

'Noisy, hilarious, tragic. A carnival of a novel'
THE TIMES

SKIPPY DIES



PAUL
MURRAY

'Outrageously enjoyable'
GUARDIAN

'A brilliant comic writer'

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2010 COSTA NOVEL AWARD

**'A BLAST OF A BOOK . . . BIG, GENEROUS,
HEARTFELT, FUNNY AND SAD' *IRISH TIMES***

'Skippy and Ruprecht are having a doughnut-eating race one evening when Skippy turns purple and falls off his chair . . .'

And so begins this epic, tragic, comic, brilliant novel set in and around Dublin's Seabrook College for Boys. Principally concerning the lives, loves, mistakes and triumphs of overweight maths-whiz Ruprecht Van Doren and his roommate Daniel 'Skippy' Juster, it features a frisbee-throwing siren called Lori, the joys (and horrors) of first love, the blatant misuse of prescription drugs, Carl (the official school psychopath), various attempts to unravel string theory . . . while at the same time exploring the very deepest mysteries of the human heart.

'Hilarious, heartbreaking, totally engrossing. A triumph' *DAILY MAIL*

'Ambitious, wise, funny, fiercely intelligent. The beauty of this cynical, hopeful, beautifully written book is that it builds a detailed world to explore life, the universe and everything' *SUNDAY EXPRESS*

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'One of the most enjoyable, funny and moving reads of this year. A rare tragicomedy that's both genuinely tragic and genuinely comic' *GUARDIAN*

'Darkly comic, dazzles, every line drips ideas for fun. Unputdownably funny, captivating. A masterpiece' *METRO*

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From here, aside from its eerie emptiness, the Memorial Gardens looks like any other park. The grassy lawn stretches off into the distance, rising on its left to a hill; the wind ruffles the water of the river to the right, and whispers through the leafless trees lining the avenue. The only edifice in sight is a small stone gazebo. They walk down and crowd into it. Inside a stanza from a Rupert Brooke poem is inscribed in the floor:

We have found safety with all things undying,
The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth,
The deep night, and birds singing, and clouds flying,
And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth . . .

'Look -' Henry Lafayette points up the hill. A tall stone cross can now be seen, looming over the crest. They climb towards it, talking less now; fanning out over the grass, they appear to Howard younger again, as if they are going backwards in time.

At the top of the hill they find themselves in a long garden, encircled by trees and ivy-clad colonnades. Water trickles into the basins of two identical fountains, winter roses grow in the borders. The surrounding city can no longer be seen: they might be in the garden of a country manor, were it not for the towering cross, and, about a hundred feet in front of it, a white stone sarcophagus.

'*Their name liveth on forevermore,*' Dewey Fortune reads from its side.

'Whose name?'

'The Irish soldiers', you spa.'

'They got that wrong,' Muiris says.

Lucas Rexroth shivers. 'This place is spooky.'

This provokes a chorus of ghostly *woohooos*; but Lucas is right.

The chilly air that shrinks their voices, the wet grass and lonesomeness, the strange disconnection from the world around, the inexplicable sense of having *interrupted something* . . . they give the garden the character of an afterworld – the kind of place you can imagine waking up in, stretched out on the grass, immediately after some horrific collision. The damp air swirls around them; gradually, the boys' chatter peters out, and they shuffle about uncomfortably until each of them is facing Howard. For a moment he waits, reluctant to dispel the curious chanting silence. Then: 'Okay,' he says. 'The Dublin Pals.' And he begins to tell them what Slattery told him about 'D' Company – how they had joined up together from the school rugby clubs, how, while Robert Graves shivered and fought off rats in a ditch in France, they were dispatched to the furnace of the Dardanelles. 'They were landed on beaches along the Gallipoli peninsula – hundreds of them, packed into a tiny space, waiting to be told what to do. Days went by, dysentery, enteritis, fever broke out, shrapnel was going off overhead the whole time, wounded and dead men were being carried through on stretchers, huge swarms of flies buzzed from corpses into the mouths of the living so it was almost impossible to sleep or eat.

'Finally the order came through for an attack on Kiretch Tepe Sirt, a long ridge overlooking the bay. The men set out in unbearable heat that only got worse as the day went on. They hadn't been given enough water and the Turks had poisoned the wells. They hadn't been given enough ammo either and they soon ran out of that too. Near the top of the ridge they found themselves pinned down by Turkish guns. They sent for reinforcements but none came. It got so hot the gorse caught fire, and they had to listen to their own wounded being burned alive.

'They spent the night trapped on the mountain, being picked off one by one. When they ran out of bullets, they threw stones. One Pal, Private Wilkin, started catching Turkish grenades and throwing them back – he did this five times before the sixth grenade exploded in his hand. At last, after hours of watching their friends being slaughtered, the men – Seabrook men, Clongowes

men, St Michael's men and others, who a week before had never been out of the country, most of them, let alone experienced enemy fire – mounted a bayonet charge on the Turkish guns. During this charge, Juster's great-grandfather, William Molloy, got shot in the hand and had to crawl back to his own lines. He was one of the lucky ones. Half the Pals were lost that night.

'After that episode the Allies changed their plans. The division packed up and the remnants of the Pals were split up and transferred to Salonika. As their ship sailed away, as they left their friends behind them on the cliffs and hillsides, the men vowed that their sacrifice, what had happened there, would not be forgotten. But as we've seen, it was forgotten. Or rather, it was deliberately erased. It seems pretty hard luck, after enduring so many terrible hardships and pointless deaths. But that's what happened. The years went by and the Pals became casualties again, this time of history.'

He stows his notebook in his bag and looks up at the boys looking back at him, dotted around the viridian sward in clumps of three and four, like rain-jacketed statues.

'It's hard for us, living in peacetime, to imagine the mindset of the people who lived through the war. So many men had been killed, one in every six who served, and there was barely anyone who wasn't touched by loss in some way. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives. Friends. This was a world overwhelmed by grief, and the ways that that grief manifested could be quite extreme. In France, for example, there was a plague of graverobbing. Poor families spent every penny they had on locating their sons' bodies and bringing them home from the Front. In Britain there was a huge outbreak of spiritualism. Fathers and mothers held seances to speak with their dead sons. Very respectable, normally quite rational people got involved. There was even the case of the celebrated scientist, a pioneer in electromagnetic waves, who believed he could use them to build a bridge between our world and the next, "tune in" to the world of the dead.'

He halts momentarily, thrown by Ruprecht Van Doren, who is

goggling at him as if he's choking on something. 'Above all, though,' he fumbles for his thread, 'people coped with their grief by remembering. They wore poppies in honour of their loved ones. They erected statues and built cenotaphs. And all over Europe, in villages, towns and cities, they opened memorial gardens like this one. This particular garden was different to all the others, though. Can anyone tell me why? He gazes evenly from face to pallid face. 'This garden was never actually opened. It wasn't begun until the thirties, and it wasn't completed until the very end of the century. For the decades in between it was let run wild. People grazed their horses here, dealers used it to sell drugs. It was the memorial garden that no one remembered. And it represented most Irish people's attitude to the war, which was to bury it.'

'The fact is that, after the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, the Irishmen who'd fought in the Great War didn't fit the new way the country imagined itself. If the British were our sworn enemies, why had two hundred thousand Irishmen gone off to fight alongside them? If our history was the struggle to escape from British oppression, what were we doing helping Britain out, fighting and dying on her behalf? The existence of these soldiers seemed to argue against this new thing called Ireland. And so, first of all, they were turned into traitors. Then, in a quite systematic way, they were forgotten.'

The boys listen palely, the lucent grass-green of the empty park shimmering around them.

'It's a good example of how history works,' Howard says. 'We tend to think of it as something solid and unchanging, appearing out of nowhere etched in stone like the Ten Commandments. But history, in the end, is only another kind of story, and stories are different from the truth. The truth is messy and chaotic and all over the place. Often it just doesn't make sense. Stories make things make sense, but the way they do that is to leave out anything that doesn't fit. And often that is quite a lot.'

'The men of "D" Company, like the other men who fought, found this out the hard way. They were told all kinds of stories to

get them to join up, stories about duty and morality and defending freedom. Most of all, they were told what a great adventure it would be. When they arrived they discovered that none of these stories was true. Instead they had been lied to and plunged into the most brutal and barbarous mess in the world's history to that point. And the history that was told of that mess was as dishonest as the stories that helped create it.

'When they left Dublin in 1914, with crowds cheering them on, the Pals must have thought that the very least they could hope for was to be remembered. Then again, after so much betrayal, maybe the ones that were left alive afterwards weren't all that surprised it went the other way. And maybe they were wise enough not to let it get to them. They had joined up as friends, and when they got out to the Front, when the grand words evaporated, that bond between them remained. That they stayed friends, that they looked out for each other, most agreed, was what kept them from cracking up altogether. And in the end was the only thing, was the one true thing, that was genuinely worth fighting for.'

He smiles summatively at the boys; they gaze mutely back at him, in their grey uniforms for all the world like an incorporeal platoon, materialized out of the winter clouds to scour the bare park for someone who has not forgotten them.

That night, for the first time in months, the construction work has stopped. The silence is so pristine as to be almost uncanny. Howard feels a light-headedness as he opens his books.

The boys had been quiet on their way back to the station. At first he was afraid he had depressed them, but as the train led them out of the city back along the coast, they emerged from their private reveries with questions:

'So, like, Seabrook students back then, would all of them have been fighting in the war?'

'Well, like you they had parents who were paying a lot of money for their education. So I'd guess that most would have graduated before they joined up. But plenty volunteered after that, I'm sure.'

'And did they get shot?'

'In some cases, I imagine.'

'Wow, I wonder if their ghosts haunt the school.'

'Duh, their ghosts haunt the battlefield, you spasm.'

'Oh sorry, I forgot to consult the world-renowned ghost expert, who knows everything about where ghosts go to haunt people.'

'If you were interested -' Howard intervening gently 'I'm sure you could find out who joined up and what happened to them.'

'How?'

'Why don't I look into it, and we can talk about it next class.'

He had shepherded them to Seabrook's double-doors and then done a swift volte-face, not yet ready to confront his fate - imagining, as he walked to his car, a hooked finger tugging down a louvre of Venetian blind in an upstairs window ... Tonight, though, spirits lifted by the boys' interest, he wonders if the situation is as bleak as all that. Isn't it possible that, with the right

spin, the story of William Molloy might snag the Automator too? A tale of Seabrook spirit elaborated onto the world stage; a former great, let slip by history, rediscovered by his schoolmates of a century later - wouldn't that be perfect material for, say, a 140th anniversary celebration? Perfect enough for the Acting Principal to overlook Howard's unorthodox (brilliantly unorthodox?) methodology, and allow him to continue, with his formerly recalcitrant class, his groundbreaking work?

The car park the following morning is crowded with company cars. Today is the first day of the annual milk round, in which representatives of various strands of Big Business - Seabrook fathers and old boys, for the most part - come in and speak one-to-one with final-year students. It was just such an interview, a decade earlier, that had set Howard on the road to London. He can still see Ryan Connolly's dad leaned back in his chair, expanding at length on the futures market and the fortunes to be made there, while on the other side of the table the young Howard thought deeply about Ryan Connolly's car, Ryan Connolly's enormous house with swimming pool, the exotic-sounding holidays to Disney World, St Tropez, Antibes, which Ryan Connolly and Ryan Connolly's dad and Ryan Connolly's incredibly hot mum went on every year.

He's in the staffroom, boiling the kettle for tea, when he realizes that Brother Jonas has materialized beside him. 'You gave me a fright,' he jokes, clutching his chest. The little man does not return his smile, merely gazes at Howard a moment with those infinitely deep, melting-chocolate eyes. Then he chants, in his soft musical voice, 'Greg would like to see you now.' With that, like a spirit guide, he glides away, not looking back to see if Howard is following.

A group of sixth-years loiter by the entrance to the Senior Rec Room, where tables and chairs have been set out for the milk round interviews. They are wearing suits - the school encourages a professional approach to the proceedings - of the same taste-fully muted tones as the expensive marques in the car park. The

change of wardrobe emboldens them; they lean against the door jamb, pronouncing on various topics with careless waves of the hand, the future that has been laid out for them at last being revealed. Howard nods cursorily as he passes them, and they nod back, looking him up and down, perhaps noticing for the first time the less than fresh cut of his own attire.

Howard enters the office to find the Automator behind his desk, staring intensely at a framed photograph of his boys. Following Howard in and closing the door, Brother Jonas installs himself in the corner, from which he shimmers discreetly like a piece of corporate art. The aquarium bubbles gently.

'You wanted to see me, Greg?' Howard says at last.

'I wouldn't say that, Howard. No, that's not how I'd put it at all.' The Automator sets down the photograph, runs a hand over his haggard face. 'Howard, do you know how many messages I had waiting for me when I came in this morning? Take a guess.'

Howard is starting to experience a familiar sinking feeling. 'I don't know, Greg. Eight?'

'Eight.' The Automator smiles ruefully. 'Eight. I wish it were eight. Eight we might have been able to deal with. The answer is twenty-nine. Twenty-nine messages, all of them pertaining to your little exodus. None of them, just so we're clear, telling me what an excellent idea it was.'

The school bell rings for the beginning of class. Howard twitches automatically at the door - 'It's taken care of,' the Automator says leadenly. He rolls his chair back from the desk and in the same dull voice says, 'Tell me, Howard - it's not going to make any difference, of course, but just for my own enlightenment - tell me what you thought you were doing, taking your class off the premises without permission?'

'I wanted to bring them to the museum, Greg. I know it was unorthodox, but I really felt they'd benefit. And they did genuinely seem to get a lot out of it.'

'I don't doubt that,' the Automator says. 'Teacher wigs out, pulls them out of class to wander around the city for the day, I'm

sure they had a gay old time. But you see I'm trying to run a school here, Howard. I'm trying to run a school, not a circus.' Howard realizes the Acting Principal's hands are trembling. Suddenly he is very thankful for the brother's presence.

'Greg, I really am sorry I didn't tell you. It was a snap decision and in retrospect I suppose I may have made the wrong call. But in order to complete this module we've been working on, I honestly believed that the class needed to see some actual historical evidence.'

'Oh, is that so?' The Automator folds his hands on his stomach. 'That's very interesting, Howard, because what I'm hearing is that you didn't see any actual historical evidence. What I'm hearing is that you took them to a park in the middle of Junkieville, where you proceeded to tell them about some dismal massacre from a hundred years ago that does not feature on the Junior Cert History course. Is that correct?'

'Yes, but - but the thing is, Greg, they really understood it. I mean they really connected with it.'

'Why the hell would we want them to connect with it?' the Automator exclaims, vein in his temple throbbing double-time. 'Why would any parent in his right mind want the teacher of his children bringing them to an inner-city graveyard to tell them horror stories? Any more than he'd want him telling them that history is . . . is - he seizes a page from the desk - "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy". Did you use those words, Howard? Were those your words?'

'I think it was TS Eli-'

'I don't care if it was Ronald McDonald! Do you think parents pay ten grand a year so their kids can learn about futility and anarchy? Take a look at the curriculum. Do you see futility and anarchy on it anywhere? Do you?'

Before Howard can reply, the Automator has steamrolled on. 'I've been doing a little historical investigation of my own,' he says, producing a ring-binder crammed with slight, fastidious handwriting - whose? 'See what other interesting things the boys have been

learning in your class, such as . . . oh yes, here's a good one, "If any question why we died, Tell them, because our fathers lied." That's great, Howard! Our fathers lied! I don't see any problem with that, do you? I can't see any issues of, of authority or discipline arising out of that one, no. Our fathers lied, why not? And our mothers are prostitutes? And here's how to crack the lock on the drinks cabinet? And then we have Mr Graves -' He brandishes a copy of *Goodbye to All That* - a carefully laminated copy. Howard closes his eyes. Jeekers. Are you aware that in the first part of this book, the author details a homosexual affair he has with a boy in his boarding school? Do you think that's the kind of material that a teacher should be presenting to impressionable young men in a Christian school? Or do you think that because Father Furlong isn't in charge, the rules no longer apply? Is that how you see it, Howard? Everybody's swinging, anything goes? He's on his feet now, face an apocalyptic red. And meanwhile you've fallen about a million miles behind your own class plan! My God, Howard, I thought we'd been through this! I thought I told you, no more war! Teach what's in the damn book!

'And what if there's nothing in the book?' Howard, beginning to lose his temper, raises his voice.

'What?' the Automator shouts back, as if they're standing at either end of a wind tunnel.

'What if there's nothing in the book, what if the book is empty?'

'Empty, Howard?' He's got the history book here too, he picks it up and ruffles through the pages. 'Doesn't look empty to me. Looks like it's full of history. Full of it.'

'Don't we have a responsibility to give both sides of the story? To make some gesture towards the truth?'

'You have a responsibility to teach what you're paid to teach! I don't care if it's the history of tic-tac-toe, if it's on the curriculum you go in there and you teach it, and you teach it in such a way that there's an outside chance a tiny fragment of it will remain alive in those boys' brains, so that they can dredge it up and repeat it in the state exams!'

'I see, so it doesn't matter if I'm perpetuating lies, then. It doesn't matter that your curriculum leaves out forty thousand dead men, including alumni of this very school. That to you is an acceptable version of history, and a cover-up is an appropriate thing to teach the boys -'

'A cover-up?' the Automator repeats incredulously, spittle flying from his mouth. 'A cover-up?'

'A cover-up, yes, something that, even though it was ninety years ago, still no one wants to talk about -'

'Jesus Christ, Howard.' The Automator runs his hand through his hair. 'This isn't some kind of giant conspiracy! Parents aren't ringing me up because they're worried you're getting close to the truth! They're ringing me up because some crackpot teacher popped a gasket and ran off with their children! That's what people think about, Howard! Reality! Don't you understand that? Why aren't my son's grades better? Will I get my new kitchen in beech or stripped pine? How's the Algarve for golf this time of year? This - this is the past, Howard. The First World War, the Easter Rising, a bunch of maniacs shooting and speechifying and waving flags, it's the past! And no one cares about it! The reason they don't talk about it is that they don't care!'

'You have to teach them to care,' Howard murmurs, remembering.

'Teach them to care?' the Automator repeats, as if stupefied. 'Teach them to - wait, do you think this is some kind of a *Dead Poets Society* situation we're in here, is that it? You think that this is some kind of a *Dead Poets*, where we're the evil tyrannical school, and you're, ah - damn it, the man, he was Mork, and he dressed up as the nanny -'

'Robin Williams?'

'Correct, that you're Robin Williams? Is that it, Howard? Because if that's it, let me just ask you something - whose interests are you serving, spending six weeks on something that's covered here in the textbook in a single page? Is it really for the boys? Or is it for yourself?'

Burning as he is with righteous anger, this question catches Howard off guard.

'Maybe you're right,' the Automator continues, 'maybe the book does leave a chunk of stuff out. And maybe in the future someone will dig it up, and make a TV documentary, and there'll be exhibitions and pull-out newspaper supplements and people all over the country will be talking about it. But when they're finished talking, Howard, then they'll go back to their kitchens or their golfing holidays or whatever they were doing before. The "truth", as you put it, won't change a goddamn thing.