

Evelyn Conlon, *Not the Same Sky: A Novel* (Wakefield Press, 2013)

Evelyn Conlon is a novelist and short story writer from Ireland. She is distinctly artistic and is the member of the *aosdána*, the Irish association which honours distinguished artistic work. She is no stranger to Australia. She lived there in the 1970s and her novel *Not the Same Sky* (2013) is set for the most part in Australia. She is an accomplished writer who has been a writer-in-residence in many countries. Her base is in Dublin, Ireland.

To date Conlon has published three collections of short stories: *My Head is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993), and *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2001). Apart from the short stories, she has also produced novels, amongst which are *Stars in the Daytime* (1989) and *A Glassful of Letters* (1998). Her last novel before *Not the Same Sky* was *Skin of Dreams* (2003), shortlisted for the Irish novel of the year.

Not the Same Sky begins with a Prologue. The temporal setting is 2008. The character Joy Kennedy receives a letter from Australia asking for a donation for building a memorial to the 4414 famine orphan girls that were shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850. It has 35 chapters excluding the Prologue.

Chapter 1 begins in the year 1848 with the story of Matt Dwyer, an Irish servant to the English Crown. The temporal setting is during the great potato famine in Ireland. Dwyer is in charge of the lists of the dead and those who have emigrated. This list is to go to England with him.

The account of the potato famine is historically placed between the years 1848 and 1850 and it strengthens the mould of the fiction created by Conlon. The story revolves around 4 young women, Bridget Joyce, Anne Sherry, Honora Rafferty and Julia Cuffe. These women, who work in the same workhouse, are deported to Australia.

The four friends become diasporic in a strange land as they cross oceans from their homeland Ireland. They lose things that every human being values in this world: their family, friends, identity and language.

Australia is a colony of England. In this new colony the women invent a new life for themselves and become very strong individuals. They conduct a journey of a spiritual, mental and physical form via their migration.

The language that Conlon uses to tell her story is descriptive and very straightforward. The absence of bombastic language lends thoughtfulness to the fictions. The novel is like a documentary that is being acted out by the characters. It can be labelled as a historical fiction.

This historically set novel is a powerful rendition of memory and the capability of the mind to shut out the past, dislodging itself from the stark circumstances of everyday life. The novel in its own way is elegant as well as subtle in the way it renders the story of Ireland, the potato famine and the migration of the victims to Australia to build a new life, culture and diaspora. Within this tragedy of migration which entails one uprooting oneself from his/her identity and history, the fiction is suffused with humour – as are many Irish narratives that deal with tragedy, such as *Angela's Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt.

The novel is set in two time frames, the present and the past. As has been stated above the Prologue begins in the year 2008. Then we are taken back in time to the potato famine. After 29 chapters of the past, in chapter 30 we face the present again, in Dublin, Ireland.

The novel presents to us the experience of capital punishment, as used to be the norm in Britain's past. The laws used to be very stringent. Australia used to be a land where prisoners

were sent to in order to reform them. This can be traced in Charles Dickens's English classic novel *Great Expectations* (1861). The main character Pip has a benefactor who was deported to Australia. *Not the Same Sky* is a very insightful work of fiction which renders the story of life and death, as well as punishment via two continents and two generations.

The ending of the novel is beautiful. Conlon uses the migration of birds from one continent to another as a metaphor to describe the act of migration. During winter birds fly to sunny places which are warm and can give them food. Thus, humans are compared to birds, and their winter is when they face difficulties and hardship in their own country. To find a better future and place of residence the men or women who are victimised, either by circumstance or other forces, move away from their place of birth, uprooting themselves, their culture and background, and leaving behind a history that is neither remembered nor forgotten, like cobwebs in an abandoned house.

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