

The Blackwater Lightship

By Colm Toibin

Scribner; \$24; 0-684-87389-3; August 22, 2000; 288 pages

The inescapable bond between members of a family - scarred and traumatic as it may be -- is the theme of Irish writer (and short listed nominee for the Booker Prize) Colm Toibin's new novel. Set in early 1990s Ireland, Toibin takes the reader on a revelatory, frequently heartbreaking journey deep into the entangled relationships between a grandmother, a mother, a son and a daughter.

The story centers around Helen O'Doherty, a woman whose life, on the surface, is a picture of charming Irish domesticity: a loving husband, two young boys, satisfying work as a school principal and a new home in a Dublin suburb. But the veneer of her carefully constructed existence is pulled apart when a friend of her brother's, Paul, appears at her door with the news that her brother, Declan, is in a hospital, seriously ill with AIDS, and wants Helen to break the news to both their contentious grandmother and their estranged mother.

Declan's illness is a shock to Helen -- though not in frequent contact, she is aware of his being gay -- but has no idea he's been HIV positive for several years. As she sets off to inform her mother, Lily, with whom she has not spoken in many years, Helen decides first to stop at her grandmother's cottage on a remote stretch of coastline. Even this is difficult: as children Helen and Declan were sent to the cottage for several months when their father was dying of cancer, and had no contact with either of their parents during their stay.

Her reunion with her grandmother is unsettled, but not unbearable; it's not until she tries to sleep that night that thoughts of her childhood painfully emerge. In a profoundly moving evocation of how the death of a parent affects a child, Toibin tenderly describes a solitary, surreptitious return to the empty family home by 12 year old Helen upon learning of her father's demise.

"When she put her hand on the kitchen door handle, she had realized that her father's hand would have touched it, too...His hand was dead now, lying cold in his coffin." Helen then moves to her parent's bedroom, and lays out a complete set of his clothing on the bed, using a pillow to represent his head, which she covers with a cap. She uses a stack of books to prop his shoes up, to make it "...seem that he was lying there asleep and she could come and lie beside him. She placed herself on her mother's side of the bed, carefully and gingerly so as not to disturb him...She reached over and lifted the cap and kissed him where his mouth should be. She snuggled up against him."

Eventually, the increasingly deteriorating Declan, his friend Paul and another friend, Larry, Helen and Lily all encamp in the grandmother's cottage. In a masterfully orchestrated series of flashbacks and intense conversations, we learn of the depth of Helen's anger toward what she perceived as her mother's utter coldness after their father's death. The crisis of Declan's illness does bring down barriers, but it's a daunting period of reconciliation for all involved.

Toibin's exploration of the inevitable pain surrounding love between parent and child is unstinting in its directness. He sees familial love as a tightrope we all must walk, and his protagonist, Helen, is a taut portrayal of a person who has managed to only cover-up the wounds from childhood, but never really leave them behind. If there is a flaw in this almost -- but not quite -- redemptive love story, it's the rather startlingly vague ending he drops on us -- but maybe that's Toibin's point: rarely is there a pat or always cheery resolution when it comes to the ever changing emotion we call love.

Peter Handel lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and was a regular reviewer for 13 years for The San Francisco Chronicle. (510-528-0946)