



## Tóibín, Colm (b. 1955)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Acclaimed Irish novelist and journalist Colm Tóibín is the author of a number of nonfiction books and five novels. His writings are infused with keen political insights and shrewd analyses. While same-sex desire is not overtly addressed in his early work, his most recent novels are astutely observed, unsentimental explorations of gay men trying to fit into an unwelcoming, and often openly hostile, world.

The second youngest of five children, Tóibín was born in 1955 in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland. He studied at the Christian Brothers School in Enniscorthy and then at St. Peter's College, Wexford.

In 1972 he went to University College, Dublin to study History and English, graduating three years later. The day after he took his final exams, Tóibín left for Barcelona, Spain where he stayed for three years, teaching English and closely following the political developments in Spain after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in November 1975. He marched in demonstrations supporting Catalan autonomy and Spanish democracy.

Tóibín returned to Dublin in 1978 and began work on an M.A. in Modern English and American Literature, which he never completed. During that time he also wrote for several periodicals, including *In Dublin*, *Hibernia*, and the *Sunday Tribune* (Dublin). In 1981 he became Features Editor of *In Dublin* and, a year later, the Editor of *Magill*, then Ireland's main current affairs magazine. He left *Magill* in 1985 to travel, first throughout South America and later in the Sudan and Egypt. A collection of Tóibín's journalism from this period was collected in *Trial of the Generals: Selected Journalism, 1980-1990* (1990).

*Walking Along the Border*, with photographs by Tony O'Shea, was published in 1987, and later reissued as *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* in 1994. The book is an account of Tóibín's travels between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and the people he encountered whose lives had been irrevocably altered by the political instability and hardships of the area. He collaborated with O'Shea again in *Dubliners* (1990). In 1988 Tóibín returned to Spain and wrote *Homage to Catalonia* (1990; revised and updated, 2002).

Other nonfiction works by Tóibín include *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1994); *The Irish Famine: A Documentary* (1999), coauthored with the historian Diarmaid Ferriter; and *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (2002), a biographical essay on the Irish nationalist and playwright.

Tóibín's first novel, *The South* (1990), was finished in 1986 but not published until four years later, having been turned down repeatedly by publishers before being accepted by Serpent's Tail. Set in Spain and rural Ireland in the 1950s, the story focuses on an Irish woman who leaves her husband and begins a relationship with a Spanish painter. The novel was shortlisted for the 1990 Whitbread First Novel Award and won the 1991 *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Irish Literature Prize for First Novel.

Tóibín's next novel, *The Heather Blazing* (1992), concerns a judge in the Irish High Court haunted by his



Colm Tóibín at the Texas Book Festival in Austin, Texas in 2006. © 2006 Larry D. Moore. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License.

past and the history of modern Ireland. The book won the 1992 Encore Prize for the best second novel of the year.

Four years later Tóibín published *The Story of the Night* (1996), his first novel explicitly to explore same-sex desire. Set in Argentina during the 1980s and narrated by Richard Garay, a young gay man living in Buenos Aires with his embittered British-born mother, the novel explores the anguish and isolation inherent among "outsiders" in an oppressive society.

Alienated and distrustful of others, Richard is secretive about his sexuality and willfully blind to his country's brutal political history. "We saw nothing," he states, "not because there was nothing, but because we had trained ourselves not to see." Struggling against his loneliness, Richard finds furtive pleasure in chance street encounters and anonymous sex at the public baths.

Later, in the aftermath of Argentina's defeat in the Falklands War, Richard prospers professionally as a translator and political consultant. He also meets Pablo, son of a wealthy Argentine entrepreneur, with whom he begins a tentative relationship. When his new lover's American friends come to visit, Richard glimpses the potential of gay life in a less restrictive society.

Like many narratives set in the 1980s, *The Story of the Night* ends with the imminent ravages of AIDS. Yet, Tóibín's novel, told in a spare, precise prose style, emerges as a meditation on the redemptive powers of love and the ability to find strength in one's own marginality.

*The Story of the Night* won the Publishing Triangle's Ferro-Grumley Award for Best Gay Male Fiction of 1997 and is included in The Publishing Triangle's list of the 100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels.

In *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) Tóibín again explores the devastation of AIDS. Set in rural County Wexford, the novel focuses on a splintered family forced to reunite when Declan, in the final stages of AIDS, decides to move to his grandmother's house by the Irish Sea to live out his final days. His sister Helen and their long-estranged mother Lily join them. Two gay friends, Larry and Paul, who have come to attend to Declan's physical caretaking, add to the tensions in the house.

After years of hostility and silence, the family members begin to mend their relationships with each other, accepting their failings and forgiving past misunderstandings that have kept them apart. *The Blackwater Lightship* is a poignant reflection on obligation, forgiveness, and the politics of family.

The novel was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2001, and was adapted for American television in 2004, with a screenplay by Shane Connaughton and featuring Angela Lansbury as Declan's grandmother, Dianne Wiest as his mother, and Gina McKee as his sister.

In 2002 Tóibín published *Love in a Dark Time: And Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature*, a series of essays, most of which first appeared in the *London Review of Books*.

Interweaving close readings of individual works with detailed analyses of the personalities behind them, Tóibín takes a fresh look at some of the most significant and influential artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries--including, among others, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, Elizabeth Bishop, Thom Gunn, and Pedro Almodóvar--artists whose sexuality has often been isolated from their works, due mainly to the reticence or obtuseness of critics and biographers.

Tóibín argues that a deeper understanding of the sexuality of an artist and a greater appreciation for a gay artist's sensibility is imperative; as he explains "... as gay readers and writers become more visible and confident, and gay politics more settled and serious, gay history becomes a vital element in gay identity, just as Irish history does in Ireland, or Jewish history among Jewish people."

Tóibín's most recent novel, *The Master* (2004), is a brilliant, evocative examination of the life of the writer Henry James from 1895 to 1899 (the "treacherous years," as Leon Edel termed them in his magisterial five-volume biography of James). The novel begins with the humiliating opening night of James's play *Guy Domville* when the author was booed from the stage by the exasperated audience as he appeared for a misguided curtain call, and ends with James just on the brink of his venerated late phase (with the creation of his masterworks *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*).

For Tóibín, James's repressed homosexuality--which is apparent to almost every character in the novel except James--is the unspoken subtext of his entire life. Tóibín shows James subtly attracted to an Irish manservant, listening greedily to gossip about Oscar Wilde, and yearning quietly for the handsome young sculptor Hendrik Andersen. Tóibín's Henry James never does face or act upon his sexuality, but instead retreats into "the sad, helpless monotony of the self ... the locked room of himself."

In one deeply resonant scene, James remembers a tension-filled night he spent in the summer of 1865 sharing the lone bed in the single room available at a resort with his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, the future Supreme Court justice. Holmes, "large-boned and strong," fresh from soldiering in the Civil War, is at ease with the situation, but James is acutely anxious and conscious of himself.

Henry watches Holmes undress and wash at the basin: "Henry studied his strong legs and buttocks, the line of his spine, his delicate bronzed neck." Holmes gets into bed, naked, and James joins him. "Holmes did not turn but lay flat on his back. To make sure that he did not fall out of the bed, Henry had to move closer to him ... keeping near the edge, yet still touching Holmes, who lay impassive. He wondered if he would ever again be so intensely alive."

*The Master* has received near-universal critical acclaim. *Publishers Weekly* called the novel "riveting," and said, "The subtlety and empathy with which Tóibín inhabits James's psyche and captures the fleeting emotional nuances of his world are beyond praise." The novel was shortlisted for the 2004 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

As an Irishman, Tóibín has worked diligently to promote his national literature, editing *The Guinness Book of Ireland* (1995), *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999), and *The Irish Times Book of Favourite Irish Poems* (2000), as well as contributing to collections of Irish writing, such as *Finbar's Hotel* (1997), a series of unsigned stories by seven Irish writers which link to form a collaborative novel.

He was awarded the E. M. Forster Award in 1995 by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and is a member of Aosdána, an Irish organization founded to promote the arts.

Tóibín currently lives in Dublin.

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### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.