



Jazzed-up Irishman

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Oh, Play That Thing

By Roddy Doyle

Jonathan Cape

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Initially perceived by some as a kind of literary punk intent on giving the fingers to the intellectual establishment, Roddy Doyle now virtually has the status of a national institution. Despite frequent sneers at his demotic prose and denunciations in letters and homilies, all his books have been resounding bestsellers. His accepted reader-on-the-street kudos has extended into school classrooms and into universities at home and abroad where the apparent simplicity of his work is regularly belied by enthusiastic undergraduate and postgraduate projects. His fiction and the acclaimed film adaptations are discussed as a matter of course at international Irish Studies conferences. Monographs have been published. His Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) was applauded by readers representative of all critical hues. To dislike his work *en bloc* in the face of such comprehensive popularity would be to put at risk the very idea of Popular Culture.

Doyle's output has been more variable in quality than usually allowed by both fans and detractors. The retrospectively packaged *Barrytown Trilogy* (1992), while it will long be remembered as one of Irish fiction's most energetic and speedily devised career launches, is arguably a victim of the very qualities that made it so distinctive. Rooted in such a specific time, place and economic milieu, all three novels now seem somewhat dated.

Complaints that Doyle, after early success, abdicated on his comic-lumpen credentials in the attempt to write a more literary brand of fiction have no justification. *Paddy Clarke* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) combined his early situational talents with a new thematic resonance and psychological depth, and they remain his best work.

Some further critical shibboleths about Doyle should be challenged. He does not speak for the state of a nation. Only the endurance of the paddywhackiest of race clichés provides for the idea that he reflects both the brighter (wit, irreverence, cuddly sentimentalism ...) and darker (fecklessness, boozing, violence ...) sides of the Irish psyche. His novels have no more necessary application to a wider Ireland than do Woody Allen's films to a wider America; even the particularised Dublin he writes about is unfamiliar to many who live elsewhere in the selfsame city. And it is unfair to charge him with entertaining readers with the traits and stories of the Dublin working classes told from a cosy middle-class perspective. Even ignoring his teaching in Kilbarrack, saying Doyle cannot write adequately about a world he is looking in on rather than experiencing is akin to saying he shouldn't write about a historical period unless he has lived through it.

All this should be kept in mind when considering the hefty task he has lately set himself. Received as his greatest adventure yet, *A Star Called Henry* (1999) is the first

volume of a trilogy titled *The Last Roundup* designed to follow the eponymous Henry Smart, born in a Dublin slum in 1901, through some of the major events of the twentieth century. Henry's first tale was interestingly Dickensian. Conceived as a kind of David Copperfield, Henry is emphatically the hero of his own life, swashbuckling his way with his father's wooden leg through the poverty of his youth, through the GPO in 1916, through the Anglo-Irish War, copulating, killing and cracking jokes. For his combination of historical content, magic-realist style and narrative length, Doyle attracted favourable comparisons with Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie and Peter Carey.

As Irish historical fiction, however, *A Star* was quite formulaic. As understandably impatient as most of his generation with the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of erstwhile Irish educators, Doyle selected a number of pieties (the careers of Pearse and Connolly, the heroic idea of Republicanism and of Michael Collins ...) and had some fun with them under the guise of humanising them. The strategy largely complied with orthodox revisionism: versions and subversions challenge the existing monolithic public record; bathos replaces pathos in the reconstruction of the national narrative.

All this is fine (Doyle pointed out that he was "making and messing around" with Irish history rather than interpreting it), so long as it is recognised for what it is: a giant wisecrack that simply inverts pieties rather than re-examining them in any sophisticated way.

Whatever one's view of the treatment, *A Star* at least had the drama of crucial historical events to sustain its longueurs and repetitions. Henry Smart's second tale does not. *Oh, Play That Thing* reacquaints us with Henry when he shows up in New York in 1924 after leaving the Liverpool and England he fled to, under threat from his former comrades, at the end of *A Star*. Knowledge of Henry's first tale is necessary for full comprehension since he regularly refers back to events and motivations. The early parts of the novel are essentially a celebration of the freedom of New York, where Henry tenaciously finds his feet, and Chicago, where he becomes Louis Armstrong's friend and keeper, thus irrupting, as he did with Irish history, into important events in the history of jazz. Amid violent days and seedy nights, the family and foes of *A Star* eventually resurface, Henry is forced to flee again, this time into the American Depression, and folk ballads are added to the nationalist songs sung at home in his honour.

Smart's continued outlandishness is explained in Doyle's comment that his approach is "like putting a magnifying glass over reality and making something bigger of it". The problem, however, is that such exaggeration seriously conflicts here with Doyle's more instinctual realist elements.

Rather than leave fiction at home inside character psychology, Doyle has taken it out for an exploratory trapeze in the real world. Henry is a thoroughgoing Rabelaisian wanderer: excited by people and places, modern in disposition, unremittingly randy. Doyle is good at achieving narrative pace, and as Henry traverses the USA the slow plod of *A Star* is replaced by an undulating rapidity that assumedly echoes the jazz theme.

In this kind of fiction, however, the world is literally not enough unless the rascal exploring it also has some realistic depth. In the later stages here, Henry is aggrandised into an on-the-road cypher that seems to owe something to Steinbeck (mentioned in the extensive bibliography). The emotionalism attached to Henry's travails in the slums of *A Star* has been well lost by the time a newly afflicted Henry

is found, one-legged now like his father and dried-up in every sense, on a John Ford set in Monument Valley in 1946.

Jump-lead repetition of the phrase “My name is Henry Smart!” is not enough to make an inwardly credible personality of this narrator. The joy of retrospective narrative sustained over three volumes is that Henry might be rescued or explained in a final instalment that will, presumably, take him up to the present of writing. For all his grandiosity and self-pluming, our hero/anti-hero/mock-hero/non-hero for now remains as inanimate as his wooden-leg motif.

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