

Teen romance as fairy tale? We have a winner!

A review by Andy Ross

The Changeling by Helen Falconer. Corgi, 488 pages

An Irish novel for young adults about fairies may seem an unpromising item for readers outside the charmed circle of Irish teenage girls. But Helen Falconer gives it enough power to work its magic on a wider class of readers, and she surely nurses the hope of emulating in her own modest way the success that J. K. Rowling achieved with her Harry Potter books. As a novelist accustomed to high praise for her prose, Ms Falconer is no doubt eager to enjoy a royalty jackpot commensurate with the exceptional quality of her talent.

The story starts with enough modern realism about schoolgirl crushes and teen texting to lull its target readers into a relation of trust. Then, with accelerating tempo, the magic kicks in and realism goes out the window in an escalating rush of supernatural fantasy. Once the tale has taken off, the action lets rip in fine style, with enough dash to propel this reader at least through a fairly long saga in one extended sitting. That, by the way, is a big achievement. Most of the few novels that this impatient philosopher reads at all leave him cold. Those consumed in one sitting are rare indeed. But modern teens unused to reading big books will need this narrative drive, and a novel that lacked it would fail at the gate.

With its artful blend of young love and folk wisdom, *The Changeling* strikes one as eminently fit for purpose. It weaves its spell both effectively and with a certain bravura, quite unashamed by its vivid evocations of the humble pleasures of daily life in a rural Ireland of little villages beside a rocky Atlantic shoreline. The grit and sensuality of social intercourse at a level most modern urbanites associate more with Thomas Hardy tales or with Poldark than with mobile phones and pinup pop stars form a fitting backdrop to a tale where realism is suspended in an indulgent reanimation of ancient Gaelic folklore. Add a swooning girl and a handsome hero and you can hear the happy chimes.

Fastidious readers might balk at an uncritical resurrection of traditional myth and superstition. We might even accuse the author of seeking to cash in on a load of old tripe, except that her love for the stuff is too manifest and our duty of respect for its ethnic authenticity too sobering. Any modern teenage girl will understand that fairies and goblins and so on are fantasy, and indulge them anyway as an affirmation of Celtic identity in the multicultural marketplace.

One obstacle to world readers is that the Gaelic names and terminology will challenge them. Most of them will find even the pronunciation of the old words too much to handle. So some parents who might have liked to read out the story to their kids will be frustrated, or at least forced to do a spot of homework in advance. On the plus side, even educated readers will learn a few new words.

Much of the Celtic myth on show in the book, it must be said, looks pitifully homespun and threadbare. In an era where Superman and Salman Rushdie have raised the bar for collective myth and symbolic supernaturalism to new heights, a celebration of the metaphysics of sprites and demons can look naive or disingenuous, as if any modern exhibition of such symptoms of psychic impoverishment should be seen with clinical cool or even as satire. But the truth deserves to be acknowledged. Most traditional belief systems in premodern times were as pitiful as the Celtic myths, and it does a modern author credit to accept and even celebrate those roots without condescension.

As an accomplished modern author, Helen Falconer is mature and cosmopolitan enough to remain untroubled by charges of childishness or cynicism. And Irish culture has a treasured place in a world community that celebrates a pantheon of Irish artists including names as big as James Joyce, not to mention an American scene that puts Irish Americans into the White House with remarkable frequency. If ever a little rural country punched above its weight, Ireland takes the cake. So no native of the Emerald Isle need be ashamed of ancestors who believed in fairies. Not least for these reasons, this thoroughbred hybrid of teen romance and fairy tale will be a winner.