

# Writing Ireland

## Lecture 12: The Ends of (Post-)Modern Irish Fiction

[Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Atlas of Literature*. London: DeAgostini, 1996: 276-79, 277. ('Divided Ireland')]

### **Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (2011)**

(keywords marking the historical trajectory in the table of contents)

- Writing from the Margins, 1665-1800
- Speak Not My Name, 1800-91
- Living in a Time of Epic: Revival and Revolution, 1891-1922
- Irish Independence and the Bureaucratic Imagination, 1922-39
- Enervated Ireland – Isolated Ireland? 1940-60
- The Struggle of Making It New, 1960-79
- Brave New Worlds: Celtic Tigers, 1979-today
- The Future of the Irish Novel in the Global Literary Market Place

### **High-Profile Irish Novelists after Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien:**

(\* = Northern Ireland)

John Banville (1945-)

Kevin Barry (1969-)

Sebastian Barry (1955-)

Dermot Bolger (1959-)

\*Anna Burns (1962-)

Seamus Deane (1940-)

Roddy Doyle (1958-)

Anne Enright (1962-)

J.G. Farrell (1935-79)

Patrick McCabe (1955-)

Colum McCann (1965-)

\*Bernard McLaverty (1942-)

John McGahern (1934-2006)

\*Brian Moore (1921-99)

Iris Murdoch (1919-99)

Edna O'Brien (1930-)

Joseph O'Connor (1963-)

\*Glenn Patterson (1961-)

Colm Tóibín (1955-)

William Trevor (1928-2016)

### **Booker-Prize-Winning Novels by Irish Writers:**

J.G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973)  
Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea* (1978)  
Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993)  
John Banville, *The Sea* (2005)  
Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (2007)  
Anna Burns, *Milkman* (2018)

Four times shortlisted: William Trevor (1970, 76, 91, 2002)

The 'Lost Man Booker Prize' for 1970:  
J.H. Farrell, *Troubles* (2010)

### **Sebastian Barry – *The Secret Scripture* (2008)**

[Sebastian Barry Wins The 2008 Costa Book Of The Year For *The Secret Scripture* (Jan 27, 2009)]

#### **Blurb:**

Nearing her hundredth birthday, and still living in the mental hospital where she was committed as a young woman, Roseanne looks back at the tragedies and passions of her life through her secret journals. Growing up in rural Ireland in the 1930s, her adolescence is marked by civil war and a turbulent family life. When she marries Tom McNulty, she believes she has found love and security – only for a terrible misunderstanding, born of prejudice and deception, to threaten her fragile happiness.

#### **Sebastian Barry on the family background of the novel:**

We were driving through Sligo, and my mother pointed out a hut and told me that that was where my great uncle's first wife had lived before being put into a lunatic asylum by the family. She knew nothing more, except that she was beautiful.  
(*The Guardian*, Jan 29, 2009)

I once heard my grandfather say that she was no good. That's what survives and the rumours of her beauty. She was nameless, fateless, unknown. I felt I was almost duty-bound as a novelist to reclaim her and, indeed, remake her.  
(*The Guardian*, April 27, 2008)

**The novel ties in with other novels and plays by Barry which are grounded in his family history:**

**Plays**

*The Steward of Christendom* (1995): Thomas Dunne, 1910-1932

**Novels**

*Annie Dunne* (2002): daughter of Thomas Dunne

*The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998): 1920s Anglo-Irish War and beyond

*A Long Long Way* (2005): Willie Dunne, son of Thomas Dunne (WWI)

*The Secret Scripture* (2008): Roseanne McNulty

*On Canaan's Side* (2011): Lily Bere, sister of Willie Dunne, daughter of Thomas Dunne (1940s US)

*The Temporary Gentleman* (2014): Jack McNulty (WWII, 1950s, Africa, UN)

*Days Without End* (2016): Thomas McNulty (Great Famine 1845-49 > Canada/US)

**Structure:**

'Roseanne's Testimony of Herself'

(Patient, Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, 1957-)

> homodiegetic narration, internal focalisation

↑  
↓

'Dr Grene's Commonplace Book'

(Senior Psychiatrist, Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital)

> homodiegetic narration, internal focalisation

+ inquiry into Roseanne's past based on documentary evidence and Fr Gaunt's report (heterodiegetic narrations)

Part 1 (R's Childhood, 1920s)

1 R 2 G-R 3 R 4 R 5 G-R 6 R 7 G-R 8 R 9 R-G-R 10 R 11 R-G

Part 2: (1930s to early 40s)

12 R-G 13 R 14 G-R 15 G-R-G 16 R-G-R 17 R

Part 3: (Mid-1940s to 1957 ... the present)

18 R-G 19 R 20 G-R-G-R 21 G 22 G

### Plot:

- Roseanne's childhood and close relationship with her father (first meeting with John Lavelle) (1920s)
- Roseanne orphaned/works at Cafe Cairo/meets and marries Tom McNulty (1930s)
- meeting with John Lavelle, discovered by Fr Gaunt: isolation, divorce due to insanity (nymphomania) at time of contract > Roseanne lives completely isolated in a hut close to the beach near Sligo for some 6 years or so
- Eneas McNulty who has gone AWOL from the British troops in WWII stays briefly at the hut (early 1940s)
- Roseanne gets pregnant, pleads for help with Mrs McNulty, is rejected and gives birth to a baby boy on the beach on her way back in desperation (1945)
- the child vanishes and Roseanne wakes up in Sligo Mental Hospital from which she is later transferred to Roscommon

### Cast of Characters:

Joseph Clear ∞ Cissy Clear  
(Presbyterian/Plymouth Brethren)

↓

Roseanne Clear/McNulty ∞ Tom McNulty

Mrs. McNulty ∞ Old Tom  
(Catholic)

↓

Eneas McNulty  
Jack McNulty  
Teasy McNulty

John Lavelle ∞ Kitty Lavelle

↓

Michael and Sean Keane  
aka John Kane

Fr Aloysius Gaunt

Dr. William Grene  
(English Catholic)

### The Problem of Reliability:

Roseanne's memory and Dr Grene's research yield different versions of core events (e.g.

her father as a graveyard superintendent and rat catcher who later commits suicide after her mother goes insane

vs.

her father as a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary who is brutally murdered in a revenge killing)

### Reasons for Unreliability:

trauma, unreliable memory  
vs.  
power, religious hypocrisy

### Intertextual References:

(in both epigraphs and the text itself)

- Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1643)
  - private notations, published only after indiscretions
  - new lively and individual prose style
  - tolerance, scepticism, reconciliation of science and religion
  - pragmatic eclecticism vs. official Anglican church doctrine
- Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800)
  - > voice vs. structure

## Anna Burns – *Milkman* (2018)

[Anna Burns wins the 2018 Man Booker Prize, Oct 17, 2018]

Earlier novels by Burns: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007),  
*Mostly Hero* (novella, 2014)

### Blurb:

In this unnamed city, to be interesting is dangerous. Middle sister is busy attempting to keep her mother from discovering her maybe-boyfriend and to keep everyone in the dark about her encounter with Milkman. But when first brother-in-law sniffs out her trouble and rumours start to swell, middle sister becomes 'interesting'. The last thing she ever wanted to be. To be interesting is to be noticed and to be noticed is dangerous.

*Milkman* is a tale of gossip and hearsay, silence and deliberate deafness. It is the story of inaction with enormous consequences.

"If Beckett had written a prose poem about the Troubles, it would read a lot like this."  
(*Daily Mail*)

## Beginning:

The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died. He had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man. Others did care though, and some were those who, in the parlance, 'knew me to see but not to speak to' and I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them, or more likely by first brother-in-law, that I had been having an affair with this milkman and that I was 18 and that he was 41 ... It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman. But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me.

## Christopher Taylor, "The Psychologicals." *London Review of Books* (25 Oct 2018): 27-28.

The speaker doesn't give her name, or anyone else's, but in dialogue she's addressed as 'middle sister' (by her sisters), as 'daughter' (by ma), as 'sister-in-law' (by third brother-in-law) and as 'maybe-girlfriend' (by her 'almost one year so far maybe-boyfriend'). The milkman's first words to her are: 'You're one of the who's-it girls, aren't you? So-and-so was your father, wasn't he?' He also mentions her four brothers, 'thingy, thingy, thingy and thingy'. She can't immediately rebuff him, 'for he'd named the credentials, the male people of my family, and I couldn't be rude because he wasn't being rude.' People are careful, where she lives, about what they say and don't say, so there's a lot of watching for unspoken cues, a constant scanning that she likens to hostile telepathy. Most people, she imagines, have learned to present only 'their topmost mental level to those who were reading it', keeping their real selves hidden in 'the undergrowth of their consciousness', and that's what she tries to do with the milkman. It doesn't work as well as she hopes.

The narrator, it soon turns out, is looking back at a couple of months towards the end of the 1970s. Two instances of misogynistic boneheadedness identify the general period: we hear about 'mainstream boys ... who wanted to beat up Julie Covington for singing "Only Women Bleed" [released in December 1977], which they thought was a song about periods', and about 'boys incensed at Sigourney Weaver for killing the creature in that new film [*Alien*, released in the UK in September 1979], when none of the men in that film had been able to kill the creature'. As for the place, it's resolutely unnamed, but it isn't an allegorical Everycity or a Russian novel-style 'town of B \_\_\_\_'. From people's speech, and the geography, and various large clues, such as the 'political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming', the segregated sectarian neighbourhoods separated by 'interface' areas, and the paramilitaries with allegiances either 'over the border' or 'over the water', the city would appear to correspond to Belfast, and the narrator's neighbourhood to Ardoyne, the Catholic, Irish nationalist district [...]

What's extraordinary about all this, though easy to overlook on a first reading, at least until the final stretch, is the density and tightness of the plotting behind the narrator's apparently rambling performance. The whole thing could be transposed into a more conventional idiom, with proper names and in the third person, say, without rearranging the scene-by-scene construction. What's more, the comic unfolding of the plot runs counter to the narrator's pinched sense of what can and can't be said and done in her neighbourhood, and, after a chilling final encounter with the milkman, there's a darkly happy ending. Without sounding too therapised – she was raised, she says, 'before these modern times when you can stand up and receive a round of applause for admitting there might be something wrong with your head' – the narrator comes to entertain the possibility of trust, and of less destructive forms of communal solidarity, and to see that she has got the people around her all wrong. If that sounds sappy, it shouldn't: the writing is scalding about such topics as the IRA's kangaroo courts and the security services' malign blundering until the very end. But as a reader you feel you've earned the novel's more optimistic resolution, and that Burns, with her wild sentences and her immense writerly discipline, has too.

## Bibliography Lecture 12:

### Anthologies:

Bolger, Dermot, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*. London: Vintage, 1995.

### Criticism:

Brewster, Scott & Michael Parker, eds., *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*. Manchester/New York: Manchester UP, 2009.

Corcoran, Neil, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature*. Oxford et al: Oxford UP, 1997.

Coughlan, Patricia. *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*. Dublin: Carysfort, 2008.

Foster, John Wilson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Hand, Derek, *A History of the Irish Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

Harte, Liam, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel, 1987-2007*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Hunt Mahony, Christina, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998.

Mahony, Christina Hunt. *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Dublin, Ireland/Washington, DC/Carysfort; Catholic U of America P, 2006.

McDonald, Ronan, ed., *Irish Writing since 1950*. London: Maney, 2005.

O'Brien, George, *The Irish Novel: 1960-2010*. Cork: Cork UP, 2013.

Watt, Stephen, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.