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Title	North by North-West
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	2000-06-03
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2000, 3 June) 'North by North-West.' Review of 'Inishowen', by Joseph O'Connor. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 9.
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1057

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To the North

Inishowen

by Joseph O'Connor

Secker and Warburg, 474pp, £10 in UK

One of the most reprinted Irish books of the last decade is Joe O'Connor's *The Secret World of the Irish Male* (1994), an augmented collection of the quasi-autobiographical humorous journalism which, appearing most notably in the *Sunday Tribune*, had gained him considerable fame, particularly among the young. O'Connor has indicated that all his writing, from that journalism to his drama and the fiction that is his main preoccupation, is "concerned with the same aims", and one of the chief problems with his fictional voice has been an intergeneric stylistic sameness wherein the early popular journalist appears to disallow the novelist full seriousness.

While *True Believers* (1991), O'Connor's best and most serious work, endures as one of the more significant short story volumes of the younger generation of writers, his three novels, *Cowboys and Indians* (1991), *Desperadoes* (1994) and *The Salesman* (1998), are inflated affairs which illustrate the damage that an unrestrained jokey mode can do to undeniably compassionate content. The subject-matter of *Inishowen* is further testimony to O'Connor's fundamental commitment to social issues: Opening with a conjectured Buncrana report from the *Donegal Democrat* of 1948 concerning an abandoned baby, this novel centres on the efforts of terminally ill Ellen Donnelly to finally locate the Irish birth mother from whom she was separated by the Catholic Church's American adoption scheme in the forties.

Over the course of the 1994 Christmas season Ellen is aided by a somewhat dissociated Dublin Garda Inspector, Martin Aiken, and is sought by her philandering plastic-surgeon husband, Milton Amery. As matters progress with these principals, every path leads to Inishowen. Having corresponded with a Donegal nun—whose letters O'Connor uses in part as potted social commentary on mid-century Ireland—Ellen makes the trip to her birthplace accompanied by Aitken who met his estranged wife on the peninsula and whose son is buried there. The climax of the story approaches as Milton also jets in with his two children and everybody moves expeditiously towards a happy ending.

Potentially emotive as this scenario is, O'Connor's characterisations are all levelled by uniform and ubiquitous belly-laugh comedy; and when people have no convincing fictional reality compassion and posited feelings can seem objectless. At certain moments Ellen is believable, and the revelation of her parentage provides a creditable *frisson*, but the sections on Milton do not quite convince as Americana and Aitken, particularly, seems more cartoonish than real. During their centre-piece trip northwards, Ellen and Aitken are used too much as ciphers for selfconscious talk about Irish identity, and the love scenes O'Connor employs to develop their humanity are in the end largely melodramatic ("tremulous sighs", "quivering shoulders").

The detriment of the clichéd aside, accessibility surely has its own virtues. While O'Connor lacks stringent aesthetic control and economy, there is a certain centrifugal energy in his writing that might best be called zest or gusto. His profligacy with language, particularly in dialogue sections, has a perceptible demotic motivation and his plotlines can suddenly regain momentum by going off in unsuspected directions.

He relates most to medial writers like Brian Moore and he patently aims for populism rather than formal craftsmanship. Most of his previous books have been bestsellers and *Inishowen* will probably similarly perform.

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