

Artemis Fowl, An Irish Rogue

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Over the last five years, the Artemis Fowl books by Eoin Colfer have been competing with J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books for the top spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list for young readers. The Colfer and Rowling books are similar in being fantasies set in today's world, but with the authors relying heavily on characters, themes, motifs, plots, and names adapted from traditional literature. This recycling of elements is an important characteristic that makes the books both accessible and memorable.

Colfer is an Irish author, who, when he came to Mesa, Arizona in July of 2008 as part of a cross-country tour promoting *Artemis Fowl: The Time Paradox*, showed family pictures from his childhood and told about the escapades instigated by his older brother—the person he credits as inspiring the Artemis Fowl character. But really, Colfer reached deeper into his Irish roots than just his own family. Artemis Fowl is a modernized, teenaged version of the Irish rogue. The Irish rogue is a leading character in Irish folktales as well as in the off-the-cuff stories that are part of Irish barroom braggadocio. He comes from the same tradition as Christy Mahon in John Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, Mr. Boyle in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, Finn MacCool in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and Sebastian Dangerfield in J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*. Just as Donleavy hinted about the personality of his leading man by alluding to the line in the old story, "Run, run as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man," Colfer hints at the character of Artemis through his first and last names. His first name alludes to the Roman goddess of the hunt while his surname, *Fowl* sounds like the adjective, *foul*. In 1955, when Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* was first published in Paris, it was banned in the United States, but nevertheless soon acquired an American following. Dorothy Parker described the "lusty, violent, wild," and humorous book as "the Picaresque novel to stop them all" (qtd. in Editorial Reviews, par. 2).

The Irish love stories about rogues, partly because these fanciful characters are wish-fulfilling rebels against British rule. The rogues are the ones who have fun outsmarting the oppressor without intentionally causing actual harm or bloodshed. Rogues break little—not big—laws. They are bright, charismatic, subversive, articulate, good natured, and fun-loving, while exhibiting an irrepressible enthusiasm for life. Even though their actions are questionable, they are working for the greater good, at least in their own minds. While being friendly and flirtatious with women, they do not settle down with one particular woman. And usually, rogues are somehow linked to a strong or aristocratic family, such as an Irish rebel chief.

Artemis matches all of these descriptions. He is Artemis Fowl II, and his wealthy family has lived for generations at Fowl Manor, the very kind of place that in Irish history would have been confiscated by the British.

Some adults, especially those who think there needs to be an obvious moral to anything that young people read, are shocked at the Artemis Fowl books, which they describe as “amoral.” We hope that when people understand Artemis as an Irish rogue—a trickster—they will withhold judgment while giving Colfer a chance to redeem his character.

While such redemption is not typically a part of stories of Irish rogues, it is a part of Colfer’s books because he is writing about a child genius. His book is as much a bildungsroman as it is the story of an Irish rogue. Literary scholars define the bildungsroman as an apprenticeship novel, one in which a young person grows to maturity. This is the basic difference between Artemis and the Irish rogues seen in stories written or told about adults for adult readers. In Colfer’s books, readers gain new appreciation for the challenges faced by Artemis, a child genius, who struggles to make his moral development catch up with his IQ. The sixth book, *The Time Paradox*, is a wonderful illustration. In it, Colfer arranges for the fourteen-year-old Artemis to come back and observe the selfish and conceited ten-year-old Artemis. The difference between the two Artemis characters should comfort even the most skeptical adult critic who worries about just what morals Colfer is—or is not—teaching his young readers.

Works Cited:

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Don and Alleen Nilsen are professors of English at Arizona State University where Don teaches in the Linguistics Program and Alleen teaches in the English Education Program. Together they have co-authored the *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor* (Oryx Press, 2000) and *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature* (Scarecrow Press, 2007).