In his latest critical work, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel (1987-2007)*, Liam Harte surveys eleven texts which he considers “to be the most sharply provocative and keenly insightful recent fictional enquiries into particular aspects of Irish history, culture, and society” (2). (There are, however, only nine subject authors: the first chapter focused on Roddy Doyle addresses the entire *Barrytown Trilogy*.) Deftly moving between historical contextualization, close reading, and critical analysis, this wide-ranging study engages many aspects of the Irish experience, often in a manner that is cogent and insightful. The readings of individual texts, too, reflect a thorough familiarity with the selected authors and their work. While Harte’s broad focus somewhat undermines the coherence of the collection as a whole, that same commitment to argumentative breadth showcases a deep understanding of both the subject texts and their social, literary, and historical milieu.

Taken individually, Harte’s readings demonstrate the kind of fluency and comprehensiveness that one has come to expect of his criticism. Each chapter, dedicated to a single author, begins with a survey of the author’s life history, literary influences, and canonical traits, as well as the social, political, and personal forces that impacted his or her oeuvre. In discussing Roddy Doyle’s *Barrytown Trilogy*, for example, Harte considers the influence of Seán Lemass’s Programme for Economic Expansion; Doyle’s canonical presencing of “a new, disregarded generation of urbanized and internationalized working-class youth” (24); the effect of Doyle’s own childhood; and his place in the literary canon as part of the tradition of “Irish tragicomedy” (28). The second section of each chapter then performs a close reading of a specific text (or, in Doyle’s case, texts) from the author’s canon.

As is often the case in a survey such as this one, Harte sets the terms of his analysis as much by what he does not do as by what he does. Consequently, the introduction offers a series of demurrals, rejecting the restrictions of “one critical approach” or “overarching theory,” and subsequently even eschewing any “single thesis or expository framework” for his approach (2). This methodology enables Harte to focus on the texts that most interest him without reducing them to a single reading which might not accurately encapsulate them all. In this sense, this work is a “survey” in the truest sense of the word.

Certain expected themes nonetheless recur. One would be hard pressed to approach any text written in later 20th-/early 21st-century Ireland without addressing its political context. Thus, the discussion of Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* engages the author’s complex relationships to Republican nationalism and historical revisionism, while, Harte argues, Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* displays the author’s well-known participation in “the abrasive intellectual debates surrounding the writing of Irish history” (174). The legacy of colonialism and the problematics of historiography are also consistently
close to the surface: Harte observes that William Trevor’s *Felicia’s Journey* has “history’s coercive power” and “the complex and debilitating legacies of Britain’s protracted history of colonialism in Ireland” as central themes (131), and he argues that Sebastian Barry’s canon offers “historically obscured individuals who…have been excluded from the Irish national master narrative” (198).

A subset of this consideration of the novels’ historical moments and national context is Harte’s attention to the forces of modernization. The issue of social change is a consistent theme throughout, from recognizing Doyle’s engagement with “working-class Dublin in transition” (25) to the “tides of social and cultural change” that influenced McGahern’s canon (51). Harte demonstrates how McCabe engages the “crisis that ensue[s] when a still-decolonizing culture…undergoes an accelerated process of uneven modernization” (80), even as he recognizes the force of “the values of a changing society” (116) in *The Heather Blazing*. The regular application of such themes gives a panoramic scope to the readings, illustrating not only consistent patterns, but also the variations in each specific author’s approach.

In tandem with these historical and political contexts, more literary themes, like the Irish gothic, also recur. Harte recognizes the influence of biographical histories but is diligent in noting that “we must be careful…not to lapse into reductive, overly biographical readings of the fiction” (54), and he carefully traces how the subject authors follow, but also how they deviate from, Irish literary tradition—for example updating “earlier dissections of rural claustrophobia,” like McCabe (76), or “chall[en]g[ing]…outmoded notions of what it meant to be Irish,” like Doyle (28). Additionally, he attends to narrative technique—usually in moments of critique—for example noting the use of a “free indirect style” of narration in Edna O’Brien’s work or Barry’s “emotionally charged prose” (162, 208).

Harte comes closest to a consistent literary theme in identifying the patterns of trauma represented in these novels, from reading *Amongst Women* “as a narrative of traumatic haunting” (60), to claiming that *Reading in the Dark* “tackles the links between turbulent postcolonial situations and the plight of the traumatized” (179), to “Enright’s formal and stylistic attempts to replicate the damaged psyche of the trauma survivor” (223). His reading of “malignant shame” in *The Butcher Boy* is particularly compelling (e.g. 86-89). Deftly using trauma theory, Harte convincingly argues that “unprocessed histories run like a dark thread through the fabric of recent Irish fiction” (11).

Although Harte’s broad approach gives him flexibility in his readings, this method has its drawbacks. Harte notes that his choices are “not…comprehensive” (2), and some chapters do not cohere as well. The text’s argumentative structure sometimes vacillates between critical analysis and what feels more like review. This is particularly notable in the discordant chapter on Edna O’Brien’s work, in which Harte focuses less on the themes traced elsewhere in favor of a sustained critique of her narrative style.

Another side effect of this straying from critical analysis is an at times awkwardly professorial tone, as when Harte notes that something will be “a key part of our explorations” (201); when he asks too many questions (34); or when he employs a somewhat self-indulgent tone (e.g., “should we wonder that a woebegone Monaghan boy…sees submarines in his own shit?” [93]). Such moments weaken the impact of the text overall and detract, at times, from the force of what are otherwise solid and critically savvy readings.
Despite these stylistic and structural limitations, taken as a whole, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel* addresses some of the most important authors and novels of its chosen timeframe. Its broad engagement with the authors’ personal, literary, and cultural contexts showcases Harte’s thorough familiarity with both the novelists and their Irish milieu. While the text overall would have benefited from a stronger commitment to the themes and issues it generally (if unevenly) traces, the individual chapters will be of considerable use to scholars working on the novels included in this study.