woman and saw his tenants’ children and grandchildren as fair game; if she objected he could evict her.

The subject of pedophilia has been much in the news in recent years, particularly in Ireland where the frequency of abuse by Catholic priests at the expense of young boys has been determinedly exposed. Recalling her disapproval of Liam’s aggressive sexual behavior in his teens, Veronica tells us:

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own—if I hadn’t been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people’s homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too.

At this point all ambiguity evaporates and we have our culprit. Enright does not establish the sort of distance between author and narrator that might allow us to suspect that Veronica’s new and simplistic interpretation of family history may be no more than a fantasy prompted by the stories in the press. Rather, her willingness to admit her own unreliability earlier on in the book actually reinforces the denunciation, though, for all his wickedness, Nugent remains, like his victim, a shadowy, undeveloped figure. Only the narrator’s elaborate horror, as she imagines the acts of abuse, is vivid.

Impressive appreciations of Enright’s work on the paperback jacket of *The Gathering* liken her writing to that of as many as nine other highly regarded novelists, with *Newsday* rather comically telling us that her voice recalls that of “the incomparable Don DeLillo.” In fact, at its best Enright’s prose style is excitingly original, a blend of defensive

social satire with extreme precision in evoking sounds, smells, and atmosphere and a great ability to make rapid and telling transitions from past to present, concrete to abstract, narrative to reflection. However, these qualities emerge for the most part in sections peripheral to the main story: a dialogue with the young undertaker who lays out Liam's body, the memory of a lover at college, Veronica's recollections of her father watching television, "the newspaper adrift in his lap."

When, on the other hand, she slides into melodrama and literary formula, *The Gathering* does indeed sound like at least nine other writers and by no means the best. As my response to the novel swung back and forth from admiration to irritation, it was hard not to wish that Enright had concentrated on the complex and chaotic Hegartys and given us rather less of the lurid, convenient, and suspiciously topical Lamb Nugent.

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