

# Is Chris Arthur Making Us Smarter?

## *On the Shorelines of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings*

IOWA CITY: UNIVERSITY OF IOWA PRESS, 2012. PAPER, \$19.95

## *Irish Elegies*

NEW YORK: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2009. 184 PAGES, CLOTH, \$80.<sup>1</sup>

## *Words of the Grey Wind: Family and Epiphany in Ulster*

BELFAST: BLACKSTAFF, 2009. 253 PAGES, PAPER, £12.99.

I don't know about you, but I've been confirming through personal experience nearly all the warnings and admonitions sounded out by gurus of technology and prophets of new media: that ease of access devalues information; that attention span decreases with the possibility of endless, linked distraction; that our brains are rewiring to handle multitasking more efficiently, which makes sustained attention more difficult; that it won't be long before we lose the ability to read long books; that our ability to concentrate on just one thing is shot, or shortly will be. Heck, even in the course of writing this paragraph, I've gone to check my email, Facebook, Chris Arthur's web page, Amazon, the archived page from his academic work at the University of Wales Lampeter. I've read again bits and pieces of each of the three books I'm reviewing; I've sent a quick note to the librarian in charge of faculty research rooms, complaining about the excessive heat in my office.

Getting to my point, though: In so many ways, Chris Arthur's essays are an

antidote to the barrage of attention-claimants that beset us in our twenty-first century technological world. In a sideways answer to Nicholas Carr's intriguing *Atlantic* article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" I would suggest that Chris Arthur is making us smart again, and if only more people were aware of the salubrious effects of his essays, we might all regain the peace and insight that come from centered meditation on the wonders of the world.

Like most essayists, Chris Arthur has been toiling away quietly for years, making beautiful experiments in the language arts, thinking through interesting connections, publishing his attempts in a variety of small journals that carry on, fueled by the love their editors and staff have for literature (you can find him at least once a year in *Southern Humanities Review*, for instance, and slightly less often in *Hotel Amerika*, *Southwest Review*, and several others). For this reason, I wouldn't be surprised if you've never heard of him before. His biggest splash on this side of the pond was "(En)trance," the opening piece in 2009's *Best American Essays*. That essay derives from a meditation on a pair of pillars that graced the entrance of Arthur's mother's childhood home, and which helped him realize that he would never become the kind of writer he once thought he'd become ("the kind who undertakes complete stories, who engineers a beginning, works things through to an ending, and offers readers an experience of apparent wholeness"). Instead, as he explores circuitously within the piece, he's become an essayist, a writer who turns his subjects this way and that, who lets his mind travel through tangents of associated meaning, who rejects the very notion of completeness in favor of a calm acceptance of the irreducible complexity of the world. "(En)trance" includes also an extended thought experiment in which Arthur imagines himself as a "temporal kestrel," viewing from on high the various creations and destructions that change the face of the land at a pace too slow for one human being to appreciate. Reading the essay, as I have done several times now, one gets the feeling of escape from the world's buzzing in favor of a peaceful ramble through the landscapes of Antrim and of Arthur's thinking. This is literary escapism, like that afforded by the writers of the sort Arthur is not and will never become, but quite unlike it, too, because the places described are verifiable, yet the path to visit them is made up of bucolic switchbacks along the meanders of mind.

Arthur's first three books, *Irish Nocturnes* (1999), *Irish Willow* (2002), and *Irish Haiku* (2005), were all published unassumingly by the Davies Group, a Colorado press whose primary focus is contemporary religion. His three most recent books, *Words of the Grey Wind* and *Irish Elegies*, both from

2009, and 2012's *On the Shorelines of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings*, show him attempting to reach a larger audience. The oddball of the group, the only book published in Ireland but without an Irish adjective in its title, is a greatest-hits collection including three or four essays from each of the earlier books, with an additional trio of new pieces. His return to the pattern and to new work, the *Elegies*, which now houses the aforementioned "(En)trance," forms part of Palgrave Macmillan's New Directions in Irish Literature series. With *On the Shorelines of Knowledge*, Arthur has found a new publisher, the University of Iowa Press, in the Sightline series of literary nonfiction titles.

Thus, if you're looking to catch up on Arthur's early work, *Words of the Grey Wind* will be a wonderful introduction. Its concerns range widely, from family to Irish history (especially "the Troubles"), to birds and unknown animal bones, to mistletoe and linen and the metal nub that fits on the end of a walking stick (it's called a "ferrule," if you were wondering); but of course those are only the ostensible subjects of his essays, and within them he reveals his questioning mind, unable to settle for easy answers or received notions. In his meditation on "Train Sounds," for instance, he tells us that

The way in which things intersect, coincide, collide, how one thing leads to another, has fascinated me for years. Every moment floats on a densely cross-hatched sea of cause and effect, waved with endless undulations that seem to embody in their continual movement and variety both the flux of possibility and the iron that every moment cools into, the shape of circumstance locking us into the way things are.

Because his essays, like all essays, never quite resolve into a kernel of wisdom, never quite put a subject to rest, you'll find Arthur returning across different pieces to some of the same ideas, such as the value of paying attention to the quotidian, or the interconnectedness of all things, or the improbabilities of existence; but with each recursion, the language is fresh, as is the occasion that gave rise to the new meditation, so that in Chris Arthur we find a guide to the contemplative life. Reading his essays, we afford ourselves the time for sustained engagement with a subject. Note, for instance, how he unfolds a split-second answer to his daughter's question "What are you thinking about, Dad?" into a several-thousand-word meditation on chance and mortality in "Looking behind 'Nothing's' Door." In reality, he answered, "Nothing," but his protective impulse (she is 12 years old and would not quite understand his

thoughts) opens to the written admission that the real answer was “bombs and sperm,” and those two words unfold into the story of his uncle’s miraculous survival amidst a spray of German bombs, and the miniscule chances that any of us should exist, given the train of requisite couplings leading back into the inexpressible past. Then, realizing that what he’s written is not what he was thinking then, but what he is thinking now in order to express fully his past thoughts, he muses that

The mind makes light seem slow. Transcribing its operations in words is a laborious business and one that can never succeed in catching either the nature, duration, or extent of what’s being thought or imagined.

Perhaps that’s true, but Arthur comes about as close as a writer can, or at least he offers convincing artistic ruminations that have the potential to restore a measure of his readers’ sanity.

In a way, the model of thinking encouraged by our Internet culture fits quite well with the essay genre, and perhaps what we claim for our time is in fact a condition of all times. In the late 1500s, Montaigne notably opposed systematic thinking, preferring instead to write “by groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering.” He continued, “I undertake to speak indiscriminately of everything that comes to my fancy without using any but my own natural resources.” Earnestly or self-deprecatingly, he criticized his essays, asking, “What are these things of mine, in truth, but grotesque and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental?” Because even in a time without electricity, let alone the gadgets that divide our attention and rewire our brains, “It [was] a thorny undertaking . . . to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings that agitate it,” Montaigne wrote, seeking a balance of control and freedom. Essentially, then, the quintessential essay is a bit distracted itself, following a ragged course through the mind’s associations, and yet it keeps its subject always in view, calmly allowing the writer’s and readers’ minds a bit of respite from the hassles and harangues of harried life—a chance to concentrate, for a change.

So let us take the long view for a moment, setting aside the Internet and virtual relationships and information available at the touch of a button. It

seems the essay has always been the middle-way solution to the problem of wandering minds seeking indiscriminate novelty. In “Of Idleness,” one of his earliest attempts, Montaigne explained that he hoped to free himself from public obligations and retire to his estate, where he would surround himself with books and let his mind wander at its leisure. But, to his surprise and dismay, he found that the uncompelled mind, “like a runaway horse, gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose.” This startling and undesirable realization, said the great master, led directly to the invention of the essay genre: “I have begun to put [these chimeras] in writing, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.”

In “Chestnuts,” an essay about (you didn’t guess it) a tropical monkey-ladder seed (*Entada gigas*) that seems to have drifted on ocean currents from Jamaica all the way to Northern Ireland, Arthur admits,

I often wonder where my drift-seeds go and whether anyone will find them. Perhaps I shouldn’t ask for anything more than the evidence our sea heart-words provide of lives and times beyond our own, of the possibility of landfall, both proximate and distant, in someone else’s understanding. Is this not enough to steel the nerve and attempt our repeated, hazardous voyages between self and other now and then?

So I guess my hope is the same as the author’s: that his essays will find appreciative readers who benefit from them.

In that case, I recommend that the next time you’re caught in the world wide web of distraction, you use a few keystrokes and mouse-clicks to purchase a book or three of Chris Arthur’s essays. Then, when the books arrive, you can begin retraining your brain to stay focused, one essay at a time, until you achieve a stillness you’ve lost amidst all your zipping about. With his beautiful extended meditations, his wandering-focused excursions through memory and study, his questions and attempts at some peace without answers, Chris Arthur may be the best chance we have against the encroaching chaos of our times.

—Patrick Madden

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1. To buy *Irish Elegies* for a vastly discounted (from the \$80 list price) \$30, readers should visit <http://us.macmillan.com/irishelegies> and use the promo code ELEGIES2012 at checkout.

