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# Murder in Michigan

## The Resurrectionists

By Michael Collins

Weidenfeld & Nicolson/Phoenix House

360pp, £12.99

It is not a metaphorical cheap shot to say that Michael Collins writes on the run. His press-release bio-information is athletically singular: as a regular break from work in his American software job, he competes in extreme marathons (Greenland, Antarctica, the Himalayas) and he first began, he says, telling himself boredom-relieving stories in the course of training for such endurances. From his debut with the stories of *The Meat Eaters* (1992), his writing has been energised by a pace that is reflective of compositional process: he has revealed that he wrote his second novel, *Emerald Underground* (1998), in only two to three months.

Though notably exterior to any Irish literary set or circles, Collins's regular garnering of commendations and awards for his five books to date has culminated in the short-listing of his last novel, *The Keepers of Truth* (2000), for the Booker Prize, and, more recently, for the IMPAC Award. *The Resurrectionists* continues his concentration on the American small-town scenario and the murder-mystery subgenre that so extensively appealed to readers of *The Keepers* this side of the Atlantic.

From a dead-end life in New Jersey, twenty-something narrator Frank plans a road trip to his childhood home in Michigan to investigate the demise of his stepfather uncle, headlined in the newspapers: "*Farmer Murdered by Mystery Man*". The first seven of thirty-nine straight chapters outline the "hemorrhage of memory" that will constitute Frank's unravelling "limbo world of things half forgotten or half remembered". When he was five, sometime in the early 1950s, his parents died in a house fire and a period of psychiatric treatment after this trauma has not relieved him of "selective amnesia". Once he reaches again the "insularity" and "conservatism" of his hometown, he quickly settles into a routine as college security guard and tries to balance complex relations with his wife, son and stepson, his half-brother and sister-in-law, while progressively satisfying his obsession with his repressed nightmarish memories.

In the exchanges between past and present, the novel seeks to depict the cultural scene from the 1950s to the 1970s that has determined Frank's mindset. Evocations of early Cold-War America with its "Duck and Cover" school song and of the experience of the Korean War are complemented by scenes from the lives lived in McDonald's and Holiday Inns. Plain veracity of background milieu may be a problem in this regard (it is perhaps significant that despite its equal emphasis on Americana, *The Keepers* did not prove overly popular in America). Bret E. Ellis excepted, it is a mistake to assume that a virtual sense of America can be achieved simply by repetitious references to the doubly-virtual world of pop TV shows; and incessant sentences that begin with "Shit, ..." do not necessarily sound out American idiom. Authenticity of character is equally a problem. That a narrator did "goddam Honors English" is not a sufficient explanation for allowing his convincing white-trash vulgate to mix at random with highly articulate stoic ruminations more suited to Richard Ford's educated men.

The inconsistencies in the narrator's characterisation are distracting even if these are meant to reflect his damaged psyche; but some of Collins's secondary characters

more consistently abet his primary emphasis on full-blooded story development. Frank's stepson, Robert Lee, whose actual father is sitting out time on death row, is convincingly sinister and bratty; and his scheming workmate, Baxter, is a worthy mouthpiece for unregenerate cynicism. Flat-toned dialogue and overwritten wisecracks are compensated for by Collins's ability to build up a sense of intrigue. He combines the classic accoutrement of his chosen subgenre (kidnapping, wrongful arrests, secret letters, apparent blackmail) with the effective air of threat and impending viciousness present in his work from the beginning.

As revelations begin, expectancy is heightened by an effective shortening of chapter length. As Frank fills in his past with the aid of taped conversations from his youth, the central puzzle of the "mystery man", who is in a coma since the murder, is solved, and the denouement, with its uncovering of insurance scams and suicides, is a genuine surprise. Despite a headlong inattention to self-editing, Collins is commendably pursuing here something still rare in Irish fiction: a diversified, idiosyncratic, sequential plot.

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