

Foster Review by Cormac Kelly

Claire Keegan's poignant and intimate novella, "Foster" is one that merges parental love and the past in what should be recognised as a brilliant and stark retelling of a summer in rural Ireland. Claire Keegan was born in 1968 in Wicklow, where a large number of her highly acclaimed short stories are set. She spent time in both Louisiana and Wales studying and has released two short story collections, her first being "Antarctica" in 1999, followed by "Walk the Blue Fields" in 2007. She won the Davy Byrnes Award in 2009 for "Foster" and has received other prestigious awards such as the Olive Cook Award and the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. Claire Keegan is known worldwide for her realism and emotional depth in her stories and continues to write in Ireland.

"Foster" is a moving short story set in a sweltering summer in Wexford in the early 1980s. With the impending birth of yet another sibling, a young girl is taken to stay with the Kinsellas for the duration of the summer. Told through the eyes of the young girl left in a new home with strangers, there is uncertainty in the air which makes the talking between them uneasy. But as apprehension turns to intimacy, the girl begins to hope, to feel, that better days are ahead. But in a home of rhubarb tarts and night-time card games, where the truth is said to be valued above all else, the girl discovers a secret. As a dark reminder of the past is brought back to light, and days end, the girl must face tragedy and the fact that her stay in this new sanctuary can only be temporary. Told through a beautiful and understated narrative, Keegan unlocks the innermost emotions that families are built on, and holds us with her sharp descriptions and wonderful insights into the mind of a loving and innocent young girl.

The girl, who remains at the centre of the story, develops a good deal throughout the tale. From an inward and emotionally wounded child to a more open and loving young girl, the protagonist of this story undoubtedly undergoes a positive transformation. Initially the girl is, for the most part, surprised when she is greeted with affection. In her own home the love of her real mother was valued by her, but never seemed warm or close, but rather practical and plain. It is alluded to in the story, that her mother did not wish to have the child she is pregnant with, giving us an insight into their relationship and also, marital relations in rural Ireland in general. The girl is quite subdued in the beginning, and clearly isn't coping well with her abandonment, having been left with strangers in a new home. She constantly fears the worst when she makes a mistake, for instance wetting the bed, which she thinks will be met with anger. And when Kinsella tenses at the kitchen table after some stern words, she believes there will be a severe punishment. But nothing comes of these incidents, and the girl is left wondering. Coming from an unhealthy and at times hostile environment to the accepting home of the Kinsellas, the girl slowly begins to settle. She helps out around the house and slowly starts to expect compassion from her temporary guardians. From this she forms a growing love for the parents as they do for her. The trip to Gorey and the walk along by the strand solidifies their relationships. As a result of this loving care, the girl knows to say "yes" not "yeah" and that at times, nothing at all needs to be said. For so long her life was dominated by her parents' rule and thus she felt somewhat isolated in her own home. But with the Kinsellas, with a sense of belonging the girl flourishes, and by the end, although there is immense sadness, has a greater idea of the kind of person she is and what it means to be truly loved. Ms Kinsella, so often, referred to as the "woman," is someone who has built up emotional resilience, but at times strains to keep a brave face. Suffering from a loss, she has tried to bury the past behind her and move on. Her character does not change drastically, as from the beginning she had expressed warmth towards the young girl. But that love for her continued to grow, as the woman, though perhaps strained at times, looked after the girl as if she were her own. However I believe her love for the young girl is underpinned by sadness, as Ms Kinsella wonders what could've happened differently, if she had been able to continue raising her own child. She is clearly quite a

different woman to the cold and practical character of the girl's real mother, Mary. She is not impersonal and guarded as she is, but rather loving and supportive, still trying to deal with her own grief, and doing what she can to keep it hidden. But I believe the girl realises that having a secret, such as the Kinsellas do, is not shameful and that sometimes kindness is all that's needed to allow someone to flourish. Kinsella, husband of Edna, is a sincere man who is clearly the antithesis of the girl's real father. Instead of showing apathy and even coldness towards the girl, Kinsella, although struggling with his own loss, greets her with open arms. Possibly in an attempt to seal his own wounds, he becomes close to the girl, and they both share quiet jokes and kind talk in the kitchen or as they walked on the strand. He values her for who she is and believes wholeheartedly she should be treasured. In this way, Keegan paints a vivid picture of a reserved man, struggling with his loss silently, and perhaps healing himself through the compassion he's showing for the young girl. Their relationship becomes so strong, I believe, that it proves significant in the closing pages of the novel. There are a few minor characters, with the three central characters, the girl, and the Kinsellas taking the focus for the majority of the story. There is some humour to be found in the side characters that appear, and all those that feature fit in smoothly into this archetypal rural Ireland setting.

"Foster" is told through the innocent but highly observant eyes of the young girl. The language is accessible yet remains highly effective, and overall with its striking simplicity paints a vivid picture of rural Irish life. Due to Keegan's masterful use of suggestibility in her writing, the story seems mature and is not labouring a point at any time. So the novella remains fluid and easy to read, but in this way, really manages to capture the torment or grief eating away at a character in just a few lines. Colloquialisms are used in the dialogue throughout the story, injecting realism into the plot, which is complemented by the highly accurate Irish characters living in County Wexford. However I would've liked if Keegan explored the girl's siblings more, as we know there were several, to shed more light on their situation and show how they differed from the protagonist. This would've added more depth to the plot and would've given a broader or more rounded view of their family. The discovery of the secret does cause a turn or a shift in the plot which changes the pace, but there were no real twists. But given the length of the novella and the distinctive, intimate writing style Keegan has perfected, no twists were needed, in my opinion, to keep readers interested.

"Foster" is a wonderful novella that captures the power of human emotions and highlights raw love between people, things that full-length novels have failed to do as artfully as "Foster" has. With her smart, honest and warm storytelling, Keegan proves she is a true master of human behaviour, when her work includes those subtle or foolish moments that make her characters human. With a tale of some happiness mingled with grief and through her realism and awareness of cultural context, Keegan weaves a story of human kindness, love after loss and hope. 8/10

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