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BookReviews

Themes of the Thames

By an Ackroyd who does an excellent history of London's financial river



The world is a ship in and out of the wind

Magical mystery, marvellous writer

Robert Coates was a writer, a poet, a critic, and a member of the Bloomsbury group



One father, two mothers, three children...

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One father, two mothers, three children . . .

Wilderness

By Roddy Doyle

Scholastic, 220pp. £12.99

Mothers and fathers who figure in children's fiction - and certainly in the Irish variety - tend to be peripheral characters. Where they appear at all, they may have roles which portray them, at one extreme, as benign supporters of their young people's endeavours or, at the other, as stultifyingly repressive. Rarely, however, are they accorded their own adult lives: they are invariably denied the chance to display the complexities of their personalities and their relationships or to witness the effects that these might have on their children. It is one of the great strengths of Roddy Doyle's new children's novel that these conventions are so daringly, and so tellingly, laid aside.

In the simplest formulation, *Wilderness* may be seen as the story of one father, two mothers and three children. Frank's marriage to Rosemary has ended in a separation and Rosemary has left Dublin for America. Their daughter, Gráinne, now 18, has initially seemed to cope with the situation and to accept the arrival of

Sandra, her father's new partner, and the subsequent births of two brothers, Johnny and Tom. But, with the arrival of her teenage years, she becomes "unhappy and unfriendly, and silent, and loud at the same time". Crisis point is reached when she throws a cup at her stepmother. With Frank's encouragement, Sandra takes the boys for a break to Lapland, a trip which coincides with Rosemary's brief return to Dublin.

For Tom and Johnny, aged 10 and 11 respectively, the Lapland experience turns out to lead not merely to a thrilling set of events in a "wilderness" of dazzling snow and dark forest. It also provides the opportunity to readjust their perceptions of one another and, following an accident, of their mother: she, in turn, will have every

reason to see her sons in quite a different light. At home, meanwhile, Gráinne and Rosemary are embarking on the first tentative steps towards some measure of rapprochement after their own wilderness years. "That's where it's hard," says Rosemary in one of their halting conversations. "It's where words don't work."

In Doyle's case, however, the words "work" extremely well and often very poignantly, not least in those circumstances where little or nothing is being said. Written in a spare, almost austere, style and employing a vocabulary which makes it accessible to confident readers of 12 years and upwards, this is a novel which - while not without occasional moments of humour - sees its author ambitiously tackle some of the more serious themes of his adult work. The struggle through the wilderness is seen to take many forms, literal and metaphorical, and readers (of whatever age) looking for a map might well start here.