

Written Off

Enrique Vila-Matas's publisher-hero is on a mission.



BY RACHEL NOLAN

LYING ill in a hospital, an aging, once successful publisher has a vivid dream. He is in Dublin, a city he has never visited but in his dream knows intimately. After a long walk, he enters a pub and orders a drink. His wife catches him, and the two end up sitting on a sidewalk, sobbing. The dream haunts the publisher, and two years later, he decides to make a trip to Dublin — “to feel a little busier in

DUBLINESQUE

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his retirement.” He rounds up three of his former writers and whisks them off to the cemetery where Paddy Dignam was buried in “Ulysses,” to stage a half-serious funeral for “the age of print.” There, he discovers that he’s being shadowed by a dead ringer for the young Samuel Beckett.

In the hands of a less elegant and ironic writer “Dublinesque” might have devolved into a rote Joyce/Beckett homage or, worse, a tour through the literary grave sites of Ireland. But Enrique Vila-Matas, one of Spain’s most distinguished novelists, turns this slight tale into a touching account of facing down mortality with a passion and an obsession for literature.

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Vila-Matas’s books are typically so preoccupied with other books that they become essay-novel hybrids. The allusions in “Dublinesque” (its title refers to a Philip Larkin poem) create a layered richness. It is literature on literature.

Like one of his idols, the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno, Vila-Matas is witty on how authors and their characters interact. (In Unamuno’s classic novel “Mist,” from 1914, a suicidal man resolves to kill Unamuno rather than himself when he learns he’s only a character in a book.) Samuel Riba, the protagonist of “Dublinesque,” also begins to feel pursued by an author — perhaps the man who looks like Beckett? — who is standing too close, peering over his shoulder, taking notes. His wife’s unexpected conversion to Buddhism “seems like the start of a classic conflict story,” he observes; “everything has suddenly sped up, as if someone wanted him involved in a less slow novel.”

“Dublinesque” itself is a slow novel. Riba doesn’t do much other than read, ponder books, tool around Dublin with his friends, Google himself and reflect on his career, bemoaning the fact that he never discovered a genius — thanks to “that most bitter misfortune of having to look for authors, those tiresomely essential beings, since without them the whole business would be impossible.” His wife shares his distaste for writers, but not his obsession with books. “She felt distant from all those names, which for her had simply increased a list — Riba’s catalog — a list now lost in time: former guests who once came to dine at her house; people who believed in nothing and who drank till dawn and who it was very difficult to get rid of.” Yet Riba can’t help reading his life as a text, and since the novel is so openly about literature, this quirk of his does not feel like a literary conceit. His friends read him the same way. Upon hearing of the mock funeral, one suspects it’s really for the publisher himself: “You haven’t made us come to Dublin so you can turn yourself into a metaphor, have you?”

It’s clear which writers have influenced Riba (and Vila-Matas). Their names pop up on every page: Joyce, Beckett and Unamuno, of course, but also Borges, Fernando Pessoa, Julien Gracq, W.G. Sebald, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Emilio Pacheco, Samuel Johnson, Heinrich von Kleist, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Marguerite Duras, Paul Auster, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Michel Houellebecq, Robert Walser. And there are more. But the reader is not tempted to pick up their books instead to chase references. Riba is plaintive, intelligent and unpredictable enough to demand our full attention, and his preoccupation with literature is not a gimmick or distraction; it is the whole story. □