

A Long Long Way by Sebastian Barry. Faber and Faber 2005.

Although this is not an especially long novel it packs an enormous amount within its 292 pages.

A Long Long Way is the story of Willie Dunn, son of a senior officer in the Dublin Metropolitan Police, and brought up with his sisters by his father after the death of their mother. In 1914, Willie joins the British army to fight for the Allies in the First World War, and the novel is largely, though not completely, preoccupied with his experiences.

Sebastian Barry, a born Dubliner, writes about his countrymen as only an Irishman could, and for those who know and love Ireland and the Irish this is a story redolent of the people of the Emerald Isle, suffused with their humour, their bravery, their dogged determination, and subtle and not so subtle anarchism.

The characters in A Long Long Way are incredibly rich; foremost among them Willie himself, his father, his sergeant Christy Moran, and the Captains Pasley and Sheridan, to name a few.

This is a novel about the tensions between patriotisms and between the people who espouse them, about the camaraderie of fighting men, about lost love, and about the common decency that exists in some surprising places. This is one of the best novels that I have read this year and I warmly recommend it to anyone who is interested in its themes, or just enjoys superlative fiction.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh