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Orangutan: A Memoir



Synopsis

Few people who have been slave to an addiction as vicious, as destructive, and as unrelenting as Colin Broderick's have lived to tell their tale. Fewer still have emerged from the darkest depths of alcoholism— from the perpetual fistfights and muggings, car crashes and blackouts— to tell the harrowing truth about the modern Irish immigrant experience. *Orangutan* is the story of a generation of young men and women in search of identity in a foreign land, both in love with and at odds with the country they've made their home. So much more than just another memoir about battling addiction, *Orangutan* is an odyssey across the unforgiving terrain of 1980s, '90s, and post-9/11 America. Whether he is languishing in the boozy squalor of the Bronx, coke-fueled and manic in the streets of Manhattan, chasing Hunter S. Thompson's American Dream from San Francisco to the desert, or turning the South into his beer-soaked playground, Broderick plainly and unflinchingly charts what it means to be Irish in America, and how the grips of heritage can destroy a man's soul. But brutal though *Orangutan* may be, it is ultimately a story of hope and redemption— it is the story of an Irish drunk unlike any you've met before.

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Guest Interview: Colum McCann Talks with Colin Broderick Colum McCann is the internationally bestselling author of the novels *Zoli*, *Dancer*, *This Side of Brightness*, and *Songdogs*, as well as two critically acclaimed story collections. A contributor to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Paris Review*, he has been named one of *Esquire's* "Best and Brightest," and his short film *Everything in This Country Must* was nominated for an Oscar in 2005. His 2009 novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, won the 2009 National

Book Award for Fiction, and was selected as .com's Best Book of 2009. Read his interview with Colin Broderick on *Orangutan*:

Colum McCann: The book starts with a warning: "This is not a very pleasant story... and if you don't like it, I don't care." There's a fury in this book that I found really honest.

Colin Broderick: You're right about that, Colum. I was on the last rung of the ladder when I started this book. I knew if I didn't come out fighting with this one, I was done for. Desperation has been a great motivator for me over the past three years.

Colum McCann: The first time I met you was about twelve years ago at the Barnes & Noble in Union Square. You handed me a manuscript and asked me to read it. You had a fire in your eyes that suggested you were never going to give up. I think at the time you told me it was your second novel. How many did you write before you finally managed to see something in print?

Colin Broderick: That fire has kept me alive through two unpublished novels, two plays, a screenplay, reams of poetry, and a nice folder of short stories over the years. It's been a long and arduous apprenticeship. But the option to quit was never viable for me. The noise in my head demands articulation. I obey, or it destroys me. When I sat down to write *Orangutan* I realized that I had most of it already written subconsciously. Since I stopped drinking I realized I have been walking around with all these stories in my head for years, and they've been driving me crazy. I drank to quiet the noise. I write now for the same reason. My goal now is to untangle the stories one word at a time so that they don't drive me completely mad.

Colum McCann: Drink is one of the great levellers of fiction writers. But it's also one of the great clichés, that it somehow fuels creativity. How did you actually manage to write while you were on the jar? Or did you just pretend?

Colin Broderick: That romantic image of the half pint of whiskey next to me on my writing table while I toiled almost killed me over the years. Personally I never wrote a coherent sentence when I was drunk. It took me a long time to accept that writing is basically hard, lonely work. It was easy to feel inspired when I was drinking. Once in a while, usually after about two or three bottles of wine, I was so inspired that I was convinced that I was just going to rattle off the next great American novel. I'd wake up in the morning with a head on me like the tire of a dirt bike and pick up my notebook and I wouldn't be able to read a single word. There might be twenty pages or so of enthusiastic, unintelligible scrawl to magnify my sense of utter hopelessness. I destroyed a lot of nice notebooks like that over the years. I never woke up with a hangover and a masterpiece in my hand. I think that whole idea of the drunk writer is a very dangerous myth. Most of the drunk writers I've researched wrote sober. Then they got drunk to celebrate.

Colum McCann: Personally I don't care about the difference between fiction and nonfiction. A story is a story, full stop. Clifford Geertz says that "the real is as imagined as

the imaginary." But there's a lot of hullabaloo about "lies" and "fabrication" in the memoir genre. What would you say to the skeptics who say that this story is too crazy to believe? Colin Broderick: I'd say, "Put my book down so I can kick your ass." What's really crazy to me is how much madness I had to leave out of the story in order to keep it within the confines of a readable book. Colum McCann: I think the whole bollicking that James Frey got was ridiculous. So he made a mistake; leave him alone. It wasn't like he was telling lies and sending kids off to war, like some politicians were doing at the time... Colin Broderick: I totally agree, Colum. I loved *A Million Little Pieces*. I couldn't put the damn thing down. In the bars where I drank, there were characters who would tell the same story over and over for years. We would be disappointed if it wasn't a little more entertaining on every new telling of it. The art of storytelling started around turf fires years ago, way before there were laptops and recording devices to take the magic out of it. If the storyteller didn't do his job right, no one would be able to remember the story to convey it orally to the next generation. Tell me a boring story you heard when you were ten. Colum McCann: You worked in the Irish construction scene in New York for twenty years while writing. How was that for you, on the job? Did you ever have to go looking for the infamous "striped paint"? Colin Broderick: I didn't go for the striped paint myself, but I've sent a few newcomers looking for it over the years. I would always tell them to bring it back and hang it on a sky hook. The Irish construction scene in New York is not a job you need a hard hat for. What you really need is a full suit of body armor and a spare liver stored in your cooler. Those guys are the best craftsmen there are. I'm just glad I survived the ride. Colum McCann: We get our voice from the voices of others. I can see Pete Hamill here. And Nick Flynn. Some Bukowski, even. So, who would you say gave you your voice? Colin Broderick: I think my own voice came up one morning when I had my arms wrapped around a toilet bowl, praying for survival. I read everything, including Hamill and Flynn. But I'll name a few of my favorite writers: Hemingway, Bukowski, Philip Roth, Graham Greene, John Irving, and the late great David Foster Wallace. Colum McCann: In the story of drinking with the transvestite in a hole-in-the-wall bar in San Francisco, you relate to her by explaining how you are in fact an orangutan trapped in the body of a man. She claims, of course, that she's the Queen of England, and maybe she is. That must have been quite a session. Has that feeling of being trapped in another body subsided any since you've put down the bottle? Colin Broderick: No. But not drinking has helped me understand that part of myself a little better and I've come to terms with the beast, which makes it easier for me to stay on this side of the prison bars. Colum McCann: A drunk, a carpenter, a writer, a womanizer, an emigrant? They're all open to particular stereotype, especially on

the page. So, how do you lift yourself--and the story--away from the old tropes? How do you make it new? Colin Broderick: Every story is new. I just hope mine is authentic and entertaining. Colum McCann: Life is unfinished, isn't it? I mean, we constantly find out that there are new ways and new directions. You're a father yourself now. You have a little girl. You're a published writer. Does happiness scare you? Colin Broderick: I'm not a real happy person in general, but my life is better right now than it's ever been. I'm on a path now that I'm treading cautiously. I look at my daughter and it's all the incentive I need in the world to keep putting one foot in front of the other, do the next right thing. Colum McCann: The late great Frank McCourt was a good friend of mine. And I assume you knew him also. He talked about the miserable Irish Catholic childhood and yet he rose above it. If you had to tag your story with a one-liner, what would it be? Colin Broderick: An Irish construction worker in New York digs through the rubble of his life to find an identity. Colum McCann: And yes, he finds it. It's a great read. And I assume you're working on your next project. Do you want to give us an idea of what it is? Colin Broderick: I'm still digging in the rubble right now. When I get to the bottom of it all and clear away the mess, I'm going to pour myself a nice, solid, concrete platform to stand on. And I'll start building again from there. Colum McCann: Good luck to you, Colin. If I find you drinking, I'll throw all your pens away forever... Colin Broderick: See, now that made me laugh out loud. Thanks, Colum.

In this whiskey-drenched memoir, Broderick details his yearslong battle with the bottle. As a young Irish immigrant in New York City in 1988, Broderick spent his days working in the building trades and his nights carousing in Bronx Irish bars where he morphed into the *Án...* of the title. A taste for cocaine and ever-greater excess destroyed his first marriage and sent him to AA; the collapse of his second marriage after a period of sobriety started him drinking again. Broderick's hard-drinking life takes readers from New York to San Francisco and Russia. Along the way, he discovered that his yearnings to be a writer would only be realized if he could dry out for good. At various moments in the narrative, Broderick draws vivid pictures of various settings--the rough and tumble Irish community in the Bronx, the Irish theater scene in Manhattan, the mean streets of New York in the early 1990s. He also clearly evokes the suffering and dark comedy of an addict whirling out of control. However, Broderick attempts to cover so much ground that his story loses focus. Incidents that he claims have great importance for him, like 9/11, are skimmed over, while most of the main characters, including his first two wives, are little more than sketches. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed

Few books have left me as speechless as Colin Broderick's "Orangutan." In the rich (and well-represented) "junkie memoir" genre, whose staple is, in part, to shock the reader over the writer's compulsion and self-destruction, it's hard to render me so floored, so impressed, at both power of prose and will of spirit to overcome. This guy is the real deal. Among the top few I've ever read (and I feel like I've read them all). Broderick excels at balancing the hope against the hopeless, the beauty and want to love against the desire to die. But here's the best part: he doesn't apologize. Not that he's romancing or proud of much of the behavior, but he recognizes that doing so after the fact is somewhat pointless. And the good part still shine no matter how rotten, if you can find where to look. Here it's the city at sunrise, the snippets of poetry to keep him holding on, the documentary that shares the secret story. There are forces far more powerful than the self at play. In the recovery genre, you can get a lot of apologists. And for good reason. It's a selfish, harmful lifestyle. Still, these sort of addictions coincide with the traditional bildungsroman; these books are about growing up. And few complete that process without stumbling. I am sure there are plenty of folks who go to school, pick the career, get married and live happily. But they don't write books. At least not the kind people want to read. What compels are those trips to hell's end, those real crises of character; and when a writer as skillful as Broderick brings you along for the journey, it is enthralling.

On one hand, this book is a funny and rollicking tale of debauchery and drinking. On the other hand, there are some things in here that will turn the stomach and literally make you sick. But author Colin Broderick starts out by giving us full warning and disclosure: It is not a pleasant story, he tells us, and if we decide to read it we have no one to blame but ourselves. I greatly enjoyed this page turner. There are a lot of laugh out loud moments. Drinking can be a hilarious business. The author manages to find humor in the darkness -- these are not dumb, slapstick laughs, but the true, intelligent comedy that somehow comes from deep tragedy. This is not just a drunk-ologue, but also a tale of an immigrant, a tale of love and excess, a tale of madness and travels and slick talk and near death experiences. The cast of characters, who are as crazy as Colin, are entertaining and funny as well. Here is co-dependency at its most dramatic, and the vicious circle of enabling that seems to go on in the workplaces and recovery rooms as much as it does in the bars. This is also the story of a wannabe writer who finally was able to publish a good book. The last part of the story gets a bit hard to read as Colin sinks deeper and deeper into the depths of alcoholism. Just when you think he has hit a true bottom, he finds a lower level to sink to. Strapped in the claws of booze

and drugs, there is much vomiting, illness, DT's. But we have been warned. I recommend for the strong of stomach and those that are interested in the true mechanics of addiction.

I'm what you'd call an "avid reader." I approach books the same way I do most things in my life (the life of someone with a so-called "addictive personality")--all or nothing. I have to devour the thing whole and leave nothing behind. That said, I've read a lot of books. A lot. And have only twice in my entire reading life finished a book and immediately turned it around and re-read it. The first time that happened was with "Infidel" by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The second time was with "Orangutan." I have convinced every single person I know to buy and read this book because A) it's incredible and B) life changing. If you've ever been addicted to anything (alcohol, cocaine, food, sex, "the office") you'll scream, cry and laugh with amazement and joy at how singularly brilliant Colin Broderick is at evoking the feeling and sense of what it means to be an addict. If you haven't ever been an addict then you'll scream, cry and laugh with amazement and joy because this book is one of the rare pieces of literature that actually makes you feel like you were there. You can smell the concrete baking off the Bronx pavement at 7am on a hungover Thursday morning. You will know what it feels like to wake up in an apartment you've never set foot in and not know what day it is or how you got there. You will know what it means to be scared and alone in New York City as a newly arrived Irish immigrant because of Broderick's uncanny ability to arrange words in such a way as to make you feel like you were there the whole time, someone off on the side, watching everything unfold. Broderick's memoir is one that belongs on every bookshelf for the simple fact of how pure and clear the author's voice is on his own experience. Broderick never pities himself or asks "why me?"

This book came highly recommended to me and I was so looking forward to reading it, especially as I am Irish and some of my friends are actually in the book. I got an e-mail to say it had been shipped and the tracking information stated that it was delivered August 8. Well it was not delivered and I still haven't got it. I checked with my neighbors to see if it was delivered to their house by mistake and it wasn't. So unfortunately I cannot review because I never received it. Very disappointing, especially since I have been an customer for years and this never happened before. I hear it is brilliant, funny and well worth the read. My friends know the author well and say it is a very accurate account of his life in the USA.

I am amazed by Colin Brodericks writing, but found "Orangutan" to be slow reading due to the graphic discription of his addiction years. I realize that the portrayal of these years was probably

needed for realism of his story, but I felt much of it was just "too much".

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