

*Shade* by Neil Jordan (John Murray)

7 December 2005

Neil Jordan is perhaps better known for the films he has directed, like *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game* and *The Company of Wolves*, than for his novels, but this is in fact his fourth novel, and it is every bit as accomplished as his films.

Like Alice Sebald's *The Lovely Bones*, this novel is narrated by a murdered woman, as we are told in the book's first sentence: "I know exactly when I died." The victim is Nina Hardy, the privileged child of an Irish mother and English father, who grew up in a large house on the banks of the estuary of the River Boyne on the Irish Sea. Her murderer is her erstwhile childhood friend, George, with whom, along with her half-brother Gregory and George's sister Janie, she had led a charmed childhood in the early twentieth century, until the idyll was disrupted, like so much else, by the First World War.

This, though, is an over-simplified reading of the dynamics of growing-up as Neil Jordan depicts them. For the War does not so much end the idyll as provide a convenient resolution to a complex of relationships that could not have endured in any case. For between Nina and her half-brother there is more than sibling affection; and poor George, the slowest and most lumbering of the four, cherishes the hopeless love for Nona that is to issue in his murdering her. Gregory, in his turn, loves George.

A climactic moment in their childhood occurs when Nina and George fall from the Maiden's Tower. Both suffer severe injuries, but more significantly undergo a change in their relation to each other and their own lives: "George, whose brief existence had heretofore been lived in the shadow of others, now had his legend, his fall, had tumbled from the Maiden's Tower with Nina Hardy, had punctured her maiden's body with his." But *Shade* is more than a tangled tale of lost innocence. In setting and subject matter, it recalls John Banville's *The Sea*, recently reviewed here. Both novels are set on the Irish coast, and both novels find in the rather bleak setting an appropriate medium for the recollection of childhood from an adult perspective. But Jordan is more self-consciously experimental, more aware of his narrator as narrator. Nina describes herself as a variant of the "narrator for whom past, present and to some extent the future are the same, who flips between them with inhuman ease." Her instance of this kind of narration is Dickens's *Great Expectations*, to which she often returns, but where Dickens's Pip looks back at his childhood with the insight of his maturity, Nina is taken one step further in that she looks back from beyond death. She also pictures her dead self as having been present to the child Nina, a shade of coming events: "I am you perfect narrator, inhabit then and now, dance between both, am nothing but my story and my story seems already endless."

The other literary allusion that recurs here is Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which the young Nina takes the central role of Rosalind. George, though he has no part in the play, identifies with the rustic Touchstone – and, as Nina points out, "a Touchstone smitten by a Rosalind is a dramatic absurdity." *As You Like It*, too, with its cross-dressing shifts of identity, usefully develops Jordan's interest in the relation between acting and identity. Nina, when she first starts acting, discovers in this activity an escape into another identity than her own: "She acted, that is to say she pretended, and as she pretended, she became."

Attracted to this mode of being (or non-being) Nina takes to a life of acting, a process that is here presented in segments intercut with descriptions of Gregory and George fighting, during the First World War, in the Dardanelles, a hardening into identity for all of them. Nina achieves fame as an actress, both on stage and the new medium of film, and after the war Gregory becomes her manager. She has a brief affair with an actor playing opposite her in *Twelfth Night*; Gregory embarks on a life-long affair with the same actor. George, severely disfigured by the war, returns to the Boyne estuary. Savagely beaten up by Irish nationalist for having “taken the King’s shilling”, he begins the slow decline into madness that is to end with his murder of Nina many years later. Summarised like this, *Shade* seems like a sombre tale indeed, and its strongest note is certainly one of melancholy and regret. But it is enlivened by the tenderness with which Jordan recalls the landscape of childhood, not only its physical features, but the emotional texture of its days, apparently endless, without a care, but yet haunted, quite literally, by the shade of the future. Innocence, the novel implies, is always already shaded by its own demise; and yet seems all the more precious for it, in that retrospection which is all that the end of innocence affords us.