

Walk the Blue Fields

By Claire Keegan

(Faber and Faber)

Coming to Claire Keegan for the first time I had no particular expectations of what this collection of eight short stories could bring. However, judging by the cover blurbs, Keegan, is a lauded short story writer with famous admirers.

While exploring the first tale, 'The Long and Painful Death', which paints a portrait of a respected female writer availing of a writer's cottage on Achill, I initially feared that I was in for 180 pages of a writer trying to keep up with her praise. Nevertheless, as the story developed and a mean-spirited self-important German man shows up to impinge on the idyllic solitude that the writer revels in, I begin to see where Keegan is heading.

The fictional male character starts to prod and poke at ordinary life, and this is the way that Keegan moves forward, gently leading us by the hand further into her worlds. Around us develop characters and lives that straddle both reality and fiction and these are delivered in deft, easy strokes of a natural, multifaceted and accomplished language.

The following story, 'The Parting



Gift', similarly begins in what seems a fairly regular, quiet family setting. This situation is soon infiltrated by the incredulous reality of incest and we find ourselves inside the bubble where the main character lives. There much is revealed but there are no emotions attached. Many of the stories are similarly pregnant with or develop a sinister surprise, something that jars the normality yet lives there side by side with it.

The recurring themes are those of loneliness, the practical impossibility of communication between people; the manner in which people often fall together in an effort not to be alone, but end up just as

lonely, if not more so.

In the eponymous story, 'Walk the Blue Fields', Keegan gets straight to the point: "It's what she once wanted but two people hardly ever want the same thing at any given point in life. It is sometimes the hardest part of being human." She often appears to suggest that the healing of these immense impossibilities lies in nature, and so the backdrop to most stories is the many variations of the Irish landscape, its smells and lights.

The last story, 'Night of the Quicken Trees', reveals the more magical aspects of life as fortune-telling, folklore, divining dreams and healing are weaved in as central aspects of a romance between two broken-hearted loners. As the woman in this story leaves us she travels with her child to a mythical Irish-speaking land, where she truly belongs, where she can be happy. The fact that Keegan herself lives in rural Ireland suggests that she herself has gone off to magical, healing nature and her short stories are the missives from that place.

For now I am satisfied with lingering over *Walk the Blue Fields*, but still very much look forward to more of Claire Keegan's work, and believe that it will fit snugly into those dark evenings by the blazing fire and rain-peppered windowpanes in my future reading life.

Review by Jeanette Rehnstrom



Jeanette Rehnstrom is a freelance journalist and writer who has written extensively for GCN for almost three years, with two columns by her featuring in the magazine every month. More information about her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at irishwritersexchange.com