

Mary Costello
ACADEMY STREET
179pp. Canongate. £12.99.
978 1 78211 418 5

"I could fit my whole life on a page", says an incidental character some two-thirds of the way through Mary Costello's excellent first novel. He is an elderly patient in a hospital where Tess Lohan is working as a nurse. He continues:

"I could write it all down on a single page." He turned and looked into her eyes. "And I am astonished that it is over and I am here, at the end."

Tess's life could be written just as briefly: born in Ireland; mother dies; distant father; emigrates to New York to work as a nurse; finds, and immediately loses, love; copes with single parenthood; the inexorable erosion and winnowing away by death and time of family and friends. Yet Costello forces the issue. She shows us, if not Tess herself, that a life of quiet desperation can be as worthy of commemoration as one of tragedy and high passion.

There is nothing immediately remarkable about the novel. It has none of the bright chatter of Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009), which is set in the same period and explores the same emigrant experience, yet this is entirely appropriate to the character of Tess, who is, if not shy, then certainly reserved and solitary. When as a child she undergoes a period of muteness associated with the loss of her mother, the texture of the novel changes hardly at all.

With few dramatic events to structure the book around, Costello orchestrates her narrative through a procession of isolated, but closely observed moments. "It is evening and the window is open a little" is the opening line, and that bringing together and measuring out of the general and incidental is characteristic. Costello is not showy in her prose, but she is wonderfully in control of it.

The marvel of the book is that, in the space of 180 pages it takes you through almost the entirety of a life, and it does so while deliberately forgoing the upsets and reversals you would expect from, say, the Dickensian approach. There are the usual intrusions of history – Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination, 9/11 – but these drift harmlessly by.

Nor would it be fair to suggest that Tess is bland or dull. There are moments of illumination in her life, such as her joy at the birth of her son, or a near-tumble into unexpected sensuality with her neighbour and only friend, Willa, and the language rises to meet them, but these are largely private, or privately felt, as our own "epiphanies" tend to be. Tess is not necessarily the kind of character to stay with the reader long after the book is closed, but during the reading of it she is an extraordinary companion.

JONATHAN GIBBS

Susan Hill
PRINTER'S DEVIL COURT
128pp. Profile. £9.99.
978 1 78125 365 6

Printer's Devil Court continues Susan Hill's series of good old-fashioned chillers, although it is neither as good as its immediate predecessor, *Dolly* (2014), nor as old-fashioned as it would perhaps like to pretend. Carefully framed as a document found among a doctor's papers, it concerns some nocturnal experiments with life and death at a London hospital, the title

being the address of the medical students who have been so bold as to meddle in such matters. But how many live at the eponymous address? "Two other doctors lived at number two, Printer's Devil Court", the narrator states, before going on immediately to name three. He seems to be further confused when he refers to "temperamental plumbing", which has more of an early twenty-first- than twentieth-century ring to it, and later to seeing somebody "wondering anxiously among the graves", which is ambiguous at best.

Such peculiarities (and another two are the recommended retail price of £9.99 for a book of just over 100 pages, and the illustrations seemingly lifted, without acknowledgement, from an out-of-copyright source) mar what is at heart a well-conceived little tale that delivers precisely what an old-fashioned ghost story should. "It was a murky November evening with a fog off the river and a fuzzy halo round every street lamp" is a reassuring kind of sentence with which to set a traditional scene, as the sometimes befuddled narrator, Dr Hugh Meredith, takes us into the depths of the hospital at night. It is moodily cold and dark down there; behind an "unmarked double-door", his fellow students go about their dubious business, following a quick theological discussion of the possibility of raising the dead and a vision of London that does not ignore the worst side of city life during a hard winter: "vagrants and beggars died on the streets in shameful numbers and we were all working round the clock". For the better-off, doctors included, of course, life goes on; but Susan Hill leaves no room for doubt that even those in white coats may pay a terrible price for playing god.

MICHAEL CAINES

Robert Olen Butler
THE HOT COUNTRY
352pp. No Exit Press. Paperback, £8.99.
978 1 84344 563 0

The Hot Country is the first historical thriller from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler. Literary authors have attempted the genre before, with varying degrees of success, but from the first page of this tightly plotted, singularly voiced novel, you sense that Butler has a genuine feel, and perhaps even love, for this propulsive kind of story.

Christopher Marlowe "Kit" Cobb is a war correspondent in Vera Cruz, in 1914. Cobb is young and determined to get the story of a lifetime out of the revolutionary chaos that is Mexico. He is passionate and idealistic; a believer in the freedom of the press. Before long he has crossed paths with a beautiful sniper and a mysterious German, both of whom have business with the revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.

Cobb, whose first two names were chosen by his mother in reference to her favourite playwright, begins with an almost innocent kind of enthusiasm that subtly darkens and becomes more cynical as events overtake him. Butler occasionally echoes Raymond Chandler in his casual metaphors and playful sense of humour. He says of the Mexican sniper that her "face stayed as blank as a tortilla" and when describing a man asking Cobb a question, he writes that "He'd drawn his craggy moon of a face out of his collar and had it angled a little like he'd just sprung a horsewhip of a question on a dirty politician". Later on, a hint of Hemingway sneaks

into the action as well.

Pace is important in this kind of novel, and Butler's tale is the rare example that doesn't slow down to explain the geopolitical backdrop to the reader. The history and research are readily apparent, but the cinematic immediacy that permeates the book allows readers to fill in the gaps for themselves. The sense of period is convincing, and the gathering clouds of the First World War linger at the fringes of the book. *The Hot Country* is filled with political intrigue, mortal danger and high adventure. Robert Olen Butler's first foray into the genre is a genuine and exhilarating success.

RUSSELL D. MCLEAN

Jonathan Taylor
KONTAKTE AND OTHER STORIES
112pp. Roman Books. Paperback, £12.99.
978 93 80905 64 8

How closely akin are music and literature? How entwined are their methods and preoccupations, how entangled their different forms of beauty? Can one shed light on the other? Jonathan Taylor's collection of short stories represents a sustained and insightful engagement with these questions.

In some of the tales, Taylor mines musicality for structural principles – sentences repeated and amplified, a duet-like exchange of correspondence, the brevity of a bagatelle. More often, music serves as the springboard for wider reflections and explorations, often wreathed in surreal, almost otherworldly harmonies. In the brief, eponymous "Kontakte", for example, a repeating cassette tape of Stockhausen parses the cold anatomy of a stultified existence, leavened only by an uncertainty as to whether a certain sound is part of the composition or a dog barking upstairs.

The book is often fretful in tone, and Taylor's staves form a sombre litany, incorporating the cruelty of fathers, the death of wives, the losses of old age, ineluctable guilt, and betrayals both grand and petty. The codas, too, are grave: death, suicide, alcoholism, forgetfulness. One of the more haunting narratives, "Je Ne Regrette Rien", charts the descent into dementia of Jack, the fervent admirer of a (very) local Edith Piaf impersonator – a decline all the more poignant because of the shallowness of the slope. Another recurring theme is the tragedy of totalitarianism, whether played out in Stalinist Russia, a classical record shop, or an amateur orchestra in Stoke-on-Trent. In the final story, "Synaesthetic Schmidt", a high C sharp and the colour red jointly invoke the spectres of Franz Lehár and Richard Strauss amid the Holocaust.

There are occasional false notes. "O Terra, Addio" treads familiar adulterous ground while asking us to believe that a renowned Egyptologist has never heard of *Aida*. And some of the repeated motifs – exposed stocking-tops, clacking high heels – are a little obvious. Yet these are minor irritations when set beside Taylor's often striking images and turns of phrase – a loveless father's cathedralled fingers conveying the redeeming power of music, a Russian composer "mugged, defrauded, pick-pocketed, fleeced of notes" by *Pravda* and the Politburo, a dusk as cold and dark as shellac. Like a Lisztian paraphrase, Taylor's writing sits for the most part at an angle to the world, unravelling and purposively misquoting the familiar and conventional in the service of wider aesthetic goals. Music, from this view, may

well be beautiful, enthralling, even redemptive; but it is far from safe, far from unthreatening, far from "relaxing". Music, Taylor reminds us, is often close to madness; and why not literature, too?

CONOR FARRINGTON

Belén Gopegui
EL COMITÉ DE LA NOCHE
262pp. Literatura Random House. €17.95.
978 84 397 2909 9

Blame it on *Twilight*. Vampire stories have lately become so sanitized that their original undercurrents – corruption, exploitation, the destruction of the young and helpless – now seem as invisible as Count Dracula in a mirror. In Belén Gopegui's latest novel, which bears the Gothicky title *El comité de la noche* (The Night Committee), the reverse is true: you will not find a single fantastic creature, but all the symbolic elements that used to make vampires so disturbing are very much in evidence. To begin with, there are large amounts of blood, even if it comes in hermetically sealed bags. The novel is partly a response to reports in the Spanish press in 2012 that a pharmaceutical company was seeking official permission to offer unemployed people €70 a week for plasma donations – an opportunistic supplement to their meagre benefits. Gopegui was not slow to draw a parallel between capitalism and vampirism, and later imagined a story in which supranational interests prey on the very people the state should protect.

In a brief first section, we hear the story of Álex, a young Spanish doctor who, having recently lost her job, feels drawn to an anti-capitalist organization that fights the law using questionable tactics. Although it sits a little awkwardly in the book, Álex's embittered monologue serves as an introduction to the second section, where we see more of the organization at work. The main character here is Carla, a Spanish biologist who is torn between professional demands, her idea of morality and her personal sympathies. Carla works for a company that develops and commercializes blood derivatives and is pushing for the privatization of the donation system. When her superiors ask her to fake some tests in order to destabilize the market and create demand, she refuses point-blank; but the situation changes when, in exchange for her co-operation, a child she deeply cares about, and who suffers from liver failure, is offered the chance to move up the transplant list. Like Carla, the narrative works tirelessly at the implications of the dilemma.

The novel sounds didactic, but what sets Gopegui apart is her commitment to exploring ways in which fiction can refresh social debate. Álex's story comes out as a *cri de coeur* typed on her laptop and published online; and Carla tells hers to a ghostwriter down on his luck, with whom she develops a tense relationship. Ideas of confession, even of communion, are in play here, but for a reader it also means that the plot works on several levels, demanding one's active attention. Unfortunately, the prose does not always repay that attention, often bending to the demands of information, especially in the dialogues. But the scenes are well observed; particularly Carla's interactions with her ersatz confessor. While the plot may play with morally loaded dice from the start, Gopegui has come up with some truly frightening villains.

MARTIN SCHIFINO