

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Stories from under the waves

Review of 'Twist' (Random House, 2025) by Colum McCann

ATIYA RUMNI MAHMOOD

Finding an independent bookstore in a new city is one of my most cherished travel experiences. Travelling to a new city and not visiting a local independent bookstore is something that has hardly ever occurred to me. These stores are like small windows to me—providing a glimpse of the local culture and history, and the literary pulse of the city.

The last time we were in Dallas, Texas attending a wedding, I carved out a slice of my busy time to go on my pilgrimage to a locally owned, independent bookstore: Interabang Books. After browsing their collection of books, I struck up a conversation with the friendly bookseller, and he recommended me *Twist*.

Twist's snappy title, the palette of the dark greenish blue jacket of the book, and the author's name caught my eye. I have a soft spot for Irish literature, and remember reading *Angela's Ashes* (Scribner, 1996) by Frank McCourt. In his memoir, McCourt, with his "literary Irishness", crafted the dark humor and hardship of growing up in Ireland. It deeply moved me.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

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So I bought *Twist*.

Twist is a story within a story that explores themes of isolation in the digital age and human connection and disconnection. "We are all shards in the smash-up. Our lives, even the

unruptured ones, bounce around on the sea floor. For a while we might brush tenderly against one another, but eventually, and inevitably, we collide and splinter," Fennell contemplates. This sombre soliloquy reflects his eagerness to repair his own shards caused by his heavy drinking. Part thriller, part fact, part self-reflection, in essence it is a novel about a writer, about broken cables, the sabotage and repair of underwater cables, and a man named John Conway.

Anthony Fennell, a heartbroken Irish journalist, is on an assignment from an online journal to write about the lives of a cable repair vessel. The first commercial cable was laid at the bottom of the English Channel in the 1850s. Since then, a vast network of cables has become an important part of

the global economy. Fennell goes off to Cape Town to join the cable repair boat, "Georges Lecoq". The boat departs into the ocean to begin the long journey from South Africa to Ghana, and the task is to fix an undersea cable that has been broken since a storm hit Congo, disrupting internet access for many in Africa. He meets the crew and the mysterious, charismatic mission chief of the vessel, John Conway.

Conway is an experienced diver and extremely knowledgeable about the ocean's endless depth. He repairs cables that carry all the world's information. He is also in a difficult relationship with Zanele, a South African actor. While Conway is sailing in the deep sea, Zanele is busy with her performance of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" in the UK. There, she is attacked with acid during a

performance.

Fennell's original goal was to document the repair mission, but Conway's erratic behavior intrigues him. Gradually he becomes obsessed with unearthing the real Conway, and just when they are about to finish their job, Conway disappears, leaving everyone on the boat in awe. The story line shifts as the title of the book hints.

It is fascinating to read Fennell's story about contradictions in the real world, his gripping description of human beings struggling to survive in the deep sea. He talks about love, hate, peaceful conflicts, wars, the sabotage of those cables, the scale of beauty of the natural world and anger at humanity's capacity to destroy it. "All the myopia. All the greed. A new cable would make billions of dollars for its owners... The

old colonialism was dressed up in a tube. It snaked the floors of our unsilent seas," he says.

As a reader I am intrigued by the narratives of the novel that reflect the broad themes of globalism, human suffering, and the gap between instant global connectivity (enabled by the cables) and the real-world crises: "The news of the bombing—and that is what most of the world heard—had shot through the media within a couple of days. It hit all the major websites, amid the stories of the pandemic and the hurricanes and the evacuations and the drowning of refugees and the other sundry horrors that the world delivered." I recall reading the remark by a British admiral in the book, "the next war will not begin in the air like they did in the past century but there is a high probability it will begin underwater".

Twist is a remarkable and highly informative novel. In today's world, we are divided, and we are lost and lonely. Although the heart of this story revolves around Fennell's struggle with issues of breakage and repair of human nature, it has a deeper narrative of mystery, idealism, and our digital vulnerability. It is part fictional and part meditative, with a multilayered structure. I had no idea before I started reading *Twist* that so much of our lives bounce around under the sea. Although the book does not mention the Bay of Bengal, I could see a connection with current concerns—as it is there that the shipping routes of Southeast Asia intersect, where energy routes and data cables intersect, where the geopolitical ambitions of major powers intersect.

Atiya Rumni Mahmood is a long-term resident of Maryland, who studied at the University of Dhaka and the University of Maryland at College Park, and worked in the greater Washington DC metro area in corporate finance and accounting. She enjoys cooking, gardening, reading, and travelling.

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A wintry account of the human experience

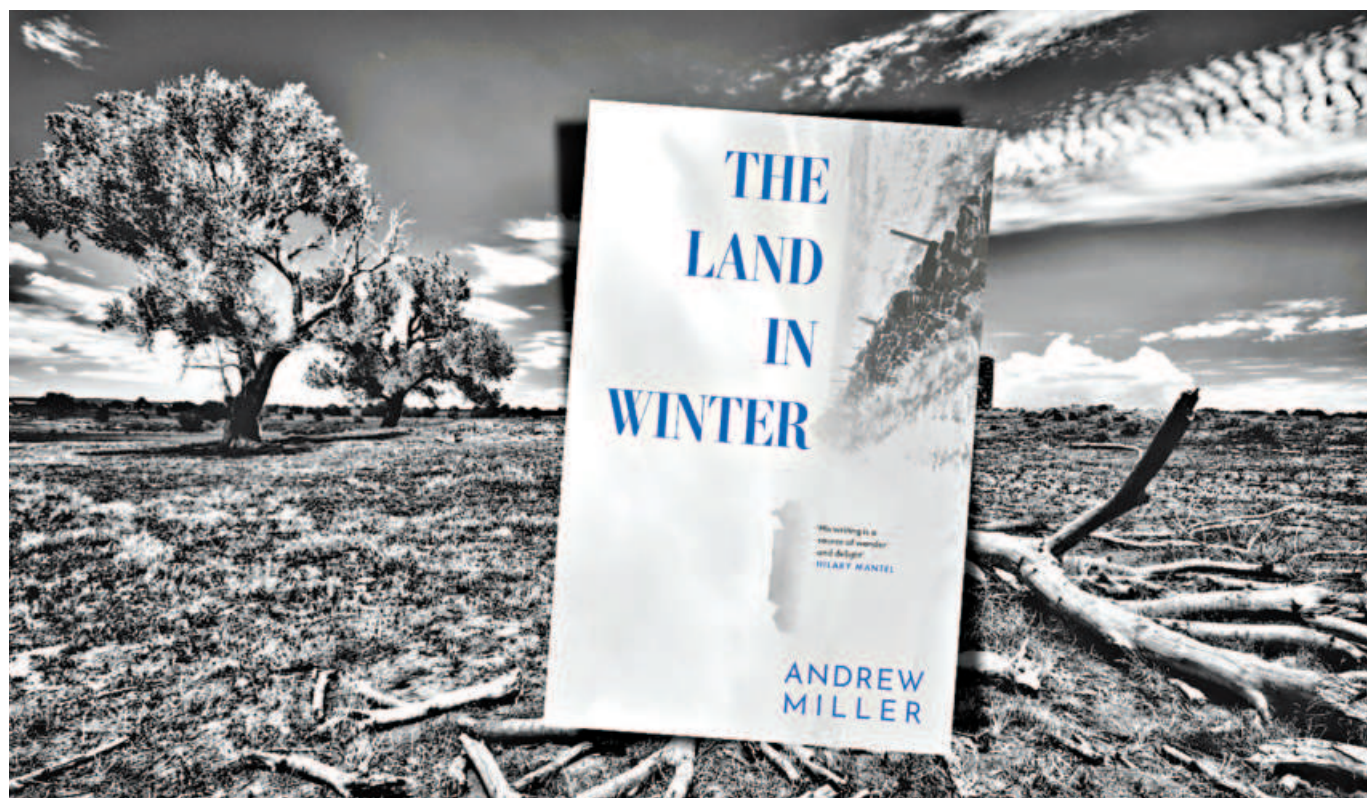
Review of Andrew Miller's 'The Land in Winter' (Sceptre, 2024)

SHOUNAK REZA

In my early 20s, I moved to New York and started going to a commuter college. I lived far from campus, so in order to get to school, I had to take a bus and then the subway, adding up to an hour of commute each way. My classmates all commuted from various parts of the city; some of them ran to work right after classes. Having been surrounded by friends all my life and not yet knowing how to enjoy my own company, I felt extremely lonely. One winter evening, on my way back home, I was informed that my train would not be stopping at a particular station, so I would have to brave my way through the winds of Manhattan to take another train, two blocks from where I was. Another person was in the same position and we started walking to the other station. We made small talk, only to realise we were both into writing. We exchanged numbers, and soon became rather unlikely friends—I was an English major; he had just graduated with a degree in Computer Science and was now working for a bank. What brought us together was our loneliness in the maze of a city that lures you in and makes you suffer until you finally fall in love with the sight and sound and smell of it. Our loneliness was informed by the fact that we felt like two nameless individuals in an ever-busy city.

In Andrew Miller's *The Land in Winter*, we encounter loneliness, except, as opposed to New York, it is set in a small village where nothing much happens. It is this isolation that brings neighbours Irene and Rita together. The two women could not be more different from each other: Irene, married to a doctor, is from an upper-middle class family in London, whereas Rita worked as a dancer before marrying Bill, who has just moved to the village to become a farmer. The two women form a friendship, something that would perhaps be impossible in a big city where class, background, and social circles inform friendships. In a village that seems stuck in wintry nothingness, all those factors become unimportant.

The village, of course, is not stuck in



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

nothingness, wintry or not. I grew up reading Agatha Christie, and I remember how Miss Marple used to observe the complexities of human nature reflected in the lives of the residents of her village. Unlike Christie's characters, Miller's characters are not conspiring and plotting against one another (this is not a mystery novel). However, scratch the surface and you will find the potential for disasters. Eric, Irene's husband, is having an affair with Allison, who happens to be rich and, to make matters more inconvenient, also married—happily so, on the surface. When he visits her, he has to make calculations: he is, after all, a doctor in a small village. What will happen if the villagers get to know about the affair?

As Eric struggles to keep his affair a secret, his neighbour Rita has to take care to silence the voices in her head. Her husband, Bill, navigates issues of his own as he tries to succeed at being a farmer after having received an elite education. His father is an immigrant who changed his last name in order to sound British. He grew wealthy and provided Bill with the best education in the country, and Bill has gone on to become a farmer.

The lives of the two couples, with their inner conflicts, converge although their issues do not intersect. I expected the conflicts—internal and external—to lead to a major explosion of sorts but Miller prevents anything like that from happening. What transpires, however, is something much

closer to life: frictions result in reactions—some of them intense, but kept realistic through Miller's measured prose. When something happens—a character finding out something, for example—it is not loudly announced. Instead, the prose gently leads us to the event. As a result, while people's feelings and inner landscape are carefully observed and even delved into, it never becomes dramatic. It is this, in my opinion, that makes the novel work so well. The four central characters are realistic—even when I did not approve of their actions, I never thought they were hyperbolic.

Looking back, the way I eventually fell in love with New York and all the meaningful friendships I formed and the people I would go on to fall out with did not happen

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dramatically—each piece of the puzzle fit into another, the complexities of my human experience paving the way for more of life. Sometimes it was only in retrospect that I realised how anticlimactic I dealt with events that were often quite serious. While I do not mean to suggest that *The Land in Winter* is anticlimactic by any means, I argue it reflects the fact that no matter how complex life is, it is often not proportionally dramatic. It is this fact of life that Miller portrays in the novel, and his four characters are microcosmic representations of the complicated, often ugly, seldom simple human experience.

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