

*The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (Bloomsbury)

14 April 2004

In *Saturday*, Ian McEwan's latest novel, the protagonist, a non-literary but dutifully literate neurosurgeon, reflects on the various kinds of books he is made to read by his literary daughter. He has problems with magic realism: "If anything is possible," he thinks, "nothing is significant."

That is the doctor's view, not necessarily McEwan's, but it expresses something of the suspicion realists harbour against this upstart genre. In their view, magic realism is the pretty but lazy sister of realism, shimmering with angel wings, flirting with ghosts, and caring none too much about plot, which can always be resolved by bringing on an angel or a spirit. Realism, the ugly sister, dutifully slaving away at potato-peeling and pig-sticking, glowers ferociously at her as she makes off with all the prizes and gets turned into giddy movies starring Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet.

In fact, the tension of this sibling rivalry, in the implicit disjunction between realist surface and magical event, generates much of the energy of magic realism. In *The Icarus Girl* that tension is externalised as a cultural divide, embodied in the person of Jessamy Hartshorn, the troubled, unpopular eight-year old daughter of a Nigerian mother and an English father. Unhappy in her new class in her school in England, she is prone to fits of screaming, and spends much of her time hiding in the linen cupboard.

On holiday in Nigeria, visiting her mother's extended family, Jess meets a girl her own age who seems to know all about her, converses with her in an English accent, and is eager to make friends. It soon transpires that the new friend, TillyTilly, can perform miraculous feats like unlocking locked doors and getting a fun fair operative on a Sunday. To the lonely Jess, TillyTilly is a source of strength and pleasure, and when she returns to England, she is overjoyed to discover that TillyTilly has followed her there. It is in developing the character of TillyTilly and the relationship between the two girls that Oyeyemi avoids the facile resolutions available to magic realism. The return to England in fact subjects TillyTilly's magic to the test of realism, in that it is also a confrontation of the Nigerian spirit world with the down-to-earth nastiness of an English school. In addition, there is modern psychology to contend with: Jess is taken to a sympathetic but inevitably limited child psychologist who seeks for a rational explanation for Jess's increasingly disturbed behaviour.

The reader, like the psychologist, is tempted to read TillyTilly as one of those imaginary friends that have been haunting literature for a while; but we are soon set straight when TillyTilly starts performing actions with very real consequences in the real world. Becoming more and more possessive of Jess, she takes it upon herself to "get" people who have slighted Jess: this leads to a teacher's nervous breakdown, Jess's father's severe depression, and a bad fall for a new friend.

The tale, starting off as a whimsical story of childhood fantasy, turns into a chilly, scary study of possession. TillyTilly reveals to Jess that she had a twin sister who died at birth; Jess's parents failed to have an *ibeji* statue of the dead child made to comfort and appease her, as Nigerian custom dictates. The implication would seem to be that this failure has in some way caused TillyTilly to appear to Jess, who is thus caught not only between the

spirit world and the real world, but also between Nigerian cosmology and British common sense.

It is not clear that Oyeye has worked out in her own mind exactly what TillyTilly's status is: is she the ghost of the dead twin, wanting to claim Jess's body as her own? This seems quite strongly suggested at times, only to be as strongly denied. But if she is not the ghost of the dead twin, in what relation does she stand to that twin and, for that matter, to Jess? Perhaps we are meant to accept that this is not a world in which rational explanations are possible, but, for better or for worse, we do expect even fantasies to have some logic of their own. Here events just seem to get out of hand for no evident reason other than that TillyTilly wants them to do so. Lacking any clear cause, the relentless series of batterings and bruising inflicted by TillyTilly become predictable and repetitive, and Jess's dreams and fantasies start to pall on the reader.

Even the mythical consolidation of meaning promised by the title is elusive: in what way is Jess (or TillyTilly) like Icarus? There are many references to flying, and at the end of the novel we are offered this: "She had stopped flying and had fallen a long time ago, and didn't know the way." But Icarus fell because he flew too close to the sun, which is usually taken to symbolise over-ambitious aspiration; it's very difficult to find any of this in Jess's situation.

Advance publicity has made much of the fact that the author, who was born in Nigeria and grew up in England, is twenty years old, and wrote this book while studying for her A levels. Certainly there is a very unusual talent in the making here: the writing is vivid, inventive and perceptive, and the book is well worth reading, particularly for its insights into the Anglo-Nigerian encounters. But by book's end the reader is left feeling that very few of the questions raised by the novel have been answered; and, perhaps more damagingly, that it doesn't much matter. In this instance, McEwan's neurosurgeon was right: because anything can happen, nothing is significant.