

Journey of the magus

John Moriarty's latest book, *Nostos*, is a blend of autobiography, mythography and incantation which involved a long journey back to the roots of Western culture

The road winds out of Killarney and on to another planet. High above the world of shamrock-bearing souvenirs and guided coach tours, there is a plateau covered with gorse and surrounded by mountain peaks. It is an astonishing place - a wild, glacial landscape where red deer roam at will and you can stare, dumbfounded, into kettle holes as round and deep and perfect as they were the day the ice melted.

Inside John Moriarty's house a fire burns cheerfully in the grate, reflecting the glowing blond wood of the floors and echoing the glorious reds and whites of the cactus and amaryllis plants in pots along one wall. But Moriarty is clearly not a man to cuddle up to cosiness. His living room is furnished with - inhabited by - books, dozens of them, placed here and there on the floor in the sort of neat, dust-free piles which suggest they are consulted on a regular basis. It is also inhabited by the mountains, visible on all sides through enormous windows now lit by patches of winter sunshine, now blurred by soft swirls of rain.

"A ballet" is how John Moriarty describes the ever-changing panorama. He jokes that he can't afford drapes, and confesses that he longs for great swathes of fabric in renaissance colours.

Then he adds: "When you stand alone, as I have done for much of my life, if you feel that you are at one with the mountains - if you are dreaming their dreams - it makes the solitude easier to live with."

Such a statement ought to sound outlandish, but Moriarty's beautifully modulated voice, rich with Kerry's buttery consonants, makes him a speaker of considerable persuasiveness. He laughs readily and heartily, often at himself, sometimes with a shake of his improbable mane.

Talking to John Moriarty is a comfortable business. Reading his books is rather different. In his latest, the 700-page *Nostos*, *Andromeda* and *Persephone* rub shoulders with Horatio Kitchener and Maag Mahoney from *Poll*. Chunks of the *Book of Job* are placed next to bits of William Blake and Christopher Marlowe. There are myths, some Greek, some Mesopotamian, some Native American, all vividly retold. There are poems and pointed observations and startling ideas; and there are passages which appear to make no sense at all.

For a reader, the experience is akin to being on a raft in a stormy sea. One minute you're riding high, exhilarated, with a view to the ends of the Earth. The next you're in a trough with a wall of words on either side and no idea what's going on.

Sentences are repeated, and repeated again, as are quotations, "which really" - major laughing and mane-shaking - "pisses people off. That pisses people off". But *Nostos* isn't meant to be a literary work, Moriarty explains. It's not quite an autobiography either. It started as an attempt to sort out the ideas expressed in his previous books,

Dreamtime and the trilogy *Turtle Was Gone A Long Time*, put down in a neat line, set into a biographical context. If it didn't quite turn out like that, well, "beautiful polished sentences wasn't how I lived my life," he says, with another rueful shake of the head. "And if I repeat Coleridge's stanza where he talks about dejection, it's an old bone that I have to go back to and chew, again and again and again. I don't solve these things. I have no answer to Kepler's horror or to Pascal's terror of the infinite spaces - they've walked with me all my life." The repetition is not meant to be pretty, he says. It's a lot closer to prayer, or meditation, than it is to poetry and the demands of the aesthetic.

"In the liturgy you get what, to me, are lovely forms repeated again and again and again," he says. "And even though I've spent years not going to Mass, for me liturgy always had primacy over literature - and I'm not talking about burning the books now. I mean the liturgy that built Chartres Cathedral, the liturgy that painted the Sistine Chapel." It sounds odd coming from a man who spent years teaching English literature in universities and who talks about King Lear as if he might drop in at any moment for a cup of tea. But then, this is also the man who keeps St Teresa of Avila by his pillow, and sums up the masterpieces of 19th-century literature as "superior gossip". He spreads his hands in acknowledgement. "Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary - wonderful books," he says. "But what can they say to the Ancient Mariner, or to Ishmael coming home from the sea? Jesus, what can Emma Bovary say to Ishmael?"

Ishmael's apocalyptic warning to the reader of *Moby Dick* not to venture into "the horrors of the half-known life" is one of the bones Moriarty chews over most often in *Nostos* - and he recalls the start of his own voyage of intellectual discovery in similarly apocalyptic terms. "I grew up in what was, basically, neolithic north Kerry," he recalls. "I mean, we had iron - an iron tongs and cast-iron pots and things - but we didn't have the mind that went along with the metallurgical ages at all."

One night he read the geological pages of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and suddenly the biblical "begats" and the comforting calculations which put the date of creation at 4004BC crashed into Darwin's estimation of the depth of the Earth's crust as "very nearly 13 and three-quarter British miles" and brought his world tumbling down. Or, as Moriarty puts it: "I fell out of my story."

"I was, literally, man overboard that night - and I couldn't even tell people what had happened to me. Nobody else seemed to feel this. And I still am a bit intrigued that people haven't suffered what I would call the devastation of the new astronomy, the new epistemology. Of course, one way to try to deal with it is to close the doors against it, go back to the seventh century; that's what the people in Iran, and the Taliban, have tried to do. "But it won't work. I didn't close the door against it. I suffered it - and though my story is particular to me, it's also generic. It was made to happen to Australian Aborigines and Native Americans; it was made to happen right across the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam; it's happening now in the forests of the Amazon. People are made to fall out of their story. So I hope that, by writing this, I've been able to say something which people will read and say, 'hang on, this is my story', or 'this is like my story'."

As stories go, *Nostos* is something of an epic. Even its author seems abashed by its length, and points out the 14 trees he has planted in his mountain-top garden, by way of compensation for the trees which must have been mashed up to produce the book's 700 pages. Readers who approach it as autobiography will find its lack of concern for times, dates and down-to-earth details - let alone such mundane matters as chapter headings - exasperating. Yet even as a straightforward life story, it has plenty to hold the attention

Moriarty has lectured in a Canadian university, been down and out in London, travelled widely in southern Europe and north America, earned his living as a gardener. He has had close encounters with women, a grizzly bear and - at great length, and with what has obviously been debilitating physical and mental pain - the dark side of his own psyche.

It's clear, though, that Moriarty intends *Nostos* as more than simply a life story. Hence the title - *nostos*, a homecoming.

"If I talk about Greece and Mesopotamia and Rome," he says, "it's because I think we need to be cleaned all the way, as far back as Greece and Mesopotamia and Rome, in the way that if an adult has difficulties coping we tend to lay him on a psychiatrist's couch and see if there is some undigested experience in childhood that is causing the problem. We have shoved those cultural experiences down into our subconscious, and now they're coming back to haunt us.

"If my stuff appears to be full of learning, it's not meant as a display of learning. It's . . . it's the whole of Western culture on the psychiatrist's couch. It's scandalous to say it, but I think I'm trying to heal Western culture. A fellow from north Kerry! How did he end up thinking that's what he's doing?"

*Nostos* is published by The Lilliput Press at £25. It will be launched by Paul Durcan tonight at the Irish Writers' Centre, 7 p.m.