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Ireland in the Coming Times

John Kenny

Welcome to Coolsville

By Jason Mordaunt

Jonathan Cape, 361pp, £10.99

In fictional terms, Ireland has practically no future. While we are replete with topical and historical novels, we are generally devoid of any consistent attempts at futuristic fiction, and Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House* (1990) remains the one serious exception to the commonplace that Irish writers are preoccupied with the past. It is natural that more scientifically advanced countries produce more futuristic creative sensibilities; in the meantime of our own speedy chase after similar advancement, we should surely not leave the imagining of our possible futures to our politicians, economists and technocrats.

Step forward Jason Mordaunt, whose first novel is set in and around Dublin in 2028. *Welcome to Coolsville* opens with a Prologue which sets the scene of a country obsessed by the economy and success ("The sour taste of begrudgery was, happily, a thing of the past"), and which introduces the topic of cyber-terror. An unnamed man, while consulting a web library, has stumbled onto a "nefarious device" which allows him encryption control of everything from bank balances to weapons facilities. In the world of the "Big Seven", the "monster servers that had been running constantly now for twenty-odd years", he sabotages major television broadcasts by generating the visual and aural slogan: "WELCOME TO COOLSVILLE ... COVER YOUR ASS ... PASS THE BUCK ... RESISTANCE IS FUTILE." For this, he has become known as "Mantra".

Coolsville is a "subopolis" thirty kilometres west of Dublin where Dr Kiely Flanagan has been conducting illegal work-productivity drug tests on guinea-humans for a medical company. The plot proper is initiated when Flanagan, to find the cash for a drug-habit debt, decides to blow the cover on her covert employer, J.P. Gillespie, whose "WentWest" corporation has for the past year been pestered by Mantra.

Things quickly get curious and nasty: three of the guinea-humans are killed in a staged car crash and the chief sleuth in the resultant cover-up is one Sister Jasmine Ylang-Ylang, member of the "Vervain Society" founded by a "rogue Jesuit" or of a "bleeding-heart kung-fu convent for anarcho-feminists", depending on character point of view. Sister Jasmine is also a cyber-terror investigator, and, after much conglomerate chicanery, a frame-up or two, and a major showdown between Mantra and WentWest, she discovers the identity of the well-intentioned terrorist and is left in control of his device.

Mordaunt seems more intent here on couching all in zaniness than on pursuing thematically or philosophically the human implications of the cyber-age. Though flat prose frequently damages the pace of the story ("He put water in the kettle to make tea and leaned on the counter as he waited for it to boil"), there is also a lively and suggestive engagement with some elements of contemporary culture. Amidst video phones, on-line music, voice-activated appliances and advanced procreation technology, the invented futuristic perspective allows for some incisive commentary on the ever-decreasing cycles of the nostalgia industry and the influence of the world media. The satire on corporate-sponsored mega-sports events is particularly welcome.

For some, the novel will not be sufficiently serious. This is not William Gibson. Nevertheless, Mordaunt has at least taken up the cyberpunk challenge in an Irish context and *Welcome to Coolsville* is worth a read, particularly if you are a smartish teenager who would like some reasonable distraction from your games console for a day or two during the holidays.