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“Sexual Violence and the Northern Ireland Troubles: Anna Burns’ *Milkman*”

Matt McGuire, Western Sydney University, AU, m.mcguire@westernsydney.edu.au

This article examines the relationship between Anna Burns’ *Milkman* (2018) and the politics of sexual violence. It argues that the moment of the novel’s publication, occurring against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, informs both the reception of the text and encourages us to examine the issue of gender violence as part of the hidden history of the Northern Irish conflict. Drawing on a range of feminist scholars, the article locates *Milkman* within a series of broader debates about the ‘cultural scaffolding’ of sexual violence and the historically masculinist logic of Irish nationalism. It concludes by situating *Milkman* within a predominant strain of recent Northern Irish fiction; namely, a ‘retrospective mood’ whereby authors have sought to revisit and reconsider the past in order to re-examine its legacy upon the precarious peace of the present.



Anna Burns' *Milkman* was an unlikely winner of the 2018 Booker Prize. In the forty-nine years since its inception, no Northern Irish writer had even won the Booker. Only four writers from Northern Ireland had ever made a Booker shortlist, and only one of those was a woman.¹ Burns' success is even more astonishing when considered alongside the publishing history of *Milkman*. While the manuscript was completed in 2014, the book did the rounds for two years before eventually being picked up by Faber. Burns recounts one publisher telling her the novel 'showed promise' and 'if she sent them £2000 they would put her on one of their courses' (McVeigh 2018). All was changed, and changed utterly, on 16 October when *Milkman* was crowned the winner of the 2018 Booker Prize. Burns received a cheque for £50,000, Faber ordered a 100,000-copy reprint and, in the months that followed, the novel received rave reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Review of Books* (Charles 2018; Alter 2018; Wills 2019).

Set in an unnamed town in an unnamed country (though it appears to be the author's native Belfast, during the 1970s), *Milkman* is a story about sexual harassment; specifically, that experienced by its eighteen-year-old narrator, middle sister, at the hands of a forty-one-year-old paramilitary officer, nicknamed milkman.² Throughout the text, milkman is a sinister, ghost-like figure. He floats out of the shadows and proceeds to pester, intimidate and ultimately try to groom middle sister for sex. A significant factor in *Milkman*'s critical success was its coincidental publication with the #MeToo movement. Beginning in October 2017 in response to allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, #MeToo sought to use the connectivity of social media to quantify and make visible the sexual harassment of women in contemporary society.³ Against this backdrop the chair of the Booker judges described *Milkman* as 'burningly topical', providing readers with 'a morally and intellectually challenging picture of what #MeToo is about' (Flood 2018). In the *Washington Post*, Ron

¹ They are: Brian Moore for *The Doctor's Wife* (1976), *The Colour of Blood* (1987), and *Lies of Silence* (1990); Jennifer Johnston for *Shadows of Our Skin* (1977); Seamus Deane for *Reading in the Dark* (1996); and Bernard MacLaverty for *Grace Notes* (1997).

² Whilst it is the language of *Milkman*, in particular the vernacular voice of middle sister, that locates the book within an Northern Irish setting. Given Belfast's status as the only major city in the region and the place of Burns' own childhood, it is reasonable to assume that the novel is set there. Working on this assumption, unnamed locations come to mirror several real-life places within Belfast. This, middle sister's "district" is loosely based on The Ardoyne, the working class catholic neighborhood in north Belfast where Burns herself grew up. While the park where middle sister runs resembles the Water Works, a large reservoir that adjoins The Ardoyne area and sits between the Cavehill and the Cliftonville Roads.

³ The phrase "me too" was first coined by the social activist Tarana Burke in 1997. Its explosion within popular consciousness can be traced to its social media use which began in 2017 when the actress Alyssa Milano asked her Twitter followers to reply "me too" if they had also experienced sexual assault or harassment. Within days, Milano's tweet had been shared in over 12 million posts and the #MeToo movement was born. See Garcia (2017). For quantitative analysis of the rise of #MeToo see Modrek (2019).

Charles took a similar line, calling the text ‘a #MeToo testimony in the context of a civil war’ (2018). For Frederick Studemann, Burns’ treatment ‘of harassment and restrictive control [was] tailor-made to our present age of #MeToo’ (2018). While 1970s Northern Ireland seems far removed from the sexual politics of twenty-first century Hollywood, the subject, structure and intention of *Milkman* are animated by longstanding issues that the #MeToo movement placed under the media spotlight.⁴ Set in the late 1970s but told from the perspective of twenty years later, the novel emulates a temporal dynamic of #MeToo, whereby accusations of historical abuse were levelled against men in positions of power. Like #MeToo, the text also sought to call out and expose forms of sexual violence that, for the most part, had remained hidden within mainstream historical and literary accounts of the Northern Irish conflict. Whilst #MeToo provided much of the fuel that propelled *Milkman* into the literary stratosphere, one must not oversimplify the relationship between these two cultural moments. Given that Burns completed the manuscript in 2014, it would be inaccurate to regard *Milkman* as a direct response to the heightened political consciousness of the #MeToo movement. A more nuanced account would be to read the forty-year chronology of the text – from the moment of its setting (1979), narration (1999) and publication (2018) – as signaling the enduring, hidden history of sexual violence that, crucially, extends far beyond the deplorable politics of the Hollywood casting couch.⁵

#MeToo then offers a point of departure, rather than a comprehensive theoretical lens for reading and making sense of *Milkman*. It points us toward the implicit and explicit forms of sexual violence that pervade the novel, asking us to reconsider their marginalization with the predominant discourses of recent Northern Irish history. The following article focuses on *Milkman*’s analysis of the ways in which the novel represents the experience and effect of sexual harassment. It does so by locating middle sister’s harassment within broader cultural politics of gender as they relate to Irish culture and to the specificity of the Troubles. Having done so it seeks to situate Burns’ landmark text within the broader field of Northern Irish fiction; in particular, the ways in which, in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement (1998), the region’s writers have sought to re-imagine the past and re-align the co-ordinates of the future. Whilst the novel’s themes have universal resonance, *Milkman* insists that we attend to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which particular instances of sexual harassment occur. As such, it offers both a powerful critique of sexual violence and a lens through

⁴ For discussion of the effect of #MeToo on Irish society see Casey (2020).

⁵ For this chronological understanding of the novel I am indebted to the outstanding essay by Clare Hutton, “The Moment and Technique of *Milkman*” (2019).

which we might reconsider the kinds of suffering that have come to be associated with the political conflict in Northern Ireland.

***Milkman* and Sexual Violence**

Milkman's preoccupation with the politics of sexual violence is apparent from the very opening of the novel. The text begins:

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 eighteen and he was forty-one. (1)

As we can see, the text is concerned with both the physical (the gun to the breast) and verbal (the name calling) nature of sexual violence. Like #MeToo, *Milkman* insists on an expansive account of this terrain, one that extends into cultural practice and takes us beyond a more criminological focus on issues like rape or domestic violence. In this regard, the text echoes the work of feminist scholars Liz Kelly and Jill Radford for whom sexual violence exists on a 'continuum', taking 'many different forms... [including] abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force' (1998: 55). The opening scene is also notable for its contrasts. We have the young, isolated, female victim up against three older, male, assailants – the milkman, first brother-in-law and Somebody McSomebody. Dramatically outnumbered, the juxtaposition signals the novel's concern with the broader social and cultural forces that middle sister is up against. The novel adopts and adapts the machinations of the psychological thriller. We have a male psychopath, satisfying his deviant urges by preying on a vulnerable woman. We also have this experience refracted through the point of view of the victim and the emotional torment that such behaviour engenders. Where *Milkman* extends this terrain is in its focus on the sociological and cultural contexts through which readers are invited to interpret and make sense of these features. For example, the opening scene introduces us to first brother-in-law who, like the milkman, is twenty-three years older than middle sister. We learn that since the narrator was twelve, he was in the habit of making lewd, sexual remarks to her whenever he found her alone. The revelation aligns *Milkman* with some of the most disturbing facts about sexual violence, including the vulnerability of underage girls and the fact that the majority of assault is committed by

intimate partners, family members or acquaintances who knew their victims.⁶ In the parlance of *Milkman* itself, it would seem that the most dangerous threat facing middle sister is not from ‘over the water’ or ‘over the road’, but from ‘over the kitchen table’ (21).

While such observations situate *Milkman* within a critical discourse about sexual violence, one must also attend to the historical specificity of the opening scene. We might note the existence of the state hit squad, the gun to middle sister’s breast and that unusual name – Somebody McSomebody. The ‘state hit squad’ is a reference to either the RUC or the British Army. A pejorative slur, it signals a widespread republican perception that the security forces in Northern Ireland acted out with the law in their pursuit of the Provisional IRA. Similarly, the mention of the firearm locates the narrative within the broader context of political violence and civil unrest that defined Northern Ireland during the 1970s. Research shows the presence of firearms in such societies meant that they were far more likely to be used on women during a sexual assault (McWilliams 1998: 127). And what about that name – Somebody McSomebody? On the one hand, it lends middle sister’s attacker an air of anonymity, suggesting that sexual violence is so ubiquitous that this man could almost be anybody. On the other hand, the name grounds *Milkman* within a distinctly Irish milieu. Whilst the prefix ‘Mc’ indicates the world of the large Irish family, the fact that it literally means ‘son of’ adds a suggestion of patriarchal dominance (Hutton 2019: 360). As a result, whilst *Milkman* invokes the issue of sexual violence in its broadest sense, it is also alert to the specific, localised context in which this issue plays out. This twin approach echoes the author’s own view on the relevance of her text: ‘I’m hoping I’ve written [the novel] in a way that would be as recognizable as representative of any society that is closed and insular and existing under similar restrictive circumstances’ (Studemann 2018). It also echoes Claire Kilroy’s take on *Milkman*: ‘Although the novel is set in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, it prompts thoughts of other regimes and their impact: Stalinist Russia, the Taliban, medieval witch hunts’ (2018). In the words of Northern Irish crime writer Adrian McKinty, ‘*Milkman* is both a story of Belfast and its particular sins but it is also a story of anywhere’ (2018).

In her landmark study *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman argues that to understand sexual trauma one must attend to both ‘the *private* forms of coercion’

⁶ Statistics from the US show that 42% of women that reported being raped were under the age of 18. Black et al 2011. Again, research has shown that, not only are the majority of rape victims women (91%) and the majority of perpetrators male (99%), most rape is committed by either an intimate partner (51%) or an acquaintance that was known to the victim (41%). See Black et al. (2011).

and ‘the *hidden* violence of men’ (1; my emphasis). It is these private and hidden forms of domination that constitute the dark heart of *Milkman*. Unlike the physical and verbal assaults of the opening scene, milkman’s harassment of middle sister occurs primarily by stealth. Throughout the novel, he approaches the narrator only four times: the first, when she is walking while reading (a favourite pastime); the second, when she is running in the park; the third, when she’s walking home from her night class; and the fourth, when she is returning from her boyfriend’s house. What distinguishes these episodes is the casual nonchalance of the milkman. In his first approach he says, “‘You’re one of the who’s-it girls, aren’t you? So-and-so was your father, wasn’t he? Your brothers, thingy, thingy, thingy and thingy, used to play in the hurley team, didn’t they? Hop in. I’ll give you a lift”’ (3). There is a subtle politics beneath these polite, meaningless words. Not only do they mask the milkman’s true intentions, they also subordinate middle sister’s identity, recognising her only in relation to the male members of her family.

The milkman’s familiarity with the narrator reiterates the critique of the stranger danger myth we saw in the opening scene. When middle sister refuses his offer, he is completely nonplussed: “‘No bother. Don’t you be worryin’. Enjoy your book there”’ (4). The nonchalance illustrates the way in which conflict situations serve to ‘intensify men’s sense of entitlement’ when it comes to women’s bodies (McWilliams 1998: 115). Significantly, the casualness of the exchange has middle sister doubting herself as she questions whether the experience even constitutes a violent act. After all, this was a ‘hair trigger society where the ground rules were – if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you... then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn’t there’ (6). In contrast to the subtle insinuations of the milkman, the ‘political problems’ were ‘huge... physical, noisy things’ like bombings, shootings and explosions (65). Thus, middle sister’s narrative insists that we look beyond the spectacle of the nightly news, challenging preconceptions about the ways in which violence came to dominate Northern Irish society during the 1970s. At the same time, the text seeks to clarify the nature of sexual harassment, supporting the definition enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1992) whereby sexual violence is both physical and psychological in nature.

Milkman’s interest in the psychology of harassment is evident in the novel’s use of the first-person narrative and our extended access to the fraught interior life of middle sister. In a similar vein, the plot of the novel is less concerned with external events than in the ways in which they come to terrorise the narrator. Following her first encounter with the milkman, middle sister alters her routine. She takes a different route to work and stops running by herself in the park. Even when he is not there, the milkman acts as a shadow presence, an invisible threat that soon preoccupies her every waking thought.

Paranoia ensues, then depression. Middle sister can't sleep. She searches her bedroom, certain he must have snuck in. By the time of the fourth encounter, the narrator is utterly traumatised, 'no longer a living person' (193), 'thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness' (303). While the milkman is killed before he has the opportunity to physically harm middle sister, the effects of his attentions are no less devastating. Thus, the novel strives to illustrate the invisible injuries that have come to be associated with trauma and with the attempt to 'bring hitherto marginalised or silenced stories to public consciousness... to witness and record that which is "forgotten" or overlooked in the grand narrative of History' (Whitehead 2004: 82–84). As will be argued below, *Milkman* can be read as a form of feminist counter-history, one that would seek to oppose the masculine bias within prevailing accounts of the conflict.

Milkman's role as a senior paramilitary, combined with the psychological trauma he inflicts, aligns the novel with feminist arguments that define sexual violence as a form of terrorism. For Claudia Card 'rape is a terrorist institution' through which women 'successfully terrorized, and others socialized by them, [are forced to] comply with men's demands' (1991: 302). Card argues that like terrorism, rape is a social phenomenon, one that affects women as a group, and not merely the individuals who are the immediate victims of such encounters. As *Milkman* demonstrates, like terrorism, rape is acutely psychological in the way that it instils fear among a target population. Rape can also be seen to serve a set of ideological ends; namely, the assertion of male power and the re-inscription of gender hierarchies within society. Card's account of rape bears remarkable similarity to the definition of terrorism offered by Richard English. For English, 'Terrorism involves heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim; it can involve a variety of acts, of targets, and of actors; it possesses an important psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group and also a wider implied audience' (2009: 24). Within *Milkman*, sexual violence is not portrayed as a chance encounter in which a violent urge is suddenly given reign. Instead, we witness the slow, deliberate and systematic grooming of middle sister. The novel debunks the enduring myth that sexual assault is about the perverse desire of a madman, also known as the 'irresistible impulse' theory of rape. It illustrates the research findings of Menachem Amir which show that the vast majority of rapes are planned, rather than spontaneous attacks (1971). Amir argues for a situational approach to sexual assault, maintaining that 'sex offenders do not constitute a unique clinical or psychopathological type; nor are they as a group invariably more disturbed than the control groups to which they are compared' (1971: 143). Such an approach encourages us to read milkman's toxic masculinity within the broader social, political and cultural context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and it is to this aspect of the novel that I now turn.

Gendered & Violence: Irish Cultural Contexts

While *Milkman* centres on middle sister's experience of sexual harassment, it also addresses the normative set of gender relations that characterised Northern Ireland during the 'dark days' of the 1970s (114). In middle sister's own words, this was the whole "I'm male and you're female" territory... "This was certain girls not being tolerated if it was deemed they did not defer to males, did not acknowledge the superiority of males, might even go so far as almost to contradict males, basically, the female wayward, a species insolent and far too sure of herself" (8). Against this backdrop, the novel bears witness to the ways in which the Troubles served to legitimate toxic forms of hyper-masculinity among those involved in political violence (Magennis 2010). Thus, the paramilitaries are described as cultivating a self-image in 'the James Bond mode', whereby they are 'the heroic guy, the invincible, sexy maverick male defeater of all bad guys' (120). Notably, middle sister is highly alert to both the machismo and immaturity of such behaviour: 'it was a game – more toy soldiers on toy battlefields, toy trains in the attic, hard men in their teens, hard men in their twenties... with the mentality being toys, even if it was far from toys these men were playing with' (312). If such forms of toxic masculinity are a crucial part of this cultural scaffolding in 1970s Northern Ireland, questions of female identity are equally important. They also lay the foundations for the milkman's actions and, as such, are vital to understanding the trauma that the protagonist suffers within the text.

The treatment of gender identity in *Milkman* echoes the work of Monica McWilliams who argues that, 'cultural beliefs about the role of women in society... accelerate or moderate the levels of violence used against women' (1998: 16). One of the ways this plays out in *Milkman* is through the oppressive limitations placed upon young women by the conservative, working-class, catholic community in which they live. Throughout the text, it is middle sister's fraught relationship with ma, and the latter's obsession with marriage, that function as a nodal point for these constrictive energies: 'Since my sixteenth birthday two years earlier... [ma] had tormented herself and me because I was not married' (45). Ma, of course, is symptomatic of 'a whole chivvy of mothers [in the district] doing their damnedest to get their daughters wed' (45). Their desperation is fuelled by a sense that this alone constitutes 'female destiny' (50). Getting married and making babies being both 'the foundation of the state' (42), 'a divine decree [and] a communal duty' (50). The tension between middle sister and ma can be interpreted by way of Anne Fogarty's work on the mother-daughter relationship in Irish women's fiction. Here, 'The figures of the mother and daughter act... as sites of contestation in which notions of female identity are put to the test, aspects of patriarchal oppression are unearthed, and unresolved conflicts within the female psyche are enacted' (2002:

88). The denial of middle sister's quest for autonomy and selfhood become clear if one considers ma's rhetoric in the context of a key feminist battleground – the control of women's reproductive rights. Ma's harangue represents the coincidence of a series of pronatalist and pro-nationalist ideologies that came to define Irish nationalism during the twentieth century. In the Free State, for example, under the leadership of Éamon De Valera, the nationalist narrative sought to reconfigure women as self-sacrificing and unquestioning mothers. The newly written Irish constitution would contain marriage bans that denied married women the opportunity of paid employment, thus helping to reinforce their dependency and subordination. While Northern Ireland may have escaped the effects of a conservative and catholic orientated constitution, the stranglehold of the church enabled a similar cultural conservatism to pervade the everyday lives of catholic women within the north. Thus, through the figure of ma, *Milkman* can be seen to take aim at a key strand of Irish nationalist discourse, one that construed women as symbolic bearers of the nation whilst allocating them a secondary, subservient role to that of their heroic male counterparts.

If female autonomy and selfhood are denied by the social pressure to get married and make babies, an alternative notion of female identity is offered by middle sister's occasional running partner, third brother-in-law. In contrast to the other males in the district, third brother-in-law 'expected women to be doughty, inspirational, even mythical, supernatural figures' and held 'an atypical high regard for all things female' (12). Whilst such intentions appear noble, middle sister recognises this as just another variation of the 'unshakable women rules' that pervade the district (12). Third brother-in-law's attitude is indicative of the mythologization of female identity within the Irish literary imagination. For W.B. Yeats, Ireland could be personified as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, who demanded that her followers sacrifice their lives to end the partition of her four green fields. Later, for Seamus Heaney, Celtic mythology would provide the image of a goddess who must be appeased through human sacrifice, whether in the peat bogs of Denmark or on the streets of seventies Belfast. For Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, such narratives serve either 'to confine Irish women in a straitjacket of purity and passivity' or to 'reproduce social arrangements which construct women as material possessions, not as speaking subjects' (1990: 1, 21).

The first-person narrative in *Milkman* can be read as a deliberate attempt to resist a cultural narrative that would deny Irish women the status of speaking subjects. As such, it is notable that a number of critics have highlighted the idiosyncratic and electric voice of the novel's narrator, middle sister. For Clair Wills, 'the novel is carried by the extraordinary dynamism of middle sister's voice' (2019). For Kwame Anthony Appiah it is this 'utterly distinctive voice' that provides the text's 'incredible original[ity]' (Flood &

Armistead 2018). The use of long, multi-clausal sentences gives *Milkman* a stream-of-consciousness quality. There is an impression of a dam finally bursting, as decades of silent suffering give way to an angry monologue through which middle sister attempts to tell the truth about the past. The Northern Ireland Troubles, of course, were fertile ground for both the making of secrets and the maintenance of silence. In the novel, we witness middle sister's ignorance of her own brothers' paramilitary involvement. Similarly, her relationship with her 'longest friend' is premised upon not asking too many questions: 'I did not ask her her business and in return she did not tell me it' (197). Thus, middle sister concludes, 'In those days... impossible it was not to be closed-up because closed-upness was everywhere' (144). Silence then is a legitimate survival strategy. However, the novel also brings an important gender dynamic to the issue. When middle sister's harassment begins, the milkman's status as a powerful paramilitary leaves her with nowhere to turn. Ma does not believe her (54–5). And she cannot go to the police, as this could have lethal consequences. Thus, the novel offers a feminist slant on an important thematic issue covered in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' in which the 'famous northern reticence' was seen to mask the hidden codes of political intolerance upon which the conflict thrived (1975: 54). For Burns, any exhaustive account of such suppression must look beyond sectarianism and attend to the significance of sexual politics as another source of silence. In this sense, middle sister's narrative evinces Herman's claim that in the face of 'unspeakable secrets... remembering and truth telling about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims' (1991: 1).

Whilst many of *Milkman*'s early reviewers may have taken their cultural cues from the #MeToo movement, it is important not to overlook the broader history of Northern Irish feminism as a critical reference point for reading the sexual politics of the text. Middle sister's stalking plays out against the backdrop of the international feminist movement and its slow seeding within the working-class community of the novel. Iconoclastically referred to as the 'issues women', the group is defined by the degree to which they, like the novel's heroine, appear to flout the dominant cultural values of 1970s Northern Ireland: 'These women... were firmly placed in the category of those way, way beyond-the-pale. The word "feminist" was beyond-the pale. The word "woman" barely escaped beyond-the-pale' (152). The 'issues women' are juxtaposed with the 'traditional women' of the district, including Ma and that whole chivvy of mothers who espouse getting married and making babies as the female *raison d'être*. In this way, the book diagnoses a particular facet of the feminist movement in 1970s Northern Ireland; namely, the tension between 'the mobilization of women in reference to their responsibilities in and for the family', as opposed to a politics that would appeal

to them based on ‘their interests as individuals’ (Roulston 1989: 222). This tension also diagnoses an important class dynamic within early Northern Irish feminism. Here, the women’s movement sought to become a mass movement that would have equal appeal for both middle-class, tertiary-educated women and their female counterparts in more working-class districts like the one featured in the novel.⁷ Far from locating middle sister within a feminist vacuum, *Milkman* diagnoses many of the difficulties that confronted early campaigners for women’s rights in Northern Ireland. The text signals the crippling sense of double marginalisation whereby women’s concerns were often seen as minor or secondary issues alongside the ‘real’ struggle for colonial independence (Gifford and MacMillan 1997: ix).

From Good Friday to Brexit – Northern Irish Literature & the Legacy of the Troubles

The Troubles officially ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The accord sought to establish a nationalist and unionist power-sharing government in Northern Ireland as the basis for a lasting peace. However, far from recalibrating the politics of the region, the consociational model enshrined in the Agreement has served to naturalise, rather than transcend, the divisions of the two dominant ideological blocs. This two traditions model is extensively satirised in *Milkman* – ‘the right butter. The wrong butter. The tea of allegiance. The tea of betrayal’ (25) – however, it remains enshrined within the political and cultural life of the post-Agreement North. Thus, historian Ian McBride can write that, ‘Whilst Northern Ireland is widely advertised as a model for aspiring conflict-resolvers, attempts to address the legacy of the Troubles have been conspicuously unsuccessful’ (2009: 117). For Aaron Kelly the work of Gramsci offers a productive lens through which to view this impasse. Northern Ireland exists in an ‘interregnum... [in which] the old is dying and the new cannot be born’ (2009: 1). The latest manifestation of this tension has been the issue of Brexit. This has seen the possibility of re-establishing a hard border on the island of Ireland and the risk that it might reignite the violence that many hoped was long gone. Against this backdrop, *Milkman* offers a vital critique of the pathological intensity of the two traditions narrative and the ways in which it obliterates a range of other issues, including gender equality, around which a more tolerant and progressive Northern Ireland might be fashioned.

The narrative of *Milkman* is structured by the backward glance of middle sister as she attempts to reconstruct her traumatic experience of harassment. The novel resonates powerfully, and in new ways, with what Neal Alexander calls a ‘retrospective mood’

⁷ For further discussion of the history of Northern Irish feminism see Beale (1986), Mitchison (1998) and Ward (1987).

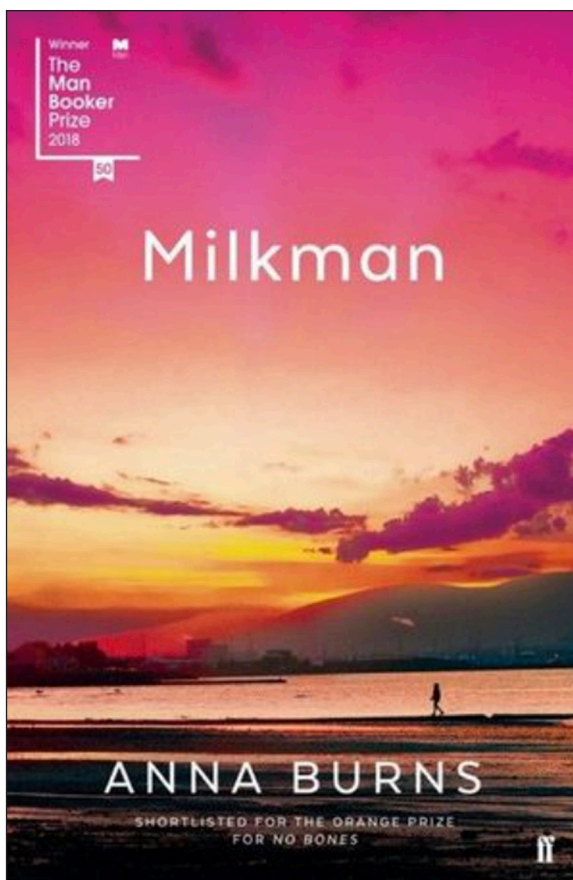
within recent Northern Irish fiction. Here, authors are preoccupied with 'recreating a particular moment in the past in an effort to illuminate the North's contemporary predicament' (2009: 272). While *Milkman* evokes an historical moment in which sexual violence was sidelined by sectarian conflict, it implicitly asks us to consider ways in which gender remains sidelined within political debates in the present. *Milkman* exemplifies Stefanie Lehner's model of recent Northern Irish fiction which, she argues, resembles Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History', the Angel who would like to 'stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed', but all the while it is 'irresistibly' blown backwards into the future (2020: 137). If *Milkman* is characterised by continuity with these models, it is important to recognise the extent of the novel's departure from other Northern Irish fiction of this period. It is notable that this retrospective dynamic has been most visible in the work of male writers. Key texts include Glenn Patterson's *The International* (1999) and *That Which Was* (2005), David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* (2008) and Eoin McNamee's *Blue Tango* (2001) (McGuire 2015a, 2015b, 2017). A revisionist ethos also pervades the burgeoning field of Northern Irish crime fiction, again in work mostly by male writers like Adrian McKinty, Stuart Neville and Brian McGilloway (McGuire 2016). Whilst these authors did not set out to write phallogocentric accounts of the legacy of the Troubles, their focus on male characters has inadvertently continued the marginalisation of female experience, sidelining forms of trauma that do not readily fit within the sectarian/post-colonial meta-narrative of Northern Irish history. All of which is to say that *Milkman*'s international achievement should not blind us to the radical shift that the text represents for recent Irish writing.

Milkman exemplifies Emilie Pine's argument that 'anti-nostalgia' is the dominant mode in which the Irish past is remembered. Here, 'the past which is evoked and performed is not a comforting vision, but is, rather represented as a space of trauma and pain' (2010: 8). Crucially, *Milkman* is about re-thinking the source of this trauma and re-considering the ways in which gender remains a maligned issue within key debates about the legacy of the conflict. In her work on Troubles commemoration, for example, Sara McDowell observes an inherent bias towards 'masculine needs... and experiences [of] pain [and] trauma' (2014: 335). Similarly, for Carmel Rolston and Celia Davies, the contribution of women in Northern Ireland has been generally unacknowledged 'by those engaged... in big-P politics' (2000: viii). More broadly, *Milkman*'s desire to take post-Agreement fiction in a new direction marks an important episode in what Eric Falci and Paige Reynold have called a 'period of historical reckoning' in Irish literary culture (2020: 7). Beginning in 1991 with the controversy over *The Field Day Anthology*'s glaring omission of the contribution of women to Irish literary history, and proceeding into contemporary phenomena such the 2016 #WakingTheFeminists movement that protested the Abbey

Theatre's male-dominated centenary programme, the arts in Ireland are increasingly being asked to account for 'the stubborn persistence of masculinist logics' within the domestic field of cultural production (2020: 7). *Milkman*'s resonance with #MeToo demonstrates the value of such heightened forms of critical consciousness and their fundamental necessity to a fuller and more satisfactory understanding of the Irish past.

Sunset

One shouldn't judge a book by its cover. However, the image that adorns *Milkman* is worth considering in light of the current essay. It features a lone figure, walking next to water, with hills in the background and a resplendent sunset. The sky is a stunning blend of vibrant colours – oranges, pinks, purples – all bleeding into one another. As Hutton has argued, the dust jacket, which was approved by Burns, is wilfully ambiguous (362). It could, of course, be any coastline and any sunset. However, for those that recognise the image, the sun is unmistakably setting in the Lagan valley behind Cave Hill as it gazes down upon Belfast lough.



The blend of the familiar and unfamiliar evokes the earlier quote from Adrian McKinty; namely, that *Milkman* is a story of Belfast *and* a story of anywhere. For Hutton, ‘Burns’s point... in taking away all that might root the story in a specific place is to suggest that the events she is describing could happen in any repressive, militarised society where conflict continues. The anonymity of the setting means that the work can transcend the conditions of its making in order to speak a more universal truth’ (362). The precise nature of this universal truth is addressed in a parallel scene in the novel, when middle sister is at her night class and the teacher is reading a piece of metaphysical French literature. As they listen, the class become increasingly frustrated by the author’s refusal to simply state that the sky is blue. The ‘rhetorical flourishes’ and ‘fancy footwork’ have them ‘up in arms and soon they are chanting: ‘*Le ciel est bleu! Le ciel est bleu!*’ (69). In response the teacher takes the class down the hall, points them at the setting sun and asks what colours they see. After some initial resistance, the class begin to see ‘sections of the sky that were not blue, but instead lilac, purple, patches of pink – differing pinks – with one patch of green that had a yellow gold extending along it’ (73). Moments later, the sky was ‘a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve behind it. It had changed colours... and before our eyes was changing colours yet’ (73). In the face of such revelations, the teacher gently teases them: ‘Don’t worry,’ she says, ‘Your unease, even your temporary unhingement, dear students, in the face of this sunset is encouraging. It can only mean progress. It can only mean enlightenment.’ (77). The revelation acts as a form of epiphany, a symbolic truth that hangs over the novel as a whole. The class is forced to bear witness to the rich, multicoloured, and protean nature of reality. They are compelled to look again at something which they think they have already seen and, as a result, believe that they already know. The process offers an implicit rebuke to the fixed mindsets and ideological authoritarianism that pervade the text. The two traditions narrative – ‘them and us... the tea of allegiance, the tea of betrayal...’ – is intellectually suspect and empirically inaccurate. The world cannot be divided into neat categories and held in abeyance. Nature, it seems, will simply not allow it.

The sunset in *Milkman* echoes the lines from Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘The Settle Bed’: ‘Whatever is given / Can always be reimagined, however four square, / Plank-think, hull stupid and out of its time / It happens to be’ (1991: 29). As *Milkman* moves toward its conclusion, this reimagining plays out in various minor, though not insignificant ways. Ma begins to let go of her conservative Catholic values. And the young women of the area begin to fight back, attacking Somebody McSomebody when he invades the private domain of the ladies’ toilet.

The milkman is killed before he has the chance to physically assault middle sister. Thus, the novel ends at dusk with the narrator, about to resume her running, sounding a note of cautious optimism: 'I inhaled the early evening light and realised that this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks & reservoirs, I exhaled this light and for a moment, just for a moment, I almost nearly laughed' (348). *Milkman* is a novel about sexual assault. But it is far more than that. It is about seeing things and seeing them differently. It is about noticing what has always been there, hidden in plain sight. It is about reimagining the past and realigning the co-ordinates of the future. *Milkman* was not supposed to win the 2018 Booker Prize. However, in doing so this powerful feminist manifesto has become the most internationally acclaimed and widely read fictional account of the Northern Irish Troubles. For a moment, just for a moment, one could almost nearly laugh.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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