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## Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993)

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## **Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993)**

*Trainspotting* is a byword for pacey, punchy, visceral Scotland. It shuttles successive images of junkies carousing without a care in Edinburgh's dark corners. The unprecedented popularity of the film adaptation (1996) has forged an unbreakable connection between the novel, the actors (Ewan McGregor, Robert Carlyle et al), and that anthemic theme song "Born Slippy." The long-awaited sequel to the film in 2017 (*T2: Trainspotting*) resurrected the story, supplying Welsh's following with a fresh hit of their old favourites.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, it sparked a new wave of interest in the now-twenty-four-year-old novel.

When it was published by Secker & Warburg it was Welsh's debut effort. We often think of it *bursting* onto the scene and *shaking* up the foundations of Scottish literature and language. But we forget the period of percolation that made *Trainspotting* a truly masterful work: cobbled together from notebooks and diaries, the novel we know and love was being drip fed to readers as early as 1991 in journals like *Dog*, *West Coast Magazine*, *New Writing Scotland*, and, more famously, *Rebel Inc.* These diaries reflect some (very real) life-experiences and even more excellent fiction, taking aim at Thatcher's Britain and the social desolation that Welsh had watched consume the country he grew up in.

The book's popularity has never faded. Its unapologetic and raw review of society has struck a nerve with each new wave of readers. Part of this is down to the author's method. Far from taking aim at war and capitalism as abstract terms, Welsh gave them a name (Mark Renton's brother Billy, who "died a spare prick in a uniform") and a face, contorted in the throes of a heroin comedown. Quite often, this portrait was a mirror. The most visceral, damning characterisation Welsh offers is of the main character himself: effectively drawing us closer to the "doubles" that make the novel so compelling. Personal self-loathing=national self-loathing; personal self-harm=national/cultural self-harm; personal gain=national gain.

At every turn, the abhorrence of a character is stacked up against some larger, corporate evil. For instance, Mark declares that "we fill up our lives with white, things like careers and relationships to delude ourselves that it isn't a total waste of time," and with a triumphant defence of his drug

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (August 2017) Irvine Welsh has 270,000 Twitter followers.

abuse, says: “smack’s an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions.” Whether these are symbols of a “wider self-hating dependency culture” or simply sketches of human failure is up to you.<sup>2</sup>

The year after *Trainspotting* was published, James Kelman won the Booker Prize for his equally raw, dialectal take on Scotland in *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994).<sup>3</sup> His acceptance speech, during which he attacked the judges, and with them the literary elite of London, is (almost) as infamous as the work itself. But we can find more similarity beyond Scotland, in the past. In his review of *Trainspotting* for *The Guardian*, James Wood called Welsh “the Scottish Céline.” And it’s true: if you read the opening passage of the French author’s *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) you will find the same nihilistic self-loathing, superimposed over one man’s reading of an entire nation. In other words, *Trainspotting* is a work with various connections both in Scotland and beyond. However we take its meaning, I am confident it will be a classic for generations to come.

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<sup>2</sup> See Murray Pittock, *Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Secker & Warburg published both *Trainspotting* and Kelman’s *How Late It Was*.