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The Barrytown Trilogy: An Introduction to Roddy Doyle's Dublin

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Roddy Doyle is perhaps the single most successful Irish novelist of his generation having gained an audience since the 1980s far beyond the environs of Dublin's Northside where most of his writing is set. Doyle represents a brash generational shift, a confident certitude in his generation's worth and ability. His literary focus is not exactly the urban world; rather it is the suburban world. Not however the suburbia of the middle-classes in their mock-Tudor houses with names offering imaginative vistas of lawns and downs. Doyle's is a suburbia devoid of bourgeois fripperies and manners. A press release accompanied the publication of Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* in 1987. While ostensibly celebrating the nature of the publishing enterprise behind the new novel it is a strong declaration of what this particular novel will do, providing a critical context for its reading and reception:

> King Farouk is a new company and will be publishing fiction by young Irish writers. King Farouk stories will be popular and direct. King Farouk novels will definitely not explore any of the following well-chewed Irish themes: the provincial upbringing of the protagonist, often the author in disguise, in the fifties and sixties; the absence of love in the home, usually the fault of the father; the brutality of the Christian Brothers' education, or the more subtle brutality of the Holy nuns or the Jesuits; the suffocating influence of the Church; the smallness of provincial town life; and, of course, the various frustrations that torment sensitive young men growing up in provincial towns in the fifties and sixties. Too many 'new' Irish novelists seem to have used the pages of their books to help rid themselves of their neuroses. King Farouk authors will keep their neuroses to themselves. King Farouk stories will entertain. King Farouk fiction will be just that: fiction – made up, direct and funny.[1]

These heady words, then, herald, in their own inimitable terms, the arrival of something new and something vibrant. The list of the usual themes of Irish writing, themes to be avoided, suggests a narrowness in terms of the types of stories that can be told and a

[1] Quoted in Liam Harte, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014) p.2

sameness in location for where these stories come from. Also telling is the desire to get away from a notion of the novel as a form of therapy: a means of making public the inner neuroses and angst of the Irish psyche. Doyle's work in contrast will be entertaining with the emphasis very much on the humorous. Of course, the other thing of note from the vantage point of 2015 is how the list and particularly the mention of the church simply no longer apply. To the surprise, one presumes of Roddy Doyle himself, is despite the underlying message of the manifesto being immediacy and therefore the disposability of the novel form, is how *The Commitments* and indeed the other novels in the Barrytown Trilogy, *The Snapper* and *The Van* are now historical documents. We continue to read them in the present moment and they tell us of a pre Celtic Tiger world, a world that no longer exists. Indeed the kind of context for the focus on the Rabbitte family in the three novels would disappear with economic prosperity. Doyle's work not only reflected these changes but was actively immersed in the processes of change itself.

There is, too, an urgency to this press release: it really matters that these books will be written and it really matters that they carve out a new terrain for the Irish novel. One of the underlying assumptions is that the suburbia of Barrytown, the very place of the action as well as the characters and the lives been lived there has not found expression in Irish writing till this point. Certainly in a culture that simply operated on the either-or dichotomy of the rural or the urban, the anonymous housing estates of Doyle's literary world appear out of place, always just off centre, always somewhere invisible or overlooked on the way to somewhere else.

There is a moment from *The Van* when Jimmy Rabbitte Sr and Bimbo's chip van, parked near the Hikers pub, is surrounded by an anonymous group of kids, their presence offering an utterly threatening and dark image in novel often content to capture the good vibrations of the summer that witnessed Ireland's soccer team's first appearance at the World Cup:

> there was a gang of them that hung round the Hikers carpark, young fellas, from fourteen to maybe nineteen. Even in the rain they stayed there. They just put their hoodies up. Some of them always had their hoodies up. They were all small and skinny

> looking but there was something frightening about them. The way they behaved, you could tell that they didn't give a fuck about anything ... It was sad ... The worst thing though was, they didn't laugh ... they didn't do anything for a laugh. Not that Jimmy Sr could see anyway. They were like fuckin' zombies. (p.519)

In spite of Doyle's own stated dictum of being humorous and entertaining, there has always been an element of strong social critique within his work. Here, the image of these teenagers who appear beyond caring is a foreboding one. The Barrytown of much of his fiction is representative of the numerous, anonymous satellite towns that have sprung up on the ever-expanding edges of the old city of Dublin. They are villages without a centre, or indeed a past. These are displaced, disconnected communities with, it seems, no traditions of living other than the immediate codes of survival. This image of, as Bimbo calls them, "The Living Dead" is one nightmarish consequence of this reality but it is one, of course, that Roddy Doyle's characters, his heroes, react against and attempt to overcome.

It is against this backdrop of drab impossibility that Doyle's first novel in the trilogy, *The Commitments*, emerges. Even the name of the novel and, more importantly, the band central to the novel embraces the basic urgent need of this community. All the traditional signifiers of identity and meaning no longer have any purchase in this world: the church and religion means nothing, the institutions of the state mean nothing. In the midst of this young Jimmy Rabbitte takes it upon himself to make something, anything, happen. This template of self-help and self-reliance underscores all of Doyle's art and it is one of the reasons why it is hard, at times, to say precisely exactly the nature of the story being told. There is a contrarian streak running through his work and certainly running through the Barrytown trilogy where there are no easy solutions or happy endings. Always, it seems, the unexpected is what will occur.

One of the more memorable moments in *The Commitments*, made particularly famous in the movie version, is when Jimmy gives a speech to the aspiring band, offering a political edge to their chosen music of soul:

> Your music should be abou' where you're from an the sort o' people yeh come from. ------ Say it once, say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud. (p.13)

No matter where you are from you can still transform yourself and elevate yourself and demand respect. Jimmy's is a manifesto of self-reliance. Here he passionately attempts to redefine Irishness by making a link to soul music as a way of reimagining a provincial sense of identity. Later, the band reinterprets lyrics from the song "Soul Train" so that the train becomes the Dart and all the stations from Killester to Kilbarrack to Sutton and Howth are name-checked. The global and local can sit happily side-by-side here, the moral being that the means to self-discovery and self-expression are to be found in the most surprising of locations. It is about making the world your own.

It would have been far too straightforward for the band to be a huge success, which might have propelled the novel into the realm of fantasy so in the end the band falls apart. Importantly, though, the energies unleashed are to be re-harnessed in a new group: this time it will be country punk and there will be no more politics to divert attention away from the music. That contrarian streak is on show here so that Jimmy, the band, and the novel refuse to be easily pigeonholed and conveniently placed. In other words, Doyle has his characters, stay one, if not, two steps ahead of any final definition. They are, in reality, not fully committed to any one genre of music, rather they are committed to getting ahead and making something of themselves. They are the opposite of idealistic: they are pragmatic.

This, too, gives the reader a clue has to one of the functions of the humour in Doyle's oeuvre. For some readers and critics all that he is doing is offering an updated version of the stereotype of the Irish person as public jester. This is reinforced with literary technique of the Barrytown Trilogy being dialogue based rather than descriptive: people talk and sing, and there is little room for self-conscious reflection. In that way Doyle avoids the wallowing in neuroses that such interiority might entail. Still the biting wit of the characters acts both as means of deflecting away any serious analysis of their lot and, importantly, as a powerful weapon to put down those who might patronisingly

position themselves in a zone of superiority. Humour is both a tool of defence but is also used as weapon of attack.

The Snapper deepens Roddy Doyle's and his readers' engagement with the world of Barrytown with the focus on Sharon Rabbite's pregnancy after a drunken encounter with an older man. Published in 1990 the novel reflects the cultural and political debates of the 1980s when Irish national discourse was convulsed by the demands for the liberalisation of the constitution with regards to both divorce and abortion. At one basic level Doyle's novel simply tells a story that reflected the social reality, not only of working-class Dublin and Ireland, but the middle-classes in general. While there is strong evidence of a social conscience within all of Doyle's writing, a recurring aspiration for justice and fairness, it is never presented in a straightforward manner. Later work by Doyle would deal with the potential of violence being gendered in the Irish family and in Irish society but here, the anxieties about the nature of this pregnancy – was it rape? – is diverted as Doyle expands the reverberations of the pregnancy away from simply Sharon alone into the realm of the family space.

Jimmy Rabbitte Sr becomes the focus as he comes to terms with this new family reality. What is interesting is how Doyle's fictive world usually lauded as ground-breaking and pioneering, actually possesses quite a conservative world-view from a certain perspective. Thus, the conventional Irish world of traditional family values and traditional roles is basically re-inscribed through Jimmy Rabbitte who will now be both grandfather *and* father to the new child. There are, therefore, certain ideals – certain traditional forms – that are to be aspired to and worked toward. Indeed, what is remarkable is how the family space simply grows a little more to accommodate Sharon and the new child. For Sharon, the trials and tribulations, of her pregnancy and her wish to keep secret the name of the father of her child are worth it. By the end of the novel she has a new role as a mother and is empowered by it:

> They'd all call her Gina, but Sharon would call her George. And they'd have to call her George as well. She'd make them. (340)

There is no revolution here, only the gradual and steady transformation of a culture. There is, undoubtedly, something very real about this description of Ireland's transformation toward the Celtic tiger in the 1980s and 1990s. The recent past is

perhaps the most difficult to capture in writing: it is too close to obtain an adequate vantage point from which to view it objectively. Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*, though, does manage to be true to the almost imperceptible movements of historical change.

While Roddy Doyle's work is most certainly acclaimed for its depiction of a location and a community in transition between an old and a new dispensation, critics have also acknowledged how these processes of change are registered through a focus on Jimmy Rabbitte Sr and his anxious masculinity in this new reality. His authority as a traditional father figure is under challenge constantly from his children and Sharon's pregnancy. When she tells him about it, it is an affront to his authority. Later in *The Van* something similar happens when Jimmy ponders how his son Darren is growing up:

> There was something about the way Darren spoke since his voice broke that left Jimmy Sr confused. He admired him more and more; he was a great young fella; he was really proud of him, but he though he felt a bit jealous of him as well sometimes. (390)

Jimmy is confused about his changing role and changing relationship to his son and indeed all his children. Doyle's brilliance is to connect this unfolding narrative to a meditation on Jimmy Sr's inarticulacy. Part of his dilemma is his inability to communicate, not only to others, but to himself the nature of his problem, the nature of his difficulties. A lot of his fathering appears to be playacting, diffusing moments of tension within the family with comic turns and diversions. Again, the emphasis with this use of humour is on the public sphere and the cost for Jimmy is an underdeveloped interior life. Still, those moments in *The Snapper* and also, more prominently, in *The Van*, when Jimmy is forced into haltingly connecting with deep emotion are powerful because they register the struggle being faced by this one individual to come to terms with the newness of his world.

Jimmy Sr's unemployment is the central pivot round which *The Van* rotates. The economic reality of jobs and their absence was, beside the debates on the liberalisation agenda round marriage and sexuality, the other big social issue of the 1980s and early 1990s. Jimmy Sr's loss of his job is not just a matter of money, though that of course is important, but it also a matter of identity as his sense of selfhood and worth is closely bound up with work. On a practical level Jimmy has nothing to do all day. The doctrine

of self-help appears once again as Jimmy makes plans of self-improvement and education, though it is Jimmy's wife Veronica who actually studies and takes exams. Education is one area in both *The Snapper* and *The Van* that is consistently presented as not just a necessity or a duty: it is means of improvement and betterment. So even in the midst of a disconnected community where the institutions of church and state hold no sway or influence, the school still remains an important space and an important idea.

If family was the social unit under pressure in *The Snapper* and in need of reimagining for the modern world, it is friendship which comes under scrutiny in *The Van*. Jimmy, more so than ever because of being let go from his job, finds solace with his friends in the pub. He allows himself a momentary recognition of how important this is for him:

> it wasn't the gargle he was dying for: it was this …; the lads here, the crack, the laughing. This is what he loved. (378)

And later after the Irish soccer team make it through to the quarter finals of the World Cup Jimmy Sr and Jimmy Jr hug in their joy:

> ---- I Love yeh, son, said Jimmy Sr when they were letting go.
>
> He could say it and no one could hear him, except young Jimmy, because of the singing and roaring and breaking glasses. (513)

Affection can be shown in public at such a moment but even here it is an emotion warily shared. Still, it is significant in that it gestures toward Jimmy Sr's ability to adapt to a changing emotional landscape. Though it is never expressed explicitly, it is curious to wonder if Jimmy's dilemma is a generational one in that, perhaps, his children will not be has emotionally stunted and underdeveloped as him, that they now inhabit a much freer world.

The reason for dwelling on such seemingly small or insignificant moments in the novel is that once again Doyle with his story of Jimmy and Bimbo and their shared business venture of a Chip Van comes to naught by the end of the story. The entrepreneurial spirit that would be celebrated above all else during the subsequent Celtic-Tiger period fails here. Some might argue that there is a powerful fatalism at work in Doyle's running through Doyle's fiction – the band in *The Commitments* breaks up and the chip

van is abandoned on Dollymount Strand – subverting any real opportunity for revolutionary change and transformation within characters' lives. Or so it would seem.

As has been said, Roddy Doyle's work refuses at one level to be easily categorised, and here he does not want to unthinkingly promote a culture of the self-start-up business. While the business itself is successful and answers many of the problems confronted by Jimmy in terms of his sense of self-worth, his sense of identity and also reconfirms his position within his family and circle friends, it is at a cost. The cost is to be found in his friendship with Bimbo which deteriorates as the business grows and blossoms. Increasingly it becomes clear that Jimmy Sr is suffering: he often finds himself crying or about to, and says to himself that he is lonely, that he misses his friend. We have here the symptoms of depression and certainly something of a mid-life crisis.

One of the more memorable episodes is Jimmy Sr's and Bimbo's trip into the centre of Dublin in attempt to bond once again outside the realm of their shared business interests. It is a disaster. And on many fronts, not least of which is Jimmy Sr's drunken attempts to grope a woman at a late night wine bar. A number of things are revealed in this episode. The power structure of the two men's relationship has altered and Jimmy Sr is no longer the 'leader' in relation to Bimbo. More importantly though is the reader's realisation that there are wider seismic shifts taking place in society beyond the narrow community and location of Barrytown. As they both slouch home after their encounter in the wine bar, Bimbo says the women they were chatting up were both teachers and both married. That there might other agendas at work here, besides their own, that there might have been another slant on the evening is, or ought to be, a revelation. All the traditional notions of the roles of men and women of Jimmy Sr's generation are reversed, if not upended. This is not what he had expected; this is not how things were meant to be. In other words, Jimmy Sr's problems are not just personal and the answer to them cannot be solely personal either. So, it is not a straightforward case that he is unable to make a go of the business with Bimbo, a personal failure as it were, there are factors outside his individual control that mean he might be left behind in a rapidly ever changing world.

And that is what is remarkable about Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*: the way in which it captures a moving target, a society in rapid transition. It is the main reason why it is so appropriate that the novels have been chosen for the 2015 One City One Book festival. From the vantage point of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland it is with wonder that we can view how rapid is the dating of Doyle's 1980s Dublin which vanished into a world of work, jobs, success and money even as he was being writing about it. The three novels certainly tell us about we lived then, but they also, in their own inimitable ways, tell us how we got to where we are today. His work's contrarian streak – its defiance of being easily pinned down and definitively typecast – affirms this for his readership. Society's ills, then as now, are multifaceted, as are any solutions to those ills: there are no easy answers, or happy endings. A prevailing sense emerges from these stories that these characters realise the nature of change and that their lot is to adapt to it. And they do what people have always done, with pragmatic resignation; they get on with things, in their own way. So, beneath the laughter are the tears but perhaps what we remember most is the laughter.

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