

Will the Irish be the Foremost Novelists of the 21st Century?

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On the face of it, the question posed by this paper's title, "Will the Irish be the Foremost Novelists of the 21st Century?", is unanswerable. Clearly it is far too early in the century to make such a judgment and even a cursory reading of any respectable literary review or of the listings for literary prizes shows any number of contenders for the title. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to make a case for the Irish by examining the work of three of the most acclaimed contemporary Irish authors, Colm Toibin, David Mitchell and Colum McCann, and by attempting to relate their work to the Irish cultural tradition, a tradition that arguably facilitates a creative use of language.

Ireland is not now nor ever has been politically unified. In the country's early Christian era it was divided into about 180 petty kingdoms, many of them no more than stockaded villages (Bartlett: 13). Although often at war with each other, these kingdoms were unified in two significant ways: through the use of a single, nondialectic language, Gaelic or Irish, and by the common understanding that authority was shared among kings, scholars, clergy, lawyers or judges and poets or singers. The authority of four of these five depended on facility with the common language and this language based authority could spread beyond political boundaries and create common cultural understandings (Bartlett: 13-15).

The written form of Irish, a monastic invention, was by the 7th Century used to create the first vernacular literature in Europe. This literature consisted largely of epic tales from the oral tradition, like the "Cattle Raid at Cooley", and legal opinions, which in the absence of any

political means to establish an island-wide legal code, created a common framework of legal and civic standards merely through the power of persuasive writing. The monastic clergy were also facile in the use of Latin, giving them access to a larger European audience, which by the 7th Century had already taken note of the style, wit and wordplay of Irish writers (Bartlett: 14-16).

The English conquest of Ireland, a long drawn out affair that began in 1169 and finally succeeded in 1691, barred the Irish from political participation, landownership and the use of the Irish language. Although the Irish became adept at the use of English, they otherwise declined to be Anglicized and when the Irish Republic was established in 1949, one of the new government's first mandates required all school children to learn to speak, read and write Gaelic. Although this remains the law of the land in the Republic, it has not led to a resurgence of Gaelic letters. Instead, the Irish have invested their passion for language, their Gaelic phonemes and their understanding of the role language plays in creating social life and individual identity in English, an investment that has made their novelists formidable contenders for the title of best novelists of the 21st Century.

Colm Toibin (Kah-lum toeBeen) is the oldest and in many ways the most Irish of the three authors we will be considering, inasmuch as he, unlike Mitchell and McCann, assumes a knowledge of Irish history, society and politics on the part of his readers. Toibin was born in Enniscorthy, County Wexford in southeastern Ireland in 1955, the second youngest of five children. His grandfather was a member of the IRA and took part in the 1916 Rebellion and his father, a teacher, was active in Republican party politics.

Toibin attended University College Dublin, graduating in 1975. He lived in Spain between 1975 and 1978 when he returned to Dublin and began a career in journalism that lasted into the 1980's. Since then he has concentrated on writing and teaching, mostly at American universities, including Stanford, the University of Texas and Columbia University in New York.

Toibin is a prolific writer. Since 1990 he has authored eight novels, two collections of short stories, one collection of essays, three works of nonfiction, best described as very personal travelogues, three books of literary criticism, two plays and numerous articles and poems. He has been listed five times for the prestigious Booker Prize, three times for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and is an elected fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Toibin's fiction focuses on a relatively small number of themes: Irish society and family life, sexual identity, cross-cultural experience, which frequently overlap in the same work. His most persistent theme and one he returns to again and again is the dysfunction and alienation created within Irish families by the death or desertion of a parent, a trauma central to Toibin's own childhood. The most frequent depiction of this theme details the alienation of a son from his mother when she abandons him to the care of relatives while she cares for his dying father. His most exhaustive consideration of this theme is in his most recent novel, 2014's Nora Webster. But virtually all of his so-called Wexford novels, those located in and around his hometown of Enniscorthy, deal with it in some form and from slightly different points of view: His first novel The South (1990), is written from the point of view of the mother, who does not

die but deserts her son to find fulfillment as an artist. In his second novel, The Heather Blazing (1992), it is the mother who dies, leaving the son to create a new relationship with his father. The Blackwater Lightship (1999) has a sister and brother abandoned to relatives while their mother nurses their dying father. Eight of Toibin's collected short stories also explore this theme, each with a slightly different cast of characters, each written from a different point of view. It is as if Toibin were trying out different permutations of his own childhood trauma, perhaps to understand it better, perhaps to see how it might have ended differently.

A second frequently explored theme is that of sexual identity, particularly when it is at odds with social convention. This is the theme of his 1996 novel The Story of the Night, 1999's The Blackwater Lightship and most notably of 2004's The Master, a fictionalized biography of Henry James that is a very plausible account of James' carefully guarded private life. Although he himself is openly gay, Toibin's work is neither defensive nor polemical. He writes about the gay experience, gay love and often quite graphically gay sex without judgment or any attempt to convince the reader of anything.

Toibin's ability to address these themes without sentimentality, moralizing or melodrama owes a great deal to his prose style. Toibin claims Henry James and Ernest Hemingway as his greatest stylistic influences. Although perhaps superficially irreconcilable, what James, Hemingway and Toibin have in common is their ability to conceal their characters' emotions and motivations even while granting the reader full access to their words and actions insofar as the characters themselves consciously recognize them. In Toibin's work as in James' and Hemingway's it is often the silences, the unspoken, what is between the words and lines

that gives the work depth and gravitas. And it is Toibin's richly austere language that denies the reader access to the author's or his characters' deepest selves and meaning, concealing more than it reveals.

David Mitchell is Irish by ancestry and volition, although he was born and raised in England. A child of the English midlands, born in 1969, he was raised in Malvern, Worcestershire. Both of his parents were artists, which he has said enabled him to believe that he could make a reasonable living as an artist (Begley). He received a degree in English and American Literature and an M.A. in Comparative Literature at the University of Kent, intent upon a career as a writer. Instead, he traveled first to Sicily and then to Hiroshima, Japan, following a girl who had captured his romantic interest (Begley). He remained in Japan for eight years, teaching English to technical students and beginning to write in earnest. He then returned to England with his pregnant wife, moving shortly thereafter to the village of Ardfield, County Cork, Ireland, where he currently resides with his wife and two children.

Like Toibin, Mitchell is extremely prolific and highly acclaimed. In the space of the last fifteen years he has published six novels, seven essays, two opera libretti, two translations from the Japanese and sixteen short stories, the most recent of which was published as a series of 280 tweets. A seventh novel is scheduled for publication this year. Like Toibin, Mitchell has been listed for a number of prestigious literary prizes, including the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the Booker Prize.

Mitchell's work is difficult to characterize in any simple way, largely because he does not limit himself to any specific style or genre. His first novel, Ghostwritten (1999), consists of nine

stream of consciousness monologues spoken by an Okinawan terrorist, a Tokyo shop clerk, a British financier in Hong Kong, a Chinese peasant, a disembodied soul in Mongolia, an art thief in Petersburg, a musician in London, an Irish physicist and a New York deejay. The characters sometimes connect incidentally but the novel's coherence comes out of its depiction of a common but not identical humanity rather than from any unifying plot.

Mitchell's second novel, 2001's number9dream, is a classic quest novel in which a Japanese teenager searches Tokyo for the father he has never met. His third novel, 2004's Cloud Atlas, exhibits an array of genres within a single book: historical fiction, melodrama, comedy, a detective story, an action thriller and a science fiction finale. Each of these sections is written in its own appropriate style and language. They are tied together by a timeline and by a recurring question: must the weak always be devoured by the strong? His next three novels, the semi-autobiographical Black Swan Green (2006), The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet (2010), and 2014's The Bone Clocks are in turn a classic coming-of-age novel, historical fiction and science fiction.

What ties Mitchell's work together is the recurrence of images, characters and themes from novel to novel. This recurrence of images and characters, so-called intertextuality, is exemplified by the "moon gray cat" that appears momentarily in three of his novels and by characters like Luisa Rey, Tim Cavendish, Kobayasi and Neal Brose who each appear in two or three novels, sometimes as central characters, sometimes merely incidentally. Taken as a whole, something that Mitchell encourages readers to do (Kakutani: 8), his work considers the classical theme of the eternal return. That is, the eternal recurrence of people, souls, events

and meanings. The same individuals lead the same lives over and over, or the same souls have different lives in different bodies, or the same patterns of events, crises of faith and conundrums of the human condition assert themselves again and again through time and space. Mitchell's work is not plot driven. For the most part his novels contain no discernable narrative arc and some seem to end rather than conclude. But taken together, they do seem to form what he has called an "ubernovel" of satisfying depth and significance.

Mitchell has a particular gift for creating distinctive characters, each with his or her own language and unique way of seeing the world, and he lavishes this gift on even minor characters. His characters' lives and destinies may reoccur or overlap, but their identities never become blurred. They are all so substantial and distinct that they are able to ground even his most fantastic scenarios in reality. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though Mitchell is channeling rather than creating them.

Mitchell's novels also constitute a pyrotechnically exuberant display of his formidable talent with language. As a child, Mitchell was plagued by a debilitating stutter, which even today occasionally reasserts itself. It is not going too far to suggest that this childhood inability to express himself verbally encouraged his dazzling command of the written language. He is a highly cerebral yet fluent writer whose descriptive powers, wonderful wordplay and facility with different styles are challenging but highly readable. Some critics have described Mitchell's use of language as "Joycean" (Alter: 9) but for me it is less egocentric and subjective and more grounded in the ordinary than the exceptional.

The third member of our Irish triumvirate, Colum McCann, was denied either Mitchell's childhood problems communicating or Toibin's experience of what Frank McCourt calls "the quintessential miserable Irish childhood" (McCann and McCourt: 387). Born in Dublin in 1965, McCann describes his family as happy and supportive and his childhood as without drama or trauma, despite the fact that much of it coincided with "the troubles" that rocked Northern Ireland from 1966 to 2008 (Bartlett: 468-579). Ideal as his childhood was, McCann has noted that it provided him with little of the material most common to Irish novelists: "As for me, I have no desire to write about my upbringing. Two hundred blank pages. What is it they say? Happiness writes white" (McCann and McCourt: 338).

McCann studied journalism at the Dublin Institute of Technology and was a reporter for the Irish Press Group with his own column and byline in The Evening Press by the time he was twenty-one. Despite this early success, he left Ireland for the United States in 1986 with no particular personal or professional goals in mind. He spent the next two years bicycling across the United States, finally settling in Texas where he earned a degree in History and Literature at the University of Texas. In 1993 he and his wife, an American, moved to Japan where McCann taught English as a foreign language. They returned to the United States in 1994 and currently live in New York City with their three children.

Although he is not as prolific as either Toibin or Mitchell, in the last twenty-one years McCann has published six novels and two volumes of short literature as well as curated a volume of essays. He is a recipient of the Rooney Prize, the Novel of the Year award, the National Book Award and, and, like Toibin, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

As his own references to his “blank page” childhood suggest, McCann does not, like Toibin, write out of personal experience or like Mitchell, out of pure unfettered imagination. He is instead interested in writing about what he has called “the small, dark anonymous corners of the world” (McCann and McCourt: 342) and their inhabitants and in trying to understand cross-cultural relationships both within and between societies.

His first novel, Songdogs (1995), is about the marriage of an itinerant Irish photographer and a girl from a small Mexican village as seen by their son, an American. 1998’s This Side of Brightness follows the marriage of a first-generation Irish-American and an African American from rural Georgia and the lives of their descendants in Twentieth Century New York. Dancer, published in 2003, is a fictionalized biography of Rudolf Nureyev that traces his life from its beginnings in a bleak Tartar enclave in Soviet Siberia to its end amidst the glitterati of New York, London and Paris. Zoli (2006) is another fictionalized biography this time of the Romani or Gypsy poet, Papuza, who struggles to maintain her cultural identity while finding artistic fulfillment in Sovietized Eastern Europe. McCann’s better known novels, 2009’s Let the Great World Spin and 2013’s Trans Atlantic, both deal with their characters’ attempts to bridge cultural differences based on gender, race, class and religion both within and between societies.

Although McCann’s prose has a clarity and power comparable to that of Toibin and Mitchell, he is distinctly a writer of method and mission. His method is research, reflecting his more academic approach to writing. His research is archival, as befits his training as a historian, but also involves face-to-face on the scene investigation typical of his days as a

journalist. Even the part of his work focused exclusively on Ireland, eight of fifteen of his collected short stories which deal with “the troubles” in Northern Ireland, is based on research, despite the fact that his mother is from Derry, Northern Ireland and that he spent his childhood summers there. This reliance on research stems from McCann’s belief that the informed imagination is as real or truthful as direct experience (McCann and Strout: 312-313) and that what we take to be objective history is equally a product of the creative mind (Englander and McCann: 367-368).

This research helps carry McCann’s stories into the substantial world and helps fulfill his mission to tell the real stories of real people, even when those people and their stories are wholly or in part the author’s creation. As he told Frank McCourt in 2008: “...we all have stories... (they) are the ultimate human democracy. It doesn’t matter how white...how poor...how straight...how far-flung you are...stories are the true human currency” (McCann and McCourt: 338). This is more than a literary or social philosophy to McCann. In 2012, he helped found an organization, Narrative4, that brings together kids from different, often directly contentious groups, who then pair off and tell each other the stories they believe most define them. When the group as a whole reconvenes, each person tells not their own, but their partner’s story, an exercise in what McCann calls “radical empathy” (Lovell), a curative or balm for cultural myopathy that is clearly the goal of the author’s own work.

Toibin, Mitchell and McCann are very different writers who write about different things in different styles for different reasons. Toibin’s work is deeply personal but written in a language and style that is guarded and removed as if to protect himself and the reader from its

full impact. Mitchell writes from an imagination nurtured by the fantasy and science fiction he read as a child and from what seems a pure joy in putting words on paper. And McCann writes carefully researched stories that he intends to help bridge the gulfs between cultures. Yet all three write from the Irish assumption that language is not just a means of expressing what is but the means of creating the self, society and perceived reality. These three are only the tip of the iceberg of contemporary, acclaimed Irish authors. I quite incidentally came across the names of at least 10 others while researching this paper. With a depth of talent like this, it is certainly possible that the Irish will be considered the best literary authors of the 21st Century; although to be sure, only time will tell.

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