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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

The New Alchemists

by Charles Handy

Charles Handy is most importantly a philosopher. He is acknowledged as a highly successful writer, lecturer and broadcaster, a self-styled social philosopher and an author whose body of textbooks for business include *The Empty Raincoat* and *The Hungry Spirit*.

The New Alchemists seeks to tell the stories, in their own words, of twenty-nine individuals who each have created something significant out of nothing or turned the equivalent of base metal into a kind of gold. The range is interesting including business people, architects, designers, artists and administrators. The feature presented on each individual arises from detailed discussion and interview with the author and is supplemented by a detailed composite photograph as developed by Elizabeth Handy, his wife and a self-published portrait photographer. The preamble to the pieces on these new alchemists includes an assessment of the nature of alchemy, the seeds of alchemy and possible ways in which new alchemists can be developed, promoted or assisted.

The book is very well written. The style is light and easily accessible to anyone, whether as a student new to the area, an expert within the area or a casual reader. The photographs and features on these highly successful people are beautifully and simply presented. The range of people interviewed and portrayed as subjects, whether in interest, age or appeal, is so broad it is impossible not to identify with at least some of them. The new alchemists include Richard Branson (Virgin), Terence Conran (Design/Restaurants), Trevor Bayliss (Inventor) and Tim Waterstone (Waterstone's bookstores). The book has the capacity to entertain, educate and inspire the reader, the benefits being directly proportional to the amount of effort, study and commitment one applies to its pages and the ideas contained therein.

The author is quick to point out that the book is limited to a focus on London resident alchemists with few examples of entrepreneurs involved in manufacturing. Perhaps the simplicity of style and presentation belies the depth of research, knowledge, value and ideas that could be gained from reading this book, thinking about its contents and most importantly applying some of the principles espoused between its covers. Do somebody a favour and buy it for them as a present. Do yourself a greater favour and read it before you give it to them. Enjoy.

Tattler

This GREAT LITTLE NATION

By Gene Kerrigan and Pat Brennan

Gill & MacMillan 1999

If you ever heard the phrase “It would never happen in Ireland” here is a book to prove you’re wrong. This book aims to cover as many as possible of the scandals and controversies that have shaped our image of Ireland since the Republic was form.

Our perspective on scandals can shift over time and as more information is brought to light. In some cases what was alleged to be a scandal turned out to be relatively innocent and in some cases a false allegation of scandal. Before you switch off, this book is not just about the Tribunals and although they are touched upon each entry is only about a page long and covers all the relevant points. The scandals are listed in alphabetical order, and at the end of some are suggested other related scandals, also covered in the book.

This is not a book you would read from cover, but would browse through picking out the topics. What happens is you get caught up in the book after reading one story, you may notice another one which catches you eye or suggested to see. Hence you move back an forth through the book. So of the topics, are funny, heartbreaking or will make you very cynical especially about the politics in Ireland. Also what hits you is that many of these scandals you remember hearing or reading about.

From the Great Tampon Scandal of 1944 to the Arms Crisis of 1970. From Taca to Tuffy to Traynor to “Thundering Disgrace” all are covered.

As the bank manger said to Charlies, “*it’s a Great Little Nation*”.

Sandra McCullagh

"As it is in Heaven" by Niall Williams

Two reviews from the ITB Bookclub.

This book tells the story of how one young man's dreary, monotonous life is utterly changed as a result of attending a concert, one winter's evening in county Clare. Stephen Griffin is so completely entranced by the beauty of the Italian music and the Italian violin player, that his life from then on is taken up with the pursuit of her. It is as if his life until then has been on "pause" and she has hit the "play" button. This development of character is not so much a transformation as a modification, not quite the chrysalis to butterfly, but rather to moth, and in many ways this change is more realistic than a dramatic Hollywood-style metamorphosis. Interwoven with this is the lonely life of Stephen's father, which also changes as a result of this event. Music is a central theme in this novel and is extremely evocative of baroque Venice. The story itself is rather fantastic and littered with coincidences, so that in truth, the reader does have to suspend his disbelief. Most of the characters are rather sad, pathetic people with unfulfilled lives and one gets the impression that Williams has somewhat over-simplified them. In fact one might wonder at the function and validity of some of the more peripheral characters, the two doctors, for example. The main character, Stephen, is also rather one-dimensional and insipid, indeed not the most likeable individual. However, one of the great strengths of the novel is the author's articulation of human feelings: grief, disappointment, acceptance, pain and joy and his ability to make these emotions very real to the reader. Add this to the wonderful descriptions of the Irish countryside, which come alive with the author's beautiful use of language. On the whole, this book is a compelling, uplifting read, ideal for the holidays.

Aidín O'Sullivan

As it is in Heaven

First the plot. *As it is in heaven* is fairly standard love story - man meets woman, seduces woman, then loses her, searches in vain for her and, without revealing the ending, is found in somewhat incredulous circumstances. The man in this case is Stephen, a teacher who lives near a cliff face in west Clare. Stephen is portrayed as a gaunt and hapless individual with a tragic past, which threatens to intrude on this loving odyssey. The woman, by contrast, is as exotic as you are likely to meet in these parts. Gabriella is an Italian musician who lives in Kenmare because her Italian boyfriend dumped her there after an aborted circuit of the Ring of Kerry. She is a soft and vulnerable character who plays enchanting music on the violin enrapturing audiences reared on a diet of Miko Russell and the Corofin Ceili Band. The love affair is nurtured by Stephen's terminally ill father by various means, one of which is placing thousands of pound under bushes in Stephen's Green. There is the twist in the end, which unravels just as you are about to lose patience, but all in all you'd wonder what it was all about.

What makes the novel bearable is the quality of writing of Niall Williams. There is a beautiful sense of place for all of the story's locations particularly in the case of Kenmare's mountain terrain. The Gabriella character is as sympathetic and endearing as any of Jane Austen's heroines. Despite the shortcomings of the plot it is a pleasant read. Definitely one to pack for the holidays. And finally you will never walk through the Green again without taking the occasional peek - under the bushes that is.

Tom Doyle