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## REVIEW: NOVEL

# Looking through this child's eyes reveals nothing

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED APRIL 9, 2006

### >>> Carry Me Down

M.J. Hyland

Canongate Books / 192 pages / \$23

If we got rid of the child narrator, would anybody miss him? Surely his characteristics have gone from enduring to inuring. First and most foremost, there's his fractured family, usually in the form of a drunken father and an ineffectual mother - one overly close to her charge, mourning a great and fragile beauty. His parents have often produced an alternately raging and principled older brother, already dead or soon to die, and a preternaturally innocent young sister, who utters gnomic statements and, if the older brother lives, is not long for this world herself. Our child narrator has a mildly offensive habit he mentions too often - say, dandruff-examining or toe-picking. This regression stands in stark contrast to his body, which is erupting with pimples, perspiration and all the other hallmarks of pubescence.

But the author loves him nonetheless and wants us to love him too. Don't we know his curious obsession signals his uniqueness (never mind it is often with The Guinness Book of World Records)? Is it even necessary to note that he rarely goes over big with his peers? But his special power counters his alienation from the schoolyard overlords. His tragic belief in a magical strength, the reader is meant to understand, is his dim way of coping with his

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miserable life. And if that's not enough to break our hearts, the narrator's voice will. Be it manic, obsessive, ebullient or - worst - entirely without affect, it is here to remind us: It's Hard Out Here for a Kid.

John Egan, Irish novelist M.J. Hyland's 12-year old protagonist in *Carry Me Down*, is about par for the course. His father, often away nights, is filled with sarcasm rather than ambition. John's father has installed the family with his mother, who barely suffers their presence. His parents alternately romance each other and fight, leaving John, otherwise his mother's comrade, bewildered by his place in the home.

John is big enough to be mistaken for a man but young enough to lose control of his bladder, which, as you can imagine, cements his place in the classroom pecking order. He scratches his head obsessively, leaving a bloody hole. He is not a bright student, and his book of choice is, in fact, *The Guinness Book of World Records*, where he believes he will wind up one day, for he has the power to tell when people are lying. Such proof as he can garner he maintains in his journal, which he calls "The Gol of Seil" ("The Log of Lies"), a backward mirror to his view of the world.

But if we are to feel the loss of his innocence acutely, John must be thrust under the burden of adult consciousness at some point. The story's pivotal crisis occurs when the father strikes John's grandmother, and she kicks them out. The family winds up in a grimy Dublin housing development, where the elevators are filled with sticky urine, John loses his motorized car to a hallway gang, and John's father begins to visit the prostitutes upstairs. Since we must see through John's blinders, we hear that the women "run the sewing machine" and "bang their canes" all night. The narrator's method of letting us know what this really means is suitably opaque, but this now seems coy rather than poignant.

Like a reader coming across the Gol of Seil, readers of *Carry Me Down* must crack a tediously obvious code, then be irritated when the text yields so little. Meanwhile, the narrative, punctuated by events of little consequence, spools out like a bus station's grainy security video. But had the author compressed them into a short story, we might still wonder why we'd been forced into this narrator's company.

The most famous childhood narrator - *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Scout - is the lens through which the reader sees not only her world, but the town, the South and a country just awakening to the crisis of institutional racism. Through John's eyes, we can barely see John Egan - and what he sees shows us nothing at all.

*Lizzie Skurnick, a Baltimore writer, is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog at [www.theoldhag.com](http://www.theoldhag.com).*

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