'The Night Swimmer,' by Matt Bondurant: review
Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Chronicle
Sunday, January 22, 2012

Eleanor Bulkington, the narrator of "The Night Swimmer," Matt Bondurant's modern gothic novel, rarely leaves home without a hardback copy of "The Journals of John Cheever," sealed in a Ziploc bag in her backpack. Introduced to his short stories while she was in graduate school, Eleanor has learned from Cheever how difficult it is to remain moral in an immoral world. She will learn as well how easy it is, for people struggling to make a fresh start, to forget the forces that bind them and how often at the moment "self-destruction enter[s] the heart, it seems no bigger than a grain of sand."

Bondurant's homage to Cheever is embedded, and at times, submerged, in a complicated story line. Fred Bulkington, Eleanor's husband, a consultant on communications strategies for a product developer, wins a pub in a dart-throwing contest sponsored by Murphy's Brewery. Distraught at the death of his friend at the World Trade Center on 9/11, he quits his job and persuades Elly to move with him from Burlington, Vt., to a small town on the southern coast of Ireland, where anyone who isn't a native is dismissed as a "blow-in." While Fred runs the pub, Elly spends her time swimming in the cold waters of Cape Clear Island. The couple soon find themselves in the middle of an ancient feud between Highgate, a blind organic goat farmer who may have special powers, and Kieran Corrigan, the chieftain of a clan that has gotten its way for generations. There are things about Clear Island, Elly is told, "that cannot be explained."

Noting that her favorite Cheever stories were first-person narratives, Elly wishes she knew how he avoided the tendency to melodrama often associated with this structure. And "The Night Swimmer," alas, is by no means immune from generating "the feeling the narrator is clutching you about the collar and begging for attention."

Consider, for example, Elly's portentous account of her fitful sleep the night after she learned about a fatal ferry accident: "I lay in bed with the mental image of a tangled knot of springs and wires, all twisted and straining around some central force, the whole spiny mess about to explode and fly in all directions." And her decision to reveal, prematurely, a fateful turn of events, for which she holds herself responsible, and about which "I carry that heavy stone in my heart every day of this life."
"The Night Swimmer," it seems to me, is best approached - and appreciated - as a tone poem, evocative and often lyrical in its descriptions of Ireland's landscape, lore, cadences and character. At the Five Bells pub on Cape Clear, Bondurant writes, a young waitress served soup and sandwiches, then plied "her flanges into the recesses of a glass with a rag, washing with an absent-minded air, her head tilted to the sound of the creaking fiddle." After a few minutes, she began to sing, "almost as a whisper, a muted whistling as she dried glasses, her eyes downcast," while the fiddler sawed rhythmically, "boot padding the floor, his eyes closed and a smile on his lips," and the patrons "in their crusted overalls" set down their glasses down carefully, "their faces averted reverently." As the song came to an end, the fiddler grew weary, "the tune wavered, and Ariel's voice trailed off into silence."

Bondurant captures as well the sensibilities - and the savagery - of inbred and insular islanders shaped by storm surges and unforgiving terrain. As a toddler, he tells us, O'Boyle the fiddler "roamed the cliffs and shorelines like a feral animal, scavenging for bird eggs and tubers," and then lurked outside the pub, "ferreting through the garbage." Broke and without a job when his mother died, he sold her home to the Corrigans.

And Bondurant's portrait of Highgate, the novel's Prospero, is unforgettable. Standing in the storm with his back arched, his long beard flowing over his shoulder, and his toes on the edge of a cliff, the old man, bent on vengeance, stretches his arms out to the western sky, "and great crooked spires of lightning thousands of feet long reached down and churned the foaming red sea."

The Bulkington's pub, Nightjar, Elly discovers, was named for tiny nocturnal birds that huddle in the lees of rocks and don't move unless someone steps on them. Attached to a place, Bondurant concludes (with an assist from John Cheever) that human beings are also so fragile that one can, "with a touch," break the laws of the natural world, "expose the useless burdens of guilt and remorse," and stake a claim on their "wayward and cataclysmic nature." That's why, we can guess, "The Night Swimmer" is the only story Elly will ever tell.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail comments to books@sfchronicle.com.

http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/01/22/RVIN1MM2ST.DTL

This article appeared on page GF - 7 of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2012 Hearst Communications Inc. | Privacy Policy | Feedback | RSS Feeds | FAQ | Site Index | Contact