



Away

Jane Urquhart

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A stunning, evocative novel set in Ireland and Canada, *Away* traces a family's complex and layered past. The narrative unfolds with shimmering clarity, and takes us from the harsh northern Irish coast in the 1840s to the quarantine stations at Grosse Isle and the barely hospitable land of the Canadian Shield; from the flourishing town of Port Hope to the flooded streets of Montreal; from Ottawa at the time of Confederation to a large-windowed house at the edge of a Great Lake during the present day. Graceful and moving, *Away* unites the personal and the political as it explores the most private, often darkest corners of our emotions where the things that root us to ourselves endure. Powerful, intricate, lyrical, *Away* is an unforgettable novel.

Away Details

Date : Published May 1st 1997 by Emblem Editions (first published 1993)

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Author : Jane Urquhart

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Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Canada, Historical, Historical Fiction

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Tina says

This book felt like a book you would be forced to read in high school - a Canadian high school specifically. It was somewhat engaging but about halfway through I was nearing boredom. The beginning was very interesting with the hint of the supernatural, but the whole fact that Mary's "away-ness" permeated the text made it lose realism for me and made me scoff at times. The parts I liked were actually about the men; they were so level-headed and interesting whereas the women were flighty and powerless - I didn't empathize with them at all, which may have been why I grew bored. For me, a book is either all about magic or doesn't contain it at all - the neither-here-nor-there magical aspect of Mary and Eileen's... whatever it was made the woman seem kind of stupid, almost juvenile. The men don't believe in it and the women confound them, and with good reason. I have to say I have no interest in another one of Urquart's books after this one.

Julie says

I would say this is Jane Urquhart at her best, but then I say that about every one of her books. This is also a book I re-read every couple of years when I want to center myself -- a book where my point of convergence places me firmly *in time*, and *out of time*. There is something that is sheer poetry about every word she writes. This one in particular, feels like reading a lovely, elegiac poem to Canada, and to Ireland.

Through Urquhart's poetic vision we are introduced to 4 generations of Irish, following them from pre-famine Ireland through emigration and eventual settlement on the shores of Lake Ontario. The story begins with a love affair and ends with heartbreak: a perfect circle of life painted with an artist's eye for vision. The story is rich with history and mythology of both the Irish and the Canadian landscapes: landscapes of fact, of heart, and of mind.

Jennifer says

for me, the strength of this novel was in the middle section of the story. during this part, i was fully engaged and fell into the flow of the writing. the first and final thirds of the book, though, were just so-so for me. too many times during these sections i felt like ideas were being floated at the reader or moments of 'aren't i

clever?' (through the use of language or how certain sentences were structured) were happening and it distracted me. I also didn't really feel there was a good flow in these sections and I remained detached from the story. When I read this book, back when it first came out...I was only so-so about it at that time, though more specifics are lost to me as it's been so long. I wasn't very excited to pick it back up as a re-read for the Canada Reads debates on CBC, but I was hopeful that I would like it more this time around - as with age sometimes comes broader perspectives.

Given that I was reading *Away* in context of the Canada Reads debates...I wonder what my re-read experience would have been like were this not the case? Out of the five books in contention...this is my least favourite and pales in comparison to my favoured novel, *Indian Horse*. As with the other books, there are shared themes but I think they are addressed better in the other books. (The ideas of loneliness, solitude, love, religion, historical moments in Canada, etc...). I also think the appeal of *Away* will be to a smaller audience. My top three books - *Indian Horse*, *Two Solitudes* and *February* - I highly recommend to all readers. This novel and *The Age of Hope* I would only recommend to certain readers.

That's a lot of rambling...sorry.

Anubha Mehta says

Away has stayed in my mind.

For a long time.

Every time I visited Northern Ontario I thought about a life of settlers in the Canadian Shield. I found myself comparing my life, many decades later, still in a bucket of a settler.

One of the implicit ways in which I learned to love Canada was by spending long endless summer nights under the Algonquin sky.

When I started writing my novel, *Peacock In the Snow*, I could easily relate to the tranquility and ferocity of nature, the pain of isolation and so many layered narratives of this evergreen masterpiece.

The_Freddy says

This was great! I truly loved reading this book.

It was my first book by Jane Urquhart and I wasn't sure what to expect. But I really loved it. The words and the world, the images, everything. This is what makes reading so great. I just had the best reading experience.

While this was definitely not magical realism, it did have a certain kind of magical realism vibe to it - and I loved it. Jane Urquhart wonderfully managed to say little, but make parts of the story feel fairy-tale-like, while actually just telling what happened.

I'm much looking forward to reading more of her work.

Rebecka says

The women in this book are so vague and poetic and otherworldly and romantic that by the end I couldn't

stand it anymore. I thought I'd like it at first, but it was just too much with the "awayness ". It doesn't help that everything they say is gibberish either.

Irene says

I am often caught between giving 3 or 4 stars to a book, and wish half stars were an option. In my universe (pun intended) 5 stars is reserved for books that are not only well written and creative but that catch me up emotionally and transport me someplace else while I'm immersed in them. 4 stars are for books that are almost there -- I usually appreciate the writing but don't feel connected enough into the book's world. Three stars are for books that are above average in terms of writing but basically run of the mill -- I put most mysteries and thrillers in this category. Two stars are seriously flawed in my opinion (as a reader) -- I may or may not finish them depending on how interesting I find the subject matter. And I would be unlikely to finish anything I'd rate with 1 star -- life is too short and there are too many other GOOD books to read.

That said, I would give *Away* 3.5 stars if I could. Good writing, interesting plot, but I found myself drifting away from the page and having to keep pulling myself back to the story. There were a few chapters that kept my interest and had me hoping I'd end up giving it 4 stars, but in the end they were too few and far between.

Kimberly says

Lyrical does not begin to describe Urquhart's writing. There were so many passages that I reread to truly appreciate their beauty that you could say I read this book one and a half times. She has a way of creating a scene that entirely surrounds you, all of the senses are involved, such that the novel stays with you long after you set it down. Remarkable. Captivating. I am not doing it justice. Read it. You'll see.

Sharyl says

3.5 stars.

This is an intriguing, well-written historical novel. My knowledge of Canadian history is practically nil, so I wasn't even aware that there were so many Irish potato famine victims in Canada struggling for survival during the time of the US Civil War (It turns out, history happened elsewhere, too).

The title takes on a double meaning. As Urquhart's story opens, we meet Mary, a very young woman living on a remote island off the coast of Ireland, who has the traumatizing experience of pulling a shipwrecked man out of the ocean, only to have him die in her arms. After this, she is never the same. Her fellow islanders superstitiously refer to her as "away," and believe she has been influenced by an evil spirit. Mary does feel an attachment to this man she pulled out of the sea, for the rest of her life.

Eventually, however, Mary does become wedded to a local school master and they start a family. She tends to be distant, but manages to lead a normal life for awhile. Later, when it becomes obvious that they will starve to death, their local landlord, who is rather taken with Mary, helps them escape to Canada. By the way, there are two landlords, the Sedgewick brothers, who are colorfully drawn characters.

The story of their journey to America, and their separation and quarantine when they arrive, is glossed over. I felt that the novel would have been more powerful with that part of the story told, especially from their young son's perspective.

After they've established a home, barely making a living, Mary suddenly disappears. This is the most heartbreak part. Liam, just seven years old, wakes up alone with a baby sister who needs to be fed and changed and a cow that needs to be milked. Brian, his father, is away from home for a couple days doing the only work he can find, so it's on Liam to become a little man.

There was a phrase their father repeated, which translated into "the trace of a man on a woman," which resonates throughout the book, first with Mary's story, then Eileen's.

Liam and Eileen seem like real characters, I cared about them, and they urged me to keep turning the pages, especially when Eileen's story becomes dramatic.

I apologize if this review seems disjointed...there are little mysteries that unfold along the way that I shouldn't touch, and both Irish and Native American folklore and spiritualism effect both Mary and Eileen.

This tale is told in flashback, and we are briefly introduced to four generations of women--Mary, Eileen, Deirdre, and Esther--but the latter two are not developed at all, and I felt there were parts of this story that seemed either left out or too vague. However, it is a riveting read, and I would certainly recommend it.

Zara Garcia-Alvarez of The Bibliotaphe Closet Blog says

The body of this novel in its narration is as suspended as the pendulum movement of waves in a body of water, of which the book is gravitationally focused.

It speaks of a history that dates back to 1842 on an island of Rathlin, just off the northern coast of Ireland and moves as its characters move in migration to the area of the Great Lakes in Canada 140 years later. As such, it is both a book of the early politics between the English and the Irish during the Irish famine in the mid 19th century and a book of displacement and yearning, immigration, and the search for home.

But it is also a book that speaks through women of four generations whose astute power to attract men to themselves is both a gift and a family curse much blamed on the dangerous power of beauty found in their pale, white skin against their red, fiery hair.

It is in this beauty that captivated the township of Cleggan, Kinramer, Church Bay, Ballygill, and Ballycarry etc. towards the character, Mary Slattery O'Malley, also renamed Moira, who was believed to be sought and taken "away" by a daemon lover from the sea.

The voice of the book is often written as lyrical fantasy, the language poetic and sentimental, which

exemplifies the beauty of not only the landscape of the mind, but its connection to the beauty and glory of Ireland's and Canada's natural landscapes, its rivers and its forests.

As Mary Slattery O'Malley was tied to the shores of Rathlin Island and the women in her family after her: Eileen, to the forests and willow trees near Black River; and Esther, to the surf of Loughbreeze Beach -- the nature of the land is exquisitely portrayed.

The women, though, become hosts of folklore:

Mary, in her withdrawn state and compulsion to imagine and be drawn to the spirit of her deceased beloved from the sea, removes herself both emotionally and physically from her husband and two children.

This same passion is passed down to her daughter, Eileen, whose innocence and creativity, is drawn to sleep in willow trees, to communicate with and have visions and prophecies from nature and conversations with namely a bird. The same power of compulsion drove her to sacrifice a life of material comfort and love alongside her brother, in search for her misplaced beloved, the political vagrant, Aiden Lanigan.

Though Urquhart's writing can be both beautiful and poetic in her descriptions of love and nature, even the sorrowful lament of a community struck by famine, I found the extremism in these women to be obsessive, self-indulgent, and delusional to the point of hysteria.

Personally, I would have preferred the book without its political implications or its irrational bouts of "love-sickness," but enjoyed the language of poetics and folklore told in the love of the landscape, history, and the style of recollection, that Urquhart described.

Aside from that, I found its main female characters too melancholy and over dramatic for reason. I would enjoy the novel alone for its lyrical storytelling and haunting spirituality that resides in its respect and wonder at nature. But it's not a novel I would allow myself to take too seriously. (Unfortunately, it takes more than pale white skin and red, fiery hair to seduce me...)

Harry Maier says

What to say about this book other than, Oh dear. This book seriously annoyed me. It piles up stereotype upon stereotype as it traces the four generations of an Irish family from the period of the Great Potato Famine through to settlement in Canada and ending in contemporary SW Ontario on the family homestead. We know these Irish: they are mystics, poets, alcoholics, bad tempered, skinflints, political agitators, lord-of-the-dancers, etc etc etc. We also know this Canada they settle: bad winters, honking Canadian geese, spring floods, friendly "Indians", anti-Catholicism, etc etc etc. In one excruciatingly bad sequence we have the love interest, a pro-Irish politico, persuading opponents not by his gift of speech but by his gift of dance! And then there is all the political correctness improbably foisted upon the 19th century protagonist who draws quick analogies between the expropriation of Irish land and the Irish taking the land of First Nations peoples, the female character who is every bit entitled to political agitation as her Fenian male counterparts, and so on and so on Oy.... At point I was so embarrassed by this book that I almost decided it wasn't worth my time. Only at the end of the story did I understand why this book should have been short-listed for any prize, when the plot turns to a discussion of Thomas D'Arcy Magee, a politician who was assassinated in 1867, and who

was agitating for a Confederation that would show equity to disenfranchised Irish settlers. In the final eighth of the novel Urquhart manages to move beyond an unbearable harlequin narrative to do some very interesting things with narrative time and point of view. These pages show why this author is a justifiably celebrated author. Unfortunately the rest of the book doesn't.

Kate says

Not a bad novel but in the end, I got annoyed with how she wouldn't write a simple sentence. No kettles boil; it's always symphonies of misty steam, swirling and dancing, up, past the kitchen window, obscuring her view like the hot version of the frost on this January morning, reminding her of the way the sprites danced, also elusive to view, also form-changing, also obstructing the clarity of sight, but of the mind's sight instead of the eye's. Beautiful for awhile, but bloody annoying soon enough.

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Lindahobbs64 Hobbs says

If you've ever been haunted by the memory of an unrequited crush – you've been “away.” Obviously, Urquhart draws this out into a splendid family saga, but I found myself able to relate to the sentiment, and that's what kept me reading. I know that haunted feeling. I've gazed out the window, as these characters did, hoping to catch a glimpse of that object of desire that never comes. I know that electric shock from the simple brush of a hand in passing, a shock you foolishly cherish and never forget. This is NOT a novel to read when you're in a hurry. This is a book to sit with and pass the hours when you have the time and patience to enjoy the rambling prose. That said, great book!

Czarny Pies says

Away est un roman très anglo-canadien. On y trouve la vie difficile des pioniers, des fées irlandaises et l'assassinat d'un des pères de confédération (à savoir Thomas D'Arcy McGee). Je trouve qu'Urquhart force la note mais c'est peut-être nécessaire si on veut créer une littérature canadienne.

Shannon says

I really enjoyed this book. I loved the historical backdrop both in Ireland and Canada. The introduction of the landlords was wonderful and added a lightness to what was otherwise potentially very dark. Especially since they were so oblivious and blind.

The away bits were believable for me if you compare them to depression - which I have been told feels like you are away from yourself, your family and your surroundings. An interesting take and makes the whole story believable.

Wonderfully written and a very good read. Dragged a bit here and there for me therefore no 5 stars from me (very few ever get the 5 star standard). This was however, very close for me and I would have given it 4.5.

Shane says

As the opening line suggests, this is a story about women, four generations of them, and their migratory journey from Ireland to Canada. These are mystical women, in touch with the spiritual world, whose men appear in mirages, out of the water or while converting their sorrows into dance. Water is another key player in the novel, whether it be the sea surrounding Rathlin Island in Northern Ireland or the lakes of Ontario, for water circumscribes worlds, separating them from others that are “away.” The concept of “away” is the hardest to wrap our heads around in this novel for it connotes a multiplicity of meanings: possessed, foreign, non-believer, immigrant, emigrant, revolutionary, the other side, the other person. The line of women in this

book are “away” while their men are practical, grounded, hard working, hard done-by by the ruling elites, betrayed or deserted by their women.

The plot pivots around two key events in history: the potato famine in Ireland circa 1845-46 and the assassination of D’Arcy McGee in 1868. The fourth-generation woman, Esther, herself now an octogenarian, is recalling the family story from the confines of the family home in Colborne, Ontario; a story of grinding poverty in Ireland leading to forced migration to Canada, to a hard scrabble existence on the Canadian Shield, to the bounty of gold discovery, to the building of wealth, and to its decay due to the march of nature and progress. After a shaky start, where we don’t quite know what is happening, we connect with great-grandmother Mary on Rathlin Island, the first person in the line of women who is “away,” and who sees her dream man, a dying sailor, emerge from the sea, the result of a shipwreck that is never called out but referred to as “a sea of floating cabbages and bottles of whiskey.” The potato famine drives her, her schoolmaster husband Brian, and their young family to Canada. But Mary abandons the family to go to another lake in the interior and spend out the rest of her life there, for she believes this is what her spirit guide, the dead sailor, had predicted for her. Daughter Eileen is another “away” person, spending her time in a tree and talking to birds who are her guides. Her brother Liam is the practical one who pulls the family out of the Canadian Shield and builds his fortune in farming down by Lake Ontario, thanks to guilt money paid by his father’s former British landlord in Ireland; Liam even transports the Seaman’s Inn (the first white building he sees upon arriving in Canada that he feels destined to live in) from Port Hope to Colborne by floating it down the lake to make it the family residence. Eileen then meets her dream man, Aidan, who dances into her life and whisk her away into a plot to kill Darcy McGee. At this point the novel hinges on whether the narrow nationalism of the impoverished Irish or the liberal federalism of a nascent Canada will win out, and with its conclusion the author stakes her position, making this book a Canada Reads contender.

Some of the characters are wonderfully drawn—Mary and Eileen in particular, Brian, Liam and Aidan, the eccentric British landlords the Sedgwick brothers—while others are hard to get a fix on: Esther, for instance. The plot is a bit contrived: inserting Eileen and Aidan into D’Arcy McGee’s murder could have been done better, I thought, and the inclusion of Esther’s mother (the third in the line of four women) who has no part in the story other than the mention of her name (which I have forgotten) is one only to fill in the time gap. Autobiographical references to family-owned hotels either swallowed by sand or struck by lightning are not elaborated on—they became the stuff of later Urquhart novels. That this is an early novel by the author is obvious in the dialogue and the melodramatic foreshadowing. And yet, the writing is lyrical and a pleasure to read, the descriptions original: “the smell of celibacy was like mildewed oilskin, milk going sour by the sink.”

The wealth of Canadian and Irish lore in this story interested me, especially as I am a resident of Northumberland County in which Port Hope and Colborne are located. I looked up the gold rush in Madoc, the flood in Griffintown (brilliantly described), and I found reference to a Seaman’s Inn in Port Hope that had been subsequently named Canada House in the mid-nineteenth century and run by a retired sea captain. And I walked out in my garden, sniffing, glad there weren’t as many skunks anymore- I’ll thank progress for that!

I have read stronger novels written by Urquhart, her later ones, but I can appreciate how this book propelled her out of the ranks of the many and into the hallowed circle of the chosen few.

Lianne Burwell says

Away is the second of the Canada Reads 2013 books to arrive from the library, and after being somewhat disappointed by Lisa Moore's February, I was a little worried when I cracked this one open.

I needn't have worried. This book sucked me in from the first page. On the one hand we have Esther, an elderly woman living on the edge of the Great Lakes in a home that is apparently going to be overrun by an expanding quarry. And at the same time, we have the story of her great-grandmother, Mary, who changed completely after finding a beautiful dying sailor, washed ashore from a shipwreck that cast cabbages, silver teapots, and caskets of whiskey up on the shore of the island she lives on in Ireland. That story follows Mary as she marries, and how she and her family emigrate to the colony of Canada during the Irish potato famine (a time period where a number of my own ancestors came to Canada from Ireland for the same reason). From there, it goes on to Eileen, Mary's daughter, who gets pulled into events that end with the assassination of Irish-Canadian politician, D'Arcy McGee.

The writing is almost poetry, and the story has aspects of pure whimsy, and I didn't want it to end. I also wanted to know more about the peripheral characters, like Exodus Crow and the Captains Shaunessey. If the book had been twice the length, I still would have been immersed.

Krista says

Speaking as a Canadian of mixed heritage, it's always a bit annoying when our official policy of Multiculturalism forces us to answer the question, "What's your nationality?" Many times over their school years, my kids were told to bring in a dish from or write a report on their nation of origin, and as my husband is also of mixed heritage, there's something rather pointless, to me, about them self-identifying as any single one of the many cultures that went into their makeup. After I don't even know how many generations here, we're Canadians. Nothing hyphenated, just Canadians. But...if I were forced to self-identify, I would have to say that with hair as coppery as Mary/Moira's and my mother's side being of pure Irish extraction, I'm more Irish than anything else. Having had Irish-Canadian friends, and also having visited the Emerald Isle as a teenager, I do have an emotional pull in that direction as well. I've read some Irish fiction over the years, some James Joyce and Maeve Binchy et al, but this was the first Ireland to Canada immigrant story I can remember reading and it had an effect on me that very likely has everything to do with this notion of self-identification.

In Away, Jane Urquhart starts her story in Ireland (poetically evoking its landscape, culture and mythology), introduces the Potato Famine (and its attendant death and devastation as well as emigration aboard the "coffin ships" for the lucky few), leading to pioneering in the harsh Canadian wilderness, and ends with a glimpse into the nascent politics of the young Dominion. Interspersed are scenes from the modern day life of an aged descendant of the O'Malley line as she tells the story of her family, giving voice to it even though she's alone, carrying on the tradition of oral history as related to her by her own elderly grandmother. In many ways this felt like a substitute for the immigration story of my own family that I'll never know, and as such, I made a connection with this book that might make me rate it higher than others who don't feel this connection.

Urquhart, in addition to being a novelist, has also published books of poetry and this lyrical sensibility is displayed throughout the book.

In describing a forest: *Leaf and leaf and shadow, shadow and sunlight scattered there, and over here, by the wind.*

In describing love: *This is what love is like, one is asleep and the other is awake but you never know which one is dreaming.*

This is also a political book, making commentary on the British Landlords in Ireland (even though the Sedgewick brothers are treated as oblivious and benign), the treatment of the Irish immigrants in Canada (from the fever sheds in Grosse Ile to the impoverished Griffintown neighbourhood of Montreal), the Fenian Rising, and the Fathers of Confederation (in particular D'Arcy McGee).

As a nation of (predominantly) immigrants, Mary's epiphany on being forced to leave Ireland is a shared part of our Canadian heritage:

She saw the world's great leave-takings, invasions and migrations, landscapes torn from beneath the feet of tribes, the Danae pushed out by the Celts, the Celts eventually smothered by the English, warriors in the night depopulating villages, boatloads of groaning African slaves. Lost forests. The children of the mountain on the plain, the children of the plain adrift on the sea. And all the mourning for abandoned geographies.

And this exchange between the mysterious Algonquin named Exodus and Mary's husband notes an equivalence between the experience of the Irish and the Native Canadians:

Exodus leaned across the table and looked steadily at the Irishman. "And so I told her," he said, "that some white men had seized my people's land and killed many animals for sport and abused our women."

The hands of the two men lay flat upon the table but their eyes never left the other's face.
"What did she say then?" asked Brian.

When Exodus replied there was a break in his voice. "She embraced me and said that the same troubles stayed in the hearts of both our peoples."

This exchange has further personal relevance for me since the only other heritage I know of is Mi'kmaq on my father's side. It may also explain why I am open to stories that involve the unseen behind the seen; whether faerie-folk or manitou.

After having read the nonfiction *Roughing it in the Bush* earlier this year, *Away* reads like a realistic and well-researched account of the early pioneers to Canada. These two books also highlight the differences in experience that was awaiting the poor Irish (even those privileged enough to have had land awaiting them as

in *Away*, which I can't imagine was a common situation) and the moneyed English who were better able to negotiate and navigate the British culture of Upper Canada. Here's another personal story: As a Canadian of mixed heritage, I honestly don't have either superficial or bone-bred prejudices against other people, no matter where they or their ancestors came from. Over the years, I've heard many of the immigration stories from my husband's family, and as a result, have been amused to watch each of my red-haired girls go off to school with a proudly researched paper on their Italian roots. But it floored me when my mother-in-law once informed me that although she always knew her grandfather came from Tipperary, she had just learned that he wasn't Irish-- he was a Brit who had bought land in Ireland in the mid-1800's, sold it at a profit, and then made his way to Canada. I couldn't help but at that point feel a kind of sleeping with the enemy internal conflict: Was he one of these notorious landlords? Did he somehow profit off the Irish during the Potato Famine? I have no clue, but reading *Away* brought this time alive for me.

I enjoyed everything about *Away*, from the fates of the drowned sailor and the Latin-teaching Brian to the beautiful and frenetic step-dancing Aidan. But this was really a story about the women: *In this family all young girls are the same young girl and all old ladies are the same old lady*. This book connected with me in a way that made me feel like this same young girl, this same old lady, if only because no one has ever taken the time to tell me what my own story is. As much as I proclaim myself Canadian first, maintain my impatience with the official need for hyphenated identities, I will concede that I likely have a need to know what path led me to where I find myself now; perhaps I can even be indulged in mourning for abandoned geographies I never knew.

Sarah says

Ug. Let me start by saying that I really loved Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*. So when I was browsing recently for something short to read (in English, not exactly easy in my neighborhood), I came across a few of her other novels. This is the story of Irish immigrants who move to Canada during the famine. Haunting and lyrical! Sounds great! I'm game!

But once you add in the magical realism aspect of "away", I got lost. Not just lost, but annoyed. And because so much time is spent on the concept of away, the pacing is crap and the characterization is really hard to grasp. I don't get it, and maybe that makes me a lazy reader or not smart enough to make comparisons to Irish lore, but I can't continue. I am about 1/4 of the way into this and I am not going to read anymore. You can't make me finish this book!

On the plus side, the landowning brothers, Osbert and Granville Sedgwick are excellent and I would read a whole book about them.
