



Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha

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Writing for an adult audience about children is risky for any writer and especially so for the novelist, who must not only master the child's idiom and psychology but also make both this idiom and this psychology interesting and believable over the course of two or three hundred pages. And imagine how much more difficult a novel such as this would be to write if the author avoided entirely the merely sensational (child abuse, fatal illnesses, and the like). Thus the paradoxical brilliance of Roddy Doyle's splendidly understated PADDY CLARKE HA HA HA, 1993 winner of Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker McConnell Prize. The awarding of the Booker only validates what many readers and reviewers already knew about the thirty-five-year-old author of three previous novels and two highly acclaimed screenplays, that his is a major talent and that Barrytown, the fictional setting of all his novels, is rapidly becoming as much a part of the literary landscape as Joyce's Dublin or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

Although Doyle's novel is often funny, the overall effect is anything but. Life in Barrytown in 1968 is both hard and confining, as Doyle knows so well from the fourteen years he spent teaching in just such a North Dublin area. Family life largely centers on the television; school seems little more than an endless round of intimidation and humiliation. In the world between, the world of disappearing farms and half-finished building sites, Paddy and the other Barrytown boys play soccer, defend their territory, run through their neighbors' yards, steal boards and nails, and, in neighboring Bayside, magazines. Mostly they try to belong, though to a group that can only define itself in negative terms, on the basis of someone being excluded. Helpless witness to the breakup of his parents' marriage, Paddy becomes that someone, his vulnerability like some physical weakness that the others find vaguely threatening. With great sensitivity and without a single misstep, false note, or moment's condescension, Doyle renders Paddy Clarke's world in terms of what his young protagonist can see but only dimly and reluctantly understand.

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