

ARTS

Sleepless in Seattle



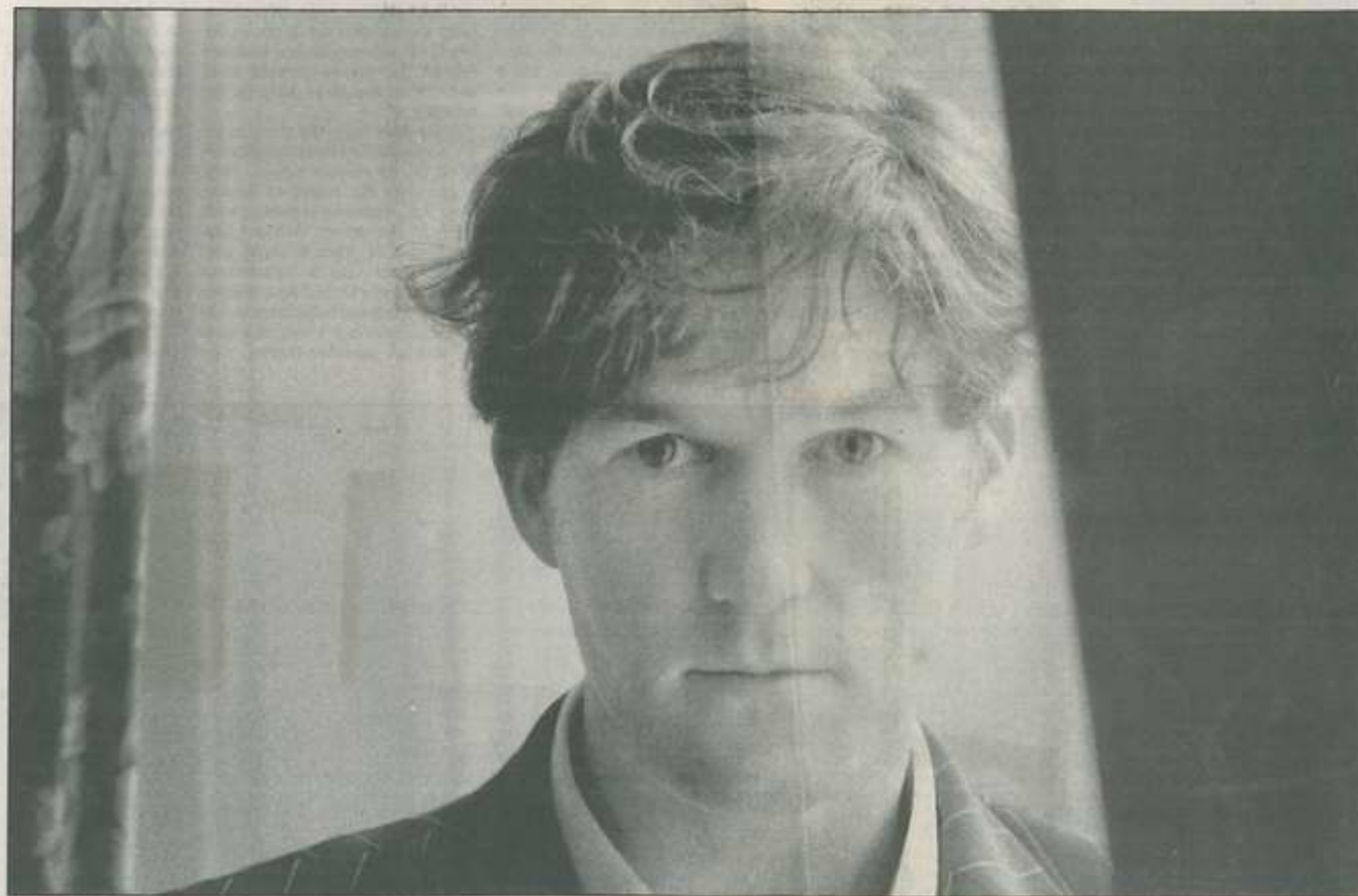
Helen Meany

When not training in extreme sport activities, **Michael Collins** writes novels – and wins coveted awards for them. He stops sprinting long enough to describe his latest novel, *The Resurrectionists*

MICHAEL Collins represents an emerging species. "How much sleep do we need," he shrugs, and of course he has a point. Why would you want to sleep when you could be running around Antarctica, sprinting in minus 30 degrees Celsius with ice embedded on your face? Or jogging up Everest perhaps. Pitting himself against the elements in inaccessible places and winning international contests for "extreme athletes" is what this 37-year-old US-based Irishman does for fun.

When he's not training in the forest wilderness behind Seattle, Collins is writing novels – or sometimes doing both simultaneously, with the help of a dictaphone. In between he devises computer programmes and installs telecommunications systems in remote Chinese villages, with his baby daughter in tow.

Until recently he hadn't bothered to mention his novel-writing to his former colleagues in Microsoft, where he worked until last summer. It was a private matter; after all, he was published in London rather than the US, where his work has had a tepid reception. But winning the Kerry Ingredients Award for Best



settling into the fringes of Michigan, "so far north winter's breath holds life in abeyance for nearly eight months of the year". The novel begins as the hard-boiled narrator, Frank, abandons New Jersey for his home town up north when he hears that his uncle, who raised him, has been murdered. Gambling on the prospect of some share in his uncle's inheritance, he takes with him his violent partner Honey, their son, and her son by her first marriage, on a trip that involves stolen cars and cash seized at gunpoint. Frank's mordant commentary casts this as an existential journey towards his past self.

On arrival in Copper, Michigan, "the world capital of nowhere", it's clear that nothing is what it seems, that Frank's 1950s childhood is shrouded in lies and conspiracy.

stories about Ireland in the early 1990s, the first of which was self-published, Collins realised that he needed to find a way of writing about the US, where he has lived since the mid-1980s. He first went there on a sports scholarship, having run competitively as a schoolboy in south Dublin. His time spent on the US racing circuit, living in campgrounds without a working visa, formed the background for his picaresque novel of the Irish illegal immigrant experience, *Emerald Underground*.

Extensive studies in computer programming led to work in Chicago, a city which fascinated him but which he eventually aban-

ment and people, and it's light all the time," he says. "Humans are changing to adapt to this, sleep becomes unnecessary, and you can pursue your own interests, alone in public."

He keeps abreast of literary trends by scanning reviews, sampling a new writer's style, but rarely reading a novel from beginning to end. "There aren't many books on my shelves. I'm more interested in observing the ideas that are packaged in popular culture."

One literary connection that he's happy to make is with Steinbeck, whose narratives of 1930s America could have been written as non-fiction but who chose to capture the texture of individual experience in fictional form. Collins, too, has a mission as a social commentator, and views his two latest novels as part of

the history of America, you could say that some of its weirdness comes from its origins: the puritans who went out there were extremists, and so many others who emigrated were desperate. It's a place built on myths that have been abandoned by Europe – the rags to riches myth, the evil empire myth, the fear of the Other – these are alive in America."

He observes the emigrant vision now taking another form: the "migration of American intellect" across the continent, from the East coast to Chicago to Seattle. People are still looking for an Eden, he says. The flight from heavy industry and from urban violence has taken highly educated people to Seattle in a form of "intellectual Darwinism".

MUST SEE

ART FILM: A free hour of Nordic short art films at Meetinghouse Square, 9 p.m. – 10 p.m.

Arts on Friday: New chairmen at the National Gallery and Abbey Theatre interviewed

Reviews

Trojan Women
Civic Theatre, Tallaght

Fintan O'Toole

WE remember, after the Holocaust and the gulags, after Srebrenica and Rwanda, that the stain of savagery runs deep in our species. It is easy to believe that the capacity for atrocity is the most venerable part of our inheritance, the longest thread that links us to our ancestors. What we sometimes forget is that the capacity for sympathy is no less venerable. This is one reason that, whenever the opportunity arises to see a good production of Euripides's *Trojan Women*, it should be taken.

Trojan Women was first performed in Athens in 415 BC. It was a shocking play, not just for its confrontation of tribal myth, but for its immediate resonance. It was as contemporary and as daring as a play about Srebrenica being performed in Belgrade a few months after the massacre. Shortly before *Trojan Women* was first staged, the Athenians had captured the island of Melos, killed its men of fighting age and enslaved its women and children.

It is this combination of universality and immediacy, of formal deconstruction of a myth and urgent reflection of contemporary reality, that make the play so extraordinary. Here we have the mythic figures of *The Iliad*: the gods Poseidon and Athena, the Trojan queen Hekabe, her daughter Cassandra, her daughters-in-law Helen and Andromache and Helen's original Greek husband Menelaus.

But here, too, we have the sordid reality of conquest: Cassandra preparing to be raped by Agamemnon, the soldiers coming to take Andromache's baby son to smash his head off the city walls. The key to a successful production of the play now is that both the heroic myth and the dirty deeds have to be fully present. The play must be neither blandly universal nor sensorially realistic but held in tension between the two. It is a tall order, but this visiting production from the York-based Actors of Dionysus company rises to it with impressive grace.

Part of what makes David Stuttard's production so confidently coherent is that he is both the director and the translator, so text and presentation work in harmony. Both achieve the contemporary resonance they desire with tact and subtlety.

Physically, Stuttard overcomes the problem that is inherent in modern productions of Greek drama, the tendency to stasis that comes from presenting as wordy drama texts that were originally presented with music, snazzy and stylised movement. The cast, within which Maria Fierbeller's Hekabe forms the steady core, is allowed to express itself through movement