

A Star Called Henry by Roddy Doyle recommended by Donna Lucey

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Donna Lucey—Charlottesville resident and author of the 2007 Virginia Literary Award for Nonfiction Finalist *Archie and Amelie*—recommends *A Star Called Henry* by Roddy Doyle. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Before heartily recommending Roddy Doyle’s boisterous Irish novel, *A Star Called Henry*, I must begin with a disclaimer: As ferociously funny and poignant as this book is, it is not for the faint of heart. Those of you offended by rough language and violence need read no further, because this book rises out of the dank slums and sewers (literally) of Dublin at the turn of the 20th century. And it’s not a pretty picture. (Think *Angela’s Ashes* with its starved-to-death babies, but written with more bile and black humor, and set against the historical backdrop of the creation of the modern Irish Free State.)

At the center of the story is Henry Smart, who narrates a fictional autobiography of the first 20 years of his life. (This is volume one of an intended trilogy called *The Last Roundup*.) Born to a young-mother-turned-ancient-hag who’s been driven mad by the ravages of poverty, and a largely absent one-legged father, Henry and his younger brother take to the streets to fend for themselves from the earliest age. “There were no children in Dublin,” Doyle notes bitterly. The writing is fast, furious, and powerful; it’s like Dickens at warp speed.

Henry survives childhood and, having gained both strength and a wily cunning from that experience, turns into an Irish Everyman figure of epic proportions, seducing women with the same deadly ease that he batters the hated Brits with his deceased father’s wooden leg. Henry becomes a key participant in the seminal events of modern Irish history: he’s backstage with Michael Collins and Patrick Pearse and James Connolly in the General Post Office in Dublin during the Easter Uprising of 1916 when

Irish rebels declare independence; and, after surviving that debacle, Henry helps define and carry out the terror tactics of the nascent I.R.A. The story bristles with murder and mayhem, betrayal and political intrigue, and Henry’s undying love for a fellow revolutionary, who becomes a mythic—and greatly-feared—killer in her own right.

The entire novel is an immersion into the bloody and violent history of Ireland, a land, in Doyle’s view, where mothers go insane or turn into killing machines. But did I mention the hilarious Irish humor throughout? And the rapid-fire dialogue that has a musical quality all its own? As frenetic—and as scatological—as the language is, one gets the sense that Doyle couldn’t get the words out fast enough, nor exorcise the anger behind them. At times, the story and the larger-than-life characters feel as if they are about to spin off the rails; yet for all its absurdist qualities, Doyle somehow manages to convey a bitter realism. The author appears to be making a rambling confession for the entire nation—“Bless us Father for we have sinned”—but without the ensuing predictable absolution. There is nothing tidy about this novel; it is messy and bawdy and out of control—as was Ireland. “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” James Joyce wrote in *Ulysses*. Roddy Doyle’s heartbreaking novel plunges into that particular nightmare and leaves the reader gasping for breath.