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‘Mad, mad carry-on entirely’.

Mondo Desperado!

By Patrick McCabe

Picador

228pp, £10 in UK.

Well now, boys and girls, today we’re going to do a book of stories about mad people and the things they get up to in the small towns of Ireland. It’s all about men who “don’t have enough to stick a stamp” going demented after “Hot Nights at the Go-Go Lounge”; and schoolmasters who like nothing better than to gawk at young girls in their pelts, soon after to suffer at “The Hands of Dingo Deery”; and young trollops who think nothing of exploiting “The Boils of Thomas Gully”; and irresponsible priests going around shouting “I Ordained the Devil.” Desperate, desperate carry-on entirely.

An máistir Pat McCabe, having completed his fifth novel, *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), promised that he would concentrate for a while on the short story and that his next book would be something like “*Winesburg, Ohio* with a rocket rammed up its backside”. McCabe’s archetypal Irish town is called Barntrosna and his George Willard is one Phildy Hackball, credited with the writing of a collection of tales entitled *Mondo Desperado*. Phildy’s text is prefaced by mock blurbs (“Phildy has got it absolutely right”/ “*Mondo Bollocks!*, surely a much more appropriate title for this ‘collection’!”), by a mock note from the publisher who fondly recalls “the image of Phildy astride the television with the waste-paper basket on his head”, and by a mock “Appreciation” from a childhood friend (“You want to know what I think of Phildy? I think he’s fantastic!”). Thereafter, the parody only intensifies.

Phildy operates as a combination of *seanchaí* (“Wait till I tell you this one!”) and an oracular narrator who forecasts, as in *The Dead School* (1995), the workings of a malicious fate, and his encompassing purpose has a quirky generic provenance: “Mondo” movies, McCabe has explained, were “trash would-be documentaries exposing all the taboos and bizarre practices of the world. They were Italian movies that appeared in 1963 except I’ve superimposed this on a small Irish town”. The verbally profligate style of this Irish “Mondo” is largely a lovingly constructed parody, pastiche even at times, of - as one of the stories has it - “the stuff of cheap throwaway pulp novels”. The book is, by turns, calculatedly melodramatic, histrionic, cheesy, tacky, clichéd, technicoloured, and is laced with campy exclamation marks. McCabe sees himself as belonging to a “folk” rather than a specifically literary tradition, and gleefully agglomerates here, as in his previous work, elements of the schlock and schmaltz and the Americana of modern popular culture. One piece in particular, called “My Friend Bruce Lee”, is an exuberant illustration of how one man’s mind is controlled by the video store.

Rather than call the Hogarthian, cartoon quality of his work “poetic realism”, McCabe has indicated that he prefers the term “social fantastic”; the paradox is that despite the fantasy and the further distancing of the real by the extensive use of parody, McCabe’s “Mondo” documents a social reality that often escapes the realists. He keeps a sure, if puckish, eye on what is too often dismissively referred to as

Country-and-Western Ireland, and only he could mention such things as a “buckrake accident” or “Margo and the Country Flavour” without making them seem merely satiric or tokenish insertions.

Avowedly trying to capture what Carson McCullers called “the laughter of disaster”, McCabe’s work is generally categorised as tragicomedy. If squirming was perhaps the more apposite reaction heretofore, these vertiginously fanciful stories, though in places as sorrowful as the tale of the infamous butcher boy, are more likely to provoke some healthy vulgar guffawing. While not everyone will have a stomach for such belly-laughs, it must be said that the idiolect and vision of this virtually *ex nihilo* writer have become so distinctive that he now deserves to have his name used adjectivally. With this gambade, the McCabesque world once again displays itself to be, like one of the Barntrosna residents, ‘exquisitely, beautifully, mad in the head!’