



Ithaca

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Ithaca, the ferociously funny and unbelievably poignant debut novel from Alan McMonagle, combines a fiercely emotional story with crackling prose. This was the summer after all the money disappeared. One minute it was here. The next it had vanished. All of it. Without trace ...Now that all the money had vanished everyone had their eyes and ears ready for all manner of doom. Summer 2009, and eleven-year-old Jason Lowry is preoccupied with thoughts of the Da he has never known. In the meantime, his vodka-swilling, swings-from-the-hip Ma is busy entertaining her latest boyfriend and indulging her fondness for joyriding. Jason escapes to the Swamp: a mysteriously rising pool of fetid water on the outskirts of the town. There, he meets the girl, a being as lost as himself, and with even less regard for reality. Together, they conjure exotic adventures - from ancient Egypt to the search for Ithaca, home of Odysseus. But what begin as innocent flights of fancy soon become forays into hazardous territory; the girl is a dangerous (and very committed) partner in crime.

Ithaca Details

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Author : Alan McMonagle

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From Reader Review Ithaca for online ebook

Paddy Ryan says

Heard about Ithaca on the radio, and decided to read on holiday. I very much enjoyed the book, but now that I am finished, can't make up my mind as to what the whole story is about. The basics are there for all to see, lonely boy in a rundown town, with a dysfunctional mother, and how he gets on with life, as he seeks to find his father. But in the end I am left wondering, how much is 'real' in the story, and how much is in his imagination, or is the whole book the crazy ramblings of a very disturbed young boy. It was certainly not what I expected.

Scotchneat says

Jason Lowry would like to know who his Da is, and he's like his Ma to maybe be more predictable once in a while - she drinks, steals cars, and dances around from time to time. They've no money, everyone knows everyone's business, and the bullies are closing in.

While at the swamp near town, Jason meets a weird girl who likes to talk about far-off, exotic places. She becomes his friend even though she loves "up on the hill", where the people with money are. He might be in love.

Margaret Madden says

Eleven-year-old Jason spends most of his summer days avoiding his drunk mother and trying to find out who his father is. His curiosity is limited by geography, so he takes his research to the local pub, shops and streets of his small town. A host of characters have plenty to say about the recession, builders, chancers and even his own mother. Jason escapes to the peaceful surroundings of the swamp where, amongst the murky waters and tree stumps, he discusses Greek legends and pictures lands far away with his only friend. They soon find themselves planning real adventures and are determined to make their mark.

Midlands Ireland is featured in many of today's finest novels, with the recession featuring heavily in most. There is something quite woeful in the description of ghost estates, whole villages of unemployed builders and hallways full of unpaid bills. It is hard to see the light through the trees of a forgotten midland town. While Ithaca has a similar setting, it stands apart from the crowd. Jacinta has a drink problem. She also has an issue with mothering. She has no filter, no morals and no hope of changing. Jason just wants to know who his father is. His mother refuses to say, so his search begins on a bar stool;

"It was my first time in the pub, a dark dungeon of a room with a beery smell and no windows.[...] Shirley Halligan was behind the counter pulling drink. Meantime, Barry the bank clerk was sitting at the low table by the wall, in his stripey suit and pink shirt and long shoes, the kind that went on long after feet end, and the wondering head on him because his mobile phone wasn't working."

McMonagle's writing brings a whole village to life with simple yet effective words. The story flows at a steady pace, with Jason at the heart of it. He is a victim of circumstance; finding solace in self-harm and vandalism; always listening and hoping for clues leading to his father. Jacinta is darkly comical, despite her situation. She has a litany of excuses for her dire financial situation and most involve Jason suffering from life-threatening illnesses.

Unusually, the dialogue in McMonagle's debut novel is without inverted commas. This lends to a raw and sharp tone and often feels like the scene is literally playing out in front of you;

"Look who it is, Shirley said, without even turning to me.

The one and only.

Back for more punishment.

You'll get a crick in your neck staring up like that, Shirley.

Don't be smart. It doesn't suit you.

You were in a much better mood the last time I was in.

I'm a woman, kid. My mood changes a million times every second."

Despite the bitterness spewing forth from Jacinta and the silent sadness which gnaws away at Jason, their story hypnotizes and jars, through lighter moments and visceral dark comedy. Mother and son get under your skin from the opening page. They crawl so far into your pores that you can almost feel the itch underneath. A remarkable and enthralling debut. Highly recommended.

The Book Chief says

‘People. Around here some of them are like clouds. Once they clear out of sight, it’s a beautiful day.’

Ithaca by debut novelist Alan McMonagle is an amazing balancing act. It is at once both incredibly sad and incredibly funny. Its dark themes are hidden behind a bombardment of light, jaunty prose. This has to be one of the most original Irish novels that I have read in recent times.

At the heart of the novel is a lonely boy and his single mother. Jason spends his life wandering about his nondescript hometown on the lookout for something. He wants a purpose. He wants to feel something, anything. He wants to find his real dad and he wants to find a friend.

He searches for these things amongst gossips, drunks and barflies who ‘if brains were chocolate, between them wouldn’t fill a Smartie.’ Between McMorro’s Pub and Rich Hill, lies a whole town of broken men and women struggling to remain upbeat in a downbeat town.

Jason’s mam is an expert in survival in these tough conditions. She navigates guards, bailiffs and landlords through an series of lies, flirtation and avoidance. She just about holds it together to provide a basic life for her son but each bill, each request, each demand chips another piece off her defiant front.

As Jason’s dad continues to be elusive, he finds a companion of sorts in ‘the girl.’ He meets her by the Swamp, a mysterious patch of stagnant water at the back of town. Through her, Jason learns many things and together they share each others secrets while getting up to all kinds of mischief.

As I read Ithaca, it reminded me a lot of Patrick McCabe’s The Butcher Boy. The story is so unbelievable that it is in fact believable. There are many boys like Jason who grow up on the fringes of society and learn to

deal with neglect as best as they know how. McMonagle brilliantly gives a voice to these outcasts and sheds a light on the pain they experience but don't necessarily feel.

The conclusion to this novel is truly heart-breaking as McMonagle expertly pulls back the curtain of imagination to reveal the harsh realities on the fringes of life.

Barbara says

This was a 2.5 star read for me. I ended up skimming a lot of it because there were a lot of long rambling conversations. The protagonist is an 11 year old boy. I really don't like books focused on pre-teen and teenaged boys. I suppose I find them hard to relate to. This book was highly rated by The Irish Times. But there are so many better examples of books with male protagonists this age like The Good Son by Paul McVeigh. This boy doesn't know his father and his mother is pretty hopeless. Pursued by bill payers and men, she's a terrible parent. I read this for a book club, and that was the reason for pushing through. Lesson learned is find more ways to avoid reading books I don't want to read.

Tanya Farrelly says

Ithaca is an impressive debut novel from Irish writer Alan McMonagle. As with his short story collection "Psychotic Episodes", McMonagle tackles dark and serious matters with wry humour. Jason is an engaging protagonist, a somewhat toned-down version of Francie Brady. (The Butcher Boy) He dreams of one day escaping from his boghole town - a town whose geography and characters are very well-drawn, particularly the swamp where Jason hangs out. The characters are terrific from "the girl" to Jason's tormentors: Brains and no-brains to Mario: the bull-nut seller. The relationship between Jason and his mother is particularly interesting and in essence tragic. I loved the typically Irish expressions, which an international audience might not get, in particular "numpty" and "did you meet anyone better than yourself". Ithaca is a novel that gave me cause for reflection - beneath the light-hearted surface lies a story as dark as the bottom of Jason's swamp. Hat off to Mr McMonagle.

Doreen Duffy says

I've just finished reading 'Ithaca', I loved it, I'm sorry to have come to the end. That boy made me laugh and he broke my heart.

Wonderful writing, I look forward to your next one.

Amanda says

I enjoyed reading this book despite the overwhelming sadness of it, and with only the smallest suggestion of hope at the end. This is a great story littered with very memorable characters and brilliant dialogue. Well worth a read.

MR RORY M GEOGHEGAN says

Good book/Great book

Good book/ Great book it's hard to tell I will have to read it again. Really enjoyed the quirky style and found it easy to read even though it jumps a little. Love love love the characters. Not so crazy about the end but maybe I was disappointed it had ended - as I said above I'll have to read it again.

Gwen says

I really didn't enjoy this book. I nearly stopped reading a few times but I was just interested enough to see how it ended. I'm not sure I should have bothered. I did like the setting during the recent recession in small town Ireland and all the colloquialisms that come with it but I found the story disjointed, the characters quite unsympathetic and the whole thing just annoyed me. I think I get what the author was trying to do but for me, it really didn't hang together.

Andy Weston says

Set in a rural Irish village in 2009, with the country in recession, and the formerly busy main street now with empty windows and boarded-up doors, 11 year old Jason Lowry dreams of escaping the dreariness. With an absent father and a mother who he adores but rarely sees, Jason is streetwise but immature in other ways. To escape the dreariness he invents a mythical land and escapes to it whenever possible, meeting a similarly aged young girl. The innocence of their relationship adds to the sadness of the story, despite McMonagle's occasional efforts to lighten the situation with dark humour. The images of neglect, self-harm, and bullying are those that stand out which makes this a difficult read throughout.

It doesn't really work for me despite this though. The distinction between myth and reality becomes increasingly more blurred, perhaps by intention. I read a couple of similar books last year, *Not Thomas* by Sara Gethin and *Glasshopper* by Isabel Ashdown, and I think it's taken me until now to realise that this 'genre' isn't really for me. Having worked with children for much of my life it's fiction that is too close to reality.

Hella says

Jason Lowry is een zielig jongetje van elf, dat opgroeit zonder vader bij een alcoholistische moeder die haar rekeningen betaalt met lichamelijke diensten. In het Ierland van 2009 (financiële crisis) is zijn toestand behoorlijk uitzichtloos. Hij snijdt zichzelf regelmatig. Gelukkig ontmoet hij een mysterieus meisje dat hem de weg wijst naar Ithaca.

Best een mooi boek, best goed geschreven, en toch ... het deed me niet veel. Het wordt een beetje een cliché, al die kleurrijke Ierse misfits en dan zo'n kind als zuiver nootje. Maar de recensies zijn laaiend dus ik zal er wel weer nix van begrepen hebben.

Murray says

What's this book like? Well, in chapter one, 12yo Jason's Ma steals her neighbour's car (again) and drives them both at breakneck speed wherever takes her fancy, hurling abuse, mockery and kisses to fellow motorists until it runs out of fuel. Then she escapes the wrath of the local policeman (cop Lawless) and the neighbour by spinning a wildly graphic and completely fictitious tale about Jason's smelly and life-threatening illness. Suffice to say it's not boring. Or slow. In fact, the author writes a bit like Ma drives. It's a wild ride and you just hang on and see where it takes you - which, as it turns out, is an increasingly dark place. I found the story arc of the girl that Jason meets by the swamp a bit unconvincing and a tad confusing in the very final pages, but it's a great read.

Liz Quirke says

A very accomplished debut with all the hallmarks of a great Irish writer. This is a book that will join the canon of masterful tales told by compelling child narrators. The authors prowess as a short story writer shines through as each chapter is so self contained. Read it and read it again.

Matthew says

The writing in this book was excellent. The subject matter, a boy all but abandoned in crash-depressed Ireland, is grim with the odd light moment. But I'm not sure I altogether bought the story and think I expected something different from the jacket copy. The Greek/fantasy travel theme wore a little thin for me after a while.

I'd definitely read something else of McGonagle's, though, from the Irish Times review, his short story collections sound similarly grim.
