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Telling Tales: 
The Fictions of William Trevor *

by ROBERT TRACY

“There’s stories you’ve made up yourself apparently … Something you’d make up in your mind … When you’d talk about a matter like that it would acquire a reality for you”—William Trevor, Nights at the Alexandra

“I am a storyteller”—William Trevor

There is an engaging parallel between William Trevor’s profession, the making of fictions, and the obsessive activity of many of his fictional characters, who are also fiction makers. Trevor is not alone among novelists in writing about the very thing he is doing, often endowing characters he has invented with some of his own ingenuity at plotting, narrating, and inventing characters and situations. Dickens too was given to inventing fictional characters who manipulate the lives of other fictions. Fagin tries to program Oliver Twist to become a thief notorious enough to figure in The Newgate Calendar, a compendium of criminal biographies. In Great Expectations Miss Havisham invents a scenario by which Estella will grow into a cold and cruel woman, a torment to men who will fall in love with her; Magwitch’s written instructions to Jaggers detail the process by which Pip is to be reinvented as a gentleman. Fagin’s plans are thwarted; Estella and Pip partly follow the courses prescribed for them by those who plan their lives as deliberately as Dickens himself planned the lives of his fictional characters. Trevor neatly acknowledges Dickensian precedent in Other People’s Worlds (1980). Mrs. Anstey is reading Martin Chuzzlewit, a novel rich in self-creating fictions: the ostentatiously virtuous Pecksniff, the fraudulent city of Eden, the equally fraudulent Anglo-Bengalee Assurance Company, Sairey Gamp’s invisible Mrs. Harris. Exposed to these evident fictions, she develops a vague unease about her prospective son-in-law and the account of himself he gives. Everything about him is a rapid improvisation, created primarily for the sheer pleasure of making up a persona and having others accept it as true. “‘Make-belief is all we have’” (Other People’s Worlds 68), he comments.

Trevor’s fascination with fiction makers, story tellers, and with the ways that fictions sometimes take on an independent life appears as early as The Boarding House (1965). One of the boarders, Mr. Studdy—Trevor’s first Irish

* All citations to short stories from Trevor’s first seven collections (1967–90) are to the Collected Stories (1992). When possible, I have supplied the year of first (periodical) publication for short stories.

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character—is a wandering voyeur. He does not always understand things that he sees, but nevertheless invents fictions about them. Hoping to blackmail a woman who delivers meals to the elderly, he accuses her of using those deliveries to mask an extramarital affair, an affair he has imagined. He demands money or he will tell her husband. When Studdy arrives at their prearranged meeting to collect the money, a man “who was not Mrs. Rush’s husband” (Boarding House 94) beats him up. The affair Studdy had made up turns real. His fiction has come alive and knocked him down.

Studdy himself is part of a text, some of it fictional, contrived by Mr. Bird, the owner of the boarding house. Bird’s “Notes on Residents” record the boarders’ idiosyncrasies, their vulnerabilities, their histories—which are probably not true—and describe how Bird has interfered in and altered each one’s life for his own amusement, as a novelist may reward or punish a character at will. Bird’s boarding house full of fictional characters recalls the boarding house invented by Flann O’Brien (Brian O’Nolan) in At Swim-Two-Birds (1939), where the novelist Dermot Trellis assembles a group of fictional characters, many borrowed from other writers, so that he can employ them in the great green Irish novel he is writing. O’Brien’s comments about the interchangeability of fictional characters and the novel as “self-evident sham” (At Swim-Two-Birds 33) also have some bearing on Trevor’s work.

The “Notes,” Bird admits, are “not always accurate; inaccuracy is a symptom of our condition” (Boarding House 109). In fact he has devised plots for these semifictional individuals to live out. By leaving the boarding house jointly to Mr. Studdy and Nurse Clock, who despise each other, he plans to control the lives of all the boarders after his own death. The plan is only thwarted by an unforeseeable event—the bane of the amateur novelist—when one of the boarders burns down the house.

Trevor’s range of human types and experiences is wide, and he is equally at home in English and Irish locales. He is particularly good on the frustrations—sexual, emotional, imaginative—of life in rural and small-town Ireland, and on the self-consciously ambiguous identity of the Anglo-Irish. Like Yeats, Synge, and Beckett, Trevor comes from the Anglo-Irish middle class, not the “Big House” of so many Irish novels. The Big House, Elizabeth Bowen has pointed out, was always absorbed in its own myth of proud isolation (Mulberry Tree 101). The Anglo-Irish, that is, Protestant middle class, lived and worked among the Catholic majority and so were more readily exposed to the antithetical narratives that have traditionally shaped Irish Catholic and Protestant identities, each with its own heroes, iconographies, and atrocities. Trevor has directly confronted these conflicting traditions in the shadow of the long Irish memory and of events in Northern Ireland since 1969, notably in such short stories and novels as “Autumn Sunshine” (1980) and “Beyond the Pale (1981),” Fools of Fortune (1983), and The Silence in the Garden (1988). The long and detailed memory is not unique to Ireland. But it is particularly tenacious there, usually combined with an inability to
agree on a common story about the past. There is a Catholic/nationalist version and a Protestant/Unionist version, as well as mutually irreconcilable accounts within both traditions.

Anglo-Irish writers have had the great privilege of being at once insiders and outsiders, close enough to know all levels of Irish life, distant enough to retain a necessary perspective. There is a cool detachment in Trevor’s analysis of his Irish characters, Catholic or Protestant, and a delicate precision as he fixes them socially. And, because the Anglo-Irish are ambiguously English and not English when they cross the Irish Sea, he is equally skilled in depicting English life.

For the future writer of fiction, Ireland’s dual narratives constitute a great gift. Growing up in a world of alternate histories that still disturb the Irish consciousness, has, I suggest, shaped Trevor’s fascination with story tellers and their selective versions of reality, the stories his characters tell themselves to keep reality at bay, or even, as in Beckett’s plays, to pass the time. While not all of his novels and stories interrogate the nature of fiction or feature fiction makers, they all reflect living in a nation that tells itself more than one story about itself.

Trevor repeatedly presents characters who remember the past in great and vivid detail and make of it a story; sometimes they invent the past and make that their story. In “Beyond the Pale” an Englishwoman has informed herself about the Irish past to entertain her husband and another couple on their yearly visits to Ireland. In a hotel garden she meets a young man who tells her his story—young love, separation, the girl’s death in London while assembling an IRA bomb—and then drowns himself before her eyes. For Cynthia the man’s own story merges with and is shaped by Ireland’s story. “Has it to do with the streets they came from? Or the history they learnt, he from his Christian Brothers, she from her nuns? … Just so much history it sounds like now, yet people starved or died while other people watched. A language was lost, a faith forbidden” (Collected Stories 763). She refuses to be silenced as she lists episode after episode of Ireland’s grim history. Her auditors do not want to hear or understand her story and are horrified when she moves from Irish history to revealing some sordid truths about her companions. “Her awful rigmarole hung about us,” the other woman concludes dismissively, “the earls who’d fled, the famine and the people planted. The children were there too, grown up into murderous riffraff” (771).

In “Autumn Sunshine” an unpleasant young Englishman is “fascinated by Ireland” and “hated his own country.” Harold, like Cynthia, repeats the long list of Irish grievances and speaks of “The struggle of the Irish people” (Collected Stories 843). When Trevor describes small Irish towns, he frequently mentions a monument to the 1798 Rising. Such monuments are common throughout the Republic; in Trevor’s stories they are a coded reminder of Catholic-Protestant divisions and mutual atrocities. Harold is obsessed with the burning to death of “Twelve men and women, accused of harbouring
Edward Tripp ("The Original Sins of Edward Tripp") is a prisoner of his sister's fantasies about burglars and murderers at work in their quiet street. He is a fiction maker and alternate narratives that appear so abundantly in later work.

There are no Irish characters as such in his first collection of short stories, "The Day We Got Drunk on Cake" (1967); we are even told that "Despite the Celtic ring of his name," a character called Justin Parke Powers "was not Irish" (Collected Stories 91). But there are early versions of the fiction makers and alternate narratives that appear so abundantly in later work. Edward Tripp ("The Original Sins of Edward Tripp") is a prisoner of his sister's fantasies about burglars and murderers at work in their quiet street. He

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The Silence in the Garden the Rollestons of Carriglas island were originally Cromwellian settlers, who "had dispossessed the Cantillons of their island and sent them on their way to the stony wilderness of Mayo" (Silence 41). Much later they were compassionate landlords who ruined themselves trying to help their tenants during the Famine. But one summer before the first World War the three Rolleston children invent a savage game (19). "Day after day all summer long, they hunted" a terrified tenant child around the island "as an animal is hunted" (183), just as Cromwell's troopers once hunted Irish kerns. Their harrying of Cornelius Dowley, a cruel imitation of ancestral crimes, provokes a chain of cruel reactions. In 1920 Dowley prepares a bomb to kill his former tormentors; it kills their butler instead. Later the Black and Tans kill Dowley in revenge for an ambush he has led. After 1920 the now adult children expiate their guilt for their treatment of Dowley and the consequences. Their "terrible ... punishment of themselves" (204) is their decision not to have children, to be the last of their family. In 1931 Carriglas loses its proud Big House isolation, when a bridge—named to honor the patriot Cornelius Dowley, who now figures in Christian Brothers history—finally connects island and mainland.

These meditations on the Irish past and the differing stories of that past recognize that the lack of a common story is politically and morally divisive. "History is unfinished in this island," exclaims Cynthia in "Beyond the Pale"; "long since it has come to a stop in Surrey" (Collected Stories 763). "Remember Mitchelstown!" was for many years a rallying cry, reminding nationalists of how police opened fire on an 1887 Home Rule meeting in the County Cork town where Trevor was born; crosses still mark the places where the victims fell, and the blame is still debated. Sinn Fein burned the local Big House, Mitchelstown Castle, in 1920-21. But for a writer of fiction, the persistent availability of at least two versions of so many incidents is a fascinating resource. Trevor's work has been nourished by his interest in the unreliability of stories, of fabrications, fictions. Again and again his stories question the very existence of the storytelling enterprise.

Trevor's combination of Irish themes or characters with fiction makers and their "stories with a degree of unreality in them" (Fools 87) was a gradual process. There are no Irish characters as such in his first collection of short stories, The Day We Got Drunk on Cake (1967); we are even told that "Despite the Celtic ring of his name," a character called Justin Parke Powers "was not Irish" (Collected Stories 91). But there are early versions of the fiction makers and alternate narratives that appear so abundantly in later work. Edward Tripp ("The Original Sins of Edward Tripp") is a prisoner of his sister's fantasies about burglars and murderers at work in their quiet street. He
must treat them as real by warning their neighbors, even though he believes that she maliciously makes them up. When a child, he gave away her “two coloured story books” (*Collected Stories* 175-76) to a beggar. Now her fantasies are her revenge, controlling him and preventing him from living outside those fantasies. Young Markham’s frequent contribution to the “ceremonial story-telling … Every night after lights-out in the dormitory” (69), is about his father murdering his mother in order to marry her sister and his determination to “wipe out those two” in revenge. The murder story may be untrue, but a fellow schoolboy goads him into carrying out his threat or perhaps persuades him he has done so when they are killed by the Mau Mau (“A School Story” 1964). After an encounter with the drunken Mrs. Fitch, who always tells the truth (“Raymond Bamber and Mrs. Fitch”), Bamber creates for himself a comforting fiction to expunge what she has told him: that her husband is a philanderer and he himself is a “‘grinding bore’” (*Collected Stories* 339).

Trevor’s conjunction of Ireland and fantasists begins with his fifth novel, *Mrs. Eckdorf in O’Neill’s Hotel* (1969) and his second short story collection, *The Ballroom of Romance* (1972). Mrs. Eckdorf comes to Dublin to photograph the inhabitants of O’Neill’s Hotel for a coffee-table book that will be superficially true but deeply false: true because it will offer a photographed reality that seems true, false because, in the words of Father Hennessy, it will make “‘an ordinary thing seem dramatic when it is not that at all … It is not right that you should dramatize their lives in a book’” (*Eckdorf* 221, 225). There is a further dimension of falsehood in the project because Mrs. Eckdorf’s books of photographs are composed less to tell truth than to satisfy—or attempt to satisfy—the needs created by her own emotional poverty and inadequacy. “‘You are seeing the lives of people who are strangers to you purely in terms of your own life,’” the priest tells her. “‘It is not right that you should do that.’” Mrs. Eckdorf and her project are a kind of metaphor for the novelist, who spies, prises, records, publishes. She dips “‘with her camera into the souls of people,” believing “that mysteries had no right to exist” (225, 64-65). At the same time, the truth she offers is fiction. Her failure to achieve truth is any novelist’s nightmare of a similar failure, a failure determined by the impossible nature of the enterprise. Her imposition of drama on the placid lives of her subjects, her imposition of her own needs and obsessions, and her exposure of intimate secrets—all these are the novelist’s hazards and dilemmas.

The book about O’Neill’s Hotel is never finished, and never could be. But Trevor uses that projected book, as well as Mrs. Eckdorf’s habit of offering dramatic and possibly true versions of her own life to casual and sometimes unwilling auditors, both to examine the fiction maker’s impulse and to transcend it. For the ordinary truth about the Hotel comes out in spite of her wish for drama: it is simply the acceptance of their imperfect lives by those who live there, their resigned forgiveness of their betrayers.

Mrs. Eckdorf and her camera are a more complex version of the fabulist who is also a voyeur. Mr. Studdy watched people to blackmail them; Mr. Bird
wrote his “Notes on Residents” to control his tenants’ destinies as a novelist controls the destinies of his characters. Mrs. Eckdorf is a more creative voyeur, hoping to turn what she sees into narrative and dramatic art.

The title story (1972) in *The Ballroom of Romance* is about the role of comforting fictions in dreary lives. The shabby rural dance hall somewhere in Ireland provides its customers with an illusion of glamour, romance, and hope. Its “blueness and its pinkness and its crystal bowl of light and its music” (*Collected Stories* 196) have let Bridie persuade herself for twenty years that the place could become the setting for a wonderful love story. Now thirty-six, she realizes the love story will never happen. The romance is illusionary, her likely future is a loveless marriage with a drunken idler.

“A Happy Family” (1966), also collected in *The Ballroom of Romance*, is about a more chilling intrusion of fiction into ordinary life than the intrusion experienced by Mr. Studdy. Mr. Farrel, who narrates “A Happy Family,” admits that his own children “never did like my stories” (*Collected Stories* 210). He describes, with circumstantial scrupulosity, his wife Elizabeth’s apparent breakdown. Elizabeth has existed for him primarily as a central character in a story he tells himself about their happy family life: “often during the day I imagined what my wife’s day must be like ... I imagined her in summer having lunch in the garden ... as the years passed it seemed to me that she took on a greater beauty. I believed that this was some reflection of her contentment, and she may even have believed it herself” (205-06).

Behind his complacency we can discern a discontented wife and a placid domestic routine masking some deep unease. On 24 May 1962—the unimagi-native Farrel is a meticulous recorder—Elizabeth receives the first of a series of phone calls from a mysterious Mr. Higgs, who seems to know all about her childhood and the aspirations she then had. He describes in detail her tenth birthday. In later calls he mocks her unfulfilled hopes and predicts a dreary future for her children: her son’s marriage will be unhappy, one daughter will be a promiscuous drunk, the other will be sickly and unattractive. Mr. Higgs, it seems, can describe the future as well as the past. Elizabeth suspects at first that someone has spied on her, even read her diary—perhaps someone “possessed of a devil” (*Collected Stories* 209). But gradually she becomes addicted to Mr. Higgs’s calls, loses interest in home and family, becomes dreamy and detached—a not uncommon fate when Trevor characters are enticed into the world of fiction. She disappears into a mental hospital. Mr. Higgs turns out to be a fiction, an imaginary companion Elizabeth had made up for herself as a child. He has come back into her life to tell her stories about herself and her children’s future, to objectify her discontents. Trevor casually lets us know that her daughter Anna also has an invisible “faithful friend who accompanied her everywhere” (211).

“Mr. McNamara” (1974) and “Mrs. Acland’s Ghosts,” both in *Angels at the Ritz* (1975), continue this fascination with fictions that take on a kind of reality. Mr. McNamara, often encountered in the bar at Fleming’s Hotel, figures in stories the narrator’s father brings back from visits to Dublin, usually
Mr. McNamara’s own anecdotes about his eccentric family and friends. Vividly told, these stories become part of the narrator’s life, a livelier and more exciting part of it:

After the death of my father Mr. McNamara lived on, though in a different kind of way. The house in Palmerston Road, with Mr. McNamara’s aunt drinking in an upstairs room, ... Mrs. Matchette playing patience instead of being successful in the theatre, ... Trixie O’Shea from Skibbereen, and the spaniel called Wolfe Tone: all of them remained quite vividly alive after my father’s death ... our own household had regularly been invaded by the other one ... my sisters and I often recalled specific incidents ... the time when Mr. McNamara’s aunt had sold the house to a man she’d met outside a public house ... the time the spaniel was run over by a van and didn’t die. All of it was preserved, with Mr. McNamara himself, white-haired and portly. (Collected Stories 460-61)

When the schoolboy narrator eventually visits Fleming’s Hotel himself, he discovers that his father did indeed have a friend there named McNamara, but the friend was a woman. Yet he cannot tell his mother this truth. He realizes he must continue his father’s “deception, and keep the secret of his lies and his hypocrisy” (Collected Stories 467). He must collaborate in maintaining a fiction.

Mrs. Acland’s ghosts are her brother and two sisters, all killed in an accident as children. She remembers and misses them so acutely that they come back to haunt her, and so drive away her servants, who see them and fear them. Mrs. Acland describes the hauntings vividly in a letter to Mr. Mockler—she has chosen his name at random from a directory—and asks him to help her gain release from the asylum where her husband has committed her. She describes her life before the accident with the precise detail of a Trevor story:

We played Monopoly by the fire, and George would always have the ship and Alice the hat and Isabel the racing-car and Mummy the dog. Daddy and I would share the old boot ... George was ... a dashing kind of boy who was always laughing ... Alice ... was just the opposite, demure and silent ... there was a lot of love in 17 Lorelei Avenue. (Collected Stories 502-03)

In 1969, “On the night of March 7th,” she began to sense the presence of her siblings. They were benign ghosts, but they frightened away the gardener and housekeeper and departed with them, “because they’d been more interested in annoying the Rachels than in comforting me” (Collected Stories 505, 508).

Mr. Mockler reads the letter and visits the asylum, where the doctor tells him an alternative story. Mrs. Acland was an only child, with parents who hated each other and never spoke: “In the house there was nothing, Mr. Mockler, for all her childhood years: nothing except silence” (Collected Stories 511). Faced with two alternative stories, Mockler creates a third: the children were projections of Mrs. Acland’s imagination, fictions so powerfully and circumstantially imagined that the Rachels had sensed their presence, perhaps even seen them: “They’d been real to her, and they’d been real to the Rachels because she had made them so. Shadows had stepped out of her mind because in her loneliness she’d wished them to” (512). The story examines the act of making fiction, the realization of the not real, fiction’s ability to compel belief. Mr. Mockler believes the story Mrs. Acland has written for him.
Somewhere, he thinks, the Rachels might be found to confirm her story; if he were younger, he would look for them. “It seemed a sadness” to him “that … a woman’s artificial ghosts should not be honoured, since she had brought them into being and given them life, as other women give other children life” (513).

Ghosts, after all, are memories that make themselves visible, stories so compelling that, in the old book reviewer’s cliché, “they seem to take on a life of their own.” Trevor’s occasional ghost stories are striking examples of fictions intruding themselves into life. Two closely related stories, “The Raising of Elvira Tremlett” (1977) in Lovers of their Time (1978), and “The Death of Peggy Meehan” (originally “The Death of Peggy Morrissey”) in The Distant Past (1979), further explore Trevor’s fascination with stories becoming true, and with the resentment fictional characters can feel for their creators—a major theme in Flann O’Brien’s At Swim-Two-Birds. In “The Raising of Elvira Tremlett” a Catholic boy in a small Irish town reads a memorial tablet in the Protestant church, which records the 1873 death of an eighteen-year-old English girl. He begins “to imagine her … I gave her her long hair and her smile and her elaborate earrings … I gave her her clothes, wondering if I had got them right … She was a bit like Myrna Loy, whom I had seen … in Test Pilot and Too Hot to Handle and The Thin Man. Only she was more beautiful than Myrna Loy, and her voice was nicer” (Collected Stories 652, 651). She becomes his companion and tells him the secrets of his own family. But then he loses control of the spirit he has summoned. She ceases to be the lovely eighteen year old he imagined and becomes a resentful old woman of eighty-nine, the age she would be if she had lived. “What right, for God’s sake, had I to blow life into her decaying bones? … She was a figment of my imagination, drawn from her dull grey tablet by my interest … She hadn’t been real, she’d been no more than a flicker on the screen of the Vista cinema” (657-58). The boy’s terror at this visitation ends only when he is committed to the local mental hospital, where he believes he sleeps in the room where Elvira Tremlett died. She no longer appears to him: “She brought me here so that I could live in peace.” In a final twist, he himself becomes the subject of a story. “I have not told this story myself,” he assures us. “It has been told by my weekly visitor, who has placed me at the centre of it because that, of course, is where I belong … The story is famous in the town, the only story of its kind the town possesses. It is told as a mystery” (658).

The narrator of “The Death of Peggy Meehan” is haunted by the girl he killed by making up a story about her death. Taken as a seven year old to his first film, “about grown ups kissing one another, and about an earthquake, and then a motor-car accident in which a woman who’d been kissed a lot was killed” (Collected Stories 394), he tells himself a story about going on a picnic with a schoolmate he hardly knows: “Her father drove us in his car … the back door against which Peggy Meehan was leaning, suddenly gave way. On the dust of the road she was as dead as the woman in the film” (396). A few
days later he learns that Peggy is indeed dead—of diphtheria. When she begins to appear to him, he is convinced that “in a story I was telling myself, I’d caused Peggy Meehan to be killed in a car accident like the woman in the film” (397). Grown older, he revises this view: “I naturally no longer believed that I was responsible for the death. In my passing, careless fantasy I wished for it and she, already dead, picked up my living thoughts.” But he is haunted, possessed by the dead girl, a shade who mocks him by growing older beside him, older and more beautiful, there and yet unattainable: “I live for her, living hopelessly, for I know I can never possess her as I wish to. I have a carnal desire for a shadow” (398-99).

Trevor’s references to films suggest the liberating effect that the establishment of “picture houses” had on the imagination of small-town Ireland in the nineteen thirties and forties. Nights at the Alexandra (1987) is his tribute to these rural film theatres and the enlargement they brought into drab and uneventful lives. Herr Messinger builds the Alexandra as a gift to his dying wife. To her it is at once a kind of memorial and a gift of storytelling to the town. “People loved the Alexandra,” the narrator recalls; “embraces were romantic there. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers shared their sophisticated dreams … Heroes fell from horses” (Nights 74). The narrator himself is taken over by Frau Messinger’s own story: “Frau Messinger had claimed me … she had held me to her with the story of her life” (75). Her story is as detailed and vivid as the films, and when he sits alone in the abandoned theater “memory is enough” (80) to evoke her. Frau Messinger’s stories about her life, and the films that supplement those stories, make her into a kind of ghost, like Peggy Meehan and Elvira Tremlett—the Alexandra even opens with Rebecca, a film in which a dead woman continues to be a compelling presence.

Three of Trevor’s novels perhaps best demonstrate that fascination with the fiction making that appears in so many of his novels and short stories: Other People’s Worlds (1980), Fools of Fortune (1983), and Felicia’s Journey (1994). In Other People’s Worlds fictions have real consequences, as they do in “A Happy Family” and seem to do in “The Death of Peggy Meehan.” Trevor’s protagonist, Francis Tyte, is an actor, a professional pretender. He is also a compulsive weaver of fictions, inventing personalities and backgrounds for himself that are adapted to those he meets. For Julia, the Catholic widow he marries, he is a quiet Catholic gentleman; for Doris Smith, the mother of his child, he is the unhappy husband of a vicious and sickly wife he is too tender to divorce; he has sketchier identities for his brief encounters as a male prostitute. He invents an old friend to be best man at his wedding but then gives this imaginary friend an imaginary glandular fever, enjoying as he does so “the usual pleasures of invention, the careful, lengthy explanation” (Other People’s Worlds 125). When Susanna Music, an actress performing with him in a television drama, remarks casually that her life and career have been easy, Francis instantly creates an alternate life story for her as a runaway orphan, child of a prostitute:
her companion spoke of a Nottingham orphanage as though it had really existed ... paint-chipped corridors, and washrooms which were dark ... she had run away ... In London an aged lecher ... a dilettante of the theatre ... helped her ... he it was who had changed her name to Susanna Music.

Drawn into the surprising fantasy, Susanna could not help seeing this figure as he was described: wizened and small, repeatedly lifting a handkerchief that smelt of peppermint to his lips ... Susanna ... couldn’t help feeling that there was a bizarrness about the speed with which an ersatz existence had been so skillfully created for her. Without any hesitation for thought the old dilettante ... had been given life, as had the housekeeper at the orphanage ... and the odd-job man there, a cantankerous person with a humped back. The housekeeper was a woman who’d been a missionary, whose skin had a leathery quality because of its exposure to years of African sun ... It seemed to Susanna that the talk could continue for hours, effortlessly inventing people and situations, changing her identity for her because she’d said she thought she’d had an easy time of it. (Other People’s Worlds 66-67)

Herself a professional pretender, Susanna senses something dangerous about Francis’s free flow of invention. Later, when she is confronted by Doris Smith, the mother of Francis’s neglected child, Susanna “recalled the details of the fantasy ... the odd-job man and the housekeeper ... For a brief, strange moment ... she was possessed by the notion that this woman had been created by Francis Tyte also, a figment of his pretence which had somehow acquired reality” (Other People’s Worlds 128).

Because the Anglo-Irish Quintons of Fools of Fortune are also Irish nationalists, Mr. Quinton, two of his children, and several servants are murdered by the Black and Tans, and their house partially burned—an atrocity that merges the two antithetical versions of Irish history by making a Protestant house and family the victims of British violence at a time when Irish rebels were destroying Protestant Big Houses. Quinton’s son survives, to take revenge years later by killing the British sergeant who was responsible. Young Quinton’s act dooms him to exile for most of his life, though locally he is seen as a hero. But he also becomes the father of Imelda, who tells herself the story of the house and family so violently destroyed in 1920-21. Imelda reads letters and documents she is not meant to read and enters the world of Kilneagh house as it was long before her birth. She experiences events so vividly that they drive her insane. But she also becomes a seer. In her detailed visions she lives through the night of destruction: “The screaming of the children began, and the torment of the flames on their flesh. The dogs were laid out dead in the yard, and the body of the man in the teddy-bear dressing-gown lay smouldering on the stairs. The blood kept running on her hands, and was tacky in her hair” (Fools 219). She sees her father purchase the knives he will use to kill Sergeant Rudkin, the spurt of blood when he does so. Eventually her visions become calming and restorative. In middle age she no longer speaks, but she is happy in the house her visionary imagination has rebuilt as it was before its destruction:

Imelda is gifted, so the local people say, and bring the afflicted to her. A woman has been rid of dementia, a man cured of a cataract. Her happiness is like a shroud miraculously about her, its source mysterious except to her. No one but Imelda knows that in the scarlet drawing-room wood blazes in the fireplace while the man of the brass log-box reaches behind him for the hand
of the serving girl ... carved on the marble of the mantelpiece the clustered leaves are as delicate
as the flicker of the flames ... she is happiest of all when she stands in the centre of the Chinese
carpet. (Fools 238)

Felicia's Journey is a version of the Bluebeard myth. Pregnant Felicia comes from Ireland to England in search of her Irish lover, who has failed to provide her with his address. Tramping about the industrial Midlands with her vague scraps of misinformation she encounters kindly Mr. Hilditch, who recognizes her vulnerability and her naivety. An accomplished fabulist, he improvises a wife who is concerned about the girl and urges him to help her, then seeks her sympathy by describing that wife’s death—and displaying items of clothing he has purchased secondhand to corroborate the wife’s existence. Hilditch has furnished his house with secondhand portraits and souvenirs from other people’s lives, and from Britain’s imperial past. He is a creator of stories—he invents for himself a military career to compensate for his rejection when he volunteered for the army—and is as eager a consumer of stories as Scheherazade’s husband. Felicia is but the most recent in a series of drifting young women he has befriended. Evading his own story, which features incest with his mother, he repeats to himself the stories of Elsie Covington and Beth, Sharon and Gaye and Jakki and Bobbi, all killed when he saw that they knew he was impotent, all buried now in his garden. When Hilditch retells these stories to himself in detail, he never completes them. He stops his retellings just before he must describe killing them, with a vague intimation that each girl went away. Felicia, sensing her danger, escapes and resumes her wandering. But the story of Hilditch and Felicia cannot be stopped as easily as the stories he tells himself. Felicia has mentioned him to some door-to-door evangelists. When they come to his door they remember Felicia’s account of his helping her, praise his kindness to her, and turn up repeatedly, eager to recruit him, until they eventually frighten him into suicide. Hilditch’s story comes to its logical end; Felicia’s story will go on among hostels and homeless shelters.

In Fools of Fortune and Felicia’s Journey the Irish past and its competing histories play crucial roles. What happened in Kilnagagh around 1920 has shaped the subsequent lives of Willie Quinton and everyone else in Fools of Fortune. The old sad story of England’s part in Ireland’s history is retold. Felicia is a kind of Kathleen Ní Houlihan, her evasive lover Irish, but a British soldier. She is his victim but she is also a victim of the Irish past. Before her pregnancy and journey she shares a bedroom with her century-old great-grandmother, another Kathleen Ní Houlihan figure, this time as poor old woman and widow of a 1916 hero. The senile old woman is the Irish past, supplemented by the family scrapbooks which contain newspaper clippings about the Easter Rising, Casement’s trial, a copy of Pearse’s proclamation of the Irish Republic, and other nationalist texts.

Trevor’s fascination with fictions within fictions continues in his most recent work. In “Music” (1985), Aunt Roche and Father Finn invent a child’s talent for music in order to spend time together. A journalist and her photogra-
pher turn a rural murder into a sensational story in “Events at Drimaghleen” (1987), freely creating mysteries and a cover-up—a kind of return to Mrs. Eckdorfs and her project at O’Neill’s Hotel. A young Orangeman is killed by his own brother because he insists on speaking in public about his vision of St. Rosa of Viterbo (“Lost Ground,” 1992). In “The Piano Tuner’s Wives” (1995), the blind man’s wife has so vividly described things to him that he imagines them clearly; has second wife asserts herself by adding and changing details to control his imagined world. After Gerard’s mother and Rebecca’s father have an affair, they divorce, marry, and share custody of the children. “Child’s Play” in After Rain is about the game they develop, acting out episodes from their divorced parents’ adulterous affair:

“Let’s do the time she caught them,” Rebecca suggested . . . Gerard lay down on the parquet and . . . worked his lips in an imaginary embrace . . .

“This is disgusting!” Rebecca cried, bursting into the room again.

Gerard sat up. He asked her what she was doing here.

“A cleaner let me in. She said I’d find you on the office floor.”

“You’d better go,” Gerard muttered quietly to his pretend companion, pushing himself to his feet.

“I’ve known for ages.” Real tears sprung on Rebecca’s rounded cheeks. Quite a gush she managed. She’d always been good at real tears.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, my God!” (After Rain 62-63).

“Three People” (1998) is about two people linked by a shared fiction that conceals a crime. This preoccupation with fictions also shapes Reading Turgeniev and My House in Umbria, two short novels collected as Two Lives (1991). Mary Louise listened to her invalid cousin Robert reading Turgeniev aloud in the last few weeks of his short life. Her intense participation in the fictional lives of Arkady and Bazarov, Insarov and Yelena, was also an intense communion with Robert that survives his death. Turgeniev’s characters become more real to her than the provincial Irish town where she lives, her loveless unconsummated marriage, until she lives in the imagined world of Turgeniev’s art. The protagonist of My House in Umbria has named and renamed herself as a novelist names a character: “Gloria Grey, Janine Ann Johns, Cora Lamore ... other names as well” (Two Lives 225). She writes popular romances so convincing that her fans write to ask if her fictional couples stayed together after the last page, if they had children, if they were happy. Now she writes My House in Umbria to record her survivals—of abandonment by her parents; of sexual molestation as a child; of lovers who left her; of prostitution; of the terrorist bomb that explodes in a railway carriage. And finally, she survives the survivors of that bombing, whom she has taken into her house. Mrs. Delahunty even survives the loss of her ability to invent fictions, and the replacement of that ability by vision, so that she can see scenes and share memories from her guests’ earlier lives.

Throughout Trevor’s novels and stories he is an acute observer of contemporary Irish and English mores, sensitive to the subterranean rumblings of the two nations’ histories in a given situation, compassionate in describing some
of his characters’ muted lives. At the end of her harrowing adventure in Other People’s Worlds, Julia takes responsibility for the child of Francis Tyte and Dorie Smith. The child is sullen, illiterate, delinquent, but her name is Joy. For Julia, finally, “It was the child’s story that mattered” (Other People’s Worlds 242), and that story can be changed. Felicia can remember and forgive her betayers, and even pity Hilditch: “Lost within a man who murdered, there was a soul like any other soul, purity itself it surely once had been” (Felicity’s Journey 212). But at the same time his work is an extended meditation on the impulse to invent fiction, the nature of fiction, the dangers of fiction, and the act of fiction.

Works Consulted