

Reviews

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HISTORY

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The Icarus Girl
By Helen Oyeyemi
Bloomsbury, 302pp. £16.99

more than a mystery friend invented by a lonely, unhappy child. She follows Jess back to England and quickly becomes the buddy from hell. Jess's behaviour becomes even more erratic. Mr Heinz, the head teacher, and something of a saint with a flair for understatement, attempts to solve the problem.

"I wanted to ask you - are you happy in your new class? I mean, obviously, I know that sometimes it all gets a little bit stressful and you, you know, erm, vent your feelings and so on, but in general is it all right there?" This to a pupil who "had calculated one weekend that on average she had at least one serious tantrum in school per week". Such looseness is typical of this novel.

Even before the arrival of Tilly, who may or may not exist beyond Jess's imagination, the child had problems. As expected, a dead twin is introduced into the narrative. Cultures have different ways of dealing with death, and the vital, belated recognition of the dead twin takes over.

Late in the story, after the family has returned to Nigeria to celebrate Jess's impending ninth birthday, Jess asks her grandfather why she had never been told about her sister. "We don't do things that way, Wuraola [pet name]. When someone dies, it's a special thing, almost secret. If someone dies badly or too young we say their enemy has died. There is no way to say these things directly in English. It is a bad thing for you to have lost your sister. She's half yourself."

The Icarus Girl, for all its confidence and graphic violence as Tilly and/or Jess battle for revenge and inflict pain, lacks literary sophistication and often emerges as routine magic realism. It is no *Nathan Strange* & *Mr Norrell*. Instead it reads as pre-teen, or possibly teen fiction.

Marketing issues should not impinge on textual criticism, yet this is a book that could easily be pitched at critically demanding 10-year-olds who will also detect the narrative weaknesses. The psychiatric sessions Jess is eventually taken to, where she meets up with the doctor's daughter, are too casually described to be taken seriously, while the trail of destruction is merely described, not confronted.

It is very much a young person's book, written by a young person, in possession of lightness of tone but dependent on predictable special effects. There is insufficient technical maturity at work, particularly in the characterisation, to achieve the subtle shifts that could have elevated what is, at best, a jauntily likeable book, towards being a convincing, even moving work about contrasting cultures and the relevance of tradition.

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Fr John Creagh (above): launched an emotive attack on the city's Jews in January 1904. Photograph: Limerick Museum. Left: Albert Siev and Edith Arnovitch at their wedding in Limerick in 1919. Photograph: Jewish Museum, Dublin

The deeds and the documents

The story of the infamous boycott of the Jewish community in Limerick in 1904 is revealed through contemporary records

Reflecting in 1993 on the impact of religion in the Ireland of his youth, novelist John McGahern recalled that preaching Redemptorists were appreciated like horror novels. "He'd raise the hair on your head", I often heard remarked with deep satisfaction. Poorer performers were described as 'watery'. The latter description could not be applied to the Redemptorist Fr John Creagh, the director of the arch-confraternity in Limerick, who from the pulpit in January 1904, launched an emotive attack on the city's Jews, most of whom lived around Coloooney Street. He was targeting a tiny community - about 25 families of Lithuanian Jews had settled in Limerick by 1900 - and insisted "they came to our land to fasten themselves on us like leeches and to draw our blood".

This book - a documentary history - deals with the context and impact of Creagh's incitement to hatred, or what became known as the Limerick Boycott. The authors decided not to use the word "pogrom" (it has been used in the past) to describe what happened, and on the evidence presented here, this was a wise choice. Many were more than willing to attack and boycott Jews, but there were many others, including the Royal Irish Constabulary, who defended them, physically and in print, and who ensured anti-Semites paid for their crimes. A member of the RIC, Constable McAvoy, expressed surprise at the boycott, as he believed the Jews "are examples of sobriety, industry and good conduct. They never break the law".

Nonetheless, for contemporary Limerick Jews this was a harrowing experience. Some invoked the memory of persecution in Russia (Kishinev and Bessarabia) and had to witness Limerick mobs yelling "Down with the Jews: they kill our innocent children". Official police reports estimated that by

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Limerick Boycott 1904: Anti-Semitism in Ireland

By Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy
Mercier Press, 163pp. €20

the spring of 1905, eight Jewish families had left, five as a direct consequence of the Boycott, and that of the 26 families who remained, eight were "in good circumstances". This was not a pogrom, but it was nasty, menacing and duplicitous.

Despite the perception and the accusations, few Jews were involved in money lending; most were "pedlars", or small shopkeepers, selling household wares, or tea. Resentment existed about the payment by instalment system, but accusations that they were exploitative were investigated and convincingly dismissed by the reports of county inspectors in 1903.

This study consists of short narrative and contemporary documents, which are wonderfully reproduced, taken mainly from the files of the Chief Secretary's office in Dublin Castle. There is also extensive reproduction from contemporary newspapers. The documents selected succeed in engaging the reader and create a real sense of immediacy. The book will be an invaluable teaching aid, for both second and third level, which is particularly significant in light of the emphasis on documents in the revised history curriculum for secondary schools.

Those seeking a more comprehensive analysis of the documents may be disappointed. The narrative is very short, the chapters often end abruptly and

avoid some questions that should have received more extensive treatment, particularly the extent to which local Catholic traders were the instigators of this boycott and the degree to which they were exploiting the poor in Limerick.

But the documents are wonderful. Here one can read the original news reports of Creagh's sermon; the editorial reaction of the *Limerick Leader*; the valiant attempt by Rabbi Levin (who showed impressive leadership) to detail and publicise what was going on; the intervention of Michael Davitt; a letter campaign by Julian Grande, director of the Irish Mission to Jews, and the criticism of the boycott by Church of Ireland bishop Dr Bunbry. Also documented are the reports of county inspectors and local police officers, and the detail by the Jewish community of assaults, verbal and physical, as well as reaction to the prosecution of 15-year-old John Raleigh, who was sentenced to a month in prison for throwing stones at Jews in Limerick.

Revealingly, there is only one letter abusive of Fr Creagh in the Redemptorist archives, signed by a "Galbally man and no Fenian". He deserves the last word:

So you low cur - had you nothing better to tell your people than to set them on the poor unfortunate Jews? You call yourself a Minister of God. You are a minister of the Devil. You are a disgrace to the Catholic religion, you brute.

◆ Diarmaid Ferriter lectures in history at St Patrick's College, DCU and presents the RTÉ Radio programme *What if?*. His book, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, was published last year by Profile and is on the shortlist for this year's Christopher Ewart Biggs Memorial Prize

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