Oh, Play That Thing by Roddy Doyle (Jonathan Cape) R150.

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Roddy Doyle first created a following for himself with a trilogy of engaging, street-wise comedies *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*, all set in Barrytown, a working-class area of Dublin. After this, in 1993, came the Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, set in the same environment, a poignant study of childhood in a broken home, and the disturbing *The Woman who Walked into Doors*, about an abused wife.

By now, Roddy Doyle is, as the *Guardian* has noted, 'Ireland's most famous living writer', and he has clearly decided to tackle a Large Theme. Thus came, in 1999, *A Star Called Henry*, announced as the first volume in a trilogy to be called *The Last Roundup*. As central character Doyle invented a Dubliner called Henry Smart. Born in 1902, Smart took an active and bloody part in the Easter Uprisings in 1916, and thereafter quickly graduated to being an I.R.A. assassin, killing whoever his superiors told him to kill, and bedding whatever woman happened to get in his way, a kind of downmarket anti-British James Bond.

His wenching career, however, is temporarily interrupted by his marriage to Miss O'Shea, a school teacher he first met when he turned up, as a precociously over-sexed minor, in her class. By the time he meets her again, at seventeen, she is a rebel, and quite as bloodthirsty as Henry; their first adult encounter is so enthusiastic that her nipples leave permanent dents in his forehead. Together, the couple become a kind of Irish Bonnie and Clyde, none the less lethal for getting around on a shared stolen bicycle.

After the Truce, Henry's former superiors find him inconvenient and order him killed by one of his former colleagues. At the end of *A Star Called Henry*, now a very experienced twenty-year old, he prudently leaves Ireland: "I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know if I'd get there. But I was still alive. I was twenty. I was Henry Smart."

Thus Doyle sets his character free, for the moment, of Irish history and releases him into the larger world – into, as it turns out in *Oh Play that Thing*, the America of the twenties and thirties, the age of Prohibition, gangsters, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl. Above all, this was the Jazz Age, the birth of jazz as we know it, in the black music that white people, in spite of segregation, were taking to in ever growing numbers.

Landing in New York, Henry meets all these phenomena head-on, often quite literally: since he has given up killing and has left his wife in Ireland, he has to rely on his potent sexual magnetism, largely a matter, in the initial stages, of his pair of irresistible blue eyes. Of course, in the New York of the time, as depicted by Doyle, any woman you bedded was bound to be a gangster's moll, and soon Henry is in trouble again and has to flee to Chicago.

Here, making out with a black woman in one of the clubs where white and black were permitted to mix, Henry is spotted by a rising young black musician called Louis Armstrong and elected to be his 'white man', the entrance ticket that even gifted black musicians needed in segregationist America.

The rest is not exactly history, as Doyle spins a yarn of ever thinner threads, taking his unlikely pair through a short but implausible career of housebreaking, in the course of which they just happen to burgle the house in which Henry's wife, last seen languishing in an Irish prison, just happens to be the house-keeper. Though the most extreme

implausibility in the book, this is unfortunately not unrepresentative of the kind of desperate measure Doyle resorts to in order to keep his story in fuel.

Doyle has done his research meticulously, and recreates in astonishing detail the Ireland of the Rebellion and the America of the early twentieth century. He invents a fascinating array of characters; he knows how they dress, where they live, what they eat, how they talk. When he writes about jazz, he is almost as virtuosic as the musicians themselves.

Why, then, is this such a tedious novel? It is possible that the coincidences and implausibilities just become too much to swallow. But mainly, I think, Henry Smart is too two-dimensional a character to sustain our interest. This may be deliberate: Doyle seems to have wanted to create a semi-mythical character. Though born into utter poverty and deprivation, Henry is from the start a magnificent physical specimen, so much so that the neighbours queue up to come and see the 'glowing' baby; and thereafter there seems to be no end not his physical stamina and resourcefulness.

But strangely for so driven a character, the action is seldom initiated by Henry: he is from the start a cat's paw, appropriated for use by other people. There are suggestions that Henry becomes aware of his own instrumentality, but, all action and no reflection, he does not have an interesting enough emotional life for this realisation to become a crisis of self-awareness.

He is as much at the mercy of his author's design as of the manipulation of his fellow-characters: as if the Louis Armstrong intrigue is not far-fetched enough, Doyle sends his character to die in the desert, only to be revived by Henry Fonda, who is taking a piss break from making a John Ford movie. Ford, recognising Henry as a survivor of the Easter Uprising, immediately recruits him as the subject of his next movie.

By the end of the novel, Henry is saying 'I was alive. I was forty-five. I was Henry Smart.' The stage is set for volume three: the fifties and sixties loom. What will it be? Marilyn Monroe? Elvis? John F Kennedy? Or is it too much to hope that Henry will go home and settle in Barrytown?