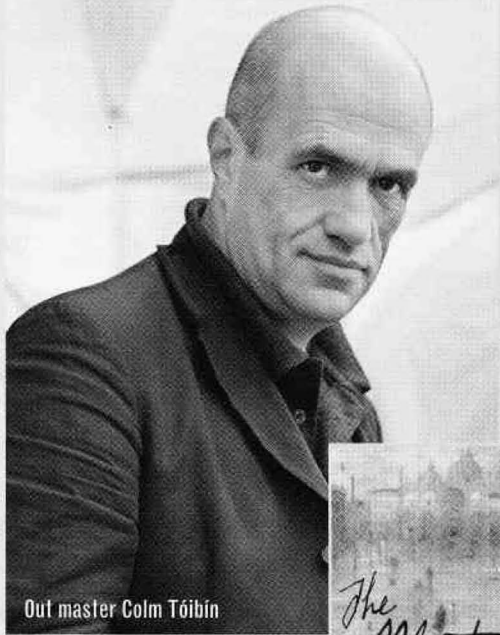




# Regarding Henry

Irish novelist Colm Tóibín talks about writing *The Master*, his riveting journey into the mind of America's great gay writer Henry James **By Michael Giltz**



Out master Colm Tóibín



**P**erhaps it was fate. Acclaimed Irish author Colm Tóibín was slyly dubbed “the Henry James of Enniscorthy” back in 1999 by *The [London] Independent*. Now he has boldly tackled the life of that legendary 19th-century novelist in *The Master* (Scribner, \$25).

Like Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, which captured the inner life of Virginia Woolf, Tóibín’s book brilliantly delves into the mind of James, the razor-sharp observer of the treachery beneath the elegance of the Gilded Age. In such novels as *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Wings of the Dove*, James portrayed a world



Closeted master Henry James

in which naïveté and openness lead to ruin. And James was himself a creature of that secretive world: All his life he

concealed his own attraction to men.

For Tóibín, who first wrote about James in a piece collected in his book of essays and articles *Love in a Dark Time* (Simon & Schuster, \$24), *The Master* was a chance to reclaim the life of a writer who removed almost all traces of his sexuality from his fiction.

“I couldn’t see how you could do it as a novelist,” admits Tóibín. “It just seemed an astonishing level of artistry, the levels of self-effacement involved. He does give it away in places—he’s so interested in secrecy. And if secrets are told, they will be so destructive and so explosive. In my own case, I exploded, I suppose.”

Tóibín is already recognized as an author of the first rank in Europe. His third novel, *The Story of the Night*, was picked by the Publishing Triangle as one of the 100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels of all time. And his most recent, *The Blackwater Lightship*, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and turned into a lovely TV film, starring Dianne Wiest and Angela Lansbury, that aired earlier this year on CBS.

Now advance reviews for *The Master* make clear this fifth novel by the 49-year-old writer should be his breakthrough work in the United States. *Publishers Weekly* calls it “riveting” and says, “The subtlety and empathy with which Tóibín inhabits James’s psyche and captures the fleeting emotional nuances of his world are beyond praise.”

TOIBIN: © CAMERA PRESS/RETN; JAMES: © HULTON ARCHIVE/BETTY IMAGES

It was three novels into his career that Tóibín tackled gay issues himself. Indeed, an editor and friend urged Tóibín to deal with gay life after writing two novels—*The South* and *The Heather Blazing*. They'd made his name and admirably tackled Ireland's history but seemed to avoid the heart of who he was. "Coming out" in his fiction felt to Tóibín like coming out of a box.

"I must say, it was greeted with immense relief by everyone I knew, because people were so glad: 'He's finally fucking written about it,'" laughs Tóibín, who lives in Dublin and spends his summers in the Pyrenees. Still, he says, "I'm probably going to write my next two books where it won't be a subject."

Being gay is the unspoken subtext of James's entire life. Tóibín shows him subtly attracted to a manservant, listening to gossip about Oscar Wilde's trial, spending a tension-filled night lying naked in bed next to future Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and yearning quietly for a gorgeous young sculptor.

"I'm obviously interested in the gay past and what can be done with it," says Tóibín. "There's very little that we know. At one point I suddenly realized this is a really great story. It's a very dramatic business being Henry James. And once I saw it as a story you could tell, I thought I could actually do this."

Indeed, James is compelled by his mother to feign illness to avoid fighting in the Civil War, suffers the painful deaths and suicides of both family members and friends, and deals with the indignities of colossal failure on the London stage. (Tóibín himself, ironically, is writing a play for the Abbey Theatre—something he'd never considered before.) But James's professional failure at drama can't compare to the personal failure of an empty emotional—and physical—life.

"I'd love to have given him one big shag in the book, one major shag," says Tóibín, who is single. "But it couldn't be done. One long night of licking and sucking and fucking. But not a hope of it, I'm afraid. It wasn't true to the spirit of him." ■

*Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.*