

That They May Face the Rising Sun [15]

2023 UK/Ireland 107 mins

UK released	26 April 2024
Director	Pat Collins
Screenplay	Eamon Little; Pat Collins; (based on the novel by John McGahern)
Cinematography	Richard Kendrick
Music	Irene Buckley; Linda Buckley
Cast	Barry Ward (Joe Ruttledge); Anna Bederke (Kate Ruttledge); Ruth McCabe (Mary Murphy); Lalor Roddy (Patrick Ryan); Sean McGinley (Johnny Murphy); Phillip Dolan (Jamesie Murphy); John Olohan (The Shah)

“Does anything happen, or is it the usual heavy going?” a novelist is asked about his latest book in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. “Not much drama,” he replies, “more day-to-day stuff.” This response acts as a wry self-commentary on Pat Collins’s film. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is concerned with the everyday lives of a small group of characters in a lakeside village in the west of Ireland. A few things do happen in the film – a wedding, a death – but there is little in the way of standard drama and conflict, and no firm narrative shape beyond the passage of time and the changing of the seasons.

It’s hard to imagine a filmmaker better suited to bringing John McGahern’s final novel to the screen than Pat Collins. The central theme of Collins’s work to date has been Irishness itself, with his documentaries (including *John McGahern: A Private World*, filmed a year before the author’s death in 2006) exploring aspects of Irish life and culture that have largely disappeared amid the country’s rapid modernisation. Collins has incorporated narrative techniques into his documentary work, notably *Silence* (2012) and *Song of Granite* (2017), and his first dramatic feature feels very much of a piece with what went before.

Collins often requests a degree of patience from his viewers and he sets the tone here with the opening credits, which invite us to watch the dawn gradually breaking on the horizon. This region of Ireland in the 1980s is one that still lives by the old ways. There are rumours of telephone poles being installed in the area soon, but for now the news is primarily shared at Sunday Mass, or by visits to your neighbours. Much of the film takes place in the kitchen of Joe and Kate Rutledge (Barry Ward and Anna Bederke), a young couple who left London to relocate in the county where Joe was born. Joe was written as McGahern's surrogate, and it's through his interactions with his neighbours that we get an understanding of this community, with a few characters emerging as particularly vivid portraits of the area's lonely rural Irish men. It is their loneliness and suppressed emotions that complicate a film that may appear, on the surface, to be a nostalgic picture-postcard vision of rural Irish life.

Characters drift in and out of the picture, narrative threads are unresolved, and much is left unsaid; all we get is a brief window into these lives, and an evocative snapshot of a particular time and place. Collins observes his characters in quiet contemplation, with the film's unhurried rhythm affording us the same space to appreciate these fleeting moments. As local businessman The Shah (John Olohan) puts it, "The rain comes down, the sun shines, grass grows, children grow old and die. That's the holy all of it" – and Collins brings the curious, attentive eye of the documentarian to capturing these moments, making *That They May Face the Rising Sun* a quietly captivating experience.

Philip Concannon, *Sight and Sound*, 24 April 2024 (abridged)

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