

A House of Cards

By Elizabeth MacDonald
(Pillar Press)

A COLLECTION of eight short stories from new writer Elizabeth MacDonald, *A House of Cards* is quite simply good writing, despite the generic-sounding title.

Frequently told from a first-person perspective, each piece reveals something about the life of a foreigner in Italy. Occasionally this is a tourist or new arrival, but mostly the world is seen from the eyes of the long-term ex-pat, and it is in these pieces that the work really shines.

MacDonald succeeds in conveying that curious dual vantage point one acquires after living in a foreign culture for many years, the one that realises full well that Continental sophistication often comes hand-in-hand with narrow mindedness and intolerance, while at the same time unable to avoid the similarly deep-seated contempt for Anglo-Saxon plain-spokenness.

A friend once told me how she hates going into shops in Europe where the shopkeepers glare at you as if you've interrupted their day, but at the same time she can't handle how salespeople in North America are all over you from the second you step in the door. "Both things drive me crazy now!" she exclaimed.



It's this delicate mental twilight zone that the stories in *A House of Cards* take as their backdrop.

When that is your base, you've definitely set the bar quite high for yourself. But MacDonald does not disappoint.

While the stories may appear slight of substance at first glance (an English art critic's carefully-ordered life is intruded upon by less refined compatriots; a newly married woman is forced to endure her attention-seeking in-laws at Sunday lunch), the ultra-believable characters, artistic use of language and subtle treatment of themes make each piece intensely interesting.

'Falling Stars', which hints at the suppressed dissatisfaction of a woman in her marriage, and 'In Hindsight', in which a married man with an equally suppressed craving

for adventure finds this expressed in an affair with a more brash colleague, are particularly complex and subtle character studies (so subtle, in fact, that I may even be mistaken about the intended theme of the former).

But what's possibly even more remarkable is that this work of obvious talent has been ignored by the major publishing world. The small but mighty Pillar Press must be commended for stepping in where the big houses fail to tread.



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller *ISAK*.

More information about the Canadian, her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com