Dermot Bolger was 9 years old in 1968 when universal secondary education finally became the law in Ireland. This belated upgrade (well behind other modern nations) perhaps explains his bold conviction that what he needed to do to become a writer after secondary school at Beneavin College was practice, not more school. He worked variously as a factory hand and as a driver/librarian for a mobile library until he could support himself by writing. It may explain as well his remarkable non-competitive attunement to the hidden lives of others, especially those who don’t go to university. He writes of and for this new generation, bringing it into the mainstream of Irish literature. He currently lives in Finglas, the Dublin working-class suburb where he was born in 1959.

*Night Shift*, Bolger’s first novel (1985), concerns Donal Flynn, who works the press at a welding rod factory. He is 18, married, and lives with his young wife in a caravan at the bottom of her parents’ garden. The novel describes Donal’s gradual maturing, as he outgrows the “night shift” of single males’ carousing in favor of his marriage. But Donal’s growth is too gradual, too late. After his last night out he returns home to learn that his wife, anxious for his return, has lost their baby in a fall down the stairs. At the hospital we find our own vicarious interest in Donal’s night life has also left us unprepared for the realization that Elizabeth has grown apart from him; and we are unprepared as well for her resolute gesture of giving him back his ring, telling him that she is leaving him to take better care of herself. Unlike such novels as Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, where women are viewed as accessories or liabilities to a central male character gratifyingly resembling the author, this first novel so knowing about young men’s lives turns against its own knowledge to observe that even a decent (and improving) young man can forfeit the love of a
good woman forever.

_The Journey Home_ (1990), Bolger's second novel, established him in Ireland and Europe as the voice of protest against Irish complacency toward a sordid politics corrupting public life. The 2008 publication of _The Journey Home_ in America restores for readers outside the market of Penguin UK a proper historical perspective on the fierce national resentment and self-criticism of the Irish 1980s so muted in Roddy Doyle's fiction, with which Bolger's own is often compared. Bolger's novels are always formally inventive; this novel begins with Hano and Katie running from their murder of a member of a corrupt political family; we read several concurrent narratives (one from beyond the grave) in each chapter, which bring each character up to date on each other's past lives.

Part I and sections of Part III of _The Woman's Daughter_ (1991), Bolger's third novel, first appeared separately in 1987, introducing the author's lifelong interest in extrasensory experience and his characters' hidden lives. The narrative's intricate connection of abused daughters across generations in the same family stands for a spiritual connection between them, even a haunting of the present by the past. A proper reading of Bolger will include his poetry and drama of this period, which share characters among them.

_A Second Life_ (1994) is one of Bolger's greatest novels. Sean Blake's consciousness hovers above "his" car accident, but also senses a pained spirit haunting the nearby Botanical Gardens. Like many who have experienced near-death, Blake recuperates reluctantly, feeling haunted by both his biological mother who gave him up for adoption, and this unknown past spirit. Sean's mother is also haunted, "hearing" his car crash in Dublin although she lives in England. As Sean works his way back to her, the novel brings her story forward: how she was forced into an institution for unwed mothers and forced to give up her child. Sean wrests himself away from researching someone else's life to working harder on sorting out his own. He finds his mother too late, but arranges a tender, magnificent reconciliation scene, taking his family to the graves of his grandparents who had cast his mother out, and releases his mother's ashes there. Bolger is never afraid of including strong emotions and strong endings in his fiction, or of seeming sentimental or to pander to popular feelings. _A Second Life_ was published just before a long-delayed 1994 public investigation in Ireland into how women were institutionalized for real or imaginary sins.

The 10 years following _A Second Life_ (Father's Music, 1997b; Temptation, 2000; and The Valparaiso Voyage, 2001) have consolidated Bolger's national and European reputation as a highly regarded novelist constantly extending his range of subject and form. _The Family on Paradise Pier_ (2005), a chronicle of twentieth-century Ireland and its entanglements in European wars and politics as seen by a disintegrating Irish Protestant family, is Bolger's most ambitious novel to date. The main character Eva first appeared as a formative influence on Hano in _The Journey Home_; her character is based on a real-life mentor (Sheila Fitzgerald) of several Irish writers and artists, including Bolger himself. Bolger is both elucidative and critical in his depiction of the public spirit of this Protestant family as each member tries to find a role in a society moving away from them. A shared memory of the family's recreational use of Paradise Pier haunts and strengthens each character.

Bolger has always been dismissive of sectarian or confessional divisions in Ireland, and hostile to labels such as "working class" and "Anglo-Irish." In 1993 he described "postcolonial literature" as inappropriate to Irish writing, "a decomposing chicken in search of its head" (1993, p. xiii). Yet he has forthrightly identified himself with an Irishness as inclusive as James Joyce's Leopold Bloom. In his important play _In High Germany_, an Irishman working abroad finds an authentic national identity solely in the multinational and multiracial national soccer team.

The public recognition of Bolger's novels for contributing to a more inclusive identity for Irish fiction is paralleled by the critical acclaim and success of his plays; he became a member of Aosdana (Ireland's national academy of artists and intellectuals) in 1991. He has given tireless, unselfish support to fellow writers throughout his career as a publisher and an impresario of new writing. He founded the influential Raven Arts Press in 1977 (when he was 18), publishing first novels by Patrick McCabe and Eoin McNamee, first books by
Colm Toibin and Fintan O'Toole, and major books by Sebastian Barry, Anthony Cronin, Paul Durcan, Francis Stuart, and Michael Hartnett. He devised and edited two novels, *Finbar's Hotel* (1997) and *Ladies' Night at Finbar's Hotel* (1999), gathering one chapter each from fellow Irish writers. Attributed to all of them collectively, these novels do not propose the parlor game of guessing which author has written individual chapters, but encourage a more generous, comradely sense of Irish writing, thoroughly in spirit with the temper of Bolger's work.

**SEE ALSO:** Doyle, Roddy (BIF); Irish Fiction (BIF); Joyce, James (BIF); Working-Class Fiction (BIF)

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


