Malarkey
by Anakana Schofield

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

Transplanted from Ireland to Vancouver, Anakana Schofield shows in her first novel, Malarkey, that she has lost none of her Irish wit.

Her main protagonist is a middle-aged farm wife who must suddenly deal with two domestic crises: her husband’s infidelity and her son’s homosexuality. The second is the more traumatic, since she witnesses Jimmy, her son, engaged in the act of lovemaking with a young man he has brought home. On one occasion, the two fellows are together in the family bathroom, causing her great consternation:

[T]he Lord save us, how I paced up and down the kitchen worrying if someone would come to the door, come in for tea and need to use the toilet and how would I explain the sight of the two of them coming out and the what on earth question in their eyes of “who is yer man with Jimmy?” (61)

The husband’s straying is easier to deal with: she will simply cheat on him. And with a much younger man, a Syrian immigrant she befriends in a store. Schofield’s handling of the wife’s modus operandi is hilarious. Once she has him in her house, with her husband gone away to town, she marvels at the moves she makes:

Who is this woman? And where has she come up with such bold ideas on an average Sunday, an average Sunday where Mass and refilling the milk jug and sugar bowl, lest there be an avalanche of visitors, were previously the order of her day. (93–4)

Halim, the young man, is rather taken aback at first, but the “snicker of alarm on his face fades to a smile” (94). He’s in the midst of showing her a book when she begins to show more interest in what’s below his belt. “[H]e continued reading undeterred. Raised the book obligingly, while she parted his trousers to discover practical cotton underwear, disappointingly so identical to her husband’s she could easily mix them up in the wash” (95).

Her alibi for her many meetings with Halim is that she is trying to find a horse. When her behaviour becomes peculiar, her husband first blames her horse fixation and then the fact that Jimmy has gone away to join the American army.

Tea plays a major role in the characters’ lives, always accompanying the gossipy chats she has with her friends, and the serious discussions she has with her husband. But it proves disastrous in her relationship with Halim:

Whatever we came together to do had an inevitability and we shoulda just got on with it – left the talking, the walking, the thinking alone. Instead we slipped into too much chat and comfort and that was an awful bad idea. Things can get sloppy around a teapot.” (127)
The wife’s name is Philomena, but she is referred to throughout as Our Woman – and her husband is Himself.

The novel begins with Our Woman seeing a grief counsellor. She’s been encouraged to do this by her friends, but she is not finding it too helpful. At the outset, then, we learn that Himself has died, and most of the subsequent events are delivered as flashbacks.

There are tragic happenings in Malarky, often cheek-by-jowl with raucous comedy, leading one to commiserate with Our Woman, especially when her odd antics put her in the hospital. At times, the proceedings seem less clear than they might have been – possibly a reflection of Our Woman’s mind or representative of Irish colloquialism. The narrative lurches from third to first person and back and flashes back and forth in a manner that might confuse a reader who doesn’t pay close attention.

There are a couple of lines near the end of the novel (and repeated at the very end) that may be intended to apply to the book itself: “It’s beautiful when it all makes sense, so it is. Occasionally it makes sense, just for a moment” (184, 222).

The fact is, though, that Malarky has a charm all its own, and Anakana Schofield has brought to pulsating life a woman we can applaud for her candour and her persistence.

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg writer whose latest book is a comic novel called Dating.

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