

FLANN O'BRIEN

The Third Policeman

READ BY JIM NORTON



NAXOS
AudioBooks

1	Chapter 1	4:40
2	After a few days...	5:01
3	A full year had not passed...	3:39
4	It was about this time, when I was nearly thirty...	5:39
5	I do not know exactly how or when...	5:09
6	On our way, I said to Divney...	5:40
7	Chapter 2	5:32
8	I cannot hope to describe what it was.	4:48
9	Forlornly, I looked and saw that this was true.	6:44
10	“No” is generally speaking a better answer than “Yes”...	5:45
11	‘Where’s the black box which was under the floor...?’	7:04
12	‘And how does this enable you...?’	5:52
13	Chapter 3	5:15
14	Everything seemed almost too pleasant...	6:53
15	I walked on unperturbed...	6:29
16	‘I am a robber,’ he said.	7:07
17	Chapter 4	5:01
18	Of my own journey to the police-barracks...	4:17
19	His back appearance was unusual.	6:24
20	‘He’s gone to America...’	6:21

21	'These are interesting rules...'	4:46
22	Chapter 5	7:06
23	He put his little spear back on the shelf...	6:28
24	He went to the table...	5:17
25	All my senses were now strained so tensely...	4:21
26	Chapter 6	6:07
27	'What is your attitude to the high saddle?'	7:17
28	I said nothing...	6:07
29	I looked carefully around me.	5:32
30	'Did you never see a bicycle leaning against the dresser...'	5:37
31	Chapter 7	5:09
32	Standing at a point on the postulated spherical earth...	5:10
33	To say this was a surprise...	5:35
34	Both of us sat silent for a while...	5:15
35	The next important thing that happened...	6:30
36	How long this eeriness lasted...	5:53
37	What happened eventually was not a shout...	6:24
38	The door was flung open and in came Gilhaney.	5:20
39	Chapter 8	4:46
40	As in many other of de Selby's concepts...	6:45

41	These few words sickened me instantly with fear...	5:56
42	He led the way to a door...	6:06
43	My eye ranged round unsatisfied.	6:16
44	I went carefully over to see what he was doing...	5:07
45	The sergeant was already looming ahead...	5:58
46	MacCruiskeen lit a match for our cigarettes...	5:22
47	And so we did.	6:58
48	We smoked in silence...	5:09
49	As they wrangled on about sweets...	2:54
50	Chapter 9	4:57
51	Bassett and many of the other commentators...	4:09
52	For the rest, little remains save the record...	4:40
53	Water? The word was in my ear...	3:31
54	Chapter 10	4:15
55	I was not at all pleased that this ghostly man...	4:29
56	I thought it was a poor subject for conversation...	6:44
57	'I heard of a man once,' he said...	4:46
58	Parts of this conversation came to me...	5:22
59	For the first time, I had the courage to turn my head...	5:21
60	Chapter 11	5:43

61	Hatchjaw's friend, Harold Barge...	6:22
62	I arose, and stretched my legs up and down the floor.	7:02
63	In the next moment, I was fumbling for the barrack latch...	6:30
64	I laid the bicycle gently against the gate pier...	5:13
65	I stopped thinking, closing up my mind...	5:21
66	I swung round in amazement...	5:21
67	The great fat body in the uniform...	5:13
68	He had now carefully blotted his work...	6:00
69	He chuckled softly at the thought...	8:02
70	Chapter 12	4:38
71	There was nothing altogether unnatural in what I saw...	5:19
72	A cold biting wind was sweeping in...	5:41

Total time: 6:43:50

Flann O'Brien

The Third Policeman

Flann O'Brien was one of several pen-names used by Brian Nolan; or rather, Brian O'Nolan; or rather, in the Gaelic form he sometimes used, Brian Ó Nualláin. Given the ambiguity of his given name, it is hardly surprising that he created so many others for himself – Flann O'Brien for some of his novels, Myles na gCopaleen (or Gopaleen) for his journalism, and several others (George Knowall, Brother Barnabas) for a variety of purposes including spoof letters, some mocking earlier ones he had himself written. O'Brien was born in County Tyrone in 1911, attended University College, Dublin, worked for the best part of 20 years as a civil servant, and died in 1966. He is also one of the funniest writers of the twentieth century, possibly any century, deserving to be placed alongside Sterne, Swift, Goldsmith and – perhaps especially – Joyce and Beckett.

His greatest fame was achieved through his articles for the *Irish Times*, under the name Myles na gCopaleen. His position in the Civil Service required a pseudonym, but it is likely he would have chosen one anyway, finding in different names a freedom to explore imaginary personalities. Names were of considerable interest to him, as playful

disguises as much as anything else, and it is notable that the narrator of *The Third Policeman* not only has no name, but is unable even to recall it. His newspaper column was called *Cruiskeen Lawn*, which translates roughly as 'little brimming jug'. The best of these were brilliant pastiches of life in the Ireland of the time, or excoriations of literary (and other) pretensions, or brilliant flights of vivid imagination, reaching from the ordinary to the exquisitely surreal. He created a series of characters that were both a reflection of their time and a pre-emptor of them – it was sometimes unclear, for example, whether he was merely duplicating the speech of 'The Plain People of Ireland' who sometimes interrupted his columns or actually creating a national stereotype. There were extravagant puns or treatises suggesting huge reserves of arcane knowledge, and all powered by a linguistic versatility that is as dazzling as it is funny. But he kept his more serious intentions for his novels.

For the brightest literary figure of his generation it was never going to be enough to write for newspapers. A precedent of artistic excellence and intellectual experimentation had been set by James Joyce and Samuel

Beckett, both of whom had left Ireland for the broader artistic and social horizons of Europe. O'Brien stayed at home, in part because he was obliged to earn a living for his mother and her other children; but his proximity to the life of the Irish literati meant he was never able to escape the presence of the two who had gone before. In discussions and reviews of his work thereafter, comparisons with Joyce were ubiquitous to the point of inevitability, and this was one area of profound frustration for him. That there was some legitimacy in it will not have soothed his temper.

O'Brien's first novel was *At Swim-Two-Birds* (the title is a literal translation of a place name). Well-received for a first novel, including praise from Joyce himself, it contained a wealth of self-conscious literary games that asked questions about characters, writers, reality and a good deal more besides, some decades before the terms post-modern or deconstructionist or absurdist were the staple of critics and authors. If it contained Joycean elements, it was also an original work, originally executed. So the level of expectation from his contemporaries was rising when O'Brien completed his second novel, *The Third Policeman*, in 1940. But it was never published in his lifetime.

On the one hand this is simple enough –

it was rejected by the publishers. But this setback seems to have completely unnerved him. Rather than try sending it out to other publishers, or accept that rejection is part of the lot of any author, O'Brien deliberately manufactured a story about losing the manuscript, including a suggestion that it had blown out of the car window page by page while he was driving. To his wife – who knew it was not lost – he explained that it would need too much reworking. It seems from this distance however that something about the book had scared him, as if the rejection were some form of moral rebuke.

(If you have yet to listen to the recording, or have not read the book, be warned – the following paragraphs contain indications of what happens at the end.)

The Third Policeman starts out as a simple, if brutal, murder-mystery. But within a very short time it slips into a parallel universe of bewildering strangeness, where time and space dilate and contract, where bizarre events happen to the unsuspecting, where perspective shifts. It is a dystopian vision, described in a plain, undemonstrative style that adds to the sense of detachment from reality. It is a quite explicit vision of hell. Alongside this tale there runs another one, conducted almost entirely in the footnotes, concerning the fictional philosopher de Selby and the extraordinary antics of his many

competing commentators. de Selby's ideas are universally absurd (night is a build-up of black pollution, travel is an hallucination, houses are necessary evils) and the commentators are given the kind of treatment meted out to their ilk in *Cruiskeen Lawn* (one of them is arrested for impersonating himself). There are philosophical elements in the main body of the book, too. For example, the world the narrator finds himself in is peopled by policemen who are convinced that atoms can shift between objects, leading in extreme cases to men actually becoming their bicycles. But the humour of this absurdity is undermined by the fact that it is not so far from Einsteinian physics; similarly, the distortions of time are related to the theory of relativity and the work of J. W. Dunne. They even find a slight echo in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. If de Selby is being mocked, are these others as well?

O'Brien was a Catholic, and remained so all his life. The vision of hell he presents is not peopled by the characters of the traditional Catholic dogma. There is no Satan – instead there is an interminable loop of fear and strangeness, a world in which things are only just out of kilter with the real one, a Dante in Wonderland. The hell of *The Third Policeman*, its similarity to the real world, suggests that O'Brien may have believed that the real world itself was a kind of hell, or at least under the

influence of evil. It is arguable that he felt genuine guilt over this, fearing it to approach heresy, and as a result felt that the rejection was almost deserved. A much later work (*The Dalkey Archive*) which rehashes some of the earlier novel, is dedicated to his Guardian Angel in the hope that the angel will realise he is just fooling around.

For all the comparisons to Joyce, however, this vision of an endless 're-experience of the already suffered', as O'Brien himself described it, is surely more Beckettian. And like Beckett, it is underscored with humour both bleak and absurd. For O'Brien this was another article of faith. In a contribution to a magazine about Joyce, he wrote:

'Humour, the handmaid of sorrow and fear, creeps out endlessly in all Joyce's works [...] to attenuate the fear of those who have belief and who genuinely think that they will be in hell or in heaven shortly, and possibly very shortly. With laughs he palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic. True humour needs this background urgency: Rabelais is funny, but his stuff cloy. His stuff lacks tragedy.'

He could have been writing about himself. *The Third Policeman* carries in it sorrow, fear, heaven, hell, doom, Irish Catholicism and the urgency of mortality. And it is very funny.

Despite three more novels, some work for television and theatre, continuing (if, towards the end, erratic) columns for newspapers, O'Brien never managed to gain the place in literary history his talent suggested he would, and he became a rather bitter, frequently drunk, remoter figure. As his drinking increased, his health deteriorated and on April 1st 1966, he died of cancer. *The Third Policeman* remained unpublished until

the year after his death. His reputation has risen and fallen over the intervening decades, but the recent appearance of *The Third Policeman* in the television series *Lost* gave sales an unexpected spike. For this extraordinary book, there could hardly be a more appropriate programme through which to reach a new public.

Notes by Roy McMillan

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Flann O'Brien

The Third Policeman

Read by **Jim Norton**

Bleak absurdity, deadpan humour and brilliant inventiveness mark this novel as one of the most important in Irish literature. Set in a disquieting other-world where people can become bicycles and dimensions shift without warning, the novel is footnoted with the extraordinary tale of a philosopher and his obsessed commentators.

A talking soul in a place where a wooden leg is a positive advantage, *The Third Policeman* is Flann O'Brien's comic, surreal and chilling masterpiece.

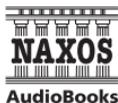


Jim Norton, one of Ireland's leading actors, has worked regularly on Joycean topics, and particularly *Ulysses*, during his long career in film, television, radio and theatre. Born and brought up in Dublin, he spent his early acting years in Irish radio. He now divides his time between London and Hollywood – where, among his many parts, has been the role of Einstein on the popular TV serial *Star Trek*. He has also recorded *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence and *Ulysses* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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