

RODDY DOYLE

Bestselling author of A STAR CALLED HENRY



Rory & Ita

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Roddy Doyle

VIKING

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For my grandparents.

Roddy Doyle

For the next generation,

Elizabeth, Rory, Jack and Kate.

Ita Doyle and Rory Doyle

Life without memory is no life at all, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.

Luis Buñuel, *My Last Breath*

The house is dark and silent.
The door has just closed behind me or soon will open.

What darkness! What silence!

Dermot Healy, *The Hallway*

In all of my life I have lived in two houses, had two jobs, and one husband. I'm a very interesting person.

Ita Doyle

I wanted to ask the questions before it was too late. And they wanted to answer them.

The book is about my parents, about the people they were before they became parents. But there's very little about parenting. My sisters and brother are born and named, but I didn't think I had the right to bring them into the book. Anyway, they're too short in the tooth, and too cute to be cornered by a brother with a mission and a microphone.

As for the parenting, the teacher in me gives my mother and father eight out of ten, but is it too late to add, 'Making good progress'?

Roddy Doyle, 16 May 2002

Chapter One – Ita

‘The first thing I remember is the gramophone arriving. I know I must have been less than three, because my mother was still alive. It was a lovely thing. I can still smell the wood of it. It was dark wood, with a press below the turntable for the records. Slats behind the turntable, six or eight of them, each the width of my hand, opened when a handle was turned, and released the sound. It was good sound. It was beautiful. I can still remember it, and the little needles and the little box, the dog of His Master’s Voice on the lid. And the needle had to be fitted in. I was able to do it myself later, and the handle turned and away we went.

‘The first record we had was John McCormack, and he sang “Macushla”. And there was McCormack singing “Adeste Fidelis”, and that used to be played every Christmas. And there was “The Old Refrain”, which is still in my mind, played by Fritz Kreisler. And a song that started, “Where are the boys of the Old Brigade?” I can remember marching around the room listening to it. And there was a record of somebody reading *The Selfish Giant*. I can remember one line: “In one corner of the garden it was always winter.”’

She remembers hands holding grease-proof paper, and lowering the paper on to the surface of a pot of soup, and the paper being lifted and bringing a film of fat with it. She remembers a tiny wooden swing, with a

little wooden girl swinging on it. She remembers a stuffed dog, a black and white terrier, called Dog, and a brown teddy bear. She remembers a doll with a bald china head. She remembers pale green notepaper with serrated edges.

'I was born on the 20th of June, 1925. I think I was born at home, in 25 Brighton Gardens, Terenure, which is one of the two houses I have lived in, that house and the house I live in now. There were an awful lot of home births at that time and I feel that I was probably born there.' She knows nothing about the birth. 'Not a thing. I just came. I was named Ita Bridget. I have no idea where the Ita came from but Bridget, I gather, was my mother's mother. I was the third child. The first, Mary Johanna (Máire), was three years older than me and the second, John Joseph (Joe), was a year older.'

She was Ita Bridget Bolger. Her father was James (Jim) Bolger, of Coolnaboy, Oilgate, in County Wexford. He was born in 1890. He grew up on a farm and was sent to St Peter's College, in Wexford town, to become a priest. The eldest of five children, his father had died when he was very young. 'His mother, my grandmother, was a tough old dame and if you were meant to be a priest, you became a priest, when all this money had been spent on you.' But he had other ideas. He left St Peter's when he was seventeen and didn't go home.* Armed with a reference, he went to Enniscorthy: 'I beg

* Ita: 'He didn't go home until she died. She wasn't dead when I was born – I think I can claim that – but I have a very vague memory of my father going off with a suitcase, a small suitcase, and being told that my grandmother was either dying or dead. I was very small at the time. That's my only memory of her; I never met her.'



to say that James Bolger has received a very good education in St Peter's College, has always shown great aptitude, and is a very good boy. I am quite sure he is thoroughly fitted for the position he seeks in the *Echo* Office.' He got the job, at the *Enniscorthy Echo*, the local newspaper.

—'He got caught up in the nationalist movement and he was found sleeping in a bed with guns under it. Now, they weren't his guns but he wouldn't tell whose they were, so he was banished from Enniscorthy.' This happened just after the outbreak of the War, in 1914. What the police found in the house of Larry DeLacey, where Jim Bolger lodged, were home-made grenades — cocoa tins filled with gelignite and scraps of iron — as well as yards of fuse and hundreds of detonators. They also found stacks of Roger Casement's pamphlet *Ireland, Germany and the Freedom of the Seas*, which had been secretly printed at the *Echo* offices. He was arrested, along with Jack Hegarty, another lodger, and taken to Arbour Hill

barracks, in Dublin. A defence fund was quickly organised, and a campaign to have the men tried by jury.

Here is the account by Robert Brennan,* Jim Bolger's brother-in-law:

... after two trials in which Tim Healy and Charlie Wyse Power appeared for the defence, the two were acquitted on all charges of treason, sedition, creating disaffection etc. They had been charged, amongst other things, with knowing that the seditious literature and the explosives were in the house and with not informing the authorities. The jury found they were not guilty, though neither of the two men could get in or out of bed without climbing over stacks of the literature, and they could hardly move anywhere in the house without knocking over one of the pernicious cocoa tins. DeLacey's old housekeeper, shown the yards of fuse, said of course she had seen it. She had cut yards off a length of it to tie the little dog to the bed-post.

Tim Healy was largely responsible for the acquittal. He made it appear that Hegarty was being persecuted, not for his political activities, but for his religion. His plea was based on the fact that one of the witnesses for the prosecution, who testified that pro-German notices were in Hegarty's handwriting, was a Belfast man who had himself, as he was forced to admit in cross-examination, preached in the streets of Cork with a Sankey and Moody band. Hegarty, said Tim, had been hounded

* The father of Maeve Brennan, author of *The Springs of Affection*, *The Rose Garden*, *The Long-Winded Lady* and *The Visitor*.

out of his employment and out of his native city by the bigots who had come down from Belfast to insult the people of Cork by preaching against their religion.*

Barred from Enniscorthy, Jim Bolger 'lived in New Ross for some years but he was able to send his writings back to Enniscorthy, so he was still working for the *Echo*.' From New Ross, he moved to Dublin. He followed Robert Brennan, to work on the *Irish Bulletin*, a Sinn Féin propaganda sheet which was produced daily and delivered by hand to the Dublin newspapers and to all the foreign correspondents in the city. Production and distribution of the *Bulletin* were difficult but the authorities in Dublin Castle never managed to stop a single issue. It was published every day, from November 1919 until the Treaty was ratified two years later. 'He never fought, as such. He was more an intellectual than a fighter.'

On the inception of the new State, Jim Bolger became a civil servant, at the Department of External Affairs. 'He never lost the idea of what he had fought for, but he wasn't a diehard.' His first task was to sit outside a room with a gun while the new Minister, Gavin Duffy, was inside the room. By the time she was born, three years later, he was sitting at a desk, in the Accounts section of External Affairs, and studying accountancy at night, at the College of Commerce, in Rathmines. He was also a freelance journalist, calling himself The Recorder, writing GAA[†] match reports for the *Irish*

* From *Allegiance* (1950) by Robert Brennan.

† Gaelic Athletic Association. Jim Bolger reported on gaelic football and hurling.

Independent. He also wrote for *Ireland's Own*, 'about ordinary life and things that go on. One article I found was about cutting the front grass. He also wrote a series of articles about the Young Irelanders for the *Independent*.

'My mother's name was Ellen O'Brien. She was born, I think, in 1895, in the townland of Ballydonegan, near Ferns, in County Wexford. She is a bit of a mystery to me. My father never spoke of her. Maybe it upset him too much, or maybe he thought it would upset us.'

She doesn't know how her parents met, or where. They were married in 1921, in Liverpool. What a Sinn Féin activist was doing in Liverpool during the War of Independence, she doesn't know. 'He never spoke about being out of the country. He was a terribly secretive man, you know. His right hand did not know what his left hand was doing and that is the truth of it.'

Home was 25 Brighton Gardens, in Terenure, a suburb three miles south of Dublin's centre. It was one in a terrace of small redbrick houses. 'There were thousands of them around the place.' The front door was painted



brown, with two stained-glass windows and a brass knocker, letter box and, later, when the electricity had been installed, a brass bell.

Immediately inside, there was a hallstand. It was tall, with a mirror set into its backing. It had hooks, for coats, high on its sides, and a shelf, for gloves; there was

also a rack for umbrellas, and a tin pot at its base, to catch the water. There was brown lino in the hall. There were two prints, *The Laughing Cavalier* on one side, and *The Toast* on the other. Both had been acquired in exchange for cigarette coupons. 'I always loved them.' There were also two pictures in the front room, but she hated these ones. The first was called *First Love*. 'There was a man in robes that you'd usually see on a Roman, and a lady with her eyes cast down, and he had his hand on her arm and they were leaning on a kind of a marble pillar, and that was *First Love*. There was no picture of the row they must have had, but *Reconciliation* showed them actually smiling at each other, so I presume they must have had one. But I always hated them. They were eventually stolen when my father moved to a newer house. There were a few other things taken too but I was so pleased with whoever took those horrible pictures; I always thought how welcome they were to them.

'The room at the front of the house was very seldom used. Christmas Day and very odd days in between. Some people called this room the parlour and others even called it the Jewman's room; people never used it but if the moneylender came looking for his money he was brought in there. But we always called it the sitting-room. There was a suite in the sitting-room, a sofa and two chairs, upholstered in brown leather, and very cold on the behind. There was a black marble fireplace, with colourful tiles running down both sides. There was a humidor on the mantelpiece, an ornate wooden box with shelves for pipes and a china jar for tobacco. My father smoked twenty Sweet Afton a week, and a two-ounce tin of Mick McQuaid Cut.' There was a large oval mirror in a mahogany frame hung above the

fireplace. There was a mahogany book press against one of the walls, packed with sets of Francis McManus, Lynn Doyle, W.W. Jacobs, Maurice Walsh and books on Irish history and literature. There were two drawers under the press, containing accounts, receipts, letters, all held by rubber bands. There was also a rosewood sideboard. The doors were beautifully carved, in a rose design. The chiffonier, on top of the sideboard, its exact width, was a mass of small shelves backed with mirrors. These shelves held small ornaments. 'I remember a glass jam or marmalade pot, in a silver holder, with silver lid and spoon. It was never used.' On the sideboard itself there was always a glass bowl, full of fruit – apples, oranges, 'nothing exotic, and refilled each week from Miss Gibney's fruit and vegetable shop in Terenure'. There was a fawn carpet with an ornate border. The floorboards along the walls were varnished.

Behind the sitting-room was the kitchen. 'Now, that was where we lived, in the kitchen. There was a table that folded up and went against the wall. There were the chairs that came with the table; they were around the walls – that's what we sat on. The one comfortable chair was my father's. If he wasn't there whoever liked could live in it, but there was always a row over it.' There was another book press. There was a big black range for cooking and heating the water. 'And then we got more refined and the range was taken out and there was an open fire, with a nice red, wooden surround, with dark red tiles and a back boiler, and the fire heated up the water.' The boiler was in the hot press, also in the kitchen, where the clothes were stored and aired. 'There was a big fender which was to keep people from falling into the fire, but it used to be draped with clothes. The lino

had a red and fawn square design.' There were flowers in the pattern but they were hard to discern in each tiny square. 'It was a thick lino but nearly like mosaic, all these tiny little squares it broke into.

'Down a step, and into the scullery. There was no room for a table in there. There was a gas cooker, and a porcelain sink beside it. On the other wall there was a big cupboard. There was a hinged board that could be pulled down, you could lean on it, for cutting bread, meat and vegetables. The floor covering was stuff called congoleum.* That would have been the cheapest. You

could cut it with a scissors. It had lovely bright colours until they were walked off.'

Up one flight of stairs, carpet held in place by brass stair-rods, and there was the first of the bedrooms, Joe's. There was a bed, a dark-wood dressing table and a wash-stand. She remembers no pictures on this boy's bedroom walls. 'People didn't put things on the bedroom walls, except they were holy pictures.' Beside



* From *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II* by Jeff Kisseloff: 'All of this later helped me in the army, because I learned how to get dressed putting on my socks and shoes fast on the cold floor. Congo-leum, which I learned later was not a bad word for floor covering, to me was one of the worst words for poor people. If you had congoleum floors, that was terrible . . . To this day I don't like to walk barefoot except on my own rug at home' (Lee Silver).

Joe's room, on the landing, was the bathroom. There was the bath and 'then there was a kind of a board that went across the bath that held the wash-basin. There was room on that as well for a little dish with soap and a face cloth.' The hot water came from the boiler, below in the kitchen hot press. The toilet was outside, 'out the back, and I was always kind of nervous going out there at night.' Later, an inside toilet was installed, 'a giant step for the Bolgers'.

'And then up another flight of stairs and there were two bedrooms with a good-sized landing, that took a fine big chest of drawers for linen and towels and that kind of thing', and two pairs of old swimming togs, male and female, sleeves to the elbows, legs to the knees. Her bedroom, which she shared with Máire, was the one on the right. The sisters shared a double bed, although she thinks she slept in a cot until she was six. The bed had brass knobs which could be screwed off and on, a favourite game. There was a light-coloured, hardwood dressing table with three drawers and a good big mirror, and there was a nice centre-doored wardrobe to match it. 'And there was a small fireplace, one of those small steel fireplaces that are much sought-after these days.' It was never lit. 'It must have been cold because I remember trying to get dressed under the bedclothes, and in those days we wore things called combinations, which was a combination of vest and knickers, and trying to get dressed under the bedclothes could be very awkward because you often stuck your leg through the wrong hole and you had to keep manipulating, but we did it, nevertheless.' There was lino on the floor - 'I can't remember it but I'm sure there were flowers on it, and a carpet strip where you got out of bed, and you made

sure you stood right on it, I can tell you.' The bedroom wallpaper was 'always flowers; even when it was changed it was flowers.' There were net curtains on the sash windows. There was a chamber pot under the bed, 'a very elegant one too, with all kinds of flowers and furbelows'.

The front bedroom, her parents', had a black marble wash-stand, with a delph* basin and matching jug for the water which was brought up from the bathroom. There was a dressing table in one corner, and wardrobe and double bed. They all matched and were, she thinks, rosewood and probably intended for a bigger room. There was a polished wood crucifix above the bed, perhaps a foot high, with a silver-coloured Christ figure. There was a carpet. 'I can still see it, pale green with pink roses.'

Downstairs again. Outside the scullery door, there was a passage. 'I have a vague memory that there were two windows, two sash windows, nearly together. I may be wrong in that but it was certainly a wide-ish window and the passage was the width of that window. There was a meat safe in the passage – I can't remember what the covering was made of but it kept the weather off it – and a great big mangle for the clothes. And then there was quite a nice little garden, good high walls. They must have been about eight feet high around, and little beds, garden beds, right around and a little grass bit in the middle. My father took care of that, and I was sorry for the grass because everything he did was very methodical.'

The house was lit by gas. The gas mantle, made of asbestos gauze, was attached, locked to the pipe-end; each mantle had to be lit by match. The mantles were

* China (from 'Delft').