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Title	Mixing With the Devil. Review of Falling Out of Heaven, by John Lynch
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Publication Date	2010
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2010) Mixing With the Devil. Review of Falling Out of Heaven, by John Lynch. Dublin: Invited Review Articles
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2761

Downloaded 2017-10-30T00:11:42Z

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Kenny, J. (05-06-2010) Mixing with the Devil review of *Falling Out of Heaven* by John Lynch , *The Irish Times*, Weekend 13

Falling Out of Heaven by John Lynch Fourth Estate 336pp £11.99

THE DRINK. Is it inherently a demon or can it claim a soul only when mixed with a measure of the demonic already in, or inflicted on, the drinker?

There are no doubt innumerable dark roads that can lead to alcoholism, and perhaps equally innumerable long and difficult ascents back into the light. But one frightful descent in particular, perhaps the darkest of the dark, naturally concerns us at present in Ireland. We know from our horrifyingly long list of victims of child sexual abuse and their support groups that trouble with drink can be a regular experience in the aftermath. There is always the question of addiction s being a matter of plain chemical dependency, but in these cases, at least, it seems mainly a frequent symptom, not the cause, of practically unspeakable emotional pain.

The common notion that drink can lend us the gift of the gab takes on a troubling ironic shade when we think that the sheer craving for oblivion can itself be an unknown articulation of a petrified constraint that may be impossible to verbalise, even when the tongue is temporarily loosed.

This double whammy of a theme is taken on with a relentless fight for full disclosure in John Lynch s new novel. In his well-received debut novel, *Torn Water* (2005), Lynch already showed considerable interest in alcoholic characters and first-person psychosis. In this second novel he takes it all by the throat and wrings the very hell out of it.

Falling Out of Heaven is narrated by Gabriel O Rourke, a man who has had many apparent reasons for general satisfaction. He had a sound job as an English teacher and was supported by a range of close personal relationships courtesy of a loving wife, a good son and a devoted sister. The purpose of his tale, however, is to take us back, through short titled chapters, to that time when the world splintered before my eyes , to that hospital where I was forced to claw back what was left of my life .

Five years previously drink brought about a familiar kind of downfall for Gabriel that is very convincingly charted by Lynch. The booze worked its serpentine way into his entire life until it choked the good out of

him to the point where he became entirely insensitive to the life of his young son, picked apart everything enjoyable in his wife's life, drank once too often on the job and was fired, and was eventually cast out into homelessness and near madness.

Gabriel is persuasively self-lacerating in recounting all of this anyhow, but he emerges as a character worthy of a deep, if compromised, sympathy as he begins to present, in tandem with his hazy recollections of his committal and recovery, his memories of the past with its dark assassins.

Gabriel is the victim of a devastated childhood, with a mother who was fanatically religious and a drunken lout of a father who physically abused his wife and sexually abused his son. In seeking to portray a man desperately trying to explain his own life to himself, Lynch is resolutely direct, especially when Gabriel recounts one particular scene where his father hits his mother, with heartbreaking consequences for his sister, Ciara. The remembered scenes of sexual abuse are raw and impressively unflinching: My world was shaped in gunfire and thunder, and the sly reach of my father's hand across my balls.

The enduring emotional trauma of Gabriel's experience with his father is greatly intensified through Lynch's regular switch from the past to the present tense. One of the major points the novel makes is that the past can easily condemn a man to repeat his family history, and Gabriel realises his father is now, and will always be, the persecuting devil within: I knew that the black dot of pain that lay in the centre of his eyes also lay in mine, and that it was a stain that no amount of washing or praying could shift.

The sins of the father are well and truly visited on the son in very challenging scenes where Gabriel may or may not become a child abuser himself.

So completely does Lynch want to present his version of the tortured soul here that the narrative becomes somewhat repetitive, static. Again and again the pain is laid on. But this may be exactly the intention in two ways. Gabriel, by necessity, has a messily obsessive mentality that is permanently compelled to return to his childhood as keeper of his secrets. And Gabriel is, after all, a recovering alcoholic, so the uncontrolled nature of his narrative, which continuously circles on a small number of key determining events, is in keeping with the talking/writing cure practised in institutional treatments.

But it remains a general problem for this novel that everything is told and nothing is left to suggestion, to the extent that the characteristic devices of the language begin to feel like a set-up. The scene of the birth of Gabriel's son is nicely used to express the way in which nature seems now to be further distancing an already confused alcoholic from his wife, until we get this clanger: I knew then that I was losing you, and that the towers of our love were falling. Granted, Gabriel is an unconventional but good English teacher and therefore has a certain facility, but the numerous overblown phrases and passages are all used to such similar effect I had killed the dreaming child, the one who had talked of the courtship of butterflies, who had opened himself to the world like a daisy reaching for the sun ; I feel the beginning of something inside me, like the small push of a daffodil through frosty ground that we might well feel bludgeoned within the moral position we are surely guaranteed to hold in any case. The Edenic innocence of children hardly needs constant re-emphasis in a work predicated from the start on the idea that Hell is alive and well in the minds of men such as me .

Moral currency in our varieties of journalism is one thing; when the issues are contained by other forms that come with different expectations, consensus cannot presume to be self-sustaining. When stylised, in fiction or otherwise, topicality is not a non-porous cell. Yes, there are many, many things more important than fine writing, and thematically Lynch touches bravely on some of the more immediate ones here. But still, by the end of this novel, when the head has been shaken yet again at the outrage of sexual abuse, the thought keeps breaking through that at the same time much of it could have been much better written.