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# The death of the author

## John Kenny

### **The Secret Life of E. Robert Pendleton**

By Michael Collins

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 328pp, €12.99

It is clever for a writer to have a set number of regularly visited themes or ideas and thereby achieve, at the very least, a kind of virtue by association with the familiar conceit that the great writers are those who spend successive works doing more or less the same, but improvable, job. It is cleverer again for a writer to hitch these same key subjects onto a very particular literary vehicle, to become so associated with a specific type of story that any earlier suspicion among readers of contrivance must give way to the possibility of a natural relation between an author's sensibility and his chosen means.

There is a sense in which Michael Collins, ever since he left Ireland behind in the short stories of *The Meat Eaters* (1992) and *The Feminists Go Swimming* (1996) and in the relative conventionalism of his first novel *The Life and Times of a Teaboy* (1994), has been extraordinarily busy rewriting the same novel-about-America detective-crime-thriller-mystery five times. His first major novel, *Emerald Underground* (1998), though its primary focus was the newly resonant situation of Irish-American "illegals", moved out into the beat-up trailer-park heartlands and intensified the blackness already present in his earlier work to a pitch appropriate to the despairing and vicious and seedy small-town America he would thereafter make thematically his own.

Some individual differences aside, his three subsequent novels, *The Keepers of Truth* (2000), *The Resurrectionists* (2002) and *Lost Souls* (2003), have all used murder as a premise for a disquieting and relentless prodding of America's underbelly in the second half of the twentieth century. Collins is a laureate of family disintegration and trashy amorality, of motel loneliness and on-the-road diner transience, of alienated and paranoid people simultaneously haunted by Vietnam and intimidated by the memory of the pioneer dream. He has waded into this murky territory while ably retaining the tag of literary writer - to call him quasi-literary would be an injustice since his general obedience of detective-crime-thriller-mystery conventions never debilitates his articulate circumspection and approachably implicit moralising.

And almost as if to emphasise the literary possibilities of his favoured genre, Collins's has now adapted it to a second well-established brand of fiction: the rich territory of the campus novel. The first four of the generally quick-fire chapters of *The Secret Life of E. Robert Pendleton* set a typical scene. It is the 1980s, and at plush mid-western Bannockburn College a creative writing teacher named Pendleton is wallowing in the English department, as infuriated with himself for falling from stellar beginnings and writing nothing in ten years as he is with the perceived hypocrisies and idiocies of college life, not least the misguided assumption outside the hallowed walls that something useful is always going on inside. Mindful of his

impending tenure review, Pendleton decides to finally commit suicide on the occasion of a guest talk at the college by a friend-turned-nemesis but is foiled at the brink by a directionless graduate student, Adi Wiltshire, who subsequently, with the surprising help of the selfsame nemesis, Horowitz, revitalises the world reputation of the now brain-damaged and resurgently suicidal Pendleton.

Adi helps Pendleton convalesce, and her thesis project now revolves around her discovery in his basement of a hitherto privately published but uncirculated novel titled *Scream*. When *Scream* is published its initial reception as a masterpiece of existential rage and longing gives way to suspicious comparisons of a death at its centre with the unsolved real-life murder a decade ago of a young girl, one of a possible series of sex crimes that one detective Ryder drives into town to re-investigate. Quite a dense and suspenseful plot unfolds around a number of potential suspects. Is Pendleton, tortured by guilt into a novelistic confession, the killer, and therefore is *Scream* best read literally or symbolically? Is it the young girl's white-trash sister, or their mutual jailbird boyfriend? Is it one of the girl's neighbours, or a colleague of Pendleton's? Or the local hick cop, or the ex-military Henry James Wright, Bannockburn's resident photographer?

Collins in no way toddles through the academic groves with the farcicality widely assumed to be the natural mode of the campus novel, but, for the first time in his fiction, he is searingly funny at times here. Though his familiar caustic tones and honest dealings with the utterly seamy are present throughout, the lampooning of academia sometimes dominates to uproarious effect, from Pendleton's spreadsheet that charts "the incestuous nature of literary reviewing", to the threatening question "Why did William Carlos Williams write such short poems?" written backwards on a bathroom mirror, to the closing epilogue on "Pendleton Studies".

Though the epilogue is perhaps overly explanatory, the novel's conclusion is both satisfyingly within the rules of its genre and idiosyncratic enough to justify Collins's persistence with pushing at those rules. He is one of Ireland's major talents abroad, and his continued blending of native writing talent with an acquired devotion to the entertainment value of American popular fiction is impressively single-minded. Readers can turn the pages of E. Robert Pendleton's secret life in equal anticipation of well-plotted thrills, of the accessible seriousness Collins's fiction has always displayed, and of a good hoot at the literary world's wrangles.

**John Kenny is an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Settlement & Historical Change, NUI Galway**