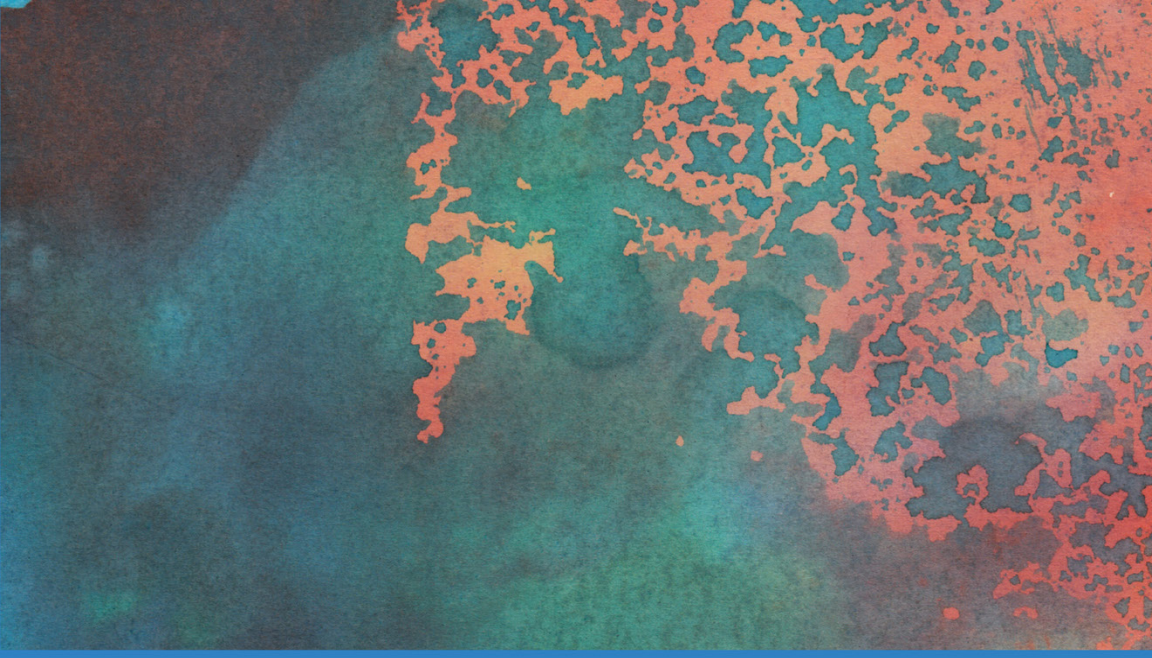
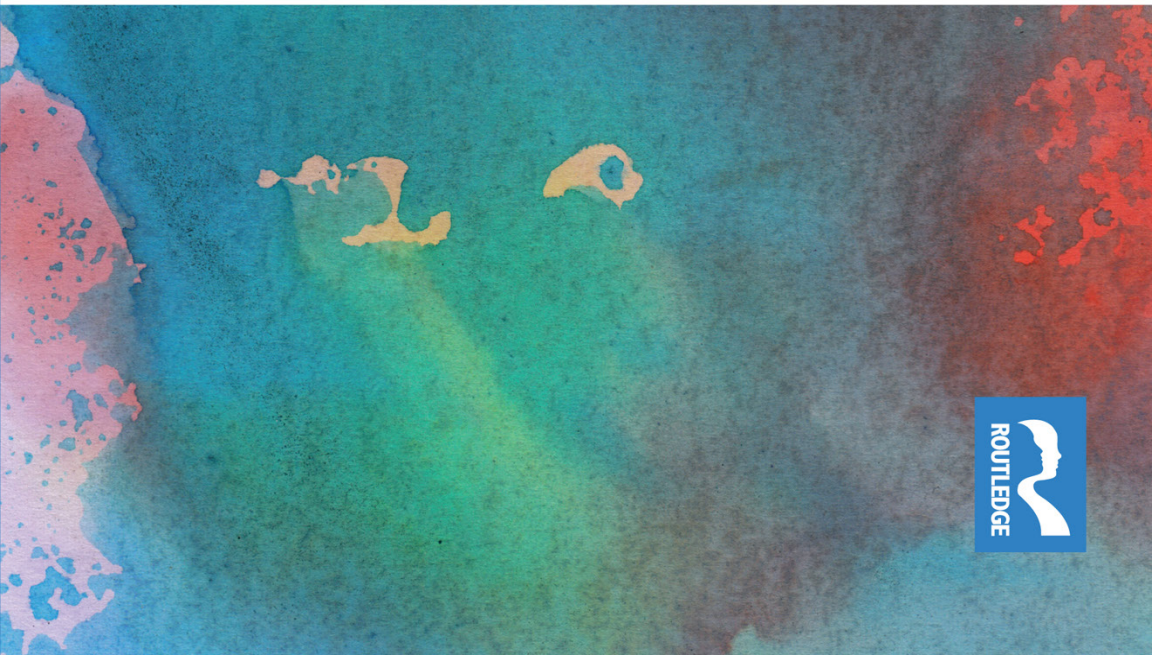


Routledge Studies in Irish Literature

READING PAUL HOWARD

THE ART OF ROSS O'CARROLL-KELLY

Eugene O'Brien



Reading Paul Howard

Reading Paul Howard: The Art of Ross O'Carroll Kelly offers a thorough examination of narrative devices, satirical modes, cultural context and humour in Howard's texts.

The volume argues that his academic critical neglect is due to a classic bifurcation in Irish Studies between high and popular culture, and it will use the thought of Pierre Bourdieu, Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida to critique this division, building a theoretical platform from which to examine the significance of Howard's work as an Irish comic and satirical writer. Addressing both the style and the substance of his work, this text locates him in a tradition of Irish satirical writing that dates back to the Gaelic bards, and it includes writers like Swift, Wilde, Flann O'Brien and Joyce. Through textual and contextual analysis, this book makes the case for Howard as a significant and original voice in Irish writing, whose fusion of the three traditional types of satire (Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean) has created a parallel Ireland that shines a satirical light on its real counterpart. As Freud suggests, humour is a way of accessing aspects of the psyche that normative discourses cannot enunciate, and Howard, through the confessional voice of Ross, offers a fictive truth on 20 years of Irish society, a truth that is not accessed by discourse in the public sphere or by what could be termed literary or high cultural fiction.

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Eugene O'Brien

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they also make us think. He is saying important things about the Ireland in which we live, and he is doing it in a very entertaining way. His work can be traced in a direct line from the ancient bards and *filí* of the Irish language through the satirical strain that is so important in Irish writing, and it is my hope that this book will encourage people to read his work in that tradition, as it very much enhances it and brings it up to date.

Introduction

Towards an Evaluation of Paul Howard

> People often ask me if there was one particular individual who inspired the character of Ross and I'm reminded of a schools' match that I attended in the mid- to late-1990s while I was writing the early stories that make up the main body of this book. It was at the very start of the Celtic Tiger and a young buck with the confident bearing of a five-star general strutted off the field and said to his father, 'I don't give a fock how you think I played – just crack open the wallet'. And, at least in my mind, that was the moment when Ross O'Carroll-Kelly was born.
>
> (Howard 2000, 8)

Writing in *The Irish Times*, reviewing Paul Howard's eleventh book *The Shelbourne Ultimatum*, Patrick Freyne saw Howard as 'one of a pantheon of anthropomorphic Irelands (others include Cuchulain, Kathleen Ní Houlihan, Dev and Marty Whelan)':

> I believe that, in years to come, heavily footnoted editions of Paul Howard's long-running series will be the textbooks on early 21st century Ireland. In fact, I assume it will be annotated sooner rather than later …. It won't be long before readers will be wondering who Katie Holmes and Suri Cruise were, so I suspect the books will soon come with more footnotes than TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*.
>
> (Freyne 2012)

The paralleling of Howard's work with that of Eliot is interesting for a number of reasons. Eliot can be seen as a synecdoche for high modernist culture. The intellectualisation of poetic theme, subject and form that highlights so much of Modernist art can be seen in its purest form in his work, with *The Waste Land* (Eliot and Rainey 2006) being a poem that needed endnotes to guide the reader through the intersubjective weave of references to myth, legend, literature and other languages and cultures. It was a poem specifically written in a high cultural frame of reference. To equate Eliot and Howard, a writer who would seem to be firmly placed in the

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paradigm of popular culture is quite a knowing gesture on Freyne's part, as the Irish literary establishment has largely ignored Howard's work, as will be further discussed in Chapter 1. To see Howard as a necessary voice in understanding contemporary Ireland, just as Eliot's voice is essential in understanding the Modernist period, therefore, is a serious claim, and one that the present book will both endorse and amplify.

Annotating a book is one of the performative gestures that enfold that book into a high cultural frame of reference; to annotate is to suggest, first, that this book is worthy of study and, second, that the context within which this book is written needs to be explained in order to fully understand the particular vision of the book. Similarly, Howard, in *Ross O'Carroll-Kelly's Guide to South Dublin: How to Get By On, Like, €10,000 a Day* (Howard 2007a) went so far as to include a glossary of terms, a '*ThesauRoss*', a dictionary of words and terms commonly used in South Dublin: 'It will give you a better understanding of what the fock everyone is banging on about' (Howard 2007a, 9). It is typical of Howard that he will affect the academic convention of explanatory notes, and then undercut them with the following profanity, and the slang term 'banging on about'. To see Howard as embodying a very particular vision of Ireland is at the core of the present study: in my view, Freyne is correct in pointing to the cultural significance of Howard's work, as it captures a very specific place and time in Ireland, as well as a very particular attitude to class and privilege, terms that are becoming increasingly important in Irish Studies, despite having been long repressed in academic critique.

This book will assess the writings of Paul Howard as being of cultural and stylistic significance. It will argue that his critical neglect is due to a bifurcation in Irish Studies between high and popular culture, and it will use the thought of Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida to critique this division and to build a theoretical platform from which to examine the significance of Howard's work as an Irish writer from an academic perspective. It will address both the style and the substance of his work by placing him in a tradition of Irish satirical writing that dates back to the Gaelic bards and includes writers like Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Flann O'Brien, Austin Clarke and James Joyce.

Through textual and contextual analysis, this book will make the case for Howard as a substantial and original voice in Irish writing, whose fusion of the three traditional types of satire (Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean) has created a parallel Ireland that shines a satirical light on its real counterpart. As Freud suggests, humour is a way of accessing aspects of the psyche that normative discourses cannot enunciate. This book will contend that Howard, through the confessional voice of Ross, offers a fictive truth about 20 years of Irish society, a truth that is not accessed by

discourse in the public sphere or by what could be termed literary or high cultural fiction. Satire as an agent of change has long been a potent force in culture, and this book will place Howard centrally in this tradition.

Paul Howard has written across a range of genres. In the series there are 21 novels; four plays; two musicals; a mock travel guide of South Dublin; a book of mock interviews with all of the characters in the series, as well as the ongoing newspaper columns, a selection of which form the core of a book published in 2021 *RO'CK of Ages* (Howard 2021b). Ross first appeared in *The Sunday Tribune* newspaper from 1998 to 2007, and then migrated to *The Irish Times*, or, as the character himself would put it, in the upper-class accent that permeates the books, *The Oirish Toimes* from 2007 to the present, and it is from the latter columns that this book derives. Spelling deviations like this, a stylistic feature called eye-dialect, force the reader to say the words aloud, and, by reading phonetically, the reader mimics the accent of the *haute bourgeoisie*, who are the main target of Howard's satire. It is clever in that even as we laugh at them, we mimic their own way of speaking and, by analogy, their way of seeing Ireland, so that, performatively, we inhabit their accent and, by extension, aspects of their worldview. These comic novels are powered by the twin engines of language and class 'and the way in which one expresses or betrays the other' (Power 2008b, 11).

As already noted, Ross has remained the topic of a newspaper column. Our analysis will begin with *RO'CK of Ages: From Boom Days to Zoom Days* (Howard 2021b), as it demonstrates, *in parvo*, the satirical and epistemological thrust of Howard's writing. This book is divided into chronological sections, from 2007 to 2020, with each series of yearly columns prefaced by a brief chronology of serious issues that occurred in the particular year, followed by a segue into the alternative world of Ross with a page containing the word: 'Meanwhile …' (Howard 2021b, 1). The ellipses lead the reader into the alternative satirical version of that year, and it is in the liminal space, shuttling between real and parallel Irelands, that Ross lives and breathes, and the force of that duality of perspective shines through in a later column not included in the collection. Meaning resides in the oscillation, the negotiation between these two discourses, *inter-dit*. The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan speaks of how the truth, or full speech, is very hard to access and that sometimes it can be found only '*inter-dit*'; it is 'said between the words, between the lines. We have to expose the kind of real to which it grants us access' (Lacan 1998b, 119).

In the column of 20 March 2021, Ross's daughter, Honor, asks why their family has not already got the COVID-19 vaccine. In Ireland, the vaccine was distributed on a need-first basis, with those who were elderly or immunocompromised getting the initial doses and then the general population, who were vaccinated in descending order of age. In this context,

Honor's question seems odd 'As in, why can't we just, like, pay to get it before everyone else?', and Sorcha explains that the vaccine is being administered on the basis of greatest need:

> 'What, even though we're rich?' Honor goes, and when she puts it like that – yeah, no – it does seem unfair.
>
> Sorcha's there, 'Honor, I hope we didn't raise you to believe that just because we live in a big house in Killiney, we should be allowed to use our money to skip the queue'.
>
> Honor goes, 'We use our money to skip every other queue. Why should this one be any different?'
>
> (Howard 2021d)

And, of course, we smile, until we look back across the imaginary ellipsis to the following week's 'real' headlines in Ireland and discover that 20 teachers and staff in St Gerard's, a fee-paying school just outside Bray, County Wicklow, received 'leftover' vaccines in the Beacon private hospital, and that 'the children of Beacon chief executive Michael Cullen attend the school'. The hospital maintained that they had permission from the HSE (Health Service Executive), but the HSE did not agree: 'these vaccines were administered contrary to our very clear guidelines and we certainly did not approve them' (Arthur Beesley 2021). This has been followed by a number of occasions where 'the great and the good' (read the wealthy and the entitled) have been seen to get vaccines ahead of their allotted place. It is Howard's awareness of how the Irish *haute bourgeoisie* never sees itself as being unfair, but rather as entitled, a position voiced enthusiastically and unironically by Ross and his father Charles, that is so accurate in his books. Ross is the classic limited narrator, who sees nothing wrong with his inherited privilege. However, Howard does see through this placenta of self-entitlement, and he consistently punctures it with sharp, Juvenalian satirical incisions.

The stylistic trope that makes the series work is the intellectual gap between the very fallible first-person narrator and the very sharp and aware intelligence of the author, which means that irony is pervasive across the series. This allows for some really sharp satirical readings of the 'real' Ireland by Howard, at Ross's expense. The fact that Howard is able to inject such irony while never taking on an omniscient narrative perspective is quite sophisticated in terms of writing technique; as Ross's father Charles ('Chorles') might put it, citing Ovid: of *ars est celere artem* ('the true art is to conceal art'). Ross's perceptions of his parallel world mirror those of the real world, and the ironic counterpoint is an ongoing leitmotif in the series. So on looking around at Leinster fans at a rugby match, he notes that:

> See, we get a bad rap – and by we I mean, like, Leinster fans? But, despite what people say, we really do come in all shapes and sizes. There's goys here with Aviator shades on their heads, goys with Oakleys on their heads, goys with Ray-Bans on their heads.
>
> I think Oisinn sums it up best when he describes it as a real cultural melting pot.
>
> (Howard 2021b, 41)

Oisinn may be speaking ironically, but Ross is not. While authorial irony is pervasive, the narrator himself is an irony-free zone, as he seems to genuinely feel that his own particular social-class grouping is a diverse one; in other words, he does not really see outside the defines of the affluent South Dublin suburbs.

This is also true of his obsession with rugby, and his ongoing delusions that he should have a place in the Irish rugby structures. Ross again seems to be the embodiment of the Brandoesque 'I could have been a contender' mentality, as he approvingly notes the comments of the New Zealand player Tana Umaga, who said that 'I could have played at number 10 for Ireland had I not pissed my talent up against the wall – which was an amazing thing for me to hear, because I don't always get the recognition?' (Howard 2021b, 60). We smile at the lack of awareness, but as this is satire in the Horatian mode, it is never completely cruel, and Ross's moments of self-knowledge (all too brief but real nonetheless) do serve to broaden him as a character. For example, he notes, watching Ronan O'Gara in action:

> See, there are those who say it could and should have been me down there today, but those people are wrong. I could never do what he does and that's a hard thing to admit when you're pushing thirty and someone else is living your dream.
>
> (Howard 2021b, 42)

And it is the skill of Howard's writing in making us feel a sense of connection with, and sympathy for, this character that may lessen the sharper Juvenalian element of the satire, but which leaves us with a character who is lovable and coherent for all his fault, in the mode of Horatian and, to an extent, Menippean satires. Ross can be seen as an aspect of the Irish cultural unconscious, living with fantasy and articulating some opinions that readers may share but are unwilling to acknowledge verbally. Some of his opinions could be seen as a form of return of the cultural repressed, which may be another factor in his enduring popularity.

The same is true of his parents, who might be termed unrepentant Dublin 4 dwellers, who have very little time for any other part of the city, let alone the country, and have no issues in voicing this. Ross's mother,

Fionnuala, is the author of a 'recession-era misery lit novel, *Mom, They Said They'd Never Heard of Sundried Tomatoes*' (Howard 2021b, 76). As she tells Ross 'there are People Like Us and there are People Like Them. As your father says, this city has been planned in such a way as to ensure that we lead parallel and mutually exclusive lives' (Howard 2021b, 256). She has formed a group called 'Luas Women', which is protesting against linking the red and green lines of the Luas (an Irish tram system), and campaigns against any extension of the postcode 'Dublin 4' to people in Terenure, again quoting her husband: 'if the people of Terenure want to live in Dublin 4, why don't they simply buy houses in Dublin 4? A damn liberty expecting Dublin 4 to come to them' (Howard 2021b, 114). We see the privilege, the classism, the smug self-regard, but Fionnuala does not, and again, it is in that gap between characters mired in their own ideology, and an author who allows them to express this until it becomes a *reductio ad absurdum*, that the humour lies. Howard points to the 'chip on my shoulder about class, which was a very big issue in the Ireland in which I grew up', and admits that he began his satirical project with 'certain axes to grind when I set out to satirise the world of schools rugby' (Howard 2000, 8), and that he gradually moved away from the players on the field to their parents, friends and family groups.

Fionnuala's husband, Charles, referred to as a disgraced property developer, local politician and founder of the political party, New Republic, is a right-wing crony capitalist. Famous for wanting to be 'tough on soccer, tough on the causes of soccer' (Howard 2021b, 18), he responds to the recession by forming a document-disposal firm called 'Shred Focking Everything', destroying documents that could be evidence of wrongdoing. 'People aren't ready to hear what it was that made this country great for eleven-and-a-little-bit years. All we're doing is making sure that no one finds out' (Howard 2021b, 63). He teaches Ross's daughter to play an Irish property version of Monopoly, 'capitalism in all its wonderful glory', as he calls it, and, as when Honor wants to buy a house on Capel Street 'she takes a hundred from her little pile of money and she puts it into – hilariously – a little brown envelope', and Charles then 'slips it into his pocket – or "off shore", as he calls it' (Howard 2021b, 324–325). He is unrepentant about his role in the Celtic Tiger, and the €48 million that he hid in Andorra. He and his solicitor-friend, Hennessy Coughlin-O'Hara, 'are tendering to build a portion of this famous wall that Donald Trump wants to build' (Howard 2021b, 244), and he says that the boom was created by people like him bending laws and bribing people:

> It was us, Ross. We're the economic boom. We're the Celtic Tiger.
>
> You think it got here by accident? Without us, the bloody Irish would still be cleaning their teeth with their own shite.
>
> (Howard 2021b, 19)

Here, the cultural unconscious of Golden-Circle Ireland speaks directly in a way that it can never do in the 'real' Ireland; here it can eschew notions of wokeness and political correctness. That shuttling back and forth across the ellipses does amuse and instruct: in the COVID lockdown, for example, class and social prejudices, while largely unspoken, were rife, as travellers and students are often blamed for COVID spikes, whereas often people like 'us', who are 'careful' but felt free to travel to a holiday home or to friends or to have dinner parties, were absolved from blame. This mentality is captured beautifully in a mother and son conversation about COVID-19: 'Oh, we're all fine up here, Ross. As I said to Delma on the phone, I just can't imagine this thing [*COVID-19*] coming to Foxrock' (Howard 2021b, 327). There is a truth in fiction, and, in Howard's work, satire provides the mode for the telling of this truth. His parallel Ireland is a mirror through which we can smile at the 'real' Ireland but also learn more about it than more normative discourses are often willing, or able, to disclose.

In these columns, Howard's ironic eye is turned on attitudes of the Dublin 4 elite, and the columns work because the reader is already very familiar with all of the characters involved in the series: Ross himself, his wife Sorcha, their daughter Honor and their triplets: Brian, Leo and Johnny (all called after Rugby players, as befits Ross's fetishisation of the game); his son from a previous relationship, Ronan Masters; his half-sister, Erika Joseph; his father Charles, his wife Fionnuala, and his long-time friend Hennessy Coughlin-O'Hara. Ross's own friends, Christian Ford, JP Conroy, Fionn de Barra and Oisinn Wallace, add to the group. Regular readers of either the columns or the books all know the particular foibles of each character, so we read the pieces in terms of familiar faces, voices and attitudes. Given that the columns feature commentary on contemporary social affairs, readers will also be aware of these as well, so it is in the oscillations and negotiations between the real Ireland and the imagined Ireland of the Ross universe, the *inter-dit*, that the humour is to be found, with a smaller dialectic involved in the interaction between the columns and the series.

The series started in 2000, two years after the first newspaper column in *The Sunday Tribune*, with *The Mis-Education Years* (Howard 2000) (the title gesturing towards the R&B album entitled *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*), which describes Ross's last two years at Castlerock College and his Leinster Senior Cup victory, albeit a steroid-fueled one. *The Teenage Dirtbag Years* (Howard 2001), referring to the title song of the debut album of the band Wheatus, which was featured in the film *Loser*, sees Ross in his first year in a sports management course in UCD. During this year, he also goes to the USA on a J1 visa. *The Orange Mocha-Chip Frappuccino Years* (Howard 2003) shows us Ross leaving home and

working for his friend JP's father, Barry Conroy, as an estate agent, in the aptly named firm of 'Hook, Lyon and Sinker', a job at which he is surprisingly good. The title of this book channels Sue Townsend's novel *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*, as well as the orange mocha frappuccino ordered by three male models in the film *Zoolander*. As is clear, the novels are always acutely plugged into the cultural *Zeitgeist* of the time in which they are written. These allusive and intersubjective titles also serve to situate the Ireland about which Howard is writing in very much a global and contemporary context: he is not remotely interested in the old Anglo-Irish conflict, as his focus is on synchronic as opposed to diachronic views of identity; he sees Ireland as part of a globalised consumer culture, and this is quite a shift in gear for Irish writing, which has remained obdurately focused on the Anglo-Irish historical context and on issues of religious and historically driven identity.

PS, I Scored the Bridesmaids (Howard 2004), whose title refers overtly to the novel *PS, I Love You*, by Cecelia Ahern, deals with his marriage to his long-term 'portner' Sorcha, and his discovery, on the wedding day, of a son (Ronan Masters) about whom he knew nothing. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightdress* (Howard 2005) tells of Ross's interactions with Ronan, who lives with his mother and grandfather in the north side of Dublin in a very working-class area. The title invokes Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, and the book is a strategic one in the series as there is now a social-class counterpoint set up between middle-class and working-class Dublin across the range of language, attitudes and outlooks.

Should Have Got Off at Sydney Parade (Howard 2006) (the title refers to *coitus interruptus*, used as a form of contraception, as this is the penultimate station on the DART electrified commuter rail network in Dublin) deals with Sorcha's pregnancy; Ross's sympathetic pregnancy; the birth of their daughter Honor; Fionnuala's burgeoning career as a writer of chick-lit; and Ross's participation in his new nightclub, Lillie's Bordello. In these three books, we see Ross gradually assuming the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood, though he takes quite an idiosyncratic view of how to fulfil these roles. He also offers a little more in the way of self-knowledge, and we get some insights into aspects of his character that are not completely shallow and narcissistic. It is in these books that his growth from caricature to character can be seen to begin. Howard shrewdly realises that one-dimensional rugby jock who is constantly womanising is not something that can be developed, and, from this point, the series will grow in breadth and in depth.

This Champagne Mojito Is the Last Thing I Own (Howard 2007b) covers Ross's fall from grace as his father goes to prison and he is forced to take up paid work while Sorcha finally leaves him after yet another

infidelity. The title refers to Jonathan Rendall's tragi-comic novel about boxing, *This Bloody Mary* (*Is the Last Thing I Own*). The title of the next novel, *Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's Box* (Howard 2008), blending Frank Sinatra (the eponymous 'Mr S' with whom Charles drank years ago in Dublin) and the myth of Pandora's box, suggesting troubling revelations, deals with his new job as the rugby coach of the Andorran national team, and also with his attempts to cope with his separation from Sorcha and Honor. He also discovers that Erika, a long-time crush of his, is his half-sister.

Rhino What You Did Last Summer (Howard 2009a) sees Ross in Los Angeles, attempting to win Sorcha back. He has a bromance with a gay American, Harvey, and his family become reality TV stars. Ross gets plastic surgery (his rhinoplasty is referenced in the title, as is the film *I Know What You Did Last Summer*). Fionnuala's novels begin to earn popularity in America, and she has an intense relationship with her agent, Trevion. In these three books, we see Howard beginning to write about the Celtic Tiger crash, and he gradually builds up to this by having Ross out of Ireland for two of the books, in Andorra and in the United States, and by having Sorcha's current partner, Cillian, acting as a type of Cassandra figure, who sees the world financial crash coming but is not believed by anyone.

In *The Oh My God Delusion* (Howard 2010), we see the economic crisis deepen, and Ross and his family continue to struggle financially, with Ross moving to a ghost estate. Additionally, he and his friends face being stripped of their Leinster Schools Senior Cup medals due to their having taken drugs to enhance their performance. The title conflates Sorcha's signature expression 'Oh My God' with Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*. *NAMA Mia!* (Howard 2011), whose title conflates the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), the Irish organisation set up to manage bad loans and property, with the ABBA-inspired stage musical *Mamma Mia!*, gives us an Ireland in recession, but Charles's shredding company 'Shred Focking Everything' is successful. Ross becomes a 'toy boy' for Regina Rathfriland, a wealthy older woman, and he tracks down his friend Oisinn, who, having gone bankrupt, has fled the country, and brings him back to Ireland. Fionnuala has switched to writing 'misery lit' memoirs: *Criminal Assets*; *Legal Affairs*, *Fifty Greys in Shades*; *Mom*, *They Said They Never Heard of Sundried Tomatoes*; *Karma Suits Ya* and *States of Ecstasy*.

The next book, *The Shelbourne Ultimatum* (Howard 2012b), whose title conflates *The Bourne Ultimatum* and Dublin's iconic Shelbourne hotel, sees Ross surviving the shooting depicted at the end of *NAMA Mia!*, but having to deal with Gardaí, who do not believe his story. He aims to sabotage Fionn and Erika's upcoming marriage; Sorcha gets a job in a pound shop; Honor becomes a child star; while Fionnuala continues to

seek fame with her misery memoir. The series now begins to feature an ensemble cast, as Howard gradually takes characters from their purely secondary roles as, what E. M. Forster called 'flat characters', and, instead, makes them more fully developed. Forster saw flat characters as 'types, and sometimes caricatures', adding that 'in their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality' (Forster 1956, 48), and he contrasted these with 'round characters', who are 'capable of surprising in a convincing way' (Forster 1956, 55). There is a gradual rotundity of characterisation to be seen as the series develops, with Charles, Fionnuala, Sorcha and especially Honor and Ronan developing quite independently of Ross.

Referring to the television series *Downton Abbe*y, and the economic downturn in Ireland, *Downturn Abbey* (Howard 2013) sees Ross become a grandfather as Ronan becomes a father. Honor is dropped from one of Fionnuala's Hallmark Channel films, and she is expelled from school due to bad behaviour. Charles and Fionnuala's divorce comes through. Sorcha throws a Downton Abbey–themed party, and Ronan falls in with a local gangster. Fionnuala moves into 'mommy porn' with *Fifty Greys in Shades* and begins a relationship with Oisinn. *Keeping Up with the Kalashnikovs* (Howard 2014) refers to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and the Kalashnikov rifle, so often used in guerrilla wars and campaigns. Fionn is taken captive while teaching at a school in Uganda, and Ross and his friends go out to rescue him. Meanwhile, Sorcha has given birth to triplets, and Honor is more difficult than ever, acting as pied piper to a troupe of rats (originally this book was to be called *Raiders of the Lost Dork*) (O'Carroll-Kelly 2014).

Seedless in Seattle (Howard 2015), connecting the film *Sleepless in Seattle* with Ross's impending vasectomy, finds Charles going to Argentina to find his missing daughter Erika. Ross is dealing with Fionn's new personality, making an enemy of his daughter, and when he gets caught writing 'The Fock-it List', Sorcha insists that Ross should get a vasectomy. He is now the father of triplets, who are called Johnny, Brian and Leo, after Leinster and Ireland rugby players Johnny Sexton, Brian O'Driscoll and Leo Cullen. These books add the triplets, expand Ross's family, and again we see the characters moving out of Ireland, which is undergoing an economic upturn. There is a new optimism reflected in the books, with the character of Fionn seeing major development, while Ross himself is now a family man with a very rebellious teenage daughter and all that this involves. The generational repetition, wherein Honor treats Ross and Sorcha as dismissively as Ross treats his own parents, is another interesting layer in this section of the series, as Ross becomes a father and grandfather while still retaining aspects of his man-child incarnation.

In *Game of Throw-ins* (Howard 2016), Ross joins a struggling Seapoint rugby team, where he plays as hooker, as opposed to his youthful preferred

position of out-half. Ronan is in a turf war with a rival *Love/Hate* tour operator, while Honor is in love with a Justin Bieber lookalike; Fionnuala is marrying a 92-year-old billionaire; and Charles founds a new political party 'New Republic'. The title combines the popular J. R. R. Martin books and television series *Game of Thrones* with the 'throw-in' move in rugby. Again, the series is very on point culturally, as the RTE gangster drama *Love/Hate* was very popular at this time and *Game of Thrones* was also becoming a cultural phenomenon.

In *Operation Trumpsformation* (Howard 2017), gay marriage is legalised in Ireland. Fionnuala is imprisoned, accused of the murder of her second husband, while Ross's triplets develop an interest in soccer. Charles aims to emulate Donald Trump and build a wall around Cork. Honor adopts a transgender identity, becoming 'Eddie', and goes on a gender-fluid toilet crusade in her school. The title connects 'Operation Transformation', a television series about weight loss and lifestyle change, with American President Donald Trump. The next book, *Dancing with the Tsars* (Howard 2018), finds Sorcha pregnant with a baby that is possibly not Ross's. Meanwhile, Charles is at war with feminists; Sorcha is a senator; Fionnuala is making trips to Russia; Ronan is dealing with sex addiction; while Ross and Honor aim to win the Mount Anville glitter ball. Separated (again) from Sorcha, Ross finds himself as a stay-at-home dad, attempting to dissuade his son from getting married and helping his daughter in her quest to win the most coveted prize in South Dublin, namely the Strictly Mount Anville glitter ball. The title conflates the TV series *Dancing with the Stars* with the Russian tsars. Here Ross becomes as close as he can be to a grown up, with family ties. He finally faces his 'I could have been a contender' rugby fantasies, and he becomes a forward, doing the dirty work as opposed to one of the glory players in the backline. There is a real sense of working through his fantasies into some form of reality here, and his bonding with his daughter further deepens his character and that of Honor, in both her female and transgender *personae*. The fact that he now has to deal with a relationship of Sorcha's is a karmic situation that many of the readers of the books will have been delighted to see.

Schmidt Happens (Howard 2019) sees Sorcha giving birth to Fionn's child, and Fionn coming to live with Ross and his family. The triplets become notorious as troublemakers around Dublin. Fionnuala seeks revenge after Ross nearly lets her choke to death in the previous book, as Charles works with shadowy Russian interests in order to become Taoiseach. Meanwhile, Ross gets an unexpected call from Irish rugby manager Joe Schmidt, who has been sent his *Rugby Tactics Book* by Honor. The title refers to Schmidt and the colloquial expression 'shit happens'.

In *Braywatch* (Howard 2020), Ross has become the rugby coach at Presentation College, Bray. His daughter Honor has become a Greta

Thunberg–style environmentalist; Fionnuala is about to become a mother of sextuplets with six Eastern European surrogate mothers, while Charles has been caught attempting to fix the election. Ross attempts to negotiate all of these hurdles while guiding a team of underachieving players to the final of the Leinster Schools Senior Cup. *Normal Sheeple* (Howard 2021a) sees a parallel Ireland where the housing crisis is solved by Homedrobes (living units the size of a hot press), and Vampire Beds (people sleeping upright). Ross is now a grandfather and ends up in Kerry playing Gaelic football and meeting a Sally Rooneyesque Irish teacher called Marianne, with the awkward dialogue between the two being an excellent pastiche of *Normal People* (the book, but especially the television series) (Rooney 2018). Charles has become Taoiseach and has moved to Áras an Uachtaráin, with Michael D. Higgins and Sabina relegated to living in the attic and surviving on baked beans and toast. Charles is pressing ahead with Irexit and is busily selling off afforestation and Ireland's riches (Newgrange has moved to Gorky Park in Moscow) as well as cosying up to Vladimir Putin. In *Once Upon a Time in … Donnybrook* (Howard 2022), we see Ross living in the aftermath of the burning down of Leinster House (Ireland's own Reichstag fire), with Charles blaming the EU and becoming ever more closely connected to the Russian-funded mafia, but Ross and Erika find out that it was he who did it. Sorcha and Ross are in conflict again, due to his having had sex with Honor's Irish teacher, and Ross becomes the coach of the Irish women's rugby team.

In these latest books, Ross faces up to his age-old loathing of Bray to become a school coach as well as playing Gaelic football, something else he would have always despised, and generally he is starting to live in his real world as opposed to his fantasy one. The relationships between different characters develop beyond him, and Charles's political ambitions become more concrete and more nefarious. Indeed, Charles is one of the most interesting characters in the series in terms of growth, as he moves from immoral to amoral to downright illegal, and yet we retain some sense of fondness for him. Ross is almost acting his age here, and there is a thoughtfulness about him at times that makes him a far rounder character than before (though Howard will still pull him back to his roots at times).

The overall plot of the series develops in these books, and, as ever, Howard keeps the reader off-balance by developing seemingly flat characters into whole new levels of complexity. Ross and his mother bond in *Normal Sheeple* – a real character development – and their connection is real and seems lasting. There is a poignancy to the Ross-Fionnuala connection here, especially as she seems to be developing some form of dementia, as there is to his relationship with his daughter, Honor.

In a way, these books form something of a protracted *Bildungsroman*, the story of the moral and psychological growth of a character from youth

to maturity. Franco Moretti calls it 'the symbolic form of modernity' (Moretti 1987, 5). For Moretti, one of the most telling points of this genre is the fetishisation of youth, and, indeed, he sees that, for our modern culture, youth becomes the age 'which holds the "meaning of life": it is the first gift Mephisto offers Faust' (Moretti 1987, 4), and Ross embodies this as, even though he is a grandfather, he still sees himself as young. So, in this sense, he is very much the embodiment of a culture where being young, looking young or acting young is at the core of so much of our social practice. This is another reason why so clearly an obnoxious character can appear to be so relatable to readers of all ages, genders and classes in Ireland. Indeed, Moretti could have been speaking about Ross when he speaks of the novelistic youth of the *Bildungsroman* as ultimately betraying itself 'in its narcissistic desire to last forever' (Moretti 1987, 228).

Howard has also written four plays about Ross, as well as two musicals, but for reasons of space, these fall outside the purview of this study. The structure of this book will involve an opening chapter that sets out the theoretical framework, looking at the ideas of different thinkers on narrative and humour, through which the series will be read. The theorists involved will be Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Chapter 2 will trace the Irish satirical tradition, which I argue is the context of Howard's writing, and will also look at his work as a blend of the three major classical traditions of satire: the Horatian, the Menippean and the Juvenalian modes. The remaining chapters will trace the development of various themes through the books, and will do so in chronological order, dividing the books into groups. I appreciate that these groups are somewhat arbitrary, but all are guided by looking at the development of the characters through different phases, as well as watching that dialectical negotiation and oscillation across the ellipses from Howard's fictive Ireland to the events of the real Ireland. Hence, Chapter 3 will look at his school and college years and his first trip to America, taking the early books: *The Miseducation of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly*, *Roysh Here*, *Roysh Now … The Teenage Dirtbag Years* and *The Orange Mocha-Chip Frappuccino Years*. Chapter 4 will look at his early married life in the books: *PS, I Scored The Bridesmaids*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightdress* and *Should Have Got Off at Sydney Parade*. Chapter 5 looks at the denial that preceded the post–Celtic Tiger recession in *This Champagne Mojito Is the Last Thing I Own*, *Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's Box* and *Rhino What You Did Last Summer*.

Chapter 6 looks at the austerity that reigned in Ireland after the 'troika' of technical experts from the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission imposed stringent austerity, and at how this was represented in *The Oh My God Delusion*; *NAMA Mia!* And *The Shelbourne Ultimatum*. Chapter 7 looks at how the Celtic Phoenix, as

Charles calls it, is part of the following books: *Downturn Abbey*; *Keeping Up with the Kalashnikovs* and *Seedless in Seattle*. Chapter 8 looks at three books that explore the more mature Ross: *Game of Throw-ins*, *Operation Trumpsformation* and *Dancing with the Tsars*. The final chapter looks at four books that show Ross finally living in the present and acting more or less age appropriately: *Schmidt Happens*, *Braywatch*, *Normal Sheeple* and *Once Upon a Time in … Donnybrook*.

One of the most important tropes that unite the series is that of negotiation: negotiation between the knowing author and fallible narrator; negotiation between fictive and real Irelands; negotiation between narrative and ironic narrative; negotiation between different forms of satire wherein we both laugh with, and at times laugh at, different characters; and, most importantly, the negotiation back and forth across those ellipses that Howard so presciently used in *RO'CK of Ages*. These are not one-way passages; rather, they involve a series of oscillations. Here I am using the term 'negotiation' in quite a specific sense. The French literary theorist and philosopher Jacques Derrida traces the etymology of 'negotiation' to the Latin *negotium*: 'not-ease, not-quiet … no leisure' (Derrida and Rottenberg 2002, 11). He sees this '[no]-leisure' as the 'impossibility of stopping or settling in a position … of establishing oneself anywhere'. This process is typified by the image of a shuttle, what he terms '*la navette*, and what the word conveys of to-and-fro between two positions, two places, two choices' in a process of 'going back and forth between different positions' (Derrida and Rottenberg 2002, 12). This is how Howard's writing works, and how his satire is so effective. There is a constant negotiation between the creation of his fictive Ireland as a mirror image of the real thing and the satirical undercutting of aspects of that real Ireland in his fictional one. There is a shuttling between the real truth and the fictive truth of the novels, which, in turn, has a lot to say about the real Ireland.

The opening chapter will offer a justification for an academic critical analysis of Howard's work, and it will address the absence of such analysis in the academic sphere as well as suggest why this is the case. It will look at the distinctions between popular and high culture in the Irish public sphere, and will it suggest, using some of the ideas of Jacques Derrida on context and framing; Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan on psychoanalysis and the unconscious; Mikhail Bakhtin on satire; and Pierre Bourdieu on the nature of symbolic power and popular culture, that imaginative writing has the ability to unveil aspects of a society that had previously remained hidden. It will also suggest that popular culture has been a hitherto undervalued resource as a means of telling different truths about Irish society.

1 Seeing Ireland Differently – The Theoretical Lens

That Howard's works are popular is not an issue; what perhaps is an issue is that they are not academically popular. There is no discussion of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly in such collections as *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, edited by Anne Mulhall, Wanda Balzano and Moynagh Sullivan (Wanda Balzano 2007); or *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger's Tales*, edited by Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy (Holohan and Tracy 2014); or *Ireland and Popular Culture*, edited by Sylvie Mikowski (Mikowski 2014); not to mention accounts focused on more 'literary' culture, such as Susan Cahill's *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years, 1990–2008: Gender, Bodies, Memory* (Cahill 2012); Derek Hand's *A History of the Irish Novel* (Hand 2011); or Liam Harte's *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel, 1987–2007* (Harte 2014).

Currently, the only texts on Ross O'Carroll-Kelly that could be classified as academic scholarship are a book by Clare Gorman, *The Undecidable: Jacques Derrida and Paul Howard* (Gorman 2015); Mike Cronin's 'Sport, Masculinity and Self-Centredness in the Writings of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly' (Cronin 2009); Adam Kelly's 'The Re-education of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly' (Kelly 2017); and three linguistic analyses of the Ross novels by Carolina Amador-Moreno: 'A Corpus-Based Approach to Contemporary Irish Writing: Ross O'Carroll-Kelly's Use of *Like* as a Discourse Marker' (Amador-Moreno 2012); '"There's, Like, Total Silence Again, Roysh, and No One Says Anything": Fictional Representations of "New" Pragmatic Markers and Quotatives in Irish English' (Amador-Moreno 2015); and 'Encapsulating Irish English in Literature', by Carolina Amador-Moreno and Ana María Terrazas-Calero (Terrazas-Calero 2017). I have written two previous pieces on him myself: 'A 'Third' Reading: James Joyce and Paul Howard and the Monstrous Aporia' (O'Brien 2009), and '"Tendency-Wit": The Cultural Unconscious of the Celtic Tiger in the Writings of Paul Howard' (O'Brien 2014). His work is mentioned in passing in five other academic articles but that is all. It is surprising, given both his popularity in

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terms of sales as well as the topicality of the issues about which he writes, that he has received so little academic interest.

Interestingly, Howard is mentioned in *Austerity and Recovery in Ireland*, where his musical on the recession, entitled *Anglo: The Musical* (Howard 2012a), was mired in legal challenges just before it began, as lawyers for the 'DPP were sending us letters saying they were concerned about it and Sean Fitzpatrick's lawyers were sending us letters saying they wanted to see the script…. On opening night, there were all these people taking notes in yellow legal pads' (Roche, O'Connell and Prothero 2016, 316). Hence, Howard is very much at the centre of current sociocultural issues, and he is one of the very few writers to confront all aspects of the Celtic Tiger, so the question has to be posed as to why there is so little critical or academic attention given to his work.

My own view is that Howard's work is seen as being popular as opposed to literary, in the old culture war binary of 'high culture' versus 'low culture' (or 'popular culture' to use the more politically correct and less pejorative euphemism). To write about Howard is not to engage with a fictional work that is deemed to be 'literary', and, for this reason, he is not discussed in the same breath as Anne Enright, John Banville, Roddy Doyle, John Boyne, Donal Ryan, Claire Kilroy, Cathal Barrett – the list goes on. *The Digital Platform for Contemporary Irish Writing*, which sets out a stage for contemporary Irish writing, is chaired by Margaret Kelleher. It is an excellent resource for contemporary writing in Ireland, and it spans poetry and fiction and Irish language books as well as those in English. It features 50 prominent Irish writers and provides access to reviews and resources about their work, but Howard is not listed therein (Kelleher 2015).

Possibly, the development of the character from a sports column in a newspaper does not tally with the usual progress of serious writers, who normally write for literary magazines or appear in short-story competitions in newspapers. Hence, there is a sense that if his work is not voiced through traditional literary pathways, then it is not 'literary' in that sense. Second, the books are very definitely located in the realm of popular culture. The parodic pseudo-confessions of a sex-obsessed sports player are not really the stuff of high literature, and, as such, the works are not given academic attention by literary and critical writers. Third, after modernism, notions of high seriousness became hegemonic in terms of defining great writers. From the New Critics to F. R. Leavis and beyond, there are not a lot of laughs to be found, and Howard is located in that realm of comedic entertainer as opposed to a writer who has some profound things to say about the human condition, and especially that of contemporary Ireland.

In terms of attention to language, Howard is especially inventive, creating a number of neologisms: 'shmugly', meaning ugly; 'shoecotic' implying