

JENNIFER ARMSTRONG. *The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. *Mary Mehan Awake*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Jennifer Armstrong's *The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan*, intended for readers of middle-school years (grades 6-9), features Walt Whitman as one of its main characters. In a blend of fact and fiction, Armstrong offers a story of an Irish family living in Swampoodle, a slum neighborhood in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. The family consists of a drunken father, his embittered son Mike who is a bricklayer working on the construction of the Capitol building, and Mairhe (Irish for Mary, pronounced Moire), a young girl who works nights in a local pub, the Shinny.

At the Shinny, Mairhe hears discussion of the war and its causes, viewed by the Irish patrons simply as a means to free slaves who will then push them even further down the economic scale in the competitive job market. Mairhe believes the Irish should not take any side in this struggle, and when Mike joins the Union army she is seized with dread and anger. Her anger is further fueled by a large man with white hair and beard who comes to the Shinny one night seeking the home of a woman whose grandson has died in an army hospital. He has brought the soldier's effects but is unfamiliar with the Irish neighborhood. He is, of course, Walt Whitman, and as Mairhe takes him to his destination he encourages her to visit the wounded, an activity she scorns out of her antipathy for the war. A second encounter with Whitman occurs when Mairhe joins a crowd hoping to catch sight of General Tom Thumb who is visiting the city.

As Mike is to go into combat at Falmouth, his father goes mad and is taken to a hospital. Mairhe is forced to live on the premises of the Shinny with the owner and his wife. By day she weaves lace to sell to dressmakers and contemplates the irony of Irish soldiers on both sides of the war, killing each other for causes to which she believes they owe no loyalty. "Can a person be two things at once?" she muses,

can we believe in one thing strongly and equally in its opposite? Can we believe in union, and in independence as well? Can we be both American and not American, Irish and not Irish? Must we choose?

Whitman, now, that man could embrace in his big arms equally the Michigan-der and the Georgian, the man of Tennessee and the man of Massachusetts the farmer of Carolina and the factory worker of New York, the woodman, the shopgirl, father and brother—all things equally within him and he carried all so light.

Though she resists the things he stands for, Mairhe accepts Whitman's help first in visiting her father in the hospital, and then in requesting a release for Mike at the office of the War Department. In the latter she is too late, and Mike is killed at Gettysburg. Stunned at the news of his death, she wanders the streets to the Capitol where she finds Whitman tending the wounded. He leads her to a dying soldier who in his delirium believes her to be his sister, and though reluctant, at Whitman's urging she yields, holding the man's hand until he dies. Only then does Whitman tell her he is a poet and recites for her lines from "Starting from Paumanok." Mairhe decides to use her earnings, originally intended to purchase Mike's release, to send her father back to Ireland.

She chooses to remain in America, with her name now "Mary," and with a new-found sense of wholeness.

The book appears to have been well-researched, but the building of the Capitol has been mistakenly placed in the 1860's. The building itself was completed in 1830, but decorations, including the Statue of Freedom that stands atop the dome were added later with Lincoln presiding over the statue's inauguration on December 2, 1863. While this is not included in the book, it is interesting to note, especially because of the way the author points up attitudes of the Irish working class toward emancipation, that the statue, designed by Thomas Crawford, was cast in a Maryland foundation by a slave, Philip Reed.

Armstrong allows Mairhe to tell her own story in a straightforward narrative mixed with dreams to create an impressionistic effect. The disunity experienced by the young girl as her family is torn apart by the war mirrors the threat of disunity to the nation, and Whitman becomes the symbolic unifier. Not able to reunite Mairhe's family, Whitman shows her the way to transcend the schism by opening herself to others and thus to achieve inner unity. It is a particularly appealing story for young people whose families may be similarly disrupted by other forces, while the immigrant aspect brings it within the scope of multicultural texts, currently much in demand in schools.

A sequel, *Mary Mehan Awake*, from the same author, was published a year later. Here Whitman figures only as a catalyst in locating work for Mary after the war ends. She has spent the remaining war years working in the army hospitals and now seeks employment as a servant girl. Whitman arranges for her to join the household of Jasper Dorsett, a naturalist, and his wife, in upstate New York. The character Dorsett strongly suggests John Burroughs. Mary leaves Washington on the day of Lincoln's funeral after writing to Whitman who is, accurately, visiting in Brooklyn. Each of the five books that make up the novel carries as epigram lines from Whitman's poems, and the book concludes with Mary's letter to Whitman telling of her plans to marry and leave for the American west.

Both these books are welcome additions to the various editions of selections from Whitman's poetry intended for children. The first of the two is especially appealing for the way it introduces the young reader to Whitman the man, before presenting the poet; the narrative thus stimulates interest that will carry the reader to the poetry. What most strongly recommends *The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan*, however, is its emphasis on Whitman the unifier who could embrace "all things equally within him [and carry] them all so light."

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