



## The Butcher Boy

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In *THE BUTCHER BOY* Patrick McCabe, who was born and raised in the small town of Clones, in Ireland's County Monaghan, creates a disturbing and fascinating protagonist and narrator in Francie Brady, a young boy who is hunted, we learn on the very first page, because of what he has done to Mrs. Nugent. The narrative then unfolds as a gradual illumination of Francie's fatal act. The child of pathetically dysfunctional parents, dependent for emotional sustenance on his friendship with Joe Purcell, Francie sees his world begin to fall apart on the day the very respectable Mrs. Nugent denounces him and his family as pigs. What makes this especially disturbing for Francie is that part of him suspects that Mrs. Nugent may be right.

Mrs. Nugent's words, and Francie's reaction to them, set in motion a train of events that give the novel almost tragic force. Unable to absorb the deaths of both his parents, his mother's suicide for which he blames himself, and shattered by the betrayal of Joe, who transfers his friendship to Mrs. Nugent's son Philip, Francie becomes increasingly, and at last irreversibly, disoriented. Everything that has gone wrong, he convinces himself, is Mrs. Nugent's fault, and Francie exacts a gruesome revenge.

McCabe's masterstroke is to entrust the narration to Francie himself and to create for his narrator a voice of power, eloquence, humor, and authenticity. The result is that material that could have degenerated into the crudest sort of melodramatic horror is realized instead as a complex and compassionate study of a tormented protagonist and a convincing portrait of his world. The story Patrick McCabe tells in *THE BUTCHER BOY* is undeniably harrowing, but his treatment of this difficult material is never less than humane.

## Sources for Further Study

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