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A Country for Young Men's Questions

John Kenny

Torn Water

By John Lynch

Fourth Estate, £12.99

Are the questions fictional young Irish men seem to brood on actual and therefore archetypically true, or are they at this stage a matter of a national gender stereotype and therefore, in terms of artistic representation, not falsifiable exactly but in every sense merely rhetorical? Given their new lemming-like abandon, which has shifted the zones of extreme behaviour from northern political violence to equally incremental but more private island-wide catastrophes of car- and self-inflicted death, it is perhaps suddenly easy for treatments of the young Irish male *in extremis* to appear out of touch, topically passé, soft-core.

Regardless of their favoured mode or style, writers of fiction cannot, should not, ever be told they must write about particular characters; the invention as well as the simple reflection of human varieties is their professional right. But when a writer seems to select for treatment a familiar type, readers have the right to wonder what the purpose, where the newness. This will surely be especially so for John Lynch in the critical reception of his first novel.

We know Lynch well. While his twenty-year career as a film actor has seen some variety – he played the two-timing shit to Gwyneth Paltrow's wounded heart in the romantic comedy *Sliding Doors* (1997) – he has been cast in the kind of roles that would have become more clichéd than characteristic were it not for his particular talent for intensity of presence. His first performance as the uncertain eponymous republican terrorist for the film version of Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1984) was a piece of remarkable precision acting, and though his subsequent major parts – as Paul Hill for *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and as Bobby Sands for *Some Mother's Son* (1996) – were reprises to some extent, his every physical and expressive moment on screen brilliantly combined existential interpretation and documentary accuracy of personality.

Because *Torn Water* is so firmly – some will say safely – within the ballpark of these three related roles, Lynch will perhaps find it doubly difficult to clear the ground for himself as a first-time novelist. It would be easier to be kind to a relative unknown, even if moving in known territory. But Lynch, even on some autobiographical levels, is to a considerable degree doing a further reprise and the demands are therefore higher. The contextual truth of what he writes about in a broad background realism is incontrovertible as such, but the overall story has a tired familiarity of character and setting and the development is slight. There are also moments, however, when an ingenuity of style and psychiatric exploration together indicate the truer fictional lines along which Lynch might in future proceed.

The extent to which Lynch is literally *of* the Troubles is reflected here in a kind of alter ego, James Lavery. James is seventeen and is growing up on a housing estate outside Lynch's native Newry during the earlier stages of the conflict. The questions that torture him are many: What happened to his father? Did he really die for Ireland eight, nine years before (“A true Irishman died only for Ireland, didn't he?”)? Why will no one tell him anything? What will he do with his alcoholic mother? What will

he do with Sully, the man who seems likely to become his stepfather? When will he find love? What happens when you die in a bomb blast? What do you do if you are seduced by an older woman? Why is death everywhere?

Much of James's brand of Irish confusion is predictably, if accurately, adolescent, and the answers to many of his questions are patly arranged. Love blossoms between fights with rival boys during a stay in the Gaeltacht. His mother reaches crisis point, but a new understanding is reached when his aunt Teezy provides the somewhat deflationary revelations on his father.

Schematism is counterbalanced by more original elements. James makes most sense of the world when immersed in stage acting at school, an area Lynch is well placed to scrutinise. Rehearsals, especially the moments when James feels wholly at one with his role (Mr Martini, the paranoiac with the imaginary friend in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), are cleverly developed. James has a related obsession with staging over-dramatic deaths, and the irony of this in political context is deftly left to the reader to surmise.

It is a single stylistic-structural element that really stays with the reader however. Each relatively short chapter closes with one italicised version or another of James's short "'thought' letters" which capture a range of voices and addressees and subjects, from patriotism and unborn children to masturbation and God. Though frequently very funny, these also have a visionary intensity that is more lyrically compelling than the storyline itself, as in "Killing the Soft Boy in Me": "I want that soft part of me dead, the part that lies sleeping in his bed, his little girly hands clasping his torch, his soft neck as white as a cloud. I'll begin there."

When it breaks away from the otherwise steady pace into the first-person mania of these flights of monologue, *Torn Water* is as singularly inventive as it is reflective of the all-too-familiar pain of domestic realities. Lynch clearly has both the wit and seriousness to plumb the mind of the young Irish male. He is now a man to as closely watch on paper as on screen.

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