

Séamas O'Reilly



Flatley, Blackbird and the trouble with vanity projects

The problem with a term like “vanity project” is that it presupposes there is any other form of art. Making a film, or a song, a book, is a staggeringly presumptuous act, in a world so filled with them already.

Take books. I released one of those last year, like a massive, vain child. A 2010 survey suggested 75% of Irish people read six books a year. Extrapolated over 50 years of prime reading age, this amounts to 600 books across a lifetime for the most readerly among us. Even if you increased that rate to one book a week, and granted yourself a maximally long and healthy 70 years in which to read to your heart's content, you'd hit a tally of about 3,600 books. That's less than 0.07% of the 6m volumes available in Trinity College's copyright library. Put another way, if you were to read one book a week for 70 years, you'd only get through a quarter of the books that Amazon currently stocks about Hitler, and less than a tenth it offers on losing weight. (Intriguingly, those two searches do have a crossover and, at the above rate, you could spend three months of your life just reading books about Hitler's diet alone.)

Put in this context, introducing another book, or poem, or painting, or movie to this teetering totem pole of media is not merely vain, but insane. But then, along comes a vanity project that reminds you why the term exists in the first place – I speak, of course, of *Blackbird*, one film of Michael Flatley.

First announced in 2018, *Blackbird* is a spy-thriller written, directed, produced by and starring Michael Flatley. Its plot, such as one exists, is that Victor Blackley (Flatley) used to be a spy for MI6, in a clandestine group called The Chieftains, which appears to be made up of three portly men in their 60s and two women in their early 30s. Having retired following his wife's death, all four surviving Chieftains now live in Barbados working in Blackley's resort-cum-casino, where an evil arms dealer played by Eric Roberts is coming to sell a diabolical superweapon to a scary terrorist, accompanied by his fiancée, a woman from Blackley's own past.

I don't think it can be overstated how long, and how earnestly, I've awaited this film since it was announced, then unannounced, and then memory holed, shortly after. And then, just over a month ago, Flatley announced that he or, at least, the world was ready for it to be unleashed, and last Friday, at a raucous

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showing in the Light House cinema in Smithfield, I finally got to see *Blackbird* fly.

There have been many reviews over the past week, many of which have focused on how bad the film is, how terrible its acting, how shoddy its script, and bewildering its conception (all true). The temptation is to carve out some other niche for myself, to contrive some positive viewpoint, however flimsy, that marks my take as different and unique – to tell you that it's not that bad, and is actually an artfully pitched study on masculinity or post-colonialism, and then explain why.

That will not be possible. This film is bad in every way it is possible for a film to be bad. Listing all of its bad qualities would, effectively, list all of its qualities. The acting, particularly from Flatley, is remarkably terrible, and made worse by his insistence on sporting a different, Dutch angled hat in nearly every scene. The script is basically made up of half-remembered lines from films that do make sense, and the plot is garbled to the point

of incomprehensibility. Its characterisation of female characters is appalling, but then so is its treatment of all humans, all of whom appear to lack sentience. Yes, in a rare feat, *Blackbird* not only fails the Bechdel Test but the Turing Test as well.

Why does an Irish-themed brigade of MI6 agents named the Chieftains exist? Why does he spend several outlandish flashback sequences of this film traipsing through a jungle wearing motorcycle gear, like some sort of covert ops Fonzie? Why did these spies all decide they wanted to spend their retirement – and in their young female colleague Caz's case, her 30s – working hospitality roles at a casino resort? One of them, Matiti, appears to have been a spy on the same level as the rest of them and is now working as a bellhop. Even if they wanted this insane demotion, are those skills particularly transferrable?

This is not the worst movie ever made, as anyone who has spent any time the burning coalface of straight-to-video schlock will tell you. Hell, if I had \$100,000 for every time I'd seen Eric Roberts in a worse movie than this, I'd have roughly the same amount of money as Eric Roberts got for doing them. (His IMDb page currently lists nearly 200 projects slated as either in production or prepared for release in 2022.)

No, what's baffling, and almost ecstatically embarrassing, is that one can see the maker's mark, the thumbprint left on the clay by a man who wanted this film to be made. The writer-director-producer-star who wrote all these lines, and then said them while squinting, looking for all the world like a cross between Terry Venables and the Tayto Man.

To see him interviewed on the Late Late as if he had made a normal film that any other human might have made was weird. I suppose it would have been strange if Ryan Tubridy had spent 20 minutes just asking “why?” But choosing to ignore it entirely was a bit like having on a man from Ardee who'd made a giant portrait of Anne Doyle's face in his own blood, and politely asking him how he got the shading so right on her nose.

Blackbird isn't so bad it's good. It is, at best, so bad it's unbelievable, and many more people will probably, like me, watch it for just that reason. It would be hypocritical of me to tell you not to, but let's just say you'd be better off reading about Hitler's diet.

HOROSCOPES

Aries

Mar 21 - Apr 19

Identify ways in which you might be holding yourself back by carrying old baggage, and get ready to leave them behind. This way, you'll be able to move forward with a lighter load.

Taurus

Apr 20 - May 20

The circle of acquaintances you surround yourself with is coming into sharper focus. Get the crew together and enjoy yourselves.

Gemini

May 21 - Jun 20

It's now your turn to take your place at the head of the line. A VIP or supervisor could open a few doors once were firmly shut, lifting you further up life's great ladder.

Cancer

Jun 21 - Jul 22

The world is calling your name! The opportunity to see the world could be just around the corner, but you don't need to wait for someone else to suggest taking this chance.

Leo

Jul 23 - Aug 22

Something powerful may begin happening at any moment. Some financial windfalls are also very possible, so keep your eyes peeled for something major to swing in your favour.

Virgo

Aug 23 - Sep 22

The cosmos might presently be asking you to team up. Think in terms of equality and equilibrium, because getting on the same footing has never been more important.

Libra

Sep 23 - Oct 22

Self-improvement is the name of the game right now. Start planning to clean up areas where you might have gotten sloppy. Little changes can add up to big improvements.

Scorpio

Oct 23 - Nov 21

You've got cosmic permission to have as much fun as possible at the moment! Do something that makes you feel more alive – and that sparks increased joy in your heart.

Sagittarius

Nov 22 - Dec 21

The universe is focusing on your home and hearth at present. This would be a great time to host a party at your place, or perhaps make a few changes to the décor.

Capricorn

Dec 22 - Jan 19

It's time to get out and meet people, reconnecting with those who might have become slight strangers. Writing is also highlighted, so get clear on your personal message before you share it.

Aquarius

Jan 20 - Feb 18

Money matters are currently up for inspection. A new job or pay raise could be forthcoming, as long as you're willing to ask for it and back yourself up with proof of your worth.

Pisces

Feb 19 - Mar 20

Major opportunities from the universe are in the next few weeks. That being said, don't wait around for these chances to come your way. You get to call the shots, so get started!

Séamas O'Reilly



Monarchy mocks the rights working people fought for

THERE aren't many specific benefits to being Northern Irish. So few, in fact, that I've been known to say that the only one I can think of is "you don't end up inherently scared of Northern Irish people". But there is another, and it's one I'll make use of this week, as we crown a new king.

I don't personally consider myself British, and due to the protections of British and Irish law — not least those enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement — neither am I compelled to do so. I've never had a British passport, though some small part of me wants one just so I can grow a moustache for its photo and keep it, side by side with my Irish passport, in a safe deposit box like I'm Jason Bourne. I do, however, have a British birth certificate, having been born, raised, and schooled in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Whether I like it or not — and whatever else I am — I was born, and still remain, a British subject.

My friends from the Republic consider me as Irish as I do. They don't mind that I've never read *Peig*, or have no idea what a transition year is. My English friends, despite knowing I did GCSEs and A-Levels like them, consider me Irish too, either because they're committed to the self-determination of Northern Ireland's Irish population, or don't really know the difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland anyway. For the most part, this is fine, until Britain does something so patently absurd that I object. At which point, I find their heckles go up and I'm forced, with great reluctance, to remind my English friends that I speak as a fellow British subject. It's a nuclear option, and not one I use lightly. I've certainly never done so in print. But in the case of this week's royal fever, I'm moved to do so.

Royalism is not a solely English occupation. You may note that many people in Northern Ireland like the royals so much they've painted portraits of them on the sides of their own homes. I speak not of them, nor their English equivalents, the people you see covered in badges outside Buckingham Palace, interviewed by TV reporters who are very clearly scared of them. No, I mean regular people. Everyday people, who don't think much about the royals at all, aside from a distant feeling that it's good that they're there to be gawked at.

I spent a day in Oxford Circus this week, now a thoroughfare of union flags in time for the big day. I could give a decent slice-of-life report on the quaint jov-

“No country, however wealthy or egalitarian, should have a monarchy. The entire premise is an insult to common sense and demeans the collected intellect of humankind

iality of bunting and tea parties, set against clumsily forceful requests that TV viewers in the year 2023 pledge allegiance to the King from home. I could have a jolly old time riffing on the breathlessly sincere reports about the ceremonial regalia to be used, in which journalists solemnly informed us that, for example, Lord Houghton of Richmond will be carrying The Sword of Temporal Justice. (One of four swords, incidentally, along with two maces, a staff, an orb, and a spoon.) I could cast a wry eye over the press's recurring assessment of King Charles as a modern, socially conscious ruler, juxtaposed with their platforming of people like Lady Victoria Hervey, who this week suggested those suspected of protesting the coronation should be imprisoned beforehand. I could even examine why no one seems to know just how much the whole thing will cost, with one Sky News commentator casually citing “hundreds of millions” — in fact, he mis-spoke and said “hundreds of billions”, but so vague is the price point, this was not even addressed.

It's just that I find my enthusiasm for any of the above approaches waning. The UK is undergoing the greatest cost of living crisis in living memory, with around 20% of its population in poverty, and two to three million using food banks each year. Inequality Briefing reports that nine of the 10 poorest areas in Europe are in the UK. (The richest in Europe remains London, which might explain the equanimity with which this reality is viewed by those attending the coronation).

As we speak, the nation's teachers — several of my siblings among them — are striking, along with doctors, nurses, NHS staff, train workers, barristers, passport office workers, driving instructors, coast guard, border force, airport workers, and parcel deliverers.

There are indeed so many ongoing industrial disputes that, in a further bitter irony, they've blurred into coverage of the coronation itself. On a pub TV I caught silent footage of some people waving flags behind barricades, and presumed it was yet more footage of happy royalists manning the procession route, only to step closer and discover it was nurses on a picket demanding a fair wage.

IN the face of this, spending hundreds of millions on pageantry to celebrate an unfathomably wealthy man, ventures from absurd to grotesque. But that is merely to quibble with the economics. At any price, the choice to venerate entrenched wealth, to glorify the very concept of unearned privilege and inherited inequality itself, is morally obscene.

Life abounds in contradictions, and it is tedious to tell people what things they should and should not take comfort in, so I speak only for myself when I give my own conclusion to all I've seen this week: No country, however wealthy or egalitarian, should have a monarchy. The entire premise is an insult to common sense and demeans the collected intellect of humankind. Every single surviving king or queen is a lamentable moral failure, and a blasphemy against the values that working people have clawed from the grip of crowned thieves and murderers for millennia. It mocks every right we have fought and died to claim for ourselves since the first crown was first forged and first placed on the first fattened head of whatever shabby warlord first fancied himself a God.

Yours sincerely, a British subject.

HOROSCOPES

Aries

Mar 21 - Apr 19

Peer pressure could get to you today, but you don't have to give in just because someone else wants you to! Be kind, but firm, and most of all, be true to yourself.

Taurus

Apr 20 - May 20

Turning a blind eye to unpleasant things is easier than usual today. Something that you learn could be unpleasant, and denying it will probably be a tempting way to deal with it.

Gemini

May 21 - Jun 20

If you never trust others with your feelings, they may think that you're all logic and no emotion. Make an effort to share your soul and create a stronger bond with someone.

Cancer

Jun 21 - Jul 22

Someone could be challenging your image now. You can try to show them who you really are, but if they refuse to see it, there's nothing that you can do except move on.

Leo

Jul 23 - Aug 22

Someone might be trying to alert you to a small issue that could end up having bigger consequences in the future. Hear them out. It could end up saving you a headache in the end.

Virgo

Aug 23 - Sep 22

Worries about a current risk could be swamping you right now! Dedication will help you to see any issues through to the end.

Libra

Sep 23 - Oct 22

A relationship that you're a part of may be unbalanced now. Find a way to share the burdens, so that you don't wonder how one of you ended up exhausted with the other.

Scorpio

Oct 23 - Nov 21

Lackluster energy might be dragging your day down. Seeking some assistance or cutting back your daily duties could be in your best interest.

Sagittarius

Nov 22 - Dec 21

Dramatic emotions stirred up in conversation could shake your personal foundation today. Staying calm shows you can keep a cool head when it matters.

Capricorn

Dec 22 - Jan 19

You could hurt your own feelings today. Your mindset may trend toward the negative. Remind yourself that things likely aren't as bad as they may seem.

Aquarius

Jan 20 - Feb 18

Exaggerating could cause unforeseen consequences for you today. It's best to try and tell people about what's going on in your life without any hyperbole.

Pisces

Feb 19 - Mar 20

Your self-worth may be challenged by others at this time. Their comments or actions may not be supportive of what you're doing, but don't worry — you don't have to agree with them!

Séamas O'Reilly



My book, AI and 'messaging with strange wires'

I open the book with trepidation. My name is on its cover, after all. It is not, however, a book I have written myself. No, this is *Summary of Did Ye Hear Mammy Died? A Memoir By Séamas O'Reilly*, written by 'Patricia T. Meyer' and published by Amazon Services LLC. It's a 'book' which comes up when you search for my own similarly titled — and excellent, best-selling and award-winning — autobiography, still available anywhere good books are sold.

When someone first pointed it out to me, I was intrigued. A quick search reveals that this is the only book 'Patricia T. Meyer' has ever written. The same goes for the dozen or so other summaries of my book, written by similarly anonymous sounding authors, all released through Amazon's self-publication strand.

While I would dearly love to believe that these are simply diehard fans of mine, moved by my work to begin a lifelong writing career, it's clear these are hastily created fake personae masking a very obvious spree of digital plagiarism.

Like the rest, Patricia T. Meyer's debut is a machine-made facsimile of my book. It is not a book so much as a crude, algorithmical trap, run through a synonymiser so it can bypass plagiarism-detection software, and con unsuspecting rubes into purchasing it by accident.

I bought one immediately.

I had my reasons. Morality aside, it is undeniably interesting that this object exists. In a weird way, it's flattering to think a book I wrote did well enough for it to have dozens of fakes circulating on Amazon, and I will admit to having enjoyed showing this ridiculous artefact to friends and family. The *idea* of this book is, in and of itself, darkly funny, before we even get to its execution, (on which more presently).

Secondly, I've been aware of these scam books for years, and had been tempted to write about what their existence says about writing, authorship and the deadening grind technology is making of every aspect of the creative arts, but never got around to it. Now, possessing one of these things with my own name on it, I knew my time had come.

I wouldn't say I had zero quibbles about giving these scammers £3 of my hard-earned cash, but I figured it was a necessary down payment for the exercise. If I was to discuss this book then, evincing a sense of duty that sounds insane when said out loud, I decided I would have to read it first. I realise that this is a privi-

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lege Patricia T. Meyer.exe probably did not grant my own work, but I am happy to be the bigger man in any moral contest between a human being and a few lines of automated code. Not least one designed exclusively to rinse money from my unsuspecting fans. That is, after all, my job.

The book itself is a slim volume, more of a pamphlet really, which gets in and out of my life story in a lean 28 pages. My own editor would likely be thrilled if I were so concise.

Its cover is almost perfectly asinine, in a sort of Microsoft Front Page 98 desktop template way, before I realise that its art shows a woman with a flower in her hair, a riff perhaps on the connection I make between my mother and flowers in the opening chapter. I have to suppress a small glimmer of appreciation for the fact my name is spelled correctly. There are, in fact, few better signs that this was written by a machine intelligence, forced to copy the spelling as I've written it, since lived experience has taught me that human beings prefer to correct that name for me, as a little treat.

It quickly becomes apparent why this book is so slight: its 28 pages comprises

merely my memoir's first chapter, divided into three sentence-paragraphs, shot through with arbitrary changes to individual words to evade detection by the aforementioned plagiarism software; "small" becomes "little", "sad" becomes "unhappy", etc.

Perhaps one word out of every 10 gets this treatment, meaning the sentences themselves are almost identical to my own. I had hoped the entire book would be written in a flurry of nonsensical synonyms, with every word changed to an increasingly absurd alternative, like when song lyrics get spun back and forth between multiple languages on Google Translate. In fact, the AI has presumably worked out exactly how little it needs to do to get out of trouble, and I get to the end of the book mostly bemused and, weirdest of all, disappointed by its lack of effort.

Sure, there is a gut level revulsion at the fact that this thing even exists. That writers' work is so devalued that this cheap photocopy is available. That, at a time when writers and readers are being exploited by gargantuan tech platforms, those same platforms are incentivising new, ever more mundane, mechanics to exploit both further. That, for all I approach this thing with a raised eyebrow, and a quasi-humorous critical distance, I am reading a computer's garbled, larcenous approximation of my mother's death. But mostly, there is a sense of grim blankness. A stultifying malaise toward the fact that millennia of the written word, and centuries of mathematics, have led us to yet another tediously dystopian hack job.

There are glimmers of something else, however. Early in my book, I describe playing with the grooves in the new corduroy trousers I was given to wear, aged five, at my mother's funeral; "fiddling with unfamiliar cords" is how I put it. Once filtered through a computer consciousness, this becomes "messaging with strange wires".

It is, perhaps, telling that a machine would translate cord as wire, but I am equally beguiled by the serendipitously Hiberno-English lilt of "messaging", and can't help marvelling at the accidental beauty of the phrase. It is the only frisson of joy I encounter in this entire exercise, and I will have to satisfy myself with that.

I have stared into the heart of a machine that's learned my words and seen nothing. I have messed with its strange wires, and I am done.

HOROSCOPES

Aries

Mar 21 - Apr 19

Indulging in a little self-care today may be the ideal option. You've got the universe's permission to wake up slowly and stay sleepy throughout your routine, so don't be afraid to take an extra nap or a relaxing bubble bath.

Taurus

Apr 20 - May 20

It's time to socialise. Today, you might find that your friends want to spend time with you and catch up on news after not seeing each other for a while. Whether you go out together or stay home to chat, you can all have some good laughs and fun times.

Gemini

May 21 - Jun 20

A reward may now be coming your way. It'll potentially be personal recognition, a gift, or an opportunity, likely born from your hard work and perseverance.

Cancer

Jun 21 - Jul 22

Travelling and learning opportunities are on the horizon. You've likely been looking for a way to expand your mind or lifestyle, despite not wanting to leave your comfort zone.

Leo

Jul 23 - Aug 22

Sharing your dreams is ideal right now. You may have much more inspiration about the near future, and that's encouraging you to brainstorm for it with people who are very close to you.

Virgo

Aug 23 - Sep 22

Rose-coloured glasses may be tinting your recent view of a relationship. Whether it's a platonic, familial, or romantic connection, the positives might seem far easier to see than the negatives.

Libra

Sep 23 - Oct 22

Your motivation is higher than normal. Let ambition drive you toward your goals, especially in terms of positive habits. It can help you make positive choices that should increase your overall health in the long run.

Scorpio

Oct 23 - Nov 21

Your creativity is likely to be at a high point. The desire to express yourself through art, crafts, or even just finding solutions to problems at work is on your mind.

Sagittarius

Nov 22 - Dec 21

Family is easier to relate to at this time. The universe is inspiring you to show your family or those you live with that you love them, and all of you can connect in emotionally healing ways.

Capricorn

Dec 22 - Jan 19

Travel might feel like a breeze for you. There could be a day trip that you're spontaneously agreeing to, a road trip you're halfway through, or a partially planned vacation that hasn't even begun yet.

Aquarius

Jan 20 - Feb 18

Finances may seem to be easier than normal now. You could receive a raise or a gift - possibly, a kind person will take a bill off your shoulders so that you no longer have to worry about it.

Pisces

Feb 19 - Mar 20

Going with the flow is the easiest path forward. Your intuition is strong today, and you may be aware of things that others aren't able to pick up on. A strange vibe or a hunch can grab you..