Tóibín, Colm

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Colm Tóibín is one of the most recognized and influential writers in Ireland in that he serves a public role as a commentator on current events, as a reviewer and editor, and as a presence at conferences and festivals, yet he preserves against this publicity a prose true to his characters rather than his own biography. Toibín has admitted to an early admiration for Hemingway, although his prose is unclouded by Hemingway's plainer–than–thou bravado. There are of course Irish influences on the author as well (he has edited a magisterial anthology of Irish fiction from Jonathan Swift to Emma Donoghue (1999c) for Penguin), yet his tone is markedly different from the ironic deadpan of Joyce’s Dubliners or the deadbeat of Beckett’s prose.

Born in 1955 in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Toibín was educated at the Christian Brothers School (where his father taught) and then at St. Peter’s College, Wexford. He took a BA in history and English at University College Dublin in 1975. He lived in Barcelona for three years, teaching English and learning Catalan, in the midst of Spain’s political turbulence. When he returned to Ireland he began writing for In Dublin, Hibernia, and the Sunday Tribune; he served three years (1982–5) as editor of Magill, at the time Ireland’s most influential current affairs magazine. During this time he worked on an MA in modern English and American literature but never submitted his thesis (on Anthony Hecht). In 1985 he left Ireland again, writing journalism while traveling in South America (especially Argentina during the time of the trial of the generals) and Africa. He published his first book in 1987 (Walking Along the Border, with photographs by Tony O’Shea) and, in 1990, he published The Trial of the Generals (1990a), Homage to Barcelona (1990a), and his first novel (completed in 1986), The South (1990b). Tóibín lives and works mainly in Dublin, but spends a summer month each year in Spain.

In 1959 Iris Murdoch advised contemporary novelists to avoid the self-regarding neurosis of high modernism
by creating characters unlike themselves (1959, 271). Toibín is such a novelist, even when he borrows from his own past: his first novel is a portrait of a Protestant woman's artistic emergence. Katherine Proctor, the main character of The South, leaves husband, son, and ancestral big house behind to begin painting and a new life in Barcelona with another painter who was jailed and tortured for his revolutionary activities during the Spanish Civil War. They live in an isolated mountain village with their daughter, but flashbacks force her lover Miguel (who does not drive) to flee with their daughter in the jeep, killing them both in an accident. Katherine's past pursues her as well through an Irish painter, Michael Graves (also from Enniscorthy), whose continued friendship preserves her Irish identity in Spain. They return to Ireland together, and Katherine makes an elaborate peace with her son, now married. She resumes her painting and keeps quiet company with Graves, not pretending that these arrangements are equal to what she has lost.

*The Heather Blazing* (1992), Toibín's next novel, follows Eamon Redmond, a high court judge who is driving to his holiday cottage with his wife, Carmen. He has just decided a suit in favor of a hospital discharging financial responsibility for a handicapped child to her impoverished parents. The novel reviews the childhood that brought him to such emotional distance from the pain of others, and from his wife and children. Chapters alternate between Eamon's present and his past, during his childhood in Enniscorthy where his father (a schoolteacher) raised him alone after his mother died. He profits from his father's political affiliation to Fianna Fáil, and meets his future wife while canvassing. His rise in the courts is not hampered by his politics. Carmen tries to make him keep less to himself. Unexpectedly, she has a stroke and dies. Through his grief he gradually comes closer to his children and their families. In a beautifully understated final episode, he becomes a companion to his grandson by making him a basin of seawater to play in. At the end, the two go to the shore to play in the sea, repeating a custom that Eamon shared with his father. Already it is clear that Toibín's journalistic career of calling Ireland's politics to account has transformed into the project of imaginatively re-envisioning Ireland.

*The Story of the Night* (1996), the author's third novel, is set in Argentina during the military dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Richard Garay's adamant British mother taught him English and associated herself with the British enclave in Buenos Aires. Richard feels distant from his family, his schoolfellows, and his fellow English teachers at the school, but he is in love with Jorge Canetto, a fellow university student who asked him to teach him English. Richard and Jorge go for a holiday in Spain together, but Jorge is emphatically heterosexual in his company. Richard's bilingualism proves invaluable to the CIA, and he is woven into the profiteering of denationalizing the Argentinian oil industry as a consultant. As Richard's world widens beyond his parents' flat and their furniture, which he has kept, he meets Pablo, Jorge's brother returned from San Francisco. Eventually Pablo agrees to move into a modern house Richard sublets.

Although Toibín's fictional characters speak as sparsely as he writes, it is only *The Story of the Night* that is told in the first person. Perhaps only the full power of Toibín's understated prose can carry what one expects or fears for Richard and Pablo. Although dates are never given, Richard's description of San Francisco recounts the initial appearance of HIV/AIDS. When Pablo inexplicably leaves him, Richard in despair goes to New York with an acquaintance from the oil industry who gives him sex and cocaine without complications. But Richard's apparently allergic reaction to the drugs shows how well this narrator keeps from himself the fact that he has AIDS. The full weight of Toibín's investment in a stylistic sparseness across several novels pays for the dignity of Richard's suffering at the end of the novel. The modesty of his narrating prose educates the reader to respect Richard's physical and emotional pain, especially his own modesty in facing it. Hemingway's sparseness and the French tradition of *l'écriture blanche* pale in comparison with what Toibín is able to achieve. Toibín has described in several interviews the history of his increasing identification with gay writing, which began at this time. Such identification for Toibín is less about tagging himself as a homosexual and more about leading the way in modeling respect for it.

*The Blackwater Lightship* (1999a), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, quietly returns to Enniscorthy, but
consciously reinvokes properties and families described in *The Heather Blazing*. The pattern of alternating between Irish and international settings in his novels has now become apparent. Toibin’s fourth novel offers a new, more energetic narrating and listening to several characters who are good at telling their own stories to each other. It is as if Toibin lets his laconic prose style temporarily rest in peace in Richard Garay’s terminal narrative. Dora Dever-eux, Lily, and Dora’s granddaughter Helen are the three main characters. Helen’s father died when she was a child. Living separate from her mother while she attended to her father in the hospital educated her in separation, and she keeps her mother separate from her own life as a principal of a comprehensive school, mother of two boys, and wife. The separation is broken by her brother Declan (who is near death from AIDS), who wants to leave the hospital to go to his grandmother’s house in Cush (another locale detailed in *The Heather Blazing*). The grandmother Dora, her daughter Lily, and her granddaughter Helen must deal with Declan’s friends and his life in the close area of a cliffside cottage and the unrelenting last stages of Declan’s illness.

*The Master* (2004b), also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is perhaps Toibin’s major work to date, profiting from his 10-year commitment to gay writing begun with *The Story of the Night* and the series of essays on gay writers for the *London Review of Books* (1994–2000), published as *Love in a Dark Time* (2002b); but also from conducting archival biographical research for *Lady Gregory’s Toothbrush* (2002a). It is rare for biographers to successfully create novelistic attachments to the characters their books treat. Toibin’s study of Henry James is as moving as Richard Ellmann on James Joyce and Hermione Lee on Virginia Woolf. He enables the reader to sense that James’s reluctance to give himself away to passion with either men or women is at one with his unparalleled artistic achievements in prose. Toibin creatively restores an antecedent master for contemporary writing who can amend the crude divisions of gay and straight fiction.

*Mothers and Sons* (2006) collects some of Toibin’s recent short stories, a form he has sponsored previously by editing an audiocassette of Irish short stories in 1997 as well as the fiction anthology for Penguin in 1999. The first story, “The Use of Reason,” appeared nine years earlier in the composite novel by seven Irish writers (Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, Hugo Hamilton, Jennifer Johnston, Joseph O’Connor, and Toibin) edited and conceived by Dermot Bolger as *Finbar’s Hotel* (1997). Perhaps the finest story in *Mothers and Sons* is “The Name of the Game,” which concerns a woman who overcomes the debts left by her husband by opening a chip shop, and then sells it successfully to finance a new life despite the pressure from her son to leave him in charge of it. Toibin has announced a second planned collection of stories on exile and return, and has begun to describe himself in interviews and public appearances as a story-catcher. Yet Toibin has also said that he has returned to writing fiction by pen and ink, as if to keep the pace of this new commitment to more stories in hand.

*Brooklyn* (2009), his latest novel (starting again in Enniscorthy), tells Ellis Lacey’s all too common Irish story of emigrating to Brooklyn, establishing a self-sufficient life impossible at home, yet pulled back by Irish duties and affections impossible to escape. Her story modifies the defeated return told in George Moore’s famous story “Homesickness” (which Toibin anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*) and uncannily evokes Joyce’s “Eveline.” Before returning to Ireland to comfort her mother grieving for the sudden death of Ellis’s older sister Rose, she marries her Brooklyn Italian boyfriend at his urging in a civil ceremony. He feels that she might not return otherwise. He is right. Ellis is now more attractive to the young men of Enniscorthy, who had ignored her earlier, and they are more attractive to her. She schedules her return to Brooklyn only when the network of transatlantic Irish family gossip blows the cover on her double life. This novel continues Toibin’s ongoing project across essay, drama, and fiction: to repossess and renew Irish literature by crafting more complex representations of gay lives and Irish identity.

SEE ALSO: Hemingway, Ernest (AF); Irish Fiction (BIF); James, Henry (AF); Politics and the Novel (BIF); Queer/Alternative Sexualities in Fiction (BIF)
REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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