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Anatomy School Header, Bernard MacLaverty, Random House, 2002, . . .

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A coming-of-age story of a northern Irish boy getting out from under the thumb of mother, church, and country. Set in Belfast in the late sixties, Bernard MacLaverty's new novel takes us into Martin Brennan's last semester of high school, when he finds old friendships tested and is forced to face the unknown. Before he can become an adult, Martin must unravel the sacred and contradictory mysteries of religion, science, and sex; he must learn the value of friendship; but most of all he must pass his exams? at any cost. Celebrating the desire to speak and the need to say nothing, *The Anatomy School* moves from the enforced silence of Martin's Catholic school retreat, through the hilarious tea-and-biscuits repartee of his eccentric elders, to the awkward wit and loose profanity of his two friends? the charismatic Kavanagh and the subversive Blaise Foley.

MacLaverty transforms the generic coming-of-age formula into a revelatory albeit lengthy read in his latest, the story of an insecure, thoughtful teenager named Martin Brennan who must survive the rigors of a pivotal year in high school while growing up in Belfast during the Troubles of the late '60s. Martin starts off in a bit of an academic quandary, having lost his scholarship to the Catholic school he attends because of subpar grades, forcing his mother to pay for the rest of the year and putting considerable pressure on the boy to boost his academic performance. Much of what follows is a low-key morality play in which Brendan and his mates go through various machinations to procure the answers to their upcoming exams, only to watch their theft backfire when the school thinks they're circulating pornographic photos and one of Martin's chums gets roughed up as a result. Brennan's sexual initiation is poignantly portrayed as he lands a job at a university anatomy lab and ends up losing his virginity there with a comely Australian minx whose departure sets Martin up to pursue the girl of his dreams. Martin is a memorable character whose unflinching compassion and capacity for self-examination provide a rock-solid foundation, and MacLaverty balances the boy's seriousness with his own wise humor. He also creates a fine cast of secondary characters to bring Martin's rites of passage to life, and the result is a book that delves deeper than usual into the vagaries of teenage emotions. MacLaverty has been down this road before (*Cal*), and all too often the reader can predict the next scene in the narrative, but despite the familiarity of the journey, he provides plenty of atmospheric background to make this heartfelt story worth the ride.

Poor Martin Brennan has to contend with a variety of indignities: an overbearing mother who dreams of her son entering the priesthood, the pressures of passing his school exams (after an unsuccessful first attempt), and the ordinary turbulence of late adolescence. Shy and unsure of himself, Martin carefully navigates his world with the help (and sometimes hindrance) of his best friends: Kavanagh, a smooth-talking charmer; and the rebellious Blaise Foley, who challenges Martin's precepts of authority and faith. Martin, a photographer for his school newspaper, studiously observes and absorbs his surroundings, from the impoverished lifestyle he and his mother must

endure to the twittering ladies and pompous priest who frequent the Brennans' dinner table. As Martin struggles with his relationships, classes, and first foray into romance, he moves slowly into manhood, readjusting his worldview. MacLaverty, whose work has previously been short-listed for the Booker Prize, writes with an easy charm and perfectly captures life in 1960s Belfast. He invests the smallest characters with great wit and humanity, creating a moving, rueful tale. Brendan Dowling

Confronting the usual thorny, coming-of-age issues of sex, religion, and morality, Belfast teenager Martin Brennan and his friends, with their hormones in high gear, are stunningly naïve, their primary concern, sex, remaining a mysterious, dark realm into which they must feel their own way. Unable to gain much needed knowledge of basic biology from home or school, they try to sublimate their urges, exploring the mysteries of faith, the example of Christ, the meaning of sin, and the importance of family and friends, while privately garnering as much information as they can about the Big Secret.

Brilliantly creating the jokey banter, braggadocio, and innuendoes of teenage conversations, MacLaverty introduces a main character who, while a bit more serious and naive than some of his friends, is still a typical teenager facing typical teenage problems. And that, to me, is both the attraction and limitation of this novel. Many readers will chuckle out loud as they relive their own pasts through Martin, but at the conclusion, some may also ask, "Is that all there is?" The superficial resolution of normal teenage predicaments, no matter how well presented here, may not be satisfying for readers who expect a broader treatment of themes and a deeper exploration of inner conflicts. The author's introduction of the Catholic/Protestant violence at the end of the novel seems gratuitous, an overly strong element used to make a generalized point about morality and religion--Martin is almost untouched by The Troubles.

MacLaverty has a great feel for working class life. His characters feel very true, and the rhythms of his writing are incredibly seductive. You can feel his clear-eyed yet forgiving nature hovering over all his characters. Simply put, he's one of the best fiction writers out there. That said, *The Anatomy School* doesn't delve as deeply as you want it to. I prefer his short stories (see his "Walking the Dog" collection) which, with less words, achieve far richer, more suggestive results. Still, MacLaverty is always worth reading. His best themes are the failures of the church, and the sympathies between males. Both are treated excellently here. In fact, no one deals with maleness exactly the way MacLaverty does, allowing his male characters to express intense need, love and attraction for each other, without ever crossing over into the sexual. He defines an area of affection between straight men that few have ever explored before.

This pitch-perfect foray into a young man's agonizing adolescence is made vivid by the small details of his daily life. Living at home with a devout Catholic mother, 1960's Belfast is a tough arena for a young man on the path toward manhood, especially when rigid Catholic school ethics stand sentinel over natural self-expression.

Strict Irish priests are rigorous in their training of young men, using corporal punishment, coupled with the occasional spiritual retreat: three days of silence, prayer and soul-searching. The most effective and lasting discipline is mental, constant drumming lectures concerning the nature of sin, especially when entertained as lascivious thoughts, where a boy's chastity is threatened by self-will. Martin Brennan and his friends survive just such an environment, their sexuality a driving force, as they bond in friendship defined by four-letter words and innuendo. Driven by hormones, conscience runs a close second, carefully nurtured through years of training.

To his shame, Brennan is repeating his last year of high school before seeking employment. Kavanagh, a star basketball player, is Martin's best pal and co-conspirator. When the more sophisticated Blaise Foley boards at their school, the paradigm changes, the three boys forming a lopsided triumvirate, as Blaise challenges Martin to question everything he has been taught. The free-floating anxiety common to boys on the verge of manhood tempers Martin and Kavanagh's natural hubris and enthusiasm.

I'm adding Bernard MacLaverty to my list of writers who do not disappoint. That decision is based on

six books, and I know I have at least three more to acquire and savour. He's a writer who engages thoughtfully with ordinary things. In this case, the setting is an all-boys Catholic school, for most of the book, and the protagonist is Martin, an only child with a single parent. Martin has to navigate the last year of school, make decisions about who he is and what he wants to be, figure out integrity, friendship, and sex. It sounds dull. But it is not. MacLavery writes it remembering that when we live those years and confront those things, they are not dull in the least. The story is set in Belfast in the late 1960's, but it is not consumed by Belfast in the late 1960's. Ordinary things went on there, then. Martin is a solid, engaging guy, smarter than his grades suggest, less confident than his friend Kavanagh, less reckless than Blaise. I was taken with him from the start and followed his progress with real tension because MacLavery shows how a single misstep in those ordinary things can change everything.(less)

Mary Lawless cleared her throat. 'A thing I've always wondered is this,' she said. 'If you had two weighing machines and you put a foot on each one, what would you weigh? Can we assume that the sum of the two scales would be your weight? Eh Martin, a bright boy like you should know that. What do you think?'

'Martin', the bright boy, would be Martin Brennan, raised by his widowed mother, who places the Catholic Church, and the priests who run it, above all else. So, Martin must decide whether he 'has the calling'. He doesn't. But to answer that he is off to a 'silent' retreat, or forced to attend weekly dinners at his home with his mother, her two lady friends and the local priest. Martin would rather hang with his two friends, Kavanagh and Foley, who, together, form a trinity of 'bright boys'. Part One of this novel follows them as they shed their adolescent skins and, with that, unveil the absurdity around them. This Part gets a little Seinfeld-y as the boys conspire to steal the questions for their upcoming examinations. But school teaches absurdity, in Ireland and elsewhere, as rutting boys, who would rather smoke in the daffs are given Milton instead. Milton? Really?

Why did students have to put up with this? If you lined up everybody in Ireland and pointed a gun at their head and said How important is it to be able to discuss Milton's Paradise Lost with a modicum of intelligence and insight? and there were two boxes marked IMPORTANT and NOT VERY IMPORTANT. If you shot everybody who ticked NOT VERY IMPORTANT it would be a lot worse than the Famine.

Mrs. Brennan, we're obliged to return Martin's effects. I've looked through them. I'm dreadfully sorry. Of course he may have just found this filthy magazine in a waste bin at a bus stop. And the bus hit him before he could get around to having a wank. Of that we're definite. So, he's probably in heaven.'

The girl in the library reading her book suddenly smiles. What was funny on the page lives in her eyes momentarily. A woman walking down the street completely by herself remembers something said, something done and can't hold back laughing and puts her hand up to cover her lower face. She knows she is giving away too much in front of strangers. Maybe she's had a drink too many; maybe she just left a good conversation in a pub or a coffee place. Whichever way it was, she gave her loveliness away to Martin as he waited for his bus one evening.

One odd thing. It's weird, as a reader, how we add layers of knowledge that often do not wait to be used. I very recently read The Inventor and the Tycoon about, in large part, the life of 19th Century photographer Eadweard Muybridge who, when he wasn't killing his wife's lover, liked to photograph people engaged in quotidian acts (like smoking a cigarette) while they were nude. Somehow, Martin comes across a copy of Muybridge's photo book, allowing MacLavery to tell Muybridge's story. The book gods play their jokes.

The Anatomy School by Bernard MacLaverty is the story of Martin Brennan, an Irish Catholic school boy repeating his final year in school. Knowing he must pass this time around, he and his two friends Kavanagh and Blaise Foley decide to take a big risk that will hopefully help them to pass their final exams. The book revolves around the boys witty conversations, tea time with Martin's mother and her friends, and the silent retreat Martin attends...more "If it matters at all, it must matter completely."

I bought this book in Oswego, New York at a dollar store. I am always drawn to the book section in stores but it isn't often that the dollar store has books I want to read. This book caught my eye initially because of the title. At the time, my friend was struggling with her anatomy class and I thought the book would be something great to give her. But this book is not really about anatomy school. The title seems to point more to what happens at an anatomy school that changes the main character Martin in the end.

The first 2/3 of this book were good for me. I didn't love it but I found it engaging. I had read some reviews of the book on goodreads.com and saw a lot of people had stopped reading after 60 pages because they were bored but I was never bored while reading The Anatomy School. One thing I loved about the book was how peaceful it was. It consisted of everyday nights where you have trouble falling to sleep and everyday school days with your friends. This peacefulness helped me connect greatly to the main character. I also really liked Martin for most of the book because I related greatly to him. His experience in school, the emotional aspect, I could relate to very well. That feeling of being accepted and being scared to speak out and being afraid to have your own opinion about something. That being said, the last 1/3 of the book was a real let down for me. For one, the book randomly jumped a few years forward and confused me for a good fifteen pages. It also did not fully address what the result was of the first 2/3 of the story. I mean, sure it addressed it in a subtle way that wasn't overly obvious but the story was building up and, in my opinion, deserved a better reveal of the outcome of the boys struggle from the first part of the book.

There were a few other things I did not like about this book. In the first part of the book, a lot of scenes take place in the classroom at the Catholic school. One scene is in a religious class in which is required for the students to take so they can understand what it means to be a Catholic. In the scene, Martin's friend Blaise decides to push the rules and states, what if someone doesn't believe in God. The priest/teacher wants to discuss this issue but, like most classes, the boys are too afraid to speak their true feelings aloud in front of the class. I was excited to read about future classes but this did not happen. Never again did the book visit this class and it was disappointing. I wanted to see the debates and hoped it would have challenged not only the students but the priest/teacher. Another thing I did not like was the climax. The climax is the title of the book...meaning what happened at the anatomy school. What happens you ask? Here is a spoiler...Martin loses his virginity to an Australia woman he just met and never sees again. Not only was this cliché but it was such an anticlimactic climax. This entire story led up to Martin having sex for the first time? That was the climax for this book about religion that could have said a lot more? It implies that sex is ALWAYS the most important thing that changes a person for the better. In fact, when Martin had sex (another spoiler), he was neglecting a promise he made to a friend. His friend, Kavanagh from school, had to do a science experiment at the anatomy school but was going to be away for the night and asked Martin to cover the night-shift for him which Martin did. Every hour Martin had to kill a mouse and record what time he did it. The times mattered. Having sex, Martin missed many of the hours and so killed the mice all at one time and wrote down false times. He then went on to blame his friend for this mishap, claiming that his friend was changing because of his girlfriend wanting him to commit to his faith and it was all Kavanagh's fault. Martin needs to grow up and start taking responsibility. I much liked first part of the book Martin, not second part Martin who grew cocky and just plain stupid and annoying.

Overall, the book seemed to be saying that you don't need religion which I agree with but it also said you don't need God at all. You need to rely on yourself. My favorite part of the book though is a quote from Kavanagh in part two when he talks about his girlfriend. He says, "Her Christianity is so important. It's not a superficial thing - like music or how you wear your hair. It's her whole life...I have to promise I'll try to...believe more. It's no good just living a life of correctness. She says it has to

come from [my heart]...she wants me to accept the Lord as my Savior. I have to accept I'm a sinner." This is where I was hoping the book would go and it didn't at all. Martin was instead left as a guy who was cocky and just a glass half-empty sort of guy and he developed as a character but seemed to move backwards instead of forwards. I will give this book 3 out of 5 stars. I liked the first part a good deal but the second part/ending was a huge letdown and the book did not seem to go much anywhere.

I heard the author Bernard MacLaverty read from this book during the Flatlake Literary Festival - it was a fantastic experience which made me want to read it for myself. I am enjoying it even though it is a sort of typical 'awakening story' in late 60s Ireland with all the saga attached to provincial life there...the wit and compassion save the day in it as at times it becomes a bit predictable. The dialogue is first rate though and I hope to finish it in a day or so as am itching to move on to...more I heard the author Bernard MacLaverty read from this book during the Flatlake Literary Festival - it was a fantastic experience which made me want to read it for myself. I am enjoying it even though it is a sort of typical 'awakening story' in late 60s Ireland with all the saga attached to provincial life there...the wit and compassion save the day in it as at times it becomes a bit predictable. The dialogue is first rate though and I hope to finish it in a day or so as am itching to move on to pastures new. (less)

The central image is photography, Martin Brennan's hobby. The idea of seizing 'the whole essence of something in a single photograph'; dirty photos; photos of exam papers for cheating; Martin's mother's old photos, of the past, of Martin as a boy. Eventually, Martin realises he wants to be a photographer. A novel about faith - losing it and keeping it. About finding your place in the world. [Oct 2004]

Bernard MacLaverty was born in Belfast (14.9.42) and lived there until 1975 when he moved to Scotland with his wife, Madeline, and four children. He has been a Medical Laboratory Technician, a mature student, a teacher of English and, for two years in the mid eighties, Writer-in-Residence at the University of Aberdeen.

Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on 14 September 1942, he lived there until 1975. Then he moved to Scotland with his wife, Madeline, and four children (Ciara, Claire, John, and Jude). He has been a Medical Laboratory Technician; a mature student at Queen's University Belfast; a teacher of English; and, for short periods, Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of Aberdeen, Liverpool John Moores, Augsburg and Iowa State. He was educated at St Malachy's College and Queen's University Belfast.

MacLaverty's *Lamb* is a novel about faith, relationships and ultimately, love; *Cal* is an examination of love in the midst of Irish violence. *Grace Notes*, which was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize, is about the conflict between a desire to compose and motherhood. *The Anatomy School* is a comic coming-of-age novel. He has also written five acclaimed collections of short stories, most of which are in his 'Collected Stories' (Cape 2013).

He has written versions of his fiction for other media - radio plays, television plays, screenplays and libretti. In 2003 he wrote and directed a short film "Bye-Child" (BAFTA nominated for Best Short Film) and more recently wrote libretti for Scottish Opera's Five:15 series - 'The King's Conjecture' with music by Gareth Williams and 'The Letter' with music by Vitaly Khodosh. For Scottish Opera in 2012, and again with music by Gareth Williams, he wrote 'The Elephant Angel' an opera for schools which toured Scotland and Northern Ireland.