

# Trainspotter cleans up

Irvine Welsh helped to define a new generation of literati. Cian O'Neill did coffee with Glasgow's chemical spokesman

**Back he came, the big man of Scottish literature, to read in Belfast.** The following morning, I got him out of bed to share some thoughts on matters serious, and less so.

Of course Irvine Welsh is busy as ever. His musical 'Blackpool' came out in December 2001 at the Great Vic Theatre in Leith, Scotland. A BBC/Fourways (his production company undertaken with Mark Cousins, Mark Carlyle, Anthony Bird) project named 'Hotel California' is being shot in Thailand and Yorkshire next year. He has another film project afoot about football hooligans. His new book **Glue** is published in July, without a cut out cover of a sex doll face (he spoke of paper cut concerns). He also appears in the Limerick Festival, August 15th.

He may be perceived as a pharmaceutical eulogist, but Welsh is no simple character. He was an interpersonal skills trainer for Edinburgh council before starting to write—helping people develop their assertiveness. "The whole thing was about process observation." Also, he was in property dealing. "It was the best way to make money." No fool.

Yet some see him as edgy, mad. "You play up to that for the column inches and the wee bit of recognition. Then you get fed up." Since easing off the drugs he has gone to another "buzz"—running. "When you are running, you do get the endorphins, you get a buzz." One kick he puts above others, though surprisingly—love. "I think that it is the most important thing in the world. I think that drives a lot of the writing. In many cases it's there by its absence." Would he write a non-chemical romance? "More than possible."

Welsh seems to be interested in young writers, name-checking people like Brian Warner, John King, Niall Griffiths. "If you like them you feel they

have importance in some way. You need more voices." This stems in part from his experience of seeking publication, starting with parts of **Trainspotting** as short stories. "I was quite lucky. When I started writing there were a lot of people around Edinburgh writing. There was myself, Ken Williamson, Duncan McClane, Alan Warner and Barry Graeme who all happened to be in Edinburgh at the same time. Edinburgh has always had lots of people indoors writing not knowing what the other ones are doing. No-one talked about it."

That reluctance may of course have derived from the state of the particular society. "Writing is seen as a sort of poncy thing to do in the culture I come from. It's difficult to say to all your mates in the pub. That's changing quite a lot now, and there are a lot of people who are telling their own stories and who are quite happy to talk about their own culture rather than think that writing is about something else."

Yet he is not known for florid language, preferring Scots phonetic and colloquialisms. "I find it easier to write (characters) that way. You can capture the essence of them. And I like the pages to turn quickly, so I like to get some rhythm going." He has described English as an imperial language of weights and measures. Yet he likes Cormac McCarthy, Faulkner, and more formal writing. "A lot of my stuff seems like I just sat down with a tape and then transcribed it, but there's probably a lot more craft to it than people realize."

Does he ever want to break out? "Yeah. With the 40,000 word novella in that Unicef **Weekenders** book the story was set in Sudan and it was part of the brief (to write straight). Left to my own devices I would never have written a story like that. Having said that I did try and work in more experimental stuff in **The Acid House** and **Maribou Stork Nightmares**. True. In 'Filth', for example, he featured a tapeworm as narrator. "I was trying to get the idea of possession, the host and parasite relationship. The tapeworm was a device of his conscience."

Despite then his technique he doesn't write criticism? "One of the things I fear most is being over analytical of my own writing because very quickly I think you can become self-conscious, killing the goose that kills the golden egg. I don't want to think about what I'm doing while I do it."

So, post Devolution, has Scotland changed? "Since Devolution, everyone has gone, all the writers. I couldnae imagine that life in Orkney has changed. They still haven't got the Parliament built yet, so it's sort of Scotland's Millenium Dome. Part of me thinks that it's Edinburgh Council spread to cover the whole country." However, Welsh is not a polemicist, and will continue to observe if not to forewarn. "Sometimes I think that I can be a bit, not flippant, but lighthearted about the important social political side of it. But, I feel that Jim Kelman has done all that. I can leave that to Jim, and I can have a bit of fun and enjoy myself." No doubt he shall. ♦

