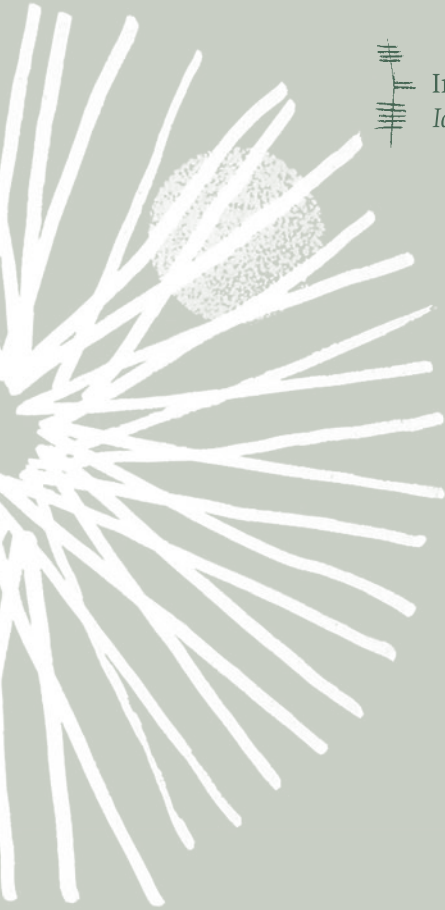


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Ireland Literature Exchange  
25 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2, Ireland

t +353 1 678 8961

+353 1 662 5807

f +353 1 662 5687

e [info@irelandliterature.com](mailto:info@irelandliterature.com)

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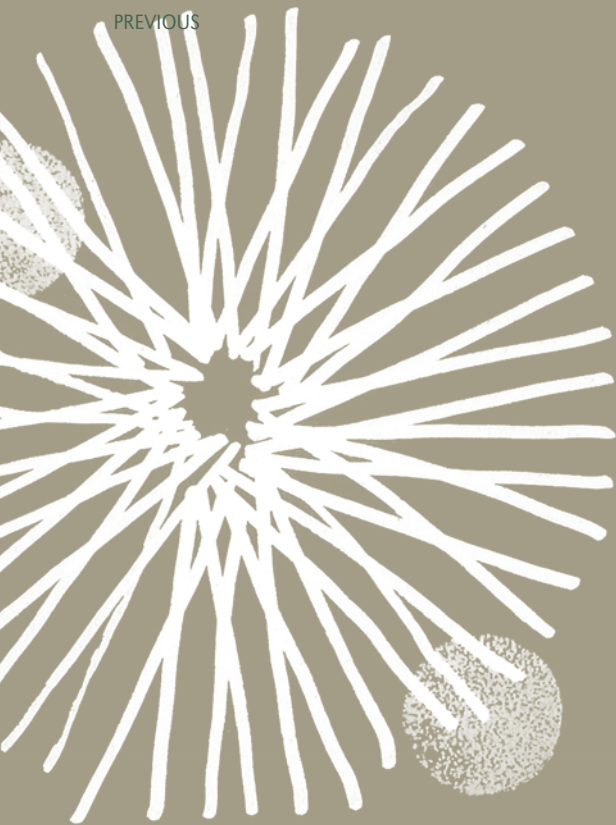


THE IRISH  
LITERARY TRADITION  
& THE CONTEMPORARY  
IRISH NOVEL



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AN INTRODUCTION TO  
TODAY'S IRISH NOVELISTS

CLAIRE KILROY

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Ireland Literature Exchange  
25 Denzille Lane  
Dublin 2  
[www.irelandliterature.com](http://www.irelandliterature.com)  
[info@irelandliterature.com](mailto:info@irelandliterature.com)

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## FOREWORD

Welcome to *The Irish Literary Tradition and the Contemporary Irish Novel!* Ireland Literature Exchange (ILE) is delighted to present this essay to publishers, translators, students, journalists and readers of literature. We hope that it will prove a useful introduction to contemporary Irish prose writing and that it will both inform and entertain our readers, giving rise to an increased interest in the literature of Ireland.

We offer this book to you in a spirit of friendship. Read our literature and get to know us! A tiny island off the coast of Europe, we are very conscious in Ireland of our small size but we are equally proud of our significant literary heritage. We are delighted that contemporary Irish literature continues to build on that heritage and that new stories and new books are being created all the time in this country.

Ireland Literature Exchange is particularly grateful to the novelist Claire Kilroy who wrote this essay on our behalf. Claire was commissioned to write an essay which made reference to a broad range of contemporary Irish writing. We specifically requested that she would reflect the rich and varied kinds of writing for which foreign publishers regularly apply to Ireland Literature Exchange for translation subsidies.

An essay of this kind can only be a snapshot – it is not intended to be comprehensive but aims to provide an overview of

contemporary Irish literature as seen through the prism of ILE's activity. We think that Claire's essay meets this brief with clarity and elegance and we are confident that you will too.

We hope that this essay will open a whole new world of Irish literature to many new readers and that it will reinforce our literary friendship with those who are already acquainted with the world of contemporary Irish literature.

Sinéad Mac Aodha, *Director, Ireland Literature Exchange*



There is a well-known poster of Irish writers that is pinned up all around Ireland – in schools, pubs, heritage sites and cafés. Any place that wishes to give a flavour of who we are as a people is likely to have this poster on display. On it are featured the faces of Joyce, Yeats, Wilde, Shaw and Beckett – the forefathers of our great literary tradition. So central is the figure of the writer to our national identity that these faces are almost as familiar to Irish people as those of their grandparents. There is hardly an Irish writer working today who will not cite the influence of one or more of these trail-blazers on his or her work.

Joyce and Beckett are the progenitors of modern Irish prose. They laid the foundation stone for a literary tradition on which future generations could build. Ireland is a small island off the western coast of Europe with a population of four and a half million. We have modest natural resources and a long and difficult history of colonisation, yet when one of our own published what he called his “usylessly unreadable blue book of eccles” – *Ulysses* – in 1922, James Joyce invented the modern novel.

*Ulysses* changed not only the history of the Irish novel, but also the history of the novel in the world. It extended the parameters of what a novel could be, revealing unanticipated dimensions.

This ebullient, lyrical, humane and visionary book furthermore changed the history of the Irish writer; or rather, it changed the future of the Irish writer.

Joyce, Beckett, Wilde, Shaw and Yeats, the writers on the aforementioned poster, wrote their major works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But which novelists have written and will write their major works in this century? When the poster of famous twenty-first century Irish writers is designed, which of today's novelists will make it into the frame?

Seamus Heaney (born 1939), our great and much-loved poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, would certainly appear in Yeats' spot as our national laureate – indeed, his face already appears on many posters celebrating our literary success. Brian Friel (born 1929) might well take the place of Oscar Wilde or George Bernard Shaw as our best-known playwright. But who would sit where Beckett sits? Who would fill Joyce's shoes? Only time and literary fashion will tell, but what follows is a selection of contenders.

John Banville (born 1945) cites Beckett as a primary influence on his work. On the occasion of Beckett's death, Banville described the writer in the *Irish Times* as "an example to us all". He had said in an interview two years previously that "every Irish writer has to take one of these two directions; you have to go into the Joycean direction or the Beckettian direction. And I go in a Beckettian direction".

Beckett and Banville share what could be termed a funny/sad view of the human condition: it's so terribly sad that it's actually

very funny. Banville is best known for his Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The Sea* (2005), but his Frames trilogy alone – *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995) – most certainly earns him a place on the poster. The Frames trilogy charts the progress of Freddie Montgomery: dilettante, buffoon and cold-blooded murderer. Banville's genius is to make Freddie's story both darkly hilarious and achingly tender, often on the same page.

John McGahern (1934–2006) undoubtedly deserves a place on the poster. He writes in a different tradition to that of Banville, Beckett and Joyce, being an artist of rural Ireland. He broke taboos and lost his job as a school teacher when he published *The Dark* in 1965, which was banned in Ireland for its alleged pornographic content. His masterpiece is *Amongst Women* (1990) which depicts the dynamic between an embittered ex-IRA commander, Moran, and his children, four daughters and a prodigal son. Like Joyce's *Dubliners*, there is a copy of *Amongst Women* in most Irish households. It has become one of our unofficial national texts.

Sebastian Barry (born 1955) also writes in the rural tradition, but with a key difference from McGahern in that he writes about the Protestant Irish, a tradition which should place his work in line with that of Samuel Beckett, who also came from a Protestant background. It is difficult, however, to think of two more diametrically opposed stylists. Barry writes at a high emotional pitch. His prose is overflowing and lyrical and lavishly descriptive next to Beckett's minimalist aesthetic.

Barry's 2008 novel, *The Secret Scripture*, about a 100-year-old woman incarcerated in a mental institution for the crime of getting pregnant outside of wedlock, was awarded the Costa Book of the Year. The novel which preceded it, *A Long, Long Way* (2005), is set in the trenches of World War I and tells the story of young Irish soldiers who fought with the British Army against Germany, and were thus regarded as traitors by their own people (at the time, Ireland was still under British rule). Barry is also an award-winning playwright who sketches his characters with considerable humanity and verve.

Colm Tóibín, born the same year as Sebastian Barry, won the 2009 Costa Novel of the Year Award for his sixth novel, *Brooklyn* (2009), which tells the story of a young Irishwoman in the 1950s who emigrates to the United States of America only to be called back to her native small town in Ireland by a family tragedy. *Brooklyn* is narrated in understated, delicately balanced prose, "scrupulously mean", as Joyce described his own writing style in *Dubliners*, using the word 'mean' in the sense of even, equipoised. Tóibín's topics in his previous novels have been diverse and adventurous, ranging from a troubled period in the life of the great American novelist Henry James in his IMPAC Award-winning novel, *The Master* (2004), to homosexual love in Argentina in *The Story of the Night* (1997) and death from AIDS in the Man Booker Prize-nominated *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999).

Another consistently interesting and experimental Irish novelist whose literary eye is attracted by diverse and alluring topics is Colum McCann (born 1965). He won the 2009 National Book

Award, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the USA. The winning novel, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), is set on the day in 1974 when the Frenchman Phillippe Petit strung a high wire between the rooftops of the Twin Towers and walked across it, while stunned New Yorkers watched from the streets. McCann dauntlessly applies his creative imagination to worlds vastly different from his own, having written about the Russian ballet dancer Nureyev in *Dancer* (2003), about Roma gypsies in *Zoli* (2006) and about homeless people living in the subway tunnels of New York in *This Side of Brightness* (1998). McCann was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1994.

Like Colum McCann, Joseph O'Neill (born 1964) lives in New York. And like John Banville, O'Neill is a professed admirer of Beckett – as a student, he wrote to him requesting that Beckett become the patron of his cricket team. Beckett accepted the invitation by return of post. Also like Banville, O'Neill writes lyrical, exquisitely cadenced prose fuelled by a tender, aching heart straining to come to terms with its losses. For example, *Netherland* (2008) is narrated by Hans van den Broek, a man whose wife has left him in the wake of 9/11, taking with her their only child. Hans finds himself alone and purposeless in New York until he meets Chuck, an eccentric Trinidadian man whose dream is to build America's first cricket stadium. It turns out, unfortunately, that Chuck has a dubious past.

Another Irish writer who made his home for many years in the United States is Gerard Donovan (born 1959). Donovan's first novel, *Schopenhauer's Telescope* (2003), a philosophical novel about the inhumanity of war, was longlisted for the Man Booker

Prize and won the 2004 Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award. His third novel, *Julius Winsome* (2006), is as much a hymn to the beauty and power of lyrical language as it is a tale of revenge. Like the aforementioned Colum McCann, Donovan continues to be an unpredictable and adventurous writer, fierce and true in his aesthetic vision.

Historically, the Irish are no strangers to finding themselves washed up on foreign shores. Joyce and Beckett wrote from the exile of Paris, with Joyce famously sending letters home to his family requesting that they check specific details about Dublin for him so that his recreation of the city in *Ulysses* would be as accurate as if he had lived there all along. "When I die", Joyce said, "Dublin will be written on my heart." The great novel of Dublin was written in Paris.

As emigration has dominated our history, it is a recurring theme in our literary tradition. In his final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2005), John McGahern featured a character who had taken the boat to London as a young man and who now wanted to return home to grow old. His family, however, didn't want him back as there was no place in their lives for him anymore. He had been away so long that he had become a stranger. Dermot Healy (born 1947) also wrote about one such Irishman who emigrated to Britain in the novel *Sudden Times* (1999) and the loss of self that such a cultural displacement entails. Healy's novel, *Long Time, No See* (2011) follows a young man as he navigates the politics, emotions and responsibilities of a modern Ireland he barely understands.

*Felicia's Journey* (1994) by William Trevor (born 1928), which won amongst other prizes the Whitbread Book of the Year, tells the story of a vulnerable young Irish girl when she is forced to travel alone to the UK. Like John McGahern, Trevor is alert to the nuances and social hierarchies of parochial Ireland and – again like McGahern – his short stories are master classes in the form. Trevor's 2009 novel, *Love and Summer*, an elegiac tale of forbidden love in fifties Ireland, was widely hailed as a masterpiece upon its publication and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Joseph O'Connor (born 1963), like Colm Tóibín in *Brooklyn*, has focused on the Irish experience of emigration and exile. O'Connor's best known novel, *Star of the Sea* (2002), depicts the Atlantic crossing of a ship full of Irish escaping the Great Irish Famine onboard a coffin ship – so named because so many passengers died on the journey. During the famine (1845–1854), the potato crop failed and the nation's population dropped from 8 million to 2 million through starvation and emigration. *Star of the Sea* was followed in 2007 by *Redemption Falls*, which depicts the emigrant experience in Frontier America. O'Connor has won several international literary prizes and is translated into 35 languages. His seventh novel, *Ghost Light* (2010), is set, for the most part, in Dublin in the same decade as *Ulysses*.

Roddy Doyle (born 1958) is best known for evoking the life of working-class Dublin with great humour and compassion in novels such as the Barrytown Trilogy (*The Commitments* (1987), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991)), his Man

Booker Prize-winning novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) and in his Paula Spencer novels, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *Paula Spencer* (2006). Like Joseph O'Connor, he has also written about the Irish who rebelled against British rule and their subsequent experiences in the United States in the Henry Smart trilogy – *A Star Called Henry* (1999), *Oh, Play That Thing!* (2004) and *The Dead Republic* (2010).

A sister strand to the novels depicting the emigrant's experience abroad is the comparatively smaller body of novels about Irish people in the days before the country's economic boom who chose to grit their teeth and remain. Joyce wrote about one such young woman who couldn't bear the prospect of emigration in the short story *Evelyn* from *Dubliners*. In *The Journey Home* (1990), novelist, poet and playwright Dermot Bolger (born 1959) tells the story of two young Dubliners who wished to stay in their native city, though it offered them very little. *The Journey Home* remains as relevant and keen in the 2010s as it was in the 1980s, which is the true mark of a classic. Bolger is a consistently insightful and compassionate observer of the lives of Irish people. His 2005 novel, *The Family on Paradise Pier*, tells the story of the decline of an Anglo-Irish family who find themselves displaced in their own country by the social upheaval brought about by the Irish War of Independence and the two World Wars that raged across Europe.

A recent variation on the theme of migration in Irish fiction is the stories of the foreign nationals who, in the wake of the country's newfound prosperity, arrive in Ireland hoping to make new lives for themselves. Chris Binchy (born 1970)



exemplifies Stendhal's exhortation that a writer should hold a mirror up to society – Binchy is a young Irish writer who has consistently explored the changing social dynamics of contemporary Dublin, his native city. He is the author of one of the first Irish novels to feature Eastern European characters as central protagonists in *Open-handed* (2008), a tale of corruption and revenge. *Notes from a Coma* (2005), by Mike McCormack (born 1965), centres around a Romanian orphan who is adopted into small-town Ireland. The novel confounds expectations by evolving into a moving love story. McCormack was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1996.

Hugo Hamilton's (born 1953) seventh novel, *Hand in the Fire* (2010), is set in Ireland and is narrated by a Serbian immigrant. Hamilton himself knows how it is to feel like a stranger in Ireland, as his award-winning and best-selling memoir *The Speckled People* (2003) demonstrated. In it, Hamilton explores the dichotomies and frictions of his German-Irish lineage. *The Speckled People* won several major international prizes and has been translated into 20 languages. A sequel, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, was published in 2006. Hamilton was awarded the Rooney Prize in 1992.

Jennifer Johnston's (born 1930) prolific output includes the 2009 novel *Truth or Fiction*, which tells the story of an ageing writer who is haunted by a war crime he committed at the end of World War Two. Like Sebastian Barry and Dermot Bolger, Johnston has written about Anglo-Irish families displaced by the World Wars in novels such as *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) and the Booker Prize-shortlisted, *Shadows on Our Skins* (1977).

Also born in 1930, Edna O'Brien published the groundbreaking novel *The Country Girls* in 1960, which was promptly banned in Ireland for its frank treatment of the sexual and emotional lives of Irish women. *The Country Girls* formed the first part of a trilogy (followed by *The Lonely Girl* in 1962 and *Girls in their Married Bliss* in 1964) in which O'Brien depicted Irish society as a culture repressed and oppressed by Catholicism, and thus it has been compared to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). One of our most celebrated and prolific writers with over thirty publications and many literary prizes to her name, O'Brien was described by the great American novelist Philip Roth as "a consummate stylist and, to my mind, the most gifted woman now writing fiction in English".

Deirdre Madden (born 1960), winner of the 1987 Rooney Prize, writes thoughtful, lyrical, fully-realised novels about the interior world of the creative mind. Her 2008 novel, *Molly Fox's Birthday*, earned her a second shortlisting for the Orange Prize – she had previously been nominated for it with *One by One in the Darkness* (1996). *Molly Fox's Birthday* was unsurprisingly cited by the great American novelist Richard Ford as his novel of the year for 2008.

In 2007, Ford had cited another Irish writer, Claire Keegan (born 1968), as the author of his book of the year for 2008 – Keegan's second short story collection, *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). Her debut collection, *Antarctica* (1999), won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2000 and was a *Los Angeles Times* Book of the Year and her novella, *Foster* (2010), won the 2009 Davy Byrne Irish Writing Award.

Anne Enright (born 1962) – like Joseph O’Connor, Roddy Doyle and Colm Tóibín, to name a few – has written about an Irish person’s journey into the Americas in her historical novel *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), which narrated the story of the Irish beauty, Eliza Lynch, who eloped to Paraguay in the 1860s as the concubine of its fabulously rich heir, Francisco Lopez. The abiding preoccupation of Enright’s prose, however, is the emotional landscape of middle class Irish women in contemporary Ireland. She is best known for her Man Booker Prize-winner *The Gathering* (2007), which depicts the damage inflicted on a family by child sexual abuse. She was awarded the Rooney Prize in 1991.

The short stories and novels of Bernard MacLaverty (born 1942) are striking for their emotional perceptiveness. His second novel *Cal* (1983) explores the so-called ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland through a love story between a Catholic young man and the Protestant widow of the policeman he has murdered. The Man Booker-shortlisted *Grace Notes* (1997) delicately handled the topic of depression by telling the story of a bereaved young woman who comes to terms with her loss through music. Since Joyce concluded *Ulysses* with the Molly Bloom soliloquy, many male Irish writers have sought to evoke the interior female voice, but few have achieved it as convincingly as MacLaverty.

Like MacLaverty, the novelist Glenn Patterson (born 1961) subtly explores the tensions of the Northern Irish Troubles through the individual stories of the people who lived through them. *The International* (1999) depicts a day in the life of the

International Hotel in Belfast in 1967, just before the city is about to be ruptured by violence. Patterson was awarded the Rooney Prize in 1988. David Park (born 1954) also tackled the subject of the Troubles in his critically acclaimed and award-winning sixth novel, *The Truth Commissioner* (2008), in which the members of a fictional truth commission are forced to confront their roles in a boy's sectarian murder.

Another Irish novelist who engages – often obliquely – in his work with the Troubles is Ronan Bennett (born 1956). Bennett's preoccupation with justice – or rather, the lack of it – in politically-charged novels such as the Whitbread Prize-shortlisted *The Catastrophist* (1997) and the Man Booker Prize-longlisted *Havoc, In Its Third Year* (2001) is not surprising, given that the author was himself imprisoned on remand as a young man and later released without charge. Carlo Gébler (born 1954) has also written about the effect of imprisonment on a man, most recently in his novel *A Good Day for a Dog* (2008). Gébler is the author of several highly regarded novels and works of non-fiction.

Eoin McNamee (born 1961) has also written politically-charged literary thrillers set in Northern Ireland, including *Resurrection Man* (1994), *The Blue Tango* (2002) and *The Ultras* (2004). *Orchid Blue* (2010), is based around the last hanging case in Northern Ireland.

Ever since Joyce opened *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with the words: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road ...", novels written

from the perspective of a child have formed a strong branch of Irish fiction. Christine Dwyer Hickey (born 1960) was longlisted for the Orange Prize in 2005 for her novel, *Tatty* (2004), which was narrated from the point of view of the eponymous Tatty, a young Dublin girl whose family is torn apart by alcoholism. *Room* (2010), the seventh novel by Emma Donoghue (born 1969), is told in the voice of Jack, a 5-year-old boy trapped in a small room with his mother. *Room* is loosely based on instances of kidnapping and confinement such as the notorious Joseph Fritzl case. *Room* is a different kind of book from Donoghue's trilogy of prize-winning historical novels, *Slammerkin* (2000), *Life Mask* (2004) and *The Sealed Letter* (2008).

Perhaps the most famous Irish novel narrated by a child is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) by the young Irish writer John Boyne (born 1971). Boyne is unusual as an Irish writer in that none of his novels are set in Ireland, but rather pitched at dramatic moments in world history – *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was set in Nazi Germany. *Mutiny on the Bounty* (2008) retells the famous sea journey made by Captain Bligh in the late eighteenth century. Boyne is one of our most accomplished storytellers and his 2009 novel, *The House of Special Purpose* is a love story depicting the assassination of the Russian imperial family in 1918. Still in his thirties, Boyne's work has received many awards, has been made into films and translated into 42 languages to date.

Patrick McCabe's (born 1955) Man Booker Prize-shortlisted *The Butcher Boy* (1992) is also narrated by a child and is the novel which has perhaps left the deepest mark on the nation's

psyche. The eponymous Butcher Boy of the novel, Francie Brady, is thrown into a Catholic institution for bad behaviour, where he is abused by a priest. McCabe certainly owes a debt to the funny/sad aspects of the forlorn yet comic figures who people the work of Beckett, but in award-winning novels such as *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) and *Winterwood* (2006), he has forged a genre all his own which he christened 'Bog Gothic'.

Humour of a dark Beckettian kind like McCabe's has always been a dominant trait of the Irish literary tradition. Flann O'Brien (1911–1966) is another exemplar. Such humour features strongly in the works of the new generation of Irish writers such as Kevin Barry (born 1969) and Paul Murray (born 1975). Kevin Barry's blackly hilarious short stories have won him international acclaim and have been published in the *New Yorker*. His debut collection, *There are Little Kingdoms* (2007), was awarded the 2008 Rooney Prize. His first novel, *City of Bohane* (2010) is published by Jonathan Cape. Paul Murray's *Skippy Dies* (2010), despite having wicked priests and abused schoolboys as characters, is hailed as a comic tour de force.

Peter Murphy (born 1968) drew on the gothic extravagances of McCabe for his debut novel, *John the Revelator* (2009), which was shortlisted for the 2009 Costa First Novel Award. Mia Gallagher (born 1967) published an equally splendid gothic novel of murder and drug addiction in Dublin, *Hellfire*, in 2006. Kevin Power (born 1981) won the Rooney Prize in 2009 for his debut novel, *Bad Day in Blackrock* (2008), a literary thriller and moving elegy, loosely based on a notorious nightclub murder by the adult children of Dublin's wealthy classes.

The vital signs that our literary tradition will continue to thrive are encouraging. This is demonstrated by the list of living Irish writers who have won practically every literary prize for which they are eligible. Most of the novelists referred to in this essay are relatively young; the best work of these writers is almost certainly ahead of them, thus ensuring that there will always be a rich supply of faces for the classroom posters of the future, which will commemorate our great literary tradition.

February 2010





## Claire Kilroy

Claire Kilroy (born 1973) is the author of three acclaimed novels: *All Summer* (2003), a literary thriller about a stolen painting; *Tenderwire* (2006), a love story between a young Irish violinist and an old Italian violin; and *All Names Have Been Changed* (2009), which tells the story of a great Irish writer and his Trinity College class of acolytes. She was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2004.

