

deal with the great themes of life and death and the quest for understanding and certainty in a world of so much darkness and chaos. All of them are also texts that simultaneously represent and shape essential values in Gilgamesh's love for Enkidu, David's guilt, the cunning of Odysseus, the adaptability of Vishnu, and Cú Chulainn's loyalty to kin.

Taking the book beyond the usual limits of scholarly monographs are the pedagogical features. Maps situate the texts geographically and spatially. Short time lines do the same historically and temporally. The selected bibliographies and suggestions for discussion and further individual or group investigation take up the momentum of curiosity and draw readers into personal engagement with the texts.

Are the texts under consideration fictions? Just how and where the boundaries are crossed in the declension of epics from myth to history and then to fiction are difficult issues. These are intricately organized narratives that had immense influence on the invention of fiction, even if their authors might have meant them to be read literally or as repositories of wisdom. What all five essays demonstrate is that the devices of fictional narration are as old as writing itself.

Since few people have the skills and training to be authorities on all five of these texts, there will be something new for everyone. But the contributors have not limited themselves to summarizing familiar interpretations. The application of sophisticated structural and narratological analyses opens up exciting new vistas in every case. Even the relatively familiar story of David is reinvigorated by Robert Alter's close reading of its rhetorical moves. Not least, each of the contributors succeeds in making even the most alien elements of these masterpieces familiar to us so that we might grasp them as part of a shared world literature.

Daragh Carville, ed.

*New Soundings: An Anthology of New Writing from the North of Ireland*

Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003. Pp. 190. £8.99

Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, 2004. Pp. 190. \$19.95

Reviewed by C. J. Ganter

As editor Daragh Carville points out in his introduction, this collection differs from the original *Soundings* anthologies edited in the 1970s in that it focuses on writing from the northern part of Ireland and features emerging writers from Northern Irish, English, and even Australian backgrounds, who are succinctly characterized as "offcomers" and "blowins" (xi). This nomenclature reflects the transient nature of what *New Writing from the North of Ireland* means

today. Carville does not claim to present all genres evenly. However, considering the fact that since the days of Oscar Wilde many Irish authors have excelled in drama and fiction, Carville's choice of texts appears somewhat unbalanced. The volume contains only one extract from a play, one short story, three novel extracts, and a total of seventy-nine poems.

Two of the novel-extracts would qualify as excellent examples of short story-writing. The piece from Jo Baker's *Mermaid's Child* is a moving first-person narrative of hope and disillusionment. Colin Carberry's section from *Narnia* offers a graphic portrait of a Protestant Belfast neighborhood where a southern visitor is keen to hide his "soft, border-town brogue" (136). In a similar way, the main character in Stephen McMahon's short story "The Dummy," a builder from the south working in the north, meticulously tries to conceal his origins, pretending to be mute. That place and speech are inextricably bound up is also one of the main concerns in Joanna Laurens's *Poor Beck*. The play is a dystopian vision of a family living in a dark tunnel beneath "the surface," where "home" is only a fading memory and dissolving human bonds are mirrored by fractured syntax. "Home," its instability, and its loss are recurrent themes in Irish writing, and a number of poems in the anthology prove it. Deirdre Cartmill's and Leontia Flynn's contributions investigate the various nuances of "home" and the sense of belonging. Flynn's enigmatic poetry invites the reader to inner journeys through rural Donegal and County Down. That "Ireland" has expanded into the global Irish diaspora is illustrated by Howard Wright, who writes about Derry, Belfast, the Sierra Nevada, and Nevada, U.S.A.—a far cry from twentieth-century parochialism. Jean Bleakley's witty endeavors probe the depths of human nature, whereas Frank Sewell's poems trace the thin line between religious belief and superstition.

Deservedly, the acclaimed Irish poet Gearóid MacLochlainn features largely. His six poems, included in their original Irish versions and in English, are self-referential analyses of the cross-linguistic snares so brilliantly captured in the Joycean dictum of the "acquired speech." In "Aistriúcháin" / "Translations," MacLochlainn exposes the schizophrenia of "bilingual reading" (37), pillorying an ignorant audience that regard themselves as "witty, broad-minded and cultured" (38) and are convinced "that they get the gist of this poetry thing" (38). Apart from MacLochlainn's contributions, the antagonisms of the Northern Irish Troubles do not loom large, which is an indication that since the Peace Agreement poets' priorities have palpably changed. In Paula Cunningham's "Mother's Pride," cultural diversification is cleverly symbolized by a knife buttering a slice of toast. In Nigel McLoughlin's poem "Belfast," this diversification is merely hinted at when the "dawn mist ... makes myths of murals" and "settles beneath flags" in "a city of many flags" (120).

All in all, Daragh Carville's *New Soundings* offers a valuable insight into today's writing in, from, and about the north of Ireland. In particular, this

anthology must be recommended to all those with a special interest in current trends in Northern Irish poetry writing.

Muriel Spark

*The Finishing School*

London: Viking, 2004. Pp. 156. £12.99

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

The latest offering by distinguished British writer Muriel Spark—author of such renowned novels as *Memento Mori*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, *The Driver's Seat*, *Loitering with Intent*, *Reality and Dreams*, and *Aiding and Abetting*—is her most metafictional novel to date. *The Finishing School*, fatuously named *Campus Sunrise*, is a movable feast. Directed by Rowland Mahler and his wife, Nina Parker, the school has eight pupils in all—a truly motley crew consisting of Princess Tilly, Joan Archer, Lionel Haas, Mary Foot, Lisa Orlando, Pansy Leghorn, Opal Gross, and Pallas Kapelas, daughter of a rich Greek criminal—currently ensconced in the French town of Ouchy.

Rowland, while still an Oxford undergraduate, wrote a play for the National Theatre which was a “young-person success” (54), but, unfortunately, “you couldn’t give away” (54) his subsequent efforts. Now he runs *College Sunrise*, where he teaches creative writing classes and attempts, with increasing difficulty, to write his novel. Nina does organizational work and teaches her popular *Etiquette*, or “*Comme il faut*” (5) classes, as she calls them. For example, her advice to any students taking employment with the United Nations is this: “First, if you, as a UN employee, are chased by an elephant stand still and wave a white handkerchief. This confuses the elephant’s legs. Second, if chased by a large python, run away in a zigzag movement, as a python can’t coordinate its head with its tail. If you have no time to run away, sit down with your back to a tree and spread your legs. The python will hesitate, not knowing which leg to begin with. Get out your knife and cut its head off” (60). Rowland’s creative writing course lends the narrative an exceptional opportunity for metafictionality, as the novel opens with his words, “You begin by setting your scene” (1).

One student, named simply Chris, is at the school to write a novel about Mary Queen of Scots. (Spark, a Scot, lives in Edinburgh, site of the murder of both Rizzio and Darnley.) After a visit to Chateau de Chillon, where Bonivard was imprisoned in 1530, the subject of Byron’s poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*, Chris decides to focus his novel on the murder of David Rizzio, Mary’s musician and advisor. He has “a new theory of the murder of Mary Queen of Scots’ husband” (83), theorizing that his brother, inspired by Bonivard, avenged Rizzio’s death by