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All We Shall Know by Donal Ryan

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Donal Ryan, author of the *Spinning Heart*, *The Thing about December* and a *Slanting of the Sun: Stories,* has never been an author to shy away from exploring the darker issues and emotions of Irish society and the human psyche. His fourth novel, *All We Shall Know* is no exception, bringing to the fore with force and grit the incendiary relationship between the Irish settled and Traveller communities.

The opening of the novel is visceral and compelling "Martin Toppy is the son of a famous Traveller and the father of my unborn child. He is seventeen. I'm thirty-three. I was his teacher. I'd have killed myself by now if I was brave enough."

The intensity of the novel's opening lines does not abate as the story unfolds. In an insert at the end of the novel, entitled *An Interview with Donal Ryan*, Ryan responds to a question that his writing is bleak by saying that "I want the experience of reading my books to be intense and memorable and to count for something in the lives of my readers beyond a temporary distraction." The author is certainly successful in this regard with *All We Shall Know,* the intensity of which resolutely remains in the mind and heart of the reader long after the book has been put back on the book shelf. Ryan also states in the interview that he likes to "shorten the gap between the reader and the page to the point where they can hear the voices of my characters and live their stories." This aspiration also holds true. By the end of the novel, the reader feels as if they have inhabited the dark and beautiful spaces in the mind and soul of the protagonist.

All We Shall Know is set in rural Tipperary. The novel centres on Melody Shee, a teacher whose marriage to Pat "the first boy I'd ever kissed" is breaking down. Melody is pregnant by her seventeen year old pupil who is a Traveller. Meanwhile Pat her husband has been visiting brothels in Limerick. "How did we turn to such savagery?" Melody asks.

The opening lines of the novel also put in place a number of clever literary devices that propel the novel forward. Each chapter is a week in Melody's pregnancy. This symbiotically locks the reader into Melody's inner world and thoughts in an almost claustrophobic and insular way. There are chilling, evocative descriptions of Melody's fears, "I spend the first hour of my day convinced that I will actually kill myself. I feel relieved. I spend the next after that worrying about the consequences of killing myself." There are vivid descriptions of the domestic rituals that Melody completes to get herself through each day as well as tender accounts of her baby moving and growing in the womb, "At seven weeks or so a foetus starts

to move. Imperceptibly, they say, but I swear I felt a stirring yesterday, a tiny shifting, a shadow weight."

Having dramatically set the scene, Ryan then goes on to create in emotive and unflinching detail a portrayal of a not so nice Melody, producing one of the most interesting anti-heroines in Irish fiction whilst somehow remaining sufficiently nuanced and subtle in this portrayal that the reader never entirely loses sympathy for her. From the outset, Melody is portrayed as the sexual aggressor in relation to Martin her pupil. She says:

"I put my hand to his hair as he leant over where he sat tracing sentences and reading them slowly, and then to his face and when I looked up I told him with my silence and my eyes that he could kiss me."

Melody, in her own words describes her coldness and hardness towards her husband Pat even before they married. This coldness is corroborated by a sea of judging voices in her community. Melody says, "Pat's Mother told me that today. That I was always a bad bitch but now I am a mad, bad bitch as well. A mad bad bitch. And a whore." She describes the women in the coffee shop "and I heard one of the crones say Poor Pat. Lord poor Pat." After Melody gets pregnant by Pat, a brick with the word cunt on it is thrown through her window."

Later in the novel we discover that Melody coldly and calculatingly abandoned her best friend at school to gain kudos with the 'cool' girls in order to win Pat, resulting in the suicide of her friend. "I could have saved Breedie Flynn. But the cool girls hated her and I couldn't be one of them if I was Breedie's friend and I couldn't keep Pat without being one of them. I told them things that she had told me."

Throughout the novel, the reader is privy to the sadness, regret and confusion that Melody has experienced in her life. In the second chapter of the book she has a dream in which Breedie asks her " 'Melody, why did you leave me?' And she reached for my hand and squeezed it and she was haloed by a blazing light... and I woke then saying 'Breedie, oh Breedie, I'm sorry.' "

Melody also expresses a desire to return the book that Martin was reading "the only book we ever read" and "I will apologise to him and then I will go to the house that I grew up in and I will sit at my father's table and be kind to him and make him know somehow that he is not to blame." She also regrets how she has treated Pat "How did Love's memory fade so completely from us? The things we said. The things that we thought. My poor Pat, my lovely man, my twinkling boy, my hero. Oh cruel, cruel me. I never knew myself. Tomorrow, I'll have forgotten myself again."

But the real sympathy for Melody emanates from outside of her own turbulent psyche. Throughout the novel, Ryan portrays a society in which personal expression is difficult. Melody has a Masters in journalism. She likes to write poetry. In one of her arguments with Pat, he taunts her that people in the pub make fun of some poems that she had published in the local newspaper. Melody also expresses sadness that her journalistic career had stalled before it had even commenced.

"I tried and tried. I wrote pieces about GM food and whaling and direct provision for asylum seekers. I wrote a searing article on sexism." When she 'waded in' and 'mounted a defence' to comments that were posted online in response to the article, she was never asked to write for the broadsheet newspaper again. "I couldn't get regular work" she laments.

Melody remains defiant. Throughout the novel, she's not afraid to attack the erstwhile sacred cows of Irish society. She screams back at the women in the coffee shop who express sympathy for Pat suggesting that they ask certain men about the "hookers that they have all

been riding whilst their mothers were kneeling down at devotions and saying novenas and doing stations of the cross in thanks to God that their boys are all married to grand girls….. I hope that they all have fucking AIDS." There are other authority figures in the novel that receive similar expletive filled tongue lashings which are exhilarating for the reader.

As Melody's alienation from the community deepens, she strikes up a friendship with a young Irish Traveller woman, Mary Crothery. Mary is an outcast in her own community as conversely, she is unable to have children. Mary is supportive and non- judgmental. The easy friendship that Mary and Melody enjoy is juxtaposed against the fractious relationships that Melody has with members of the settled community.

Mary Crothery is described as being psychic. Throughout the novel Melody is repeatedly drawn to visit the halting side where Mary lives. In the chapter marked 'Week Sixteen', Melody says that "some unknowable longing came over me that I felt could only be assuaged by going there" and goes on to say that the camp "might offer up some insight, some clear vision." The honour and loyalty of the travelling community is further depicted when Melody's pupil Martin tells her that he loves her and that even at the age of seventeen he would fight to the death for her.

Melody's mother, already deceased in the novel is depicted retrospectively as a restless and yearning character. Ryan deftly paints a picture of a former generation who made the best of things. "My mother and father didn't fit together… she was an aesthete and a classicist; he didn't know what these things were." She describes her father as having "a sense of having to see this thing through, this raising of a child and supporting of a wife." Ryan's portrayal of the father's unconditional love for his daughter particularly as the town turns their back on her is breathtakingly moving such as looking out the window for her visits and cutting her grass. "He loved me defiantly, fiercely," Melody states.

The book triumphs in a number of ways. There are the vivid, rich, almost forensic descriptions of Melody's inner turmoil and the equally vivid and real descriptions of Melody's relationships with Mary, Pat, her father and her community. But Ryan excels as he does in other novels in showing the ebbing away of an older Irish life, and of the creation of a newer society in which people live more authentic but not necessarily easier lives; of a generation not yet fully extricated from the older way of life but desperately and clumsily trying to create new meaning and find new ways forward. Throughout the novel, Ryan subtly captures in the background the changing fabric of Irish life as if Ireland could be a character in the book in its own right. Pat is a water meter installer. Melody's father frequents a café with a Lithuanian waitress who he remarks is very nice. Ryan also captures the lingering prejudices of Irish society and the semantics of that prejudice. Pat asks Melody why she is obsessed with 'Knackers'. New fertile possibilities however are presented by the author. Melody's friendship with Mary embodies the breaking down of older societal boundaries and barriers.

In a second insert in the novel, an essay by Ryan called a *Taste of Vision*, the author asks a friend about the verisimilitude of his depiction of travellers. He also asks his dad "did I get it right?" By the end of the novel, I didn't feel that Ryan gets the portrayal of Travellers right and that a less stereotypical and more nuanced portrayal would have strengthened the novel. Where Ryan does get it right is in the fascinating, rebellious female characters that are the fulcrum of the novel around which everything else is a mediocre satellite as well as the rich and complex portrayal of Melody and her inner and outer worlds. It was also fascinating to read an Irish book in which an Irish Traveller woman is front and centre. Ultimately the real triumph of this book, in a year in which Irish Travellers have gained recognition as an ethnic minority, is that Ryan has shown us the possibilities that exist between the settled and Traveller

communities via the beautiful and sustaining friendship of Mary and Melody the apotheosis of which is characterised by the novel's unexpected but atoning denouement.