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I-69 Does Not Stop. Seán Connelly. Bloomington, Indiana: Unknown Arts Press, 2002, 410 pages, \$16.00 paper.

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I-69 Does Not Stop is an entertaining and daring novel. It is entertaining in an old fashioned way: it has a go-ahead plot with sufficient intrigue and tension to generate and maintain interest, a good mixture of sympathetic protagonists and vigorous antagonists, a nonstop David and Goliath confrontation, and a hopeful and happy ending. How, with such apparently once-orthodox elements, can it qualify as daring? Easily. First, the book is something uncommon in U.S. literature, a genuine political novel. Second, it is an open and unapologetic polemic, dedicated to a specific agenda. Third, the author willingly risks losing any readers searching for easy entertainment by including passages of political and historical background, not unlike Tolstoy's interspersed essays in *War and Peace*, though these background histories are integrated into the basic story. Finally, it dares to end hopefully and happily in a literary genre most writers have seen as demanding defeat and tragedy: consider *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Darkness at Noon*, for example.

Seán Connelly makes his motives and his intentions very clear in a foreword which summarizes the current and ongoing struggle of activists in Bloomington, Indiana, and the surrounding area, to stop the construction of a new terrain Interstate 69 route.¹ The most cursory research indicates that the new terrain route for I-69 chosen by a small group of Indiana's politicians is not only more expensive but environmentally disastrous compared to almost all other suggested routes. Even a generous conclusion is that the route is a shameless and shameful collusion between short-sighted politicians and corporate greed, employing rigged studies, ignoring public hearings, and steam rolling the principles of democracy. It is difficult to imagine anyone other than those benefiting from the chosen route disagreeing with Connelly's claims: "The I-69 extension, in one form or another, has been in the works for more than a decade, and for that same decade, it has been resisted by the people of Indiana" (p. i). This novel, he makes clear, is one more form of resistance.

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¹He includes the Web Site of Citizens for Appropriate Rural Roads (www.carri69.org), which links to other sites, such as "the fifty most wasteful roads in America," should any readers wish to explore the issue further.

If the highway extension had popular support, as Connelly observes, it would long ago have become a reality. On the contrary, the extent to which it has been opposed is unusual, Big Politics and Big Business long ago having learned that their vast resources invariably wear down what might be called the democratic opposition: the people. The I-69 extension has become a symbol of much of what has gone wrong with the democratic process in the past century, including the "reminder that democracy belongs to the highest bidder" (p. iii).

Connelly's novel is, as he says, an allegory rather than an account of the real struggle in southern Indiana. His ideal goals are to inspire unity among the highway's opponents, to kindle "the just outrage we should feel" (p. iv), and to propose that democracy and political activism can work. He has, obviously, set himself a difficult task. Opposing a highway doesn't sound like the stuff of exciting fiction, especially when the story is laced with such background material as the history of transportation in America, but Connelly manages his self-imposed mission deftly, gracefully, and persuasively. *I-69 Does Not Stop* is a skilful mix of art, entertainment, and instruction.

In the United States, novels which openly advocate for a cause, which are polemical or seem to verge upon propaganda, are usually suspect, especially among academics and critics. On occasion, novelists with social agendas have been granted grudging respect and admiration: John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, and Harriet Beecher Stowe come to mind, though each was at times attacked unmercifully by political foes and literary purists alike. Gore Vidal, perhaps the United States's best recent political novelist has been among its most reviled: at least in part because his unpopular perspective has been both contrary to popular mythologies of America — and accurate. The political novel is generally treated rather more equitably in Europe. China Miéville is a solid contemporary example, and André Malraux a sturdy representative of the genre's respectability in the last century. From the chilling novels of Agota Kristof to the brilliantly playful mysteries of Peter Dickason, from Albert Camus to Robert MacLiam Wilson, political fiction is less likely to be sneered at as mere propaganda rather than art by European readers. One wonders if the lack of political sophistication the rest of the world attributes to U.S. citizens is reflected in their attitude toward "art."

American novelists who have been openly political often have been "prophets without honor." Gore Vidal, for example, disheartened by the vitriolic response to his political novels abandoned the United States and moved to Italy. Allan Seager, a first-rate novelist who in the 1950s and early 1960s may have been Vidal's equal as a political novelist, fell quickly into obscurity, in spite of the high esteem in which he was held by the likes of Robert Penn Warren, James Dickey, and Hugh Kenner. In fact, Robert Penn Warren said that Seager was as good a novelist as the United States had in the 1950s. Seager was well aware of the risks he took as a political novelist. Indeed, the protagonist of his finest novel, *Amos Berry*, is given the name of an Old Testament prophet. Seager, in his journals, noted that he was saying what he wanted said, knowing that as his novels became more political his appeal, and his sales, diminished: a fate typical of American novelists who chose to be openly and seriously political.

I-69 Does Not Stop, however, is a best seller, doubtless because it is openly political. It is a best seller in Bloomington, Indiana, and its amazing success in that city supports one of the novel's themes: the importance of community and local values to quality of life. Connelly visited bookstores asking that they stock a few copies of his novel. National chains were reluctant to carry it because of the controversy sug-

gested by the book's title: big money generally supported the highway extension. Two local bookstores, Boxcar Books and Howard's Bookstore, stocked the novel, as did Bloomingfoods, a local grocery. Howard's Bookstore put copies in its window, they quickly sold out, and Howard's ordered more copies. Boxcar Books published an interview with the author in "Paper Cuts," its contribution to *The Pin-Up*, a weekly events calendar. Word spread. Indiana University's student newspaper, the *Indiana Daily Student*, published an article on Connelly and the book. The next day Borders Books (so far the only national bookseller, except for Amazon, to carry the book) called and asked for copies. The novel's fame grew in the local area. Connelly was interviewed on local radio, by WTWO television in nearby Terre Haute, and the book was reviewed in a number of local publications.

Bookstores and publications with national connections were a different story. The response of Books-A-Million in Terre Haute was typical. The WTWO broadcast generated interest in the Terre Haute area, partly no doubt because Terre Haute opposes the highway extension. Barnes and Noble, Indiana State University's Bookstore (Connelly attended both Indiana State University and Indiana University), declined to carry the book, just as it had in Bloomington. Only Book Nation, a locally owned bookstore, was willing to stock the book. Connelly, a native of Terre Haute, was turned down by Books-A-Million, which in Terre Haute typically supports local authors by stocking their books, holding book signings, and in general helping generate publicity. The local manager explained that he couldn't stock the book because Corporate Headquarters did not want to be associated with such a controversial issue. *I-69 Does Not Stop* explores, among other things, the oblique manner in which Corporate America practices censorship and manipulates opinion. Bookstores often refuse to carry books on controversial issues, of course, but such refusal is obviously highly selective, because nearly any book, no matter how harmless it may seem to the vast majority, can become controversial: witness the response of religious fundamentalists to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Censorship in the United States takes many forms: Michael Moore's signing is cancelled at a Philadelphia Borders, Blockbuster decides that *Henry and June* (among countless others) is obscene and shouldn't be available for rental, Wal-Mart carries only the "clean" versions of pop CDs. Connelly is simply experiencing one of the issues explored in his novel: the numerous ways Corporate America and its Government counterparts manipulate perception. If the nation's largest video and bookstore chains opt not to carry a book, video, or CD thousands of people are denied access, and such "passive censorship" grows as more and more local bookstores, video stores, and music shops are driven out of business by the national retail giants.

This manipulation of perception is central to *I-69 Does Not Stop*, just as it is crucial to the actual controversy surrounding the extension of the highway. Fionn, the novel's protagonist, employs a stratagem to stop construction. He creates the illusion that trees in the highway's path are occupied by numerous anti-highway activists, whereas he is there alone. Fionn's clever strategy is rooted in apparent defeat: he has seen the activist community in Bloomington "worn down by the constant publicity, the media blitz touting the highway, the exclusion of dissent from the public discussion" in newspapers and he realizes that those opposing the highway have been "defeated by illusion. The illusion that the consent of the community was not required to put the highway through" (p. 13). His realization that "illusions, powerfully presented, create realities," that "appearance was a weapon of inestimable power" gives him hope that he can wield at least a little power himself

by "incorporating the tool of facile oppression into the battle for liberation" (p. 15). He does create a powerful illusion, but in an ironic twist, those behind the highway extension (including the FBI, portrayed as the "muscle" of the status quo), use the media to portray Fionn as a terrorist and a murderer. For him, the ongoing conflict of appearance and reality are made personal: that the public perceive him, and by association all opposition to the highway, as a terrorist and a murderer becomes central to the pro-highway forces.

One of the book's strategies is to make the reader aware of the lessons Fionn learns about appearance, and the novel's exploration of perception, on a number of levels, is both rich and instructive. The gap between the myths of the United States which have been absorbed by the majority of her citizens and reality is woven skillfully through the book. As an informed activist, Fionn is aware of the FBI's woeful history of "protecting freedom" by violating the rights of citizens, yet even as he is being framed by them his childhood beliefs revive: "They're at my door. They're on my telephone. They're framing me and I still can't believe it. I am an idiot because I can't escape my elementary school education." Mrs. Fenmore, who has given Fionn sanctuary in her home, then observes that "faith in government has been taught to us all our lives" (p. 232). Faith is the operative word, as this book shows, because evidence and experience should shake that faith. Such evidence in this novel is taken from every era, beginning with the shameful collusion of banks and politicians to allow foreclosure against the farmer-soldiers of the Revolutionary War who couldn't make payments on their land while they were "fighting for freedom" and continuing through the jailing of Eugene Debs, the management of the Vietnam war, the CIA's support of Noriega, through the Gulf War to the current violation of citizen's rights in the name of Homeland Security.

Indeed, the frank presentation of a number of questionable incidents in the FBI's "history" probably assured that no mainstream publisher would seriously consider publishing this novel. A worried Fionn muses, "The FBI obviously didn't need a crime to put a person away. They were the strange, secret police of freedom who ruled against anyone who didn't fully understand how 'freedom' was to be defined. Masked by the famous veil of 'national security,' and bolstered by shrill cries that to question was un-American, no one need know that he was in jail. And no one need worry that he would ever get out. Geronimo Pratt or Leonard Peltier would be happy enough to testify on that point" (p. 203). Plot and reality are merged with the mention of Frank Ambrose, a Bloomington activist who spent eight months in jail for tree spiking, was never convicted, and was eventually released when charges were dropped. Readers are also reminded of COINTELPRO which infiltrated the peace movement, AIM, unions, the civil rights movement, and the Black Panthers, among others. J. Edgar Hoover, it is instructive to remember, declared that the civil rights movement was a Communist organization and authorized a warrantless wire-tap of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Yet, as this novel points out again and again, it is difficult for people to see the truth once they have embraced the myth of the FBI as protectors of Constitutional rights, of freedoms, of democracy. Central to the plot, and to the polemics, are the connections Connelly makes: the new terrain highway route is being forced through by the collusion of Big Money Capitalism, Politicians, Law Enforcement, and Government Agencies. In the novel this sometimes has the feel of a scheme as sinister as the grand conspiracy in *Foucault's Pendulum*. Connelly makes his extensive conspiracy believable, in part because he crafts the plot very meticulously, and partly because the abundant examples produce an atmosphere of verisimilitude

which the reader eventually shares with the characters. When the activist Brigit Dodd delivers a near-monologue on the history of transportation in the United States, pointing out how highways served the interest of big business and demolishing the myth that Eisenhower had the interstate systems built for national security reasons, she is educating the reader along with her fellow activists. Scores of these illustrations of Government's complicity with Big Business are presented. It is a strategy similar to that employed by Darwin in *The Origin of Species*: overkill. When one is arguing against current conviction, example after example is necessary to open eyes and minds to alternative possibilities.

Crucial to the plot, and crucial to Connelly's purpose, however, is the process of eyes and minds opening, of a sometimes painful and difficult coming to awareness, of seeing beyond the accepted myths. In what nearly becomes a reprise of Kent State near the novel's end, a National Guard captain refuses to issue the order which could kill protesters. After a struggle between his training and the reality of what he is experiencing, he replaces "the illusion of patriotism [with] the reality of it" (p. 403). It is just here that Connelly's great leap of faith is made. The novel's "happy ending" has its roots in an ultimate faith in democracy, or at least in the strength of the people, in the belief that life can be restored to "the conscience of the community" (p. 112). Contrary to the pattern of traditional myth, and most western literature, *I-69 Does Not Stop* proposes that people cannot pin their hopes on a savior, a hero; rather, diverse groups must unite. Syncretism should be the ideal. Early in the novel Fionn recalls the "failed" protest of the tree-sitter, Dolphin: "everyone pinned their hopes on a hero-deliverer who would carry their weight for them while they felt warm inside that their community didn't just lie down in front of big money. Instead of applauding her effort, the community wondered why she didn't have the resolve of Butterfly [the more famous West Coast tree-sitting activist] and Dolphin disappeared amidst rumors, lies and shadow" (p. 12). The triumph of an integrated and unified opposition to the highway at the novel's end is an expression of hope, idealism, and a faith in democracy's potential. More important than stopping the highway, which may be temporary, is the giant step toward joining disparate groups, which have customarily been convinced that their interests lie separately: "The world worked in compartments. Feminists worked on feminist issues. Gays on gay issues. Blacks on black issues. Muslims on Muslim issues. Jews on Jewish issues." At the novel's end it is, for once, "People working on people's issues" (p. 264).

To focus on the political dimension of *I-69 Does Not Stop* may be misleading. Clearly, its success in southwestern Indiana indicates that it is more than an activist tract, and indeed it is. It is highly entertaining, it is often suspenseful, and it is frequently funny. Fionn makes his presence as a tree-sitter known and immediately antagonizes a local big money power by urinating on the man's map from a limb above his head. An FBI agent provocateur is persuaded to throw a lemon meringue pie in the face of a Senator. The whimsical and the serious are rarely far apart. Among the literary allusions, for example, Connelly has named a minor character Eliot Rosewater in a nod to Kurt Vonnegut's novel about big money, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. And the giant corporation behind the pro-highway forces is the Aucalf Corporation, the golden calf, the prototypical false idol.

Such religious allusion is one small part of the complex associations Connelly makes. Corporate executives are secular monks: "zealots in the church of capitalism," anxious to carry out their CEO's every command. Connelly makes it clear that capitalism in the United States has taken on an almost religious significance.

It has also become, in the minds of many, synonymous with freedom and democracy. The FBI's agent provocateur thinks, at one point, "Capitalism meant freedom, liberty and equality. The people who stood against it wanted quotas. They wanted to tell people how much money they could have and what kind of car to drive. They wanted to keep him from doing . . . well, anything, really. Anti-capitalists wanted to stop people from doing whatever they wanted and that was the logic of it. Capitalists liked freedom and their opponents opposed freedom. How could anyone misunderstand that?" (pp. 270–271).

The U.S. attitude toward law is part of this web of associations. Mulling over civil disobedience, Fíonn thinks, "In the United States, the law was divine. The trouble was, that like all divinity, it sprang from the minds of men . . . Laws were written by corporations, religious ethics by ruling states and apologist historians. The heart was the only voice that would let one sleep in peace" (pp. 110–111). Later Newt Gingrich's comment that, like the Founding Fathers, he would throw up his hands to God, is dissected: "If he is throwing up his hands to God and would like us to believe that God is providing an answer, what is the implication? Law is divine? It is not an attack on a certain ideology to question a law that is detrimental to the majority; it is an attack on God. We, as mere mortals, are over-stepping the boundaries of our knowledge by ignorantly attacking the divine. The implication is that we are not fit to rule. It's a funny thing to say in a country that calls itself free and democratic" (pp. 285–286). The myth that any law is somehow sacrosanct, and that to break even a bad law is somehow immoral, is a powerful weapon against dissent.

It is difficult to convey the richness of this novel, because it is of a piece; it has an internal unity that can't be conveyed by pulling out a few elements for display. Even names of characters are purposeful. They are sometimes whimsical, sometimes suggestive, often both. Henry K. Millhouse combines Kissinger and Nixon in one name. Aucalf's CEO, Rand Taggart combines the corporation and an Ayn Rand character (Connelly may be the anti-Ayn Rand of novelists). Walter Rickart and Sheriff Berry are nods to two of Allan Seager's characters. The nature of Edie Carson, racist and avaricious capitalist, is suggested by association: Edward Carson's hatred of homosexuals sent Oscar Wilde to jail, and his rabid anti-Catholicism contributed to the century-long "troubles" in Ireland. Perceptive readers can enjoy not only the symbolic associations of the names of characters, but also identifying real counterparts for fictional characters. Many are local, and familiar to Bloomington readers, but some clearly are not. Peggy Seeger is unmistakably the model for Julia Ethelson, "a popular folksinger in the early sixties and an activist all her life" (p. 220). Ethelson has a framed letter on her wall dated 1957 from John Foster Dulles warning her that she will be imprisoned if she travels to the Soviet Union, which had invited her to a global music festival. Incredulous that the U. S. government threatened her freedom to protect her from the freedom-denying Soviets, she attended the festival despite the risk. A young Peggy Seeger bravely made the same decision when Dulles, then Secretary of State, made the identical threat.

Some allusions are less accessible. Mike Casement suggests Sir Roger Casement, knighted for exposing the inhumane treatment of the Congolese by Belgium but executed for siding with the Irish, exploited and mistreated by Great Britain. And when activists agree to meet at The Straw Road at Midnight, Ireland's treatment by England is again suggested: the French forces of General Humbert and Irish rebels were guided at night through Mayo by Irish peasants holding flaming straw. Thus

the way came to be called The Straw Road; it is an appropriate symbol, among other things, of politically powerless people cooperating in an act of dissent.

Bloomington readers and reviewers have praised Connelly's loving portrait of Bloomington, with his descriptions of the area, the inclusion of local businesses and events, such as the Lotus Fest, but above all his evocation of the character of the city. Unlike scores of American cities, Bloomington has not become a cookie cutter replica of every other urban area that national franchises continue to create across the nation. It has a thriving downtown, and it strongly supports local businesses. Bloomington's special character affects its residents; the number of professionals, for example, who have chosen to stay in Bloomington and work at jobs outside their specialty rather than relocate for a bigger salary, is astounding.

Yet the novel's popularity in Bloomington can't be attributed solely to its subject, its locale, nor to the factual and historical observations and parallels. Above all, it is a good story, well-written, with an entertaining and engrossing plot. Attesting to Connelly's craftsmanship, more than one reader has commented specifically on the novel's two prologues, which border on the poetic. Although it is something of a marvel that this book achieved such extensive popularity in Bloomington without the aid of marketing and with only the support of local businesses and alternative media, it's also a shame that readers across the nation have not had access to it. If excellence guaranteed nationwide success this novel would have it.