I'm looking at my copy of the published correspondence between Samuel Beckett and director Alan Schneider, No Author Better Served.¹

On the cover, Sam fixes me with those piercing baby blues of his (the photo is black and white, but you just know those eyes are blue). On the left, there are three smaller photos of Sam and Alan, hard at work.

A wise man once said, “you can't judge a book by its cover,”² though since at least the early twentieth century, book cover art has been immensely influential in getting someone to buy the book. Sometimes the cover reflects the content of the book. Sometimes it is literally flashy, like the metallic inks used on the covers of overpriced paperbacks sold in airport bookshops which act as lures to attract bookworms. For famous authors, a portrait of the author on the cover might sell the book, as is usually the case with Samuel Beckett, due to his aquiline looks. In almost every recollection of meeting Beckett, someone mentions the whiskey bottle coming out at some point. But

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¹ Edited by Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000). The important American stage director of Waiting for Godot and other plays by Beckett, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Tiny Alice (etc., etc.) and of Beckett’s film Film, Schneider infamously died in London walking into the path of a moving car when looking the wrong way while crossing the street to post a letter to Beckett. Schneider was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine.

you never see Beckett on the cover of his books holding an empty bottle and staring into space. He’s always staring right at you, freakishly intent. I wouldn’t play poker with that man. And that’s the sales point.

Now I’m looking at my paperback copy of The Complete Plays by Brendan Behan. Behan, another famous 20th-century Irish playwright, is on the cover. He, too, is at work, sitting at the typewriter, staring at me. Only... he’s scratching his head, his jumper is soiled, and though the photo is black and white, we can clearly see two bloody puncture marks on his forehead. He looks half-asleep; and on closer scrutiny, the sheet of paper has only just been put into his typewriter: it is blank.

You can’t help but wonder: WTPh (Why This Photo)? What is going on in this picture? Did he come home from the pub with a bright idea for tomorrow’s Irish Press column (“Jowls of the Dirty Shirts”?4) only to fall asleep at the typewriter, gouging his head in the process? Who took this picture? Did his wife Beatrice want to capture him hard at work, putting so much effort into his craft that putting the paper into the machine was the last thing on his mind as he passed out once more, still in his jumper with its impression of the barroom floor from the night before? Upon her entering the room, however, Brendan awoke, still groggy with sleep: “D’ye think you could stop with that shutterbuggery and fix me up some coffee and eggs?”

There are plenty of examples of alcoholic writers who look back at you with handsome faces from their book jackets: the Americans Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, Jack

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London, Anne Sexton, and Tennessee Williams come immediately to mind – but you won’t see them injured on their book covers.

Perhaps the wounds are the puncture marks of an Irish cobra, Behan having taken on the mantle of St. Patrick, trying to banish the poisonous snakes out of Ireland with his typewriter instead of a crozier. Brendan is gone; the venomous reptiles of the Irish press remain. So too the venomous reptiles of the London publishing houses.

If you’ve gotten this far, it is obvious that this is not an academic essay, just the musings of an academic, who like BB, is scratching his head at the keyboard, wondering why it is that of all the books on my shelves the absolute worst covers are those on books by or about Behan. I only have space here for a few. They are legion.

Behan’s fame surely rested on his plays, but one could argue *Borstal Boy* is his crowning achievement. You surely wouldn’t know it from the book covers.

First up, the Corgi edition from 1963: It is bad enough that Behan is imprisoned by the Irish flag on this cover; yet again he is portrayed with open sores on his face. His face is fat, so he’s not on a hunger strike, but had they not heard of airbrushing?

The 1975 Corgi paperback of *Borstal Boy* shows Behan behind the (borstal?) bar, his left hand on one of the taps. Suspicious, for the lines drawn in a pub are usually more sacrosanct and deadly than the Maginot: it’s hard to believe any barman would let a customer, let alone generous barfly Brendan Behan, behind his taps. It doesn’t look like the image was drawn from life; if it was drawn from a photo, it must have been one posed in jest – although it looks like he’s holding onto the tap pull like a sailor holding onto a mast for dear life in a storm. But what is it doing on the cover of a book, let alone one that takes place in a boys’ prison?
And then there are the memoirs and biographies.

*Teems of Times and Happy Returns* by The Brother, Dominic Behan⁵ – not content with just Brendan – features *multipple* Behans on its cover, *all* of them pished. It does help to put things in perspective, although again, it is not representative of the book: you can count the times Brendan is mentioned in the book on one hand. I must give credit to the blurb writer: “Growing up with the Behans, when men were ready to kill for the rocks and lakes of Ireland” – insert any Irish surname there, and for sure I’d buy it.

To be fair, *Teems* was published by Four Square, a division of The New English Library which published key works of Anglo-Irish literature (Synge, Joyce, Flann O’Brien, etc.). Four Square also published *The World of Brendan Behan,* an outstanding selection of criticism and reminiscences by writers such as Micheál Mac Liammóir and Benedict Kiely, prepared in the wake of Behan’s death, with an excellent front cover of Behan as the King of Clubs, a double-reference to his presence on the club scene and also, of course, a shamrock, but holding a quill in his hand instead of a sceptre. The back cover has three photos of Behan, all pretty good – and in none of them is he bleeding.

Beatrice Behan’s *My Life with Brendan* (London: Nash, 1974) is a shocker, with a shot of the two of them on the cover, her smiling, him... not, his head resting on top of hers. This cover gives me the heebie-jeebies, partly for the “chemistry” between the couple, and partly for the lit candle behind them, just inches away from Behan’s famously wild hair. Are we meant to feel sorry for her, for having to literally “put up” with him? Of course we do, but there is much more to the book than that: it’s a personal – her story, not his – as well as a universal narrative about caring for someone you love who is both self-destructive and (terminally) ill. If she approved the cover, then it has the opposite effect on me, the cover feels vindictive, which the narrative is not. And, if it was chosen by the marketing department (which is more likely – and thank you, Nathalie Lamprechts, for this insight), then it feels like a monstrous desecration of her husband’s corpse. Does anyone not love a wedding photo? Our sincere condolences to the widow.

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Dyed a vertiginous puke-green (about the same colour as the poison warning label for children in the USA and the colour of the dye the yanks courteously use on St. Patrick’s Day to distinguish American beer so you wouldn’t confuse it with the real thing), the cover of the American Lancer Contemporary Books paperback edition of Behan’s tape-recorded memoir Confessions of an Irish Rebel (1965) shows him neatly attired in coat and tie... but you might fail to notice that, when gobsmacked by the open grimace on his face, displaying the broken teeth of a jack-o’-lantern, at least the few remaining teeth which are there.
If that weren’t enough, the hip cover blurb states: “A penetrating look at our disintegrating world from the inside viewpoint of the earliest drop-out.” I cannot help but think of his disintegrating teeth dropping out. That impression is buoyed by the following blurb: “…Brendan Behan at his most flavoursome…” What flavour? I don’t know about you, but I’m tasting blood, and the fetid rot of tooth decay: sickly-sweet, as I imagine BB to have been when on his uppers and his best behaviour.

After the wake, Dominic “made amends” and actually did write about his dear departed brother. Dom, Dom, Dom. The image on the cover of the paperback edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) – where Brendan looks uncannily like a cross between a
lamprey and his good friend Harpo Marx – seems to have been cropped and colourised from the original photo printed in its entirety (no less indignant) as the frontispiece to the hardcover edition (London: Leslie Frewin, 1965). Is this the way I looked to my younger brother? Quite possibly. But ask yourself, would you buy this book based on its cover? Who would? Is the hyena population greater in Fleet Street or High Street?

Even more modern editions don’t let up, such as *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Hutchinson/Arrow/Arena, 1985), with a black and white drawing of Behan on the cover, where it looks like he’s starring in *The Informer*, hiding in an alleyway around the corner from the main drag, his face sweaty and turned away in case he’s recognised by the odd passer-by. He’s dressed in a coat and tie, as if the publisher had asked what happened to his generous book advance to which Behan replied, “I forgot I have to make a phone call – I’ll be right back, order yourself another one” and then high-tailed it out of there, with just the jacket on his back. “The final volume of his rumbustious autobiography,” it proudly states, probably with the emphasis on the “rum.” To be fair, the artist likely tried to capture the drama of the famous shooting incident when Behan was on the lam from the peelers, but this is the older Brendan, not the teenager. Due to the grotesque nature of his splayed face and angle of his head, he looks like a real Bog Man. [Queue Seamus Heaney: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLK8NsIVrk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLK8NsIVrk)

But it’s not just photos of Behan the worse for drink, nor is it a problem relegated to the distant past.
The American edition of Behan’s *The Complete Plays* is published by Grove Press (Beckett’s US publisher), who did a fine cover for *The Hostage* when he was still alive, as well as the post-mortem *2 Plays*:

(New York: Grove/Evergreen/Black Cat, 1965)

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Ten years after his death, their compendium edition has a painted cover featuring a tiny young woman, naked, inside a glass of water. The water in the glass reaches her nose: if she falls asleep, she’s dead. The glass is on a table, littered with what look like used paper tissues. And what’s that next to the tissues? A hand? Come here to me while I tell ye: it’s another tiny naked person, prone, apparently violated from behind. (Is this supposed to illustrate “After the Wake”? No, that story is not in this collection.) If it helps, over the prone (dead from drowning in a half-pint?) violated person, ah sure, look – it’s the word “éire” in Gaelic type. Oh right, it’s all clear now – clear as a glass of water with a drowning girl in it who is forced to look at a violated person until someone lets her out or she falls asleep and dies.

The saga continues. More recently, you have two reissues: Confessions of an Irish Rebel and Ulick O’Connor’s Brendan Behan. Both use the same photo of Behan with a pint glass in his hand, only it’s reversed: Perfect! You can use these two editions as handsome bookends for your own Brendan Behan book cover library! Well… one is handsome, Confessions. It’s been lightened, something has been done to the eyes, and the background has been removed. On the O’Connor book, the dingy pub wall can be seen behind him, there are blotches on his left hand (cropped entirely out of the Confessions cover), and on his face. And yet… the Confessions photo is fine-grained, the O’Connor somehow out of focus...? Has it been intentionally darkened to make him look sicker and more deranged? Or has some white magic been done to the photo on Confessions? You’ll have to be the judge, it’s your library. Clearly a conversation piece, the pair of them.

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Drink did and does play a large part in all of this.

The stage Irishman we can trace back to Shakespeare, at least, but he was still very much with us during Behan’s life. There is a famous photo of Behan in New York, backstage on Broadway, with the Irish-American entertainer Jackie Gleason.  

Gleason as a comedian had dozens of recurring characters he would play for laughs, many of them alcoholics.

But Brendan Behan became a media sensation for being drunk on live TV and radio, in effect breaking that fourth wall in the aether. Behan the unpredictable celebrity fit the image of his play The Hostage, but the reality was that he was shy, and drink helped him overcome his fear of getting in front of the microphone.

It made good copy, and there were plenty of photo opportunities for paparazzi. Today, when the world-wide web floods us with images, the results of these are back. One you probably know, the infamous photo of Behan on stage at the mic, barely able to stand. It has somehow graced the Brendan Behan English- and German-language Wikipedia pages as the main picture of the article for years, and it is as difficult to obliterate as Irishman jokes in England. Goggle-eyed, Behan seems like he’s on his very last legs, liver

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10 Jackie Gleason (1917–1987). Born in Brooklyn to Irish-American parents, he overcame a childhood probably rougher than Behan’s to achieve massive fame as a radio/film/television comedian (The Honeymooners, The Jackie Gleason Show), music presenter (he sold millions of records), and actor on stage and screen (e.g. his portrayal of Minnesota Fats in The Hustler was frightening, earning him an Oscar nomination in 1962).

and lights gone. Along with the legions of Manhattan book editors, his own ghost seems to have given up on him.

Why this horrid photo? When we open Wikipedia, do we spy F. Scott Fitzgerald lying in a puddle of puke? William Faulkner crumpled in the parking lot of The Brown Derby being helped into the back of a Warner Brothers limousine to take him back to his studio desk?

We do not, nor should we. Respect.

So... where is the respect on my bookshelves? I have a dozen books with the grotesque Brendan Behan gracing their covers. My daughters are frightened of them, and I don’t blame them. They are growing up in a more enlightened time, without “Irishman” jokes, without media stereotypes of drunken Irish and drunken Indians. Regarding the latter, there is the case of Jack Kerouac.

Many parallels could be drawn between him and Behan: Kerouac (1920–1969) was of the same generation as Behan. His sudden fame also exacerbated his drinking to the point of early death by alcoholism.

Both were raised Catholic; both were apparently bisexual and suffered from Catholic guilt because of it. Both were lauded as the voices of their generation.¹² Both were aware of

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¹² And speaking of voices, both recorded pretty good albums: Jack Kerouac with Steve Allen, *Poetry for the Beat Generation* (Hanover Signature Record Corp, 33 1/3 rpm 12" LP #5000, 1959); Jack Kerouac with Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, *Blues and Haikus* (Hanover Signature Record Corp, 33 1/3 rpm 12" LP #5006, 1959); *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folksongs and Ballads* (Spoken Arts Records CD SAC760, 1985). For more on that, see David Livingstone’s contribution to *Litteraria Pragensia* 34.67 (2024), “Revisiting Brendan Behan”, ed. Nathalie Lamprecht and Ondřej Pilný.
the tension between English and another tongue (Irish and Canadian French respectively) in their written work. Both were media sensations for appearing drunk in public.

Both were adopted in the 1960s by Madison Avenue as poster boys, the daddies of the 1960s generation: the big IRA man, “the earliest drop-out” and the “King of the Beat Generation.” You might say, both were marketed to death. Ghettoized due to ethnicity and cultural stereotypes, their importance and worth as writers could be easily dismissed (in both cases, I think their significance is still underrated).  

The drunken Irishman. The drunken Indian (Kerouac was Mohawk and Caughnawaga).

I recall the comment Kerouac’s friend Carolyn Cassady made upon seeing a Czech edition of a Kerouac biography with “King of the Beat Generation” plastered across the cover: “That’s what killed him, you know, people calling him that.”

A few people calling him that? Or a few million book covers? Photos plastered all over the internet are one thing, but I would argue that the covers of books by and about Behan, particularly, perpetrate the stereotype while guttering his reputation.

This has to stop, and recent releases like John McCourt’s Reading Brendan Behan (Cork: Cork UP, 2019),

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13 Like Truman Capote’s comment about Kerouac: “That’s not writing, that’s typing.” The passage of time has not been kind to Capote. Kerouac was the better writer.

14 Wife of Neal Cassady, “Dean Moriarty” of Kerouac’s On the Road. Carolyn Robinson Cassady (1923–2013) was also Kerouac’s lover. Kerouac’s novel Big Sur is especially kind to her. A writer and photographer, she emigrated to the UK when Neal died and made her living from publishing her memoirs and from licensing her tasteful photos of Neal and Jack. The incident took place in the publishing house Votobia, in Olomouc, Czech Republic in 1997.
John Brannigan’s *A Bit of a Writer. Brendan Behan’s Collected Short Prose* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2023),

and reappraisals like the conference “Brendan Behan at 100: Legacy and New Directions” (hosted by the Centre for Irish Studies at Charles University, Prague) are necessary tonics that should help to cure this unfortunate disease, though it may take time and money (Getty Images holds the copyrights now to most of the good photos of BB, and their prices are stiff) due to the damage done (see AI Addendum below).

**Addendum**

AI, anyone? You could always make your own Brendan Behan cover... all it takes is a few prompts...

A five-leaf orange clover, with a trigger guard on the desktop pistol for a gorilla guerilla... very Irisih!
What country is this?

*Borstal Boy* by Georgie Best, as told to BB.

Absolutely gobsmacked... and eye-smacked.
Phock art!

Cheap shots, I know, and, obviously, AI is in its infancy... but what has it been trained on? The Internet. Thus, we have to train it ourselves, as loving parents... so may I offer a suggestion?