The rifts and rhythms of a vanished Southie

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By Perrin Ireland | April 6, 2008

Map of Ireland
By Stephanie Grant
Scribner, 197 pp., $22

It's 1974, and the sometimes volatile busing of black students into South Boston (and white students out of South Boston) is in full throttle. In a state of barely contained terror, Ann Ahern, a white 16-year-old from Southie, is riding the afternoon black bus with a black classmate, Rochelle, out of Southie and through Roxbury. At Rochelle's insistence, Ann has scooted down onto the floor of the bus to conceal the potentially inflammatory sight of a white girl as the bus passes through the predominantly black neighborhood.

While she lives just minutes away, Ann has never been to Roxbury and asks Rochelle to describe what she sees. Rochelle acquiesces and reports on the luncheonette, the package store, the medical supply store, the elderly woman, the poodle, the brother with the sheepskin coat, and their interactions. "To tell the truth," Ann tells us in this conversational, first-person narrative, "I liked the sound of her voice. Her particular way of describing."

Stephanie Grant's voice, her particular way of describing, is the star of this well-written second novel (after the assured "The Passion of Alice," which was long-listed for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction). Ann, a tough, sympathetic redhead who'd been told her freckled face was the map of Ireland, lives with her mother and brothers in the Old Harbor housing project, considered a step above the Old Colony project, but a step down from the East End, where the family lived before her father abandoned them (this predominantly Irish-Catholic geographic terrain has been explored in Michael Patrick MacDonald's nonfiction book "All Souls: A Family Story From Southie," which Grant includes in her acknowledgments).

Ann, who capitalizes "white" as well as "black" in her narrative, serves as a sensitive guide to an era. Once she and two female black acquaintances are emerging from a wrecked car on a highway, and watch with trepidation as a white man who'd stopped his car approaches. The man chats with them, and tells them his story. "He'd been a hippie then a baker. When he turned forty he gave up and went to law school. His wife made jewelry. I realized this was his way of saying: I won't harm you."

South Boston, Ann says, "is what they call a peninsula, which means water on three sides, which means you have to make an effort to leave it." At one point she reflects that she'd never leave "Southie my whole useless life, no matter how far I went." Challenging this sentiment becomes the landscape of the novel, which brings the question of choice into sharp and painful focus. "Always, always," Ann says of her mother, who joined the busing protesters, "she made you choose one side of yourself over the rest."

For Ann, choice is irrelevant to sexual identity. "It may surprise you to know, but everybody in Southie knew that I liked girls only, and liked them that way." Neither does the choice in question, apparently, concern religion; Ann has rejected but not exorcised her Catholic faith, although at one point she did consider becoming a nun because she liked "the way people saw you as set apart, but not in a way that enraged them." Ann is also set apart by a history of minor pyromania, and setting fire to a telephone booth leads to a series of enforced (and state-supported) visits to a psychologist.

The inciting incident in this intermittently incendiary novel (Ann's sexual responses also frequently employ references to heat and flame) is the appearance at Ann's high school of a black French teacher, who is actually from France, although originally from Senegal (but "who on earth would admit that?" Ann thinks). Ann becomes infatuated with Mademoiselle Eugénie. "The color shone off Mademoiselle Eugénie's skin, and I realized then, for the first time, that black had other colors in it." Her crush on Eugénie, and later on Rochelle, propels her on a journey that takes her out of South Boston, at least temporarily, and thrusts her into a relationship with black militants.

Ann is forced, eventually, to make a choice, an unthinkable choice. Despite glorious bursts of humor, her loneliness is palpable, and at times the novel feels like sustained heartbreak.

Ann's descriptions of life in Southie are so compelling that some readers may miss those passages, with their very specific, idiosyncratic details, when she steps out of this world she knows best into the wider world. But Grant emerges on the other side with her firm grip on originality, and ultimately, in spite of the wonderful epigraph by

Heraclitus - "Geography is fate" - Ann represents not so much her community, but herself: a documented pyromaniac who intertwines an intense response to love and its loss with an abhorrence of becoming a Benedict Arnold or "a John Dean."

Early on, she muses that "the problem with the movies was that they made you think you had more experience than you actually did." That, too, is the gift of a well-worded novel. "Map of Ireland" is admirably ambitious, bold, and smart.

Perrin Ireland is the author of the novels "Ana Imagined" and, most recently, "Chatter." ■