



Book Recommendation

Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan

I am currently editing the manuscript of the first fiction book that I have attempted to write. As I do, I am reading other writers' – particularly other writers of fiction – books with a keen eye to the way they are written. I am doing my best to avoid comparisons which diminish me – and all my wellbeing reading is called upon to keep myself from sabotaging my efforts with self-criticism arising from comparison – and to learn from these writers so that I may become a better writer.

Claire Keegan's book, *Small Things Like These* is one such book by a writer who takes my breath away. It would be easy for me to be discouraged from writing by reading Keegan's book, but I know I need to ground myself with self-compassionate comments like, "This is your first attempt. Emerging writers are just that – emerging. It is not age-bound. It is your first attempt." Having made these reassuring comments to myself, I am able to turn my focus to what I can learn from Keegan's writing.

The first feature that struck me was the sense of place that Keegan creates. Here are the opening lines:

In October there were yellow trees. Then the clocks went back the hour and the long November winds came in and blew, and stripped the trees bare. In the town of New Ross, chimneys threw out smoke which fell away and drifted off in hairy, drawn-out strings before dispersing along the quays, and soon the River Barrow, dark as stout, swelled up with rain.

How evocative this description of a Northern hemisphere town is! It is a visual feast. The colour of the trees as precursors to them falling; the man-made time of the clocks juxtaposed with Nature's time – the seasons; the wind-blown smoke described with the striking comparison to "hairy drawn-out strings" and the River Barrow, the uniquely apt comparison to the black ale, stout. This description immediately conjures that place with its specific details and imagery and controlled, fresh language. It is economical but generous too.

I learn from Keegan the richness of close, sensory imagery when creating a sense of place. I, as the reader, am gifted a picture for my mind's eye, upon which the narrative is overlaid. As I edit my manuscript in the coming days, my endeavour will be to anchor my tale in its unique place, to bring it to life in the minds of my prospective readers. I will not concern myself, or more probably, I will control the impulse to compare my efforts unfavourably with Keegan's, as I choose my words and craft my sentences.

In introducing this book to our **my manifesto** blog readers, what is my point?



We are all at a stage in our learning, no matter our age, education, or background, which is *our* stage. We can all learn more, but what we learn, and what we are receptive to learn, will differ for each one of us. We can learn from others – the teachers, the philosophers, the thinkers, the poets - if we open our minds and become like the child who has encountered this learning for the first time.

Furthermore, this choice, Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, is a masterful exemplar for the writer. Together with its mastery though, is a powerful study of human nature in circumstances which pit the protagonist, Bill Furlong, with choices which take him to the very edge of his moral code. Experiencing this space with him, we are prompted to reflect upon what we stand for.

Have you done your work?