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# What you get is what you see

**John Kenny**

## **The Third Party**

By Glenn Patterson

The Blackstaff Press

169pp, £7.99

In his highly entertaining and informative selection of his journalism, *Lapsed Protestant* (2006), Glenn Patterson has a piece from 1994 titled “Never-ending stories” where he addresses a question which has surely become a frequent annoyance for post-Troubles writers in Northern Ireland: “What are you going to write about now?” Patterson especially recalls the perception among colleagues when he was young that a budding writer from Northern Ireland would have readymade material to hand: “God, you’re so lucky coming from Belfast”. The inscribed aesthetic presumption was that subject matter is primary in creative writing, and Patterson rightfully scolds literary critics and academics for their general failure of imagination in expecting or seeing in Northern Irish fiction only this or that quotient of readily identifiable Northern Irish material.

Hidden within this blinkered critical presumption that he rejects is an accompanying casual supposition that all writers want to, or simply should, be realists: what is directly seen and experienced *out there*, it seems, must inevitably find its way *in here*, into the literary work. Patterson concludes his convincing rebuttal of the presumption by arguing, with a pointed choice of word, for the importance of visibly shifting realities: “Perhaps the word ‘process’ ... holds the key to this whole question of what comes next. Process – the inevitability of change – is the simple experience of living. Messy and entirely human, here as anywhere, process is a story without an end”. Crucial as this point is, Patterson too readily accepts by default the initial implication that fiction is above all about material – in the old distinction, his argument still prioritises content, albeit a shifting content, over form.

Since the time Patterson wrote his piece, it has become increasingly conventional in Irish literary criticism to take our writers to task for not keeping up thematically with the changing times they see in front of them. One of the consequences of the much fêted speed of social change here, however, is that the unconscious clichés produced by our cultural self-consciousness are also coined much faster. The insistence that new material must instantaneously find its way into our literature so that we can back-pat ourselves for our badges of advancing modernity has become instantaneously humdrum, mainly because the broadly realist presumption behind it is so aesthetically static. That a Moldovan might appear in an Irish novel, for instance, would be no more an automatic guarantee of its literary merits or overall relevance or interest than if it had on its first page a leprechaun atop a shamrocky ditch liltng away to a well-thumbed *Moore’s Melodies*.

So here we have *The Third Party*, Patterson’s seventh novel and only the second to be set outside his native Northern Ireland, in this case courtesy of a Belfast business man (early forties, plasticised PVC packaging) on an alienating trip to Hiroshima. Moving out from his hotel room, our businessman takes in, through equivalently titled

sections, a Breakfast, a Lunch, a Reception and Dinner. Then a series of somewhat confusing night-time social events progresses towards the double meaning of a Third Party, after which things quickly move to a mysterious ending that shrieks with a loneliness emanating in part from the weighted use of an eagle as symbol.

The writing at this denouement is perhaps better than anything Patterson has done in any single section of his previous novels, and he capitalises on occasionally interesting questions raised throughout about identity and the way family and the past can follow a man around the globe like a chip on a shoulder. In comparison, the lead-up is a low-flying affair, from the early paragraph that drearily itemises the fare at a buffet, to the later mention of Darren Clarke which appears particularly overdetermined in its contemporaneity. Another Belfastman, the writer Ike who is also in town at a conference (*Writing Out of Conflict*), is used to uncertain parodic effect, though Patterson is clearly wise to the ironies and vagaries of the writing scene. The A-Bomb Museum is visited but the narrator's sense of its significance contributes little depth to the story.

If a simple change of material is the order of the day, then writers must realise that the exotic can no longer depend on itself. We all travel these days and see these things; we *know* we are all to be good internationalists now. The interest and innovation of the formal treatment in fiction, the creation of striking modes and tones and styles: these are the things that can be done at home at the desk and they are all. In their absence, this novel's Japanese extravaganza of streets and stores, and night lights under which Irishmen, Croats, Armenians and sundry Westerners and Easterners giddily move, is no more inherently interesting than the half-on neon sign on your shop down the road.

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