

Fiction

Exploring the silence of men

Mary O'Donnell's new short stories touch the core of male experience, writes Ciaran Carty

ELIZABETH Jane Howard, wife of Kingsley Amis and mother of Martin, famously remarked that only "intelligent" men bothered to read fiction written by women, but the rest weren't open-minded enough. "It got up the noses of some male readers at the time," says Mary O'Donnell.

With Doris Lessing winning the Nobel Prize and Anne Enright the Booker Prize, such misogyny is on the wane, apart from occasional dismissive references to chick-lit. O'Donnell's wide-ranging new collection of short stories *Storm Over Belfast* elegantly implies the absurdity of literary gender bias. Several of her protagonists are men at odds with the world – a father with ambivalent feelings towards his teenage daughter and her friends, a man trying to break with a woman in a relationship that has become impossible, a husband nagged by his wife into disciplining their son, a son who doesn't want to disappoint his liberal parents. She probes their insecurity and frustrations with an intuitive understanding that touches the core of male experience.

"The man in fiction is too often at an oblique and obstructive angle to the fulfilment of a woman's life," she says. "I have to say many of the stories in my first collection *Strong Pagans* were a bit

like that. The man was an impediment."

The Oscar-winning film *American Beauty* has been influential in prompting her to put the male psyche under closer scrutiny. "I liked the way it explored the silence of men, that inner silence which seems not to have any echoing response."

This attempt to get under the skin of men is a facet of her fiction, rather than an agenda. Still less should she be seen as a voice of the Irish middle classes. "Some of my characters are indeed middle class but that's not the point. The point is that they are people who are living and working and just getting on with it. They are people who have breathed in the oppression of the 1970s and 1980s, as I certainly did.

"One doesn't write to support any class or not. It's not a supportive thing if the literature happens sometimes to be set among middle-class characters. It's simply where the story is set. What's interesting is these characters and what they are doing within their milieu."

Mary O'Donnell grew up in Monaghan. Her father was a creamery manager originally from Wexford. Many of her summers were spent in her grandfather's home near New Ross. It's the setting for her book's elegiac