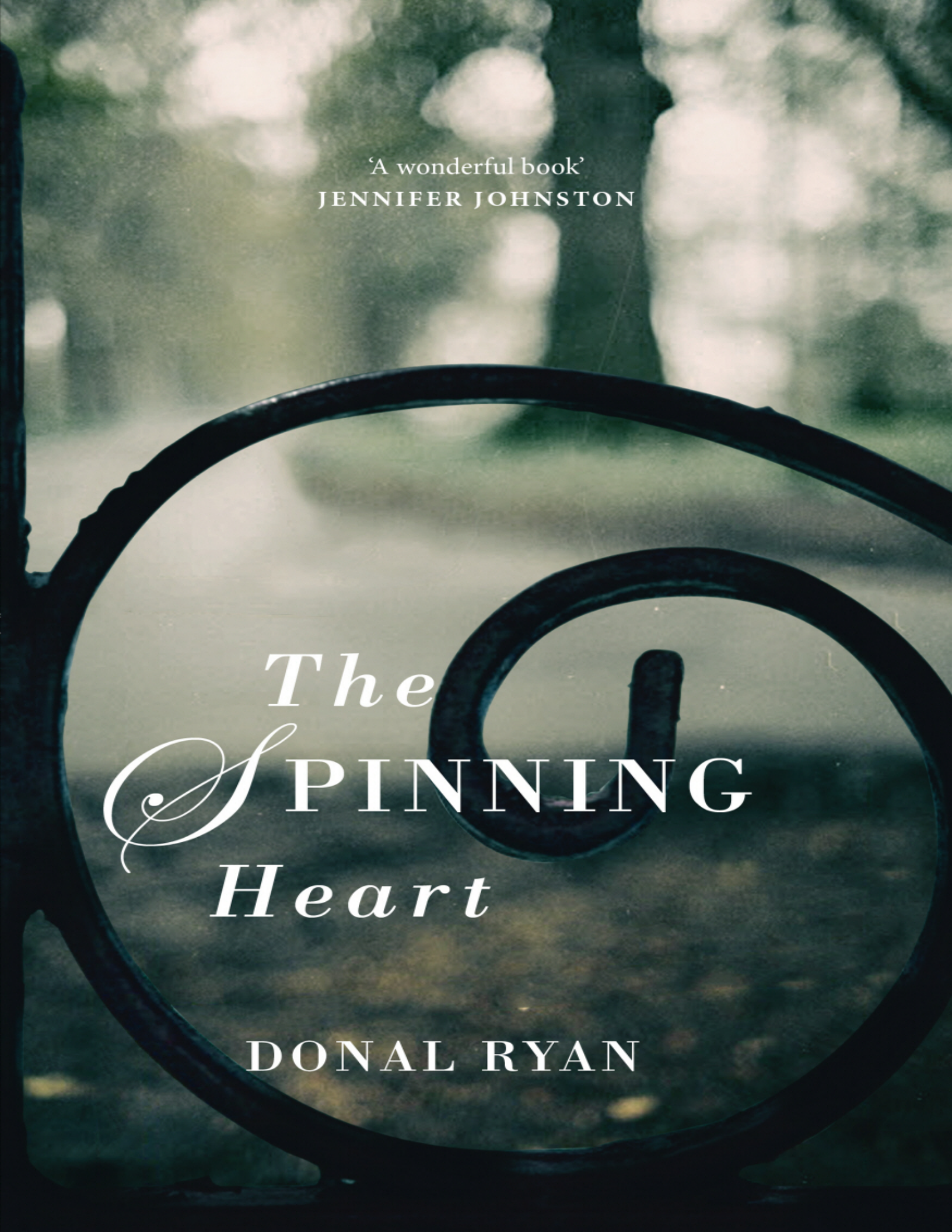
'A wonderful book'
JENNIFER JOHNSTON
The
SPINNING
Heart
DONAL RYAN

About the Book

‘My father still lives back the road past the weir in the cottage I was reared in. I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn’t yet missed a day of letting me down.’

In the aftermath of Ireland’s financial collapse, dangerous tensions surface in an Irish town. As violence flares, the characters face a battle between public persona and inner desires. Through a chorus of unique voices, each struggling to tell their own kind of truth, a single authentic tale unfolds.

The Spinning Heart speaks for contemporary Ireland like no other novel. Wry, vulnerable, all too human, it captures the language and spirit of rural Ireland and with uncanny perception articulates the words and thoughts of a generation. Technically daring and evocative of Patrick McCabe and J.M. Synge, this novel of small-town life is witty, dark and sweetly poignant.

Donal Ryan’s brilliantly realized debut announces a stunning new voice in literary fiction.

Contents

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The SPINNING *Heart*

DONAL RYAN

This book is dedicated to the memory of Dan Murphy

Bobby

MY FATHER STILL lives back the road past the weir in the cottage I was reared in. I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn't yet missed a day of letting me down. He smiles at me; that terrible smile. He knows I'm coming to check is he dead. He knows I know he knows. He laughs his crooked laugh. I ask is he okay for everything and he only laughs. We look at each other for a while and when I can no longer stand the stench off of him, I go away. Good luck, I say, I'll see you tomorrow. You will, he says back. I know I will.

There's a red metal heart in the centre of the low front gate, skewered on a rotating hinge. It's flaking now; the red is nearly gone. It needs to be scraped and sanded and painted and oiled. It still spins in the wind, though. I can hear it creak, creak, creak as I walk away. A flaking, creaking, spinning heart.

When he dies, I'll get the cottage and the two acres that's left. He drank out Granddad's farm years ago. After I have him buried, I'll burn the cottage down and piss on the embers and I'll sell the two acres for as much as I can get. Every day he lives lowers the price I'll get. He knows that too; he stays alive to spite me. His heart is caked with muck and his lungs are shrivelled and black, but still he manages to draw in air and wheeze and cough and spit it back out. I was left go from my job two months ago and it was the best medicine he could have got. It gave him an extra six months, I'd say. If he ever finds out how Pokey Burke shafted me, he'll surely make a full recovery. Pokey could

apply to be beatified then, having had a miracle ascribed to him.

What reason would I have ever had not to trust Pokey Burke? He was young when I started working for him – three years younger than me – but the whole parish had worked for his auld fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping. Pokey Burke was called after the Pope: Seán Pól, his parents christened him. But his brother Eamonn was not yet two years old when his parents brought the new baby home and he decided the new baby was Pokey and everybody agreed away with him and little Seán Pól was stuck with Pokey for a lifetime. And beyond, if he leaves anyone behind that will remember him or talk about him when he's gone.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN something was up the day last year when Mickey Briars came in asking about his pension. Did ye boys know we're all meant to be in a proper pension? We didn't Mickey. Ya, with some crowd called *SIFF*. A proper pension like, not just the state one. Tis *extra*. Mickey's left hand was outstretched. It held the invisible weight of what he should have been given but wasn't. He tapped out his list of ungiven things, a bony finger slapping on sundried, limeburnt flesh. There were tears in his yellow eyes. He was after being shafted. Robbed. And not even by a man, but by a little prick. That's what he couldn't get over.

He went over and started to beat the prefab door until Pokey opened it a crack and threw an envelope at him and slammed the door again, just as Mickey put his head down and went to ram him like an old billy goat. Mickey's hard old skull splintered that door and it very nearly gave way. Pokey must have shat himself inside. I want my fuckin pension you little prick, Mickey roared and roared. I want my fuckin pension and the rest of my stamps. Come out you bollocks till I kill you. For a finish he went on a rampage around the place, turning over barrows and pulling

formwork apart and when he picked up a shovel and started swinging, we all ran for cover. Except poor innocent Timmy Hanrahan: he only stood grinning back to his two ears like the gom that he is.

Auld Mickey Briars lamped Timmy Hanrahan twice across both sides of his innocent young head before we subdued him. We locked Mickey into the back of Seanie Shaper's Hiace until he became more philosophical for himself. Then we left him out and we all dragged crying, bleeding Timmy up the road to Ciss's and fed him pints for the evening. Mickey Briars softened his Jameson with tears and told Timmy he was sorry, he was always fond of him, he was a grand boy so he was, it was only that he thought he was laughing at him. I wouldn't laugh at you, Mickey, Timmy said. I know you wouldn't son. I know you wouldn't.

Pokey had shouted after us to put the first round of drink on his slate. There wasn't a man of us put his hand in his pocket all evening. Poor Timmy puked his guts up early on in the session and we slagged him – good-naturedly of course – and he laughed through his snots and his tears and the blood on his head caked up grand and came off in one thin scab before we sent him walking home for himself with a bag of chips and three battered sausages and a dose of concussion that could have easily killed him.

To this day there's a quare auld draw on one of his eyeballs, as if it's not able to keep time with its comrade. But it makes no odds to Tim; if there's a mirror in that house he hardly pays it any heed. And if he's thicker than he was before, who's to say? Who's to care? You don't need brains to shovel shit and carry blocks and take orders from rat-faced little men who'll use you all day and laugh at you all night and never pay in your stamps.

That's the worst of the whole thing. We all went in to draw our stamps and they only laughed at us. Stamps? What stamps? There wasn't a stamp paid in for any of us, nor a screed to the Revenue, either. I showed the little

blonde girl at the hatch my last payslip. You could clearly see what was taken out: PRSI, PAYE, Income levy, pension. She held it in front of her with her nose wrinkled up like I was after wiping my armpit with it. Well? I said. Well what? What's the story? There's no story sir. I wasn't on the computer as an employee of Pokey Burke or anyone else. Did you never look for a P60 from your employer? A what, now? You're some fool, she said with her eyes. I know I am, my red cheeks said back. I think she started to feel sorry for me then. But when she looked at the line of goms behind me – Seanie Shaper, innocent Timmy, fat Rory Slattery and the rest of the boys, all clutching their dirty payslips – she started to feel more sorry for herself.

TRIONA LETS ON she doesn't blame me for being taken for a fool. Sure why would you have ever checked, love? It wasn't just you. He fooled everyone. My lovely, lovely Triona, she fairly let herself down when she married me. She could have gone with any of them smart boys that got the real money out of the boom: the architects, solicitors, auctioneers. They were all after her. She went for me bald-headed though, as if to spite them. She put her hand in mine one night inside in town after the disco and that was that; she never let go of me. She saw more in me than I knew was there. She made me, so she did. She even softened my father. How did you pull her, he wanted to know. She won't stay with you. She's too good for you. You're her bit of rough, he said. All women goes through this auld phase. Ya, I thought, like my mother, except her auld phase didn't end until she died, twisted and knotted up and spent, exhausted, pure solid burnt out from him.

And now I can't pay for the messages. Christ on a bike. I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. *Foreman*, I was, clearing a grand a week. Set for life. Houses would never stop going up. I'd see babies like our own being pushed around the village below

and think: lovely, work for the future, they'll all need their own houses some day too. We knew Pokey was a prick, but none of us cared. What matter what kind of a man he was, once the bank kept giving him money to build more and more? Once they buried that boy of the Cunliffes years ago and his auld auntie grabbed that land and divided it out among the bigshots, we all thought we were feckin elected.

That poor boy knew more than any of us. I remember when they carried him up to the Height, how the Penroses wheeled little one-legged Eugene out on to the street as he passed on his way to lie between his mother and father, and Eugene spat on the hearse and the big dirty gob slid down along the side window. He couldn't stop blackguarding that boy even and he dead. I remember him well. He got kicked around the place and all I ever did was laugh. He was the quietest boy you'd meet, he never threw a shape nor said a cross word, and he ended up getting shot down like a mad dog. And everyone was glad. We all hated him. We all believed the newspapers, over the evidence of our own eyes and ears and a lifetime of knowing what we knew to be true. We wanted to hate him. He hadn't a hope.

I WAS as smart as any of the posh lads in school. I was well able for the English and geography and history. All those equations in physics and maths made sense to me. I couldn't ever let on I knew anything, though, that would have been suicide in my gang. I did pass maths even though I know I could have done honours. I never opened my mouth in English. A lad from the village wrote an essay one time and Pawsy Rogers praised him from a height; he said it showed great flair and imagination. He got kicked the whole way back to the village.

I had that King Lear's number from the start, well before the teacher started to break things down slowly for the thick lads: he was a stupid prick. He had it all and wanted more, he wanted the whole world to kiss his arse. I

had Goneril and Regan pegged for bitches too, and I knew that Cordelia was the one who really, truly loved him. She wouldn't lie to him, no matter how much he wanted her to. You're a man and no more, she said, you're not perfect, but I love you. Cordelia was true of heart. There aren't many Cordelias in this world. Triona is one. I was scared before I knew I was, of facing down Josie Burke, and she told me. I was scared, imagine, even though I was in the right.

Pokey Burke left his father and mother to mop up after him. The auld lad said he didn't know where Pokey was, but I knew he was lying. He owes me money, Josie, I said. Does he now? Did he not pay you a fine wage? He was looking down at me from the third step before his front door. I might as well have had a cap in my hand and called him sir. My stamps. My pension. My redundancy. I could hear my own voice shaking. The state looks after all that when fellas goes bust, he said. Go in as far as town to the dole office. He said no more, only kept looking down at me, down along his nose. Right so. Right so, I will. I didn't say I'd been there already, we all had, and it turned out Pokey had rowed us up the creek and left us there. I should have said I'd been on to the taxman and the welfare inspectors and the unions and they'd soon soften Pokey's cough, but I hadn't and I didn't and I turned away with a pain in my heart for the man I'd thought I was.

Triona said don't mind them love, don't think about them, the Burkes were always users and crooks dressed up like the salt of the earth. Everyone's seen their real faces now. The whole village knows what they've done. You're a worker and everyone knows it. People look up to you. They'll be fighting each other to take you on once things pick up. Everyone around here knows you're the only one can keep the reins on them madmen. Who else could be a foreman over the lads around here? Who else could knock a day's work out of fat Rory Slattery? And stop Seanie Shaper from trying to get off with himself? I laughed then,

through my invisible tears. I couldn't stand myself. I couldn't stand her smiling through her fear and having to coax me out of my misery like a big, sulky child. I wish to God I could talk to her the way she wants me to, besides forever making her guess what I'm thinking. Why can't I find the words?

Right so, right so, right so. Imagine being such a coward and not even knowing it. Imagine being so suddenly useless.

I THOUGHT ABOUT killing my father all day yesterday. There are ways, you know, to kill a man, especially an old, frail man, which wouldn't look like murder. It wouldn't be murder anyway, just putting the skids under nature. It's only badness that sustains him. I could hold a cushion or a pillow over his mouth and nose. He'd flail about, but I'd bat his hands softly back down. I wouldn't mark him. His strength is gone from him. I wouldn't like to see his eyes while I killed him; he'd be laughing at me, I know well he would. He'd still be telling me I'm only a useless prick, a streak of piss, a shame to him, even and he dying. He wouldn't plead, only laugh at me with his yellow eyes.

I was always jealous of Seanie Shaper growing up. Any time I ever called to Seanie's, I'd hear them laughing when I got to the bend before their house. They'd all be roaring laughing at some aping their father would be at, and their mother would be cooking and telling them to shut up their fooling but she'd be laughing herself. The odd time, I'd stay and eat, and Seanie and his brothers and sister would take ages to finish because they'd be laughing so much. Their father was wiry and kind-looking. He had a lovely smile. He'd warm you with it. You knew there was nothing in him only good nature. He had a big pile of old *Ireland's Own* magazines he'd look for when they had the dinner ate. He needed them for the song words. They'd all roll their eyes and let on to be disgusted but still and all they'd clap and

sing along while he pounded out the songs: ‘The Rathlin Bog’ and ‘The Rising of the Moon’ and ‘Come Out Ye Black and Tans’. It twisted my soul, the pleasure of that house, the warmth of it and the laughter; it was nearly unbearable to be there and to have half my mind filled with the chill and the gloom and the thick silence of our cottage. I hated Seanie Shaper for having a father like that and not even knowing his luck.

MY FATHER never drank a drop until the day the probate was finished on Granddad’s farm. Paulie Jackman sent off a cheque that same day to the Revenue for the inheritance tax. He handed my father Granddad’s savings in cash. Then my father went to Ciss Brien’s and ordered a Jameson and a pint and drank them down and vomited them up and Ciss herself, who was still going strong that time, gave him a sog into the mouth of her experienced fist for himself. It took him months to train himself to be a drinker. He never wavered from his goal. He paid no heed to pleas or censure. He was laughed at and talked about and watched in wonderment by the old guard of Ciss’s front bar; here was a man they always knew yet hardly knew at all, a quiet son of a small farmer who was never known for intemperance or loudness, a cute fucker they all thought, and he drinking out a farm. They loved him, or loved the thought of him, what they thought he was: a man who could easily have had a good life who chose instead their life: spite and bitterness and age-fogged glasses of watery whiskey in dark, cobwebbed country bars, shit-smeared toilets, blood-streaked piss, and early death. He could have helped it but didn’t. They couldn’t help it and loved him for being worse than them. He was the king of the wasters. He bought drink for men he didn’t like and listened to their yarns and their sodden stories. He gave an eye filled with darkness they could mistake for desire to women he thought were only common whores. The day he spent the