Sex, death and words

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Julie Maxwell

THESE ARE OUR CHILDREN
304pp. Quercus. £16.99.
978 1 78087 712 9

In 2010, John Sutherland and Stephen Fender compiled an almanac called *Love, Sex, Death and Words*. The title's clear and uncontroversial implication is that love, sex and death are the literary big shots. Birth rarely gets much airtime – except as the by-product of love and sex. In the real world, too, it can be easy to forget that "all this juice and all this joy" is driven by biological imperative. Thus the heroine of Julie Maxwell's excellent novel is plausibly surprised, on page one, by a planned pregnancy: "After so many years of protected sex, it was faintly astonishing to discover that the method actually worked".

When "the method" is allowed to work, there will be, some months later, a lot more juice and a good deal of pain, usually accompanied by a beloved baby. (Usually, but not always: it is estimated that one in seven known pregnancies ends in miscarriage.) Few writers venture into the delivery suite itself, generally preferring to pace outside, like Levin during Kitty's long labour in *Anna Karenina*. *These Are Our Children* opens the door on a whole ward full of pre- and neonatal complications.

This largely uncharted subject matter brings its own complications, not least the danger of slipping into reportage or polemic. Maxwell avoids these modes, yet the very words "pregnancy" and "miscarriage" will surely be enough to deter some readers before they make it past the dust jacket. But fiction can go anywhere, as long as the writer is sufficiently skilled and brave; Maxwell is totally unafraid, and her precision-tooled descriptive powers make her an invaluable guide.

A caesarian baby's first breath

She is able, for example, to show us Helen, a neonatal nurse going through the trauma of stillbirth at twenty weeks. Crouched over the toilet pan, Helen sees the tip emerging, "a smooth ellipsoid of flesh. A shiny guinea pig, perhaps". Later, "hands and feet that were curled into the body spring out mechanically, prosthetically, as the liquid stirs with an illusion of life, and she's transfixed". The prose in this horrifying, heartbreaking passage is equal to the emotional experience of miscarriage as well: "Helen is so determined not to be revolted that she doesn't notice she's delighted. There's a face!"

This unlimited access is Maxwell's chief triumph. But in a quieter way, *These Are Our Children* is also a formally inventive novel. The narrative voice is straightforward enough: third-person focalized, switching easily between characters when necessary. The innovation lies in the tonal contrast between the two storylines. We follow Florence, pregnant with a baby that could be her husband's or her lover's, and Helen, defined by her grief over the miscarriage. The two strands are connected mostly by theme, but also, towards the end, by some wonderfully intricate plotting that capitalizes on Maxwell's formidable grasp of neonatal medicine.

Florence's story is essentially a hospital comedy involving mistaken dates and incompetent midwives. The infidelity is a source of pleasure rather than hackneyed angst. Florence's husband Robert is "the keeper of her core identity"; Thomas Marvelle, a professor of neonatology, is "the other love of her life". Put simply, she loves both men. This experience, along with her early memories of masturbation and fantasy, is set against the sharper realities of ectopic pregnancy and caesarean section.

For Helen, meanwhile, the all-consuming miscarriage places her permanently in the tragic mode. It spells the end of sex with her husband Joseph and, ultimately, the failure of love. Flipping between the two heroines feels like switching abruptly from major to minor. It is a dramatic effect that widens the novel's scope, tacitly reminding the reader of all the other, unwritten storylines, in this hospital and beyond.

Running through both narratives is the lover Marvelle's ingenious (fictional) invention. The Wet Incubator pushes the limits of foetal "viability" back to twenty weeks rather than twenty-four, rekindling the debate over abortion ethics. The moral complexities of neonatology are deftly handled, with Marvelle's and Helen's viewpoints juxtaposed to highlight their irresolvable opposition. While Marvelle is dedicated to scientific innovation, Helen can see the burden of hope placed on parents whose children would otherwise have died in the womb or at birth – and who, even with the incubator's help, may not live.

Then there is the alien landscape of the hospital itself. Florence watches "a little of her blood long-jumping the junior doctor's tight ivory gloves". Two pills are "served in a small paper dish crinkled like a miniature Camembert". Helen has some photographs of her dead baby in an envelope. When she finally works up the courage to look at them, she notices that "where the camera flash reflected on his body, he was glazed like a pot". It's all there: humour, wisdom, commitment to the difficult truth. And most basic and most important of all, good writing.

Raise a fist

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Alice McDermott

SOMEONE
240pp. Bloomsbury Circus. £16.99.
978 1 4088 4724 4

It is easy to fall in love with Alice McDermott's prose. Her endearing details and graceful sentences value the ordinary confusions of day-to-day lives – just as the modest title, *Someone*, and the rabble of monochrome, faceless figures on the dust jacket of her new novel suggest. A collection of unordered episodic memories, some of them mere snapshots, extend from the first-person narrator's childhood in 1920s New York to her final years, as a grandmother.

The book opens with Marie aged seven, an Irish-American Catholic "little girl cartoon" keeping vigil for her father outside their house in Brooklyn (though, "these days, I wouldn't wish Brooklyn on a dog", they all "half-joked"). She is an observer: "the neighborhood's men and working women were coming home. Everyone wore hats. Everyone wore trim dark shoes". The unremarkable blur of "everyone" sits in opposition to Marie's quirky, slow-paced concentration on the girl next door, Pegeen Chehab, a minor character, who is unnervingly killed off a few pages later:

> Her hat was beige with something dark along the crown, a brown feather or two. There was a certain asymmetry to her shoulders. She had a lopping, hunchbacked walk. She had, always, a bit of black hair along her cheek, straggling to her shoulder, her bun coming undone. She carried her purse in the lightest clasp of her fingers, down along the side of her leg.

McDermott brilliantly renders the eye-level curiosity of a child lost in a "forest of adults, all red knuckles, for me, and wedding bands and the hems of jackets", a woman's calves "even in the dim stairwell, were bright white, veined with gray and blue like marble pillars, the rolled stockings at her ankles as solid as stone".

Pegeen's funeral is the first of a string of deaths that pinpoint time for us in Marie's story: "Five years widowed, eight without Gabe, thirty without my mother in the world, and sixty-some-odd (sixty-six, could it be?) since my father was gone". While giving birth to her first child, Marie almost dies; afterwards, her listless, helpless body is washed by a nurse who "lifted my hand and clamped it under her armpit, in the casually efficient way a busy woman hanging clothes holds a clothespin in her mouth". In another episode we see Marie take a job at a funeral parlour headed by Mr Fagin, the undertaker ("later he would tell me that it was his intention to reclaim the name of Fagin from the bastard").

This man has a comically macabre streak, not unlike his namesake, which is at odds with his "gentle hands". Among the shelves of black binders, prayer books and the collected works of Charles Dickens bound in "rich leather" sat "the bodiless head of a china baby doll, curly-haired and beautiful, with a rosebud smile and what might have been human lashes on the edges of its closed eyes . . . a model, he would also tell me later, for the face of a child in restful sleep". We soon observe Marie become similarly "cavalier" about death; she secretly tries on the plush coats of mourning female clients before hanging them in the vestibule, and wipes away smudged lipstick from the mouths of corpses.

One of McDermott's greatest strengths is her ability to withhold information, despite her use of a retrospective narrative, so that our emotions are pulled at the same time as Marie's. After she experiences an unexpected heartbreak, we are plunged into the immediacy of her thoughts:

> I sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to take my glasses off, fling them across the room. To tear the new hat from my head and fling it, too. Put my hands to my scalp and peel off the homely face. Unbutton the dress, unbuckle the belt, remove the frail slip. I wanted to reach behind my neck and unhook the flesh from the bone, open it along the zipper of my spine, step out of my skin and fling it to the floor. Back shoulder stomach and breast. Trample it. Raise a fist to God.

McDermott has amassed various prizes for her previous six novels, and this book demands similar attention.