



# The Heather Blazing

*Colm Tóibín*

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## **The Heather Blazing** Colm Tóibín

The sea is slowly eating into the land and the hill with the old watchtower has completely disappeared. The nearest house has crumbled and fallen into the sea. It is Ireland in the late twentieth century. Eamon Redmond is a judge in the Irish High Court. Obsessed all his life by the letter and spirit of the law, he is just beginning to discover how painfully unconnected he is from other human beings. With effortless fluency, Colm Toibin reconstructs the history of Eamon's relationships - with his father, his first "girl, " his wife, and the children who barely know him. He gives us a family as minutely realized as any of John McGahern's, and he writes about Eamon's affection for the landscape of his childhood on the east coast of Ireland with such skill that the land itself becomes a character. The result is a novel that ensnares us with its emotional intensity and dazzles with its crystalline prose. In *The Heather Blazing*, Colm Toibin displays once again the gifts that illuminated *The South*, a book described by Don DeLillo as "a grand achievement, " and by John Banville as "a daring imaginative feat...a splendid first novel."

## **The Heather Blazing Details**

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Author : Colm Tóibín

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# From Reader Review The Heather Blazing for online ebook

## CynthiaS says

Not sure how I missed this when it appeared in 1992...lovely Irish book that runs like a clear stream, without being falsely amped on the Troubles. It's no small talent to be able to slow fictional time down to its honest reality: families in rooms, talking, lunching in gardens worrying about getting the rugs wet. Toibin captures the simultaneous intimacy and utterly unbridgeable distances that constitute a family. For teaching purposes, this novel would be great for showing students how much deliberate and methodical pattern must be put down in layers first, before you can bring a reader to his weeping knees in the final paragraph, which is simply a grandfather walking out into the surf with his baby grandson, then walking him back in when he frets, afraid. That paragraph on its own is mere description; at the end of this novel it raises you from the dead.

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## H.A. Leuschel says

This was one of those quietly powerful books where the main protagonist floats through life as if he was forever caught in a glass bowl looking out yet unable to be truly part of other people's deepest feelings and thoughts. He often hints on the fact that he'd like to engage, understand and be a part of his family's emotional bond yet falters at every step of the way ... until it is almost too late. Melancholic and oppressively sad at times but well worth a read nevertheless.

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## Chris says

If you are planning a trip to Dublin and western Ireland, pick up this book. While I found it a touch slow, the pace is deliberate and is an incredibly moving story. To think this was Toibin's second novel shows his genius was there from the start.

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## Rob Twinem says

An elderly judge Eamon Redmond lives with his wife Carmel and travels to the fair city of Dublin everyday to fulfill his high court role. A quiet, thoughtful, deeply intellectual man Eamon often reflects on his life in the present and moments of his childhood that helped shape and create the person he is today. His childhood was a time of order, daily chores, and routine but always under the auspices of the only binding force in the community; the catholic church. A church that demanded allegiance and in return for such devotion and faith man could be saved from the evils of the world, but "without God's help, we will all die in our sinful condition and remain separated from God forever". The truth of the situation was that the church offered few answers for a young man exploring his sexuality, trying to make sense of the often painful passage from boyhood to manhood. However politics and the allegiance to a particular party played a much more prominent role in the life of the citizens with its constant reminder of past struggles and romantic leaders most prominent of which was Eamon de Valera and the famous Easter rising of 1916 against British rule. As Eamon Redmond becomes immersed in the politics of the age he meets and falls in love with a young party

worker Carmel who is equally smitten by her admirer's oratory skills and his ambitions within the political arena.

The story is told in two parts a reflection, often romantic, view of childhood with its warmth and sadness at the passing of close relatives, and in contrast adulthood, responsibilities and complex decisions that constitutes the daily routine of a high court judge. To me *The Heather Blazing* celebrates the importance of family and how the youthful formative years impress and influence our decisions and mindset into adulthood. Colm Toibin is a great observer of daily routines and the Ireland he describes reminds me, as an Irishman, of my own childhood with simple family routines embedded forever in my mind....."They all settled around the fire, the women with glasses of sherry, the men with beer, the three boys with glasses of lemonade. Eamon watched as his father tipped his glass to the side and poured the beer in slowly, letting it slide softly down the edge of the glass"....The harsh beautiful untamed Irish landscape with wild unpredictable seas somehow compliments the simplistic yet deeply moving narrative of one of Ireland's finest authors.

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### **Barry Pierce says**

In his first novel set entirely in Enniscorthy, Colm Tóibín tells the tale of a high court judge, Eamon, living in late 20th century Ireland. I feel that this would be his hardest novel to get into if the reader isn't Irish or unless you have strangely intimate knowledge of 20th century Irish politics. With cameos from Lemass, de Valera, and Haughey, you can already tell that this novel is steeped in politics that many would find either dry or highly testing. However it is more than just a political novel, it is a portrait of a man trying to keep his life together. Like Katherine in *The South*, we strive for things to come together but then we remember that this is a Colm Tóibín novel and that *never* happens. Overall this is enjoyable but is more of a sign of things to come.

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

Let me start by asking, what is it about Irish authors and their beach houses? Often decaying, often illuminated on and off by a nearby lighthouse, they are almost characters in the novels. That's the case with this story by Toibin as well as his *Blackwater Lightship*. Beach houses figure prominently in Trevor's *Silence in the Garden* and in Lucy Gault. Then there's Banville's *The Sea*. And I happen to be reading *The Sea*, *The Sea* by Iris Murdoch – another Irish author and another beach house. It also makes me think of the beach house and lighthouse that prominently figure in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, although of course she's not an Irish writer.

So this is an early novel by Toibin, his second, 1992. A judge and law professor is approaching retirement. In alternating present and past chapters, we see his current life and his reflections on his coming of age. The beach house that he retreats to every summer with his wife is the same one he visits as a child and it's literally in danger of eroding into the sea, as a neighboring house does in the story.

The judge has just learned that his unmarried daughter is pregnant. That doesn't stop him from making a legal ruling that allows a catholic school to dismiss a girl who just delivered a baby (even though the baby's father can stay in the school). Needless to say, he has a distant relationship with his daughter and with a son. His wife has a stroke and his life changes.

(view spoiler)

As a geographer, I appreciate Toibin using a real landscape and real places in County Wexford in the southeastern-most part of Ireland. Tuskar Rock is a real lighthouse, Ballyconnigar, Curracloe Beach are along cliffs as featured in the story and they are subject to extreme erosion with occasional beachfront homes falling into the sea. Enniscorthy, where the main character grew up, also featured in his novel Brooklyn, is a real town where Toibin grew up.

Two passages I particularly liked:

"He had the air of a man sitting in a room he wasn't used to, wearing clothes that he normally wore only to Sunday Mass."

"He felt that he could be any age watching this scene, and experienced a sudden illusion that nothing in him had changes since he first saw these buildings."

Good writing, understated, like Trevor's, and a good story as we would expect from Toibin.

Photos from top: Curracloe Beach from panoramio.com

Tuskar Rock lighthouse from indigo.ie

Enniscorthy from wld.ir

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## Paul says

At Boolavogue as the sun was setting  
O'er the bright May meadows of Shelmalier,  
A rebel hand set the heather blazing  
and brought the neighbours from far and near.

Toibin's writing is beautiful and lyrical and the title comes from the first verse of a song as recorded above. It recalls the Irish rebellion of 1798 which was brutally put down by the British (as usual). The novel tells the story of Eamon Redmond an Irish High Court judge, alternating between past and present telling the story of his childhood and his later life. Redmond is a leading member of Fianna Fail and we also see the changing nature of that party with real history intruding as De Valera and Haughey play minor roles. The star of this novel is the Irish countryside; the land and the sea of the south-east coast, of Wexford and Limerick. Redmond comes across as a rather cold character and we are taken through a couple of judgments he makes early in the book which make the reader tend to dislike him. His family, especially his wife

Carmel, also find him distant and difficult to know.

We follow Redmond from his childhood and his relationship with his father, through courtship and starting out in law to legal eminence and widowhood. There is an epiphany at the end, but it is very late; too late for many of those who know him.

The troubles are in the background, but still a presence and there are some indications of Redmond's family involvements in the uprisings that led to independence. Later as a judge the troubles form a backdrop, but they are secondary to the tale.

Communication is a key theme; Redmond's inability to communicate on an emotional level, his father's struggles to communicate after a stroke and the embarrassment Eamon felt when he was in his father's class at school. The communication issues extend to his children as well. There are other juxtapositions as well. At the Redmond's holiday home the sea is eroding the land; as a judge his decisions relate to the rights of society as opposed to the rights of the individual, Death is also ever present and as a child Redmond describes the death of relatives and the rites and rituals of the Catholic Church (also ever present). Irish history permeates the novel; Redmond is a pillar of the Fianna Fail establishment, his father was a message carrier for the IRA.

Although simply and lyrically written; there is a thread of complexity within because Toibin is examining the republican ideology of the Irish state and the social reality of its population and the tensions with the Catholic Church. It is a critique of the way the Irish state has developed, written in 1992, which seems even more pertinent today. But it is a critique from a position of support with a strong sense of the immersion in history and landscape. It's really rather good. The only problem is that we spend all our time with Eamon Redmond and he isn't that likeable.

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## **Barbara says**

In a slow, quiet way Toibin tells us the story of Eamon Redmond. He expertly weaves together Eamon's childhood with his life as a judge, husband, father, and grandfather. It is the story of how our history shapes us and influences who we become. Our imperfections, relationships, aspirations are all related to our past. Eamon is a flawed man, but a man of many good qualities, too.

The book is equally about the beauty of the Irish seascape; its permanence and its impermanence. The cottage at Cush on the Wexford coast is so like what he knew as a child. The beloved sea; the same all these years but now eroding the cliff near his cottage. What stays the same? Everything and nothing.

There are many other themes in this lovely book. It is not a book that screams at you, but one that whispers, and will continue to call you back.

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## **Teresa says**

### **3.5**

Now that I've read all of Toibin's novels to date, I can see how this one, his second, led to his later works, especially *The Blackwater Lightship*, which I loved. That's also what I said of his first novel, *The South* and his third, *The Story of the Night*; but I think it's even more true here, as I also found echoes that resonate in his later short-story collections.

There are not only themes he will go on to more fully develop later, but his way of getting into a character through seemingly simple sentences about what the character is/was doing and where he is/was living is also being developed here. His handling of time, chapters that mostly alternate between the present-day life of his main character and the character's past, as a child and a young man, already seems masterful. The ending is wonderful.

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## Richard Springer says

This is a book about the silences that occur between people and the difficulties of really knowing someone, even a spouse, when that person is very reticent to talk about their inner feelings and life-changing experiences. I don't know if growing up in an Irish Catholic family, as I did, helped in my appreciation of this book, but it certainly resonated for me. The main character, a judge, is dealing with memories about his relationship with his father, his father's debilitating stroke, the relationship with his wife and her stroke, and his two grown children and distance from them, especially involving the cases he rules on as a judge. It reads both like a first novel in describing the main character growing up so unsure of himself, without any of the indulgences of a first novel, and also as the work of an older writer dealing with the themes of loneliness and the finality of death. There are wonderful passages where relatives of the judge recall the early days of the Irish uprisings. The book has a modest and simple plan that is executed with precision.

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## Laysee says

**The Heather Blazing** is a superlatively quiet novel set in the Wexford Coast, Ireland, about the resonance of childhood memories and losses that continue to reverberate through adult life.

The key character is Éamon Redmond, a revered judge who retreats each summer at the end of the law term to a cliff-side house in Cush with his wife (Carmel). Cush is where Éamon and his single-parent dad spent their summer every year when Éamon was a boy. There is a soothing calm that comes from just reading Tóibín's description of the landscape. I did like trailing Éamon on his solitary walks along the coastline, visiting crumbling houses, wading out to the sea, and having the sky and ocean all to himself. What Éamon most remembers about this rainy small town is *'watching the sky over the sea, searching for a sign that it would brighten up, sitting there in the long afternoons.'* The natural coastal landscape, as some reviewers have observed, is a character study all of its own.

The chapters alternate between Éamon's present summer retreats and his sad childhood past. In the public eye, Éamon is a prominent judge with an illustrious career. In private, he is guarded, unnaturally reserved, and distant. The privileged reader with knowledge of Éamon's early years understands why but not his family, and this accentuates his loneliness.

(view spoiler) Tóibín created a character who grew up extremely self-controlled and self-sufficient but very much alone. In years to come, Éamon the adult is unable to communicate with his wife whom he dearly loves and his children. More than once, Carmel confronts Éamon about his emotional distance and confesses she hardly knows him. And yet, I have no heart to be angry with Éamon or judge him for his aloofness. At the close of the novel, I was happy to see him making effort to play with his rather exasperating grandson.

Another aspect I found interesting is Tóibín's exploration of the tension between statutes of the law and

standards of morality in Éamon's legal profession. This arose from a noteworthy case involving an unmarried woman who was removed from her teaching position in a religious school for being pregnant out of wedlock and living with a married man, the father of her child. Should she be restored to her job and be compensated? What is there beyond the law? Ironically, Éamon's daughter is pregnant and unmarried. Éamon recognizes there are no legal issues, only moral ones: *'..... charity, mercy, forgiveness. These words had no legal status, they belonged firmly to the language of Christianity but they had a greater bearing on the case than any set of legal terms.'* He is conscious of a deep unease because he feels ill equipped as a moral arbiter. How tough the role of a judge!

**The Heather Blazing** is Tóibín's second novel written in 1992. Its overwhelming quiet quality led me to read up a bit on Tóibín's life beyond the Afterword which provided some background to this novel. It came as no surprise to me that **The Heather Blazing** drew largely on Tóibín's own life and that of his father. Tóibín said, *I blurred what had happened to my father in his life with memories of my own. Éamon Redmond was both of us in some ways, and neither of us in others. But the atmosphere of the town and the coast belonged to a life I knew as much as the protagonist of the novel did.'*

According to Wikipedia, *'Tóibín has said his writing comes out of silence. He does not favor story and does not view himself as storyteller.'* This is most evident in **The Heather Blazing**. There is no plot. The reader who seeks a story will be disappointed and frustrated. Yet, there is beauty that issues from Tóibín's silence as well as from his measured and deceptively simple prose.

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## Leah says

### Weighed in the balances...

On the last day of the legal term, High Court judge Eamon Redmond will deliver a judgement and then head off for the summer to Cush on the coast of County Wexford, where he has spent all his summers since childhood. Outwardly he is a successful man, well respected in the country, an advisor to the government, and someone who takes the responsibility of his position seriously. But he is also reserved, his life ruled by order, and somewhat remote even from his closest family. As the summer progresses, he finds events in the present force him to revisit and re-assess his past.

Like so many of Tóibín's books, this is almost entirely a character study with very little in the way of plot. Generally speaking, that doesn't work for me, but Tóibín's deceptively plain prose and in-depth understanding of the people and communities he's writing about exert an almost hypnotic effect on me, drawing me into the lives of the people he offers up for inspection – characters so entirely real and well-drawn that it becomes hard after a time to think of them as in any way fictional. This effect is magnified by his siting of so many of his novels in and around the town of Enniscorthy, where Tóibín himself grew up – a place whose culture and society I have gradually come to feel I understand almost as intimately as my own hometown.

History plays a major role in this book, both personal and political. An only child, Eamon's mother died in childbirth leaving him to be brought up by his father and extended family. His grandfather was involved in the 1916 Easter Rising and his father too played a part, albeit small, in the troubled history of the country. Through them, Eamon is introduced early to the politics of Fianna Fail, and the opportunity in his late teens to make a speech in front of the revered leader of the uprising, Éamon de Valera, gains him the support that sets him on the path to his present position. Yet now decades later, he is a pillar of the Establishment,



delivering judgements on Nationalist terrorists.

The same dichotomy exists in his personal life. The judgement he is about to give is on a schoolgirl, an unmarried mother, who wishes to go back to school. The Catholic school has expelled her on the grounds that her return would send a dangerous moral message to their other pupils. His musings show his doubts over the religious aspects built into the Constitution, and in his own ability to decide right and wrong. He considers using his judgement to redefine the family as it was understood when the Constitution was written, but in the end, through a kind of cowardice, he decides in favour of the school. It is a feature of his remoteness that he gives no consideration to the fact that his own daughter is pregnant and unmarried when reaching his decision – this is a man whose work and family are kept in strictly separate compartments.

Tóibín's prose is always understated, relying on precision and clarity rather than poetic flourishes for its effect. Despite this, there is a deep emotionalism in his work, an utter truthfulness that can be, in its quietness, as devastating as any great overblown work of drama. In a book full of parallels, Eamon's story is headed and tailed by two commonplace tragedies – his father's stroke while Eamon was still at school, and his wife's stroke and subsequent death in the present day. His early life is beautifully observed, with scenes such as the family gathering at Christmas showing all the depth of family and community in small town Ireland. And his courtship of Carmel, his future wife, is no Romeo and Juliet affair – it's a truthful account of two young people coming together who share many of the same views on life and are able to compromise on the rest.

It is in understanding Eamon's childhood and early years that we come to understand the adult man, and in a sense his life and family history mirrors that of Ireland too – the tumultuous century of rebellions and civil strife drawing towards a quieter ending as Tóibín was writing in the early '90s; the past not forgotten, the future not yet certain, the direction in the hands of those in power, many of whom would have to make major shifts in their political stance to achieve a hope of settled peace. Tóibín is never overtly political in his writing, but his deep insight into this society of Enniscorthy, built up layer on layer with each book he sets there, provides a microcosm for us to see the slow process of change taking place, the small shifts in attitude that gradually make the big political adjustments possible.

In truth, Eamon's story didn't resonate with me quite as deeply as Tóibín's women, but I suspect that's to do with my own gender rather than the book. Sometimes my lack of knowledge of Irish history left me feeling I wasn't getting the full nuance of parts of the story. But it is another wonderful character study, moving and insightful, that adds a further dimension to Tóibín's portrayal of this community. Coincidentally, I followed immediately on my reading of this book with Joyce's *Dubliners*, and began to feel that, although Tóibín is working on small-town life and in full-length novels, in some ways his books have the same effect as Joyce's stories – each one concentrating on a single aspect, but together building to give a complete and profound picture of a complexly intertwined society.

[www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com](http://www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com)

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## Philip says

The Heather Blazing by Colm Toibin is a deeply emotional, deeply moving book. It's the story of Eamon Redmond, a complex man, grown on tender roots, influential friends, a keen intellect and a tangible distance between himself and those whom he loves.

The book is set in three parts, each of which dips in and out of time. We are with Eamon as a child in the small Wexford seaside villages he forever regards as home. Coastal erosion changes them over time and provides, in itself, a metaphor of aging, both of the individual and the community. Eamon's schoolteacher father is a significant figure, both locally as a renowned teacher, and nationally as a result of what he accomplished in his youth in the furtherance of Irish independence and political development. Eamon's mother died when he was young, an act for which, perhaps, he could never forgive her.

We also see Eamon as an adolescent, hormones abuzz, becoming aware of adulthood, a physical, intellectual and, for him, a political transformation. But it is also a time when his father's illness complicates his life. Throughout, we are never sure whether Eamon's perception of such difficulty remains primarily selfish, driven by self-interest. If we are honest, none of us knows how that equation works out.

We are with Eamon when he meets Carmel, his future and only wife. They share a political commitment and a life together. And they have two children. Naimh becomes pregnant at a crucial time. Donal is successful in his own way, but perhaps inherited his father's distance in relationships.

And then there's another time and another Eamon, the professional, the legal Eamon. At first he practices law, but later, at a relatively early age, he accepts a politically-driven appointment to the judiciary. He has powerful sponsors, but also toys a little with the idea that he is being kicked upstairs. The moment, however, is his, no matter how dubious the source of the patronage. And then there are the cases that he has to judge, cases that impact in their own way upon the substance of his own life, his own family, whatever that might be, however the entity might be defined. It remains a substance that is perceived mainly by others, it seems, as he enacts his training and judges other people's experience according to rules he has dutifully learned so that he might apply them dispassionately.

So Colm Toibin mixes these time frames and circumstances in each of the book's three sections. We are also presented with some intellectual arguments arising from the substance of the judge's daily routine, issues with which he must grapple in his assessment of competing interests. Eventually he must address the dichotomy of terrorism versus political action, a definition that, years ago, might have left his own father on this side or that, if ever he had been identified.

Eamon's friends, in hindsight, might not have been the most worthy or honest sponsors, and so, again only with hindsight, we might question his judgment. But the pursuance of interests, like life, itself, is a process, and a process that *The Heather Blazing* describes in its richness and illusory permanence. As the Wexford coast erodes, Eamon ages, changes, succeeds, fails, loves and loves again, all in his own way. He engages us, and yet we, like the trusting, thoughtful Carmel, his wife, we never really know him, and we never really understand why we feel that way. If only he knew himself. A quite beautiful book. Life goes on.

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## **Rick says**

Toibin is among our most deft and compassionate of writers but also among our most revealing. He writes with that observant, precise style that falls between the worlds of a documentary photographer and imagist poet. The small bits matter. What we almost say. What we prefer in moments both ordinary and significant. What soothes us and what we need escape from. *The Heather Blazing* is Toibin's second novel. It's set in

contemporary Ireland with a judge as its primary protagonist but it is a personal, not a political, drama, though there are political shadows everywhere.

Eamon Redmond is married with two adult children. He lives a life of rigorous self-discipline and, in likely avoidance of the passionate moods of his country and emotional obligations of his family, he is devoted to the narrow reading of law, which tends to favor the status quo, and to a material sense of familial duty, which leaves him detached but with a satisfaction in fulfilling his responsibilities. His adult daughter is a single mom. His son's girlfriend is at odds (as his Eamon's son and daughter) with a recent court ruling. His wife tries her best to keep a peace. "He left the door open and the light on and sat reading in the living room. The baby was asleep and Niamh had gone to bed. He could see Carmel's shape in the bed through the open door. She seemed to be asleep. He went in and lay beside her, reading with his clothes on. He did not want to sleep but soon he found that he was drowsy so he got into his pyjamas and turned off the light. Carmel did not stir as he got under the blankets and he was careful not to disturb her." Flashbacks develop Eamon's back story and tragedy upsets all the delicate balances, included calculated avoidance, that were in play.

Toibin doesn't write epic novels. They are no more dramatic or historic than the subject of a Vermeer painting, but just as powerful and significant in their insight. They are also just as profoundly moving and beautiful.

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## **Shovelmonkey1 says**

The Heather Blazing takes its title from a line in a traditional Irish folk song. But within the book there is very little blazing and if anything the fires are dying out. This is a book stuffed with metaphors. Filled up like a pinata, one sharp tap and it would burst and you'd be left with metaphor all over your face.

Set predominantly in the seaside village of Cush, Co. Limerick, which is slowly being eroded away into the sea. Every wave and every storm see another piece of land washed into the water and carried away forever. Sometimes it is a grain of sand that is taken and sometimes it is a whole chunk of land. Houses are eaten, tumbling from the cliff to the beach below. The sea has a gaping maw and an insatiable hunger. It also has a ceaseless rhythm that cannot be stopped.

In tandem with this, the life of Judge Eamon Redmond is also being eroded a piece at time. From his holiday home in Cush and his chambers in Dublin he thinks back upon his life; the changes life has wrought on him and the changes he himself has made. His mother, father and uncle are gone. His children drift steadily away from him and in court he is asked to make moral as well as legal judgements which bring home the steady erosion of the Catholic moral values and the hold that the church once held upon society. Life is washing over him and each time it recedes it takes little pieces away.

So far so metaphorical indeed. But not just metaphorical, quite lyrical too. Thematically this book will probably resonate with many who have loved and lost, or been loved and failed to love adequately in return. Elements of this reminded me of *Any Human Heart* by William Boyd. The idea of a life retrospective is there as are themes of regret, isolation and loneliness. Yes, it's all a little depressing but life can be a little depressing and it's worth a read.

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