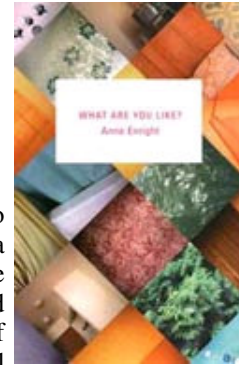


WHAT ARE YOU LIKE?

Anne Enright

Atlantic Monthly Press (\$24)

by Amy Halloran



What Are You Like? is the first novel published in America by BBC Radio Journalist in Anne Enright, and it is gruelingly beautiful. "She was small for a monster, with the slightly hurt look that monsters have and babies share, the same need to understand," begins the book, dismissing sentimentality and straightforward storytelling in one fell swoop. If you like twisted tellings of truths to be unwound over the course of a couple hundred pages, this book will pull you from sleep in the middle of the night and ask you to read it until, confused and disturbed, you can fight for sleep again.

"What are you like?" is a turn of phrase that means more in Ireland and England than it does in the U.S. The book reveals the title's context and double meaning. "What are you like?" the monster baby asks herself in the mirror when she's a woman, looking for herself in New York. "What am I like?" Evelyn, the monster baby's stepmother, asks herself and her stepchild while trying on clothes in a shop in Dublin. "The stepmother is worrying what kind of substitute mother she offers the girl, but also, she is quizzing how she looks, in a kind of a put-down: how dare she look good in clothes?" "No, it's lovely," her step-daughter Maria reassures her. What Maria thinks of the other meaning of the question we don't know, because what we know of Maria is limited by her own limitations; the grown up baby can't outgrow her monstrosities because she feels an overwhelming lack of self-knowledge.

The language Enright uses is stunning enough to be almost untrustworthy. The book flows smoothly into the reader, pouring its characters' discomforts like free shots at a bar. After a few rounds, the discerning drinker will wonder about the bartender's intentions. Is the desire to create empathy actually establishing distance? "The secret places of my wife," thinks Maria's mother, who literally eats words, who wears her clothes inside out. "She was a woman who mistook sex for everything else." "She drank until she was the smallest thing in the room, every organ in her body small and hard and old." "She had a violent need for fried eggs." Mostly, the poetry of Enright's prose is effective, but sometimes it is only affected, leaving the reader to wonder about a string of words. Did they describe an object or action or skirt it, by sheer description?

This is especially evident while Maria is in New York City. Her search for self leads to a nervous breakdown whose narration is laborious and stretches over too many pages. The tricks of phrase are taxing. Although they seem to serve a purpose, writing a trail of breadcrumbs to feed the reader who may not have witnessed a breakdown, personally or otherwise, reading Maria's dissolution is eventually boring. Still the book does not lose the reader, because most of us don't know who we are. Maria's sense of dislocation, even without the backdrop of New York City, is familiar to modernity. The quest for identification and identity are extreme in her instance, however, and the unveiling of her family secrets is well worth weathering the difficult middle for the overall pleasure of the read.

Anne Enright has a book of stories, *The Portable Virgin* and a novel, *The Wig My Father Wore*, both available across the Atlantic ocean. Hopefully *What Are You Like?* will gain her an American audience that will demand stateside releases of those titles. If this novel is representative of Enright's fiction, her writing is pithier and more intelligent than much of what is billed as contemporary literature in American and British publishing. Certainly, it is leagues beyond Bridget Fielding and for that reason alone, deserves reading in this country.

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