

Singling out the Irish novelist

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The Modern Irish Novel: Irish Novelists after 1945.

By Rüdiger Imhof.

Wolfhound, 308pp. €14.99.

There is more truth in the subtitle than the title of Rüdiger Imhof's new book. *The Modern Irish Novel* is not about that genre in any holistic or comparative sense, but is rather a sequence of independent essays on twelve Irish novelists (the lack of interconnections is reflected in the absence of an index). Before things get underway with a discussion of Beckett, Imhof, a German "Professor of Literature and a specialist in Irish Studies", spends quite some prefatory time identifying his target readership.

This series of studies, he says, was "put together first and foremost with the lay reader in mind"; but his deference to this common reader, while a worthy motivation in itself, is belied in ways not entirely reducible to his frequent awkwardness of style. Dismissing from his purview what he blithely calls "matters extraneous to literature", Imhof yet goes on in the book to talk of such matters as the "death of the author", "deconstructionist literary criticism", "postmodernist literary discourse" and "reception theory" as if the common reader should have a received idea of exactly what these mean. Equally, the reader is given no satisfactory explanation as to why the end of World War II is a suitable starting date for a discussion of the modern Irish novel.

Such arbitrariness aside, Imhof clearly intends an accessible approach. In general, his readings comprise elaborate plot summaries and the book will prove invaluable to those undergraduate students of the Irish novel who cannot find time to read their primary texts. Plotlines by Aidan Higgins, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor and Brian Moore are excoriated in detail. The endnotes for each chapter are rudimentary - rather than deploy secondary sources, Imhof is often avowedly derivative of them, and he is sometimes as preoccupied with the critical worth of book blurbs as with establishing any kind of elaborate interpretative context.

The tone is frequently robust, and though his discursive elaborations do not always justify his initial evaluations of particular novels Imhof is frequently entertaining in his convictions. He is quite scathing, for instance, of Jennifer Johnston's literary worth and he gets in a cut at "Some vituperative virago" who "saw fit to accuse me of misogyny for my criticism of Johnston's novels". Even if one might wonder at the judgment of a commentator who can say rhetorically "But is Bolger not wonderful!" strictly on the value of the gimmicky *Finbar's Hotel* (1997), the argument that Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999) is "an execrably bad novel" points to a certain creditable independence of mind. Most commendably, he provides extended proof of the importance of *The Pornographer* (1979) in John McGahern's *oeuvre*.

Unfortunately, Imhof's own standards do not match the enthusiasm for Irish fiction evident on every page of this book. There's a truly annoying array of

hyphenated misspellings (“im-possibility”, “char-acteristics”, “nar-rative” all occur in the first few pages alone). There are numerous factual errors: Camus, not Sartre, wrote *La Chute*; Julia O’Faolain wrote *Godded and Coded* (1970), not *Coded and Godded*; and though Imhof has issued two editions of his book on John Banville, he manages to mistake “*The Something Twins*” of *Birchwood* (1973) for “*The Sometime Twins*”.

While such details may not necessarily damage Imhof’s overall readings of his chosen novelists, one has to wonder what credence can be given to his interpretation of an important novel like Patrick McCabe’s *The Dead School* when he repeatedly mistakes the character of Marion for that of Ms Evans. Imhof might argue that such patent mistakes are merely academic; but the common reader, as well as any other, is best served by good proofreading, by accuracy, and by general intellectual care.

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