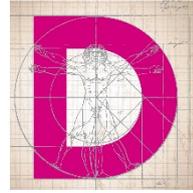


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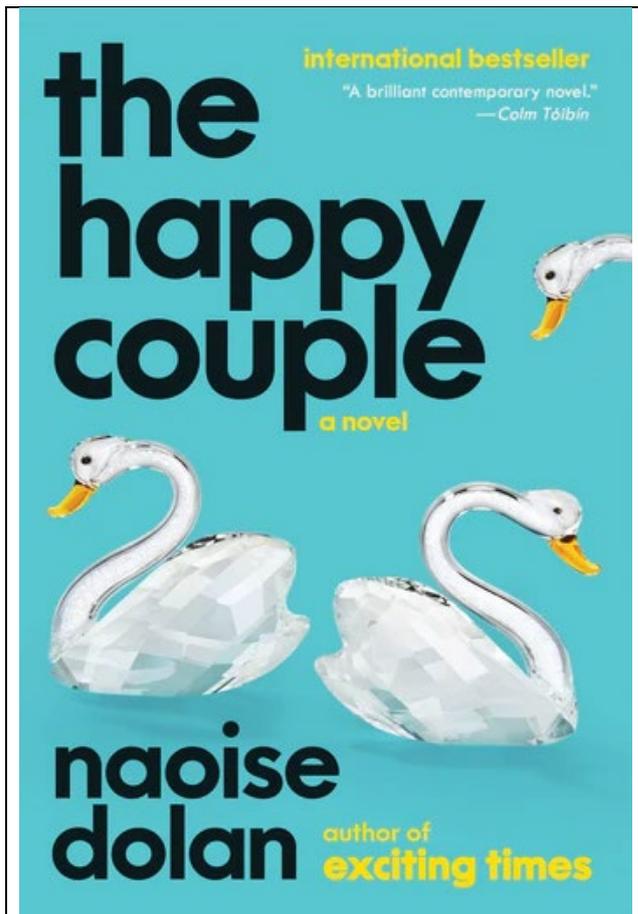
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BOOK REVIEW: *THE HAPPY COUPLE*
RESEÑA DE LIBRO: *THE HAPPY COUPLE*

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The Happy Couple is Naoise Dolan's second novel, following her success with *Exciting Times*—which was widely translated and shortlisted for Irish and British prizes alike. Dolan is an Irish writer, born in Dublin in 1992; she holds an English Degree from Trinity College and a master's degree in Victorian literature from Oxford University. Her work has been recognized for its literary value both by the press and reviewers. Aspects of her personal life, such as being a queer woman who has taught English internationally, translate to her novels—more directly in her debut novel but still present in *The Happy Couple*. The latter was published in 2023 by Harper Collins, and so far has been translated into Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Romanian, and Portuguese. Even though the novel revolves around an engaged couple and their impending marriage, it is not a love story. Described by the press as a social novel, or even as a modern “comedy of manners” (Feeny, 2023), *The Happy Couple* is concerned with social issues. It reflects on the intricacies of contemporary relationships and identities in a world where binaries have become less defined in many aspects including sexuality, gender, and national identity.

The protagonists of the novel are Celine and Luke, a couple in their late twenties who resolve that after moving in together and adopting a cat, marriage is the next natural step even though neither of them is too enthusiastic about this idea. The initial scene describes the conversation in which they make this decision in a rather cold and pragmatic tone. Then, the narrative follows them in the span of a year, covering all the wedding festivities—from the engagement party to the wedding day. Most of the action develops at parties, providing ideal scenarios to introduce the rest of the eccentric cast. The secondary characters are all interconnected and influence the couple's life: Maria is Celine's judgmental but passionate ex-girlfriend; Archie is Luke's best friend and best man but also the only other person with whom he has had a meaningful romantic relationship prior to Celine; Phoebe is Celine's sister, who hates Luke and everything he represents; and lastly, Vivian is a friend of Luke and Archie who mostly acts an observer—she describes the rest of the world as ants she watches for entertainment. The narration takes turns to explore each of the characters' perspectives, except for Maria's as she mainly acts as a catalyst and as one of the many unresolved questions in the couple's lives.

Even though all the characters mentioned above are queer, heteronormativity is an ever-present weight in the novel that constantly exerts its pressure in their lives. The protagonist's decision to marry a man with a history of infidelity and dishonesty is questionable not only for the characters but for the reader. Celine is an accomplished piano player—though she makes her living mainly by imparting lessons—whose biggest joy in life is her profession. Her methodical and analytical mind is usually occupied by dissecting social interactions, which do not come naturally to her. She is aware of her peculiarities, and often struggles to comply with social expectations; however, she also tends to take the path of least resistance in uncomfortable situations—from accepting compliments to getting married to a man. To the big question of why is this couple going through the wedding at all, Luke offers an answer: “heteronormativity is a near-ubiquitous form of mania” (Dolan, 2023, p. 147).

Issues of feminism and masculinity are also introduced through Celine and Luke's relationship. Readers spend most of the novel forming assumptions about their dynamic

based on Celine's perspective, but by the fourth part, when Luke becomes the narrative focalizer, it is revealed that his perspective differs massively from hers. He theorizes that their relationship follows the all-too-common trope of the genius who follows a passion and exploits their potential (a role historically exclusive to men) while "some woman feels responsible for him" (Dolan, 2023, p. 151). Luke believes he fulfills the latter role by doing most of the household labor while also having an office job, enabling Celine to pursue her passion. In this way, Luke questions notions of power imbalance and gender in heterosexual relationships, even making bold statements like "patriarchy degrades men far more than it ever could women. It hurts and degrades both, but women get more hurt and men get more degraded" (Dolan, 2023, p. 148). While contestable, his reasoning reveals feelings of resentment, anger, and unfulfillment—he feels objectified by Celine and believes she considers him "a prop" (Dolan, 2023, p. 142) or "an accessory" (Dolan, 2023, p. 229). Other characters also perceive this power imbalance. Maria, for example, calls him a "good enough trophy husband" (Dolan, 2023, p. 177) and theorizes that Celine wants to marry him to gain social status and respect. Luke's perspective, though cynical and at times contradictory, can challenge readers' preconceptions about male-female dynamics in contemporary relationships.

Overall, the relationship between the two protagonists, and their decision to get married in the first place, invites readers to reflect upon marriage as an institution, and whether it retains any meaning in a post-modern world. The novel depicts marriage as a social event staged not for the couple but for an audience of strangers—long-lost relatives and distant acquaintances. The performative nature of the event is further demonstrated by the wedding festivities taking place in London, rather than Dublin, where the couple lives, to satisfy Celine's aunt.

Beyond issues of gender and sexuality, the novel explores themes of national identity and diaspora. While Dolan's previous novel, *Exciting Times*, explicitly engages with transnational issues through its premise of an Irish teacher of English living in China surrounded by other international characters, *The Happy Couple* continues to explore these themes while also making a return to the local. Irish identity and the Irish diaspora are concepts explored through every character in the novel. For instance, Luke's friend group of former Oxford students consists exclusively of people of Irish heritage. Ironically, Vivian, who is the only member who has actually lived in Ireland, is also the only one who has no Irish ancestry as her family migrated from Nigeria and later moved to London. Meanwhile, the three men in the group all have distant connections to Ireland through relatives who migrated to the United States, Britain, or a former Commonwealth country. This display of characters who identify to some degree with the Irish diaspora raises the question of what it means to be Irish in a globalized world.

In contrast with Luke's friend group's diasporic background, Celine's family is mostly from Ireland; however, they are affected by the postcolonial reality of the country as well. Phoebe's attempt at speaking Irish to exclude Luke is a clear example of this: her limited knowledge of the language results in nonsense sentences. Celine herself, though she reflects on her upbringing as Irish Catholic, is a cosmopolitan character who has travelled all around Europe for work. The novel also addresses the question of religion and its effects on Irish culture. For example, Celine's mother, Brigid, "[has] lived in South

Dublin too long, and [has] assimilated Protestant penny-pinching” (Dolan, 2023, 210) but her sister-in-law, Maggy who lives in London, has kept her Irish Catholic manners. This comedic observation reflects religious and cultural differences within regions of Ireland. The protagonist’s uncle, Grellan, though also an Irish immigrant in London, is the character who mostly represents a more traditional model of Irishness. This is communicated particularly through his use of language, which is richer in Irish-specific vocabulary and expressions, and his manners, which Luke describes as those of an “Irish dad” (Dolan, 2023, p. 187).

Ultimately, *The Happy Couple* is a novel that explores the hybrid nature of identity, gender, and sexuality in the 21st century, depicting how the once-rigid borders of modern dichotomies have become increasingly blurred. Through situating its complex cast of characters in the familiar context of an impending marriage, the novel allows for exploration of hybrid sexual and national identities, inviting analysis from a wide range of critical perspectives.

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