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INSIDE OUT America's Prison Problem

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have created strikingly original forms. Her cerebral concerns are a fine complement to her intricate narrative puzzles. *Great House* is filled with metafictional conceits and delicious literary allusions (to the great Chilean antipoet Nicanor Parra, and to Lorca and Camus, for example). Krauss's interest in the lasting effects of the Holocaust extends to other horrors perpetrated on other victims—hence her foray into Pinochet's Chile—and to the grief of missed connections between survivors: father and son, husband and wife, grieving mother and child given up for adoption.

Despite my cranky reservations about its concept, this is Krauss's best novel to date. It is utterly compelling in its willingness to explore sorrow, alienation, and grief. All her narrators reveal the depths of their spiritual isolation, and we readers come to see why a single piece of furniture ("an enormous, foreboding thing") consumes their imaginations. As the novel draws to a close, Krauss draws the narrative threads connecting the desk's owners tighter, but recognizes, too, the artifice and even the futility of solving every narrative mystery too neatly. Though the answer to a plot puzzle is written on a piece of folded paper, that paper is thrown into a fire, the identity of the mystery character never to be learned by the reader.

The antiques dealer Weisz tells us that his customers, finally recovering their loved ones' lost possessions, invariably display "disappointment, then the relief of something at last sinking away." Weisz tells us, too, that the school founded by that first-century rabbi ben Zakkai to replace the burnt temple came to be known as the Great House, and the laws its scholars debated became the Talmud. "Now every Jewish soul," his father once told him, "is built around the house that burned in that fire." Krauss's novel, too, is built around loss; it too burns hot and bright. ■

Valerie Sayers is professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. Her new novel, *The Powers*, and reprints of her previous novels will be published by Northwestern University Press.

Peter Quinn

At the Crossroads

Who Occupies This House

Kathleen Hill

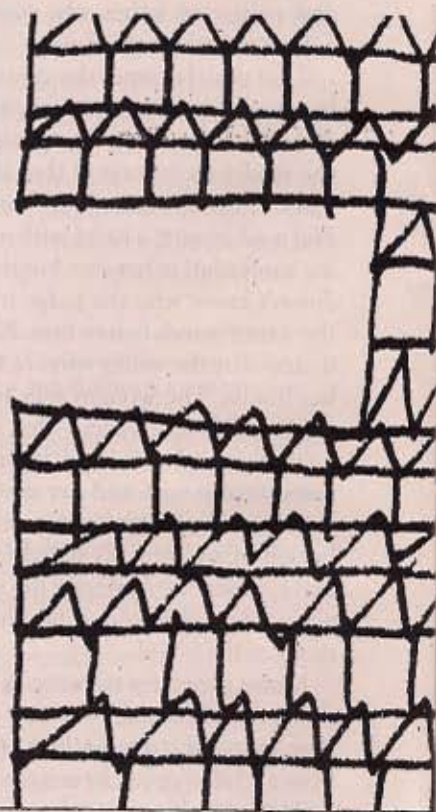
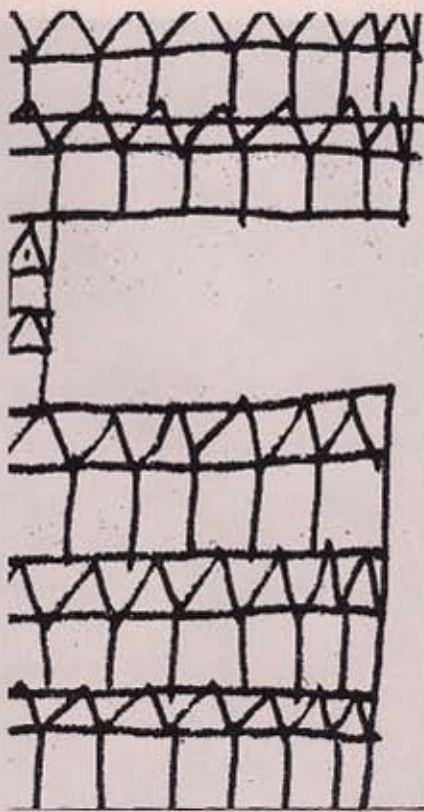
TriQuarterly, \$26.95, 272 pp.

Kathleen Hill's novel *Who Occupies This House* is an intergenerational saga that traces the material progress and emotional travails of an Irish-Catholic family from Famine Ireland to the present-day suburbs of New York City. Richly nuanced, eloquently insightful, and elegantly crafted, *Who Occupies This House* is rooted in the particularities of Irish immigration and assimilation. Yet, much like the long day's journey laid out by Eugene O'Neill in his masterful play, Hill's novel slips the entanglements of ethnic and familial specifics to take flight amid the continuities and disruptions common to the human predicament.

At the heart of Hill's novel is this truth: Contra the 1937 Pulitzer Prize-

winning play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, *You Can't Take It with You*, we not only can take it with us, but we do, at least most of it. We leave behind ephemeral accumulations and corruptible, perishable trinkets—cash, clothes, homes, etc.—that survive for a generation or two (or three or four) before they're sold, lost, trashed, or given away. We take with us what really matters: Our soul-defining loves, hopes, fears, expectations, memories, ecstasies, agonies; the dense and driven passion of individual experience that sets us apart, marks our singular passage from cradle to grave, and allows us each, no matter how lacking in celebrity or worldly significance, to re-make Whitman's boast into our epitaph: *I was large, I contained multitudes*.

Sometimes, à la pharaohs and emperors, the ruling classes or their retainers do their best to invest the material existence of the rich and famous/infamous



with permanence. Intent on resisting the remorseless erasures of time, they mummify and preserve, store and restore, build mausoleums and erect statues. In a few cases, they succeed for a while, even a millennium or two (or three or four), before their monuments join that of Shelley's forgotten potentate, Ozymandias—a trunkless, shattered “colossal wreck” stranded in the desert. In the end, the pyramids and Albert Speer's deluded blueprints notwithstanding, impermanence is as irresistible and irrevocable as Newton's laws.

As *Who Occupies This House* makes clear, there are also instances in which the forgetting is deliberate as well as sudden, in which the past is understood as crippling wound rather than ennobling inheritance, in which events fraught with physical and psychic defeat and humiliation are deliberately abandoned, left by the wayside with the unburied dead, tossed overboard in sea-crossed burials, canvas sacks weighted with stones, losses deeply mourned but left unspoken,

searing deaths and hurried requiems put under a self-imposed quarantine intended to protect generations after from ineffectual, paralyzing grief and infectious fear of inevitable ruin and abasement, tribal as well as individual.

Shrouded in silence, however, the dead persist. Gone wherever it is the dead go, the void or otherwise, taking with them everything of personal consequence—souls, scars, secrets—the dead remain a hovering, insistent presence. They disappear; and they remain. They bequeath more than a final testament of DNA, with its genetic inheritance of bodily strengths and weaknesses that snip short or spin out the time allotted to their progeny; equally, their legacies are insinuated into the thoughts and subconscious desires that, to one degree or another, continue to play out in the lives of those who follow.

The characters who inhabit *Who Occupies This House* are part of a genealogy that involves the union of several Irish families and includes the odd Yankee

eventually absorbed into the ways and religion of the Carmody/Conroy clan. In the hands of a lesser artist, this montage of courtships, marriages, births, and deaths might make for confusion. But for all its narrative complexity, Hill's story never loses momentum or clarity.

Each character is minted with an individuality that reflects the storyteller's passionate attachment:

Because it's only the people we love best who escape our easier inventions, whose inner lives compete with our own in their vast and mysterious purposes. We're driven to wonder and suppose; to turn the person we know we don't know every which way in hopes of seeing more clearly. The more we care for a person, the less we can say: he's this, he's that.... The contradictions, the ambiguities, the conflicting forces: that's what we come to know.

In recounting those conflicts and ambiguities, Hill appropriates the accoutrements of real-life memoirs—post cards, diaries, photographs, mementos,

SKILLIN SOCIETY PROFILE



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etc. Succeeding generations try to decipher some final truth from the clues they are left. But the answer remains elusive. Each generation, as different as it might believe itself to be from the one that came before, occupies the same "mysterious crossroads of naked spirit and the circumstances with which it must struggle: that perplexing intersection."

The house referred to in the title of Hill's book is of the spacious, gracious, and comfortable type erected in the suburbs of the early twentieth century. It is sanctuary and stage for several generations, home to familial holidays and domestic heartbreaks, before—inevitably—new owners take possession. Books and furniture are dispersed, given away, or sold.

What is left is the undying memory of a death-bed moment between mother and daughter that redeems and transcends the distances inflicted by profound, trivial misunderstandings:

When I entered the room Kate was looking out the window but soon enough the green floodlights swung around in my direction as I stood by the bed and settled on my face. And there it was, the great burning gaze of love, blazing straight at me. I didn't know what to say...and in a blind attempt to get out of the way laid my face against the bones of hers. For a moment we were silent. Then, from my own mouth, I heard the words: "I'll carry you. Always."

After a moment, very slowly, from Kate, in a thick whisper: "And I will carry you."

Pigeonholers, beware: *Who Occupies This House* evades easy definition. Part historical fiction, part fictional memoir, part family history, the only category into which it snugly fits is truly memorable literature, Irish American in its primary focus but containing multitudes and encompassing far wider worlds. In language at once lean and ripe with meaning, it frequently blurs the line between prose and poetry. Every page pulsates with truths that only the lies of fiction can reach. I'll carry its meaning, music, and language. Always. ■

Peter Quinn is the author most recently of the novel *The Man Who Never Returned* (Overlook).