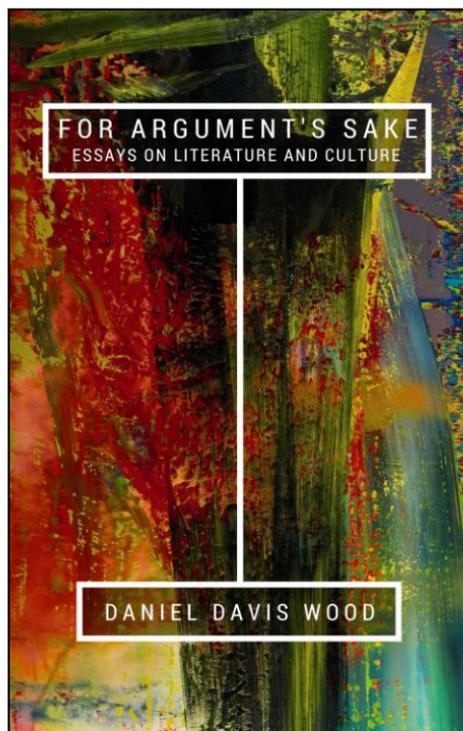


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THE QUIET ACHIEVER
OF IRISH LITERATURE

CLAIRE KEEGAN'S *FOSTER*

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SINCE SHE PUBLISHED HER DÉBUT COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES just over a decade ago, Claire Keegan has developed a reputation as the quiet achiever of Irish literature. Despite critical acclaim and several awards for her first two books, *Antarctica* and *Walk the Blue Fields*, she has emerged as a writer of exacting discretion — one whose professional interest in putting words on the page is tempered by the cultivation of a public silence. Offering few interviews and fewer festival appearances, she has allowed her work to speak for itself and to attract attention with its own voice.

That's not a problem in the British Isles, where Keegan's stories are widely read and respected, but in the rest of the world her deliberately low profile has left her overshadowed by those literary superstars with whom she shares both an artform and a nationality: contemporary Irish writers like William Trevor, Colm Tóibín, and Anne Enright, along with such bygone giants as James Joyce, Frank O'Connor, Maeve Brennan, and John McGahern. Recently, however, Keegan has taken a few tentative steps into the international limelight. In early 2010, she drew her first American readership when she published her short story 'Foster' in *The New Yorker*. Almost immediately that readership expanded when Richard Ford — *the* American authority on the contemporary short story — chose 'Foster' as the winner of a literary competition of which he was the judge; and then, with Ford's support, Keegan spent the rest of 2010 revising and expanding 'Foster' into a novella which she published at the end of the year as her first standalone narrative.

Foster is narrated by a young girl whose parents inexplicably give her up for adoption to a childless couple in the Irish countryside. At eight or nine years of age, the girl is just old enough to be unsettled by the strangeness of her new situation and yet too young to understand how it has arisen and why her parents have cast her into it. *Foster*, however, rejects the easy novelistic route of taking the girl's dilemma as a narrative premise with which to generate a series of dramatic incidents — a confrontation between the girl and her

foster family, perhaps, or a crisis that reveals the devastating reasons for her exile. Instead, the novella turns inwards and digs down into the innate complexities of its narrative premise in order to extract and exploit the dramatic tensions it already contains.

Why would the parents of a grown daughter abandon her to an unfamiliar couple, and why would that couple accept the girl apparently without hesitation? What sort of agreement have the two couples struck without the input or the awareness of the girl at its centre? As the girl prepares to leave home, she overhears her parents in conversation. "How long should they keep her?" one of them asks the other, to which the other replies: "Can't they keep her as long as they like?" (9). So the arrangement is indefinite, but also, somehow, only temporary. What rationale can there be for a temporary adoption? Perhaps the girl's parents give her away because they can no longer afford the expense of caring and providing for a child: she is unwashed and unkempt when she meets her foster parents, and as she explores their neat and spacious home she wonders if, here, "there may even be money to spare" (13). Or perhaps her parents give her away because they need time alone to resolve some bitter marital difficulties: "This, I know, is where [my foster parents] sleep," the girl thinks to herself when she spies their bedroom, "and I'm glad, for some reason, that they sleep together" (17). But then, if her parents need relief from the cost of raising a child or the chance to sort out their troubles in private, why is the girl given up for adoption while her younger brother is allowed to stay home?

At the heart of *Fosterlies* a secret that Keegan takes great pains to conceal, and key to that secret is the issue of the girl's tender age. In part, she is given away by her parents and welcomed into her foster family because she is eight or nine and not any younger. At the same time, though, that age brings with it a curiosity and a sense of independence which compel the girl to uncover the greater reasons for her abandonment and acceptance. In this regard, the girl's foster mother offers no help: she is unapologetically obstructionist, flatly dismissing the questions the girl raises so that the girl only ever refers to her as 'the woman,' as someone to whom she simply cannot feel close. The woman's husband, however, is more responsive.

Although, like his wife, he remains shrouded in silence, the girl senses that his silence is not directed especially towards her and slowly she develops a respectful relationship with him. He is a wounded man, reserved and reticent, shocked into solemnity by an unforgettable tragedy that he cannot bring himself to discuss — a tragedy that the girl learns is also the reason for her sudden presence in his life. So she faces both an opportunity and an impasse, drawn towards the man who could tell her plainly why her parents gave her away but unable to make him speak when he fails to deliver the explanation she seeks. Their story, then, is the story of a communication that flourishes without words, and very nearly beyond words.

In expressing his admiration for *Foster*, Richard Ford, quoted in a blurb, praised the novella as “a highwire act of uncommon narrative virtuosity.” It is exactly that. Poised delicately between the dual perils of wordlessness and verbose excess, the novella treads lightly along a tightrope towards the disclosure of its central secret as an essentially instinctual sympathy develops between a man who declines to speak at length and the girl who narrates their story with an abundance of words. The result is a delicately articulated account of the aftermath of an unspeakable trauma in a dialect confined by inexperience and incomprehension. The balancing act, as Keegan performs it, is deft and assured without being audacious, a quiet attempt to give voice to painfully hidden memories without disturbing the silence that has settled upon them, and most impressive of all is that it culminates in the utterance of a single word — the last, perfect word of the book — which distils, into only two syllables, more meaning than could be conveyed as powerfully in a page-long soliloquy.

Whether Claire Keegan’s personal life contains any biographical similarity to her story of adoption is difficult to say; but, narrative aside, *Foster* is arguably Keegan’s most personal work to date insofar as it represents her way of being in the world more than anything else she has written. This is especially true given the revisions and expansions that distinguish the novella from the original short story. While the differences between the two versions are few, each difference allows *Foster* to take a great stride towards becoming more the kind of story ‘Foster’ wanted to be, refining the austerity

of its rhetoric so that silence now touches almost every word. A few extra pages here and there reinforce the girl's isolation in the countryside until she is swallowed into its atmospheric hush, and other light revisions — a sentence struck out, a paragraph compressed — strip away the short story's most overtly lyrical prose in order to invest the girl with a voice more hesitant and true to life. What emerges from the revision process is a stunning work of art distinguished, above all, by the intimacy with which it communicates the sensibilities of its author in much the same way as the girl communicates those of her foster father. Claire Keegan, the quiet achiever of Irish literature, is known for saying very little about her art; and in *Foster*, for the first time, she has taken quietude as her subject and made art from the lives of others who prefer to say very little.

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