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## New Essays on New Novels

**Irish University Review** (vol. 30, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2000)

**Special Issue: Contemporary Irish Fiction**

Ed. Anthony Roche.

208pp, £8.50

As tradition in progress, contemporary literature can be difficult to pin down, its shiftiness encouraging intellectuals towards more self-contained excavations of established historical periods. In the latest issue of the IUR, Anthony Roche determinedly attends to the ultra-contemporary in Irish fiction, indicating that when he solicited essays for his project he decided not to define “contemporary” simply as “living”. The result is a collection of studies mainly of the fiction of the last decade.

In his economical introduction Roche outlines his various cues, among them the publication this year of an expanded version of Dermot Bolger’s *Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993), and points at base to the contrast between the relative “dearth of critical writing in the field” and the “quantum leap in the quantity, range and variety of Irish fiction since the mid nineteen eighties”. The possibility that this explosion of activity has frequently had an inverse relationship with aesthetic *quality* of output must await examination, since these essays, though certainly discursive, are mainly promotional. (The most productive negative critique is offered in Brian Donnelly’s essay, “Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO”, where a sympathetic summary of the early work is balanced by indication of the shortcomings of *A Star Called Henry*).

The IUR is closely allied with IASIL, the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures, and has been a particularly useful outlet for European interest in Irish studies. The established continental fascination with John Banville, the elder statesman of the volume, is evinced by one of the longer essays, “Books of Revelation”, where Elke d’Hoker (Belgium) examines the prevalence of epiphanies in his work; in the initial essay, “Exilic Returns”, Roberta Gefer Wondrich (Italy) examines the continued attraction of the Irish imagination to the paradigm of exile, using the case studies of Desmond Hogan, Neil Jordan and Colm Tóibín; Laura Pelaschiar (Italy) focuses on Glenn Patterson, Robert McLiam Wilson and Deirdre Madden in a commentary on “The Evolving Role of the City in Northern Irish Fiction”.

Madden is also the subject of a comprehensive essay by Michael Parker, and this is followed by Derek Hand’s detailed reading of Eilís Ní Dhuibhne’s fascinating science fiction novel, *The Bray House* (1990). There are monograph pieces also on postmodernism and Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man* (1994) by Dermot McCarthy, on postcolonialism and Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* (1996) by Liam Harte, and on Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992) by John Scaggs, which, as the shortest essay, provides a disappointingly cursory analysis of one of the most significant contemporary novels. The longest essay is Anne Fogarty’s examination of “The Theme of Social Change in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction” through a focus on Mary Morrissy, Anne Haverty, Jennifer Johnston and Mary O’Donnell, and the notability of Haverty’s *One Day as a Tiger* (1997) is

reinforced by Gerry Smyth who rounds off the forum with an “ecocritical” analysis of this novel alongside Hugo Hamilton’s *Headbanger* (1996).

As a group, these essays are a valuable instalment in giving recent Irish fiction its critical dues. While general readers, often quite rightly, find the profusion of references and literary/cultural theories off-putting in academic writing, public interest in journals such as this one should be generated. Though some of the pieces do occasionally get a little bogged in the less practical side of criticism, and though there are distracting footnotes aplenty, the suggestiveness of this volume for scholars is matched by a reasonable approachability—and few critical volumes come at such an accessible price.

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