



## The Pitfalls of Journo-Fiction

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# Suffering for the truth

**John Kenny**

## **According to Luke**

By Gerard Stembridge

Penguin Ireland, 227pp. £10.99

We Irish find ourselves fascinating. The singularity of our recent economic and social development and the attendant newfound and painstaking efforts to clean up our politics are clearly worthy of note at home and abroad, but a problem emerges, for literature at least, when these matters are assumed to be worthy of record in and of themselves, undigested, uninterpreted, and non-universalised.

In our fiction, particularly, we seem more and more to think only of the fascinating actualities of the time and place we're in, as though all possibility of the transcendent is obliterated by the sheer public interest of the changes we see immediately before us. We have heeded too closely the implication that the appropriate literary mode of a mature society is discursive realism; we are coming down with grey truth.

Aside from its natural dominance in the currently preferred genre of popular fiction, the recording imperative of realism has been made at home in a version of the fact-based novel – not the docu-novel or non-fiction novel or faction exactly, but a kind of journo-fiction where the headlining political facts of the day, rather than any imagined after-life for these facts, are sustained as the crucial coordinates of experience for characters; where reasonable prior knowledge, and thus the accepted significance of these public facts, is assumed in the reader; where public figures directly appear in the story, or are thinly disguised, or are typified. Elements of journo-fiction are widespread in new Irish novels, but Eamonn Sweeney's *The Photograph* (2000) is perhaps the most notable example thus far.

Gerard Stembridge is well placed to write this kind of fiction. Besides his eleven plays and his screenplays for his extraordinary directorial debut, *Guiltrip* (1995), for *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999) and *About Adam* (2000), he is most familiar as the co-writer, with Dermot Morgan, of the radio show *Scrap Saturday* which stands as one of the highpoints of political satire in Ireland.

For *According to Luke*, a first novel originally serialised in *The Dubliner*, Stembridge has combined certain elements from these previous works. Though in no way as violently intense as *Guiltrip*, there are some dark moments concerning death, suicide, alcoholism and arson. A similar structure to *About Adam* is used whereby six characters have their interrelated stories told individually by turn, in this case via a unifying third-person narration. But the most intriguing aspect of the novel is the way Stembridge brings his particular take on political scandals and misdemeanours to bear on a story about a family, the Reids, torn apart by the father's disgrace as a wealthy Fianna Fáil barrister.

The personal fallout from political sleaze is introduced in the first of twelve titled chapters through the eldest Reid son, Luke, whose memories of youthful trips with the family to their holiday home in Kerry are now compromised. Outraged and guilt-ridden, he subsequently rolls back his own lifestyle, recruits his long-lost cousin Barry in a retributive campaign against his father, and is incapable of stopping or even caring about the series of family complications and sufferings that ensue.

Luke's accompanying characters are nicely devised: Emma, Luke's bookish girlfriend, with her view of the Reids as "something out of Eugene O'Neill"; Ruth, the youngest Reid daughter and "protest junkie" who is particularly wounded by the family disgrace; 16-year-old younger brother, Matthew, Vespa-craving and iPod-wielding; the fiercely loyal mother, Norma, a kind of Carmella Soprano faced with the knowledge that she is complicit in her husband's villainy; and hard-working, hard-training, GAA-scorning, perma-tanned, carefully groomed womaniser, Barry, a triumph of character observation by Stemberidge.

But a considerable downside is the extent to which the moral judgment of the Reid disgrace remains in the end literally according to Luke. Perennial moral outrage against Fianna Fáil is a *fait accompli* of daily journalism, and to retain any thematic fictional interest or discursive probity it requires more than occasional small nods to potential mixed motives, more inventive examination of, for instance, the "gilt-edged liberal-left credentials" and the "ludicrous charade of South Dublin respectability" than is occasioned here.

The record and the truth, the crucial cataloguing of uncovered lies and deceits, can surely be left to the newspapers, to the evening news, to the great extended prose texts of our tribunals. If fiction merely repeats the job without convincingly re-interpreting the familiar positions and the established narrative then we might begin to worry about an impoverishment of possible meanings and a decay in our capacity for literary lying.

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