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Midnight in a Perfect Life By Michael Collins, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 262pp, £12.99

HERE IS one approach to composition that tends not to appear on writers lists of top 10 rules for success: write a book over six months, then spend the next six months in extreme training for multiple ironman marathons (the Sahara, the Himalayas or North Pole will do), then, head clear and adrenaline at bay, write another book. Then repeat.

This relentless regime in photographs he looks like determination incarnate has helped Michael Collins ascend to a prominent position in Irish fiction while simultaneously remaining outside of the often narrow ground of the Irish writing scene. Aside from his cabinet of athletics achievements, he has to his name a notable list of Irish and international awards and short-listings (including one for the Man Booker), and he is by now a regular feature at major literary festivals. He made an impressive debut with *The Meateaters* (1992), a collection of stories he began in a writing class at the University of Notre Dame, where an athletics scholarship had enticed him away from his native Limerick, and the second volume of stories and six novels he has published since then have all received wide critical acclaim. His work has been translated into 17 languages. Three of his novels are currently lined up for film treatments. Already, his manuscripts have been acquired by Trinity College Dublin. At the relatively young age of 46 he is firmly on the winners podium. This would all be much easier to begrudge if it weren't for the thought of the discipline it must take to rein in physical prowess and sit still at the desk for any period of time and get anything at all done on the page. Given the subjects of his recent fiction, Collins is no doubt very self-aware about his current feted state. He has always specialised in dysfunctional mentalities, atmospheres of threat and uncertainty, scenarios of violence and criminality, and lately he has been directing these fascinations at an area seemingly rich in suitable disrepute: the writing life itself. His fiction has sometimes had uncompromisingly self-examining autobiographical aspects so it is perhaps natural that he would eventually get round to a thorough invigilation of his own profession. His last novel, *The Secret Life of E Robert Pendleton* (2006), an excellent variation on the campus novel, was a jolly and thoroughly creditable kick at the self-important tussles of the literary world. While there are distinct similarities, with his new novel we have a kind of inverse treatment, a much more solemn story about a writer that is, if not self-regarding exactly, possibly overly given to fairly standard representations of the travails of creativity.

Midnight in a Perfect Life is narrated in retrospect by Karl, a wavering writer whose already agonised state is compounded by the precipice of forty . . . the statistical fact that I had fewer years ahead of me than behind me . With early success behind him, Karl is now making little money, is having trouble completing, let alone selling, the new novel that is to be his magnum opus, and he resorts to hack work

and ghost-writing to scrape by. He has a tendency to become obsessed with other women, while his wife, Lori, the breadwinner and self-consciously over forty, is piling on unwelcome pressure to conceive a child. Meanwhile, his senile mother is in a nursing home that he can no longer afford. Kierkegaard-quoting Karl has in any case an underlying reason for general angst that is pure Collins: when he was 13, his wayward father, a travelling salesman, murdered one of his mistresses before turning the gun on himself.

Collins has always emphasised the importance of what he calls the sociological underpinning of his novels, and living as he has in the US since his stint at Notre Dame, he is justifiably lauded for his precise ability to portray the America of underground lives and rustbelts, badlands and wastelands, back roads and wrong roads. The arena where all Karl's dissatisfactions compete is modern Chicago, Collins's skilful depiction of which is abetted by his knowing this milieu well. Too well. While studying for a doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of Illinois, Chicago, he encountered firsthand the city's infamous slums, and one day in the spring of 1995 he was attacked by a frenzied drug addict, receiving a life-threatening stab wound. This type of experience is deployed here to great effect and, vicious as it is, this concentration on Chicago is one of the two most enjoyable aspects of Karl's lamentations.

Even more convincing is the complex world of modern human procreation that Collins explores through Lori. The topics of pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, surrogacy and fertility clinics are all developed acutely and emotively towards one of the novel's best clinchers, a perfect observation about the ironic relentlessness of Lori's mothering instinct: Her desperation did not lend itself to compassion .

Apart from these strong thematic engagements, however, there are considerable downturns here in the writing itself. These begin to appear early on. We are told that Karl's mother lives in a nursing home that is less than a mile from where Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper died in a plane crash in 1959, on what Don McLean described in American Pie as the day the music died . Such inconsequential received knowledge amounts to nothing but filler. Retrospective constructs often limp across the pace of the story (It put me in mind of ; What came to mind). Dull, single-sentence paragraphs are more suggestive of film-script rudiments than cohesive narrative, and there are lazy repetitions of words and phrases (within five lines we have the mystical call of sirens and a mystical third sex ; within 10 lines we have I had my hand to my head and I had my hand to my forehead).

Especially grating are the numerous moments when obviousness and inanity masquerade as profundity: We come into consciousness under the sway of circumstances, under the influence of nature, but also nurture ; Reality, in the end, was defined by our wants and desires, by how we saw ourselves within . It's difficult to reconcile all this with the novel's finer elements. Collins has always been good at portraying

ineptitude in his narrators and characters and in the end it may be that Karl is a deliberate depiction of the writer, not as anti-hero exactly, but as incapable and delusional non-hero.

Maybe. Collins's novels, especially the more recent ones, are richly plotted yet quite leanly crafted at their best, and even at their occasional worst have always been workmanlike. But this one should surely have been sent round for a good few more laps before it was let rest.