

Panel 12

Intermedial Irish Writing

Reconfiguring Genres in Rural Irish Writing Today

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Rural Irish writing today faces the double challenge of being ‘contemporary’ rather than *roman du terroir* and being ‘literary’. Aidan Higgins said of Dermot Healy’s break-out rural-set story ‘Banished Misfortune’ (1976), ‘If there is a better account of modern Ireland, I have yet to read it’, while Tom MacIntyre called it ‘a story that’s pure song ... a meeting extraordinary between (so to speak) Seamus Ennis [a noted Irish piper and music collector] and J. S. Bach’. Its narrative is structured by the techniques of Irish traditional music and titles of tunes that are woven into the narrative. Musical performances form part of the plot and both major characters comment on the music. Many rural writers take Healy’s approach to reconfiguring the genres of rural writing as their reference point. Mike McCormack said that Healy’s narratives, ‘his milieu of small villages’ were a great liberation. Claire Keegan said books by Dermot Healy, John McGahern and Edna O’Brien in the local library ‘taught me I could write about rural Ireland’. Rural writers operate outside the Metropolis, and this has its costs. John Banville said that Pat McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992) ‘has used stuff the rest of us didn’t bother with’. Seán Farrell quotes a comment on *Frogs for Watchdogs* (2025): ‘Dermot Bolger said there was a whiff of silage off my novel’, adding somewhat doubtfully, ‘I think that was a compliment’. Many rural Irish writers continue to reconfigure genres. Timothy O’Grady worked with Steve Pyke to produce the photo novel *I Could Read the Sky* (1998), built around the memories that rural Irish emigrants to London had of their homeplaces. (Nichola Bruce turned it into a film with Dermot Healy as the lead actor, and Pat McCabe as an extra.) In *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), Sara Baume used mixed media with found objects she photographed. Healy had created a mixed media forum for rural writing through the ground-breaking journals *The Drumlin* and *Force 10*, a format that Kevin Barry and Olivia Smith still promote through the annual *Winter Papers*. In *handiwork* (2020), Sara Baume combines narrative with reflections on art and her own practice of art, blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction. Eoin McNamee, whose novels deal with real crimes, has written of ‘the attachment of fiction to a real person’ that it is ‘a sign that invention in the novel form is running out of steam, that some other means of addressing the world is required’. Marina Marnego distinguishes between the *terroir* novel ‘characterised by ... the linearity of the writing’ and the *neorural* novel that is ‘able to represent the essence of the phenomenon using fewer words and thanks to the “rarefied” writing style, using metaphors and complex narrative techniques’. From this point of view, Irish rural writing has tended toward the *neorural*. Reconfigurations of the narrative voice have come to the fore as a result, *The Butcher Boy* being a case in point, as is Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016). Danny Denton’s *All Along the Echo* (2022) creates a dialogic polyphony of voices and communications media. In *The Spinning Heart* (2012), Donal Ryan creates a kaleidoscope montage or collage of narrative voices that the reader must collate in order

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to construct the narrative, a technique he reprises in the sequel *Heart, Be at Peace* (2024). Having fictionalised his autobiography in early novels, Aidan Higgins set out to recover his autobiography from the fiction by blurring the line between novel and memoir, between creative fiction and non-fiction, writing in the epigraph to *Darkling Plain (texts for the air)* (2010), 'Fabrication or truth? It little matters. Authenticity is all that need concern us'. Rural Irish writing today makes authenticity the goal, and what makes the works under consideration here 'literary' is their reconfiguration of new genres and forms, and in particular, the bodying forth of a distinctive 'voice' that conveys such authenticity in the context of life outside the metropolis.

Biography

Seán Golden is the author and editor of *Yeats and Asia: Overviews and Case Studies* (2020). He is also the co-editor, with Peter Fallon, of *Soft Day: A Miscellany of Contemporary Irish Literature* (1997). He has numerous publications in Irish literary studies, which can be found in *Cyphers*, *The Crane Bag*, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, *Force 10*, *The SHOp* and *The Stinging Fly*.