

*At Swim, Two Boys* by Jamie O'Neill (Scribner) R139.95

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To write a novel inviting comparison with James Joyce's *Ulysses* is courageous; to write a first novel inviting comparison with *Ulysses* is presumptuous; to write a gay first novel inviting comparison with *Ulysses* is, some might say, blasphemous. Jamie O'Neill's achievement is to have pulled it off: *At Swim Two Boys* manages to be both homage to Joyce and a fine novel in its own right.

The title, of course, is a nod in the direction of that other celebration of Dublin, Flann O'Brien's *At Swim – Two Birds*. But the main correspondences remain Joycean, especially in the figure of Mr Mack, the deluded, pretentious shopkeeper with large ambitions and uncertain control of his own linguistic aspirations, who is given many of Leopold Bloom's traits and foibles. Whether his son, young Jim Mack, is intended to be a more sympathetic version of Stephen Dedalus is open to question – certainly if this is so, this is the young Stephen of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, whose sexual and intellectual awakening Joyce traces in this early novel.

That said, one does wonder why O'Neill chose to take such pains with the Joycean parody: would the novel not have been better without it? The reason may be that O'Neill grew up in Joyce territory, near the Sandycove beach and Martello tower on which *Ulysses* opens. O'Neill clearly knows his Kingstown and his Dublin; but his narrative has quite enough intrinsic interest not to have to rely on such Joycean credentials.

Set in Dublin in the year leading up to Easter 1916, the novel traces, in parallel with the growing political tension, the burgeoning love of two boys, Jim Mack, the scholarship boy, and Doyler Doyle, the parish dung-shoveller, precocious Socialist, and occasional rent boy. It is in this last capacity that Doyler meets Anthony MacMurrough, disaffected and decadent scion of one of the oldest and grandest of the Irish families, fresh from a sentence of two years hard labour in Wandsworth prison for "gross indecency" (all this taking place, of course, not long after the infamous Oscar Wilde trials.) MacMurrough, Mack and Doyle form an unlikely triangular relationship, with young Mack being initiated into sexual and political awareness more or less concurrently.

There is a longish section in which MacMurrough has a conversation with a dead friend and mentor, one Scrotes, on the subject of friendship. It's a central passage, because it offers justification for the sexual-political paralleling of the boys' growing love for each other and the events leading up the Easter 1916 rebellion. But O'Neill casts it in the mock-catechistic style of the Ithaca section of *Ulysses*; generally regarded as one of Joyce's more tedious exercises in style, it does not improve in the parodying: "Certainly friendship had its political implications and Scrotes was able to advance instances of friends who had effected risings and revolts against despots and bullies. Tyrants, so Plato said, stand in awe of friends. The question then arose: was friendship incidental or essential to these actions? MacMurrough inclined to the latter view; for friendship, he maintained, tending to the good of both friends, by extension might seek the good of all."

As that extract will demonstrate, *At Swim, Two Boys* is almost old-fashioned, in this post-Aids era, in its idealisation of male friendship – not that the idealisation is in any way premised upon celibacy. As Eveline MacMurrough, Anthony's imperious aunt,

says, in reply to his coy reference to the love that dare not speak its name: “Its name is buggery.”

O’Neill manages to combine buggery and idealisation in the novel’s climax, the swim to an outlying rock that the two boys have pledged each other to undertake on Easter Sunday 1916 – which of course was also when the Easter uprising against British rule was due to take place. The uprising is bungled and does not take place till the next day, which conveniently gives the boys time to consummate the successful fulfilment of their pledge, with some help from MacMurrough, after which history takes its toll. The uprising itself is recreated in authoritative detail, as indeed is the whole history of the period (South African readers will be interested in Mr Mack’s recollections of the Boer War).

In his great poem on the Uprisings, “Easter 1916,” Yeats wrote “Hearts with one purpose alone/Through summer and winter seem/ Enchanted to a stone/ To trouble the living stream.” O’Neill deliberately invokes this poem in having young Mack say, in the terrible aftermath of the uprising “You know I’ll be a stone”, and having MacMurrough fantasise about an escape from the wars to an island: “In the living stream they’d swim a season.”

The famous refrain of Yeats’s poem is “A terrible beauty is born,” and O’Neill is clearly searching for the terrible beauty underlying his country’s tragic history, in terms that also embrace that other struggle for liberation of which Oscar Wilde was a casualty.

The novel is not flawless: as I’ve suggested, the Joycean parallels are at times obtrusive without being functional, and the plotting is so tight as to seem contrived, the many coincidences linking the house of MacMurrough with the shop of Mr Mack becoming a bit too much to credit. Most damagingly of all, the central relationships hover on the edge of sentimentality, and the high-mindedness of the various transactions, by their nature fairly basically physical, are at times somewhat implausible. The two boys, in particular, often seem impossibly mature in negotiating their own highly unconventional adolescence. O’Neill tends to fall in love with his own characters, which makes for some very humane, unjudgemental writing, but also for lack of critical distance.

But these are quibbles. This is a wonderful first novel; more than that, it’s a wonderful novel by any standards.