

A memorable take on the torture of memory loss

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

The Heart of Everything

By Henrietta McKervey
Hachette Books Ireland, 304pp, €12.99

Henrietta McKervey is a name which may ring a bell with readers who had the pleasure of reading her wonderful blog on the travels she undertook to North Atlantic lighthouses, rocks and islands as part of the project which won her the first Maeve Binchy Travel Writing Award in 2014. And just a year ago, she published her debut novel, *What Becomes of Us*, which received plenty of well-deserved critical acclaim.

The main protagonist of her latest novel is the likeable, wise and witty Mags Jensen, a 67-year-old woman, once married to a Norwegian architect, who has spent her life in the south Dublin suburbs – first Shankill, then, when we meet her, Booterstown. Mags is the mother of three grown-up children, whose lives have taken them in varied direc-

tions. Relations between the siblings are not warm – Anita, an edgy housewife, and bohemian Elin, children's book author and illustrator, avoid each other assiduously. Raymond, their brother, is an irresponsible alcoholic librarian. Their mother is like a switchboard operator who keeps the tenuous family communications network functioning. She is at the heart of the family and they are all in touch with her if not with each other.

When Mags leaves her house in Booterstown to go to the shops and fails to return, the three siblings are forced to unite. For five days they join forces in what soon becomes a missing person search. During the increasingly frantic hunt for their mother the events of their childhood and more recent past which created the fissures in the family are revealed. An honest evaluation of their situations, if not precisely a reconciliation, is achieved. (Any apparent resemblance to the plot of Anne Enright's marvelous novel, *The Green Road*, is definitely accidental: McKervey's novel was written and submitted as an MFA thesis in UCD at least a year before the publication of *The Green Road*. The history of fiction abounds with these curious coincidences.)

The central concern of McKervey's is memory loss, and the effect Alzheimers or senior dementia has on the sufferer and her



■ Henrietta McKervey: imagination and wit. PHOTOGRAPH: AILBHE O'DONNELL

loved ones. The role of memory in forging individual and family identity, and in cementing or wrecking relationships, is subtly explored.

The torture of memory loss is narrated with a nice blend of sensitivity and humour: "Laying the table doesn't take long; plate, cutlery, butter dish but not the tub of spread, cup in the saucer and what else? She looks around. Where's that . . . thingy? She has no

idea what she's looking for but can't give up on herself. She has a hand raised to the press over the table so she must have been after something. She takes a two-finger Kit Kat from the shelf and puts it next to the saucer. She knows it's not really what she was looking for but this way she's remembered something . . . A half-remember."

Mags, in the early stages of the debility, swerves in and out of forgetfulness. She is often lucid. Her observations on her surroundings are arresting; the cluttered landscapes of Booterstown and Shankill are wittily evoked:

"On the far side of the Rock Road there is a salt marsh nature reserve. Just beyond it lies the thin line of the DART track; and beyond that again, the curling, sealy-blue waves of Dublin Bay. It has always seemed peculiar to her that a nature reserve can be bounded by a dual carriageway on one side and a train line on the other. Not very natural, is it? During winter she has spotted geese come all the way from Canada, teal from Russia, and those lovely redshanks, stopping on their journey from Iceland to Africa . . . Free in the air but controlled by a destiny outside themselves, an instinct that propels them across frozen continents to this small, grubby stretch beside a busy road in a busy city."

The novel is full of such fresh observations, and the recreation of this busy stretch of the Dublin coastline seen through the eyes of Mags is simultaneously accurate and quirky. What impresses most in the novel is the quality of the writing, the striking images and witty turns of phrase. The book is readable and straightforward, and the search for the missing Mags imbues it with tension. It's a page turner. But just because a book is accessible doesn't mean it's lightweight or thinly written. The author's light touch should not blind us to her stylistic skills.

Henrietta McKervey is a novelist in the early stages of her career, brimming over with promise. She has wit, imagination, and an understanding of human beings, which are the hallmark of the true novelist. In addition she has the drive and perseverance every serious writer needs.

On the MFA programme in UCD, she was one of the stars of a gifted class, a talented student, always eager to learn and improve. In the two years since her graduation she has already published two novels. The first was good and this is better. We look forward to many more.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is a writer and critic. A member of Aosdána, she also teaches creative writing

