

Was Michael Collins's death a cover-up?

Gerard Murphy's 'The Great Cover-up' has an intriguing theory of the Big Fellow's death

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The Great Cover-Up: The Truth about the Death of Michael Collins

Gerard Murphy, Collins Press, €19.99

Gerard Murphy does not accept the widely held view that Michael Collins was killed, almost accidentally, by a ricochet in a hastily improvised ambush. Instead, he believes him a victim of an assassination plot organised by the Munster Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Murphy points the finger particularly at Florence O'Donoghue and Seán O'Hegarty, believing them central in organising an IRB "court" that found Collins guilty of treason to the Irish Republic for signing and promoting the Treaty and condemned him to death. He also believes that O'Donoghue lured Collins into a trap, a trap disguised as peace negotiations to end the Civil War. The argument then goes that O'Donoghue spent much of the rest of his life covering up the plot and spreading disinformation. How plausible is Murphy's case? He provides a good array of both contemporary and subsequent sources, builds up his evidence well (though going too far in his chapter on the deaths of drivers and doctors) but ultimately a verdict of "not proven" must be returned.

Brian Maye

Less

By Andrew Sean Greer

Abacus, £8.99

Brave indeed is the fiction author who makes his leading character a modestly successful writer and other leading lights even more successful writers. But Andrew Greer obviously has no need of such fears for this novel won, among many other awards, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. This is a bitter-sweet comic novel about many topics. It's about the vanity of writers, experiencing a crisis in midlife when your gay (male) lover of nine years leaves you to marry another, it's about world of travel (a middle-aged odyssey) and its associated (often sexual) wonders and frustrations. And it's emphatically about homosexual love. Less (his name) has two prolonged love affairs but cheats regularly in between with secret affairs that run from weeks to many months. Our hapless, lovable protagonist moves from disaster to disaster, some of which are hilarious, some harrowing. But it's the writing that lifts this book above the ordinary. The prose is almost musical, frequently funny and occasionally bitterly sad. Greer plainly loves the delights of language and metaphor – for example "the plane convulsed in the moonlight, like a man turning into a werewolf". A delight.

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Owen Dawson

The Boy who Belonged to the Sea

By Denis Thériault, translated from the French by Liedewy Hawke

Oneworld £8.99

A dreamy, underwater experience, this brief novel by Thériault is a hallucinogenic dive into another realm. Set on the coast of the Gulf of St Lawrence in Canada, the sea swells as both menace and magic, treachery and refuge in a story that is as much about the miracle of friendship as it is about the devastation of grief.

It tells the story of two boys, one who has lost his father and whose mother is in a deep coma, and one whose mother is dead but who nevertheless fantasises about her continued existence in the same way as he has prophetic dreams about a world under the sea. The two boys fall into a deep friendship, united by their loneliness and longing – but from the beginning there is an ineluctable current of tragedy.

The sea is more than analogy; imagining a magical place below the waves gives the boys release from grieving, a panacea to their isolation and pain. Here is a fragile poetry, charming and childlike in its simplicity, yet profound on the unfathomable depths of loss, of love.

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