

*Paula Spencer* by Roddy Doyle (Jonathan Cape)

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Admirers of Roddy Doyle's Barrytown trilogy (*The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*) will be pleased that, after his foray into the America exotics of *Oh, Play that Thing*, he has now returned to Dublin for his latest novel. Indeed, where *Oh, Play that Thing* seemed intent on straining credulity to the limit with a superhuman hero and a series of far-fetched events, *Paula Spencer* seems deliberately humdrum, firmly rooted in the prosaic details of working-class Dublin as experienced by a cleaning-woman.

Even the title of the novel, the very ordinary name of its very ordinary protagonist, signals this change of emphasis. But for readers of Doyle it will also signal something else: for Paula Spencer is the eponymous *Woman who Walked into Doors* of Doyle's novel of a battered, alcoholic wife. Now, this new title seems to state, Paula is no longer identified purely by her own victimhood: she has her own identity to recover.

*Paula Spencer*, is, in short, the story of a recovery, the painful road back, not only from abuse and alcoholism, but from a woman's alienation from her own children, who had at an early age to bear the burden of a violent father and a drunken mother. Nicola, the eldest, who took the management of the household upon herself when her mother was drunk, still treats Paula as if she were one of the children; John Paul, who was a heroin addict at fourteen, now precariously rehabilitated, keeps a wary distance; Leanne, who has inherited her mother's alcoholism, shies away from Paula's attempts at contact; Jack, the youngest, is unapproachable in his adolescent word. These are damaged lives, and Paula knows that she was partly responsible for damaging them.

It is in the nature of a recovery to be less eventful than a decline and fall. The events are non-events: not having the drink you're dying to have, not hitting out at the child who infuriates you. The only line of suspense is: can Paula hold out? Can she patch up her fragile relationship with her children? For the reader, though, there is the further question: can Doyle keep it up? Can he keep our interest in the mundane details of the life of a recovering alcoholic?

Miraculously, he can. Doyle manages to engross us in the ordinary concreteness of Paula's world, with its brand names and its appliances, its fast foods, its small aspirations and petty victories. Dealing with a neighbour showing off her possessions, Paula thinks: "The fire, the flat-screen telly, the three-in-one. Rita isn't boasting, or she doesn't know she is. She's just content – Paula thinks. And that's fine. Good luck to her. She begrudges Rita nothing. And anyway, Paula's fridge is bigger than Rita's."

Gradually, too, we come to realise that material objects are not just simple acquisitions for Paula: they are emblems of her new existence, in which she can actually afford to buy something other than booze with the money she has made herself: "It's ridiculous, really. It's not the first time she's handled a CD. But it feels that way. Maybe it's just ownership. She bought this disc. She bought the player. She worked for these things. For herself. For the house."

Unpatronisingly, Doyle brings home to us that what we might feel ideologically obliged to sneer at as middle-class consumerism can be a form of dignity, of pride in victory over circumstance. Even just having eggs in the house enables Paula to reach out to her taciturn daughter:

“–Hungry? Says Paula.

–No, says Leanne. –A bit.

–An omelette.

She has the eggs. She bought them today.

Leanne nods now.

–Yeah. Nice.”

As this extract demonstrates, the dialogue is hardly Jamesian. And yet it is expressive of shades of meaning far subtler than its apparently common-place surface would suggest. Reaching out to her son, the rehabilitated junkie, Paula tries to apologise for having failed him as a mother:

“–How –?

She stops.

–What? he says.

–No, she says.

She smiles. It’s good; she can.

–D’you not want to – I don’t know. Kill me?

–No, he says.

–Are you not angry?

–Sometimes, he says.

She makes herself; she looks straight at him.

–It’s for me to deal with, he says.

–I’m sorry, she says.

–Yeah.

He nods.”

Given the number of dysfunctional or previously dysfunctional people in the novel, the tone is surprisingly light. Doyle imbues his characters with a sardonic humour born of a bitter sense that the world’s not out to please them. Carmel, Paula’s sister, is diagnosed with breast cancer; the next day Kylie Minogue’s cancer hits the headlines. Paula phones Carmel because she thinks the coincidence may have upset her:

“–Are you coming home from work? says Carmel.

–Yeah.

–On the Dart?

–Yeah.

–Well, if you mention Kylie Minogue, I’ll be waiting at the station and I’ll smack the face off you.

–People are worried about you, says Paula.

–Oh, I know, says Carmel. –And I’ve had to cancel my tour of Asia and Australia. For fuck sake.”

Smacking the face off people may not be the most effective way of dealing with breast cancer, but it may just make it more tolerable. It’s the way these battered people cope with their lives in this harrowingly funny novel.