

**Königs Erläuterungen und Materialien**  
**Band 483**

Erläuterungen zu

Roddy Doyle  
**A Star Called Henry**

von Hans-Georg Schede  
übersetzt von Julia Bee

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## Preface

Set in Ireland in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Roddy Doyle's novel *A Star Called Henry* is the story not only of the violent birth of the Irish Republic, but also of the coming-of-age of a young man who is driven by an irrepressible will to assert himself, but who nevertheless – as he himself only later realises – allows himself to be manipulated by others and to become a pawn in somebody else's game. The novel paints an at times lurid picture of a society in which unscrupulousness leads to success and where those who are underprivileged from the start, as a rule, end up the losers as well. Under such circumstances Henry fails because he is not ambitious for power; all he wants is to be admired and to be loved. This makes him become dependent on others. Although his good looks and his boyish boisterous ambition to prove himself, coupled with his hunger for a bit of tender loving care, make him irresistible to women, the men just use him. At the end he is left with nothing but blood on his hands.

Doyle's novel is packed with so many different events and characters that it is almost impossible to fully understand on first reading. For this reason, this guide gives a detailed account of the historical background to the plot (see in particular chapters 1.2, 2.1 and 2.5), the content of the novel and the narrative composition (see chapters 2.2 and 2.3) in addition to a detailed analysis of the principle characters (2.4). The guide also looks at the style and use of language (2.6) and offers new angles of interpretation (2.7). Chapter 1.1 and 1.3 examine the extent to which *A Star Called Henry* is characteristic of Doyle's literary works as a whole.

Roddy Doyle is one of the most successful Irish authors of our times, and many of his books have been turned into films. In his works, he unites an almost tangible realism with the carefree and adventurous enjoyment of the fantastic. Thus, his books are always gripping and mostly provocative. They are well worth reading.

# 1. Roddy Doyle: Life and works

## 1.1 Biography

Roddy Doyle has lived in Dublin all his life. In 2002, he published a book about his parents, Rory and Ita. With this one exception, he has done his utmost to keep himself out of the public eye, which explains the limited information that is available about him.

Year	Event	Age
1958–1993	Roddy Doyle is born in Dublin on 8 May and grows up in Kilbarrack, in the north of the city. His father works as a typesetter and instructor in the printing industry. His mother, Ita, has worked as a hospital secretary. From an early age, his father encourages him to read. After attending St. Fintan's Christian Brothers School in Sutton, Roddy Doyle goes on to study at University College Dublin. He becomes a teacher of English and Geography and is offered a position at Greendale Community School in Kilbarrack. It is during this time that he also establishes himself as a writer. In 1993, he gives up teaching to become a full-time writer. He is married and has two sons, Rory and Jack.	0–35
1987	Roddy Doyle publishes his first novel, <i>The Commitments</i> . His stage play, <i>Brown Bread</i> , premieres.	29
1989	A second stage play, <i>War</i> , premieres.	31
1990	The second part of the <i>Barrytown Trilogy</i> , <i>The Snapper</i> , is published.	32

Year	Event	Age
1991	<i>The Barrytown Trilogy's</i> third and final novel, <i>The Van</i> , is published. The book is shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Alan Parker turns <i>The Commitments</i> into a film; Roddy writes the script with Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais. The film is awarded several prizes by the British Academy of Film and TV Arts.	33
1992	The Barrytown Trilogy is published as a complete work.	34
1993	Roddy Doyle publishes his fourth novel, <i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i> , and is awarded the Booker Prize for it. Stephen Frears turns <i>The Snapper</i> into a film based on Roddy Doyle's script.	35
1994	The BBC produces and broadcasts a four-part TV series entitled <i>Family</i> , with a script written by Roddy Doyle.	36
1995	<i>Family</i> is broadcast in Ireland and triggers protests from politicians, priests and the teacher's union who accuse him of betraying Ireland by portraying the country too negatively, undermining the idea of marriage and suggesting that teachers hit their pupils.	37
1996	The fifth novel, <i>The Woman Who Walked into Doors</i> , is published. The idea for this book is based on the last episode of <i>Family</i> and is narrated from the mother's point of view.	38
1997	The third novel in the <i>Barrytown Trilogy</i> , <i>The Van</i> , is also turned into a film. Stephen Frears directs it and Roddy Doyle provides the script.	39

## 1.1 Biography

Year	Event	Age
1999	<p><i>A Star called Henry</i> is published and is intended to be the first part of a series of novels, <i>The Last Roundup</i>.</p> <p>Roddy Doyle publishes his first children's book, <i>Not Just for Christmas</i>, and works as co-author on the series, <i>Finbar's Hotel</i>.</p>	41
2000	<p>A second book for children is published: <i>The Giggler Treatment. When Brendan Met Trudy</i> – a comedy about the relationship between a self-conscious teacher and a resolute female thief – is performed on stage.</p>	42
2001	<p>Another children's book is published: <i>Rover Saves Christmas</i>, in addition to a novel which Roddy Doyle has co-written with other authors, among them Frank McCourt (<i>Yeats is Dead! A Novel by Fifteen Irish Writers</i>). The stage play <i>Guess Who's Coming to the Dinner</i> premieres at the Dublin Theatre Festival.</p>	43
2002	<p>Roddy Doyle publishes <i>Rory and Ita</i>.</p>	44
2003	<p><i>The Woman Who Walked into Doors</i> premieres on stage in Roddy Doyle's own adaptation.</p>	45
2004	<p>The second volume of <i>The Last Roundup</i>, <i>Oh, Play That Thing</i>, is published. Doyle's fourth children's book, <i>The Meanwhile Adventures</i>, is published.</p> <p>Roddy Doyle causes a stir when, in the run-up to the lavish centenary celebrations of Bloomsday (the day in 1904 on which the plot of <i>Ulysses</i> is set) planned in Dublin, he openly talks about his dislike of James Joyce, an author he considers to be overrated.</p>	46

Year	Event	Age
2006	Roddy Doyle publishes <i>Paula Spencer</i> , his eighth novel, as well as the 'novella', <i>Mad Weekend</i> .	48
2007	A fifth children's book, <i>Wilderness</i> , and a novel co-written with other writers, <i>Click</i> , is published. Roddy Doyle and Bisi Adigun write a version of <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> together for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2007. In addition to this, Roddy Doyle publishes a collection of stories under the title of <i>The Deportees and Other Stories</i> .	49

### 1.2 Historical context<sup>1</sup>

#### Background to the conflict

In the second half of the nineteenth century, new groups began to form in Ireland. Their aim was to rid the country of British supremacy which had existed there for centuries. These groups originated in the predominantly Catholic provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connaught. In the Northern province of Ulster, where the majority of the population were Protestant, it was hoped that British supremacy would continue. The reasons for this were historical. When King Henry VIII (1491–1547) denounced the Catholic faith in the first half of the sixteenth century (because the Pope had refused to grant him his divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Arragon) and created his **own Protestant State Church** – the Anglican Church –, it triggered a backlash in the **traditionally Catholic Ireland**. So, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, (Protestant) British settlers were sent to Ireland by Henry's successors to the throne to break down this resistance. The

#### Ireland's religious split

new Protestant citizens established themselves as the dominant force in the province of Ulster in particular. It was this policy of settlement that eventually led to both the confessional and political division of Ireland.

At the end of the nineteenth century, which for Ireland had been a time of great material poverty (half of the population had perished in the great famine of the 1840s and many had emigrated to the US), **Nationalism** – as was the case in many of the countries of Europe – also reached its peak in Ireland. The more the nation defined itself as a Catholic country, the more the Protestant North felt excluded and pushed into the arms of Britain.

One of the leaders of the new national movement was the printer and journalist, **Arthur Griffith** (1872–1922), who tried to revive

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1 See also Maurer

the cultural heritage of Ireland as an independent entity, and who also promoted a new political approach towards Britain. He wanted the Irish delegates in the London Parliament in Westminster to give up their seats and set up a new Irish parliament in Dublin instead. Furthermore, he wanted Ireland to be turned into a separate, viable economic entity. To push through his political goals, Griffith founded his own party in 1905 and gave it the Gaelic name of *Sinn Féin*, meaning 'we ourselves'. The Irish Socialist Republican Party, which had already been founded by **James Connolly** (1868–1916) in 1896 as the party of the Irish workers' movement, became the second most important party after Sinn Féin.

In Britain, too, efforts had long been made to grant the overwhelming majority of people of Ireland their wish for independence. Both in 1886 and in 1893, the British Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), had put forward respective legislative proposals to Parliament, but without success. The third '**Home Rule**' proposal of 1912 envisioned that the Irish would be responsible for domestic matters and that foreign affairs would be decided upon by the British Empire. This proposal was welcomed in Ireland by the majority, but opposed by the Northern Protestant 'Unionists'. Tension between the two sides grew. Both parties had been building up private armies since 1911. 1913 saw the official founding of the *Ulster Volunteer Force* on the one side and of the *Irish Citizen Army* on the other. The nationalists were supported financially by Irish who had emigrated to America in the nineteenth century.

Britain's Ireland policy

### The Easter Rising of 1916

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War in September 1914, the British monarch signed the legislation on 'Home Rule', which was only to come into effect, however, after the end of the war. The Irish delegates to Westminster had achieved their goal, but paradoxically at the expense of their own political influence. They had fulfilled their mission without Ireland moving any closer to actual

## 1.2 Historical context

independence. The armed militia in the country pushed for a more rapid solution. The nationalists also saw a historic chance to rid themselves of British supremacy while Britain was involved in the Great War (in which 200,000 Irish volunteers, of whom 60,000 lost their lives, were also defending the Empire under the British flag.). One of the major advocates for a rebellion was **Patrick Pearse** (1879–1916), who since 1915 had been the leader of the *Gaelic League*, an association founded by Irish academics to safeguard the native cultural heritage and which in the course of a few years had developed into a national movement. Pearse was a barrister but above all a writer, an educator and prophet of a new Ireland. In his writings, he linked the Catholic idea of salvation with the demand for an altruistic commitment to the national cause, even to the point of personal sacrifice.

Eventually, the diverse national powers united in a loose coalition: the Catholics, the Socialists around the work leaders James Connolly and James Larkin (1874–1947), the Fernier and the supporters of the Gaelic League. Concrete plans for the rebellion were formed; financial support came from America, arms came from Germany. The highly symbolic day of **Easter Sunday 1916** was chosen: **The resurrection of the Irish nation** was to take place on the day of resurrection of the Saviour. However, due to inadequate organisation and logistical mishaps, nothing actually happened on Easter Sunday – the ship with the largest arms and ammunition supply landed too early, aroused suspicion and was about to be investigated by

The siege of the  
General Post Office

the British when the captain decided to dump the entire load into the sea. It was not until Easter Monday that the General Post Office in Dublin and other places of strategic importance were occupied. **Around 1600 insurgents** participated. Their chances of succeeding were hopeless from the start despite the fact that the British were preoccupied with the war and only had limited forces available to suppress the rebellion.

It was on Easter Monday, too, that Patrick Pearse read out the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, declaring Ireland's right to self-