

Flann O'Brien

(Brian O'Nolan, Myles na gCopaleen)
1912 – 1966

Irish Cultural Center Book Discussions

Saturday, December 1, 2018

At Swim-Two-Birds

(1939)

[Gaelic: "Snámh-dá-én"]

10:30 AM – 12:30 PM

Norton Room

Guide

"In the year 1939, a book curiously named *At Swim Two Birds* appeared. Adolf Hitler took serious exception to it and in fact loathed it so much that he started World War II in order to torpedo it. In a grim irony that is not without charm, the book survived the war while Hitler did not." (Flann O'Brien, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 4 Feb. 1965).

► Critics call O'Brien's book an "anti-novel." Clearly O'Brien is concerned with the relationship between literature and life or reality. In what ways does the novel challenge our ideas about an author and his characters and the distinction between reality and imagination? Consider, for example, any links between the narrator and Trellis, his creation.

► Novelists in the early 20th C. began to experiment with narrative (e.g., stream of consciousness and unreliable narrators), and some deliberately broke the illusion of verisimilitude through self-referencing, highlighting the text as fiction. (The term "metafiction" is often used to describe such literature.) You might want to note examples to share. Consider how the novel emphasizes realism even as it is an assault on realistic literature.

► James Joyce's verdict: "A really funny book." Do you agree with him? You might want to note examples to share.

► Parody is a characteristic of postmodernism. Consider the different types of literature touched on in the novel (folklore, Irish heroic literature, fairytales, American westerns, works by James Joyce). What is O'Brien's purpose in bringing in such a mixture of literary forms?

► Do you detect patterns and connections between the various levels that make up this novel? If the complexity of *At Swim-Two-Birds* causes some confusion, perhaps the following diagram will help:

Level One:	O'Brien's book
Level Two:	Narrator's book
Level Three:	Dermot Trellis writing a book about sin
Level Four:	Orlick Trellis writing a book to punish the elder Trellis

Looking Ahead: Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* on January 26, 2019