

UCDscholarcast

Series 13 (Spring 2015)

Dublin: One City, One Book Lectures 2015

(in association with Dublin City Public Libraries)

Series Editor: Derek Hand

General Editor: P.J. Mathews

© UCDscholarcast

The Van

Dr Paula Murphy

Department of English, Mater Dei institute of Education

The Van is the last novel in the Barrytown trilogy. It was published in 1991 and was short-listed for the Booker prize that year. Like the other novels, it focuses mainly on one character from the Rabbitte family, in this case Jimmy Rabbitte Sr.

By the third novel in the trilogy, the reader is already quite familiar with Jimmy Sr's character. In *The Commitments*, he featured as a comic, vivacious, though bewildered parent watching the development of Jimmy Junior's musical career. In *The Snapper*, Jimmy Sr was given a more central role, as the reader witnessed his struggles with the judgement of his peers, when a married neighbour is rumoured to be the father of his daughter Sharon's baby. The reader also observed his difficulty with emotional openness, a theme which is reprised in *The Van*. By the end of *The Snapper*, Jimmy Sr is seen to be embracing the new openness of his children's generation about women's bodies and sexuality in general. He takes an active interest in the biological processes involved in Sharon's pregnancy and the changes and symptoms that she is experiencing. This is contrasted with the marginal role Jimmy Sr played in the births of his own children, and so it is clear how he has changed and developed as a character during that novel. In his last appearance in *The Snapper* he is driving Sharon to the hospital, helping her to time her contractions and providing her with characteristically light-hearted emotional support: 'Good girl. It's only the owl cervix dilatin'. – It could happen to a bishop, wha" (5593).

When *The Van* begins, Jimmy Sr's character has undergone a significant change. It is approximately 12 to 18 months after the end of *The Snapper*, judging from the verbal abilities of Sharon's baby, Gina. He has been laid off from his job as a plasterer, and the novel explores the effect of Jimmy Sr's unemployment, both on himself, and on his relationships with his family and friends. It is a depressing theme, and though the novel is comic like the others in the trilogy, Caramine White notes that it is 'in a sense the bleakest of Doyle's novels, containing no hope for an ultimate triumph' (White 2001, 83). In the novel's opening scene, Jimmy Sr is feels as though he is physically pushed out of the family home to make room for the needs of his wife and children. When Darren comes into the kitchen to do his homework, Jimmy Sr offers to move and ends up sitting on the front step: 'Christ, the step was cold; he'd end up with piles or the flu or something. But there was nowhere else to go until after dinner. All the rooms in the house were occupied' (5662). Jimmy Sr's physical

marginalisation in this opening scene mirrors his lost sense of position in the family as the breadwinner and leader. Jimmy Sr is no longer sure where he fits in the family structure as an unemployed father and husband.

Jimmy Sr's unemployment has brought about many small practical changes to the Rabbitte family. Jimmy Sr notices the video tapes that Gina has been given as gifts, but there is no VCR to play them in (6077). When Darren is walking home from football he hopes there will be hot water: 'there often wasn't these days' (6039). When Jimmy Sr was working, there was a choice of cereals in the press based on whatever the twins saw being advertised on television: 'they only had the Cornflakes now' (6344). Christmas is a source of stress for Jimmy and Veronica as they wonder how they will afford to buy presents, food and drink.

More than these practical effects though, the novel focuses on how unemployment affects Jimmy Sr's relationships and its impact on his own psychological welfare. Jimmy Sr does not spend several nights a week in the pub like he did in *The Snapper* because he cannot afford it. He does not miss drinking as much as the companionship that he found in the pub, which he cannot replace: 'it wasn't the gargle he was dying for: it was this (he sat back and smiled at Bimbo); the lads here, the crack, the laughing. This was what he loved' (6180). Not having money to go to the pub means that he has to face this crisis largely without the support network of his friends.

The circumstances of other family members compound Jimmy Sr's misery, as they all appear to be moving on with their lives in some way, while he is stationary, or even regressing. Jimmy Sr finds it hard to understand what has happened to his relationship with Darren, who previously idolised his father. Darren has become a responsible, studious young man, but he has also become opinionated and critical. When Darren is disrespectful at the dinner table, Jimmy Sr chastises him, reminding him who paid for the dinner he is eating. When Darren responds that the State paid for it, Jimmy Sr is devastated. He 'looked like he'd been told someone had died' (7229) Losing his position as breadwinner makes him feel like he has lost his authority as a father. Their relationship has become complex and difficult: '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 thought he felt a bit jealous of him as well sometimes' (6383).

The closeness of Jimmy and Sharon's relationship was central to *The Snapper*. In *The Van*, that closeness has been lost. Sharon notices that her father has become 'miserable, and small and kind of beaten looking' (6110). She tries to confront him and encourage him to talk about how he is feeling, but Jimmy Sr angrily refuses to engage. We see how the

relationship has failed again when Jimmy Sr hears Sharon crying in her room and does not try to comfort her: 'Jimmy Sr held the door handle. He was going to go in. But he couldn't. He wanted to, but he couldn't. He wouldn't have known what to do anymore' (6439). There is a pathos in the implication that once he could have helped his daughter. As White states, 'Jimmy has become an emotional coward' (White 2001, 87).

Relationships are strained or weakened with his other children too. The twins, Tracy and Linda, are experimenting with smoking and getting into trouble with their teachers in school. They seem to be in need of their father's direction and guidance but Jimmy Sr is not able to provide it. His son Leslie, who had gotten into trouble with the law, has left home for England, and has not been in contact for several months. Christmas comes and goes without Jimmy Sr or Veronica hearing from him. At the start of *The Van*, Jimmy Jr has moved out to live with his girlfriend, and during the novel he gets engaged. His father tries hard to be pleased for him, but his reaction is troubled. As is often the case with emotional issues, we are left to guess why, as Jimmy Sr sometimes lacks the willingness and the language to reflect on his emotional state. We are told only that after the announcement, Liverpool scored and Jimmy Sr didn't react and didn't know who scored the goal. The reader is aware that Jimmy Sr is angry at one level because of his son's success. When Jimmy Jr puts a fiver into his pocket, for 'A few pints' (6094), Jimmy Sr later puzzles at his reaction: 'It was funny; he'd been really grateful when young Jimmy had given him the fiver, delighted, and at the same time, or just after, he'd wanted to go after him and thump the living shite out of him' (6124).

Perhaps the relationship that is most affected by Jimmy's unemployment is his marriage. Veronica too is changing and moving on with her life. She is taking some leaving certificate subjects and at the start of the novel is studying in the bedroom with the door locked. This suggests that it is an activity that she wishes to pursue alone, away from her husband and children. She later confirms that this is the case; that she is attracted to the sense of independence she has achieved. Jimmy is proud of her but also a little resentful of how she has been distracted from her role in the family. At dinner, Jimmy Sr complains that it is the second time they have eaten burgers that week. Veronica responds cuttingly by criticising Jimmy's inability to provide for the family: 'When I start getting some proper money again you won't see them so often' (5795). He has lost his ability to entertain her because he feels as though nothing happens in his life to interest her. He admits to making up incidents to relate to her about his day: 'he felt like a right prick when he was telling her but he kind of

had to, he didn't know why; to let her know that he was getting on fine' (6691). As the novel progresses, the reader is introduced to the idea that Jimmy's lack of employment may be having an impact on his virility. He is acutely sensitive to remarks about his purpose or ability. Veronica teasingly tells him 'You're useless' when he asks her to untie his shoelaces, and his reaction is extreme: 'For a split second he was going to straighten his leg quick and put his foot in her stomach, the way she spoke to him like that; for a split second only. Not really' (6284). Their sex life appears to have waned. Towards the end of *The Snapper*, Jimmy Sr was seen rejoicing in Veronica's willingness to have sex with him while it was still bright outside. In *The Van*, when they have sex on Christmas Day, Jimmy Sr notes that it has been a couple of months since they have 'done the business' (6643).

Jimmy Sr's violent thoughts are part of a wider picture of anxiety and depression that he is experiencing. Perhaps because of his inability to articulate or express the devastating impact of unemployment on his self-esteem, his mental suffering manifests itself as a series of debilitating physical symptoms, coupled with a constant mental tension that quickly erupts into angry outbursts: 'There were days when there was this feeling in his guts all the time, like a fart building up only it wasn't that at all. It was as if his trousers were too tight for him, but he'd check and they weren't, they were grand; but there was a little ball of hard air inside him, getting bigger' (6467); 'He'd thought his teeth were going to crack and break; he couldn't get his mouth to open, as if it had been locked and getting tighter. And he'd had to snap his eyes shut, waiting for the crunch and pain' (6110).

Things improve for Jimmy when his friend Bimbo also becomes unemployed, after being laid off from his job as a baker. The difficult task of filling in time is made a little easier with Bimbo in the same situation: 'they were good for each other, him and Bimbo' (7102). Bimbo receives redundancy money when he is laid off work, and with this, he decides to buy a chip van, and to go into business with Jimmy Sr. Initially, they are partners and agree to split the profits, although Bimbo has paid for the cost of the van. The van is filthy and not running. Cleaning it, equipping it, and learning the necessary skills to cook and serve food, initially fills a need in the lives of both men, giving them a sense of purpose and something to look forward to. It also immediately improves the relationship between Jimmy and Veronica, who teaches him some cooking skills and lets him experiment on the family dinner: 'they hadn't laughed together like that in ages. She'd a good sense of humour, Veronica had' (7657). When the van starts making a profit, he revels in being able to be the provider in the family again: 'At the end of the week – next Friday – he was going to put money on the table in front of Veronica, and say nothing' (8318). Jimmy Sr is able to provide Sharon and Darren with jobs in the van, which helps to re-energise his relationship with them both. He enjoys

working with Sharon, who is smart and capable. He and she are like 'two parts of the same machine' (8198) in the chip van. When he catches Linda and Tracy hanging around with a group of teenagers who are throwing stones at the van, he has the confidence and authority to discipline them, forcing them to clean out the van as punishment, showing him stepping back into his parental role. When Darren starts to work in the van, he challenges Jimmy in various ways, including through adopting vegetarianism, but they adjust to dealing with each other on a new, more equal footing, and this relationship also improves.

The hopeful tone of this part of the novel is buoyed further by context of Ireland's performance in the Italia '90 World Cup. Doyle's narrative expresses the sense of solidarity, joy and optimism that characterised the support for the Irish soccer team at this time. The chip van, Bimbo's Burgers, cashes in on World Cup fever, with orders named after Johnny Giles and Eamon Dunphy, RTE commentators on the World Cup: 'By Thursday of the second week, the night of the Holland game, the word Sausage had disappeared out of Barrytown. People were asking for a dunphy an' chips, please, or an eamon, a spice burger an' a small single' (8358). The jubilation that follows Ireland's unlikely success in each match allows Jimmy Sr an emotional valve that he has been unable to find in any of his relationships. He cries when Ireland get through to the quarter finals, and the overwhelming joy of the moment allows him to express his love for his son, Jimmy Jr, with whom he had been struggling to repress jealousy and resentment: 'I love yeh son, said Jimmy Sr ... I think you're fuckin' great ...he liked what he heard, Jimmy Sr could tell that. He gave Jimmy Sr a dig in the stomach. – You're not a bad oul' cunt yourself, he said' (8471). But Ireland's success and Jimmy's happiness are short lived. The day Ireland get through to the quarter finals is the best day of Jimmy Sr's life. A section describing Jimmy Sr's joy and the van's unanticipated success is followed by a very brief section of just one sentence: 'And then they got beaten by the Italians and that was the end of that' (8502).

A few different factors combine to cause the end of Jimmy and Bimbo's partnership in the chip van. A group of disaffected teenagers start to harass the men, whom the men nickname The Living Dead. They rock the van from side to side while they are inside, take it off its bricks and roll it down the hill. Jimmy Sr comically compares the harassment to the film *Assault on Precinct 13* but they are sincerely frightened. A further problem that begins to arise is the involvement of Bimbo's wife Maggie in the decision-making about the van: 'Bimbo and Maggie were the ones in charge; Jimmy Sr couldn't help thinking that sometimes. Not just Maggie. The both of them' (9159). Jimmy Sr is also aware that the business partnership began on an unequal footing, as Bimbo paid for the van initially. He begins to test the idea that he is not an equal partner in the business, suggesting that the

van be called Bimbo and Jimmy's Burgers: 'No, said Bimbo, very – too fuckin' quickly' (9235). In an effort to get their friendship 'back to normal, the way they used to be' (9556), Jimmy Sr suggests that he and Bimbo have a night out together in the city.

At several points in the novel, Jimmy Sr makes comments about women in the company of his male friends that make them uncomfortable. He thinks about and talks about his sons' girlfriends, local factory girls, and his friend Bertie's wife Vera. When he makes some bawdy remarks about Mandy from the Gem, 'He wondered if he should have been talking like this, if he was maybe giving something away' (6829). As if often the case with Jimmy Sr, he identifies that there is a psychological issue or problem, but does not probe further to investigate what it might be. White argues that these fantasies represent Jimmy's attempt to 'reassure himself sexually' (White 2001, 88). In contrast to these sexual comments and thoughts about other women, his sexual relationship with his wife seems to have been waning. This is linked in the novel to Jimmy Sr's depression, which is in turned caused by the effect on his self-esteem of not being the provider for his family. Although Jimmy Sr's work in the van has vastly improved his relationships with his family and his friends, this issue is still unresolved. When Jimmy sets out for his big night out in town with Bimbo, he wants to prove to himself that he can attract a desirable woman, and set the matter to rest in his own mind: 'Maybe just the once he'd like to get the leg over one of these kind of women, only the once ... and then he'd be satisfied' (9636)

The night out that follows is the culmination of several thematic strands that have been woven though the novel up to this point. It focuses on the lasting psychological implications of Jimmy Sr's unemployment, specifically in the form of lack of sexual confidence, which persist in spite of employment being regained. It also shines a spotlight on the friendship between Jimmy Sr and Bimbo. It has begun to break down, and this night out is a slightly desperate attempt to rekindle their old, easy relationship. The night is disastrous on all fronts. Jimmy tries to turn the hierarchy of their friendship back to how it used to be, with him in charge. He sets the itinerary for the night and decides which pubs they will visit. In a night club at the end of the night, Jimmy insists on chatting up two women, and spends more than he can afford buying expensive drinks for them. Humiliatingly, the woman that Bimbo has been talking to kisses him, but Jimmy Sr's advances towards the other woman are rejected.

The novel seems to come to the conclusion that Bimbo and Jimmy's relationship cannot be redeemed. Jimmy Sr is told that he is no longer a full partner in Bimbo's Burgers, and is instead working for a wage. This too is a blow to Jimmy's ego, because he secretly regarded himself as Bimbo's superior in intelligence, wit and industry. When a health inspector

threatens to close them down and Bimbo suspects Jimmy Sr of being the informant, their relationship is dragged towards its conclusion: 'they were coming up to the end' (10372). In a dramatic scene at the end of the novel, Bimbo's Burgers chip van is pushed into the sea at Dollymount Strand after an argument between Jimmy and Bimbo. This seemingly grand gesture about the insignificance of the business compared to the importance of their friendship falls flat almost immediately, as Jimmy tells Bimbo 'You'll be able to get it when the tide goes out again' (10484) and he walks away alone.

In *The Van*, Roddy Doyle explores the far reaching implications of unemployment. Through Jimmy Sr, he creates a compelling picture of the effects of unemployment on the individual: physically, emotionally and psychologically. He explores how it affects the relationships with the unemployed person's family and friends. Perhaps most depressingly, he makes clear the persistent nature of the effects of unemployment, which continue long after the depression seems to have lifted, relationships have been repaired and employment has been resumed. Brian Donnelly rightly notes that in these early Doyle novels 'the social and economic consequences of their lives are viewed exclusively within the personal and domestic sphere' (Doyle 2000, 20). But exploring unemployment through the lens of a small community does not prevent Doyle from making implicit political criticism about a system that allows a man to suffer in this way with little or no support from the state apart from a meagre monetary payment. *The Van* ends The Barrytown trilogy on a dark note. At the end of *The Commitments*, the band has fallen apart but Jimmy is busily working on his next venture. At the end of *The Snapper*, the baby has been born and Sharon is showing her proud defiance by naming her Georgina. But at the end of *The Van*, there is no boldness of spirit in Jimmy Sr. He has been beaten down by his experience of unemployment. Despite earning a good wage, and knowing on a rational level that he is fortunate, 'he was a lucky fuckin' man' (10070), he is experiencing the physical symptoms of depression again and the reader is left wondering if he will ever fully recover. The final lines of the novel have him getting into bed beside Veronica, pitifully asking to be held: 'Give us a hug, Veronica, will yeh.- - I need a hug' (10491).

WORKS CITED

Donnelly, Brian, 2000. 'Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1.

Doyle, Roddy, 1998. *The Barrytown Trilogy, The Commitments, The Snapper, The Van*. London: Vintage Books (Kindle Edition)

White, Caramine, 2001. *Reading Roddy Doyle*. New York: Syracuse University Press.