



# The Stray Sod Country

*Patrick McCabe*

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It is 1958, and as Laika, the Sputnik dog, is launched into space, Golly Murray, the Cullymore barber's wife, finds herself oddly obsessing about the canine cosmonaut. Meanwhile, Fonsy "Teddy" O'Neill is returning, like the prodigal son, from overseas, with Brylcreem in his hair and a Cuban-heeled swagger to his step, having experienced his coming-of-age in Skegness, England. Father Augustus Hand is working on a bold new theatrical production for Easter, which he, for one, knows will put Cullymore on the map. And, as the Manchester United football team prepares to take off from Munich airport, James A. Reilly sits in his hovel by the lake outside town, with his pet fox and his father's gun, feeling the weight of an insidious and inscrutable presence pressing down upon him.

As these imperiled characters wrestle with their identities, mysteriously powerful narrator plucks, gently, at the strings of their fates, and watches the twitching response. This novel is a devil's-eye view of a lost era, a sojourn to the dark side of our past, one we may not have come back from. With echoes of *Peyton Place* and Fellini's *Amarcord*, and with a sinister narrator at its heart, this is at once a story of a small town—with its secrets, fears, friendships, and betrayals—and a sweeping, theatrical extravagance from one of the finest writers of his generation.

## The Stray Sod Country Details

Date : Published September 28th 2010 by Bloomsbury USA (first published January 1st 2010)

ISBN : 9781608192748

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Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : European Literature, Irish Literature, Cultural, Ireland, Literary Fiction, Novels

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# From Reader Review The Stray Sod Country for online ebook

## Judith says

### READING NOTES:

>1958....Cullymore, Ireland. SPUTNIK is in orbit and the village is in turmoil. A Parish Priest beset with Paranoia and Guilt...Housewives with thoughts of Murder...a Teddy Boy come home hoping to regain the Lass He Once Loved....the World in between the Serious 1950s...on the cusp of the Wild & Wooly 1960s.....Satan pulls the strings.....

The position of "remote artificer" ..be that Satan or God...or collective Conscience??? I haven't decided on any guilty party..But, Satan can't exist without God....If Satan is the Puppetmaster here..God lurks in the wings..and vice versa....Given the Time..1958...on the cusp...between the staid 1950s and the potential unknown of the 1960s....

Culleymore, Ireland is the perfect place for Old Scratch to insinuate himself into the lives of "normal" folk...a seriously paranoid parish Priest what carries a load of Past Guilt.....erstwhile housewives, one who has murderous night time thoughts.....the "hated" local hermit..the SCAPEGOAT...

The FETCH...what gives access to THE STRAY SOD COUNTRY...where we all go when life becomes a bit "too much....Is OLD SCRATCH the one who pulls the strings, here?.or is it the fact that Times are Changing?

Patrick Mc Cabe is not LACE CURTAIN Irish..as a writer...His books include violence, cruelty, and madness....but i own 4 of them...If you want to start reading them...do so with [The Butcher Boy]

i give this book 4 1/2 stars

\* i know this review sucks...but i can never give a decent review to a book i seriously love\*

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## A. Mary says

There's no one like Patrick McCabe. His specialty is the very dark yet cheerful psychopath. The narrator in this case is "the Fetch," a myth figure responsible for all of the peculiar and "out of character" things people do and say. In 1950s Cullymore, they say and do some extraordinary things. But none of them, and this is the beauty of it for the Fetch, really understands what's happening. Think "the devil made me do it." McCabe explores evil in the world by focussing on a small Irish community. The narrator's unusual vocabulary is a large part of the fun, and I have to say that the priest's thought life is my favourite thing in the whole book. He makes me laugh aloud, even though he is cursing and swearing at a fellow priest and at parishioners. It's hard to rate the book, but it's a solid three, if not a four.

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## **Meghan says**

I'm sure this is a very good book. However, I just didn't get it. I didn't understand the story or the characters. The one positive aspect that I found was the narration style. I thought it was really intriguing but otherwise I found this book very hard going.

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## **Shannon says**

Sigh... Well, that's over. That pretty much sums up my feelings on this book, which is not poorly written at all. In fact, it captures a time and a place perfectly. It's well researched and very authentic feeling. Perhaps that's the problem... because this town is the most boring place ever, and not worth writing a book about. The most exciting event... the one that the book works up to... is completely skipped over and told in small flashbacks from the future. The problem with this... um, the only question on your mind the entire book is answered by the sheer fact that the character you're waiting to see die (pretty much) is alive and telling you a bit of... 'the events of that day' Ugh, how dull. I want to read about the day of 'Tenebrae', the miracle play, and D-Day for Father Hand.... but apparently after like page 290ish, you find out that nothing really happened, and however many years later, they're all alive and living their same boring lives. So, from page 1-150, you can pretty much skip entirely over and you'll never know the difference. Page 150-270 is moderately interesting, only because you get to read about the town nut job, Mr. Reilly, practicing to kill a priest by killing a dog. In fact, he is the only character that is mildly interesting. I'm sorry, but I don't care about most of the characters. They almost fuse together to create a blob of a character which I shall call Cullymore. Because apparently if you live in this town, all you care about is who is Catholic and who is Protestant. And they refer to it a lot, and I still don't know... what the F is the Stray Sod Country?

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## **Ellen Herbert says**

read on a plane back from NY. will be reading more by this author. Not a comfy ride, but authentic. He writes about the vague madness that follows us all and how we accommodate it, ignore it, battle it and yes, succumb at times. 1958 England.

My dreams will be full tonight.

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## **g026r says**

I'm having a good deal of trouble giving voice to just what my issues with this one were. It wasn't badly written by any means, with no major stylistic issues (a few minor quirks that made me grind my teeth, like the lack of quotation marks and the italicization of many, but not all, proper nouns) -- a bit choppy, perhaps.

I think, in the end, my issue was that for a good 80 to 90 percent of the book I just didn't care about the characters. Which is a problem, as for probably the first two thirds of the book new characters are constantly being introduced; it's a book with a large cast, and I'll admit that with every new character I was left hoping

that maybe this one would be one I'd care about.

(Perhaps that was the problem? That the continual increase in cast size meant that none of the other characters had a chance to develop enough.)

Regardless of that, I mention that I didn't really care about it for the first 80-90%, the last 30-60 pages is really all conclusion and denouement, all wrapping up the plot threads, jumping around in time as necessary. It has a few problems, in that some of the few points of suspense and tension from earlier in the book get spoiled before we see the resolution but, being one of the few points where I cared at all about what was happening, I'm willing to forgive those.

In the end? Maybe not a bad book. Maybe not a good book. Definitely not the book for me.

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## **Frank says**

Weird happenings in the hinterlands. Or are they so very weird after all? *The Stray Sod Country* is set in the relatively tranquil and boring year of 1958 in the border town of Cullymore (a thinly disguised Clones, Co. Monaghan, McCabe's hometown). Laika, the Russian dog, is orbiting the earth; the football world is reeling after the Munich air disaster claimed the lives of a good portion of the Manchester United team. And in Cullymore, resentment seethes under a thin veneer of tolerance and neighbourliness.

Geraldine Murray wishes her husband would interfere with the brakes of her uppity Protestant neighbour Blossom Forster. James Reilly, banished from the town to a rubbish tip, plots revenge and polishes his father's Civil War-era Enfield. Father August Hand obsesses with jealousy over the successes of a former fellow-seminarian. Happy Carroll, a most unhappy carpenter, turns informer against the IRA. The bachelor Protestant dentist buys kisses, if not more, from teen-aged girls. All these thoughts and actions are so atypical: it seems some outside force compels this aberrant behaviour.

It takes a while for this book to find the thread. In the first dozen pages it seems as if dozens of characters are introduced, dozens of subplots set in motion by the omniscient third-person narrator. It isn't until the sixtieth page that the narrator steps out of the shadows to reveal himself. And who is he? His names are legion: Nobodaddy, the Fetch, Old Nick, Satan. He waits and watches and pulls strings that tug at emotions and psyches of his hapless play-things. Leading them all eventually to the "Stray Sod Country". One character, explaining the significance of stepping on a "stray sod", tells how the person has a feeling of "being lost in what once were reassuring surroundings. Being intimidated, confused — by the very thing that once made you feel secure." This alienation, this "cosmic loneliness", terrifies the tight-knit townsfolk: all the more so because of their suffocating togetherness.

And this then is McCabe's real subject: for those feelings of "cosmic loneliness" are not peculiar to small Monaghan towns in 1958. They are if anything, a "cosmic constant", a natural state of the human condition. If that's the work of the Devil, than he's been at it for all of human history and is likely to continue.

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## **Stephanie Lindsay Hagen says**

"The Stray Sod Country", is an odd, oddly written story. It takes place primarily in 1958 Cullymore, Ireland.

The townspeople are superstitious...and rightly so. Their most secret thoughts are being stirred and manipulated by an unseen, malevolent entity. And a very patient one. This malign force will at times take years to finish tormenting his puppets but then when he's done, he takes them away with a pleasant memory. How nice of him. He goes by many names but I see him as a very twisted reaper.

I liked this book, but I didn't love it. And now I find myself peering deeper into the shadows and looking over my shoulder.

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### **Amanda Hamilton says**

Since I kept this book in the car to read when I had some time to kill, there were long stretches of time when I wasn't reading the book at all. Not that the plot jumps around \*too\* much and once I picked it back up, I didn't have very many 'Oh, who are these people again?' moments. Its very much a character-driven book set in Ireland.

Also, yay for tangential references to the Beatles via Billy Fury and skiffle.

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### **Jolie says**

In this book, McCabe captures a wide variety of crazy, each represented by a different member of a small Irish town. As in real life, sometimes the madness is normal and well-concealed, other times it's overt, and the reader is forced to ponder which is more dangerous—the devil that's known, or that that lurks beneath the surface.

Although written with McCabe's typical unblinking stare and gritty insight, the book isn't the easiest read. Characters so deeply flawed are hard to love, and the meandering plot - which mimics the wont of the insane - doesn't bring one easily back to the book once set down. A worthwhile read, but altogether unenjoyable (which perhaps is part of the story's experience).

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### **Kimberley says**

i didn't actually finish this book. i got about 100 or so pages in and just couldn't get into it. i didn't enjoy the lack of quotation marks (the dashes weren't enough) or some of the darkness of the book.

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### **Christina Needham says**

I won this book on Goodreads.com. Overall, I'd say that I liked the book. The writing was a little hard to follow at times, very choppy, but the story itself was interesting. I especially liked the evolving role of the narrator. I wasn't expecting that at all.

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## Ciaran Mcfadden says

Another tale of life in small town ireland ... McCabe's humour isn't just dark, it's black. Still his writing style makes for a good read. Thoroughly enjoyed this book.

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## Kate Kerrigan says

In my opinion McCabe has no equal in capturing the unique nature of the true Irish vernacular. Even if nothing were to happen in his books (which it most certainly does) his style of writing is like listening to a favorite uncle, I could just sit and read it all day long. In fact, you don;t read his books - you HEAR them. Stray Sod is laugh out loud with the dark, mysterious undertones that have become his trademark. Gripping, compelling - read it on my Kindle and couldn't put it down and I am supposed to be finishing a novel myself right now!

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## Kaion says

I received and started reading *The Stray Sod Country* from Goodread's First Reads in mid-November. But I had difficulty making it much past the first tenth of the novel, being largely unrewarded by McCabe's portraits of 1950's Irish village life—featuring a seemingly endless cast of characters with little to no, well, point seeming to arise. This spring break, I finally mustered enough sheer will to barrel through the book's rambling fits and starts (or maybe it was just ecstatic momentum from conquering the behemoth of *Mists of Avalon*), out of a sense of obligation. So was there a point?

The titular 'Stray Sod Country' of McCabe's novel is explained as a piece of Irish folklore: a place of mind that alienates one from seeing the familiar as familiar again, or more shortly--“cosmic loneliness”... or what we'd probably today call existential angst. Because the residents of Cullymore, Ireland are being observed by the narrative lens of none other than the 'Fetch' himself, the Devil who manipulates and feeds the fears and doubts of the broadly-drawn villagers to tragic ends, while at the same time proclaiming he does naught but observe their own destructive tendencies. Such contradictory and confounding muddle characterizes *Stray Sod Country*. While McCabe isn't totally untalented in creating weight within the tortured psyches of his characters, he overplays their single-minded neuroses over the course of the novel, leaving them no more than caricatures.

McCabe may be trying to say something about the Cold War or village life, or the consuming power of ignored irrationality in the age of reason, or the crushing weight of religion... but it's impossible for me to tell within this doddering mess. But given if how I felt wadding as the book seemed to go and on eternally, I definitely felt maybe some of the characters should have worried less of going to the Fetch and more about hell on Earth. Rating: 1 star

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