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Title	Gangland Knockabout
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Publication Date	2000-03-18
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2000, 18 March) 'Gangland Knockabout.' Review of 'Cartoon City', by Ferdia MacAnna. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 8.
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/464

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Gangland Knockabout

Cartoon City

By Ferdia MacAnna.

Review.

279pp, £9.99 in UK.

To promote its broadcast of the American quasi-comedy series *Sex in the City*, TV3 has recently been running an advertisement where certain concocted Dublin scenes are used to assert a parallel: "Different city - same problems." Ferdia MacAnna's new novel reads like an extended literary version of that hip sound bite: Despite a determined usage of the specific geography of our capital in its setting, *Cartoon City*, employing a highly imitative plot structure, draws a Dublin that could be any modern stylized urban backdrop.

This is essentially a standard crime story, told in an even more hyperbolic comic mode than MacAnna's *The Last of the High Kings* (1991). Myles Sheridan, a lanky thirty-year-old tabloid journalist with a nose for sensationalism, immerses himself in Dublin's underworld with the aid of his childhood friend, Paddy. After involvement in such illegalities as cigarette smuggling and dogfighting, Myles's assumed criminal career accelerates when Mia, the *femme fatale* who distracts him from his girlfriend and young daughter, asks him to murder her money-laundering father. In a world where everyone has a nickname ("Goalpost", accompanied by "Black Pat", is going to kill "Psychodad"), nothing happens realistically and even the most threatening moments tumble into slapstick ("He pulled the trigger. Instantaneously, the chandelier in the hallway exploded ..."). Barely stopping short of slipping on banana skins, these characters visit druggy nightclubs, carry out various botch jobs, and concern themselves with the exhibit of certain penis paintings.

Often accompanied by long jive-talking sections, all the capering gives the novel the feel of an *I Went Down*-type movie script, and the book even provides its own soundtrack, mentioning popular songs at regular intervals. In what are presumably intended as moments of self-consciousness, MacAnna emphasises the filmic hyperreality of his creations: Myles finds that "In US television cop shows things were always predictable ...", feels "As though he was inside his own movie with himself as star, screenwriter and director", and he "kept expecting to hear bells tolling in the distance, twangy guitars, the full Clint Eastwood".

This thematic is not sufficiently developed on the authorial level to give any real resonance to the title however, and, equally, when a further import for the cartoon angle is identified in a remembered episode between Myles and his father, any potential emotiveness is negated by the fact that neither character is fictionally believable. Even the basic localization of these cartoon people is frequently unconvincing since MacAnna manages to deflate his idiom by exoticising it: "Barry must be the guy she had 'got off with' ... 'Got off with' being a polite term for 'slept with', or as Mia would say, 'shagged'".

Though there is something of an incongruously vicious close to his story, MacAnna's world, like early Roddy Doyle, is subsumed in a variety of urban pastoral where the principals are primarily great gas and where their innocence is protected by hilarious failure (Myles manages only to murder a couple of pigeons). While we continue to hear much about the advancing, all-too-real crime problems of a changing

Dublin, there would appear to be a failure of imagination in dealings with the topic in fiction. Given the recent popularity of this kind of caricatural treatment of Irish criminals, it may soon - even if only for aesthetic interest - be imperative, as Shaw said when rejecting the stage Irishman, to have no sense of humour.

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