In this study George O’Brien offers fifty-one discrete readings of Irish novels - one for each year from 1960 to 2010. These analyses do not view the novels through any particular lens; instead, O’Brien has sought to present a wide and disparate array of novels, the majority of which are examined in terms of their social relevance, while others receive a more formal analysis. As a result, each of the fifty-one reviews (which are approximately 1,500 words long) stands alone and is entirely independent of its neighbours. Such an organisation inevitably means that students will find this a very useful book - they will zoom in on the discussion of the text they are working on and find there a recapitulation of the plot of the novel shot through with O’Brien’s invaluable accumulated critical insight (as an Emeritus Professor of English at Georgetown University) and supplemented by an outstanding thirty-page bibliography that lists an enormous range of secondary texts. However, the utility of the book particularly for undergraduates is somewhat reduced by O’Brien’s choice of texts. Eschewing any notion of “a hierarchy of ‘greatest’ works” (p. xxvi), he not only throws light on texts that have fallen by the wayside of critical opinion (for example, Sam Hanna Bell’s 1961 The Hollow Ball, Anthony C. West’s 1968 As Towns with Fire and Ian Cochrane’s 1974 Gone in the Head), but also focuses on lesser-reputed novels in the oeuvres of more famous writers. This is particularly noticeable in the case of perhaps the two most important novelists of the period: we have John Banville’s Kepler (1981) rather than The Book of Evidence or The Sea; and instead of John McGahern’s Amongst Women, O’Brien examines The Pornographer (1979), which he describes as “probably McGahern’s least popular novel” (p. 70). But while these by-roads offer stimulating alternative perspectives, they also raise questions about the overall depiction of the period. Having decided to examine only one novel per author, O’Brien nonetheless contends that his choices provide “a representative view” (p. xxvi) of the writers’ bodies of work. Gathering these texts together, therefore, must also constitute a representative overview of the field of Irish fiction. And for O’Brien this is a plural and heterogeneous landscape; as he asserts, his book underscores “the difficulties presented by the contemporary Irish novel to canon formation and […] the idea that there is one specific notion of tradition that the novel, or any other literary form, should maintain.” (p. xxvi) No doubt this is an accurate reflection, but even so it is open to the suspicion that such a fractured panorama is the inevitable outcome of the anthologist’s choices.

In terms of deracinating established traditions, O’Brien tends to frame 1960 as something of a year zero in Irish writing, employing O’Faoláin’s 1962 assessment of “the comparative failure of the Irish novel” (p. ix) as a way of dismissing all that came before as a cultural desert created by years of draconian censorship; there is, for instance, not one mention of Elizabeth Bowen in the book. At the same, this radical decontextualisation is silently breached by the thematic threads O’Brien points to in the novels he has assembled. One of the
dominant clichés about Irish novelists is that they have had to struggle to escape from the oppressive shadow of Joyce. Notably, Joyce is only mentioned eight times in the course of this book. While it is salutary to avoid setting up Joyce as the ultimate reference point of Irish letters, it is impossible to read O’Brien’s Introduction without feeling his ghostly presence. Surveying the concerns of the novels he analyses, O’Brien offers a series of very general motifs and themes that he sees running through these in a non-formulised fashion. These include: change, choice, disruption, youth, a splitting from home and nation, a critique of history, a search for privacy, and a grappling with sexuality. In short, issues that permeate *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*.

What is interesting is how these themes have been developed and played with in the novels O’Brien selects. Versions of the dissipative, stay-a-bed male student protagonists that feature in works of Joyce, Beckett and Flann O’Brien, who live more in their heads than in the world, can still be found in Michael Farrell’s *Thy Tears Might Cease* (1963) and Francis Stuart’s *Black List, Section H* (1971). But these are being supplanted by, amongst others, more dynamic female characters - tellingly this survey opens up with Edna O’Brien’s 1960 *The Country Girls*. As George O’Brien argues “sexuality is the major marker of difference in the contemporary Irish novel” (p. xx), and his survey draws appropriate attention to the diversity of sexualities and experiences portrayed in novels such as Emma Donoghue’s 1995 *Hood*, Glenn Patterson’s *The International* (1999) and Keith Ridgway’s *The Parts* (2003).

Another theme that can be related back to Joyce – emigration – is foregrounded in the novels that O’Brien has chosen to examine from the mid-1980s onward. But what is most noticeable is how tales of Irish emigrant experience in London, such as those found in J.M. O’Neill’s *Open Cut* (1986) and Carlo Gébler’s 1987 *Work and Play*, are succeeded by texts that confidently articulate the experiences of other cultures. For instance, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) have been hailed in the USA as two of the most important 9/11 novels, Hugo Hamilton’s *The Last Shot* (1991) is, on many levels, a German novel, while Colm Tóibín’s 2004 *The Master* is a consummate imaginative immersion into Henry James’s existence.

Of course, as with any anthology, one can always raise questions about writers who have not been included. Despite flagging the boom in Irish crime fiction, chick lit and fantasy (p. ix), no representative text from these genres is considered. This is indicative of the fact that O’Brien does not register the role of the Irish writer in the world literary marketplace. In the period under discussion, Irish writers have moved from the periphery to the centre of the Anglophone literary sphere and are as at home in New York and London as they are in Dublin or Belfast. The ways in which this influences their careers is not considered. There is also no space here for the Northern Irish writers Ronan Bennett, Robert McLiam Wilson and David Park. Indeed, O’Brien tends to avoid framing the Troubles as a separate category, and instead sees thematic convergences between novels from either side of the border: in both cases they “dwell on the modern person’s choices” (p. xvi). At times in the Introduction this approach sounds like a paean to modernisation, but in his readings of texts such as Dermot Bolger’s 1990 *The Journey Home* and Anne Haverty’s *One Day as a Tiger* (1997), O’Brien is alert to
the undersides of this process. Tellingly, he concludes by seeing in Paul Murray’s *Skippy Dies* (2010) “a report card” on the crippling crisis that has followed Ireland’s Celtic Tiger years, and which has left a generation to “stumble through a mismanaged and fragmented present without the remotest idea of what difference their doing so will make to securing a future” (pp. 183-4). Through its account of the ways in which Irish novelists have chronicled and come to terms with the diverse shifts in Irish society over the fifty years it surveys, O’Brien’s study suggests that they will continue to be guides to this uncertain future.


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1759 was a truly remarkable year in the cultural history of Britain and France, marking as it did the turning point in the Seven Years War. With the defeat of the French in a number of transatlantic battles, British global supremacy was cemented for over 150 years until the empire began gradually to break apart in the aftermath of the two World Wars. A new, indestructible self-image as the modern-day version of Alexander’s Macedonians was forged. Intellectually, the achievements of that year are no less notable either, for 1759 saw the publication of Samuel Johnson’s important Orientalist novella *Rasselas*, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the first volume of Laurence Sterne’s block-busting comic-epic *Tristram Shandy*. Meanwhile France, Britain’s rival in the empire-building stakes, had been making its own contributions to the European Enlightenment. Before the year was out seven volumes of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* had been published, and Voltaire’s enduringly significant *Candide* had also appeared. Against this background of intellectual inquisition and war on a global scale between the world’s two major military forces, *Reading 1759* is an attempt to concentrate scholarly efforts on the cultural output of that significant year for European, and indeed, world history.

The book has a most adventurous approach. The collection of essays, as editor Shaun Regan outlines in his clear-sighted introduction, is the first study of the eighteenth-century literary culture since 1982 that is solely focused on a single year. Yet for all the momentousness, and indeed influence, of the various accomplishments of 1759, is it worth studying the literary output of a single year, what Regan calls an annualized reading of literary culture? Although there have been some surveys of single years, most prominently in the field of history, such an approach has yet to take root in literary studies. The answer to the question, however, as exemplified by these authorative essays, is certainly yes. If one drawback of such a microscopic focus on a single year is that a broader historical context may be lost, the collection more than demonstrates the illuminations of