

The Punching Man/Boys are Elastic, Girls are Fantastic

By Marsha Swan
(Hag's Head Press)

HERE WE HAVE two novellas with intertwined stories, both giving an immigrant's perspective on Dublin.

The Punching Man chronicles the everyday life of an orphaned Roma boy, Remus, adopted by a good-hearted couple who take him to Dublin for a new life and raise him as their own.

Once in Dublin, Remus struggles with the cultural difference, his lack of English, bullying at the inner city school he attends and the crowded situation at the hostel where he lives with his foster parents and sisters.

Slowly but surely he starts to integrate and interacts more with the Irish and other immigrant children as his English gains fluency. But just as he starts to settle, he is uprooted again.

His teacher Ruth is upset at his sudden disappearance, and she tries to find out more.

Ruth is also the protagonist of the second novella. She's a single middle-aged American woman suffering from cancer who has settled



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in Dublin with her Irish husband. Ruth wants to start working again, despite her illness, in order to give herself a sense of purpose, to keep herself occupied and forget about the cancer.

As in her hometown, she opts for a 'difficult school'. A dedicated teacher, she leads her pupils to slowly advance in their learning. No matter how difficult they are, she gradually wins their trust, while at the same time dealing with the jealousies and vanities among her colleagues.

Portraying the lives of refugees and the communities of inner city social housing, the author has chosen the underbelly of Dublin's society as a backdrop for these novellas. However both stories would have benefited from more plot development in order to raise them above social commentary, despite Swan's careful illustration of the close-knit communities both in the hostel among the refugees, and of the local residents in the flats close to the school.

Never the less, Swan's stories are full of hope that both sides can have a fresh start, which marks these works apart from the pack.



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