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Books on the Box

One of the prime reasons given for the modern decline in reading habits, for the predicted future death of the book, is the epidemic of the domestic television set. Paradoxically, literary activity, beyond the realm of screen writing, has always been inspirational for film makers, and writers have served as the perennial subjects of documentary makers. One medium can, on occasion, nicely feed the other. With the press-release subtitle, 'Getting Behind the Marketing Hype', the recently screened 'UnderCover Portraits' series of monographic programmes aims, at base, to personalise and contextualise nine living Irish writers, demonstrating in the process the mutually beneficial processes of book and box.

Televised weekly from March through to May in unbroken forty-to-fifty minute slots, the nine studies were made for RTÉ by Orpheus Productions and are variously written, produced and directed principally by Ted Dolan (3), Michael Garvey (3), and Colm Ó Briain (3). The pitch for the collective effort is determined and precise: 'The marketing machine of the modern book industry rarely dwells on the influences and experiences which make the writers the artists they are. Against this frenzied background it is sometimes difficult to appreciate fully the work of writers and their important contribution to their society ... [this series] seeks to balance the hype by treating nine of Ireland's most eminent authors from a broader perspective and so in a more thoughtful and reflective fashion. The programmes examine the total range of their output and include contributions and evaluations from other novelists, poets, critics and, where appropriate, family and friends.' While not all of the programmes are quite as wide-ranging as they might have been, and while the analysis offered by some of the involved commentators is sometimes predicatable enough, the contributions from various close relations and friends of these writers are generally new and they suited the accessible design and unhurried tone of the series. All of the subjects will appear more humanised to viewers and readers after this personalised approach.

Accompanied by a sprightly little signature tune, the series got off to a demure start with Dolan's study of Jennifer Johnston, the Dublin-born (1930), Derry-resident author of eleven novels and various works for stage. Opening with a rather elongated reading by the writer from her own work, this programme finds Johnston in her usual frank form and she openly talks of her well-heeled upbringing amidst the 'urban gentry' of Dublin and her memories are abetted by some commentary from her brother, Michael. Excerpts from the BBC adaptations of her 1974 WWI novel, *How many Miles to Babylon?* (with Daniel Day Lewis) and of her Troubles novel, *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977), are included with her discussion of her Protestant background and her experience of coming back from England to live in Derry in the early seventies. As contextualisation of her familial influences, there is also resonant archival footage shown of an interview with her father, Denis Johnston, who recalls his famously retitling of one of his plays *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* after Lady Gregory and the Abbey rejected it. The critics and other writers Dolan gets on board include Edna Longley, Julia O'Faolain, and Bruce Stewart who categorises Johnston, with her established topics of the Irish Big House and the protestant professional classes, as a 'revisionist writer'. Overall, this programme has a quiet, considered feel, and gels Johnston's private life well with some of the individual works. W J McCormack,

however, should not have been let get away with the unexamined and overweening closing comment, gleaned from André Gide, that ‘the function of minorities [Irish protestants] is to maintain moral standards’.

One of the more captivating opening sequences of the series is the camera’s progression up the stairs of an art gallery/workshop to the accompaniment of a reading by Anthony Cronin in Dolan’s second programme. A venerable elder statesman in Irish letters at this stage, Cronin (b. 1928) - poet, critic, biographer, novelist, journalist - is a worthy subject: He fraternised with Behan, Flann O’Brien and Patrick Kavanagh in his rather directionless career as a student (an experience recollected in the classic *Dead as Doornails*, 1976) and Dolan includes the great familiar pictures of this group’s Bloomsday jaunt. Working also with excerpts from Cronin’s ‘Personal Account’ interview of 1974, Dolan does an excellent job of covering Cronin’s broad range of activity. Through some comments by poet Mary O’Malley, the cultural importance of Cronin’s ‘democratic’ journalism, particularly his ‘Viewpoint’ column in the *Irish Times* in the seventies is affirmed, and poet Thomas McCarthy recalls that Cronin was also a significant figure in the vital mid-century journal *The Bell*. Via commentary from Paul Durcan, who visibly reads most of his contribution, and from Eamonn Dunphy, Cronin’s poetry is decently covered, but the programme loses cohesiveness when his biographical work becomes the focus. The interview with John Banville would have been more apt in a biopic of Beckett or Flann since it veers away from direct commentary on Cronin’s important biographies of these figures, and the inclusion of Beckett footage from ‘Beginning to End’ (1966) serves no pertinent purpose. Closing with some discussion of Cronin’s pivotal role in establishing Aos Dána with Haughey in 1983, this programme fizzles out rather than being wrapped up.

Michael Garvey’s portrait of Maeve Binchy turned out to be one of the vivacious highlights of the series. Though opening with rather predictable scenic shots of Binchy’s Killiney (waterscapes seem interminably tied to filmic studies of writers), the value of interviewing friends and acquaintances is best revealed here as light is cast on the writer through talk with childhood schoolfriends and with former pupils of hers during her short teaching career. Despite the customary suspicions of populism, Binchy (b. 1940) is the wisest and most honest of Ireland’s numerous popular women’s writers and, though Garvey includes little focus on the actual work, he perfectly captures her engaging ebullience and directness while reminding us of her achievements outside of her fiction. It is often forgotten that Binchy was a notable journalist before world fame alighted, and she was central to the development of a women’s page on the *Irish Times* from 1967, becoming that paper’s London correspondent also in 1973. There is some revealing talk about the book industry by Binchy’s agent and her publisher and some critical commentary by Kathy Cremin, a specialist in popular women’s fiction. While the excerpts from the screen version of *A Circle of Friends* might be expected, the most impactful part of the programme is the fairly lengthy piece from the much less saccharine 1978 RTÉ screenplay, ‘Deeply Regretted by ...’

In total sympathy with its subject, the most atmospheric and moody programme of the series is Garvey’s work on John Banville. Opening with some beautiful shots of a hazy Turin, beloved to Banville from his love of Nietzsche, this programme focuses

heavily on the writer's famed European obsessions, though the German critic Rüdiger Imhof's commentary on this aspect is somewhat balanced by Joe McMinn's deliberations over Banville's antipathy to being called an Irish writer. Much of what Banville has to say is expected (to cope with media attention, most writers develop warranted stock responses), but the delving into areas of Banville's childhood and upbringing was new. With some shots from Wexford town where Banville was born in an area called the Faythe in 1945, his sister, Vonnie Evans, and his brother Vincent give some account of their family and upbringing, while Tom Kilroy and Colm Tóibín provide some critical analysis of the work. This documentary, though affected in content and pace somewhat by Banville's quietness and pause, is tightly edited, has no intrusive narratorial commentary, and manages to run along quite smoothly.

Due, presumably, to Willaim Trevor's preferred olympianism, Colm Ó Briain's piece on William Trevor enjoys no new interview material from the writer whatsoever. Written and narrated by Dolores MacKenna, author of a recent monograph on Trevor, the programme relies heavily on archival interviews, from 'Writer in Profile' and 'Folio' (RTÉ, 1976/1979) and from 'Bookmark' (BBC 1986), but compensates for this with an extensive critical attention to creative work not usually given nearly enough time. Born William Trevor Cox in Mitchelstown in 1928, Trevor had a privileged middle-class education in protestant schools in Ireland and the effects of his developing sense of 'outsidedness', compounded by a permanent move to England in 1953, is well covered both through interviews with some of his youthful contemporaries and with critics such as David Marcus and Victoria Glendenning. Historian Roy Foster is brought in to lend weight to analysis of Trevor's protestant and Irish thematics, while some recollections from Pat O'Connor accompany clips from his renowned adaptation of Trevor's story 'The Ballroom of Romance'. Much less familiar are further excerpts from Trevor's screen work, from the family drama 'Access to the Children' (RTÉ 1984) which starred Donal McCann and the vicious 'Events at Drimaghleen' (BBC/RTÉ 1991). (For discussion of 'William Trevor on Screen', see *Film West* 38.)

Narrated by Eamonn Morrissey, Ó Briain's programme on Roddy Doyle turned out to be the most niggling, mainly because of a stratified interview nomenclature that goes astray. The narration points out early on that Doyle's 'talent for humour and sharply observed dialogue have made his writing accessible to readers from a diversity of backgrounds', and moves then to interview 'The Feminist Academic' (Ailbhe Smyth), 'The Economist' (George Lee), 'The Politician' (Tommy Broughan), 'The Writer' (Carlo Gébler), 'The Actor' (Ger Ryan). These would have been more properly signalled as from a variety of professions rather than backgrounds: they are all educated/cultured people, even 'The Community Activist' (Mick Rafferty), presumably the intended spokesperson for the plebeians. While Doyle has done some good cultural work with the underprivileged, and the programme does well to cover his involvement with The Passion Machine theatre company, the received idea that Doyle's fiction somehow champions the lower Dublin classes should, at this stage, have been more rigorously examined. This said, Ó Briain takes the exceptional and useful move of including, unlike Dolan or Garvey, some provoking negative criticism of his subject, from 'The Community Activist': 'It's like as if [Doyle] is creating a zoo of very funny and sometimes dangerous working-class people that it's safe for middle-class people to get close to and not feel threatened ...' Alongside excerpts

from the familiar screen versions of *The Van*, *The Snapper*, and of the central screenplay, 'The Family', Doyle's career is brought precisely up to date by Ó Briain and he finishes, cutely, with Doyle's own negative comments on the film industry—he cannot seem to get his screen adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (1937) filmed because, he says, it is not sufficiently feel-good.

In Dolan's third study, 'John McGahern', the writer has a warning for those involved in secondary work on writers and writing: 'Once a book is written it belongs to the reader and the less the writer has to say about it the better; it's not his business, and all he can do is bow ... There are only two important figures in literature and that's the reader and the writer ... The whole *business* of literature, prizes, publications, hype, even programmes like this, they really have nothing got to do with the essential business which [is] two private businesses ... The whole of literature rests on that solitary and potentially subversive figure alone with a book. You can't legislate for him ...' This is a salutary admonition in these days of publicity tours and reading circuits where it is almost impossible to be a reticent, retiring author. Most especially, no one, artists included, owes anything to the increasingly ubiquitous camera and writers should be allowed, if they so wish, to confine their commentaries to their chosen medium of the printed page. It would be a facile misapprehension, for instance, to accuse William Trevor of elitism or misanthropy simply because he has chosen to fight increasingly shy of televised interviews.

The selected privacies of the individual allowed for however, the 'solitary and potentially subversive figure' McGahern speaks of is well entitled, when trying to understand the books he is alone with, to clamber for ancillary information and discussion if it is offered. This UnderCover series, despite the occasional lapses in technique and comprehensiveness, is uniformly sympathetic towards its nine subjects, indeed towards the very concept of literary creativity itself, and provides, in general, both new analysis and clarifying points of information. The efforts of these three directors and their retinues will do nothing other than enhance reading and—the equilibrium is entirely coincidental—they have produced a highlight apiece: Dolan's McGahern study elicits some revealing comments, particularly regarding personal background, from a fairly guarded writer and the analysis offered by Declan Kiberd, an erstwhile pupil of McGahern's, and particularly by Colm Tóibín is excellent. This programme is especially timely since McGahern (b. 1934), after a gap of more than a decade, will soon be publishing a new novel. Paul Muldoon (b. 1955) is also a quite self-protected writer and Garvey has done well in probing this poet's attitudes towards his family; and the stylistic highlight of the entire series is perhaps his superimposition of Muldoon reading an English translation with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill reading her original in Irish. Ó Briain's piece on Dermot Healy (b. 1947), who made his own screen debut last year as the lead in Nichola Bruce's 'I Could Read the Sky' (see *Film West* 37), might be said to be the most compelling single programme, though this may have a little to do with the inherent nature of the subject, as Neil Jordan has it, his 'wildness'. Healy is currently one of the country's most popular writers and his energetic involvement in so many local projects, combined with the fact that he ranges from poetry to drama to fiction, gives him an air of interest reflected in Ó Briain's thorough treatment. These three programmes are perfect and are compulsory viewing for anyone interested in contemporary Irish writing.

Given the fact that the perpetual standing army of Irish writers Patrick Kavanagh used to talk about is presently better ranked than ever before, there are numerous other potential subjects for this kind of caring series. It is to be hoped that Dolan, Garvey and Ó Briain, with or without others, will soon provide further enjoyment and enlightenment for all book-in-hand solitary subversives. Whisper it: these programmes will have been taped countrywide for repeated subterranean use by dedicated English teachers and lecturers—the best of professional praise in itself.

John Kenny