

*Rory and Ita* by Roddy Doyle (Jonathan Cape, R180)

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Tolstoy famously commented that "All happy families are alike, but all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way." This would seem to imply that happy families are too uniform to form the stuff of fiction; a tenet that Roddy Doyle flagrantly defies in this account of the lives of his father and mother.

In *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*, Doyle created Irish working-class Catholic families that were rather more rough and ready than their Anglo-American counterparts, and came to fame and fortune and Booker Prize with *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, which featured a broken home; after which, in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, he gave us the story of an abused wife. Doyle, in other words, is not exactly a chronicler of happy families, and as a result *Rory and Ita* comes as a bit of a surprise.

Rory and Ita are clearly two exceptionally nice people. Ita in particular is unfailingly happy, uncritical, feeling herself fortunate in her friends family and circumstances in general. Telling the story of how the bedroom ceiling fell on her, she concludes "I thought it was grand. And I loved everything about that locality."

This is clearly not Brontë territory. Talking of her primary school, the Dominican College in Dublin, Ita says: "I loved Eccles Street from the day I started. I literally never missed a day. ... There was Sister Alvero, and a Sister Acquin. They were nice, gentle people. Everything was lovely there."

Ita's mother died when she was three, and she and her siblings were looked after by a housekeeper and a succession of maids: "The maids came with amazing regularity but they were all lovely and they were all very nice to us." Even the mother of one of the maids "was a lovely old lady and she had a canary and we were very fond of it."

Narratively, the problem is that if everybody is lovely, from the nuns to the canary, is anybody really lovelier than anybody else? And what about people who really are not lovely by any charitable stretch of the imagination?

When her father remarries what sounds like a dipsomaniac kleptomaniac sadist, Ita tries hard to look on the bright side, and vacillates almost comically between her habit of cheerful stoicism and her realisation that the woman really was a bit of a monster: "She was alright, as a rule. But there was nothing warm about her. And we always felt that she'd have preferred it if we hadn't been there. ... I suppose, mentally, she could be cruel, and I don't think she really meant to be; it was just the make of the woman."

When the stepmother dies at the age of ninety, having given everybody around her a hard time, Ita manages, at last, a judgement: "I might as well be honest; I didn't grieve for her."

Ita must be a delightful person to know, but she lacks that critical edge that narrative tends to rely on for its distinctions and discriminations. Perhaps the most surprising thing about her life is that instead of ending up, as one might have expected, exploited and abandoned, she marries somebody almost as charitable and gullible as herself. Rory, growing up in circumstances even more straitened materially than Ita's, finds equally little grounds for complaint. About his first school, he says "Half the day you sat and half the day you stood; there wasn't room for us all. ... there was no particular hardship about it; that was just how it was."

The culture of entitlement, like dysfunctional families, was clearly alien to the Ireland of the day. At one stage Rory is farmed out to an aunt and uncle because of over-crowding in his own home, where his mother as a matter of course took in homeless nephews and nieces (Rory had over eighty first cousins). He feels no resentment at being excluded from his own home (“It was a family thing”); but the treatment he receives from his loveless aunt and uncle does, at last, elicit a complaint: “Living there was persecution; it was terrible. . . It was a most horrific time.” Even here, though, his native stoicism prevents open rebellion: “But it didn’t break me. I put up with it.”

Nowadays, of course, we feel that this kind of thing should not be put up with. And, as far as writing books is concerned, we agree with Tolstoy that there is a kind of sameness about happy families that doesn’t really engage our interest. Without anger, resentment, or jealousy, even love seems a slightly humdrum affair.

But in the end, once one has succumbed to the relentless barrage of trivia, one’s cynicism is disarmed and one’s critical faculties lulled by the sheer good nature of these people. They come to seem exceptional, after all, paradoxically, in their very ordinariness – or rather, in their contentedness with ordinariness, and above all in their refusal to make their ordinariness the basis of their judgements of other people. Reflecting on the great changes in Ireland since their youth, they find nothing but pleasure in the vibrant new multicultural society that has supplanted the grey uniformity of their youth. Ita has only one small gripe: “We both enjoy the time we are living in. We make the most of it. I just wish to God the taxis were better.”

Rory is even more positive: “ . . . Dublin has become a very cosmopolitan, colourful and lively place. The streets throb with the sound of multiple accents and languages, and there’s a very obvious presence of different races, and a noticeably large number of young people.”

For us, also living in a country undergoing rapid and visible change, there is surely something to learn from this openness to change. These two lives, uneventful as events are measured in books and newspapers, are yet, ultimately, rich in interest and variety.