



## Breaking the Book Fetish

Title	Breaking the Book Fetish
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Publication Date	2006-03-25
Publisher	The Irish Times

# Open journals

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### **Cyphers (No.s 59-60)**

Ed. Leland Bardwell, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Pearse Hutchinson, MacDara Woods  
Dublin, 68pp, €9.99

### **The Dublin Review (No. 22)**

Ed. Brendan Barrington  
Dublin, 128pp, €7.50

### **Irish Pages (Vol. 3, No. 1)**

Ed. Chris Agee, with Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Séan Mac Aindreasa  
Belfast, 270pp, €14

### **Poetry Ireland Review (No. 85)**

Ed. Peter Sirr  
Dublin, 128pp, €7.99

### **Southword (No. 9)**

Ed. Patrick Cotter, Gregory O'Donoghue, Vincent McDonnell  
Cork, 100pp, [no price]

### **The Stinging Fly (Issue 3, Vol. 2)**

Ed. Declan Meade  
Dublin, 96pp, €6

A fetish for the book currently dominates the intellectual world, especially so in the humanities sphere. At a time when everything we might call the non-book (journals, newspapers, magazines, letters, diaries) is cherished as source material, it is ironic that the value of this material is widely assumed to be fully actuated only when it is discursively recycled in book form. It is not just that we have some kind of residual peasant awe of what we once called book-learning, a blind belief that the covers alone confer on the pages between an aura of unassailable transcendent value. What we have is something similar but much more vulgar: a willing acceptance that the publication of a book, above all else and even at the expense of equivalent contributions in other verbal and textual forms, is an inherent guarantee of the author's own value, a conferment par excellence to the guild.

The writing and editorial completion of a book can be one of the talismanic achievements of human culture, but not necessarily so. In a curious return to primal idolatry, we presently revere an object for what we have pre-decided it represents rather than for what it is or contains in itself in a particular instance; word-count rather than word-risk or word-impact or word-worth is now all the order. If all books are good - and this applies to all genres, critical and creative - then no book is good.

Possibly as an overreaction to the changed status of the book in the evolving world of alternative media, we are now discouraged from even reverently scraping the gild on the book spine, from asking in the old way “Yes, but have we read it and is it in fact any good?”

All this is worth almost overstating because meanwhile the work continues on the production of the very daily and periodical source material that alas for some will only become useful and significant once a respectable lapse of time has erased the taint of ephemerality and allowed for book-reclamation of the sources on more estimable historicist grounds.

The matter is nicely illustrated in Kevin Kiely’s retrospective assessment of the first thirty years of *Cyphers* (still humbly referred to by the editors as “an occasional publication on literature and the arts”) at the end of the current issue. *Cyphers* still looks largely untouched by advances in printing, yet its presently traditional contributor-listing cover and stitched pages argue for the sheer value of content over packaging. By Kiely’s categorised account, *Cyphers* has over its three decades published original work by Séamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Ciarán Carson, Dermot Healy, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian among a host of other poets in Irish and English. The journal has made particular contributions to poetry translation, and though fiction has been its lesser genre it picked up Molly McCloskey, Philip Davison and John Banville along the way. Kiely also includes, under the neat title “The Rear Garden”, a substantial summary of the journal’s facilitation of reviews and repeatedly mentions the contributions of John Jordan whose reviewing skills were among the best we’ve had in Ireland. These reviews, says Kiely, “make juicy reading”. As they should.

Refounded by John Jordan in the early 1960s from David Marcus’s original, *Poetry Ireland Review*, with its high production values and extensive list of Irish and international contributors, has attained such status as a premier journal that there seems little to be said outside of directly reading it - the individual contributions speak for themselves and there is no editorial to invite an aye or nay. John F. Deane’s attachment of the “Review” to the journal’s title in the early 1980s was significant, and Peter Sirtt includes here, along with his own essay on translation and an intriguing essay by James Harpur on the poems of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a number of wide-ranging reviews which test the contemporary scene.

With his latest “View from the Linen Hall” that opens the new *Irish Pages*, Chris Agee continues his pattern of robust editorials. This biannual, with perhaps by now the most tasteful and recognisable of Irish journal covers, is always a hefty read and always manages a round-up of literary heavy-hitters. A Tim Robinson lecture, five poems from Heaney, a story from William Trevor, John Montague on “An Ulster Tandem”, samples from Louis MacNeice’s forthcoming *Selected Letters* - all are joined here in a happy mix of discursive and creative genres, and with some writing in Irish. The changing thematic organisation of *Irish Pages*, this time under the banner “The Literary World”, usually depends as much on Agee’s own contributions as those of his contributors, but his argument here for a sociological study of the Irish literary scene is important and suggestive in itself. The price should not dissuade - it takes quite a time to finally dip out of *Irish Pages*.

As the foreword to *Southword* remembers, Cork lost two poets in 2005: Michael Davitt, who is also commemorated in *Irish Pages*, and, more sorrowfully for *Southword*, Greg O’Donoghue, the journal’s poetry editor. A third of the current issue is taken up with various tributes to a colleague lost. This solidly produced journal is based at The Munster Literature Centre and therefore has a natural commitment to

Frank O'Connor's genre. Five stories form the bulk of the issue before a short review section gives way to an interview with Yiyun Li to whom, as the winner of the notably lucrative inaugural O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2005, anyone interested in the genre will want to listen.

One of the glossiest of domestic journals available at present, *The Stinging Fly* has recently been boosted by an increase in Arts Council funding and a move last year into book publication with Seán O'Reilly's *Watermark*. A short editorial is supported by a highly useful news section that would be well imitated by other journals, then we are into the main business of new fiction and poetry, from familiars and unfamiliar, and a considerable review section. Since he practices both fiction and poetry, the centrepiece for most will be the Nick Laird interview in which he is, among many things, asked about the by now infamous reservations on Kavanagh he expressed last year in the *London Review of Books*.

If *The Stinging Fly* aims for what might be called snazziness, *The Dublin Review* remains gloriously old-fashioned in its presentational restraint. Now in its sixth year, the reasons for this journal's rise to a pre-eminent position in the field of Irish periodicals are many and relate to both packaging and content. It is a wieldy size. Its pages have a materially classy look (100gsm Munken Cream stock and thread-sewn, the website tells us). The entire contents can be memorised with a glance at the cover (this time: Catriona Crowe on the Ferns Report, Brian Dillon on Tracey Emin, Molly McCloskey on Sri Lanka, George O'Brien on McGahern, fiction by Colm Tóibín, Maile Chapman and Aiden O'Reilly). There is no clutter of the extraneous or supplementary; main text is always the emphasis and even the notes on contributors are minimalist. While creative work is regularly included, the journal has become synonymous with the joyous free form that is the essay. Not least, *The Dublin Review* is relatively careful on the fault-line that damages many journals: proofreading.

It runs somewhat contrary to the very purpose of journals such as these to choose for the moment highlights and lowlights because, while strenuous editorial decisions naturally have to be made with which contributors, rejectees and readers can hardly all agree, the need to fill the pages of regular issues makes for more open invitations to writers than with the book format. And because the screening process therefore does not seem as prolonged as that exercised in book publishing, journalistic offerings appear to many as perhaps too easily and immediately achieved to be of much lasting consequence. But the "diurnal" at the root of journal can be uniformly dismissed as denoting a comparatively limited of-the-day value only if we are innocent enough to believe that the institution of the book somehow remains outside of time, untouched by poor authors, poor editors and poor publishers aplenty.

In an entertaining section of *Poetry Ireland Review*, Denis O'Driscoll compiles a number of "Pickings and Choosings", among which is a Christian Wiman quip from the journal *Poetry*: "If a critic gets ten books sent to him for review, and he finds six or seven of them are excellent, then he is either the luckiest poetry reviewer on the planet, or he has no taste". So it is for readers of individual contributions in most journals. Yes, we may want all journals to uniformize themselves according to our own discriminations. Yes, we may want certain encountered contributors and even some journals to pass particularly immediately into non-book oblivion. But what we do not ever want is a dearth of hard-working editors devoted to the journal format, or any slackening of their seemingly in-built resistance to the book fetishist's threat of thanklessness.

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