

Secret Ireland

Booker finalist shines light on a country's tumultuous recent past

Whenever I find my reservoir of books drying up and am despairing over new authors to explore, I go to the Man Booker Prize website. I know that any book listed there, whether a winner or a finalist, new or old, will be well worth the read. It was there I was introduced to Irish author Sebastian Barry and his haunting new novel, *The Secret Scripture*.

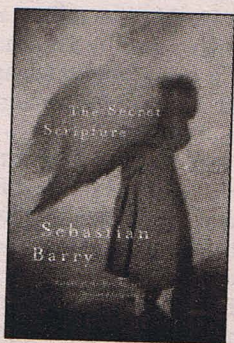
Roseanne McNulty is a longtime resident at a forgotten asylum in Ireland. Hovering around a century old, with the feeling of death fast approaching her, she embarks upon a secret record of her life, written on stolen paper and hidden in the floorboards of her room. The hospital's psychiatrist, Dr. Grene, has been presiding over its wards for as long as Roseanne has been a patient. His poor hospital is as old and decrepit as many of its residents and has been condemned. He has been promised a brand-new facility that will be safer, nicer and cleaner—and much smaller. Dr. Grene is tasked with the horrible job of re-evaluating all of his patients and determining who needs to be relocated and who can be released. His inquiries bring up some questions regarding how Roseanne became a resident in the first place and whether she truly belongs among the mentally ill.

Drifting back and forth between Roseanne's hidden memoir and Dr. Grene's diary, *The Secret Scripture* pieces together a story of a lost girl trying to find a place within her fractured country. Growing up in Sligo (just south of the border that divides the Republic from the North), young Roseanne grows up surrounded by dissent. Her country is torn apart by civil war, which pushes her Presbyterian father farther away from the society of the mostly Catholic town. Though he remains a loving father and husband, he can't get through to Roseanne's mother, an exotic creature trapped by the poverty of her family and the desolate country, who slowly gives into madness. Left on her own at too young an age, Roseanne is swept down a path of secrets that leads her to Dr. Grene and his hospital.

Barry creates these wonderfully tragic characters that are easy to love through all their faults and tragedies. He has a poetic, almost musical prose that's easy to get swept up in and hard to put down. Even the most horrible of events (the rats that Roseanne's father catches and kills, the brutal fighting between the Irish boys made enemies by war, the burning of young girls trapped in their blazing orphanage) are tempered and almost made beautiful by Barry's elegiac, soothing language.

The Secret Scripture is Barry's second novel shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and I hope we will see many more contend for the award. He's putting faces and feelings on Ireland's tumultuous recent history—a history that shouldn't be forgotten.

—Sarah Gignac



The Secret Scripture
by Sebastian Barry
Viking, 304 pages, \$24.95