



Poetry that had to be written

Authenticity: from Vultures to The Radio

'Raised Among Vultures' by Molly Twomey (The Gallery Press 75pp €12.95), and 'The Boy with The Radio' by Cormac Culkeen (Beir Bua Press 44pp €8.90)

Reviewed by Kevin Higgins

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At an initial, superficial glance these two debut poetry collections differ wildly, from the genders and ages of the poets – Twomey is in her twenties while Culkeen won't see forty again – to the fact that Twomey's debut is published by Gallery, until recently considered by most who take an interest in such matters to be the most conservative force in Irish poetry-publishing; while Culkeen's 'The Boy with The Radio' comes from radical Tipperary-based Beir Bua Press, a dynamic new poetry publishing outfit with a marked leaning towards neo-surrealism.

Gallery published its first book in 1970 while Beir Bua emerged during the pandemic, publishing its first book in 2021.

Gallery is lavishly supported by the Arts Council while Beir Bua has, so far as I'm aware, yet to receive a cent in government subsidy.

Publication by Gallery is often a poet's passport to eventually becoming an esteemed member of the poetry establishment, once the ascendant poet has gathered sufficient mildew to be safely quoted by the likes of soon-to-be former Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi.

There are a number of poets on the Beir Bua list who, given their current ideological leanings, are unlikely to be admitted to one of those shamrock, fiddles, and poetry shindigs at the White House. And yet, for all the ways in which they apparently diverge, these two collections share perhaps the most important quality a book of poetry can have. Both 'Raised Among Vultures' and 'The Boy with The Radio' brim with poetry that clearly had to be written. The voices in both are striking for their authenticity, a rare enough quality in the Irish poetry world where, in these days of accelerated networking, authenticity is often thinner on the ground than it would be at a convention of auctioneers basking in an address by Bertie Ahern.

Both Twomey and Culkeen are the real thing, and had to write these poems. There is no posing from either of them.

Twomey's poems are a matter of life and death. She has



Keep your eye on the poet

spoken, and written, of her profound struggle with an eating disorder while she was a student at NUI Galway. These poems, in several of which Twomey confronts and bears stylish witness to her worst days, are a vital confirmation that in her case the life force won out. In 'Everyone Here Is Dead Honest' she writes: "We stay up all night, / flossing with each other's veins. / Who knew there were so many ways to die?"

The poem concludes: "I don't want to wake up / and weigh a cup of kale twenty-seven times, / water down my slimline".

In the startlingly honest "I did not eat for three weeks" the narrator puts the disorder down to, among many other things, the fact "even the driving instructor stood me up" and "because I was not old enough to vote but wanted change".

In 'Notebook' Twomey shows an empathy rare in one her age for someone wrestling with a different variety of addictive behaviour (heroin, in this case). Her empathy is also profound in the poems she writes about her mother, father, and brother; 'Zipping Up My Mother's Dress' is just gorgeous. While in 'Dead Ends' she displays a savage truthfulness which has more in common with Baudelaire at his most shocking than with most recent Irish poems you'll read.

Cormac Culkeen's 'The Boy with The Radio' also reeks of rare authenticity. His poems are littered with stained mugs and floorboards covered only with old copies of the Tuam Herald newspaper.

In 'Hermit' the poem's subject responds to a knock on the door "Like a mouse in open grass / Beneath a hawk's shadow".

Culkeen directs an interrogating light on places and people contemporary Ireland generally likes to omit from its official version of itself, now that we're a Modern European Democracy, whatever that means. Not very much to some people in the interior, Culkeen's poems imply.

In 'The Local' he writes of a once essential but now defunct public house where these days: "A dartboard with its last markers catches a stripe of headlamps".

A plain-speaking neo-surrealist in the manner of cult American writer Richard Brautigan has arisen from the rarely written of townlands of north county Galway.

The publication of Culkeen's first collection of poetry is a cause for celebration. He is gloriously flexible when it comes to poetic form. The title prose-poem 'The Boy with The Radio' is a classic; should the world still exist a century from now people will read it and know what it was like to live in pre-internet north County Galway.

If I ever become Minister for Justice, Culkeen's poems will be gently force-fed to Leinster rugby fans in the Cafes of Sandymount and Booterstown as part of their cultural re-education. **L**