

Saudade in the City: Kevin Barry's City of Bohane

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Kevin Barry's IMPAC award winning debut novel *City of Bohane* presents us with a dystopian West of Ireland narrative trimmed with a stylish Tarantino edge. Following on from his award-winning collection of short stories, *There are Little Kingdoms*, Barry strikes again with his depiction of the little kingdom of Bohane during the year 2053. There are no cars or technology whatsoever in this futuristic novel, but there are plenty of weapon-wielding Bohane dwellers in fighting form for a brawl. The novel changes focus between a number of different characters, each somehow involved in the town's ongoing feud. Geographically and psychologically, the town is split into different factions. Logan Hartnett, aka The Tall Fella, aka The 'Bino, runs the leading Hartnett Fancy gang, and encounters a number of different oppositions throughout the novel. 'The Gant' Broderick, a giant of a man with "a pair of hands on him the size of Belfast sinks" is back from a twenty-five year stint in some remote unknown location aiming to win back the love of Logan's wife. As well as this, The 'Bino's gang must face an uprising by the local scumbag clan off The Rises, contend with the Big Nothin' polis, and maintain their savvy sense of style.

Each chapter begins with a wide cinematographic position and zooms with a Steinbeck-like quality into the action of one of the Bohanian denizens. Regardless of age, each character is plagued by a crippling nostalgia for an unspecified "lost-time". Considering the novel was written during a recession-stricken Ireland, there are clear nods to contemporary Ireland living in a melancholic state. The use of drugs by almost every character in the novel acts as a numbing agent or "dream-pipe" away from the perils of both modern-day and dystopian Ireland. The bog-soaked prose of Barry's novel has clear traditional Irish storytelling influences of sound and rhythm, with a focus on playing with and expressing oneself through aural language. Constant religious references in this ungodly place nod to the maintenance of a traditional Hiberno-English tongue well into the 2050s. The strong contrast between dialogue and narrative tone and language creates a clear differentiation between the voice of each character, and we learn about each of them through their own individual cant - "flat and harsh among the consonants, sing-song and soupy on the vowels, betimes vaguely Caribbean."

City of Bohane is not a novel without its flaws, falling short in a number of places. Barry's language certainly packs a heavy punch, but vigorously strings along a less impressive choppy and somewhat forgettable plot. The action of the novel is isolated within a short number of chapters or scenes. The love triangle on which the novel positions itself is a

little dull, and you will find yourself more interested in what the characters are wearing rather than their romantic gains. Certain characters such as the strangely alluded to but never explained film-club owning narrator of the novel are underexplored, if explored at all. However, Barry's incredible wordsmithery does not need a dense plot to give it bones - to read *City of Bohane* exclusively for its stunning turn-of-phrase and dazzling visual descriptions is an immense pleasure in itself. Although this is a story you may have heard before, *City of Bohane* is not a novel you have read before.

Barry is a master of misdirection. He shoves the reader from her high-horse of assumed familiarity and down into the Bohane gutter among the "inebriates and hoor-lickers". His disjointed and reconstructed language completely throws us from what we think our expectations of a gangland crime novel set in the West of Ireland should be. Initially, the city's vernacular is pretty jarring, but soon enough the reader gains the ability to keep pace with Barry's rolling linguistic rhythm. The novel's visual and auditory qualities are accompanied by an additional sense - one of gloom and angst. This foreboding tangibility, along with the novel's stylised linguistics haunt the reader long after the novel has been put down.

Ultimately, if you're looking to read a novel with a fresh and weighty plot, *City of Bohane* is not the book for you. However, Barry's linguistic ability and craftsmanship of dialogue cannot be commended enough. This debut novel is an absolute delight to read and will leave you immensely impressed by the innovative ways in which language can be simultaneously modern and primitive; both chic and tacky and make you nostalgic for a past that has not yet happened.