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Easter Rising: An Irish American Coming Up From Under



Synopsis

A powerfully redemptive story of escape from the Irish American ghetto. Michael Patrick MacDonald's *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* told the story of the loss of four of his siblings to the violence, poverty, and gangsterism of Boston's Irish American ghetto. The question "How did you get out?" has haunted MacDonald ever since. In response he has written this new book, a searingly honest story of reinvention that begins with young MacDonald's breakaway from the soul-crushing walls of Southie's Old Colony housing project and ends with two healing journeys to Ireland that are unlike anything in Irish American literature. The story begins with MacDonald's first urgent forays outside Southie, into Boston and eventually to New York's East Village, where he becomes part of the club scene swirling around Johnny Rotten, Mission of Burma, the Clash, and other groups. MacDonald's one-of-a-kind 1980s social history gives us a powerful glimpse of what punk music is for him: a lifesaving form of subversion and self-education. But family tragedies draw him home again, where trauma and guilt lead to an emotional collapse. In a harrowing yet hilarious scene of self-discovery, MacDonald meets his father for the first time -- much too late. After this spectacularly failed attempt to connect, MacDonald travels to Ireland, first as an alienated young man who has learned to hate shamrocks with a passion, and then on a second trip with his extraordinary "Ma," a roots journey laced with both rebellion and profound redemption.

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Customer Reviews

Michael Patrick MacDonald helped launch Boston's successful gun-buyback program and is founder of the South Boston Vigil Group. He has won the American Book Award, a New England

Literary Lights Award, and the Myers Center Outstanding Book Award administered by the Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America. His second book, the highly acclaimed memoir *Easter Rising*, was published in 2006, and will be available in paperback from Houghton Mifflin in March, 2008. He is currently writing the screenplay of *All Souls* for director Ron Shelton. MacDonald lives in Brooklyn.

I learned to jump subway fares by tagging along with my brother Kevin and his friends on shoplifting ventures outside the project. Downtown Boston was only three stops but worlds away from Old Colony Project. I was ten, and Southie's busing riots of the past two years had now dissipated into the occasional scuffle with the police. Still, everyone in our neighborhood always said how dangerous it was to leave. It was still the world against Southie and Southie against the world. So for me there was a terrifying thrill in leaving the neighborhood at all. The more I snuck on those trains, the more it felt like traveling to another country, like I was a tourist about to see strange lands and stranger people for the very first time. At first our technique was basic. We'd wait at the top of the stairs of Andrew Station until we heard a train arriving, then dart down the stairs, hop over the turnstiles, and bolt for the train's doors. By the time we were lined up at the four turnstiles, the train would be just making its final wshhhh sound, which Kevin said was the air releasing from the brake cylinder. We'd each lift off, hands on either side of the turnstile, and drive our legs over the bars feet first, landing as far out as we could. By the time we landed, the fare taker would be screaming and knocking on his scratched and blurry Plexiglas windows, mouthing what I imagined was "You little fucks!" Right about then I knew we would hear the train doors open with a collective rumble. If we did it according to Kevin's exact timing; if we started running downstairs at just the right moment, when the train was first coming to a halt with a long screech of the brakes; we'd usually make it inside just before we felt the suction of the doors closing behind us. No one ever chased after us in the early days, so we probably didn't have to turn it into the heart-racing caper it always felt like. But it was great each time to feel the breeze of those clackety doors nearly catching my shirt. I'd take a deep breath in relief, and then in expectation. If the train we hopped came from the suburbs, it would be one of the brand-new modern ones, carrying all whites. But if it had come from Dorchester it would be one of the old, rundown ones and filled with blacks. I would go off by myself to grab a seat and silently take in all the newness, black or white. But my brother Kevin seemed interested only in "getting the fuck in, and getting the fuck out" back to Southie. To him we were on a mission, and he was all business. He'd make me stand up so that we were all sticking together. He'd keep us huddled around him while

he told us what to do and what not to do around all these dangerous blacks and goofy- looking white people from the world that was not Southie. And heâ€™d whack me in the head every time I snuck a glance at the people he was talking about. But after a few minutes our huddle would fall apart. As we tried to keep our feet firmly planted on the bumpy ride, I always seemed to have the worst balance, flailing backward and sideways with the trainâ€™s chaotic twists and turns. I didnâ€™t mind, though, as long as I never hit the floor. Riding the trains was my favorite thing to do even before the trips with Kevin. Ma always told us we should want to go places, like Dorchester or Jamaica Plain. “For Chrissake, donâ€™t you wanna see the world?â€• she said. On my eighth birthday she took me all the way to Park Street Station and put me on the Green Line to Jamaica Plain, where Nana would be waiting at the other end to take me out for a birthday dinner. The old trolley looked like it was the first one ever built, with bars over square windows that opened. Best of all, it had a driverâ€™s booth at both ends — I guessed that was so it didnâ€™t have to turn around at the end of the line. That seemed like the greatest day in the world, being trusted to get on a Green Line trolley all by myself. I kept thinking that to drown out how nervous I was getting. I sat in the backward- facing driverâ€™s seat and waved to Ma on the platform while I pretended to myself that I was the conductor. Ma disappeared from view, and I distracted myself by trying to think up an excuse for why I was driving backward. But before I could, all the excitement and the backward driving made me puke out the window into the blackness of the tunnel. I went to sit in a normal remaining seat, to pretend like nothing had happened. On the forty-five- minute-long journey, I let my fears get the best of me, though, and imagined that I would end up on this one-way trip forever and never see my family again. Worst of all, I was soon the only passenger remaining. When the train came to a final screeching halt, the driver shut off the engine and the lights and barked, “Last stop! Arborway!â€• while packing up his things like he was going home. My heart was in my mouuuuuth until I saw Nana waving and running across the ghost town of a train yard. The sight of Nana was unmistakable, always in a loose navy blue polka-dot dress, shoes you saw at drugstores, and a flowered kerchief tied snugly under her chin. “For Chrissake, you look like Mother Hubbard,â€• Ma would snap at her when Nana complained about Maâ€™s miniskirts and spike heels. For me though, Nanaâ€™s old-fashionedness was calming. And this day the sight of her was more comforting than ever. I hopped off the trolley stairs in one leap. Nana greeted me as she always did, not saying hello but spitting on a napkin that seemed like it had been in her purse forever and rubbing it into my cheeks until they hurt. Nana talked about rosy cheeks like they were the most important thing in the world for people to see. “Weâ€™ll go for a wee supper now,â€• she said in that Donegal way that made everything sound like both an exclamation and a question.

Well over my fears, I greeted her by saying that riding the subways was just about the greatest thing in the world and that I couldn't wait to do it again. Going home from fare-jumping trips with Kevin and his crew was easier than the trip out. We'd walk from Filene's to South Station and press the red stop button hidden near the ground at the top of a wooden escalator so ancient-looking that Kevin convinced me it was from 17th-century colonial days. After we pressed the button, the escalator would stutter in its climbing motion and then come to a rolling stop. That's when we'd run down the steep and treacherous steps into the station exit. Each wooden step was about one foot square, and I always wondered if people were skinnier in colonial times. At the bottom of the escalator was an unmanned gate that was often left wide open. But even if it was chained and padlocked, you could push out one fence post to make a gap, just enough to slip through. It usually took a bit of teamwork, but it was a cinch. Kevin was the scrawniest and could slip through without anyone's help, so he'd go first and pull on the gate from the other side. One day I discovered an even better way to get back home to Southie. Kevin was inside Papa Gino's, pulling a scam he'd recently perfected. When the cashier called out a number, Kevin would wave a receipt from the trash, all excited-like, as if he'd won the lottery. His performance was so convincing; or maybe just distracting; that he'd walk away with a tray full of pizza and Cokes. Okie and Stubs would distract the waiting customers even further by asking if anyone knew where the bathroom was. I was outside on Tremont Street, playing lookout; for what I didn't know; and daydreaming that Kevin would get a whole pizza pie. But Kevin cared more about scamming stuff for everyone else than for himself, and I knew he would give away his only slice if that's all he got. While I was supposedly keeping watch, I spied groups of black people gathering nearby and then disappearing through an automatic door to a steel shaft sticking up from the sidewalk. As soon as one cluster of mothers, teenagers, and babies in strollers disappeared through the mystery door, more groups would gather around, press a button, and then loiter at a slight distance. They tried hard to look inconspicuous by rubbing their hands together or jumping up and down in one place as if they were cold, but I knew by their watchful eyes that they were just looking out, like I was supposed to be doing. The door opened, and again the busy sidewalk turned empty. I walked closer and saw through little steamy windows that everyone was squeezed like sardines onto an elevator and then whisked away to some place below Tremont Street. I pressed the button and waited for the elevator to come back up again so I could investigate. What are you, a fuckin' losah? Kevin screamed down Tremont Street just as the doors opened and more people looked around before hopping on. He was running toward me with a single slice of pizza, yelling at me for always wandering off. You were supposed to keep watch! he barked,

grabbing me by the collar. Okie and Stubs were running behind him, pizzaless. They seemed like they thought they were being chased, and I told them to follow me. We squeezed into the elevator and pushed our way to the middle, surrounded by whole families of black people. Kevin punched me for staring up at them, even though there was nowhere else to look but up. In the end I would get high marks for finding a whole new and simpler method for getting a free ride home. The service elevator led from the street right into the subway system, beyond the conductor booths, and we all filed out nonchalantly. That day I earned the only slice of pizza Kevin was able to score. In the days that followed I was so proud of my find I put the word out all over Old Colony Project about the new way to get home from downtown. That pissed Kevin off — he said the more people knew, the sooner the MBTA would cop on and shut us out. For a time the elevator was the one place in Boston youâ™d see my neighbors from Southie squeezed into a small space with black people. A key was required for the elevator to work, but the keyhole was always turned sideways, in the on position, either because it was broken or because some transit worker was doing us all a favor. Kevin and his friends didnâ™t care about leaving Southie except on scamming missions — they never went just to wander. And I could never get my own friends to leave the project, so it wasnâ™t long before I was venturing alone to see the strange lands and strange people beyond Southieâ™s borders. Copyright Â© 2006 by Michael Patrick MacDonald. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company.

Let me start off by saying that I'm a huge supporter of Michael Patrick MacDonald. I absolutely love his work. May I suggest before reading *Easter Rising*, read MacDonald's book *"All Souls."* You will be forever moved by the words and story you read. Both publications left me speechless. The words from these memoirs will make you laugh, think, and weep. If you only read one book ever again I strongly advice *"All Souls"* or *"Easter Rising."*

Easter Rising, is the journey of a young boy who struggles to find an identity independent from cohort and culture in South Boston. Michael Patrick MacDonald, searches to find a meaning to the word "normal", in a world where it is normal for strong Irish youths, to fight, do drugs and die before their time. This book focuses on MacDonalds will to find meaning to his life while recovering from the tragic deaths of his older brothers. Thankfully, MacDonald finds an outlet in the underground world of Bostons "Punk Rock" and "Reggae" scene and befriends the characters that thrive in it. His exploration of music and himself becomes a vital part of his survival in a world that seems to be crumbling around him. Michael MacDonalds descriptions of characters in this book are so very

honest and likable that, by the time you are finished you feel like you are family (and if you have roots in Ireland, you probably are). This book is for anybody that has ever lost somebody. This book is for anybody who feels like they don't belong. This book is for anybody who is trying to understand their child. This book is for anybody who has ever felt lost. This book is for anybody who is in search of meaning. This book is for anybody that has questioned their culture. This book is for anybody that doesn't get the word "normal" This book is for anybody that enjoys music. This book is for anybody. On a side note, I have never both laughed and cried while reading a book. Michael Patrick MacDonald has a way of bringing out feelings in you that you are not expecting to feel.

"All Souls" is one of the most beautiful, moving, powerful books I have ever read. As other reviewers have mentioned, how could Mr. MacDonald hope to come close to his first book? He does not try. I believe that MacDonald wrote "Easter Rising" with the belief that all who pick it up have read "All Souls" (as every thinking American and/or Irishman should). Instead of covering ground previously trodden in that heartwrenching, beautifully written account, MacDonald tells more about his own journey. "All Souls" was a story of a family torn apart by tribalism, willful ignorance and hatred, and Whitey Bulger's iron fisted rule over South Boston. "Easter Rising" tells the tale of Michael's own youthful travels through the Boston and New York music scene, and, in the second half of the book, how MacDonald discovered his true self, an American-Irishman born and raised in South Boston, yet drawn to mother Ireland. His mother is, as has been mentioned by others, one of the larger than life figures in recent American literature, with her ever present accordion and ability to connect with any and all who cross her path. "Ma" is unforgettable, and I hope that she knows how loved she is by folks like myself. I feel closer to my father, a Boston Irishmanman with whom I clashed throughout his lifetime, through Ma. Thanks to Micheal Patrick MacDonald, one of the most important voices in America literature today.

MacDonald doesn't put his tumultuous past to "rest" or behind him, as he learns through first escaping, denial, and return. Picking up not so much where "All Souls" leaves off, but where MacDonald steps back to let the story of his family tell the tale, "Easter Rising" is MacDonald's story, of witnessing the events around him, the decision and serendipitous events that help him escape to another world only a few miles away, then further and further until he tries to physically remove himself from the events surrounding him. Returning "home" both physically and mentally - to Southie and into the role of family guardian - only reinforces the separateness of the culture into which MacDonald has returned. It is only on a "blackmail" trip to Ireland, against his wishes, that

MacDonald sees the beginning of his family's tale, and then returning with his mother, comes full circle into acceptance, gratitude, and peace. MacDonald is surprisingly un-bitter and thankfully lacks the "poor me" style that so many autobiographies embrace; his humor throughout it all as well as his ability to empathize even under the worst of circumstances, shine throughout. A remarkable book.

As a Southie resident, I found the book tragic and inspirational. There is a sad history here but also an incredible sense of community. I think anyone moving into the area should read this along with All Souls.

Awesome book!

I was expecting a hard cover but received a paperback. The book itself was very good.

Awesome story - Great book!

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