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If you go down to the woods today...

John Kenny

Winterwood

By Patrick McCabe

Bloomsbury,
242pp. £12.99

Do even pure white unblemished souls return to the welcoming arms of Jesus? In perhaps the most crucial scene in the whole of Pat McCabe's oeuvre, Mrs McAdoo of *The Dead School* (1995) evidently thinks not as she buries "little chubbies", her infant son Thomas, and, ignoring somehow the Canon's insistence that a welcoming Christ walks among a congregation on the happy going-home day of a funeral, throws herself into the grave and rants and raves and swears, tearing away at the coffin lid like a madwoman. And the congregation, willing her to stop and resume the atmosphere of peaceful and harmonious togetherness presumed appropriate to a burial, quickly adopt in embarrassment the position of the truly pitiable ones: "This is great carry-on. This is a grand how-do-you-do I must say. Or what in the hell is wrong with her? Jesus Mary and Joseph such a thing to happen on the day of a funeral".

When the point in all of McCabe is exactly that this is, surely, the most natural thing to happen on the day of a funeral. Total abjection, McCabe's *métier*, knows no time for any conventional reassurance; his principals have always raged at the dying of all kinds of light. He is the master of an unmitigated anger and frustration and confusion brought on, in the authorial sense, by a primal reaction to the outrage of death and, in the sense of fictional characterisation, by an incapacitation of the sang-froid expected of socialised adult humans even when in the depths of unhappiness, of love in extremis, of afflictions both real and imagined, both imposed and paranoically self-inflicted.

And many readers of McCabe have found themselves in the position of that uncomfortable congregation at the graveside, wondering at the full chaotic embrace of the darkness of it all.

The Butcher Boy (1992) and *The Dead School* are generally accepted as masterpieces. *Music on Clinton Street* (1986), though uneven, has the charm of a nascent style, and *Carn* (1989) is the first great direct treatment of contemporary social change in Ireland, with an astonishing quick-fire style organically related to its subject. The jury is still out on *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) and won't necessarily be encouraged quickly back in by the second Neil Jordan/McCabe adaptation of last year. Many of the jury themselves begged clemency in and after *Mondo Desperado* (1999) and the related *Emerald Germs of Ireland* (2001) – on these, certainly to some extent *jeux d'esprit* on McCabe's behalf, the jury may either stand or consider itself dismissed, for both books are like nothing else produced in contemporary Irish fiction: they are the only honest testaments we have to the conscious and clever deployment of cliché, to the effect and mood of expressive drunkenness and articulate hangover.

The tribulation for those at this stage still gaping confusedly into the hole is that there is no distancing effect in McCabe, no Olympian aloofness or objectification that might buoy us up, no clear narrative neatness, as he has gone on, that might convince us that at least it all can be contained in a controlled style or deportment. McCabe's principals and narrators do not peep at grief, whispering contemplative findings over

their shoulders; they stand aside, shout us into place down alongside them, and scratch us with the mess of anguish full in the face. What should never be missed is the kind of imitative form that McCabe often practises whereby the circumlocutions and evasiveness of the narrative is a direct reflection of his narrators' instability, their sheer unwillingness, in a way comparable to Beckett, to relinquish their loss of the run of themselves. *Call Me the Breeze* (2003) is his nonpareil in this regard.

The genius of McCabe is that far from allowing himself or his chief characters to wallow in the idea of an empty existential homeless wasteland, he has always attuned his prose to the socio-cultural particularities of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland. His splicing of psychiatric interest and national interest is seamless.

With *Winterwood*, he moves into the darkest of our interiors through a narrator named Redmond Hatch, a regional journalist writing articles on "folklore and changing ways in Ireland" who befriends a local character and fiddler, Pappie Strange, who in turn emerges in McCabe's hands as a powerful bogeyman figuration for the stories of domestic violence and abuse that have come to the surface here over the past couple of decades. The novel is astonishingly brave in its treatment of paedophilia, and only McCabe could do this in a way that simultaneously accommodates readers who are puzzled and repulsed by the awful human specificity of crimes against children, and readers who would equally subscribe to the notion of pure transcendent evil.

As ever with McCabe, all readers will have to make up their own minds about the dependability of Hatch as a narrator since the novel is not so much about events that have, for the purposes of the story, verifiably happened or not but about a psychic state that is damaged beyond its own recognition, in this case by horrors both suffered and in turn perpetrated. The trademarks are all here (pop-culture allusions, a rapidly changing Ireland, musical obsessions, love gone awry, booze-addled brains), but *Winterwood* is a singular addition to McCabe's oeuvre in its sustained blend of social commentary with the combined archetypal effect of murderous folk ballads and our darker fairytales.

Though a stylistic original, McCabe is the true heir to John McGahern in his sophisticated approach to the hard topics and his ability to simultaneously probe the public and private implications of these. But while for the later McGahern there may be a consoling, if mythic, day when the dead will face the rising sun, it is never likely to be comforting to go with McCabe down into the self's murky depths and the deadly holes of this country's recent past. The chorus-like voice of fate that stalks all McCabe's stories is at its most impressive in *Winterwood* as it closes with an eerie evocation of a damnation that awaits all black and polluted souls.

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