Dear All,

The Gathering - was a tough but rewarding read. Tough because Enright focuses ( in the Irish tradition ) on dysfunctional families. Not my favourite kind of book. But Anne Enright had, against the odds, won the 2007 Man Booker prize for this novel. We were urged to read it by one of our Steglitz group members and I agreed.. One of the advantages of reading groups is that we all read books that we wouldn't have chosen ourselves. I would not have chosen such a seemingly grim, depressing novel especially as I'd picked it up a few times in bookshops and put it back again. But I'm pleased to have been persuaded and I found much to admire in Enright's writing even though I can't say I enjoyed the experience.

Opinions were very mixed in the groups. Most of us had liked or loved it but one or two had wanted to throw it against the wall. Those in favour particularly liked the reflective quality of the writing and were fascinated with the narrator Veronica Hegarty's search to understand herself. Those against, found Veronica such an irritatingly self obsessed, relentlessly insecure and negative person that they didn't care about her enough to sympathise with her problems. Others found the writing so cold and chilling that it was a painful experience. One of us said "my heart went cold like stone " . "I felt tense and anxious all the time I was reading" " It was not the kind of book to read after a hard day at work." But others had identified strongly with Veronica and had absolutely loved it.

We wondered whether Veronica Hegarty is meant to be a symbol for a modern successful Ireland. She is a wife and mother, prosperous with two small and loving daughters, a devoted husband, living in a large suburban house with a new Saab in the driveway. Yet she is not content with her life. She wants to escape, especially from her husband Tom and stays up all night to avoid physical contact with him. Since the birth of their children Veronica increasingly resents the feeling that she and the children are "in his way." Once a happy marriage, it is now in serious trouble. Whilst grieving for her brother Liam, Veronica cuts herself off from her small family.

In contrast, her own huge family-the Hegartys- is a symbol of the strict Catholic Irish past. An Ireland where contraception was illegal and abortion still is. Veronica is one of 10 living Hegarty children; two have died and seven were miscarriages. Her ineffectual father is long dead and her mother has receded into what seems a haze of post-procreative trauma. All of this is brought forcefully to the fore when Veronica's favourite sibling, the alcoholic Liam, fills his pockets with stones and walks into the sea at Brighton In taking his own life, he does not fail. His suicide is one of his wasted life's few well-planned, successful exercises. He wore a bright yellow jacket so that his body would be found easily. Fastidious to the end, he removed his underpants and socks because he didn't want to be found in anything that was dirty.

>From the moment she undertakes to tell her mother what has occurred, through Liam's funeral and its personally traumatic aftermath, Veronica's memories -- and life -- slowly dissolve into what might be called a haze of understanding, as she tries to work out her own past and that of her family. Liam and Veronica had been particularly close and had come to share a dark secret while living for a time with their grandmother Ada..

As she pursues her own and Liam's pasts, Veronica interweaves a half-imagined account of her grandmother's life and of its intersection with her own. We were uncertain whether Ada had been forced to pay Nugent for the rent with her own sexual favours as well as allowing her children to be used as payment. Her husband Charlie was a gambler and it is implied in letters from Nugent that rent is owing.

In one letter Nugent writes "I am quite entitled , as you will find, to seek an increase or find another tenant, which I am, as you know, very slow to do. I am very much in my rights. Hoping to continue an arrangement that is suitable to all concerned. " Yours. Lambert Nugent. What was the arrangement? We can't be sure as Veronica does not know either.
One of Enright's skills is to examine the nature of memory—how well do we remember incidents from our childhoods? Do we remember the events or how we felt at the time? How much do we imagine or exaggerate? How many family myths are incorporated into reality? We discussed how we blank unpleasant experiences and cannot recall them accurately. Veronica is not certain that she was abused by Nugent but she is certain that her brother Liam had been. Is that because it was too painful for her to face her own abuse? Or through guilt has she taken on the burden of abuse too?

The horrific sexual abuse of children within the Catholic church in Ireland has been well documented. Enright carefully examines the lasting impact of abuse on the victims. Veronica is convinced that the abuse is the main reason for Liam’s suicide. Even at the age of forty he has not come to terms with his past—he is haunted by his experiences and Veronica feels guilty because she has told no-one in the family what had happened. Maybe her own mother had also been abused by Nugent and her uncle Brendan had spent his life in a mental institution. Perhaps he was abused too. Maybe the reason the mother is protected from bad news—"don't tell mammy" is the mantra of the Hegarty family—is because their father knew what had happened to their mother and wanted to protect her.

Enright teases us with snippets of information and confused flashbacks that Veronica struggles to understand. What is the truth? She is not sure. But she cannot forgive her mother for being so distant and for not loving her children enough. She blames her for having sex too often and producing too many children. "Consequences mammy" she says "consequences." Her own attitude to sex is coldly negative. She feels used and abused by her own husband. "I love my husband, but I lay there with one leg on either side of his dancing country-boy hips and I did not feel alive. I felt like a chicken when it is quartered."

"We do not always like the people we love.". She also feels her husband must hate her because he desires her. Love and hate are linked in her mind. Maybe because she loved and hated her brother Liam too. There is a hint that their relationship was incestuous. Born only 11 months before Veronica, they had been like twins. In the midst of such a large family, they formed an exclusive bond. They were inseparable until adulthood. But Liam is far more unconventional than Veronica and as adults they drift apart and lead very different lives.

Here is Veronica’s description of Liam—recognizable to anybody who ever has dealt with that most frustrating of creatures, the smart and charming addict/alcoholic: "This was not the first time I left my brother, and it would not be the last. In his later, drinking years, I left him every time he arrived. But even before he hit the bottle, there were times when I just had to roll my eyes and walk away.

"The problem with Liam was never something big. The problem with Liam was always a hundred small things. . . For someone who was blunderingly stupid most all of the time, my brother was very astute. And what he was astute about were other people's lives, their weaknesses and hopes, the little lies they like to tell themselves about why and whether they should ever get out of bed. This was Liam's great talent -- exposing the lie.

"Drink made him vicious, but even sober he could smell what was going on in a room, I swear it . . . because the place Liam worked best was under your skin"

"I am trying to put a time on it—when I stopped worrying about him and started to worry about his drinking instead. A drinker does not exist. Whatever they say, it's just the drink talking."

As students Liam and Veronica had travelled together to England for the first time. Veronica's picture of London struck a chord with us.

"And it seemed to us that England was a single city from one side to the other, without pause. We stood at the mouth of the underground in Euston, thinking that a train had just pulled in, and we would be able to make
our way down when the crowd was gone. After a while we realised that the rush of people was not going to ease, there was no one particular train. London was all flow, it had no edges, it was everywhere.

Later, when Veronica is on the train to Brighton to collect Liam’s body, she remarks "There has always been something childish about England for me. Haywards Heath, Wivelsfield, Burgess Hill, Hassocks. Names so silly and twee they must be made up. The constant surprise of this land, that it is actually green and actually pleasant."

These observations about England are perceptive. We discussed our own impressions on arriving in London, how crowded and vast it can seem. How one can feel overwhelmed by the vast numbers of people rushing everywhere. And then when one finally leaves the sprawl of London behind, the lush green of the countryside coming as a relief from all of the hustle and bustle.

Travelling towards a destination is usually a pleasant experience - with something to look forward to. On her journey to Brighton Veronica muses that "travel is a contrary kind of thing, because moving towards a dead man is not moving at all." Veronica’s journey is one of coming to terms not only with her brother’s death but with herself. Enright has said that she is fascinated with "the poetry of biology." I think she means the emotional stuff of DNA - the deep connections we can have with our families - that there is beauty in these close bonds. But there is a downside to the intensity of being so close to others.

For most of the novel Veronica is lost in a black cloud of grief - unable to function and to feel. At the very end we are given a welcome glimpse of optimism.

"I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all. I want to wake up in the morning and fall asleep at night. I want to make love to my husband again. Because for every time he wanted to undo me, there was love that put me back together again - put us both back together."

"I just want to be less afraid. Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. There is such a long way to fall, because you are up so high in those things. Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now."

We agreed that this final paragraph is very powerful and we are given the impression that Veronica will rejoin her children, husband and her life. She is also imagining having another child, and if it is a boy, she will name him after her brother. Some of us found this ending too neat and tidy and would have preferred her to break free from her life and start afresh. But most of us were relieved to be given a light at the end of the tunnel of a very dark book.

During the BBC World Book Club programme Anne Enright phoned and asked another famous Irish writer Edna O’Brien "Do you have to be an unhappy person to be a successful writer?"

This question speaks for itself. Surely winning the Booker prize will have given Anne Enright the recognition she needed. And let’s hope some joy and happiness too.

Many thanks for such lively and fun discussions.

Good reading!!

Jan