

## Beyond Imitation

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

*The House on Eccles Road*, by Judith Kitchen. Gray Wolf Press, 2002.

If “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” what might we call a work of fiction that uses an older novel as its springboard? James Joyce’s *Ulysses* provides the inspiration for Judith Kitchen’s recent novel, *The House on Eccles Road* (winner of the S. Mariella Gable prize); but this small book isn’t an imitation, only a selective borrowing. While Kitchen’s first novel is also an artful exploration of interior landscapes, this is a humbler project, crafted around one seductive idea: *What if the story were Molly Bloom’s?*

Here we have Molly O’Rourke, musician and singer of Irish songs, married 13 years to Leo Bluhm, an English professor—two refugees from previous marriages. They had met when Molly was singing in the local pub. The action takes place during a single warm day in June in Dublin, Ohio. Leo is off to the city to teach while Molly remains at home shaping her hours, hoping Leo will remember their wedding anniversary so they might somehow connect for a celebratory meal.

The story moves effortlessly through the minds of Molly and Leo, as well as a neighbor, her brother, Leo’s teaching colleague, and Molly’s former lover, Ted. Passage from one character’s thoughts to another’s may take place in a single page, a strategy that skillfully serves the circular flow of the book. The men are as carefully rendered as Molly, with their own obsessions and insights, such as Leo with his wandering eye for thighs and his guilt. Informing everyone’s day, however, is the death (eight years ago) of Arjay, Molly and Leo’s 4-year-old son.

In Molly’s mind, past and present meld, for nowadays Molly prefers “the company of her own thoughts.” “We are nothing in this

world," she thinks, "and yet we have such heavy feet . . ." Memories of a childhood farm, of her dead son, of music when she still loved it, mingle with more prosaic events: the choice of dinner plates or dishes to cook; the pizza ordered for two neighbor boys and the pictures they draw; a traffic jam; a hospital visit. Yet Kitchen consistently casts ordinary things in a gently thrilling light. Early on, Molly considers baking Leo a pie, "using single-malt scotch instead of water as her liquid and let[ting] it bubble in the oven, the crust heaving up and down like a lung." The novel abounds with similar grace notes, as Kitchen builds Molly's (and Leo's) day, incrementally, through tiny observations and insights, in language both accessible and poetic.

In spite of a flurry of telephone and hand-written messages, Molly and Leo consistently fail to connect. Still, this journey of a day succeeds on several levels. It allows Molly to return to herself, on her own terms, after her years of mourning and displacement. Simultaneously, it beautifully explores one of humankind's most arduous jobs: waiting. Molly's hours are defined by waiting for the phone to ring, for traffic to move after an unsettling accident, for Leo to return to his office or arrive at the pub. Toward the end of the novel, she observes,

All day she had felt as though she were waiting, her whole life tied to her expectations of someone else. Her happiness dependent on someone's appearance. His phone call. His attention. Now she felt as though she had been waiting all these years not for Leo, but for her own self to return . . . the self she had been the night they met . . . from before birth . . .

One misstep might be Kitchen's decision to structure a later chapter (another borrowing) with paragraph titles posing questions in a literary Q & A: "*At what time did Molly arrive at Ted's apartment?*" "*At what time did Leo arrive at his office?*" "*What was the nature of Molly's conversation?*" "*Who wanted the onion rings?*" Here it seems an odd device, used to accelerate the action toward

the climax when Molly is invited to sing her Irish songs, once again, but the change in rhythm feels jarring.

Yet how pleasurable it is to discover a novel as “aural” as this one, and how appropriate that singing is an underlying theme. We “hear” others watching Leo, for example. “At home he was often disheveled,” says Molly, “scattered about the house as though pieces of him were fluttering away. A confetti of obligations.” Elsewhere, after a game of tennis, a colleague imagines Leo approvingly as “nothing if not form, perhaps a villanelle.” Ironically, it is Leo who remains lost. In the last pages, Kitchen turns *Ulysses* around and gives the original Molly’s stream-of-consciousness soliloquy, like a song in the mind’s ear, to a confounded Leo.

In the end, no comparison to Joyce is required, only quiet thanks that one book can provide the seed for another. *The House on Eccles Road* offers its own merits, for this is a moving novel of transformation, written in a felicitous prose that ought to be read slowly, and aloud.