Maurice Leitch has always been something of a curio on the middle shelves of Irish fiction. While his impressive debut with *The Liberty Lad* (1965) was followed by a Guardian Prize novel, *Poor Lazarus* (1969), and, later, by *Silver’s City* (1981) which won the Whitbread Prize, his reputation has never seemed quite secure, especially southwards of his native Antrim. The quick explanation for this will usually be that the distinctly Northern Irish protestant sensibility which is his inheritance and for which he continues to be a strident spokesperson, is somehow resisted by southern readers. He did not make it into the ranks of his own peers in even the revised edition of Dermot Bolger’s determinedly inclusive *Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (2000). Colm Tóibín, nevertheless, in *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999), accords him a place in the wider tradition of the Irish novel, rightfully resisting the temptation to have his work shadowed by the younger Northern writers. To omit those first two novels from any account of the courageous fictional forays made in the sixties - into the area of sexuality especially - would be akin to ignoring the work of John Broderick, a writer Leitch has always admired (and a writer who is, incidentally, also omitted from the Bolger anthology).

The more appreciable explanation for Leitch’s lesser stature is that his robust and usefully discomfiting themes have usually not been matched by his aesthetics. Like Broderick’s, his prose forms have generally been neither progressive nor pretty. Rarely, however, has he been quite so imprecise and uncontrolled as in *The Eggman’s Apprentice*. Equal in length to Leitch’s interesting and popular last novel, *The Smoke King* (1998), this new work has no thematic which might compensate for lack of style. A fascination Leitch has frequently shown for crime narrative is on overdrive here where, from his prison cell, one Hugo Dinsmore, vaguely placed temporally somewhere in the fifties or sixties, looks back over his life with a view to explaining how he fell into a five-year sentence. It is all standard watch-me-grow fare. Orphaned at an early age when his parents die almost simultaneously, “Poor wee Hugo” spends a little time with an aunt before he is scuttled off to live at a farm called Larkhill in rural Antrim where a “strange, cluttered household” of extended family move around him as he drags himself and his sensitive imagination up through early childhood, through despised school-days, and onwards to what is truly a massive burst of sexual awakening at sixteen. This point is reached at the end of “Book One” of the story.

While Leitch’s chapter divisions have no real logic, the basic bifurcate structure of the book works well and “Book Two” initially tells of how the remarkable balladeer’s voice Hugo discovers in his throat in the earlier part insinuates him into the company of a local gangster called the Eggman. A kind of singing factotum, Hugo quickly finds himself in a *demi-monde* of huxters, loose women, drink, drugs and jive-man clothes; he performs as a “tick man”, collecting money with other thuggish lackeys and, ultimately, is promoted to the position of driver of the Eggman’s prized Cadillac.

Far from having the psychological credibility of the protagonist of Leitch’s best novel, *Gilchrist* (1994), Hugo and his retinue are all depthless creations. Deaths
happen, lives are destroyed, heroic gestures are finally made, but it is hard to really care. Nothing is left to the imagination: the climactic mystery of Hugo’s imprisonment is destroyed through the constant use of anticipatory phrases like “the present chamber of horrors” and “my present situation”; the inevitability of the violent ending is advertised when Hugo is warned at one point, “Don’t ever cross the Eggman”; a summary of the action is even provided at the end through a judge’s judgement. Leitch’s characters have often been at their best when they are vehicles for certain issues and debates; but without the social relevancy of his earlier work his people here have nothing, really, to communicate. While the unfortunate fate of a pink Cadillac taken down from the mid-century silver screen and dropped into the middle of Antrim has its own quirky pleasures, *The Eggman’s Apprentice* forces a tired speculation at this stage on just how many more sub-cinematic crime stories contemporary Irish fiction is going to give us.

*John Kenny teaches in the English Department, NUI Galway.*