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**FICTION: *Our Lady of Greenwich Village* By Dermot McEvoy** Skyhorse, 336pp. \$24.95

DERMOT McEVOY seems to have this thing about ghosts and apparitions. In his 2002 novel, *Terrible Angel*, the shade of Michael Collins emerged from purgatory and materialised on the streets of contemporary New York, and in his latest, the blessed Virgin Mary appears, unbidden, to influence the outcome of a hard-fought campaign for a lower-Manhattan congressional seat waged by an Irish-born émigré, a political consultant-turned reform candidate named Wolfe Tone O'Rourke.

Subtitled *A Novel of Church, State, Politics, and Kindred Spirits*, *Our Lady of Greenwich Village* is all of that, but on another level it is a loving paean to yet another ghost - that of the Lion's Head, the legendary Greenwich Village watering hole that shuttered its doors a dozen years ago.

Since its passing, the Lion's Head has been celebrated (as "The Last Great Saloon" by the late Frederick Exley), lampooned (as "The Monkey's Paw" by the folksinger-turned novelist Kinky Friedman), and, more recently, eulogised in song (*Comedians and Angels*, the title cut of Tom Paxton's latest album).

As Pete Hamill described it in his memoir *A Drinking Life*, the Lion's Head was "a glorious mixture of newspapermen, painters, musicians, seamen, ex-communists, priests and nuns, athletes, stockbrokers, politicians, and folksingers, bound together in the levelling democracy of drink".

Hogan's Moat, the centrepiece of this deft political satire, shares more than its address - 59 Christopher Street - with the late, lamented saloon. Historical figures from the bar's storied past intermingle with McEvoy's barely-disguised fictive characters. Even the resident dope dealer ("the Weasel" in Friedman's *Greenwich Killing Time*), is reprised here - as "Fischbein, the house Pablo Escobar" of Hogan's Moat.

Although it enjoyed a reputation as a "writers' bar", the Lion's Head had a long-running political history as well. Robert F Kennedy was sitting at a table in the back room when he made his decision to run for president in 1968. The Head was the campaign headquarters when longshoreman-turned-novelist Joe Flaherty managed the Norman Mailer-Jimmy Breslin (for mayor and New York City council president) ticket in 1969, and a year later, gay activist Doug Ireland, operating almost exclusively from a Lion's Head bar stool, orchestrated Bella Abzug's successful race for congress. John V Lindsay and Eugene McCarthy drank there, though not on the same night, and the Lion's Head also served as the arena for Flaherty's spectacular one-punch knockout, with a left hook, following a philosophical disagreement with Democrat senator John Culver (Iowa).

While the saloon milieu provides the subtext, *Our Lady*'s plotline revolves, in flashback, around a 2000 election that sees O'Rourke march into battle against Republican incumbent Jackie Swift, whose anti-abortion fervour has earned the backing of the New York Archdiocese.

Jackie might be a caricature of the addle-brained zealots swept into congress in the early George W Bush era (in a McEvoy pun only a Republican mother could love, Swift and his wife christen their newborn daughter "Julie Annie") but, true to the tradition of the Lion's Head, where limousine liberals were regularly skewered, *Our Lady*'s cast of wisecracking bar-room denizens harpoons the icons of the left with equal enthusiasm.

For example, Benedict "Cyclops" Reilly, a one-eyed newspaperman whose dispatches function as a sort of a Greek chorus to move the narrative along, notes, correctly, of the *New York Times* that "the only strike they ever supported was in f\*\*\*ing Poland !" Another saloon wag dryly describes New York's ostensibly influential Liberal Party: "It *isn't* liberal, and it isn't a party ."

In McEvoy's hilariously cynical presentation of Manhattan politics, the endorsement of an organisation called the Village Queer Democrats is deemed so vital that a heterosexual office-seeker, fraudulently but enthusiastically, climbs *into* the closet.

McEvoy's narrative makes frequent references to both Hollywood and literary trivia, and while the political aspects of the plot owe a debt not only to *The Last Hurrah* , but to Flaherty's campaign memoir, *Managing Mailer* , the religious angle seems to be one part *Da Vinci Code* , one part *The Song of Bernadette* .

When Jackie Swift winds up in St Vincent's ER after passing out during a cocaine-addled bout of rough sex, a bumbling campaign aide concocts a preposterous alibi and tells the press the congressman was visited by an apparition of the Virgin Mary, and when the archbishop of New York endorses the vision, Jackie is forced to go along with the cover story.

But even as Vatican bagmen and corrupt papal nuncios keep popping up in an attempt to rig the election, what seems to be the *actual* blessed Virgin starts appearing to O'Rourke, and the shade of his long-dead Irish great-grandmother to his African-American girlfriend, Simone.

By this time, the astute reader will probably be wondering when the Weasel's drugs are going to wear off.

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