

Brian Doyle: Class and Cash on Easy Avenue

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“Is it better to be poor and good, or rich and...bad!” So reads the cover blurb on my paperback edition of Brian Doyle’s Canadian Library Award-winning novel *Easy Avenue*. This is, as one would expect, an over-simplification of what Doyle’s novel is really about, but it isn’t entirely off the money either. In Doyle’s world the rich are often bad, but not necessarily so, and the poor, although often portrayed positively, are far from perfect. Hulbert “Hubbo” O’Driscoll, the preteen protagonist of *Easy Avenue*, is himself both a poor and a good, if imperfect, kid. Living in post-war Canada he is exposed to a number of possible avenues to wealth and success over the course of the novel. My purpose here is to explore the attitudes towards both wealth and poverty presented in *Easy Avenue* and examine the process through which Hubbo eventually achieves some modicum of success.

Hubbo lost his mom in childbirth. His father died a few months later, having been run over by a streetcar. Doyle is intentionally vague, but it may have been either as a result of drinking or a suicide. Hubbo has since been raised by Mrs. O’Driscoll, whose husband was a distant relative of Hubbo’s father. Mr. O’Driscoll was supposedly drowned at sea during World War II, but his widow has yet to give up hope of his eventual return. She and Hubbo have recently been forced to move out of their rented house in a working-class neighborhood of Ottawa and into the Uplands Emergency Shelter on an old military base at the edge of town along with a lot of other families rendered impoverished and homeless in the wake of the recently ended war. Mrs. O’Driscoll has just started a job as a cleaning lady at Glebe Collegiate Institute, the high school Hubbo will be entering in the fall, a high school, Doyle has stated, that is essentially the one where he himself taught for more than three decades (Doyle; Wynne-Jones).

Hubbo’s first interaction with wealth comes when he serves as a caddy at a golf club, which, ironically enough, is located virtually next door to the Shelter. The contrast, as Hubbo makes clear, is stark: “Everybody,” he says, “in the Uplands Emergency Shelter was poor, and of course everybody at the Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club was rich, except the caddies” (10). Hubbo is paid double the ordinary caddy’s rate, \$1.50 per round, to carry the bag and find lost balls for Mr. Donald D. DonaldmcDonald, the “World’s Worst Golfer,” as the chapter title makes clear. Mr. DonaldmcDonald, yes that’s his last name—one word—is obviously rich but appears to have no friends and takes very little apparent pleasure from his chosen sport, which throws him into paroxysms of rage on a regular basis. Hubbo eventually saves DonaldmcDonald’s life after he has a heart attack on the course, and they both decide to give up golf at this point.

One of Doyle’s favorite literary devices, as Tim Wynne-Jones makes clear in his recent nomination of Doyle for the 2005 NSK Neustadt Prize for Children’s Literature, is the “lack of an omniscient (and judgmental) point of view” in Doyle’s work, and this is particularly evident in *Easy Avenue*. Although Doyle infuses the boy’s laconic descriptions of the people around him with subtle irony reminiscent, perhaps, of one of his favorite novels, *Huckleberry Finn*, Hubbo, on a conscious level, is a fairly objective narrator. He’s aware of the injustices that surround him, but he mostly describes what he sees without comment. He tells us, for example, that one of the

families that share the building with the O'Driscolls has a son who is "brainless," that is the boy is either microcephalic or has Down's Syndrome like Doyle's own sister, but Hubbo attaches no moral stigma to that pronouncement. The "brainless boy" is simply a part of his universe. When a new girl named Fleurette Featherstone Fitchell moves into the building, rumors circulate that she is "dirty," that is sexually active. Hubbo, however, simply sees her as a troubled but basically good kid who needs a friend, and he refuses to engage in gossip. He finds her fascinating, but he makes no explicit suppositions about her sexuality whatsoever.

The disparity between wealth and poverty in Ottawa is readily apparent to Hubbo. He lives among poor people, but sees the wealthy golfers next door on a daily basis. In order to get to school or go downtown to shop, he and everyone else at the Uplands Shelter must take public transportation, but the wealthy folks live between the Shelter and the city center. Thus, each day, "we, the poor people...were already on the bus, taking up half of all the seats, when the rich people started to get on. They had to come down the aisle, past us, to find places to sit" (30-31), something the rich people do with obvious trepidation. In school, some of the more well-to-do students have formed what they call the Hi-Y club, the application form for which includes questions concerning the applicant's father's occupation and what kind of car he drives, questions obviously designed to keep out the riffraff. Hubbo, who'd like to be a member of the Hi-Y club, is clearly aware of his own poverty and knows that he'd rather be rich and cultured. He is distressed by the raucousness of the poor people on the bus and the way the wealthy cringe away from them. He is embarrassed by the fact that he has holes in his underwear and that his adoptive mother works as a cleaning lady at his school; in fact, he refuses to acknowledge her presence in the school, hiding behind his locker door when she goes by. He agonizes over his desire to join the Hi-Y club and at one point goes so far as to fill out a false application, listing the address of his wealthy employer (who lives on Easy Avenue, of course) as if it were his own and lying about what his non-existent father does for a living.

The novel brims with failed, fanciful, or impractical success stories and get rich quick schemes, so much so that it is not surprising that some reference sources misidentify the novel's title as *Easy Street* (See, for example, Egoff, *New Republic*, 80). Hubbo's wrong-headed attempt to join the Hi-Y club is merely the most obvious of the schemes. Early on in the book, after giving up caddying, he looks for jobs all over Ottawa and, when he finally gets an interview at the symbolically named Cinderella Bookstore, he lies incompetently about his previous work experience and his religion (accidentally saying he's Lithuanian when he means Lutheran). Hubbo's guardian, Mrs. O'Driscoll, concocts a never ending stream of tall tales about, for example, her late-husband's seducing rich women out of their life savings, tales she obviously relishes as a joke, but that Hubbo appears to take, at least partially, at face value. One of Hubbo's less competent teachers is always bringing up "big successes like Napoleon and Prime Minister King and Shakespeare and Lassie" and telling his students to emulate them. This same teacher uses an idiot guidance textbook filled with illustrations reminiscent of "Goofus and Gallant" from *Highlights for Children* magazine. These consist of pairs of pictures, for example, of a doctor and a garbage man. The teacher then insists that the children decide which one they want to be when they grow up.

And then, part way through the book, Hubbo not only gets a part-time job working for a rich old lady but also begins to receive "mysterious money," a walloping, great \$50 a month, from

a person or persons unknown. At this point it actually seems possible that his desire for great wealth and success is on its way to being fulfilled.

Balancing out both Hubbo's fits of embarrassment over his poverty and his desire for unearned success are Mrs. O'Driscoll's common sense and the boy's own talent for objective observation. When, after the bus driver has to discipline some of his fellow Uplands inhabitants for rowdiness and for upsetting the rich people on the bus, Hubbo complains to Mrs. O'Driscoll, saying "I wish we were rich," she rather sensibly responds "What on earth for? ... This is fun!" She then adds, "Maybe you *will* be rich someday. But I'm telling you, if you care *too* much about it, you won't be any happier than you are now" (39). Further, Hubbo does recognize some of the less endearing traits of the wealthy people he has had a chance to observe close up. Those on the bus, as he describes them, seem weak kneed and helpless, less virile, and more fearful than their poorer fellow travelers. Moreover, upper-class people truly don't seem to have much fun. The two rich adults Hubbo's gotten to know on a name basis, his employers Mr. Donald McDonald and Miss Collar-Cuff, seem permanently depressed. Further, the rich kids at his school, who run Hi-Y and always seem to be dangling membership in the club just out of his reach, simply aren't very nice people. They're given to taunting and pulling nasty pranks on folks who can't fight back. One of them, Doug, finds out about Fleurette's undeserved reputation for being "dirty" (the result, perhaps, of the fact that her mother apparently works as a prostitute) and tries to bribe Hubbo with membership in the club if he will introduce them. Doug, despite his upper class background, also turns out to be a thief, stealing candy bars from the school store to sell for money he doesn't really need.

Still, hooked by the taste of wealth he's gotten from working for Miss Collar-Cuff and from his mysterious \$50 a month—plot devices that have caused several critics to compare *Easy Avenue* to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (Adey, 72; Egoff, *New Republic*, 80)—Hubbo only gradually recognizes that he himself has been behaving badly. Eventually disgusted by how various members of the Hi-Y club have mocked Mrs. O'Driscoll at work, talked about Fleurette, and been involved in thievery, Hubbo realizes that they aren't people with whom he wishes to be associated. He refuses membership in their club once and for all and tears their application form to pieces. Having come to his senses, he is embarrassed by his past desire to avoid Mrs. O'Driscoll at school, by his now irreversible refusal to let her meet Miss Collar-Cuff (who has died suddenly), and by his discovery that Mrs. O'Driscoll and Fleurette believe he's become "snooty" and "strange and hurtful" (108) since he began receiving the \$50 a month. In an attempt to make amends Hubbo acknowledges Mrs. O'Driscoll at school, hugging her in the corridor in front of the other students (who cheer by the way). Later, he insists that Doug admit that it was some other boy and not Hubbo who passed on rumors about Fleurette's supposedly being "dirty" to the Hi-Y people. When Doug, after first saying he will do so if Hubbo does him a favor, then reneges on his promise, sneering that "Who's going to believe you and a cleaning lady?" (110), Hubbo intentionally resorts to what might be called poor man's tactics, punching the rich kid in the nose and twisting his wrist until he fulfills his promise and tells Fleurette the truth.

Above the entrance to Hubbo's school is a carved torch and below it the Latin motto "*Alere Flammam*" and its meaning is a mystery to the boy throughout much of the book. This motto, shared by schools around the world, translates as "Kindle the Torch," and is clearly a reference to the torch of knowledge and, most importantly, self-knowledge of a sort that doesn't come easily.

Hubbo achieves it only by fits and starts. As the novel ends, however, he has not only gained a sense of his legitimate place in the world, overcome the shame he has felt about being poor, and made things right with both Mrs. O'Driscoll and Fleurette, but he also takes part in what might be seen as a folktale, or perhaps Dickensian ending. His secret benefactor, the person responsible for his getting both the job with Miss Collar-Cuff and the \$50 checks, is revealed to be Mr. Donald D. DonaldmcDonald. The checks, Hubbo's reward for saving the former golfer's life, will continue indefinitely. Finally, and perhaps a tad unbelievably, except within the context of a folktale or a Dickens novel, on the very last page of the book, as everyone attends a picnic, Mrs. O'Driscoll looks up, sees an approaching figure, and says "Lord strike me dead!...It's O'Driscoll!"

No explanation is given, but apparently Mrs. O'Driscoll isn't a widow after all; her husband has survived his fall into the sea and finally made his way home. Not only has Hubbo learned valuable lessons about overcoming class prejudice and being comfortable in his own skin, not only has he achieved a modicum of financial security, but, suddenly and unexpectedly, he finds himself about to take part in the no doubt happy reestablishment of a two parent family.

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