



Joyce's debut novel is set on Inishmore, largest of the three Aran Islands in Ireland's Galway Bay. In one passage the central character notes that, "in Irish society, potatoes and the sacrament of Mass were similar in the respect that no matter what condition they were in or how they were presented, people always commented on how lovely they were".

THE SUNDAY NATION

A PRIEST WALKS into a sacristy where his long-time cleaning lady is tidying up and notices that the key to the tabernacle is missing. He asks if she's seen it. "That depends, Father," she replies.

"On what?"
"On what a tabernacle is."
You expect this sort of elbow-in-the-ribs humour in a story written by an Irishman and set in Ireland. You typically expect quirky priests and quirkier cops, all shenanigans and shillelaghs, tumbling in a chaotic spin-wash of deception and counter-feint that's an ordeal for the participants but, for the rest of us, great fun to watch. Toss in optional references to potatoes, the Troubles and Bob Geldof, and away you go.

These sorts of yarns can turn into terrific movies, and that's exactly what Ronan Joyce has in mind as he churns out a slew of screenplays about Father Marcus Nee, a priest so devoted to his flock that he's not above a little illicit behaviour to get them whatever's needed. (Somehow he eventually becomes Pope, which certainly sounds like an episode not to be missed.) Until Hollywood picks up the whisky-tinged scent, the screenplays are taking the form of novels. "Week at the Nees" is the first to become available online.

I am duty-bound but happy to mention that the author, a former *Nation* subeditor, is a long-time acquaintance of mine, but, despite Ronan once assuring me that he is the grand-nephew (or something like that) of James Joyce, I can honestly say I didn't expect much from this book. He's a rookie at this, after all. But when I add that I ended up thoroughly enjoying the book, I'm still being honest.

"Week at the Nees" is entertaining from start to finish – almost. Joyce the Younger makes the odd rookie mistake, notably an urge early on to insert Wikipedia-like explanations – of what a "currach" is, for example, or even the "sac-



Week at the Nees'
By Ronan Joyce
Published by Smashwords
Available from Amazon etc (see end note)
Reviewed by Paul Dorsey

risty" (though not, unfortunately, a "feckin' chisseler").

Once out of the dictionary and among the thrum of waves on the rocky Irish coast, however, we're having ourselves a wonderful week's sailing through a classic whodunit packed with characters that are cleverly drawn and then cleverly placed.

Where in Thailand, or more recently Cambodia, one wonders, did Ronan come up with the idea of illegally distilled poteen (no definition offered, but obviously it's booze) being distributed in holy-water bottles shaped like the Virgin

An excerpt

"The experienced officer wasn't surprised that they hadn't yet found the suspect. If his long, decorated career as a detective had taught him anything, it was that people would do almost anything to prevent the progress of an ongoing police inquiry. He reflected on the rebellious nature of the Irish people and felt that it didn't bode well with the task at hand. For centuries, the Irish had fought against authority and the heavy hand of uniformed officials, primarily because those men in uniforms were foreigners who didn't belong. For centuries, the Irish had lied, cheated and sometimes killed to protect themselves against the tyranny of their British oppressors. Even in the early days of the Irish republic, they'd found it difficult to trust the Irish-born police officers who were charged with their protection, simply because they wore uniforms and embraced the ideals of the same British system they had fought to overthrow."

Mary? This is how Father Marcus is earning extra income for his parish, with the aid of an ageing ex-hippie Englishman, and this is why we get into a situation like this:

Marcus' dad Eamon plays the role of endearing village drunk, but his love of spirits goes unrequited in all the pubs, so he talks elderly Father Tom O'Flaherty, Marcus' predecessor, into fetching him a stock of "holy water" from the aforementioned sacristy. Father Tom of course brings him the real thing, from the baptismal, a gulp of which might be a blessing to Eamon but is anything but bliss. Eamon explains that the bishop sanctified the water in the Virgin Mary bottles, while the water in the font has merely Marcus' endorsement.

"What feckin difference does that make?" O'Flaherty asks, since bishop and priest alike share the same ability. "It's a

mortal sin to drink holy water blessed by your own blood," Eamon explains, to which Tom replies, "You must think I came down in the last shower." And, anyway, how could Eamon tell where the water came from just by tasting it? "You can always tell when it's blessed by a relative," says Eamon. "It tastes a bit like vinegar."

So now you know.
Giddy nonsense like this swirls around a baffling bank robbery, a palaeontologist's career gone askew, a mum (the story's love interest of sorts) with a dangerously wayward daughter, a fetching boat skipper's pot-smoking daughter who wears a silk negligee under her oilskins, and a conveniently isolated pub that has donkeys to carry home its inebriated patrons and, out back inside a shipping container, a casino that "looks for all the world like a Victorian brothel".

There's quite a bit of action and dramatic tension, too (Hollywood take note) – fist-fights, lethal gunfire, a bicycle chase (!) and a perilous storm at sea. There are tender moments among the central characters and, somewhat surprisingly for a cheeky tale like this, a more-than-passing respect for the Catholic Church.

Add to all this enough twists, turns and surprises to have Agatha Christie scratching her head and you've got what they call in the trade a genuine pot-boiler. The race to the ending is thrillingly contrived, yes, but that's what Hollywood does best. Get the casting agent to see if Liam Neeson's available. I'll be first in line at the Lido.

Nees up

"Week at the Nees" is not available in bookshops but can be obtained as a paperback from Amazon.com for about Bt320 plus shipping or downloaded as an ebook from Amazon (Kindle) and the Apple iBookstore (iPad and iPhone) for Bt90. Find it also at Smashwords.com in a variety of formats.

NEW release

Make time

THE STAR
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

WHEN I was a student in the 1980s, the future seemed so peachy. The conventional wisdom was that my generation would be the first not to work more than 40 hours a week. Indeed, we'd be only doing half of that – if we were unlucky. In the 21st century, computers would do all our work for us, freeing us up for the kind of bountiful leisure time denied to our parents and grandparents.

It turns out that computers became our masters. We became slaves to the machines. And, for a variety of reasons, we're working longer hours than ever.

"Overwhelmed" author Brigid Schulte cites stats that reveal today's working parents in the prime of their lives in the United States work about an additional month per year, as tabulated by hours, than their toiling parents at the same age.

I want to hug Schulte – an award-winning *Washington Post* journalist – for highlighting the most pernicious disorder of our era.

"Overwhelmed: Work, Love, And Play When No One Has The Time" is a fastidiously researched – yet jargon-free – study of how top-down policies and societal pressures have shredded our leisure time into useless bits of time fragments, dehumanising us and damaging the health of countless millions.

Part pop-psychology, part self-help guide, the book is on the side of the "scattered, fragmented, exhausted" soul who chooses not to be a workaholic, and seeks a more satisfying work-life balance.

Its author talks to sociologists and scientists around the globe to illustrate how serious and widespread the situation is. Among many surveys, she cites one of workers with families in which 90 per cent report moderate to high levels of "role overload", or trying to do too many things at once.

The depressing picture sprawls across socio-economic boundaries. While poorer parents are overwhelmed trying to cobble together several part-time jobs to make the rent, affluent families are working insane hours, with a knock-on effect on their children's mental health.

One of the most shocking statements in the book is: "The US is the only advanced economy that doesn't guarantee workers paid time off," Schulte notes. "Nearly one-quarter of all American workers get no paid vacation." Although this is an America-centric observation, it contains an important point. "Presenteeism" is today's virtue.

Schulte chides employers for believing that there is a direct correlation between time spent at one's desk and productivity yield.

This is a fallacy. Voluminous research has proved that most people can only do eight to nine hours of quality work a day. After those productive hours, the company is paying the worker for "recreational browsing".

So, what is the answer? Schulte makes it simple. It's up to you to decide if you want – or sufficiently value – "busier than thou" bragging rights. There are only 24 hours in a day, 16, if you include enough sleep – and sufficient sleep is a major prerequisite of sound physical and mental health. Prioritise what is important to you.

As obvious as the solution might be, the lead-up to this conclusion is well worth reading through and ruminating over.



American Smoke:
Journeys to the End of the Light
By Iain Sinclair
Published by Faber & Faber
Available at major bookshops,
Bt654
Reviewed by Michael Dirda

Serendipity have any copies? From the store's vast holdings emerge both Bonner titles. "I was dizzy with gratitude and turned, in trepidation, to check the prices. The pencil markings were my own. I had parted with both items, unread, many years ago, when Peter invigilated my stock. The cycle was complete."

In his final pages, Sinclair recognises how much the American-ness of his favourite writers will always elude him. "Their intensities would never be mine." No matter. Sinclair's own intensities – as evidenced in this book – are just as crazed, just as magnificent.

Journeying deep into the American interzone

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHER IAIN SINCLAIR STEPS OUT ON THE EDGE FOR TRIPS THROUGH THE HOME TERRITORY OF BURROUGHS, KEROUAC AND OTHER CULTURAL REBELS

THE WASHINGTON POST

BACK AROUND 1980, I was in London, staying with a friend in Camden Town and visiting used-book shops whenever I could. On one frosty morning, I found myself on Farringdon Road, where a rubicund gentleman named George Jeffery held the last remaining licence to sell books from wooden barrows on the city streets. Every Saturday, all the London book "runners" would congregate around these flatbed wagons, jostling and elbowing each other for good position. At 9am, George would take a sip of coffee from his thermos, then whip off the canvas tarp covering one of the book-laden barrows – there were four or five – and hurriedly step back. In a berserk frenzy, runners would scoop up all the choice titles in a matter of seconds, after which George would saunter down to the next tarp with everybody madly scurrying after him.

I have seldom spent better mornings in my life. I say mornings because, naturally enough, I returned the following Saturday. On that second visit, I was introduced to a dealer who specialised in the Beats and the Black Mountain poets. His name was Iain Sinclair. We never met again, but I soon heard more about him.

Over the past 35 years, Sinclair has come a

long way, though one could also argue that he hasn't come far at all. Now known for his novels ("Downriver" won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize), frequent essays (many in the *London Review of Books*), and such studies in urban topography as "London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25", Sinclair has nonetheless remained a kind of latter-day English beat, the exponent of a baroque, free-wheeling prose that dazzles relentlessly, even remorselessly. If you ever feel that the plain EB White/George Orwell transparent style is – whisper it softly – really kind of flat and boring, try Sinclair. If you are drawn to English that doesn't just sing, but sings the blues and does scat and rocks the joint, try Sinclair. His sentences deliver a rush like no one else's.

"American Smoke: Journeys to the End of the Light", additionally described as "A Fiction of Memory", is certainly a head trip worth taking. But those new to Sinclair may need to adjust their expectations. Sinclair assumes you will know his references. He's not going to explain a lot, as he relates his visits to the homes and home territories of Charles Olson, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Malcolm Lowry, Gary Snyder and other writers. Don't expect chronological tidiness, either. Sinclair bounces around in time and segues into odd digres-

sions: For instance, he reflects at length on Nazi Albert Speer's habit of mentally walking across Europe or even Siberia – the miles precisely calculated – as he paced back and forth in the Spandau prison yard, year after year. Sinclair is, in fact, himself a pilgrim of derangement, always tracking the ley lines of spiritual energy and stepping the routes of his heroes as they wandered drunkenly from bars to hotels to hovels.

As like calls to like, Sinclair gravitates to visionaries, cultural rebels and all those who live by their wits or on the edge. His individual pen portraits are as neat as Oscar Wilde quips. The essence of cool, Gregory Corso "knows just how to put his foot on the fender of a car". Antiquarian book dealer Greg Gibson looks like "the fated man who comes back from the whaleboat disaster to ghost a tale of marine cannibalism". Another Gibson – the lanky, bespectacled science fiction writer William Gibson – moves "through airports with such familiarity that he barely registered on their surveillance systems".

Sometimes, Sinclair lets out all the stops, as in his description of Dylan Thomas in America:

"This crumpled, swollen-bellied man with the stained nicotine teeth was the original post-war performance poet, playing to packed

crowds, and losing, in the sweats and fears of hypnotic projection, all sense of self. The preacherly mannerisms of his Methodist ancestors, and the seductive rumble and thunder of voice from the abused instrument of his body, mesmerised the uptown poetry mob. Why had he crossed the Atlantic? The questions never stopped. "To continue my lifelong search for naked women in wet mackintoshes," he said. And said again. ... A hundred and fifty readings, up and down the country; death flights, claustrophobic trains, cars bear-squeezed with host-institution academics and faculty wives."

After journeys through Charles Olson's Gloucester, Massachusetts, Burroughs's Lawrence, Kansas, and Lowry's Vancouver, Sinclair finds himself in Berkeley, California, outside Serendipity Books. Its owner, Peter Howard, almost single-handedly established the collectibility of writing from the 1960s. But this legend among bookmen – according to one friend, he resembled "an aged, unkempt and unshaven derelict" – has just recently died, and his store would soon close. Sinclair's memory drifts back to the time in London when he first met Howard. Now, though, Sinclair is himself seeking two hard-to-find mysteries written by Lowry's wife Margerie Bonner. Might