

Elegant and erudite ideas from a class act

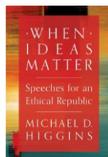
Whereas Charles Haughey's volume of speeches was seen as a vanity project, Michael D's lofty tome is a thought-provoking anthology packed with ideology, writes **ANDREW LYNCH**

When Charlie Haughey published a 1,200-page volume of his speeches called *The Spirit of the Nation* in 1986, it was widely mocked as a ridiculous vanity project. "I cringe at the arrogance of it... God help Ireland", was the fairly typical response of Fine Gael minister Gemma Hussey during a Dáil debate. Although Haughey's book was dutifully bought by diehard Fianna Fáil supporters, it is hard to believe that a single person ever read it from cover to cover.

When *Ideas Matter* by President Michael D Higgins deserves a lot more respect. Our ninth head of state has never been shy about calling himself an intellectual, and campaigned on the basis that his would be "a presidency of ideas". This anthology shows him living up to that promise, collecting 35 public addresses from his inauguration in 2011 to this year's Easter Rising commemorations.

The first thing you notice about Higgins's oratory is just how defiantly old-fashioned it sounds. In an age where politicians increasingly use colloquial language and snappy sound-bites, he favours long sentences dense with academic language that demand total concentration from his audience. The President may be an inspirational figure, but he has never even tried to coin a slogan in the mould of "Yes we

NON-FICTION
When Ideas Matter: Speeches for an Ethical Republic
Michael D Higgins



Head of Zeus, hdbk, 352 pages, €24.99

can" or anything that could be printed on a t-shirt.

Another Higgins characteristic is his sheer breadth of learning. A typical Higgins lecture will include elements of history, sociology and philosophy with a dash of literary criticism and a cúpla focail as Gaeilge thrown in for good measure. While his relentlessly lofty tone is sometimes off-putting, at least nobody can ever accuse him of dumbing down.

Above all, these speeches are notable as by far the most ideological ever given by an Irish president. When Higgins refers to right-wing icons such as the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, you can sense his contempt dripping from the page. At the same time, he lavishes praise on left-wing historians (EP Thompson), Marxist philosophers (Ernst Bloch) and even communist poets (Pablo Neruda and Victor Jara). In other words, this lifelong social-

ist is still flying the red flag — just from a more elevated platform than before. He acknowledges this himself in his preface: "In truth what I have written I would have sought to write, irrespective of circumstance." His partisan approach often irritates conservative commentators who believe that Áras an Uachtaráin should be a politics-free zone.

On the other hand, expecting Higgins to totally suppress his beliefs was about as realistic as expecting Enda Kenny to stay neutral in last month's All-Ireland football final — and most people understood this when he was elected five years ago with more than a million votes.

When *Ideas Matter* also shows the President to be a class act. He is superb at tailoring remarks to fit the occasion, a good example being his Windsor Castle toast to Queen Elizabeth built around the Irish word 'scáth' that means both shadow and shelter. Some of the speeches here celebrate his personal links with a particular place (Britain, Chile and El Salvador), while others are dedicated to individual heroes, including Patrick Kavanagh and Kader Asmal.

Whatever might be Higgins's headline subject on any given day, however, the same themes recur over and over again. One is his hatred for unregulated markets, credit-rating agencies and anything that smacks of neoliberal Reagan-Thatcher economics. "The ten-

gency of recent decades to regard the individual as primarily a consumer... rather than as a citizen who actively participates in society, has had an impoverishing effect on all our lives," he declares.

Perhaps the President's biggest hobby-horse is what he calls "the ethics of memory", which can be loosely translated as the notion that all cultures and traditions deserve to have their past respected. Fortunately for him, he was elected at the start of a decade in which major centenaries seem to come along every other week. He quotes



His advocacy of 'amnesty rather than an immoral amnesia' is the key to healing wounds in Northern Ireland



Thought-provoking: Michael D Higgins with his book of speeches outside Áras an Uachtaráin.
PHOTO: FRANK Mc GRATH

constantly from the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, arguing that his advocacy of "amnesty rather than an immoral amnesia" is the key to healing wounds in Northern Ireland.

Higgins's orations are erudite, elegantly written and always thought-provoking whether you agree with his arguments or not. The downside is that he can occasionally sound pompous and rarely uses one word when 10 will do. Even his greatest admirers should brace themselves for plenty of abstruse sentences such as: "The act of imagining needs some element of myth to retain belief, and

as a mechanism for the retention of hope in the unrealised possibilities of being human and truly free, in joyous co-existence with others on this vulnerable planet of ours."

By their very nature, speeches are primarily designed to be listened to rather than printed between hard covers. Michael D Higgins in full flight, however, is well worth reading as well as hearing. It would be a shame if *When Ideas Matter* ended up as a 21st century version of *The Spirit of the Nation* — adorning many Irish living rooms but rarely taken down from the shelf.



Fitting conclusion: Róisín O'Donnell

Shining welcome light on female voices from North

SHORT STORIES

The Glass Shore
Edited by Sinéad Gleeson



New Island Books, hbk, 378 pages, €19.95

'Nothing but mischief comes of women thinking for themselves." So declares Brinkhampton, the hapless toff on a quest for love in Sarah Grand's short story 'Eugenia'. Born in Co Down in 1854, Grand is just one of 25 female writers from Northern Ireland who have been brought together in Sinéad Gleeson's latest anthology, *The Glass Shore*.

However, despite the accompanying biography outlining Grand's immensely prolific career (her autobiography, *The Beth Book*, sold more than 20,000 copies in its first week alone), Grand's work has been — unlike that of her male counterparts — almost entirely forgotten, a fact of which the pompous Brinkhampton would no doubt approve.

The sheer volume of forgotten female authors from the North was precisely the impetus behind Gleeson curating this anthology, seeking once again to re-address the disproportionate maleness of Ireland's literary canon. Gleeson's first attempt to rise to such a challenge, *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers*, was published last year to much well-deserved acclaim. But even in the wake of its staggering achievement, it became clear there remained a need for something similar in terms of women who hailed specifically from the North.

One of the many reasons for canonical male dominance is that there are those who still believe female authors can only write about certain issues. Coupled with this, there remains the lazy assumption that Northern Irish authors can only ever deal with one particular issue. As the protagonist of Evelyn Conlon's story bemoans, "they couldn't stop hearing the headlines in my accent".

Sexist violence and political tensions do of course feature in *The Glass Shore*, most explicitly in Rosemary Jenkinson's 'The Mural Painter' or Mary Beckett's 'Flags and Emblems'. However, beyond the marchers and fighters, we also get Polish cleaners and wayward travellers and oil executives on business trips to Algiers; psychic performers who reunite the living and the dead, and male council workers who reunite orphaned children and their estranged, eccentric parents.

The latter is the premise for Caroline Blackwood's story 'Taft's Wife', where

the awkward reunion takes place in a lavish London tea-room. London features again as a site of possibility in Jan Carson's story 'Settling' after a young couple decides there is nothing left for them in Belfast and embark on a new life across the water. Carson beautifully captures the protagonist's wavering excitement and the eventual creep of homesickness as she slowly feels herself 'splitting in two' — an internal border between home and away; between what was and what might now be.

Carson is the third-last author in the anthology's chronological progression. After her story comes Lucy Caldwell's tragically intimate 'Mayday' and Róisín O'Donnell's other-worldly 'The Seventh Man'. As it happens, all three of these writers have had story collections published to glowing reviews in 2016, offering hope that the contemporary literary scene, at least, appears far more inclusive of women from the North. Meanwhile, with its fantastical twist, O'Donnell's story serves as the perfect note on which to conclude the anthology. For throughout these tales, the ethereal and the uncanny, the spiritual and the mythical, feature heavily.

O'Donnell's protagonist is a woman who has survived for thousands of years by feasting on the life of the men she marries. With her seventh husband, however, it is a very different story. This time, she is really in love and the fact that he is dying has nothing to do with her. We watch her waiting by his hospital bedside, thinking back over history and the spells she has cast, right up to the present day and the forays on Tinder that led her to her beloved. The tale as a whole veers towards the sentimental, but the narrator's tenderness remains palpable, while the ending sounds a truly poignant note.

Such unexpected poignancy also catches the reader off guard in Bernice McGill's 'The Cure for Too Much Feeling', where a hardened woman who gave up her only child many years ago suddenly finds herself inexplicably moved by a painting on a museum wall; or in Una Woods's positively odd 'The Diary, An Everyday Fable', in which the emotions and ambitions of three pieces of scrap metal pose an existential enquiry into the true meaning of loneliness.

Margaret Barrington's 'Village Without Men' is also a sort of fable, in which the entire male population of a village is drowned at sea, forcing the women and children to devise a new sort of existence. One must resist the temptation to read the story as an analogy for the anthology as a whole, but certainly in its quiet, wry, uncanny power, Barrington represents the kind of forgotten voice one can expect to find from this delightfully varied, utterly necessary new book.

RUTH GILLIGAN

Unravelling DNA of writing a bestseller leaves authors tied

NON-FICTION
The Bestseller Code

Jodie Archer and Matthew L Jockers
Allen Lane, hdbk, 256 pages, €25.99



In his entertaining *Bestsellers*, the indefatigable John Sutherland concluded that "to look for significant patterns, trends or symmetries" among bestsellers "is, if not pointless, baffling". The truth of Sutherland's argument is

demonstrated by how publishers, who are naturally keen to find significant patterns, trends or symmetries, have often been spectacularly baffled, and have rejected such future bestselling classics as *Animal Farm* (dismissed by TS Eliot at Faber as "not convincing"), *Lord of the Flies*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and the first Harry Potter.

The *Bestseller Code* sets out to challenge Sutherland's axiom. Jodie Archer, who worked in publishing before writing a PhD thesis on bestsellers, and Matthew Jockers, a professor at Nebraska University and a pioneer in "digital humanities", particularly "stylometrics", have devised what they call a "bestseller-o-meter".

Their starting point is the *New York Times* bestseller list. Every year in the US, more than 50,000 new works of fiction are published, excluding self-published ebooks, of which about 200 make the list — less than half a per cent. A fraction of those remains on the list for more than 10 weeks, and a few of that fraction sell a million copies in a year.

To find out what distinguishes the few Archer and Jockers fed a computer almost 5,000 novels, including just over 500 *NYT* bestsellers (thereby altering the proportion of bestsellers in the mix from 0.5 to 10pc, naughtily), and then asked it to "predict" which would succeed. It duly did so, "with an

error rate of only 10 to 20pc". Doesn't that "only" look rather desperate?

Quite early — on page 29 — Archer and Jockers announce that theirs is not a "how-to" book, and "comes attached to no guarantee". They might have announced this still earlier — on page one, say — but to have done so would have lost them most of their potential readers. They claim to be interested in "widening access, potentially, to the career of writing", which is doubtless a noble ambition but somewhat at odds with their book's professed non-"how-to"-ness.

So what is the point of *The Bestseller Code*? Its authors hope that it will "lay some of that ineffable je ne sais quoi of

talented writers bare", and reveal not only the "latent DNA", "core DNA", "topical DNA" and "foundational DNA" of blockbusters, but also the "difference between breakout affective DNA and lower-selling DNA". What this modish bilge boils down to is that bestsellers tend to have certain things in common, most of which you do not need a computer to detect.

In *On Writing* (2000), for example, Stephen King advises that one write from personal knowledge of life, friendship, love and work, especially the latter, and the bestseller-o-meter agrees. King also thinks that it is much better to report speech with a simple "she said", rather than "she

up in knots

exclaimed indignantly", and so does the bestseller-o-meter. And so it goes on. Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* is translated into graphs, with the observation that it is advisable to have a clear three-act structure, with a regular rhythm. Characters should do, look, tell, know and arrive, rather than wait, murmur, hesitate, halt and drop — though a worshipfully quoted passage from *The Da Vinci Code* includes this horror: "Sophie immediately plopped down on the stone floor."

"Wouldn't it be fun," ask the authors, addressing the heart of their thesis, and missing, "if success weren't so random?" No, it wouldn't.

LEWIS JONES



Noble ambition: Matthew L Jockers and Jodie Archer