Two or three group members had expressed an interest in reading and discussing this novel, so, although it has some similarities with an earlier book discussed (*The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*), as Sebastian Barry is an author whose work we hadn’t as yet looked at it was decided to read and discuss it. Unfortunately three members weren’t able to attend the meeting, but those who were present had an interesting and thoughtful discussion.

The author, originally seen as a playwright and poet, has, since the 1990s, been considered one of Ireland’s leading novelists and *The Secret Scripture* was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2008. His novels feature characters inspired by his real-life ancestors; in this work Roseanne, the nearly 100 year-old woman who has been in a mental hospital for decades, and whose written account of her life forms one strand of the dual, first-person narrative structure (which we felt was very effective), was inspired by Barry’s own great-aunt. We all found her an interesting and believable character and loved the beautiful descriptive passages where she is remembering the Irish landscapes of her youth. In fact, throughout the novel we found the sense of Ireland, through the language, characters and themes, extremely powerful.

Dr Grene, her psychiatrist, seemed to us a less interesting character but we thought his angst over his failing marriage and doubts about his effectiveness as a doctor were well portrayed.

There were slight doubts about some of the coincidences in the plot, particularly the secret that is finally uncovered and that links Roseanne to Dr Grene, but for one member the quality of the writing and way the themes are handled overcame such doubts. A couple of members found the ending disappointing, but it was suggested that the taking by Dr Grene of a rose cutting from the garden of the small house at the beach where Roseanne was virtually incarcerated for several years is a neat way both of linking him to his late wife (who loved the flowers) and of suggesting that as Roseanne’s life will soon end, her spirit will survive through him.

Much of the novel revolves around the telling of stories and true and false memories, and we all appreciated the light shone by these stories on the themes of Irish history at the time of the civil war in the 1920s, rural poverty, the role of the church, the power of priests, and the position of women. We discussed at some length Roseanne’s memories of the father she adored, and saw how, due to the polarised political climate of the time, these became falsified by her to obliterate his time in the Free State police and death at the hands of the IRA. Dr Grene, who finally uncovers the full, true story of the father, prefers her version to the nasty events in the priest’s account. We also never know if Roseanne has opened and read the letter sent to her by her brother-in-law in which he reveals the truth of the annulment of her marriage and incarceration. Nor do we know if Dr Grene will reveal the secret to Roseanne before she dies; the ending is enigmatic because stories always leave room for speculation.