

Pluck of the Irish

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

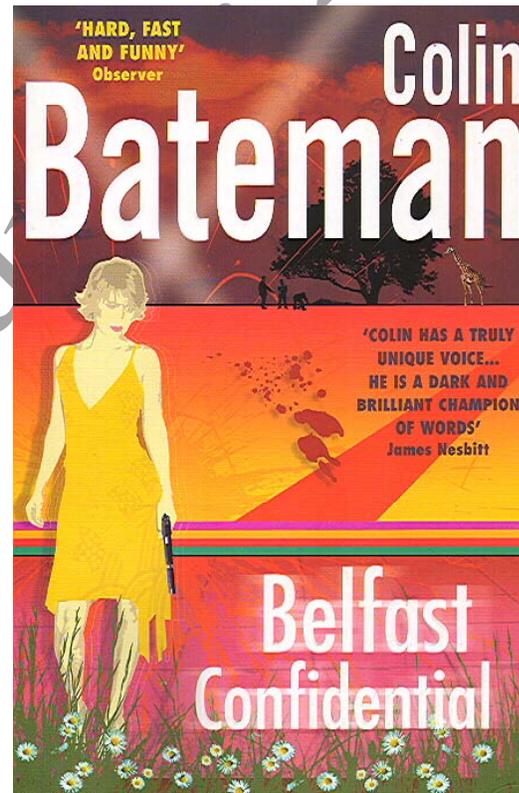
The Irish have long enjoyed a reputation for a certain quirkiness in their national character, a tolerance – make that a marked preference – for zany and bizarre outlooks on the world. This week's pick skillfully exploits that tradition, in a captivating tale that reads as though it originated one evening amongst a group of mates sharing more than a few pints of Guinness in a smokey Belfast pub. It is a darkly cynical tale, weaving together violence and farce in a captivating mix that, for all its insanity, seems almost plausible in the seductive setting of the Emerald Isle.

Colin Bateman

No stranger to the literary scene, Colin Bateman has penned over fourteen novels to date, including three for children. His humour shows in many of his titles: *Mohammed Maguire*, *Of Wee Sweetie Mice and Men*, *Driving Big Davie*, *Reservoir Pups*, and *The Seagulls Have Landed*.

Born in County Down, Northern Ireland, in 1962, Colin was a shy kid who, in his own words, “wouldn't say boo to a goose.” Encouraged by his local newspaper, Colin enrolled in a technical college to learn shorthand and typing, and began his literary career (while still a teenager) as a cub reporter. He quickly learned his craft and went on to become an award-winning journalist, establishing a reputation for lampooning local self-important personalities. His first

novel, *Divorcing Jack*, was widely rejected before being picked up by HarperCollins and published in 1995; it went on to win the Elizabeth Trask Award, with a £12,000 prize. Not bad for a first novel. *Divorcing Jack* was followed by more novels, screenplays, and scripts for television.



Stemming from his days as a hardworking journalist, Colin writes a chapter a day, without any overall plan of where the story is going. Although generally this is not a good plan, for Colin it seems to work well, giving his novels a delightfully antic quality. He tends to have several projects going

simultaneously, so if a novel isn't working for him, he turns his attention to a screenplay or a children's book in progress. Colin's next novel is titled *I Predict a Riot*, and he is currently working as well on a new children's novel, *The Titanic Times*, and an opera about King William of Orange, titled *King Billy*.

A dedicated soccer (Liverpool) fan, Colin plays five-a-side football twice a week. He and his wife Andrea divide their time between Bangor (just outside Belfast) and Dublin, accompanied by their 11-year-old son, Matthew and their cat, Rosie, whom he professes to hate.

Belfast Confidential
(Headline, 2005)

Moose McBride is a local success story, and no one is more astonished than he. The editor of a tabloid magazine, *Belfast Confidential*, Moose is about to publish his annual Power List, a catalogue of the shapers and movers of Belfast life. While many of the local glitterati aspire to being included on The List, others would be happier, thank you very much, avoiding the harsh light of public attention. Moose has been receiving threats of late—which, like most things in life, he declines to take seriously.

Bad move. When the offices of *Belfast Confidential* go up in flames, Moose is inside, tied to a chair. His widow, the very-much-younger May Li, implores Moose's best friend, journalist Dan Starkey, to carry on his project. So in temporary quarters, with only a handful of the magazine's former staff, Starkey sets out to revive the magazine, and it is not long before Dan himself receives not-very-veiled threats.

When the police investigation shows signs of going nowhere fast, it falls to Starkey to find out who killed his closest

friend. Not unreasonably, he looks for suspects among candidates for The List. They are not hard to find, and include a corporate executive with ambitious plans to build a sports-car plant in the region, a smarmy but successful TV host, the owner of a trendy new gentleman's club who is on the brink of bankruptcy, an ex-Liverpool football player seeking to start a new club in Belfast, and a local underworld crime boss with aspirations of being accepted in polite society. Add to that rather eclectic mix a senior Irish politician, corrupt cops, two gay journalists, a bungling bodyguard obsessed with Starkey's wife, and a body-count that threatens to reach double digits (not including household pets), and you have a recipe for madcap mayhem on a truly epic scale.

Wickedly hilarious

Perhaps influenced by his background in screenwriting and his love for movies (or maybe it's just from living in Ireland), *Belfast Confidential* recalls the screwball comedy films of the 1930's. The characters are delightfully bizarre, and the action is fast-paced. If the language is more-than-occasionally explicit, the humour, dark and wickedly hilarious, more than makes up for this. Quite possibly Bateman's best book to date (and the seventh in the Dan Starkey series), it has been widely and critically acclaimed. Suffice to say that *Belfast Confidential* is the product of a truly disturbed mind, and is a criminally good read.

Jim Napier can be reached at
jim.napier52@gmail.com