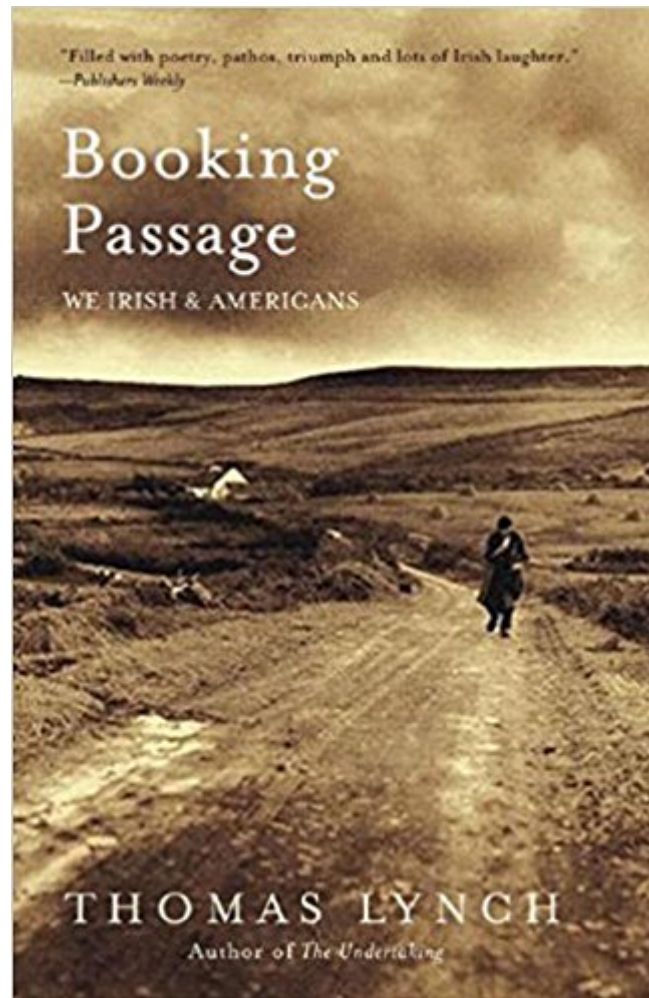




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Booking Passage: We Irish And Americans



Synopsis

In thirty-five years and dozens of return trips to Ireland, Thomas Lynch has found a template for the larger world inside the small one, the planet in the local parish. Part memoir, part cultural study, *Booking Passage* is a brilliant, often comedic guidebook for those "fellow travelers, fellow pilgrims" making their way through the complexities of their own lives and times.

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Customer Reviews

Undertaker-cum-poet Lynch (*Bodies in Motion and at Rest*) recalls his long romance with Eire and how it has affected his life in this compelling memoir. He takes off for the Emerald Isle early in 1970 to meet his people, who live on the edge of the Atlantic in County Clare. He stays with his elderly cousins, Nora and Tommy, a brother and sister who never married. The humble cottage has no water and is heated by a turf fire. Here the young Yank absorbs his culture shock and learns how life is lived without television, cars and other modern distractions. After Tommy's death, Lynch and Nora become closer, and he begins to bring the 20th century into the house in the form of running water. Along the way he tells the story of the Lynches of County Clare: how they survived "starvation, eviction and emigration—the three-headed scourge of English racism" and the pain of diaspora as they emigrated to the U.S. Along the way Lynch examines his own life: his love-hate relationship with the misogynist Catholic Church and pedophilic priests; his battle with alcoholism; the breakup of his marriage and remarriage; and his unusual love of the undertaking trade. This is a deeply thought-out book filled with poetry, pathos, triumph and lots of Irish laughter. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All

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“[Lynch] is a subtle, quick-moving mind, and it is a pleasure to walk beside his mental perambulations . . . rendered with love and grace.” - Detroit Free Press
“[Lynch] draws an enticing picture of his home away from home: the dreamlike environs of Moveen, County Clare.” - New York Times Book Review
“He is no mere tourist but a man who made a deep personal commitment to the land from which his forebears came and who has a sensitive, nuanced understanding of the place and its people. . . . It is a lovely book.” - Washington Post

Thomas Lynch is a man inebriated with words, "One could come and go, traveling light in the portable universe of words, counting on images for transport" (Lynch 2005:239). I've read this book wishing Lynch's passages about Ireland had been more lengthy and cohesive. "Booking Passage" is a cobbled-together plethora of piecemeal impressions, scattered ruminations mixed with the occasional narrative. The chapter "Death Comes for the Young Curate" contains Lynch's inimitable encounter with a priest on Iona's beach. Later, his spleen about a neighbor with the designer pooches and their infinitesimal waste is hilarious, as is his horror at the story of a man, being "taken short," is finally found, having died on an Irish pub's toilet: "Every time I read this I am chilled. Killed in a loo in Killaloe - Bejaysus if it doesn't prove Himself is an almighty joker after all" (2005:227). Lynch is best describing his heritage and narrating actual events. Canny old Nora Lynch wisely used this well-off American cousin, and in return Lynch earned his Irish stripes. He talks of being broke, yet traveling through Europe; truly broke folks don't get to rent a car, drive to Milan, fly to London, then Detroit, moving "rapidly between the worlds" (242). Lynch is tone-deaf to physical and spiritual realities around him, true of many Boomers of his economic niche, too detached from what is truly uncomfortable. "Strangeness and distance made every utterance precious" (259). To call Lynch's exploitation of being "Irish" and "Catholic" inauthentic is too easy. Lynch's tunnel vision is self-focused, his all-seeing eye blurrily fixated on himself. Something essential is missing, whether in Ireland or Michigan. One derives no real sense of the actual land and dirt of Ireland, the faces of his neighbors and relatives, the way they move, their life. You won't savor what the food tastes like, the smells, colors, sensations, touch, but there's a scattering of architectural descriptions. What you get is what people sound like, and of course they do sound interesting. "Everything is tributary, every image and experience capable of turning in on itself a hundred different ways" (270-271). As in navel gazing, Godhelpus. To Lynch, life is language: words, lyrics, strings of nouns and vowels,

meanings imposed by playing with them and scattering them. Tossing `em up in the air to see what interesting wordy detritus results. Oddly, Lynch includes a poem about drifting like a snowdrift over his ex-wife, "O...O... O..." Over the top, typical boomer-style, pun intended. After his divorce, he rants about extreme feminism in witty manner, but he goes too far bemoaning equality and the abuse of women, as forced mutilation still occurs. His bits on 911 are dated and out of place, too self-conscious. The last chapter is one of the most self-indulgent, narcissistic exercises in the grandiosity of poets and poetry I've ever stumbled upon, worse than wading through a bog. The genuflecting name-dropping of famous poets, and the unfortunate actor, is beyond dull. And his pal Heffernan's poem with "gangs of rowdy robes of fur," and "where animals devoid of any anger/lifting up bits of landscape in their teeth" maddens (248). There's no notion of the country from Canada to the Rocky Mountain West, where grizzly bears roam and chomp up human-made road signs and the occasional human. Many of the book's poems read as head games, politics, boomer-theology, and melancholy narcissism. A wash of words is Lynch's medicine, all hollow sound, no depth, but clever turns of phrase recycled in articles and essays, betokening a shortage of creativity. Thus the ultimate flatness when the reader finally closes this unsatisfying book. Lynch's descriptions of his sisters and Irish women are a kick: "they are strikingly beautiful, immovable, and possessed of powers we know nothing of . . . the source of all that is holy and hazardous . . . a matrilineage that finds its way back to the kitchen and cauldron in a boggy parish in the old country . . . devotees of the votive and vigil, rosary and novena, perpetual adorations, lives of the saints, imitations of Christ, statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Sacred Heart, Stations of the Cross, relics, waters, ribbons and badges, prayerbooks and scapulars - all of which makes them morally superior and spiritually dangerous" (209-210). Indeed.

I read this as a library book -- and it was so deeply touching that I had to buy a copy for my home library. The writing is superb - as is the exploration of identities, place, and history. What makes a family? Where is home? And it includes a wonderful description of poetry: "If life is linear, our brief histories stretched between baptisms and burials, and the larger history tied to events that happen in a line: and then, and then, and then ... poetry is the thing that twists history and geography and memory free of such plodding." (p. 270) This book should appeal to those interested in Ireland and genealogy to be sure, but also to those simply drawn to a poetic voice.

Perhaps of most interest to those of Irish ancestry, the author exhibits humor and insight into the Irish - those who stayed and the offspring of those who emigrated. A very pleasant read.

As one with an Irish heiritage and one who has traveled to Ireland, I was swept into the story and immersed into Lynch's characters as I read! I could picture the places, hear the Irish tongue, and relate to the tensions, having grown up in a home where there was a Protestant father who held deep seated Catholic prejudices left from his days before emigration. I love stories of Ireland and this is one of the most wonderful ones mixing the family of both sides of "the pond".

I'd been waiting for what seemed like too long for a third book of stories from Thomas Lynch, but wondered if his Irish-based tales could possibility be as compelling as his earlier works, which were stories about life based on his career in dealing with the dead (in addition to being a writer, Lynch is an undertaker). But again, just as he used the funeral home as a backdrop for stories not about death but about life, Lynch uses Ireland, land of his ancestry and his frequent visits, as the canvas for telling poignant stories about life. Now I'll give friends copies of "Booking Passage" while i wait for a fourth book from Thomas Lynch.

I really got into this book. Lynch has a lovely touch. Humor and sentiment, properly mixed.

great

Excellent.

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