

Strangeness and failure: Gish Jen's *Who's Irish?*

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Who's Irish?, by Gish Jen, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999, 208 pp., \$22.00

Gish Jen has published two well-received novels, *Typical American* (1992) and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1997), both of which deal with the entry of Chinese immigrants or their families into American life. *Who's Irish?* is her first book of short stories. It deals with much the same material, and the quality of the eight stories is uneven; two are quite satisfying, the rest less so.

"Birthmates" was selected by John Updike for inclusion in the *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. The protagonist, Art Woo, is a divorced computer salesman who sells a technology quickly becoming obsolete. As he prepares to market his wares at a sales show, he belatedly discovers that the motel he has chosen in order to save money is a welfare hotel. Paranoid from the start, he checks behind wall-hangings for hidden peepholes and worries that someone will break into the room. For self-defense he carries a telephone receiver that he has removed from the rest of device.

Art expects to be challenged and irritated by Billy, a fellow salesman from another company, a blowhard who was born on the same day in the same year as Art. After Art has set up shop at the sales convention he finds out that Billy has moved on to a better job in Silicon Valley. Art himself decides to jump the sinking company ship when a friend puts him in touch with a headhunter. Things are looking up for Art. He goes back to his hotel to make the appointed call with the headhunter, which of course, cannot be made.

There is a feeling of desperation and failure in "Birthmates," the kind of nervous desperation that leads one to drink too much or to do stupid things. Art Woo's paranoia seems quite well integrated with this overall sense. The story is also rather amusing. This is not entirely a good thing, because it seems that Jen is laughing at her characters, and that she may not be entirely sympathetic to them. But mercifully, the focus at least is on the underdog.

Jen's presentation of Art walking around his motel with a telephone receiver is arresting. His eccentricity feels natural. The story does not pander to what seems to be a prevalent taste in the American short story for quirkiness as a thing in itself. Art's paranoia, cheapness and desperation seem to flow from

something bigger than himself. Peculiar or unsettling circumstances do not create emotions or emotional crises; they can only be catalysts for feelings that have long been simmering under the surface. To her credit, in this story Jen is not leaning too much on the peculiar situation as a conventional device, meant primarily to be attention-grabbing. She shows briefly and elegantly a world that creates alienation and anxiety in Art.

"Duncan in China" is a novella-length piece. A 37-year-old Chinese-American, Duncan Hsu, gets a job teaching English in mainland China not too long after the ascent of Deng Xiaoping in the early 80s. Duncan, who does not speak much Chinese, has had trouble settling on a career in the US. His parents disparage him and contrast his life to that of his brother, who runs a successful import/export business and drives a BMW. Moved by the artistry of Sung dynasty porcelains ("their grace and purity, and delicate crackle glazes; what with their wholeness and confidence and wholly untutored air"), Duncan has decided to try out life in a China of "ineffable beauty and restraint."

When he arrives in China and is given a job as a "foreign expert" at a mining institute Duncan realizes that "the China of the early 1980s had more to do with eating melon seeds around a coal heater the size of a breadbox than about Sung dynasty porcelain." The physical discomfort of cold rooms in the winter, the mental discomfort of being treated as a privileged person (he has a bathroom in his apartment), the creepy bureaucratic time-servers who are his superiors, all introduce Duncan to a quite unexpected world. He teaches students who are mixture of ex-Red Guards and their victims. No one talks about much of importance, and the loneliness he has tried to escape in the United States only deepens.

Then Duncan falls in love with one of his students, the vivacious and intelligent Louise (all of his students take English names in his class), from a mysteriously protected former aristocratic family. He encounters puritanical and bureaucratic resistance to developing a relationship with her. Finally, he is allowed a chaperoned visit with Louise to the Stairway to Heaven, a famous Buddhist pilgrimage site. Duncan sees scores of elderly women making the steep climb without adequate lodging or protection from the elements. At the summit a fire

erupts and he and Louise manage to communicate their affection for each other. But Louise is constrained and secretive. Duncan cannot understand why. When he returns to the school, he realizes that their chaperone, another student named William, was an informer. Louise is transferred to another posting.

Duncan receives permission to visit his cousin, Guotai, in Beijing. Guotai is desperate. He is poor and tubercular and only wants to emigrate to America. Duncan knows that he cannot help him because of his disease, but Guotai denies that he is ill at all. He shows off his rude and wild son who shocks Duncan by drinking beer, “Of course he drinks beer,” Guotai says, “In Harbin everyone drinks beer. The average is twelve bottles per person per day. We are so close to Russia, you see. They taught us everything we know. To the Russians, those drunks!”

At the end of the story, Duncan meets Louise again. They have completely misunderstood each other's attitude toward love. I found this moment very sad. But Duncan does make a new start in love, and the story ends on a hopeful note.

I thought that “Duncan in China” was Jen's most successful story. Its subtle misunderstandings, its lovely language and imagery, its responsiveness to beauty and ugliness, the slightly surreal trip on the Stairway to Heaven, and all this in a world of informers and official stupidity, are combined movingly. It is hard to love, and Jen tells us so. Duncan has not found love at all in the United States, neither love nor happiness, so he looks for it elsewhere, and it is hard to find there as well.

In China he encounters people who are living on the edge. Meat, good plumbing and deep emotion are luxuries. Both nature and society are oppressive and make everything difficult. Society and feeling come into conflict, and this becomes much more apparent—and crucial—to Duncan in China than it seems to have been in the United States. Duncan wakes up. I wonder if the story is so accomplished because Jen removed herself from what she perceives to be the problems of American society, in particular the issue of ethnicity.

I did not find much that was compelling in the other five stories in *Who's Irish?*; on the contrary, they seem rather dull. This is not to say they are poorly written, but Jen attempts to put too much of an epic face on small family tribulations. Her characters' problems are not big enough, or not intensely enough felt. The title piece, “Who's Irish?” exemplifies this. A Chinese grandmother living with her daughter and her daughter's Irish-American husband comes into conflict with their permissive attitudes as she cares for her three-year-old granddaughter. No one understands her views on child rearing except her in-law, the American mother of her daughter's husband. The grandmother scarcely understands the lives or attitudes of the younger generation. Her daughter holds down a corporate job for which she is eternally preparing “presentations” and her daughter's husband is a sporadically employed managerial type. The grandmother has worked hard

and fearlessly in operating a restaurant with her husband and does not understand the “sensitive” values of her daughter and son-in-law. In the end, the older and younger generations cannot accommodate their different views on child rearing, and the Chinese grandmother moves in with her Irish-American in-law.

I disliked the way the story was narrated in broken English by the Chinese grandmother. It seemed that Jen is only handicapping the full expression of the grandmother's views. Is the point to make it clear that this is the authentic voice of a non-native speaker? I think character grows up more internally, and that such tricks, while they can be appropriate in a character with a distinct view of the world, are superfluous here. The story is needlessly told in the present tense, and there is a pseudo-analytical style. For example, in relating her granddaughter's speech the grandmother says,

“I hate you! She yell. I hate you! Meanie.

Meanie is my new name these days.”

Statement, punctuation. Too much of the story, in fact too much of all the stories in the book, proceeds with this rhythm.

This story attempts to center itself around a cultural conflict between old China and new America. That conflict, however, is not made profound; it lacks depth and a sense of history.

This brings us to another troubling aspect of Jen's book: the extraordinary emphasis the author places on ethnicity. Is there a real conflict in the United States between Irish-American and Chinese-American “cultures”? How great a tragedy is it if a person in your boyfriend's family (as happens in another story) mistakenly calls you Japanese-American and not Chinese-American? Racism is real, and hostility against Asian-Americans is deliberately whipped up for political purposes, but Jen's exploration of the issue seems inadequate.

Jen is talented, but most of these short stories, with the two exceptions I have mentioned, seem too focused on minutiae: sociologically focused on the ethnic, aesthetically on minor feelings and images that seem relatively conventional. At her best, Jen is capable of addressing with grace various kinds of failure and a sense of the new or the odd to which they can lead us. When she does this, she is on the side of the unfortunate, and that is saying something.



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