



A Man in a Distant Field: A Novel

By Theresa Kishkan

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Short-listed for the 2005 Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize

Declan O'Malley came to the coast of British Columbia because it was as far away from Ireland as he could possibly go. Haunted by memories of his family's death at the hands of the Black and Tans, Declan is unable to escape his grief. He immerses himself in a new life, seeking to produce a more perfect translation of Homer's Odyssey while at the same time becoming closer to the family on whose property he is living. But Declan cannot free himself from his past, and when Ireland beckons, he is drawn to his own history and to the opportunity for a happier future.

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Editorial Review

Review

Mythical themes meld with B.C. history and tradition: In Theresa Kishkan's hands, the archetypal survivor story loses none of its epic emotional power...

It's no accident that the great early 20th-century writers - Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce - seized on Odysseus as the anti-heroic archetype of man in the modern age. The Trojan War was a kind of cultural civil war with reverberations that ultimately destroyed the world of the victors. Of the survivors, only Odysseus, the failed conscientious objector, offered hope of redemption through faith, endurance and the transformation of the self. With her new novel, *A Man in a Distant Field*, Sunshine Coast author Theresa Kishkan demonstrates that the story of the archetypal survivor has lost none of its epic emotional power, despite being mocked by a popular reality TV show. Like Odysseus, Declan O'Malley is one of history's walking wounded. An Irish schoolteacher and the victim of a horrific atrocity inflicted by the Black and Tans, he has fled to the farthest shore of the world, the coast of British Columbia. In 1922, Oyster Bay on the Sechelt Peninsula is still a grey area. The natives' waning prehistoric culture touches the frayed edge of a colonial pioneer culture stretched to its limits. Here, where even the sea has no memory of Ireland, he becomes a beachcomber and lives the marginal life of a man marooned between worlds. But all we are is the sum of our memories, Declan discovers as he labours with his old Greek primer to make a personal translation of *The Odyssey* as a way to keep from going barking mad. Inevitably, the correspondences between the sufferings of Odysseus and his own deep loss open possibilities of escape from alienation. His rescue of, and reverence for, an old native burial canoe - a kind of symbol of the doomed ship of Odysseus - invites him to experience the creation of a new canoe with local native fishermen. Through his translation work, Declan rediscovers himself as a teacher. He uses it to teach Rose Neil, his landlord's bright 12-year-old daughter, to read. Recognizing Rose as the person who has saved him so he can complete his journey, he returns to still-troubled Ireland to confront his ghosts, reclaim his identity and earn the love of a Penelope who mourns her own loss yet keeps faith with the idea of love. Kishkan carries all this off masterfully in a scant 300 pages by combining the crafts of the poet and the screenwriter. There isn't a moment in this novel when you can't "see" something intensely, whether it's the shining black dorsals of a pod of killer whales shadowing a cedar canoe or the wildflowers growing around a secret "Mass stone" where Irish Catholics were driven to take the sacraments in the wilds. The cadences of Irish speech, not only in the dialogue but subtly woven into the narrative, maintain the continuity of Declan O'Malley's mood, as well as a sense of the period. Kishkan also uses a technique from classical Greek drama. A powerful sense of horrific violence informs the story, but the violent events all occur "offstage," recounted in dialogue or as memory flashbacks. The only one that forms part of the action is the aftermath of a beating. The novel is constructed like a play in reverse. Instead of creating minimal sets and suggestive backdrops in front of which the dramatic action occurs, Kishkan evokes a backdrop of garishly violent historical events, in front of which small mundane rituals of sanity and redemption are acted out: planting seeds, building shelters, cooking, talking, teaching, dressing the wounds of young idealists, offering hospitality to strangers, learning to love. An emerging poet in the late 1970s and early '80s, Kishkan married award-winning poet John Pass, built a house on the Sunshine Coast, raised three children with him and was mostly too busy to write. According to her, she discovered she'd "lost her poetic voice" when she began writing seriously again in the early '90s. To find a voice, she turned to prose, producing a collection of essays, *Red Laredo Boots*, in 1996. Then in 1999 she published the exquisitely poetic novella *Inishbream*. In her first full-length novel, *Sisters of Grass* (2000), set in the B.C. Interior, she was already experimenting with the tricky virtuoso act of weaving the thread of a lyrically apprehended "ordinary" life into the warp and woof of history and tradition. The result was a hauntingly beautiful, but distinctively regional, novel. In *A Man in a Distant Field*, she applies the method to a transformative period

in modern Western culture. She picks up the classic thread dropped by postmodern Play-Doh writers and weaves it into a tragic tapestry worthy of Penelope herself. Squamish writer John Moore is the author of the novel *The Flea Market*. New things 'agitating to be written about'

John Moore, in conversation with writer Theresa Kishkan: Moore: After 20 years as a poet, in 1999 you began shifting to prose with the novella *Inishbream*. Why? Kishkan: In fact, I wrote *Inishbream* in 1979 but it wasn't published until the Barbarian Press did a beautiful letterpress edition in 1999, followed by a trade edition from Goose Lane in 2001. But, yes, I did begin my writing life as a poet and really had no idea I'd end up writing fiction. (*Inishbream* is mostly a memoir, with a tiny bit of fiction here and there.) I had three children within four years and put writing on hold for a time. When I returned to it, thinking I would write poetry again, I found I couldn't find that voice again. After building a house with my husband and raising our children, I discovered the world was a more detailed place suddenly, with all sorts of things agitating to be written about, material I'd never considered before. I'd try to write a lyric poem and it would grow and grow. (My novel *Sisters of Grass* began as a short meditation on horses on the Pennask Lake Road above the Nicola Valley!) Everything I wanted to do seemed to need a different form, something a bit more elastic. JM: In *Inishbream*, and now in *A Man in a Distant Field*, it's obvious you have a strong connection to Ireland and its tragic history. TK: I lived in Ireland for a year after I graduated from university, mostly in a cottage on a small island off the Connemara coast. I was completely taken by the landscape, the music, the stories, the history and the sense of shifting transparencies, where the present seemed to be superimposed on the past, or vice-versa. I remember walking with an elderly friend and seeing a ruined house, which, she told me, had been burned during the Troubles. She had vivid memories of this, having been born in 1903. She was a cousin of Constance and Eva Gore-Booth; she'd met [W.B.] Yeats; her mother had supported the Republicans during the civil war. And most families I knew had a famine story to tell, as well. These stories settled in and wouldn't leave me alone. JM: *A Man in a Distant Field* has links to both Ireland and to the story of Odysseus, which James Joyce used as the archetypal pattern for *Ulysses*. Is this an homage, a leg-pull or a bit of both? TK: I began *A Man in a Distant Field* in order to write about two particular places: the Pender Harbour area, where I make my home, and the west of Ireland. While I didn't intend the novel to be a retelling of *The Odyssey* exactly, I did discover that the poem had such echoes and resonance with Declan's own life. The great mythic themes of *The Odyssey* - loss, exile, honouring the dead, the long homecoming - are central to Western culture. But it is also a very domestic poem, filled with laundry and weather and animal husbandry....Perhaps my novel is a particularly feminine way of reinvigorating *The Odyssey*. JM: What are you working on now? TK: I'm about halfway through a novel, *The Age of Water Lilies*, which is set partly in the doomed orchard community of Walhachin just before and during the First World War and partly in the Fairfield neighbourhood of Victoria in the early 1960s, where I spent some of my childhood ... I'm trying to knit together a number of preoccupations I have with war, natural history, and the texture of place and memory. (John Moore *Vancouver Sun*)

With her new novel, *A Man In A Distant Field*, Theresa Kishkan demonstrates that the story of the archetypal survivor has lost none of its epic emotional power...There isn't a moment in this novel when you can't see something intensely (*Vancouver Sun*)

A magical and haunting evocation of grief and growth...sip carefully or drink freely. Either way, you'll soon find yourself under Kishkan's spell.

(Quill and Quire, January 2005)

The Georgia Straight By John Burns Publish Date: 10-Mar-2005 A man is torn from his home, from his wife and children. Maddened with grief and brought low by weariness, he nonetheless overcomes endless obstacles to return home, altered but unbroken. If that story evokes *The Odyssey*, it's no coincidence: Homer's epic poem of the ill-fated wanderer underpins Theresa Kishkan's compelling, insightful *A Man in a*

Distant Field. Our man is Declan O'Malley, who finds himself in a distant field indeed after fleeing County Mayo circa 1922. Caught up in the Troubles, his family slaughtered by English soldiers in retaliation for republican mischief, Declan sets sail for the New World over the horizon. He winds up on the Sunshine Coast in a ramshackle cabin as empty and forlorn as poor Declan himself, whom Kishkan - a dexterous novelist, essayist, and poet living in Sechelt - describes as "a cairn of living grief, grey as water." The rude vigour of the land, its monstrous sword ferns and bountiful seas, stands in sharp contrast to the contained verdancy of Irish soil, and from his travels and sorrowful hermitage, Declan gains insight on his former life and homeland: "It was as though it took the fuss of those coastal rainforests, the lush growth of the estuary, to make this [Irish] one clear to him. Now there was a reference point, a transparency to hold to the land of his birth, to make its contrasts evident." The ache proves too great and Declan returns to Ireland, to the village of his ancestors, renewed if not refreshed as he struggles to rebuild a life. He passes the time in study of *The Odyssey*, finding solace and temporary shelter in the epic and its similarities to his own life: "Perhaps that is what I find so satisfying in this poem I am contemplating, he thought. That mine is not the first loss, that I am not the only man to find himself on a beach in a far country, alone in the world." But Declan is not Odysseus, and no Penelope awaits his return from distant fields. Kishkan's patient, nuanced delineation of a life of contemplation, bent on regeneration, resigned to half-happiness, celebrates the stubborn, halting power of the honourable individual set adrift in dishonest times.

Kishkan's patient, nuanced delineation of a life of contemplation, bent on regeneration, resigned to half-happiness, celebrates the stubborn, baiting power of the honourable individual set adrift in dishonest time. (Georgia Straight)

Kishkan's narrative takes a long view, restoring some humanity to an inhumane situation by her loving treatment of one simple man's story. (*Globe and Mail*)

From the Inside Flap

Declan O'Malley came to the coast of British Columbia because it was as far away from Ireland as he could go. He immerses himself in a new life, seeking to produce a more perfect translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. But Declan cannot free himself from his past, and when Ireland beckons, he is drawn to his own history.

About the Author

Theresa Kishkan has lived on both coasts of Canada as well as in Greece, England, and Ireland. She currently lives on B.C.'s Sechelt Peninsula with her husband and three children. They run a small private press, High Ground Press. Kishkan is the author of a novel (*Sisters of Grass*), a novella (*Irishbream*), and several books of poetry.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Ella Straw:

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