

# Brian James Patrick Doyle (1956-2017)

By Edwin Battistella

Writer Brian Doyle explored the spirit of Oregon's small towns and the wonders of the world. Describing himself as "a story catcher," he wrote about spirituality, family, nature, place, wine, and the human heart with a distinctive playful style and zest. The author of over two dozen books, Doyle was also the longtime editor of *Portland*, the University of Portland's alumni magazine.

Brian James Patrick Doyle was born in New York City in 1956, into a large Irish-Catholic family with six brothers and one sister. His mother, Ethel Clancey Doyle, was a teacher, and his father, James A. Doyle, was a journalist and the executive director of the Catholic Press Association. He earned a degree in English from the University of Notre Dame in 1978 and worked at the *U.S. Catholic* and *Boston College* magazines before moving to Oregon. In Boston, he married Mary Miller, whose artwork appears in several of his books; the couple had three children.

In 1991, Brian Doyle was named the editor of *Portland*, which he guided to national recognition, most notably with *Newsweek's* Sibley Award in 2005. Under his leadership, the magazine published essays not just about the University of Portland but also about beauty, faith, and nature, written by such contributors as Ursula K. Le Guin, David James Duncan, Cornel West, Ian Frazier, James Mattis, Kathleen Dean Moore, and Doyle himself.

Doyle was the author or editor of novels, short fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and essays. As an essayist, he often explored Catholicism and was a regular contributor to *America: The Jesuit Review* and *Guideposts*. He described his commitment to his faith in terms of the "genius of Catholicism at its deepest...compassion, witness, reverence, kindness, and tenderness." From 2004 to 2006, Doyle was the editor of *The Best Catholic Writing*, an annual volume published by Loyola University Press.

Doyle was a co-author with his father of *Two Voices: A Father and Son Discuss Family and Faith* (1996). His other nonfiction work includes *The Grail* (2006), which documents the work of father-and-son winemakers at their vineyard in Dundee, and *The Wet Engine* (2005), which is about the physical workings of the heart told alongside the story of a life-saving cardiac surgery on one of his infant children. His work also appeared in *the Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *the American Scholar*, *the Oregonian*, and *the New York Times*.

Doyle's first novel, *Mink River* (2010), is the story of a fictional town on the Oregon Coast told in the sometimes mystical voices of its struggling inhabitants. The character of Declan O'Donnell, who sailed off into the sunset at the end of *Mink River*, is featured in his later novel, *The Plover* (2014). Set in the South Seas and inspired by Doyle's fascination with the works of Thor Heyerdahl and Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Plover* combines adventure and mysticism. *Chicago* (2016) tells the story of a young Notre Dame graduate who takes a job at a Catholic magazine in Chicago in the 1970s and explores the Windy City, and *The Adventures of John Carson in Several Quarters of the World* (2017) set a fictionalized Stevenson in San Francisco, in homage to nineteenth-century storytelling.

Doyle's 2015 young adult novel *Martin Marten* is set on Wy'east, a Native name for Mount Hood. The story intertwines the lives of Dave, a fourteen-year-old boy, and Martin, a pine marten leaving the nest. *Martin Marten* received the 2016 Oregon Book Award for young adult fiction and the 2017 John Burroughs Medal for Distinguished Nature Writing.

As a novelist, Doyle had a quirky style that suited the energy and mysticism of his writing, often providing the reader with sentient animals and long, adjective-filled, comma-free sentences in a frenzied but ecstatic pace. His writing has been described as "magical realism," although he rejected that term, telling one interviewer that "I don't think I write magic realism—I want more to suggest gently that millions more things are possible and real and happening than we know about." He explained his style this way: "I love runs of adjectives like bursts of salmon in a river." After *Mink River* was published, one of his brothers sent him a page consisting of nothing but commas, joking that "you might want to learn to use these."

Well known in the Oregon literary community, Doyle gave readings and presentations around the state, often leading the audience in a chorus of "Amazing Grace" or regaling them with the story an argument he had with a Buddhist monk about whether soccer or basketball was the better sport. The monk was the Dalai Lama. Doyle's writing garnered him the Catholic Book Award, three Pushcart Prizes, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Portland, yet he described himself modestly, attributing his interest in writing to his parents.

Brian Doyle died of brain cancer in May 2017. In an interview shortly before the end of his life, he reflected: "If I could say anything to everybody, I would say thank you. I'm quietly very proud to have been called an Oregon writer."

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