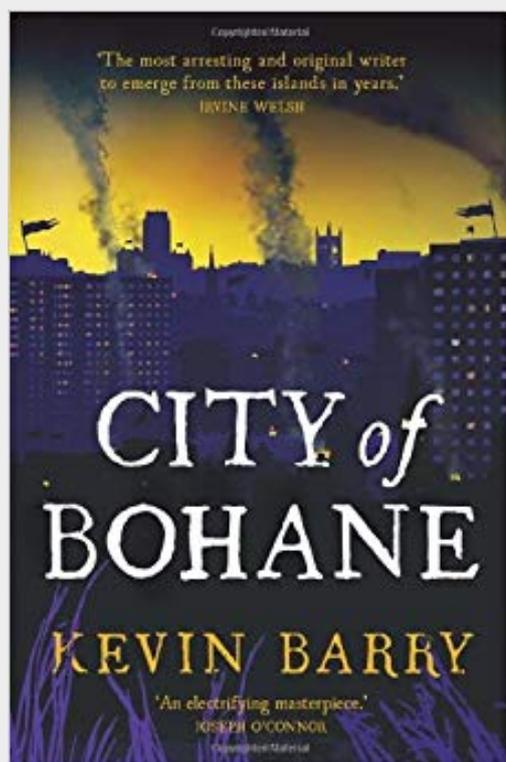


## City of Bohane by Kevin Barry



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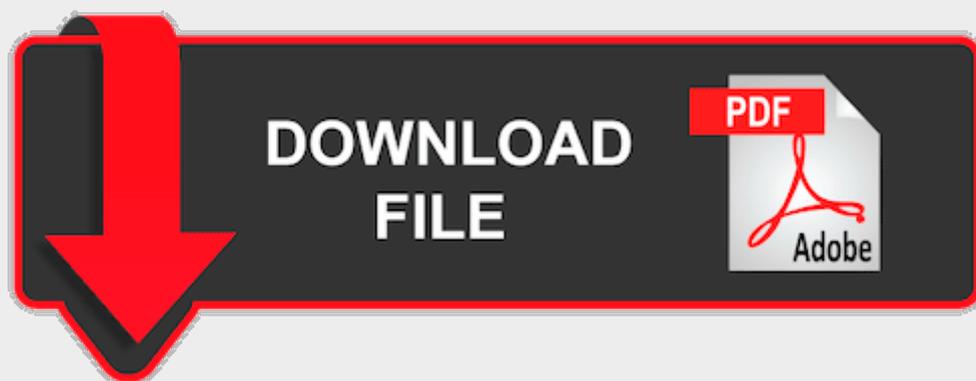
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As if Joyce had sat down and written Sin City -- this is the cool, comic, violent and lyrical debut novel from Ireland's most talented new writer. Thirty or so years in the future. The once-great city of Bohane on the west coast of Ireland is on its knees, infested by vice and split along tribal lines. There are the posh parts of town, but it is in the slums and backstreets of Smoketown, the tower blocks of the North Rises and the eerie bogs of the Big Nothin' that the city really lives. For years it has all been under the control of Logan Hartnett, the dapper godfather of the Hartnett Fancy gang. But they say his old rival Gant Broderick is back; there is dissent within the Fancy ranks; there are problems with the missus... and then there's his mother. **City of Bohane** is a provincial noir of mesmerising imagination and vaulting linguistic invention. Cool and comic, violent and lyrical, it is a taste of the startlingly new.



## Reviews of the City of Bohane by Kevin Barry



## 1. Flamekiller

I've enjoyed Kevin Barry's short stories and was excited to pick up his first novel.

This is a rich, dense gangland saga set in a strange Irish seaside town of Bohane. Strange because although ostensibly set on Ireland's west coast, Barry draws such a vivid picture it's a place that's all his own.

"Smoketown was hoors, herb, fetish parlours, grog pits, needle alleys, dream salons and Chinese restaurants".

Just when you think you've got a handle on the scene, with two warring gangs, up pops a third: a tribe of semi-wild aborigines who speak Jamaican patois.

It's equally difficult to pinpoint exactly when this is set: at times, it feels like dandified Teddy Boy Britain, at other times, futuristic, but it's a future in which technology has failed us, and humankind has reverted to no tech tribal warfare. Mercifully, there's not a mobile phone in sight.

Barry has acknowledged the influence of Anthony Burgess, and like the Manchester master, he has invented a language all his own: "Cusacks gonna sulk up a welt o' vengeance by 'n' by and if yer askin' me, like? A rake of them tossers bullin' down off the Rises is the las' thing Smoketown need."

This immerses you even further into his strange world, and it's a rewarding, if alarming experience.

As with Burgess' Clockwork Orange there are some startling scenes of ultraviolence.

Our hero, if you can call him such, is The Gant, who, after a long period of banishment, returns to Bohane to: do what exactly? We think it's to confront his one time nemesis, Logan, the gangleader who bosses this place, and has the politicians, police and newspapers all in his pocket. But I was never sure exactly what his motives were.

At its heart there is a touching love story, and the language is delightful and thrilling, but I felt the story rather petered out towards the end.

## 2. Danrad

This is a novel and difficult to typify. It is the story of territorial power struggle between the putative brokers who ply a region with which you are most likely unfamiliar. The City of Bohane is the center of the universe gravitationally affecting such planets as the Dunes, the North Country, and other surrounds. The area is connected by the 98 steps which if you are familiar with the east side of the greater Detroit area you will recognize as the 94 corridor complete with its very own 8 Mile. To keep this novel from over running my imagination I repositioned the turf as Grosse Pointe, St Clair Shores, the lower East Side, Belle Isle, Eastern Market, and Mt Clemens. The river which flows through and defines the setting of this futuristic, perhaps post apocalyptic (lost years) story is simply the Detroit River. But make no mistake; this is Ireland and the time frame is the 2050's. A cadre of characters reminiscent of a younger Godfather, Lucy Liu straight out of Kill Bill, a group of lieutenants with an eye on being the top dog in the second level, and the Huns at the gate, ghost around the landscape.

The apparent locus of influence, Logan Hartnet (Long Fella), despite his smooth operation and dangerous, if only edgy, persona is, as it turns out, not the true power that rocks the throne. That trophy goes to his mom Girly, an enormous reclusive John Jameson drinking presence who seems to be equally addicted to her "room" and the past, and especially the American acting scene from 1950's Hollywood. At age 90 she know two things: 1. time will take her out & 2. her son, the heir apparent, is weak in ways not evident to the adoring populace.

When you start this wonderful tale you may want to take some notes. Unless you are familiar with futuristic Irish street slang and back country vernacular it will feel initially like you are reading this novel in another language. (Tell ye this for thruppence: many a yella moon has shone on the glorified pig's Mickey that is the Bohane peninsula since we had seen the likes of an eight-family mobbed descent off the Northside Rises.) The character development is deliberately obscure and fed to you like puppy scraps. You are glad in the end that you didn't know then what you don't know now (apologies to Bob Seger). I may have missed it but I never did figure out who was narrating this saga. I don't think it matters but it may have been that omnipresent "observer" we are all familiar with.

There are two things missing from that brave new world and I only noticed this after a quarter of the book. There are no motor vehicles and despite some very brutal, explicit, but not gratuitous, violence there are no guns. The weapons of choice are steel toed boots and knives of varying types and sizes. If you are familiar with the Irish riots depicted in the

Gangs of New York you'll get the picture. The names are the stuff of mafia nostalgia: Ol Boy, Big Dom, Prince Tubby, Eyes, Wolfie, etc.

But wait... could this be a love story, too? The Godfather's wife is Macu (think im'macu'late) and she was and is a beauty despite an odd flaw. From out of the past (25 years) a one time suitor, Gant, is back in town. He is big, good looking, charismatic, clever and wants, apparently what could have been his. The years have been good to him and he still turns the heads of men and women alike. If you're looking for the main theme you might find that it is lost in the minor plays and a struggle for survival in a bizarre terrain which I almost always pictured as that sepia toned backdrop every Mad Max fan knows and loves. There is no hard ending but you will recognize the concept of a new status quo as a beginning and if you were going to write this book, in retrospect, that is the way you would. 3\* GIBO

### 3. Amarin

This is not a great work of plotting or character development. There is no tremendous insight that bubbles up or any deep satiric or other voice at work that has huge things to teach the reader. What there is though is a really terrific writer at work writing an immensely well crafted and entertaining story. The language of the book is funny, clever, deeply sad in spots, and always just what it needs to be to involve the reader in what is going on in the narrative. I didn't really care too much what happened to any of the characters, but I was very invested in finding out how it would be described.

Mr. Barry also manages to communicate a strong sense of place; the west of Ireland that isn't really the west of Ireland, but is perhaps more the west of Ireland than the actual place. He credits Anthony Burgess as a major influence, which he obviously was, and like Burgess, he manages to take the imagination into the most important parts of place, in a sense its emotional touch points, while being very comfortable taking all sorts of liberties with description; Bohane is like Burgess' Britain or any number of fantastic sights around the world that couldn't possibly be but come off as absolutely authentic.

His characters tend to be types and he is a painterly narrator, showing us the image of the old woman and the whiskey, the boys with the homicidal boot heels and carefully arranged hair, etc., and providing them with

dialogue that perfectly suits the image and associations his descriptions conjure up. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and Beatlebone as well.

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