

Adapting *The Barrytown Trilogy*: An interview with Roddy Doyle

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July 1998

Roddy Doyle (1958, Dublin), a former school teacher, is the reputed author of the novels *The Commitments* (1987), *The Snapper* (1990), *The Van* (1991, shortlisted for the Booker Prize), *Paddy Clarke, Ha Ha Ha* (1993, winner of the Booker Prize) and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). He has also written plays (*War*, 1989; *Brownbread*, 1993) and screenplays for the cinema and TV. Doyle's first three novels were published in a single volume with the title of *The Barrytown Trilogy* in 1992, though they were not originally intended to form a trilogy. What is exceptional in this case is that each of these three novels has a corresponding screen adaptation: *The Commitments* (1991), an American film directed by English director Alan Parker, was followed by *The Snapper* (1993) and *The Van* (1996), both directed by Stephen Frears and produced for the BBC.

The three novels and the corresponding films portray working-class Dublin and, more specifically, the lives of the members of the Rabbite family. *The Commitments* narrates the efforts of Jimmy Rabbite Jr., the eldest, teenage son of the family, to form a soul band. Soul, he argues, is what the Irish should play, for they are the «niggers of Europe». The novel narrates how the petty tensions between the many members of the band finally destroy it just when they are on the verge of success. *The Snapper* deals with the pregnancy of Sharon Rabbite, the eldest daughter. The novel focuses on Sharon's embarrassment at how she got pregnant —her middle-aged neighbour practically raped her when she was drunk— and her decision to keep the name of the baby's father a secret. *The Snapper* is memorable, above all, because of the transformation of Jimmy Rabbite Sr. from a rather puzzled prospective granddad into his daughter's most committed defender. *The Van* deals with a disastrous business venture that almost wrecks Rabbite Sr.'s friendship with his business partner and neighbour. The two unemployed men hit on the idea of using an old van to open a fast-food stall. However, after some initial success, the business collapses due to the partners' inability to control their rowdy customers and the dirt accumulating in the van.

The basis of the three novel is dialogue. The description of settings and of the psychology or physical appearance of the characters is minimal if not out-

right minimalist. Doyle prefers, instead, to capture the nuances of Dublin working-class's speech —despite the limitations of the written text to reproduce dialectal variations— and to let the characters speak for themselves. The abundance of dialogue makes the novels extremely entertaining and also unusually true to life. Of course, they demand the participation of the reader, who must supply his or her own visualisation of the scenes in the novels. Reading Doyle's novels is, in this sense, not unlike reading a play (or a screenplay) with unusually long stage directions. Apart from the well-paced plotting and the immense humanity of the characters, Doyle's trilogy is highly commendable because of its sense of humour. No matter what their problems may be the Rabbits and their friends are always ready to see life from an optimistic point of view. Doyle's characters invite the reader not to laugh at them but to laugh away with them the cares and trouble of working-class life. This laughter, however, never trivialises the characters' feelings and experiences. It is a laughter born out of the need to survive life's little and big ironies.

The following interview, held in June 1998, focuses on the three screen adaptations of Doyle's novels and on the role he played in their making.

Links & Letters: When reading your novels, especially *The Commitments* in which music and dialogue are essential, the reader may have the impression that your novels are very close to being (potential) screenplays. They focus on realist dialogue, have few descriptions, there is hardly any authorial intervention in them, and they are structured in clearly 'filmable' scenes. Did you have a possible film adaptation in mind when writing your *Barrytown Trilogy*? And if that is the case, what kind of adaptation? Or are you, simply, very much influenced by film?

Roddy Doyle: I didn't write *The Barrytown Trilogy* as a unit. It wasn't my intention to write three novels and then block them into a trilogy. It just happened that way; one book led to the next and by the time I was close to finishing *The Van* I'd decided that I wouldn't write any more Rabbits books. The idea to publish them in single form came, I think, more than after a year after the publication of *The Van*.

I wrote *The Commitments* in 1986 and *The Van* in 1990, a five year period. I was writing *The Van* at the same time that *The Commitments* was being filmed. Film was far from my mind when I was writing *The Commitments*; it never occurred to me, if I remember correctly, that it would be or could be filmed. After it had been published, people started commenting that it would make a good film, and I didn't disagree with them. I suppose that film was one of my influences. But, in a way, the decision to write about a gang of people, in *The Commitments*, and the nature of what they were doing, messing around with music, dictated the style. There was no room for detailed description; it didn't seem necessary and desirable. As I read over the pages that I was writing, I didn't feel that they lacked anything. Also, at times it didn't matter who was talking. The story had to be told at speed, like the

songs they were singing. I've always been wary of physical descriptions of characters; it can be lazy, you know, fat=greedy, glasses=intellectual.

I enjoyed writing *The Commitments* and, almost immediately after completing it, started *The Snapper*; I wanted to continue in the same style, to see if it would work in a more intimate context. Possibly film adaptations weren't on my mind.

Links & Letters: You give your readers very few clues about how they should visualise the characters and the settings in your novels. Inevitably, after seeing the films, the impression is that this is how the screen adaptations complement your books: by visualising (and, of course, making audible) what you suggest. In fact, the images of the films interfere heavily with the text in second readings of the novels. Should this be the function of the screen adaptation? Why, in any case, do you supply your readers with such scant information to visualise your texts?

Roddy Doyle: I don't give many descriptions in the first three books (the later ones are much more detailed) because I felt they were out of place. Jimmy Rabbite Sr. is very close to being the narrator of *The Van*. It would never dawn on him to describe his street or his house; the words of the book wouldn't be as close to him if this happened. I have noted, from letters and comments from people at readings, that they visualise characters and landscapes themselves, and enjoy it. One reviewer described Imelda in *The Commitments* as a 'blonde bombshell', years before Alan Parker cast a blonde in the role; there is no reference to her hair colour in the book. I have always felt, long before I started writing, that the reader is actively involved in the creation of the story; the reader feels gaps, forms opinions, adds details. I always leave those gaps. I don't like being led by the hand, and bad writing does that.

What books and films have in common is story. This is why, I think, so many novels end up being filmed. I don't see the film adaptations of my books as having a function other than to be viewed as films. This can often be a problem: readers develop a relationship with a book; they have firm ideas about how a character looks etc. The film often intrudes or disappoints. 'It's not as good as the book', must be one of the most common statements in the English language.

Links & Letters: It is interesting to note that in the reviews of the films based on your novels, your name is hardly mentioned. Your presence behind the camera is actually more noticeable in reviews of *The Van*, in which you are usually mentioned as the author of the *Barrytown Trilogy*. However, reviewers tend to focus on the work of Alan Parker and Stephen Frears and relate the content of the films not so much to your novels as to their previous films. How do you feel about this general neglect by reviewers of the figure of the screen writer and of the adapted novelist? And about your own situation?

Roddy Doyle: I don't feel neglected! Focusing on the director is the conventional critical approach; it is conservative and can often be misleading,

often interesting. *Liberty Balance* is a wonderful film. John Ford directed it; it has all his trademarks. Who wrote it? I don't remember and I watched it yesterday: it's a John Ford film. The 'director' approach tends to neglect other skills, perhaps because most critics know nothing about them. Critics, particularly those writing for the press or presenting magazine programmes, often take their 'information' from press releases. I was prominent in *The Van* press release because I was available for interviews at Cannes and London, the first time I'd agreed to do interviews for a film project, and because the fact that Stephen Frears was working on one of my books for the second time was, from the publicists' point of view, an interesting selling point. I've got a big childish kick out of seeing my name on the screen at the start of the three movies but I really don't care if people —critics or humans— remember my input.

Links & Letters: The two film directors who have adapted the novels of the *Barrytown Trilogy*, Alan Parker and Stephen Frears are English. Frears himself has admitted his almost total ignorance about Ireland before he started filming your novels. How has their foreign view of Ireland conditioned the adaptation of your own view of Ireland for the screen? Would you have chosen an Irish director or preferred the films to be entirely Irish?

Roddy Doyle: I think both men, not being Irish or familiar with Dublin, brought fresh eyes to the stories. They picked and chose their settings, didn't allow geography to get in their way. I think that many of the best American films have been made by European directors; they see and hear things that the locals don't. I didn't see much of Alan at work but I know that Stephen loved listening to the actors and crew. I think that Stephen served the script and the book. He constantly read them, constantly asked questions. He went through each set and took down the holy statues because we agreed that they wouldn't have been in that particular house. They had been installed by other, Irish people —the designer and props people. If I had a criticism of *The Commitments* it would be that the holy statues creep in a bit; the statues shouldn't have been there, that young man wouldn't have gone to confession, that nun would not have been walking through the hospital casualty ward— I live beside a convent but I haven't seen a nun in years.

I was very happy that Alan and Stephen wanted to direct the films. Their nationality didn't matter that much to me; their previous films did. I'd love to work with an Irish director but only if he/she is sensitive, as interesting and nice as Stephen Frears. At the time, I don't think I would have chosen an Irish director. There didn't seem to be any. Neil Jordan, whose work I admire greatly, was away doing his own thing; I wouldn't have wanted to interrupt him. Jim Sheridan hadn't made *My Left Foot* when talk of *The Commitments* film had started, and I don't like his later films —the stories are trite, the dialogue is appalling. The other few Irish films being made at the time seemed to roll in between the two pillars, dreary and amateurish.

Links & Letters: Parker has declared that he filmed *The Commitments* because he had enjoyed your novel, whereas Frears has declared that he did not know your novels and filmed *The Snapper* because of the freshness and sense of humour of your screenplay. How did these situations condition the way you worked with Parker and with Frears, respectively? Did you have a different status as a writer for each director?

Roddy Doyle: I didn't really work with Alan. I wrote a version of the screenplay here in Dublin and, then, two British writers, Dick Clement and Ian LeFrenais who, like Alan, both lived and worked in Los Angeles, wrote on top of that. My job, my part of the work, was done a long time before production. With Stephen, my job really never ended, until individual scenes had been actually filmed. There were constant questions, plenty of re-writes, new ideas, some good, some off-the-wall.

Links & Letters: You have now entered the exclusive club of the Booker Winner Prize with *Paddy Clarke Ha, Ha, Ha*. Yet in all likelihood, many more people have seen films based on your books than read your books. Would you agree with the idea that the novel is bound to become in the near future a genre subordinated to the interests of film-makers? Does it make sense to regard printed fiction as an art —as university teachers and scholars do— above film? Or is film a parasite of the novel?

Roddy Doyle: I disagree with you. The novel is alive and well and independent. Some novels become films, others don't: it doesn't matter. As to which is the higher, fiction or film, it depends on the novel, it depends on the film. I don't think film is a parasite: it just seems that way after you've sat through a few bad films. Was Shakespeare a parasite? He never had an original idea in his life. All fiction writers, whether novelists or screenwriters, are, in some sense, parasites; they need past events, older stories, to make up their own stories.

Links & Letters: Many writers whose work is adapted for the screen feel no interest in adapting their own work. Yet you have rewritten yours for the screen. As a novelist, how did you feel about re-writing and re-arranging your own material? Are the screenplays in any way an "improvement" on the novels or would you call them a variation on the same theme?

Roddy Doyle: I enjoy adapting my work for the screen, although I don't intend doing it again for quite a while. I like dismantling the books and putting them together, taking out material that wouldn't work on-screen, creating fresh material that would. It's good fun. Also, childishly, it's easier to fill a screenplay page—a bust of dialogue will do the job—and this is a joy when a page of a novel is often a very good day's work. I don't see them as an 'improvement', but another way of telling the same story.

Links & Letters: In the case of *The Commitments*, you are co-author of the screenplay, whereas you are the sole author of the screenplays for *The Snapper*

and *The Van*. What degree of control did you have over the re-writing of your original novels in each case? Is the experience of writing a screenplay with others radically different from writing a novel alone?

Roddy Doyle: In the case of *The Commitments*, very little control, in fact, none. I was happy with the final film but it's not an experience I'd want to repeat. The screen writer's position is always going to be a precarious one. The novelist has complete control of his/her work, but the screen writer is an employee. I had written into my contract for *The Snapper* that I would write the script and if there were problems I'd sort them out and, if this proved impossible, someone else could be brought in with my approval. I didn't, strictly speaking, write with Clements and LeFrenais; we were an ocean and a continent apart, so I'm not really able to answer the last part of your question. It's not a question of working alone or not; writing fiction and screenplays are very different exercises.

Links & Letters: As a writer who has had the chance to rewrite his own books for another narrative medium, do you think that re-writing and adapting in general are underrated by critics and reviewers? Should those interested in your work consider the screenplays as literary texts at the same level as your novels?

Roddy Doyle: I don't know; I haven't paid much attention to that. No, I don't think that screenplays should be read as literary texts. What a good screenplay is, I think, is a set of instructions for other people involved in the production of the film. The instructions should be clear, concise, clever, etc.—but never literature.

Links & Letters: Alan Parker was worried that *The Commitments* might fail to reach a large American audience as Americans might find the subject too local. In contrast, others have praised the capacity of your plots to transcend their Irish setting and speak to (working-class) people all over the world. In countries such as Spain, where the novels are read in translation and the films are dubbed—and so the nuances of working-class Dublin speech are lost—audiences may miss much of what you have to say about contemporary Ireland. In view of this, it might seem that the Irishness of your characters, their accents and your plots is not really relevant for the success of your work. What's your view on this issue?

Roddy Doyle: I've always tried to write stories that knit universal and local qualities together. The themes—domestic violence, music, birth, unemployment, childhood—are universal, recognised everywhere. The dialogue, the geography, the general culture are local. Obviously, in translation the balance shifts; much is lost. This fact never put me off reading well translated work, French, Russian etc. I know that I'm not getting the full experience, but I'm getting enough to know that Dostoevsky and Zola are astonishing writers. In reading American, British, even work from other parts of Ireland, I'm missing nuances, slang meanings etc. It is put to me: an Ice-

landic publisher wants to publish *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. Do I say 'Let them learn English', or do I agree to it and hope that the translator does a good job? The latter, everytime. I take a keen interest in the translation. When I become aware that a particular translator has done a good job, I insist that they be chosen to translate my later work. From talking to readers outside Ireland and from reading letters, it seems that the Irishness of my books is very important to them.

Links & Letters: *The Snapper* was originally conceived as a TV film but made it to the big screen thanks to its success in the Cannes festival. Does this mean that the same standard of quality can be achieved in a TV adaptation as in a film adaptation? Would you be equally pleased if *The Snapper* had become 'just' a successful TV film?

Roddy Doyle: *The Snapper* was made as a TV film, very deliberately so. It was broadcast by BBC before it went to Cannes. Stephen Frears was invited to show it at Cannes, and it was a huge hit. I agreed to its getting a cinema release but I never liked the film on the big screen; it had a grainy quality and I think it would have been a different film if we'd known that it was going to be shown in cinemas. We all made that film in the knowledge that it would be broadcast the following May, on a Sunday night on BBC 2, and we were all quite happy with that.

Links & Letters: The paradox is that *The Van* (novel) was short-listed for the Booker Prize but *The Van* (film) disappointed many. What were the factors that contributed to the success of the novel and the relative failure of the film? Why should the same plot (or almost), written by you in both cases, give such diverse results on the screen and on paper?

Roddy Doyle: This is a question I can't answer. I was delighted with the film of *The Van*, and still am.

Links & Letters: The *Barrytown Trilogy* is articulated by the presence of the Rabbite family but in the films only the presence of actor Colm Meany ensures a certain plot continuity or, at least, the suggestion that the films are related. Part of the coherence of the world of the novels is thus lost on film audiences. Why did this happen? How important was this loss for you in the process of adaptation?

Roddy Doyle: Continuity wasn't an issue when we made the films. I deliberately changed family names, the structure of the family. Also, the makers of *The Commitments* had the cinematic rights to the Rabbite surname, for X amount of years, I'm not sure of the duration. What I, and we, didn't want to do was use all the same actors —probably impossible, anyway— the same locations, etc. It seemed like a tedious approach to a new film. *The Commitments* had been filmed all over Dublin. *The Snapper* used just a small area. Colm was a late addition to *The Snapper*. Stephen met him in L.A. and liked him; Stephen was keen that he have that role decided

before he came to Dublin. I wrote *The Van* not knowing if Colm would be available or not. But, as I said, continuity wasn't an issue.

Links & Letters: Films are collaborative efforts in which many people intervene, usually to the disadvantage of the adapted author or the screen writer. Have you felt at any point during the process of adaptation of your work or after the release of the films that you risked losing control over your personal work? How does this affect you?

Roddy Doyle: Films are indeed collaborative efforts but I don't agree with you when you say, *usually* to the disadvantage of the author of the screenplay. Yes, it happens that a script or original work suffers but this is far from being a certainty. One of the things I have enjoyed about watching the films being made is witnessing the life that actors bring to the lines or trying to figure out why Oliver Stapleton, the cinematographer, and Stephen Frears, chose to place the camera in such-and-such position for a particular scene or a burst of dialogue. Any writer involved in film making runs the risk of losing control. Since the making of *The Commitments*, I have tried to be careful about the people I work with. It doesn't guarantee creative success but it does make the collaboration something like a pleasure.

Links & Letters: Do you think that screenplays should be taught in Literature courses and included in the history of Literature?

Roddy Doyle: No. As I said already, screenplays are instructions for other people involved in the making of a film.

Links & Letters: What would become of Roddy Doyle, the screen writer, without Roddy Doyle, the novelist? Would he still exist? What kind of reputation do you think he would enjoy?

Roddy Doyle: If a gun was put to my head and I was told that I could write only novels or screenplays, I would choose novels immediately. From a writing point of view, they are far more engrossing, fulfilling, frustrating, challenging. The novel is the freest form. It is all about words and the world that can be created by combining words in certain ways. Every sentence, every two words side by side are a creation. I have written original work for television and it has been well received. I'm currently writing an original screenplay. I hope to write more. I've also written an adaptation of a novel by Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine*. The time to answer the last part of your question hasn't arrived yet.