

This page shows the article as it originally appeared in the newspaper. The article itself can be read on the following page.

Book Reviews

Mystery, morals and passion

The book reviews the works of D.H. Lawrence both through the novel and the poetry



Mapping obsession



Page 40

This is the article's web address for reference.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/2009/12/12/Pg051.html#Ar05101>

The User may not copy, reproduce, distribute, or create derivative works from the Content without expressly being authorised to do so by the relevant copyright owner. © Copyright 2013 The Irish Times. All Rights Reserved.

Mapping obsession

The Museum of Innocence

By Orhan Pamuk. Trans. Maureen Freely
Faber & Faber, 532pp. £18.99

AT A relatively youthful 57, the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk has a trophy shelf that includes the 2003 Impac award and the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature. His breakthrough novel, *My Name Is Red* (2000), was, like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, your classy publisher's dream: a lush historical novel that garnered all manner of critical garlands and yet was palatable enough to be bought and read by the truckload. Pamuk, a freedom-of-speech test case in his native country, has sold some seven million books worldwide, ascending to the pantheon of writers – McCarthy, Coetzee, Proulx and Ishiguro – whose virtuosity is seemingly beyond reproach yet won't scare the horses in the marketplace.

The Museum of Innocence, the sixth Pamuk novel to be published in English, is a tale of erotic and psychological obsession that unspools over several decades. Kemal, the narrator, is a wealthy young Turkish businessman who falls hopelessly in love with Füsün, an aspiring actress some 12 years his junior. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy spends the guts of a decade trying to win her back.

Throughout the book, Kemal collects mementos of his brief affair with Füsün, objects she has graced with her touch or presence, and as the yarn progresses this compulsion becomes ever more fetishistic, with the smitten man pressing these holy relics to his skin or taking them into his mouth, by which point the reader must reluctantly conclude that love has driven him mad. (Reluctantly, because if we truly fall in love, it seems, we truly lose our marbles.)

The backdrop to all this is somewhat Gatsbyish – the idle lives of the Turkish leisure classes amid the social and political tumult of late-1970s Istanbul – but Pamuk manages to render his cast of playboys and privileged courtiers as a fairly engaging lot.

Much of this is down to the author's transparent style and stately, scrupulous adherence to character as plot. That it's hard to single out any particular bravura passage is a credit to his restraint rather than an indictment of plain writing. This magician keeps all his tricks hidden. Pamuk, the reader imagines, would sooner hack off a limb than allow a gear-grinding or overtly showy moment to distract from his immaculately fashioned narrative. Like Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, this is an Austenian study of manners (although not without its own quiet drama: one is frequently reminded of Martin Scorsese's observation that the genteel protocols of *The Age of Innocence* were in their way every bit as savage as the gutter codes of *Mean Streets*).

But at its core *The Museum of Innocence* is a detailed map of the geography of obsession: the incessant mental chatter, the internal arguments and counterarguments, the self-delusion, the abasement, the mind's compulsion to aggravate its condition by returning to the source of its pain, repeatedly reopening the wound. Kemal neurotically monitors the state of his own heart while second-guessing that of his beloved, all the time spiralling downwards into an abject loss of dignity or, worse, a state of not caring about that loss of dignity.

So far, so compelling, except *The Museum of Innocence* contains one serious anatomical flaw: a great saggy underbelly of a 200-page midsection, where the tale deteriorates into tedious bouts of maundering and mooning, by which point we lose all goodwill for a narrator whose love now appears to be little more than a form of masochism. (The last straw is an eight-year period during which Kemal visits Füsün's house almost nightly to watch television with her family, even though she has married a young film director. What transpires is a sort of prose version of *The Royle Family*.)

Is Kemal's love anything other than displaced narcissism? Does he give a damn about his beloved's wishes, her desires, her ambitions? Apparently not.

This is not to say all narrators need be sympathetic or even likable. Nick Laird's *Glover's Mistake* transfixed with a similar

tale this year, but it was at least 60,000 words shorter. By the last act of *The Museum of Innocence*, Kemal has become too needy and too outright creepy to keep us inside. At this point the most patient reader will have wearied of his endless rhapsodising and blind devotion, and even a moving denouement can't redeem the tale. As for the device of introducing an "Orhan Pamuk" character in the final pages, well, it's just too cute to be wholesome.

With this book, Pamuk highlights everything that modern "literary" novelists do so well (forensic examination of small moments, subtle nuances of character) and everything they ignore at their peril (plot, urgency, dynamism). The result is a deeply affecting but also flawed piece of work. A pity, because with sterner editing *The Museum of Innocence* might have been a small masterpiece.

Peter Murphy is a novelist and journalist. His first book, *John the Revelator*, is shortlisted for the 2009 Costa First Novel Award

PETER MURPHY



Classy publisher's dream: Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul. Photograph: Eric Bouvet/Getty Images