

Observer Effect BY KATHRYN HUGHES

By KATHRYN HUGHES

A MIDDLE-AGED English artist arrives on an island off the west coast of Ireland in the summer of 1979. Lloyd, the protagonist of Audrey Magee's new novel, "The Colony," hopes to revitalize his career by spending three months painting the landscape and

THE COLONY

By Audrey Magee

376 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$28.

its handful of inhabitants. In his optimistic moments, he imagines making work that will get him talked about as the "Gauguin of the Northern Hemisphere," doing for this rocky Atlantic outpost what the French primitivist once did for Tahiti. At the very least, he will please the "half-wife" he has left behind in London who doubles as his dealer and has recently taken to telling him that his paintings are derivative and dull.

After a lurching, punishing crossing from the mainland in a currach (he finds

KATHRYN HUGHES is a critic and the author, most recently, of "Victorians Undone."

the motorboat inauthentic), Lloyd is dismayed to discover that he is not the only visitor with designs on the island. A French linguist who goes by JP has returned for a fifth summer to complete his longitudinal study on the inhabitants' use of Gaelic, fieldwork that he hopes will get him a Ph.D. JP berates the younger inhabitants for occasionally lapsing into English and mourns the fact that so many have already emigrated to Dublin, London and Boston.

Magee tracks her two unlikable protagonists as they ransack the island for their own ends, each believing that they have its best interests at heart. To underscore that this is, in microcosm, the story of England's ancient and continuing colonization of Ireland, Magee drops in news bulletins from the mainland that chart 1979's summer of sectarian violence between the Provisional I.R.A. and Protestant paramilitaries. Tit-for-tat assassinations become the background mood music, with the sickening crescendo arriving at the end of August, when Lord Mountbatten, the queen's cousin and a war hero, is blown up with his family while on holiday in County Sligo.

Magee keeps a cool distance from these atrocities, just as she did in her previous novel, "The Undertaking," set in Nazi Ger-



ARIELLE MARTINS

many. Her voice is spare to the point of austerity, with paragraphs sometimes no more than a word long and short lines spilling vertically down the page in what looks, at first glance, like poetry. This limber form allows Magee to plunge into the interior lives of her characters, who have plenty to say to themselves about the power struggles playing out before them, even if they tend to keep quiet in company.

Most notable is Mairéad, the beautiful young "widow island woman," who has lost her immediate family in a fishing disaster

and now finds herself scrapped over by the remaining men on the island — JP (with whom she is sleeping), Lloyd (for whom she is posing naked) and Francis (her late husband's brother, who approves of neither). Under the influence of Lloyd, Mairéad's teenage son, James — whom JP insists on renaming Séamus — is beginning to explore painting for himself. The boy's naïf style is a revelation to Lloyd, pointing to fertile directions in which his own work might travel. Questions of cultural appropriation arise as James comes to resent the way in which "Mr. Lloyd" (we never learn his Christian name) has "stolen" his art.

"The Colony" is a novel of ideas and at times those ideas can feel schematic, especially when JP is given a back story for his linguistic zealotry that draws on France's historical occupation of Algeria. In general, though, Magee builds her world with a rich particularity that never defaults to the off-the-peg lyricism that often marks novels about rural Ireland. The documentary interludes, meanwhile, anchor the story in the brutal political realities of Ireland during a fateful summer, while acting as a reminder of imperialism's broader legacy around the world. □