Repeat Offenders: Trauma and Abuse in Brian Doyle's Fiction

—Adrienne Kertzer

"Of course, he was always exaggerating. You could never get the truth out of him." (Doyle, *Easy Avenue* 88)

Brian Doyle is one of Canada's most honoured children's writers. Celebrated as a novelist sensitive to issues of class, race, and disability, he is rightly praised by Michele Landsberg for "combin[ing] a sort of Celtic plangency with Ottawa Valley tall tale, Canadian colloquialism, and working-class deadpan" (33). What his Ottawa Valley tall tales repeatedly respond to are issues of trauma and abuse. However, his last three novels—*Uncle Ronald* (1996), *Mary Ann Alice* (2001) and *Boy O'Boy* (2003)—signal a major shift in his representational practice. The structure is still comic but the tone darkens; abuse is no longer, as it often is in the earlier fiction, a joking matter. While this shift undoubtedly reflects changing cultural notions regarding the representation of trauma and abuse in children's literature, this does not fully explain the way that *Mary Ann Alice* expands upon and *Boy O'Boy* rewrites Doyle's earlier fiction.

A complex and playful writer, with a marked preference for storytelling techniques associated with oral literature, Doyle is clearly committed to telling the truth to his child readers. Yet his penchant for exposing communal silences and in this sense advocating greater honesty with the young exists within a narrative practice in which his own narrators lie and are not always condemned for doing so: as Spud Sweetgrass observes, "Canadian sons tell their mothers lies. . . . It's a Canadian tradition" (*Spud Sweetgrass* 97). In Doyle's fiction, truth-telling is preferable—except in situations where it is not, where for reasons of social utility and human kindness, lying may be the morally superior choice. Doyle's depictions of trauma and abuse are thus double-edged, serving to initiate readers not only into the knowledge of abuse and its consequences, but also into the etiquette of laughter and lying. In

Mary Ann Alice, when Patchy Drizzle, a character who has pretended to be dead in order to liberate his wife from their marriage, asks the narrator to repeat his wife's final words, the narrator lies, and tells her reader: "What people don't know won't hurt them, I always say" (*Mary Ann Alice* 164). Even recognizing the difference between Doyle's fictional narrator, and the author, I am not entirely convinced that Doyle would disagree.

Doyle's fiction offers insight into the etiquette of laughing at trauma and abuse and into the way that child readers learn cultural rules about when it is appropriate to laugh. In the early fiction, traumatic abuse is a minor and marginal detail; beginning with *Uncle Ronald* and as evidenced by his most recent novel, *Boy O'Boy*, it has moved to centre stage. This change is not simply a matter of a writer's individual choice. Doyle's increasing attention to trauma also reflects developments within our cultural construction of the "landscape of memory" (Kirmayer 175), one which affects readers as well as writers. Certainly, I read Doyle very differently than I did in 1978 when he published his first novel. Today, I am incapable of ignoring the references to possible physical abuse in his first two novels, *Hey Dad!* and *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove*, but they did not register when I first read them. So if Doyle is more willing now to foreground issues of physical abuse, to write that incidents of abuse are not just imaginary but really happen, he may do so partly because we live in a culture that is far more willing to believe him.

Doyle's fiction often includes tall tales, legends, anecdotes, and outrageous jokes, forms associated with oral storytelling which he incorporates in his fiction to tell truths about Canadian life not always found in conventional written documents. He also uses these forms to destabilize our ability to recognize what is true. His tall tales and outrageous jokes imply that the characters readers should admire are the communal insiders, those who can recognize the difference between a joke and a statement of fact; but as one who has read all of Doyle's fiction, I suspect that such insider status is difficult to achieve. In reading Doyle, I do not always know when a joke is just a joke, or what the facts are. "I'll believe it when I see it" is an oft-repeated sentence in *Up to Low* that defines characters' incredulity when they learn that Mean Hughie is dying of cancer; it also indicates how plentiful tall tales and outrageous jokes blur the reader's ability to distinguish between truth and fiction, and to know what to believe. Baby Bridget laughs when she is told by Tommy's father, "Frank used to be a great baseball player before his head was run over by a tank in the war" (*Up to Low* 57). Thinking about similar details that are presented as fact elsewhere in Doyle's fiction, I cannot share Baby Bridget's confidence that she knows when Tommy's father is telling a joke. In *Angel Square*,

Frank returns from World War II and I read his lack of balance as a running gag that is also symptomatic of his alcoholism. But why Frank is an alcoholic or whether the war contributed to his drinking remains unsaid. In this way, the joke—if it is a joke—screens any attempt to see Frank as more than a comic stereotype.

The more I read the eleven novels Doyle has published, the more I am fascinated by his patterns of repetition. Why does the narrator of *Mary Ann Alice* compulsively dwell upon details of *Uncle Ronald* and narrate passages that uncannily distort/prefigure events described in *Up to Low*, and why does *Boy O'Boy* rewrite *Angel Square*? Doyle's endless circles around the same subjects—"violence . . . pain . . . cruelty" (*Uncle Ronald* 77)—convey that "evil LURKS in the hearts of men" (*Angel Square* 14) in *Boy O'Boy* as well. But only The Shadow knows how evil defined as antisemitism and ethnic hatred in *Angel Square* becomes the evil of sexual predators in *Boy O'Boy*. In *Angel Square*, Tommy enjoys "scary organ music" (14) and "imagine[s] the guy playing the organ, stabbing at the keys with his fingers to make me jump and hit my head" (14). In *Boy O'Boy*, Doyle rewrites this scene; the protagonist is no longer listening to the radio; he is inside the choir loft and what is imaginary, exciting, and non-sexual in *Angel Square* is real, terrifying, and sexual. In *Angel Square*, Tommy's heroism makes Margot Lane tell him that he really is The Shadow, but in *Boy O'Boy*, when Billy Batson says SHAZAM!, "nothing goes BOOM! and he doesn't change into Captain Marvel" (30).

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Patterns of repetition, often triggered by traumatic memories and scenes of abuse, appear throughout Doyle's work. Thinking of his first encounter with Baby Bridget, the narrator of *Up to Low* states, "I was seeing the whole thing again" (16). In reading Doyle, I similarly find myself "looking at the pictures repeated over and over again" (*Mary Ann Alice* 125), an outsider to the story who is never certain where the truth lies. Over and over again, the same pictures and a compulsion to return to the scene of the crime; as Spud Sweetgrass says "I can replay it any time I want to" (*Spud in Winter* 7). In *Boy O'Boy*, Martin's grandmother advises him, "Read everything" (158). In this paper, I have followed her advice, concentrating on the five Low novels collected in *The Low Life: Five Great Tales from up and down the River*, as well as the two novels, *Mary Ann Alice* and *Boy O'Boy* published since then.[1] My argument has five stages.

Tracing the relationship between Doyle's earlier and later representations of trauma and abuse, I begin by reading *Uncle Ronald* as a turning point in his work. Secondly, I examine how Doyle's use of tall tales, legends, anecdotes, and jokes destabilizes notions of truth. I then turn to *Mary Ann Alice* both for what it reveals about Doyle's use of oral storytellers and for the way it displays signs of being haunted by traumatic episodes in the earlier fiction. Finally, I demonstrate that *Boy O'Boy* rewrites *Angel Square* in a manner that makes me wonder whether lurking within the 1984 novel is the book Doyle did not and could not publish until 2003.

Shifting the Perspective: From the Early Fiction to *Uncle Ronald*

Theories of comedy often stress that laughter requires our seeing people as objects and seeing them from a distance, for, when we identify with the man slipping on a banana peel, we are less likely to laugh. When Doyle writes a first-person narrative of abuse and trauma in *Uncle Ronald*, he softens its impact by having his narrator remember from a great temporal distance. Such distance seems necessary for laughter at a first-person recollection of physical abuse; the immediacy of the story of sexual abuse narrated in *Boy O'Boy* makes laughing much harder. Thus in *Uncle Ronald*, the narrator, Mickey McGuire, recalls a childhood trauma one hundred years after its occurrence. He is so old that he can put his shame as a twelve-year-old about bedwetting into the context of having finally reached the age where bedwetting is no longer shameful. Mickey ends his narrative by stating that he is ready to die: "A hundred and twelve years is enough, don't you think?" (*Uncle Ronald* 138). His readiness for death seems comically appropriate, until I consider that his astonishing age also means that he has been living with his traumatic memories for a century.

Uncle Ronald begins with an image of a "dead maple leaf" (7) that is fixed in Mickey's brain; one hundred years after 1895, this traumatic visual memory remains, a striking contrast to the fragile state of Mickey's current memory: "I can't remember . . . and I can't remember . . . and I can't tell you . . . and I can never remember" (7). The leaf is an emblem of Mickey's trauma when he learns that his physically abusive father has followed him from Ottawa to Low; he sees this after waking up the next morning to "a pissed-in bed" (104). Carrying pails of water to clean his bed, Mickey identifies with the leaf "limping . . . struggling along like an old, crippled spider" (106). Even after Uncle Ronald attempts to cheer him up by joking, Mickey does not confide in him. Caught between an abusive father and an abused mother who now has a knife that she is determined to use, and given that his own father was also beaten as a child, Mickey seems trapped

within a cycle of abuse until his father's cruelty to an abused horse, Second Chance Lance, prompts a melodramatic ending in which the father's violence to the horse leads to his death in a train accident. The image of his father's death has remained with Mickey for a century: "I see that picture now" (132). Doyle minimizes the description of what Mickey claims he can still see: his father "gobbled up by the wheels" (133) and chopped into "quite a few different sized pieces" (134). Instead, Doyle stresses Mickey's relief that the train accident has helped him to escape an unbearable situation and his unresolved anger at his father. At the funeral, when he is instructed by Father Foley to drop a paper flower into the grave, Mickey throws it "hard into the hole" (135). Telling this story after one hundred years, he still has no kind words to say about his father.

Comedy is not totally missing from *Uncle Ronald*, for example, in the early chapter that outlines Mickey's increasingly desperate attempts to stop wetting the bed, but the tone tends to be darkly ironic. One chapter is titled "He Liked Me Better Than Her," a conclusion that Mickey takes from his mother when she notes that his father beats her with the "buckle end of the belt" (8) but turns the belt around to beat him. Early in the novel, Doyle satirizes *Beautiful Joe: The Autobiography of a Dog* but this satire gradually disappears once he introduces Second Chance Lance, the horse whose reaction to the abusive father will save Mickey's life. According to Mickey, *Beautiful Joe* "almost makes you cry except you can't because every now and then you say to yourself, did the dog get somebody to write this for him?" (31); in contrast, *Uncle Ronald*, with its first-person subjective memory of abuse, initially makes the reader laugh but, by the end, the reader does not want to.

Mickey's first name also signals Doyle's move away from comedy. Giving Mickey the same first name as that of Crazy Mickey in *Up to Low* and Mickey Malarkey in *Covered Bridge*, he even makes him the same age as Mickey Malarkey, "the biggest liar in the Gatineaus" (*Covered Bridge* 75)—an impressive claim given the number of liars who live along the Gatineau River. Mickey Malarkey is both comic and legendary; in keeping with the Canadian tradition of lying mentioned by Spud Sweetgrass, Mickey Malarkey is presented as one whose lies predate Confederation. Local farmers contribute to his reputation by saying, "Old Mickey Malarkey was lying before he learned to talk" (75). In contrast to Mickey in *Uncle Ronald*, Mickey Malarkey never tells the truth. His outright lies form part of a "conversation game" (77) in which the farmers take turns bringing his boast about filling a boat with catfish down to size so that he finally admits he hates fishing, a statement that is also likely not true given that everything that Mickey Malarkey says is presented as a falsehood, including his insistence that he has never lied, "which, of course,

was one of the biggest lies he ever told" (76). When Mickey Malarkey tells an elaborate story about "a cousin who was told not to shove a bean in his nose and did" (86), his story is clearly not meant to be believed.

In contrast, the one-hundred-year-old Crazy Mickey is a more ambiguous predecessor of Mickey McGuire. In *Up to Low*, the narrator, Tommy, wonders why his great-grandfather, Crazy Mickey, cries every afternoon in the barn when his wife takes a nap. Tommy's father explains that he cries because he fears that she is dead, and that when she wakes up he is so happy to see her that he cries again. He also explains that Crazy Mickey has always had that name and that he cries in the barn because that is where he cried when he first arrived in Canada and his mother died "about ninety years ago" (*Up to Low* 67). A pattern of behaviour that we might initially read as both comic and a sign of senility thus also speaks to memories of an original sorrow. When Tommy questions whether he should believe anything told by someone called Crazy Mickey, his father tells him he has no choice: "he's all we've got" (67). Since Crazy Mickey is a minor character, persuading readers to believe his memories is also not crucial in the way it is in *Uncle Ronald* where Mickey McGuire is all we've got to tell us the truth about the past.

Uncle Ronald is the first Doyle novel in which the narrator does not merely and often jokingly comment upon abuse as either imaginary or something that happens only to other people. In Doyle's second novel, *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove*, Ryan, the young protagonist, confides that he hates how the man in the seat next to him on the plane keeps "letting his knee rest over my leg" (11). The gesture makes him nervous, but the incident is quickly forgotten, for Doyle's interest lies elsewhere, in Ryan's anxiety after his father "ran away from home" (11). Missing his father desperately, lonely when he is sent away from home for the summer, Ryan recalls how his father once reacted after the Ottawa police interrogated them because they suspected that the father was the child molester they were seeking. The novel dismisses this possibility quickly and comically—how could a man abuse his own child? All the father has to do to convince the police of his innocence is to assert that he is the boy's father: "If you've established that I'm not some sex-crazed maniac is it alright if I sit here with my son and have a chat with him this beautiful fall evening about his horrible report card?" (77). In *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove*, only other characters' fathers abuse their children—a secondary character acknowledges that his father "used to hit me a lot" (41)—and to suggest otherwise is a joke.

Although prior to *Uncle Ronald*, Doyle's narrators are never abused, they repeatedly comment upon the abuse of others. Spud Sweetgrass expresses disgust about "priests doing stuff" (*Spud Sweetgrass*

43), and he often hitches rides with drivers who are characterized as potential sexual predators: "That's the trouble with hitchhiking. There are so many weirdos driving around" (81). But despite encountering a driver who claims that he is a zipper salesman and appears overly interested in Spud's zipper and another driver who displays pictures of naked women on his windshield and invites Spud to look at more of them at home, Spud always emerges from the trucks unscathed. He recalls his parents laughing about stereotypes; they joke that flared nostrils and high pants are the identifying marks of "perverts" (9) and "abusers" (10). Dumper Stubbs, a character Spud announces that he dislikes in the very first chapter, does possess these features, but the crimes he is charged with at the end do not include sexual abuse. It is characteristic of Doyle's early fiction that Spud presents his comments about abuse in the context of a "funny conversation" (9), a nostalgic memory about what he has lost since his father died.

Similarly, in Doyle's first novel, *Hey, Dad!*, Ryan's sister, Megan, irritates her father sufficiently that he threatens, "one more word out of you and I'm going to hit you one!" (84). But Megan's father, while he often embarrasses his daughter never does hit her. In both *Hey, Dad!* and the sequel, Y*ou Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove*, the father tells jokes, the difference being that Ryan appreciates jokes such as the one about the principal "stapling his [father's] fingers to the desk" (*You Can Pick Me up* 71); Megan does not. *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove* implies that the father's behaviour in *Hey, Dad!* is symptomatic of an emerging mid-life crisis; regardless, the novel is remarkably tolerant. For example, when Megan's father is accused of being a Peeping Tom, because he shouts "PEEEEEEK-A-BOOOO" (*Hey, Dad!* 73) outside a public toilet, he dismisses the incident as a well-intentioned mistake: "I was just making a joke" (74). Megan's father reasons that it is acceptable to shout like this if the woman inside the toilet is his wife, and while Megan is constantly mortified by her father, the novel codes his behaviour as social embarrassment—aren't all adolescent girls embarrassed by their fathers?—not criminal in nature. Beginning with the words "how I hated my Dad for a while" (7), *Hey, Dad!* ends with father and daughter embracing.

Tall Tales and Truth

Megan's frustration with her father includes the way he talks: "I kept believing everything he said and then finding out that what he said wasn't true. I wasn't a kid anymore and I was starting to get quite serious about the difference between truth and lies" (*Hey, Dad!* 28). Telling the difference between truth and lies is challenging in Doyle's fiction precisely because of the legends, tall tales, anecdotes, and jokes that are such

a strong feature of his work. No one would claim that Doyle's fiction is composed entirely of tall tales, and even when novels incorporate tall tales and imitate oral storytelling techniques, they are clearly not oral. Tall tales function in novels as a disruptive element "within a larger fictional canvas" (Pinsker 251) and the context of the novel alters the way readers view the tall-tale characters: "Dovetail these colorful characters into the world of a novel and they change shape, becoming an index of the continual warfare between harder-headed claims about reality and the energy which would stretch that 'truth' into grotesquely comic shapes" (Pinsker 254). The novelist who uses tall tales often does so in order to scrutinize the limits of that discourse, to see what, if anything, remains outside the boundaries of tall-tale narratives.

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In calling Doyle a tall-tale novelist, I am referring not to a body of work composed entirely of tall tales, but to an atmosphere prevalent in much of his fiction, one which makes getting at the truth no easy matter and speaks to the exaggeration characteristic of all aspects of his humour. Carolyn S. Brown invokes similar language when she characterizes Mark Twain as the author of "tall tale fiction" (110) and argues that a folk tale genre "can be adapted and translated into literature" (viii). Although folklorists "classify as tall tales only those humorous stories which contain clear impossibilities or gross exaggerations of natural phenomena" (10), Brown, quoting Twain, observes that the "tall tale's great utility is that it can alleviate discomfort by transforming 'miserable matter' into wonderful humor" (106). She opens up the possibility that some tall tales are responses to trauma, and our very ability to laugh may require that we forget the miserable matter that prompts the story.

Brown defines the tall tale as a "fictional story . . . which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness, and . . . performs different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional" (11). Identifying the fictional basis of the tall tale seems central to its pleasure; it may also explain how the telling of tall tales serves to exclude the outsider—the one who does not get the joke (for example, the tax collectors in *Uncle Ronald*, the lawyers in *Mary Ann Alice*, and the tourists in *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove*). By "making a game of the ignorance of outsiders" (36), the teller of tall tales "promotes and reinforces group

identity, and . . . provides a means of controlling threatening situations" (33). The outsider cannot tell the difference between fiction and truth.

Although folklorists use belief to distinguish the tall tale from the legend—"a legend is a story that is believed" (Jason 134)—their accounts of the tall tale suggest that its relationship to truth is complicated. Stith Thompson refers to tall tales as "outrageous exaggerations" (214) and includes them as a subcategory within a larger category of Lies and Exaggerations. Walter Blair stresses their "exuberant combinations of fact with outrageous fiction" (Botkin 491) and B. A. Botkin insists that the "improving on actual happenings rather than outright lying is the distinguishing feature of the tall tale" (491). Brown says that a tall tale "masquerades as a true narrative" (10). These definitions highlight a central ambiguity. Does the tall tale's exaggeration combine with fact or is its exaggeration—its fiction—framed by fact? The entry on the "Tall Tale" in the *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature* does not answer this question when it defines the tall tale as "a humorous folk narrative that uses outrageous exaggeration within the frame of a realistic story—in certain situations, in order to perpetuate a hoax" (643). What are those certain situations?

Tall tales differ from legends, but they are often "linked to legendary or semi-legendary characters like Paul Bunyan . . . or occasionally to less well-known local characters" (Fowke 27). The way that the frame tale serves to introduce a group of stories about a central tall-tale figure resembles Doyle's practice. His narrators tell numerous stories about larger-than-life characters such as Mean Hughie, Uncle Ronald (seen as a giant by Mickey the first time he meets him and capable of legendary and heroic exploits of strength such as the way he saves Second Chance Lance by tying a rope round his own waist and dragging the horse up a hill,) and Lannigan, the character whose gargantuan appetite astonishes Mary Ann Alice.

The exaggeration, ambiguous truth status, and social function that characterize the tall tale also apply to the jokes Doyle's characters tell. In *Mary Ann Alice*, when Algonquin Art sets up the lawyer, we read that "It's like a little play on a stage with two people in it . . . Except the bald-headed lawyer doesn't know he's in a play" (83). The series of questions asked by Algonquin Art culminates with the defeat of the lawyer: "Y'er not too smart, are ya?" (85). Algonquin Art may not be a tall-tale hero such as Paul Bunyan, but in the game he plays with the lawyer, he firmly establishes the lawyer's outsider status.

In the author's note to *Mary Ann Alice*, Doyle situates his novel in relation to a specific historical event, the building of the Paugan Dam at Low, Quebec. The repetition of characters' names in his fiction is both comic—the many Dorises in *Easy Avenue*—and true to names commonly found

in the Ottawa and Low areas. Look up Mary Ann Alice McCrank in Google and a website titled *The McCrank Pioneer Family* provides information about the generations of McCranks that lived around Martindale and Low. But Doyle also uses names to subvert realist readings of his fiction. For example, Tommy, the narrator of *Up to Low*, the first of the Low series, about events set in 1950, states that his mother died two years before and therefore he and his father live with the germ-obsessed Aunt Dottie. The narrator of *Angel Square*, published two years later, but recounting events that occur during the first Christmas after World War II, that is almost five years earlier than the events recounted in *Up to Low*, is also called Tommy. The two novels appear to share the same narrator since the latter also lives with his father and an Aunt Dottie (albeit one who is more sympathetically portrayed). What the narrator of *Angel Square* does not have and does not notice that he is missing is a mother; she is simply not mentioned anywhere in the novel. Instead, Tommy has a "Mentally Deficient" (36) older sister, Pamela, a character who never appears in *Up to Low*. This narrative technique destabilizes the reader's ability to categorize the novels. Like the folk tales and legends Edith Fowke describes, within a realist framework, a cycle of stories is told by a narrator called Tommy. In one version, *Angel Square*, he has a sister; in another, *Up to Low*, he doesn't.[2]

Oral Storytelling in *Mary Ann Alice*

Doyle's subversion of readers' attempts to connect the characters in his different books is also evident in *Mary Ann Alice*. The novel's eponymous narrator is an oral storyteller whose narrative approach has much in common with Doyle's own practice: his fascination with retelling stories from multiple angles and his attentiveness to the way real historical events eventually take on the narrative characteristics of tall tales. In the first chapter, Mary Ann Alice summarizes the family history of a young man, Mickey McGuire Jr., whom she plans to kiss one day. Boasting that her favourite teacher says that she has "the soul of a poet" (12), she proves that she does by outlining a family tree that is more than a factual accounting of names. She tells us that Mickey is not only Ronnie O'Rourke's great nephew, but also related to many other characters whom we may have "heard about" (18). A key story we may have "heard about" is how Mickey's father, Mickey McGuire Sr., escaped from his abusive father, and how the latter—also called Mickey McGuire—subsequently died in a train accident. That Mary Ann Alice assumes that we have "heard" how a stolen and abused horse deliberately ran into a train presumes our familiarity with the novel *Uncle Ronald,* which Doyle published five years before *Mary Ann Alice*. *Uncle Ronald* takes place in 1895, thirty-one years earlier than the 1926 setting of *Mary Ann Alice*, and Mary Ann Alice's

references to the earlier events reinforce her role as an oral storyteller who tells us what she has heard from others.

In functioning as an oral storyteller, Mary Ann Alice parallels many of Doyle's characters who love to talk, and often, to make jokes about abusive situations. Undoubtedly, writing matters in the plots of Doyle's fiction—written letters figure prominently in the plots of *You Can Pick Me Up at Peggy's Cove* and *Covered Bridge*, and Tommy, the narrator of *Angel Square*, reveals the mystery of who beat up Sammy Rosenberg's father by writing 200 messages—but what Doyle's narrators primarily do is talk: comically, repetitively, and inconsistently. The opening word of *You Can Pick Me Up* is "Listen" (9); the first words of *Angel Square* are "Let me tell you about last Christmas" (7). The value of talk resonates throughout Doyle's work, producing comic digressions on the art of conversation and the desirability of being talked about. Even Steven in *Uncle Ronald* has "the look of a lad who'd never ever murder a bailiff but wouldn't mind if people *said* that he did" (92). In the course of the novel, Even Steven achieves his goal and becomes legendary; one hundred years later, people are still talking about him.

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Doyle's fiction acknowledges both the value and the political weakness of talk. Talk is class-specific, and is essentially a weapon of the powerless, one that lower-class people use precisely when the power wielded by institutional structures is turned against them or, as is the case of *Angel Square*, is indifferent to injustice. Tommy's written messages in *Angel Square* do not put an end to antisemitism in post-war Ottawa; they are successful to the extent that they provoke Tommy's neighbours to stand outside the antisemite's apartment and indulge in a combination of gossip and tall tales: "They say Mr. Logg kills little kids and he eats dem" (117). Although Tommy feels safer now that the neighbours know about Mr. Logg, he also observes that the policeman does not arrest Mr. Logg—he only talks to him.

Mary Ann Alice takes her role as an oral storyteller very seriously; in addition to informing her listeners about the distant past, she reports events that took place after the conclusion of *Uncle Ronald* and prior to the opening of *Mary Ann Alice*: "Then Great-uncle Ronnie married Cecilia Hickey. . . . Mickey Jr.'s father, Mickey Sr., grew up and married Martha McCooey, daughter of old Boner McCooey and they had Mickey Jr." (18). Possessed of knowledge that even Doyle's ideal reader cannot have, since Doyle ends *Uncle Ronald* long before Mickey Sr. grows up,

Mary Ann Alice also chooses to be silent about some details in that family history. She discreetly does not mention that the members of the McCooey clan have nicknames that are ludicrously appropriate; in fact, Doyle is similarly discreet in that he does not explain the sexual derivation of Boner McCooey's name when Mickey narrates *Uncle Ronald*. Mickey merely reports overhearing the gossip of two men: "well, we don't have to point out how he goes around all the time!" (*Uncle Ronald* 37). This technique of including both what is heard and what is not stated juxtaposed beside Mary Ann Alice's silence about the pun in Boner McCooey's name highlights a consequence of generational transmission. Oral storytellers do not simply repeat; they also omit and shift the story into another direction. Mary Ann Alice abandons her attempt to provide a coherent account of who married whom in the McGuire family, supposedly because her listener will "never be able to keep it straight anyway" (18), but more likely because the story she wishes to tell in 1926 is different.

Just as each generation of tale tellers omits some details, it may imagine details that earlier tellers refused to provide. Even from the distance of one hundred years, the narrator of *Uncle Ronald* refuses to dwell upon the dismembered nature of his father's corpse. In contrast, Mary Ann Alice is obsessed with one gory detail: "he was cut up into chunks the size of stewing meat" (20). Admitting that she only knows about the train accident indirectly as a story told to her by her father—thereby confirming that she knows about this traumatic event only as a story—Mary Ann Alice is embarrassed by her macabre fascination—should poetic young ladies dwell upon such details? She tries various storylines in order to distract herself. Finally, in what proves to be a futile attempt to ground herself in the present, she describes a stew that Mrs. Kealey is stirring, a fact that immediately leads to yet more gossip and anecdotes. She reports that Mrs. Kealey is famous for making "the best stew on the whole Gatineau River" (20–21), a mixed blessing since "[t]hey say" (21) her husband may have died from eating too much. After confiding that her father believes that "Mr. Kealey's last wish was to have the grave hole he'd be buried in filled with gravy and vegetables so he'd feel right at home" (21), Mary Ann Alice protests, "That's not true, of course, not a word of it" (21), a qualification that implies that earlier statements about Mr. Kealey are true. Sincerely wanting to tell the truth, she returns to staring at Mrs. Kealey's delicious stew, but again proves incapable of forgetting Mickey McGuire Jr.'s dead grandfather: "Other people look in the stew pot and they think of stew. But not me. How hard it is, sometimes, to have the soul of a poet!" (21).

This moment is characteristic of Doyle's work in two ways. Mary Ann Alice is clearly if secondarily traumatized by the story of how a train accident

ended the life of an abusive father—she can't help but think about it, but with time, the grotesque imagery of that death has separated from the physical abuse that occasioned it. It has become comic, not just in the linking of stew and body parts, but in the way that Mary Ann Alice justifies her ghoulish interest by attributing it to her poetic nature. As a self-proclaimed poet, she does not mean to be callous, but Mickey McGuire Jr.'s grandfather died a long time ago; the trauma the narrator experiences in *Uncle Ronald* has become separate from the gory incident that compels Mary Ann Alice's interest. Other anecdotes in Doyle's work repeat this pattern. In *Uncle Ronald*, Even Steven illustrates the pattern when he comments upon the first person killed by the Gatineau train: "We're very proud of our Jimmy. Three or four have been killed since, but you never forget the first one. . . . Cut him up into twenty or more pieces!" (62). Secondly, the distinction that Mary Ann Alice draws between truth and her father's joke is itself problematic. Mary Ann Alice says that her father's account of Mr. Kealey's last wish cannot be true, but the reader cannot therefore conclude that Mr. Kealey really did die of eating too much of his wife's stew, and that Mickey McGuire Jr.'s grandfather's mangled body really ended up resembling chunks of stew.

Haunted by Baby Bridget

The most intriguing aspect of *Mary Ann Alice* is the way it enables Doyle to look both backwards and forwards over the history of his characters, even if his narrator, Mary Ann Alice, necessarily remains oblivious to the future implications of her observations. Mary Ann Alice does not just reflect upon events that transpire thirty-one years prior to 1926; some of the comic events she reports are uncannily similar to a central traumatic incident recounted in *Up to Low*. In this novel, Tommy is infatuated with Baby Bridget who lost half her arm in a binder accident, which led her father, Mean Hughie, to hit her for being in the way. In *Mary Ann Alice*, set twenty-four years prior to the 1950 setting of *Up to Low*, Mary Ann Alice overhears an anecdote about Mean Hughie and how he intimidated a lawyer. The speakers at a picnic regale themselves with different versions of how Mean Hughie tied up a lawyer with binder twine. Even though several of the speakers suffer abuse in *Uncle Ronald*, none of them feels sorry for the lawyer in *Mary Ann Alice*. Mean Hughie's violent response in 1926 is standard comedy—the revenge of the powerless farmer upon the big-city lawyer.

Nevertheless, the parallels between Mean Hughie's behaviour in the two novels is disturbing, particularly after Mary Ann Alice claims that the sheaves of grain produced by a binder resemble "pretty little girl[s]" (24). She is not upset by this comparison; she thinks it is charming: "My father said one time I looked as pretty as a sheaf of grain. I liked it when he said

that" (25).[3] The image makes her view a cut field with "hundreds of sheaves [as] a whole lot of small groups of little girls, lying around all over the field" (25). While Mary Ann Alice's ignorance of what will happen to Mean Hughie's daughter in the future justifies the innocence of the image, Doyle as a writer is not so innocent, and neither is the reader who reads everything and is baffled by how to respond. Does Doyle also have the soul of a poet, and in his case does this mean that he keeps repeating images from his earlier work?

The reader's bewilderment increases when Mary Ann Alice concludes the chapter, "What Mean Hughie Did," with the observation that binder twine is "used for lots of things besides tying up sheaves of grain" (25). Anyone familiar with Baby Bridget's use of the same words in *Up to Low*, when she tells Tommy that binder twine can be used for anything, may wonder why Doyle also gives Mary Ann Alice the metaphor of sheaves as little girls. What is Doyle's intent here? If I am not expected to remember what is recounted in *Up to Low*, why does Mary Ann Alice's language parallel it? Am I supposed to ignore Tommy's learning in *Up to Low* of yet another use for binder twine? When he is disturbed that Baby Bridget acts as though she expects that he will hit her when she does something wrong, he is told by his father that she does so because Mean Hughie "hit her while the blood was pouring out of her poor arm" (61) and that Mean Hughie then saved his daughter's life by breaking off "a piece of binder twine, with his bare hands" (62) and used it to tie the bleeding stump.

We never know why Mean Hughie is called Mean Hughie; like Crazy Mickey he has always been called that.[4] In both *Up to Low* and *Mary Ann Alice*, the narrators have terrifying nightmares about his physical violence: Mary Ann Alice dreams of him sitting in the mess hall carving slices off the lawyer; Tommy dreams of him beating a horse.[5] In *Up to Low*, Mean Hughie is a giant who can tear apart binder twine, someone who, even when dying of cancer and pitifully shrunken, is capable of building his own coffin and climbing in. He is the subject of numerous tall tales; in one, pushed too far by Buck O'Connor's teasing about the dam, he is reputed to have cut off part of his ear: "They say that Buck went right home, looked in the mirror, took a big pair of scissors and snipped off most of his *other* ear just so's he'd look *even*!" (33–34). In *Mary Ann Alice*, although gigantic men are still prevalent—for example, Lannigan who can lift a streetcar but claims to be much weaker than his grandfather who would "lift the corner of the house" (117) to wake people up—Mean Hughie is less of a giant and more of a farmer taken advantage of by big-city interests. Unlike the anecdote about Buck O'Connor in *Up to Low* which exaggerates Mean Hughie's violence, the anecdotes about him in *Mary*

Ann Alice emphasize matters of class and power and encourage readers to regard him as a victim. Despite frightening the lawyer, his violence accomplishes nothing; the building of the Paugan Dam proceeds and raises the level of the river so that he loses half his fields. His intimidation of the lawyer only means that the lawyers must resort to more devious behaviour and more determined and effective lying to the villagers. Mary Ann Alice's anecdote about Mean Hughie and the lawyer thereby allows Doyle to deepen the class dimension of his story, and gives further evidence that the comic lies of tall tales and outrageous jokes are ethically preferable to the lies of corporate lawyers and often serve as the only weapon the villagers have.

Angel Square and *Boy O'Boy*

The signs of repetition evident in *Mary Ann Alice* are overwhelming in *Boy O'Boy*. Both *Angel Square* and *Boy O'Boy* are set in Lowertown, Ottawa in 1945. *Boy O'Boy* begins a few months earlier, just before the war's end. *Angel Square* focuses on an antisemitic attack upon Tommy's best friend's father; *Boy O'Boy* focuses on the sexual abuse of boys. In *Uncle Ronald*, Doyle softens the representation of parental abuse by making the narrator an old man who recalls the abuse from a distant past; in *Boy O'Boy*, a child narrator, Martin O'Boy, tells a much more immediate story of how he and his best friend, Billy Batson, are sexually abused by Mr. George, the man who plays the church organ. (Even when Doyle subdues the comedy, puns remain; the final chapter, recounting the punishment of Mr. George is titled "Sorriest Organ Player.") The difference between the two books is not just that one parodies the traditional Christmas story, and the other "What I Did on My Summer Holidays." From the moment that Martin introduces himself by explaining that he dislikes people who try to call him Boy O'Boy, the shift in tone is striking; unlike the earlier fiction, in *Boy O'Boy* the sexual abuse of children is treated very seriously.

Despite this difference in subject matter and tone, the verbal echoes between the two novels are extensive. In *Angel Square*, when Tommy realizes that Mr. Logg is the man who has assaulted Sammy Rosenberg's father, he is in church assisting with the communion service. Staring at Mr. Logg's "big furry tongue" (96), he identifies Logg as the assailant and immediately thinks that he hears "somebody stab an organ somewhere." He then considers how "only two or three . . . in church knew about what Mr. Logg had done" (96). Deciding to look for incriminating evidence in Logg's apartment, Tommy goes to 32 Cobourg Street, a location that places Logg very close to Martin O'Boy's home "two doors down from Cobourg Street, on Papineau" (*Boy O'Boy* 19). Tommy pretends that he just wants to sell Logg

comics with sexually sadistic images in them. As he knocks at the door, he imagines that Logg is probably asleep and therefore will still be in his underwear and "rubbing his little eyes" (98) when he opens the door. While Doyle does not tell readers what Logg is wearing when he lets Tommy in, he does describe Logg as "rubbing his eyes" and thereby leaves open the implication that Logg is indeed in his underwear. Logg sits on a "dirty bed" (99), "grunting and groaning" (100) as he peruses the comics that Tommy has brought. Tommy senses that "that there was something awful in the room with Mr. Logg and me" (101); on the next page he says that Logg grabs his "curly hair" (102)—a physical detail that until that point Doyle has not mentioned and one that connects Tommy with Martin in a more disturbing fashion than other similarities the two protagonists share, for example, that they both have cats.

The relationship between the two novels reinforces the conclusion that the story of sexual abuse is one that Doyle could not, or did not want to, tell in 1984. Martin and Billy are "summer boys in the choir . . . [replacements for] some of the regular boys who go away from Lowertown all summer to their uncles' farms or to their shacks and cabins along the rivers" (29). They attend the same school as Tommy, have some of the same teachers, and even walk across Angel Square, although there are fewer fights because it is summer time and everyone is away. There are many clues that establish that Martin is poorer than Tommy in *Angel Square*; one of them is that Tommy regularly goes to Imbro's Restaurant when he gets paid at choir, whereas Martin, who can't even afford a proper pair of shoes, normally walks past the restaurant and wistfully looks at what other people are eating.

The one time Martin enters the restaurant occurs when Mr. George invites him to have an ice cream sundae. Never having had one, Martin agrees and is tricked into ordering a sundae loaded with crème de menthe and brandy.[6] Meanwhile Mr. George, who had earlier compared the purity and beauty of Martin's voice to an "ice cream sundae" (88), orders a "banana split half the size of the table" (99). Martin is oblivious to the implications of Mr. George's gigantic hunger. Like the waitress in *Angel Square* who has "heard it all before" (77), the waitress in *Boy O'Boy* is not so innocent. Martin hears but does not react to the waitress's comment: "Another young choir singer, Mr. George?" (99). Her words not only imply that Mr. George is a serial sexual predator, they also indicate an adult complacency regarding the abuse. The waitress is not the only adult who knows about Mr. George's proclivities but fails to act; Skippy Skidmore, the music teacher and choir master at Martin's school, reprimands Mr. George after he catches him hugging Martin: "We've spoken of this before, haven't we?" (89). When Martin and Mr. George leave the

restaurant, the waitress laughs at the hangover Martin will have, and leans over him, making the pencil tucked behind her ear "look . . . as big as a log" (101).[7] More importantly, the waitress does nothing to stop Mr. George. But then neither do the affluent citizens who are upset when Martin and Billy spoil Mr. George's special organ recital by jamming the organ pipes. They gossip that Mr. George "likes to fiddle with little boys!" (148), and want him fired, but their outrage appears more directed towards the terrible music than to his sexual behaviour.

Imbro's Restaurant is not the only location found in both novels. Tommy walks down Papineau Street—the street where Martin lives—every day. This may be a trivial coincidence, but it is surely not trivial that, when Martin meets Mr. George after joining "the Protestant church choir on King Edward up the hill past Rideau Street" (19), Doyle gives directions that first appear in *Angel Square* when Tommy goes to choir practice at "Saint Albany's Anglican Church" and follows the same route: "up the hill on King Edward" (75). Once at the church, Tommy goes "down the wooden stairs to the practice room" (75). Although in *Boy O'Boy*, Doyle calls the church St. Alban's, whereas in *Angel Square* it is called Saint Albany's, its location as well as the wooden steps that lead to the basement choir hall, are remarkably similar. In *Angel Square*, the church stairs are minimally described; Tommy merely observes that the church's basement practice room reminds him of a similar room at Talmud Torah (address 171 George Street). In contrast, in *Boy O'Boy*, Angel Square gets little attention, but the stairs leading down to the church basement are repeatedly described. When Mr. George takes Martin to Heney Park and puts Martin's hand in his lap, the shocked child thinks that the engorged penis feels "like the railing going down the dark back stairs to the choir room" (104).[8]

In *Angel Square* Tommy uses a pseudonym, The Shadow, to sign the sheets that reveal the truth about Mr. Logg. Nevertheless, he freely tells Ozzie O'Driscoll "everything" (110).[9] In contrast, in *Boy O'Boy*, Martin is much more hesitant, unable to tell his mother, and only able to warn Mrs. Batson that her own son is another of Mr. George's victims by taking on another identity: "I'm not me saying this. I'm Alan Ladd so it's all right" (136). Even in this disassociated state, Martin cannot tell her everything: "I tell some more, not all" (136). What the novels share, however, is the implication that the crime each novel addresses still remains. *Angel Square* never claims that solving the mystery of the attack upon Sammy Rosenberg's father will put an end to antisemitism, and *Boy O'Boy* establishes that punishing Mr. George will not put an end to the sexual abuse of children. In both novels the resolutions happen outside the legal system. Even when Mr. Logg is identified as the man who attacked Sammy's father, the crowd outside his

apartment includes one man who says, "Jews should be beat up" (118). Similarly, although Martin's adult friend, a returning soldier, ensures that Mr. George never bothers Martin and Billy again—"we'll come for you, my friends and I, and you'll wind up the sorriest organ player that ever had a fondness for fiddling with choir boys" (157)—Doyle emphasizes that Mr. George is not the only adult attracted to Martin. About the only adult male who does not stare at Martin and want to touch him is his bad-tempered father, a man who never hits Martin, but does not hug him either. Male teachers put their hands in Martin's curly blond hair; the ice man calls him "pretty boy" (69); even his ever-silent grandfather stares at Martin until he feels uncomfortable and naively concludes that he is staring because he envies his hair. Martin's grandmother tells him that he is a "beautiful, beautiful boy" (26) and will have to live with the consequences for the rest of his life. That the consequences primarily refer to increased sexual vulnerability is evident when the grandmother's words are followed by Martin's description of the Aztec priests' sacrifice of a beautiful naked boy. Just as Martin is terrified by the picture of the trap door spider precisely because he can imagine being its victim, he senses his vulnerability long before the attack by Mr. George leads him into a huge and suffocating spider's web.

Although *Boy O'Boy* does not rid itself totally of the tall tales, wild names, and plentiful jokes that characterize Doyle's fiction, Martin rarely laughs. The tales through which Billy idealizes his father mask the reality of his illness and his incarceration in "the loony bin" (67); the stories that Mr. George tells about his military career are shabby lies intended to seduce Martin. Martin says that his father's jokes are funnier when he is out than when he is at home, and home is a place where he wishes he didn't live. His twin brother, Phil, is mentally disabled, but unlike Tommy's relationship with his disabled sister in *Angel Square*, Martin's attitude to his brother is resentful. Whenever he needs his mother's sympathy, she is distracted by the more pressing needs of her other son—literally so; at one point Phil's arm is caught in a washing-machine wringer. *Boy O'Boy* begins with the death of Martin's grandmother and his memory of how she always carried an umbrella. He recalls that his mother attributes this eccentric behaviour to the shock his grandmother experienced when she had to use her umbrella to blind a man who was stalking her. Once Martin deduces that the stalker was Billy Batson's father and that the attack was caused by Mr. Batson's brain disease, the anecdote shifts from the comic tale of Granny successfully outwitting a stalker to a story that's not very funny at all. When Martin later uses his grandmother's umbrella to alter the organ pipes, Mr. George takes on an inhuman aspect that stresses Martin's perception of him as a

monstrous spider. There is nothing funny about this novel's resolution.

According to the press release announcing that he had won the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for *Boy O'Boy*, Doyle writes "to present evidence and bear witness" ("Canadian Library Association"). Such language, reminiscent of references to bearing witness in Holocaust testimony, may explain why *Boy O'Boy* necessarily departs from Doyle's earlier comic practice: comic and exaggerative forms are highly problematic as bearers of witness. They are undoubtedly human responses; they help us to master and control situations over which we may have little control, but they are untrustworthy as statements of truth. The inhabitants of Low tell tall tales and outrageous jokes, but as *Mary Ann Alice* illustrates, they are nearly always defeated by the powerful who do not get the joke. Those who suffer abuse need more than jokes to protect them.

. . . comic and exaggerative forms are highly problematic as bearers of witness.

What appears crucial is why adults tell children jokes and tall tales. In my own childhood, I was the recipient of a special tall tale, one designed just for me. I knew that my Uncle Ben was not really Prince Richard of Poland, cousin to Queen Elizabeth, and the author of letters that always came stamped with a royal seal that resembled the seals decorating the purple bags of Crown Royal. I knew that he wasn't really a prince, but could not prove it; what I never knew, not even as an adult, was much about the truth regarding his life during World War Two, events that may have encouraged this kind man to create such a preposterous autobiography.[10] Like Mary Ann Alice, I knew "That's not true, of course, not a word of it" (21), but delighted in the story's details as much as I enjoyed trying to expose what he refused to say. At the cost of not knowing the true story that he did not want to tell, I learned the etiquette of laughter and lying.

Notes

[1] Of Doyle's eleven novels, only the first two—*Hey, Dad!* and its sequel *You Can Pick Me up at Peggy's Cove*—are set outside Ottawa and the Gatineau hills. *Spud Sweetgrass* and *Spud in Winter*, while set in Ottawa, make no references to the characters and incidents developed in the Low series. *The Low Life* collects *Uncle Ronald, Angel Square, Easy Avenue, Covered Bridge*, and *Up to Low*.

[2] Doyle's sister died in 1949. This autobiographical explanation for the absence of Tommy's sister in *Up to Low*, a novel set one year after the death of Doyle's sister, does not explain why Doyle reinscribes her death by killing off another family member, one who otherwise never appears in the Low novels: "We hadn't been up to Low since my mother died two years before" (11). The sister's absence thus marks the complex relationship between Doyle and his narrators, as well as the limits of his comedy. There is no logical reason why Doyle couldn't invent a sister for Tommy other than the blurring of his own 1950 memories with those of Tommy; imagining Tommy in 1950, it seems he is unwilling to invent a narrator able to joke so soon after a sister's recent death.

[3] Tim Wynne-Jones praises the "sweet, offbeat imagery" (183) of the passage.

[4] We do learn in *Mary Ann Alice* that Mean Hughie's last name is Mahoney (90).

[5] The image of beating a horse will later be central to Doyle's exploration of abuse in *Uncle Ronald*.

[6] Crème de menthe is the liqueur that enables Frank in *Up to Low* to break his promise not to drink ever again. He has found a loophole since crème de menthe is not "beer, liquor, or wine" (109). In *Boy O'Boy*, crème de menthe is similarly deceptive since Mr. George uses it to get Martin drunk. In contrast to Frank, Martin is totally ignorant of its alcoholic content.

[7] Doyle clearly uses the restaurant episode to foreshadow the sexual abuse that immediately follows it. The pencil as big as a log is not just phallic; it raises the question of why the villain in *Angel Square* is called Mr. Logg.

[8] Doyle mentions Heney Park only once in *Angel Square*, but does not locate any of the novel's episodes in that setting (60). Heney Park, it appears, is off limits to Doyle's imagination in the earlier novel.

[9] O'Driscoll is a policeman who moonlights as Santa Claus. In contrast, Mr. George masquerades as a war hero.

[10] I learned some of the details in a profile published late in his life in the *Canadian Jewish News*. There I read of his escape from Poland, his internment in a labor camp in northern Siberia, and his service in the Polish Army, "part of the Eighth British Army . . . that participated in the invasion of Italy" (Gasner 47). These were details my uncle never once mentioned to me.

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