

FAMOUS IRISH WRITERS



Many would say that Ireland's finest export is Guinness, but they're not entirely correct. If there is one aspect of Irish culture that has made a significant impact both around the world and on our own shores, it is without a doubt the many Irish writers who have achieved worldwide acclaim for their words. The tradition of storytelling has always been strong in Ireland ever since the days of the Celts, and with our naturally sociable personalities and tendency to chatter for hours on end, it's no wonder this wonderful oral tradition has transferred onto paper too. Exploring Irish writing gives a fantastic insight into Irish society and psyche, both today and historically. It's the next best thing to actually exploring the country We've put together a list of 9 of the best Irish writers, both from long ago and not so long ago, along with the best works to read from each. This will give you a taster of the intriguing and captivating world of Irish literature. If you haven't read any of these authors yet, you should start right now. Just be warned, you probably won't be able to stop... If you are interested in Irish literature, you may also want to check out our previous post here on 10 of the Best Irish Poets

James Joyce

James Joyce is usually the first name that pops in to people's heads when they think of Irish writing. He is definitely the most important Irish writer and one of the most significant writers in the world too, thanks to his unique modernist style that revolutionised fiction writing in the early 20th century. His best known work is *Ulysses*, an enormous tome that parallels the episodes of Homer's *Odyssey* in various different literary styles

including the 'stream of consciousness' technique that he became famous for. Joyce was born in Rathgar, Dublin, in 1882 and spent his youth in various parts of Dublin.. He spent his later years in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris, dying in Zurich after complications from a perforated ulcer at the age of 58.

On June 16th every year the author and his most famous work are commemorated all around the world with a series of literary events known as 'Bloomsday', chosen because of the date of the events of Ulysses (which also happens to be the day Joyce and his wife Nora went on their first date).

What to read: While Ulysses is hands down Joyce's most well known and most talked about book, it's notoriously difficult to make sense of - even for those who are already familiar with his style and way of writing. Dubliners, however, is much less complex. A book of short stories about all sorts of Dublin characters in the early 20th century, it's a perfect view of what life was like in the city at that time from various perspectives, from the aristocracy all the way down to the poorer classes and everything in between.

Oscar Wilde

During his time, Oscar Wilde was one of the most recognisable personalities in the British Isles thanks to his unrivalled wit, flamboyant dress sense and charismatic personality. He was very well read, coming from an aristocratic family who gave him an excellent education, so writing and journalism was a natural career path for him. He enjoyed great success during his 20s and 30s with his plays which at the time provided biting satirical social commentary. Unfortunately, it all went wrong for Oscar when evidence emerged of his homosexual activities, which was then a criminal offence. He was imprisoned for two years and fled to France immediately after his release, where he died penniless and unknown at the age of 46.

What to read: Wilde's writing is much more accessible than Joyce's, and with his sharp wit and natural flair, any of his plays or novels will appeal to most people. The Importance of Being Ernest is one his best loved plays, and is just as hilarious now as it would have been when it was first performed. The Picture of Dorian Gray is another excellent story that still has relevance today too; it explores the perils of vanity and selfishness with a dark and supernatural twist. Wilde also wrote a book of children's stories which are great fun, no matter how old you are!

Bram Stoker

Bram Stoker's name is synonymous with his most famous work: Dracula! During his lifetime he was better known as being the personal assistant of well known actor Henry Irving however, and as the business manager of London's Lyceum theatre. Born in Clontarf, Dublin, he studied at Trinity College and made his living initially as a theatre critic, before devoting his life to the service of Henry Irving, who he travelled the world with. In

his spare time he wrote novels and short stories. In fact, his original manuscript for Dracula got lost somewhere along the way of his travels with Irving, only to show up in a barn in Pennsylvania in the 1980s!

What to read: It has to be 'Bram Stoker's Dracula', naturally! This is where all of those ubiquitous vampire stereotypes originate from, but if you're willing to forget everything you've already seen or read about the pale, bloodthirsty creatures, you'll really enjoy this chilling, suspenseful story. If you're more of a film buff, Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation is a particularly accurate (if stylised) depiction of the novel, starring Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, and the great Gary Oldman as Dracula himself.

Roddy Doyle

Roddy Doyle is Ireland's current national literary treasure. His novels encapsulate the typically Dublin sense of humour and are known for their heartwarming characters - any time Doyle has a new book release, you can be sure it will be at the top of the bestsellers list for several weeks. The setting for his novels is usually working class Dublin, and his writing style uses lots of slang phrases, often written in local dialects with heavy use of dialogue between characters. Roddy was born, raised, and still lives in Dublin, where he also runs a creative writing centre for children, young adults, and adults with special needs.

What to read: Roddy practically has a whole library's worth of excellent reads, but his 'Barrytown Trilogy' are the three classic novels that seem to be the most popular - all three have been adapted into films that are treasured by the Irish public. The three books (The Van, The Snapper and The Commitments), which were the first novels Doyle published, are not chronological, but feature the same cast of characters in each - a family from working class Dublin who go through all the ups and downs of family life with hilarious results.

W.B Yeats

W.B Yeats was a talented poet and one of the most prominent figures that spearheaded the Irish literary revival in the late 1800s. He was also one of the founders of the Abbey, the most prestigious theatre in Ireland, and was the first ever Irish person to be awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. He was a regular commentator on Irish politics, which was going through a very turbulent period as Ireland struggled to gain independence

from Britain - and eventually became a Senator in the independent Irish government. This, his childhood visits to county Sligo, and his unsuccessful love life were the inspiration for most of his poetry - he proposed marriage to the love of his life, Maud Gonne, four separate times over several years, but she refused all four proposals!

What to read: Yeats has been on the curriculum for Irish high school students for decades, so his poems are not only easily accessible and open to multiple interpretations, but they're also ingrained into the memory of many an Irish person! Two of his most loved poems include 'Lake Isle of Innisfree', an ode to his favourite place in Sligo, and 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', a hopelessly romantic declaration of love!

Maeve Binchy

Of the many modern Irish writers, Maeve Binchy is probably the most beloved both in Ireland and around the world. She passed away only a few years ago, but was regarded as a national treasure long before that. Her many novels are largely set in rural or small town Ireland, full of descriptive characters and often with a surprise plot twist ending. Her writing career began by accident when she stayed at a kibbutz in Israel, writing home to her parents, who sent her letters to the Irish Independent. 50 years later her 16 novels, 4 short story collections, and various other pieces have been translated into 37 languages.

What to read: Any and all of Binchy's books make excellent reads that will appeal to everyone - that's why she's so popular, after all. Her bestselling novels are Circle of Friends, Tara Road, Scarlet Feather and Deeply Regretted By..., all of which one her many awards during her lifetime. A new collection of short stories that she had been writing over several decades has just been published, with an introduction about the woman herself by her husband, Gordon Snell.

Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift is the oldest writer in this list, born in 1667! None the less, he's still a very worthy inclusion as he was a highly accomplished satirical writer, poet and, oddly enough, cleric who became Dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin during his lifetime. He was born in Dublin to a family with multiple literary connections, and was a prolific writer, completing several novels, essays, poems and political papers. Like Oscar Wilde, his story ends with sadness, as after a possible

stroke at the age of 75 he lost the ability to speak and became mentally unstable, at one point trying to tear out his own eye when it became inflamed and painful. After his death, the large fortune he left behind was used to found a hospital for the mentally ill.

What to read: Swift's best and most popular work is Gulliver's Travels. Often regarded as a children's classic, the novel is in fact very complex, reflecting on Swift's political views and experiences and full of metaphors for different parties and events. As well as that, it's also a satire on human nature and a parody of the traveller's tales literary genre that was prominent at the time.

Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett is a regular entry on 'most influential writers' lists. As he was heavily involved in theatre and drama the majority of his work consists of plays, although he also wrote many poems and a handful of novels. He spent most of his adult life in Paris and wrote in both English and French, even joining the French resistance movement in 1940 and receiving two medals for his efforts. His work fits into the modernist genre and is usually based on various elements of human nature, often with dark, black comedy undertones.

What to read: Waiting for Godot is considered to be Beckett's masterpiece. It's a two act play in which two characters wait for the arrival of a figure known as Godot, who never shows up - so naturally, not much happens! The play opened to much debate in 1953, and is still regularly performed today. Various interpretations on what the play actually means have been put forward, but there is no general consensus; which is probably what makes it so popular!

CS Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis is often mistakenly identified as a British novelist, but he was born and spent his early life in Belfast before moving to England to attend boarding school at the age of ten. He grew up surrounded by books and was a very imaginative child, so it's no wonder he ended up writing one of the best children's books of all time. When his childhood pet dog Jacksie died, he refused to answer to any other name than Jack, a nickname that stuck with him all his life. Throughout his life he retained a strong sense of his Irish identity, constantly seeking out Irish

natives when he lived in Britain. He even spent his honeymoon in Northern Ireland at the Old Inn in Crawfordsburn!

What to read: Lewis' perennial children's classic, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is a must read no matter what age you may be. To date the seven novels that make up the series have sold over 100 million copies in 41 different languages, and have been adapted multiple times for radio, television, stage and cinema. He also wrote an interesting account of his life in Ireland and the struggles he encountered when he first moved to England in the first part of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

John Banville

Of all of the current Irish writers, John Banville is probably the most critically acclaimed, although arguably not as well known to the public as some of the others on this list. Hailing from Wexford, to date he has published 18 novels, 6 plays, 1 short story collection and 2 works of non-fiction (not including works written under his pseudonym, Benjamin Black). He is known for his precise style of writing and dark humour and has been honoured with numerous awards throughout his career, including the Booker Prize and just this year the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. He is also one of very few authors who did not study at university level - his talent is all natural.

What to read: Some of Banville's most celebrated works include *The Sea*: a novel written as the reflective journal of the main character Max Morden, who attempts to come to terms with the deaths of his loved ones; and *The Book of Evidence*, the story of a scientist who murders a servant girl after she catches him attempting to steal his neighbour's painting. The latter also has a sequel, *Ghosts*, that's well worth a read too.