

William Trevor made the ordinary and familiar, new and shocking

Trevor was a world class writer who chronicled the lives of the forgotten, the despairing losers, the innocent and the devious, the lonely and the unloved

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William Trevor: an Irish writer, an international writer, a great writer. Photograph: Eric Luke

Detached sympathy, irony and a masterful grasp of the essential menace lurking at the heart of human existence partly – although only partly – attempts to explain the fluid, diverse genius of William Trevor's singular art.

His fiction is that of a confirmed realist; he has chronicled the lonely, the eccentric, the pathetic and the unloved. He knew how damaged people could be; he was also acutely aware of the cruelty and coldness of which humans are capable.

While the world debated the conflicting merits of awarding this year's Nobel prize for literature to the great American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, others wondered why not honour a supreme storyteller such as William Trevor?

Indeed, in 2013 when the Stockholm committee did select a writer, Canadian Alice Munro, I can recall writing “wonderful”, while adding, it could just as easily have been, should have been Trevor, a short-story writer of far wider range who has also written superb novels, such as *Fools of Fortune*, *Reading Turgenev*, *The Story of Lucy Gault* and *Love and Summer*.

Few writers had as strong a claim; perhaps none have been as regrettably overlooked. Seamus Heaney deserved to win the Nobel Prize; Trevor would have been an equally deserving winner.

Many novelists and short-story writers when asked about their major influences invariably single him out. An Irish writer, an international writer, a great writer. Put bluntly he is revered by writers. “I don’t have language rich enough to describe all I owe to [William Trevor](#),” said Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri when I interviewed her in 2008.

Throughout his career Trevor defied the stock “write what you know” advice given to aspiring writers. The least autobiographical of major Irish writers, he looked to the imagination and as an astute, natural psychologist believed in foraging the unpredictable depths of human behaviour. He knew the value of distance, the role of the observer. A writer must listen, he did and it shows.

This apparently most unexperimental of writers experimented every time he sat down to write. Sophisticated but never slick, he was adventurous; prepared to try anything in the pursuit of a story needing to be told.

In all wrote 14 novels – 15, if *Reading Turgenev* (from *Two Lives*, 1991), at 222 pages, is correctly considered a novel – and 11 individual short story collections, or more than 140 stories, many among the finest written in English.

Trevor the writer is extraordinary, familiar yet elusive. In person he was gentle, kind, unassuming and gracious, a very rare gentleman who could conceal the relentless concentration he applied to pursuing the ideas and the characters which occupied his busy mind.

Missing

At a time such as this, death, the expected tributes will flow. But the truth remains that Trevor, who ranks high among the world’s greatest writers and has an undisputed international reputation, has frequently, inexplicably, drifted out from

the central Irish literary consciousness. Aosdána conferred the honour of Saoi, or wise man, on Trevor as recently – one might suggest belatedly – as 2015.

All too often whether in debate or conversation when Irish writers are discussing the national literature, Trevor is overlooked, or seen as not entirely Irish – how wrong. One need look no further than *The Hill Bachelors* (2000), a superb collection of wonderful stories set mostly in Ireland, which includes *Against the Odds*. Trevor knew Ireland – and at every vocal and cultural register.

If there is one telling sentence among so very many as his admirers look to his work in the initial stages of absorbing the loss of a writer who so honoured and graced the art of story, it may be this from *Reading Turgenev*: “Only love matters in the bits and pieces of a person’s life.”

Describing him as a miniaturist exploring quiet lives of desperation is akin to saying Jane Austen wrote about girls in need of wealthy husbands. Trevor, in common with Austen, was an instinctive stylist, alert to the exactness of language, the power of nuance, be it Irish or English, Anglo-Irish Protestant, middle class Irish Protestant – the social milieu to which he belonged – or Catholic, and above all, he delighted in the captivating allure of ambivalence. “The two youths walked the way they’d come that morning, both of them wondering if the nerve to kill was something you acquired.” (*A Bit of Business*, from *After Rain*, 1996).

He could also be very funny. In *Honeymoon in Tramore* (From *Family Sins*, 1990), a woman already pregnant by one man succeeds in getting another to marry her and, as they enjoy their wedding breakfast, the landlady is heard remarking of her husband’s dim-witted greyhound, “Would any animal in its sane mind keep getting into the cement mixer?”

Wide range

Trevor looked to the forgotten, the despairing losers trapped on shabby, failing family farms, or caught up in the non-life of a provincial town, perhaps working in a defeated local shop. He examined the innocent and also the devious. This much is true, yet there is also so much more. The marvel and also the dilemma of Trevor’s unflustered, sophisticated vision, filtered through his understated prose is that it has a deceptively wide range.

Even admirers of Trevor’s work may not have experienced the full extent of his canvas – there is a great deal of reading in Trevor’s oeuvre. Not by chance were so many British and American critics initially convinced Trevor was an English writer.

To fully appreciate the extent of his gifts, from the humane to the sinister, it is vital to read as much of it as possible – in fact all of it. Read a few stories, you will agree that he is a great writer; read most or all of it and you will be awestruck.

- William Trevor: The master who hid his art
- A barely-there genius with a beady eye: Irish writers on William Trevor
- William Trevor: Writers are outsiders with no place in society

It is as if he inherited the qualities of the great 19th century Russian masters and allowed them to mingle freely with the finest Irish and American masters of the short-story form. He often said that his novels were in fact each a series of story stories contained within one story; he may well be right, yet that does not diminish their success as novels.

Trevor's rare versatility lies in his command of voice – he matched Elizabeth Bowen's cool authority, could mimic the stiff manners of the English middle classes yet was equally at home in the world of Kavanagh's virtuoso exploration of the tragic comedy of rural Ireland. His stories stand equal to those of Frank O'Connor, Somerset Maugham, V.S. Pritchett, John Updike and John Cheever.

The most obvious comparison though is Anton Chekhov – that is where one most accurately places Trevor, the heir of Chekhov.

It has been suggested that Trevor's vision is a genteel variation of John McGahern's powerfully emotive rigour. Yet McGahern's abiding focus on the individual is strongly autobiographical and is in tone as well as stylistically and thematically narrower than that of Trevor, who drew so astutely on his peripatetic childhood in the small towns of provincial Munster.

Clouding easy assessment of Trevor are the insightful, sharply ironic tales featuring the bored and prosperous middle classes of west London suburbs populated by idle, adulterous characters at the mercy of their devious ploys and haphazard deceptions, all as adroit and authentic as his Irish narratives.

The details are irrelevant, whether a lonely shadowy character is enduring existence in an Irish provincial town or a London bedsit, Trevor was an all-seeing, witty and at times, unpredictable observer capable of empathy and savagery. "People run away to be alone ... Some people had to be alone." (From *Love and Summer*, 2009).

Trevor catches the voice of everywhere because he always considered himself to have come from nowhere in particular. There is the humour in his work, yet so much sorrow. Why?

‘Middle-class gypsy’

Born William Trevor Cox in Cork in 1928, the middle of three children of a bank official father whose job kept the family in transit, Trevor once referred to his parents as having “carted” their unhappy marriage around with them. A child who has witnessed adults at each other’s throats tends not to forget the spectacle and Trevor didn’t.

He described his childhood as that of a “middle-class gypsy” during which he attended 13 schools throughout provincial Ireland before arriving at Sandford Park, Dublin, in 1941 when he was 13. Two years later he moved on to St Columba’s, also in Dublin. From there he entered Trinity College and after a day as a medical student, opted for a history degree. Initially, he was drawn to sculpture not writing because he didn’t much care for the “literary” set among his fellow pupils.

He worked as a teacher in Ireland for three years but when the school closed, no further posts were forthcoming. Employment caused Trevor to move to England in 1953.

By then he had married the London-born but very Irish Jane Ryan whom he had met at Trinity. He taught art in the English midlands for three years before settling in Devon. There he returned to sculpture and also began to write.

In the time-honoured tradition of many writers, he spent five years in advertising. There was a first novel, *A Standard of Behaviour*, published in 1958. But he disowned it and continued writing.

The Old Boys (1964) is generally regarded as his debut. It began his career in some style; prizes and the freedom to become a full-time writer. Evelyn Waugh hailed it as “uncommonly well-written, gruesome, funny and original”. What more would an aspiring writer need? Trevor was 36.

The Old Boys is a hilarious and accomplished account of Mr Jaraby’s determined bid to become president of the Old Boys Association, despite many victims of his cruel schoolboy bullying are still alive, as are their grievances. Jaraby is delightfully vile: constantly goading his disgruntled wife, who is no slouch at vicious repartee.

The Boarding House (1965) and *The Love Department* (1966), both less memorable, quickly followed.

The publication of *The Day We Got Drunk on Cake* (1967) proved significant. It was his first collection and several of its seven stories concentrated on themes which were

to become Trevor territory – loneliness, alienation, middle-class marriage, the elderly reduced to easy prey.

The nastiness of human interaction is also evident in *Mrs Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel* (1969) and *Miss Gomez and the Brethren* (1971).

Within a year, Trevor published what was to be a landmark book for him, his second volume of stories, *The Ballroom of Romance*. The poignant title story reveals the early maturity of Trevor's daunting narrative skill. Bridie, tends her widower father, and is a middle-aged child, waiting for her chance at love. Her only hope rests in the pathetic Bowser Egan, a representative of a familiar type, the aging bachelor content to delay marriage until a widowed mother dies.

In *O Fat White Woman*, Mrs Digby-Hunter is one of the first of Trevor's many studies of disappointed wives. She knows how to treat her pain: "On the short grass of the lawn, tucked out of sight beneath her deck-chair, was a small box of Terry's All Gold chocolates, and on her lap, open at page eight, lay a paper-backed novel by her second favourite writer of historical fiction."

Defining strength

Characterisation is possibly Trevor's defining strength, he was particularly skilful with female characters who range from the vulnerable to the vengeful; the likeable to the predatory. *Elizabeth Alone* (1973), a landmark novel for him in many ways, is about the lives of four very different women who are patients in a London hospital ward. Their collective experiences weave in and out of Trevor territory; bad marriages, failed romance, age, sexual repression, religious fanaticism and always, the randomness of existence. Elizabeth is a memorable and sympathetic creation, conscious that "the years were like useless leaves, dead now. Yielding no memories that she wanted".

The Children of Dynmouth (1976), the first of Trevor's three Whitbread-winning novels, reveals exactly how adroit he is with darkness. Young Timothy Gedge (great name – Trevor had a Dickensian flair for name) is a misfit intent on blackmailing selected individuals living in an English seaside town to secure the props required for a gruesome one-man show he is keen on staging.

The narrative highlights an aspect of Trevor's work which is overlooked – its prevailing strangeness. Timothy, peculiar and creepily unwholesome, is a truth-teller. He also offers a glimpse of one of Trevor's most memorable baddies, Hilditch,

the deeply sinister if pathetic catering manager in *Felicia's Journey* which in 1995 would win Trevor his third Whitbread Prize.

Following the publication of *The Children of Dynmouth*, some critics began to slightly revise their opinion of Trevor. Here was a writer capable of anything, prepared to inject a more threatening form of menace.

Another collection of stories, *Lovers of their Time*, dominated by *Matilda's England*, a three-part story, was published in 1978. It revealed a subtle transition. In the story the narrator admits to having a life-long obsession with Challacombe Manor and its previous owner. The old woman had attempted, shortly before her death, to partly restore the place to its former glory, by way of a tennis court. The atmospheric period feel of that narrative is more usually associated with Trevor's Anglo-Irish stories.

Sense of Ireland

Ireland had already begun to assert itself fully in Trevor's imagination. Often criticised for being too removed from Ireland, he calmly dismissed the accusation. He always made a point of reading Irish newspapers and visited Ireland often, particularly while his sister was still alive. She had spent her life tending their parents and by cruel irony she emerged as a character he could have created. As with Heaney, Trevor was felt not to have engaged with the conflict in the North. This is untrue; he looked to the historical and then engaged with the political. *Fools of Fortune* (1983) encapsulates the chaos and contradictions of post-Treaty Ireland. It is a starkly beautiful work. Trevor conveys the pathos and the anger in a narrative which helps define not only the Anglo-Irish culture but also its passing.

Ireland's history also inspires the title story from *The News From Ireland* collection (1986) in which an English governess records her observations of the Famine in her journal: "Last night I could not sleep again. I lay there thinking of the starvation, of the faces of the silent women when they come to the gate lodge for food. There's a yellow-greyness in the flesh of their faces, they are themselves like obedient animals. Their babies die when they feed them grass and roots."

The depravity of Hilditch in *Felicia's Journey* is countered by his pathetic mediocrity. He is the consummate unlikely villain with his pudgy hands, high-pitched voice and fondness for junk food. Into his orbit wanders Felicia, the ruined young Irish girl who hurries to England in pursuit of a caddish lover who had fed her lies.

The plot sounds like stock melodrama, but Trevor's characterisation, feel for voice and use of thriller-like suspense confers tragic grandeur. Above all, in Hilditch, he

has created a shocking though sympathetic study of evil spiralling out of control. As ever Trevor seemed alert to human weakness and the way desires can become corrupt and corrupting.

For sheer beauty, *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002) is difficult to surpass. It was an honour to be a judge for the Irish Fiction Award at Listowel Writers Week when this poignant, perfectly balanced human tragedy won the prize, and Trevor was so delighted holding the book at the presentation.

Curiosity shaped his approach to life and writing. He once told me that his head was full of characters and he had to find out what they were doing. Everything one can hope to learn about life and fiction is contained within the glimpses of humanity created by him. A bold claim? Yes it is, yet a justified one.

Trevor with his sweet smile and the puckered face of a benign schoolmaster, his slightly distracted air; how well did he know Ireland? As well as he knew people. A story such as *The Dressmaker's Child*, published in the *New Yorker* in 2004, and in the impressive collection, *Cheating at Canasta* (2007), says so very much about the world we all inhabit. Humour, wit, ruthless clarity and elegance, he saw through pretence.

The collection *After Rain* was published in 1996 and I remember wondering could short stories get any better. In *The Piano Tuner's Wives*, Belle in old age finally gets to marry her beloved after his first wife dies; the locals show no mercy: "Well, she got the ruins of him anyway."

Reading Trevor's work has been an enduring experience of my life. He makes the ordinary and familiar, new and shocking. Fiction does not have to be real, but it does have to be true.