



## Strumpet City - One City One Book edition

*James Plunkett*

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## **Strumpet City - One City One Book edition** James Plunkett

Set in Dublin during the Lockout of 1913, *Strumpet City* is a panoramic novel of city life. It embraces a wide range of social milieux, from the miseries of the tenements to the cultivated, bourgeois Bradshaws. It introduces a memorable cast of characters: the main protagonist, Fitz, a model of the hard-working, loyal and abused trade unionist; the isolated, well-meaning and ineffectual Fr O'Connor; the wretched and destitute Rashers Tierney. In the background hovers the enormous shadow of Jim Larkin, Plunkett's real-life hero.

*Strumpet City*'s popularity derives from its realism and its naturalistic presentation of traumatic historical events. There are clear heroes and villains. The book is informed by a sense of moral outrage at the treatment of the locked-out trade unionists, the indifference and evasion of the city's clergy and middle class and the squalor and degradation of the tenement slums.

## **Strumpet City - One City One Book edition Details**

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Author : James Plunkett

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## **From Reader Review Strumpet City - One City One Book edition for online ebook**

### **Emma Flanagan says**

Strumpet City is the great social novel of Dublin. Plunkett does for Dublin what writers like Dickens did for London. He expertly encapsulates the social strata of early 20th century Dublin with all its hardship and poverty but also the loving comradery of the people which helps them survive the hardship.

Plunkett's descriptions of the city are masterful. He lets us hear, smell and feel the clamour of the city. A city which remained largely unchanged until the 1960s when the tenements were cleared once and for all.

While I would levy some criticism at Plunkett for his character development, he does give us Rashers Tierney. I cannot think of Rashers match anywhere in literature and he must surely be one of the most beloved characters in Irish literature.

I would encourage all to read this book. And for those interested there is an interesting podcast by History Ireland discussing the book and the period.

<http://www.historyireland.com/podcast...>

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### **Noeleen says**

In addition to being my May Book Club read, Strumpet City is the chosen book for Dublin, One City, One Book, an initiative of Dublin City Council. Further information on this initiative can be found at <http://dublinonecityonebook.ie/>

Like many others, I watched Hugh Leonard's adaptation of James Plunkett's Strumpet City on RTE television in 1980, we all sat glued to the television screen each week, eagerly awaiting each episode as it unfolded. So I was delighted this was chosen in our Book Club as the read for May as I finally got a chance to read it and also revisit the television series (hired on DVD whilst reading the book).

Set in Dublin at the beginning of the 20th Century and focusing on the 1913 lock-out, Strumpet City is considered a much loved Irish classic and rightly so. James Plunkett did a superb job of capturing the social, political and economic aspects of this era. These were indeed difficult times for workers and their families who lived in the tenements in Dublin City. While most experienced extreme poverty, yet even at such a difficult time, they found new hope in Jim Larkin and the Trade Union movement. There was a wonderful array of characters in the book representing all social classes, the upper class Bradshaws, the poverty-stricken inhabitants of the tenements, the workers, trade union leaders and the clergy. Some of my favourite characters were Father Gifley, Mr Yearling and of course aul Rashers Tierney himself.

As this year is the one hundred anniversary of the 1913 lock-out, it's ironic that this year in Ireland so much controversy is evident over the past number of months between the public sector unions, government and employers. The unions appear to have lost the respect and support of their grass roots over the last number of years and perhaps it would be no harm if their leaders sat down and read this book, just to remind them of their origins, their purpose, commitments and priorities. But that's another day's discussion. I think this

book/TV series should be compulsory reading/watching in all secondary schools in Ireland as it captures a most historic and important time in Ireland's history, one which may not be familiar to a whole generation of Irish.

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### **Vivienne says**

Wow, wow, wow! I finally finished this book and, boy, was I was blown away by it! Read this if: you like epic novels; you like historical novels; you like *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*; you're interested in Ireland or want to know more about Irish history; you abhor poverty and social injustice; you want a really good read with great characters that will make you think and tug at your heart-strings.

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### **Josephine (Jo) says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I first read it in the 1970s and at that time I was young and idealistic. I believed that all the problems covered in the book, the extreme poverty and injustice at the beginning of the twentieth century were things of the past and that workers were not treated in that way any more. The story covers the period prior to the beginning of 'the troubles' in Ireland and focuses upon the treatment of the men on strike for fair pay who were facing Lock-out from their jobs. We are introduced to Fr. O'Connor who has just arrived at St. Brigid's Church as he asked to be transferred to a parish where he could work with 'the poor'. The trouble with Fr. O'Connor is that he does not like poor people, they are dirty, they smell, they beg and he considers them to have brought a lot of their troubles upon themselves with their own feckless behaviour. The Parish Priest in charge of St. Brigid's is Fr. Giffley, at heart a good and caring man who has spent his life in the parish and has been worn down trying to help the poor. He has a severe drink problem and is also walking a fine line between sanity and madness.

The story revolves around men like Fitz and his wife Mary and the Mulhall family. Mr Mulhall is heavily involved in the strike whilst James Larkin, who actually was the union organizer who sparked the events leading up to the Lock-out, raised money in other countries to help support the strikers in Ireland but this was far too little and people were facing near starvation.

I think the character that will stay in my memory and heart for the longest is Rashers Tierney and his little dog Rusty, the only creature to show Rashers any love. Poor Rashers did not even know what his real name was. He lived in a filthy and dank cellar, sleeping on a few dirty sacks on the floor. Some days he found food in the bins of the rich people, often he and Rusty went without. Fr. O'Connor had no pity for the likes of Rashers and dismissed him from his winter job of keeping the church boiler fuelled. I found his story heartbreaking.

The writing in this book is poetic and eloquent and gives a real insight into that part of history just before the world would be plunged into the dreadful darkness of the first World War.

I am wise enough to know now that these things were not 'of the past'; they are just as relevant today and if you look around you will find a Rashers Tierney existing not so far from where you live.

A wonderful piece of writing.

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## **Laura says**

Bleak, but very readable.

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## **Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says**

Wow!

I enjoyed reading this book.

It was rich in themes which range from socialism, trade-unions, strikes, police brutality, religion, poverty etc.

It is based on the period before world war I. The characters, most of them are poor and destitute. It is a struggle to get a meal a day.

The workers are oppressed by the employers.

The strikes are rampant.

The police are brutal.

The priests are irresponsible and misleading.

The Government is reluctant and turns a deaf ear to the cries of its citizens.

The rich are arrogant.

And you think that that was a long time ago. It is what is happening now! We are still angry and hungry, satisfied and dissatisfied, poor and rich.

The preachers have gone from comforting to exploiting us. They take advantage of our vulnerability and naivete and 'steal' the last coin we have.

We are all living in our own strumpet cities with politicians promising us heaven when they give us hell.

Sorry, we live with the hope that God is going to reward our suffering. We are slow to blame him and accept our fate as handed to us.

Our children, suffering, going hungry without even clothing. Education is very expensive yet we are told that it is a basic need. Why can't it be free like oxygen.

This book does not answer your questions but shows you the ills that plagues society. The difference between the rich and the poor. And the role of God in all this.

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## **Edelita says**

A tremendously powerful novel. It tells the story of the 1913 Lockout in Dublin, at a time when many of the working classes were already living in dire poverty, worsened by the effects of the Lockout. (The Lockout was a major industrial dispute involving 20,000 workers and 300 of their employers).

The characters in the novel represent both sides of the divide. Even so, as in all good novels, opinions are not quite so clear cut. Some of the upper classes do try to help the poor and of course some of the poor are only half-hearted in their support of the strikers, desperate as they are for work.

This novel does have a slightly Dickensian air about it but with less sentimentality and more humour.

The character of Rashers Tierney is very well done and reminds me of Dublin characters I knew as a child, in his wit and humour. The 3 priests are also very complex characters and well done, considering Plunkett himself was an anti-clericalist.

Special mention should also be made of Mrs Bradshaw, an upper class lady, who while trying to help in small ways cannot see the bigger picture and would be quite content for things to stay as they are, with the poor getting occasional handouts but otherwise knowing their place.

I am surprised a book like this got past the censor in the 60's as not only is one of the characters a prostitute but there are also some not so charitable remarks made regarding the church.

Another noteworthy aspect of this book is Plunkett's treatment of women. He acknowledges the hard life particular to women at the time (childbirth, childrearing, grinding poverty) and gives them a voice and recognition, something often overlooked in historical novels.

All in all, a very satisfying and moving (sometimes horrifying) book that really packs a punch.

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## **Barbara says**

This book details the poverty of inner city Dublin at the turn of the 20th century. It was recently the One City One Book read in Dublin, resurrecting a book that was published in 1969. It is reminiscent of the book *A Fine Balance* about India, though *A Fine Balance* manages to be more heart-wrenching and even more hopeless. Despite being the story of the Great Lockout of 1913, it lacked some depth regarding the lockout.

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## **Chrissie says**

A good book of historical fiction set in Dublin and focusing on the Lockout of 1913. There are characters from all walks of life and the story relayed is realistic. The plight of the poor can not possibly leave the reader unmoved. In the foreground you have a set of fictional characters, in the background the well-known Jim Larkin. My complaint is that you can easily sort the characters into two groups - the villains and the heroes.

The bottom line: I felt I ought to be more engaged than I was.

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## **Kinga says**

"Strumpet City" is an Irish social novel published in 1969, that is good 50 years too late. When everyone was waist deep in post-modernist adventures, this novel tries to warm the hearts for a battle and does it in an

earnest and unpretentious way.

Like with any other social novel, whether it's Steinbeck or Hugo, we know where the author's sympathies lie. No secret is ever made of it. And frankly I do have a soft spot for a good social novel with the pureness of its heart, its childlike stubbornness, its teenage idealism, its insistence on broadcasting all the wrongs and standing up for the little guy.

It's hard not to love 'Strumpet City', admire Fitz, pity Rashers, feel contempt for the Bradshaws, and despise Father O'Connor (oh, how wonderfully despicable he was). This is all precisely what Plunkett wanted us to feel while we're being educated on the Dublin Lockout of 1913.

It's a shame this novel somewhat missed its time and you won't see it in elegant Penguin Classics covers.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

James Plunkett, although not a great stylist, enriches his profound knowledge of working-class Irish history with a great love for the city of Dublin and a profound sympathy for all its inhabitants, from the wealthy to the poor. As a consequence, this novel about the 1913 Lock-out is wise and often very moving.

Plunkett is particularly good at showing how political convictions lead people to action, and how these actions in turn transform their lives and alter their relationships in unexpected ways. As such, it is a worthy descendant of the novels of Walter Scott.

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### **Ted says**

It was one of those never-ending June evenings, with long reaches of sky from which the light seemed unable to ebb. Rashers moved slowly ... At Chandlers Court he stopped to get his breath and to look up at the sky. It was never ending, with never fading light. He thought of Death and felt it was waiting for him somewhere in the sky's deeps, cold Sergeant Death, as the song said, Death the sad smiling tyrant, the cruel remorseless old foe.

A wonderful novel, this. It tells the stories, spread over the years 1907-1914, of a number of characters, most of them in the lower working class of Dublin, but several from other stations: priests, business owners, a "slum lord". The focus of the story is the famous (though only famous to me now that I have read this novel) Dublin Lock-out of 1913-14, the most severe industrial dispute in the history of Ireland ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dublin\\_...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dublin_...)).

The characters are real, not caricatures. Some of them will be quite unforgettable to me I think (even if I can't remember their names after a short space into the future). One of the unforgettable "characters", James Larkin, actually was the union organizer who sparked the events leading up to the Lock-out, and provided both the rallying point for the workers, and the target for the employers and every other segment of society which opposed them.

Rashers Tierney, the fellow mentioned above, is one of the most vivid portrayals I've come across in a long time, a street walker, sometime street entertainer, a fellow who with his beloved dog wends his way through the story as an example of the bumpy ride down that the extreme poor of a large city, not just Dublin, endure. I think I will remember his name for a while. (view spoiler)

Two other characters that will stick with me are Fathers O'Connor and Giffley, who together with Father O'Sullivan minister (each in their own way) to the parishioners of St. Brigid's, a church in the poorest section of Dublin.

Father Giffley is the senior priest at the church, hence in charge; he is also an alcoholic, slowly losing his mind in his own perilous descent. He is in rebellion against his church, unable to accept the blind eye that its hierarchy has toward the deprivations and suffering of the poor. Plunkett's portrayal of him is masterful, a portrayal in turns shocking, horrifying, and heart-breaking.

Father O'Connor, whose story is told with perhaps more detail than any other character's, is pretty much the opposite of Father Giffley, whom he despises for his drinking, and for his rejection of the Church's position on the strikers and employers.

And that position? The Catholic Church was officially in support of the employers in the dispute, both because the employers represented "authority", and (perhaps more importantly) because the union represented socialism, the dread anti-god movement. This makes perfect sense from the Church's perspective, I'm afraid, but was still something of a surprise to me. The way the Church was willing to describe the grovelling poor of the working class, trying to get some improvement in their status through unionism, as doing little more than following the devil's direction, was both shocking and disheartening to me. (The novel does mention that several priests, besides Father Giffley, did reject this.)

Illustrative of this attitude is what happened (both in the novel and in actual fact) when a plan to transport children of the striking workers to England was broached. These children, many practically starving, were to live with sympathetic unionists there while the lockout continued. The Church rallied faithful Catholics to guard the quaysides and prevent any such transfer, on the grounds that the children in these homes would be subject to Protestant, or worse yet, atheist influence; and that therefore they **must be forced** to remain in Dublin with their families, and face the consequences of their striking fathers' reckless and sinful actions. The mind reels.

The title? "Strumpet City"? "Strumpet" is a centuries-old word for prostitute, of course. So is Plunkett calling Dublin the "City of whores"? I don't know, but actually he found the title in a play, quoted at the front of the book, called *The Old Lady Says 'No'*, written in 1929 by an Irish playwright named Denis Johnston:

Shall we sit down together for a while? Here on the hillside, where we can look down on the city ...

*Strumpet city in the sunset*

*So old, so sick with memories*

*Old Mother;*

*Some they say are damned*

*But you, I know, will walk the streets of Paradise*

*Head high, and unashamed.*

When I was about done with this review, I found the following wonderful appreciation of the book. It's from

the Introduction to the latest edition of the novel, by Fintan O'Toole.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/boo...>

The novel was selected as Dublin's 2013 'One City One Book' book of the year, in commemoration of the centenary of the 1913 Lockout.

Very highly recommended.

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## **Kyle says**

Dublin was "a comfortless city" (71). "There were particular deaths no longer, only Death in general" (96). "These bricks were returning once more to dust, one by one these walls would bulge outwards, crack, collapse into rubble. They were despised and uncared for, like the tenants they sheltered, who lived for the most part on bread and tea and bore children on rickety beds to grow up in the same hardship and hunger. Larkin was thundering his message of revolution, organising strikes, leading assaults on a shocked society, but the immediate gains, where they came at all, made little difference" (296). "But that was the Will of God" (390). Oh! Not quite Angela's Ashes monotonous Irish misery but close, no?

Plunkett's novel, as it is the sort of centennial epic that captures a zeitgeist, is meant as an Irish equivalent to the 'Great American novel'. I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, as the novelistic pieces are often cut-out predictable (thwarts, melancholies, drifting moods, joys, etc.). And, you know, books in English that aren't American aren't so common, I humbly reckon, at least in the canon I know; so it has that rarity thing going for it. It's also often compared to another Irish great, Joyce's *Ulysses*, which proves it sweeping through decades (maximalist) where Joyce zeroes in one day in 1904 (minimalist). Which is a better experience of Dublin? I do not know, frankly.

The 1913 lock-out -- one side cheering for Larkin, Connolly, revolution, and the other for status quo, wealth inequality, the same old landlord/tenant grumbling -- makes a fine premise at times. The socialist debates this setting summons are eternally conveyed in quaint yet precise words and eternally proven in itchy moods, vignettes, piquant life corners. It can be a little tiresome at times (haven't you yet decided? realized?), but life in general can be that way just as often as literature, no? We aren't ready for a nature like that, I suppose, human civilization and all; still stuck we are to miserable capitalism and pained "justice" and 'the way it's been and will continue to be' and stuff. So depressing in that sense. But not a bad book in general. I don't know.

Maybe when Dublin itself is glimpsed, less when the human characters inside it get long gazes and are followed? All on page 494, near the book's end, the city's characterized in a sad yet funny way again: Rashers Tierney describes Dublin as "the most misbegotten kip of a city in the whole wide world" ['kip' defined soon after as "a resort of ill fame, a whorehouse"; for Father Griffley "it was a fitting word. It pleased him."] Just as Rashers as a character can remind us of Bubbles, so can *Strumpet City's* Dublin echo *The Wire's* Baltimore: a hard-luck, blue-collar place, of a lot of highs and lows both, in a particular and remarkable turn of history. We need not so much the inhabitants' complicated, confusing ins and outs, in my opinion: let's bask more in reality (smaller nature), no?

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## Frank says

I first read this sometime in the early '80s, after having seen the RTÉ television programme on PBS. It's in the sprawling epic category, although it doesn't stray much further north than Drumcondra nor south of Dún Laoghaire; the Phoenix Park marks its western extremity and Dublin Bay is the east. Oh, there are mentions of Connemara and Cork, Liverpool and London, but those are places people will come from or go to. The real action takes place either in Kingstown (as Dún Laoghaire was then known) or within a few blocks of the Liffey: inside a circle which could be drawn with Liberty Hall at the centre and Parnell Square on the radius. A tight little world indeed for an epic.

The cast of characters is expansive enough, however; mostly families. There are the wealthy Bradshaws: husband and wife occupying a handsome home in Kingstown with their two servants, the elderly Miss Gilchrist and young Mary; there is the de facto family group in the rectory of St. Brigid's: the alcoholic Fr. Giffley, the sincere but dull Fr. O'Sullivan, and the priggish youthful Fr. O'Connor, transferred from Kingstown and a continuing link between the inner city and leafy suburb; then there is the extended clan at Number 3 Chandler's Court, a rundown tenement within St. Brigid's parish: Robert and Mary Fitzpatrick (she formerly in service to the Bradshaws), the Mulhalls across the hall, the Hennesseys' layabout husband, shrewish wife and multitudinous children; and finally if you will, the beggar Rashers Tierney and his dog Rusty, also occupants of No. 3, if only the basement. We might also consider a larger family, even by Irish Catholic standards: the brotherhood of Big Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, of whom many of the above are members. There are, as might be expected in an epic, many walk-ons, including King Edward VII, Jim Larkin and James Connelly, a cheery handful of rozzers and rogues, the occasional hooer (with the requisite heart of gold), and on and on, with cameos by all the leading lights of the Celtic revival and beyond.

No epic is worth the handle without an epic struggle, and this is the centre of the novel: The 1913 Dublin Lockout, when Labour and Management effectively closed down the entire city, throwing thousands of the poorest out of work, ruining innumerable businesses and setting the next stage in Ireland's long struggle for independence. The novel begins in 1907, introducing the characters on the occasion of a rare royal visit, which gives plenty of opportunity for Plunkett to establish the political stance of each.

Plunkett's writing style is workmanlike, straightforward without being too flowery. In spite of the huge cast, the novel moves along at a brisk clip, driven as it is by historical events. I make no claim to verify the veracity of the history: the general outlines conform. The real story is how huge events affect little people: in this, James Plunkett's *Strumpet City* is successful.

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## Silvia Pastorelli says

I had the luck to find this book abandoned in my street, among others, it looked new and probably never read. I picked it up, as I have a special affection for Ireland and Irish literature, but delayed the reading for months, as I never felt inclined. I should have read it straightaway!

I loved Plunkett's prose almost immediately and his, at times lyrical, description of Dublin. The story is set from 1907 to 1914 in Dublin during the Lockout, a series of strikes during what probably is the most important industrial dispute of Ireland. As others have said, this is a great social and historical novel: the description of the bleak conditions of the working class (together with their sense of community and cohesion) are exceptionally portrayed and it is impossible not to be moved. The critiques moved by the

author to the role the clergy played in opposing the strikes and siding with the employers are harsh, but not didactic. Plunkett also showed exceptions in the beautifully sketched characters of Yearling, who belongs to the employers class and is not blind to the conditions of his employees, and Father Giffley, a priest who, despite his addiction, is the most empathic with his parishioners.

This book has deeply moved me and I could not help but admire the cohesion and comradeship of a community, deprived of rights and education, but rich in integrity and tightly clung to its dignity.

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