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**Review: Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: *Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* by Caroline Magennis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). 248 pages, ISBN: 9781350074729, Hbk £85.00, e-book £76.50.**

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This is a book review of Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: *Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures*, by Caroline Magennis. The review is by Timothy Baker.

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Lucy Caldwell's *Intimacies: Eleven More Stories* (2021) movingly charts the lives of young Northern Irish women. While *Multitudes*, her previous collection, focuses largely on children and adolescents, *Intimacies* tells a number of stories of motherhood and reproductive rights, largely centred on women in their twenties and thirties. The final, title story consists of seven sections, narrated by a mother to her unborn child. At the end she speaks of '[t]his private place achieved against the public odds; achieved and in a sense guaranteed because of them', and claims that the words she gives her child are a 'spell' to make 'now' an 'always' (Caldwell 2021: 154-5). As Caroline Magennis writes in her beautiful, important new monograph, Caldwell's stories in this collection show 'how we navigate the tensions of intimacy between this holding-close and letting-go, and across the breadth of our intimate lives' (61). Caldwell's collection, like the other texts Magennis discusses, reframes and remakes questions of intimacy, the relations between public and private, and the forms of bodily connection we share.

Caldwell's text was published in May 2021, just three months before *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* was itself released. The proximity of these dates indicates the immediacy of Magennis's project: the texts considered were largely published between 2015 and 2020, around twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. As Magennis notes, while the work emerges from a broader 'post-conflict' context, it also reflects a particular moment marked by unease and sporadic violence, in particular the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in 2019. Positioned at a time when the effects of the Agreement have been established, but before further ramifications of Brexit and Covid-19 have been reflected in literature, this is material that speaks to a precise moment. Magennis's text is one of the first critical appraisals of this period, and could not be more timely. At the same time, however, the appearance of Caldwell's text, among other very recent works, also indicates one of the volume's other chief merits, which is its responsiveness. Throughout the volume it is clear that Magennis has not established a rigid, pre-existing framework into which fictional work is neatly slotted, but that the monograph's focus has changed and developed as more material has been published. Magennis's work presents a rare, and vital, ethics of dialogue. Criticism is not held at a distance, or presented as a second-order set of reflections. Instead, Magennis is engaged in the same project as the writers she discusses: trying to make sense of our own lived present. As such, this volume is an excellent example of contemporary criticism not simply as a set of ruminations on recent writing, but as an engaged intervention. Magennis's text thinks alongside her chosen works of fiction as much as it thinks about them, and provides a model of active criticism.

The monograph is, as Magennis writes in her first sentence, ‘preoccupied with a central question – what does it mean to pay attention to the representation of the body, intimacy, and pleasure in Northern Irish writing’ (1). This approach suggests two major and urgent interventions in contemporary literary studies. Firstly, Magennis challenges a tradition of critical writing that uses trauma as the predominant lens through which to approach Northern Irish writing. Magennis pays attention to a variety of experiences that have been systematically elided in current discussions, which very frequently look at texts as a conduit to understanding political violence. Focusing predominantly on questions of home and family is not to overlook the Troubles or ignore the importance of trauma, but rather simultaneously to examine the dangers of the domestic and recognise emergent themes of intimacy, bodies, and pleasure. Magennis’s work is fundamentally expansionist: she details to the readers those texts and themes that have been overlooked in pursuit of a dominant critical paradigm. Secondly, as much as the book is focused on and speaks specifically to Northern Irish literature, it includes a number of crucial reflections on the importance of taking pleasure seriously in both criticism and life. As much as it is often taboo to speak of joy in a time of suffering, Magennis claims, to focus only on trauma often elides important aspects of how people live, and how those lives are reflected in literary texts. *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* is a profoundly feminist text: Magennis writes as the ‘owner-occupier of a Northern Irish body’ (1), and constructs an argument that recognises the vital importance of embodied critical perspectives. It is a text not only about bodies, but written from a body; it is a text that recognises, to a degree unusual in contemporary criticism, the variations in bodily lived experience.

The first three chapters of the monograph take a thematic approach, focusing respectively on intimacy, pleasure, and skin. In the first chapter Magennis examines work by Michael Hughes, Wendy Erskine, Jan Carson, Phil Harrison, and Caldwell, highlighting the way a focus on intimacy helps readers rethink attachments and relationships. The chapter largely focuses on domestic settings. Following Lauren Berlant, among others, Magennis looks at the way intimacy ‘lives at the intersection between our private worlds – it does not just represent a sanctuary from the external world’ (17). Rather than opposing the personal and political, Magennis’s readings demonstrate their complex entwinement. Here, as in later chapters, Magennis is careful not to let her analysis be overwhelmed by extant theoretical models: the different senses of intimacy explored throughout the chapter stem primarily from persuasive close readings. While the volume clearly emerges from a deep investment in queer, feminist,

and affect theories, these are worn very lightly: the text is consistently accessible, and treats its primary texts seriously as nuanced thinking in their own right.

The second chapter focuses on pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, in order to examine to what extent the chosen texts, by Glenn Patterson, Billy Cowan, Rosemary Jenkinson, and again Caldwell, 'offer new ways of being an erotic subject in the changed political climate' (63). Magennis does not erect a binary distinction between pleasure and trauma, but rather illustrates the importance of varied affective states. While the work discussed here demonstrates a greater and more diverse focus on pleasure than texts from previous generations, it also shows how moments of pleasure have long been an important, if underrecognised, feature of Northern Irish writing, including during the Troubles. As Magennis writes, 'we must not treat Northern Irish culture as an instrumental tool to do the ethical work of politicians' (87). Instead, recognising the diversity of pleasures is a way both to chart recent changes in Northern Irish fiction and emphasise aspects that have long been overlooked.

The book then turns, in a discussion of work by David Park, Bernie McGill, Roisín O'Donnell, and Jenkinson, to a nuanced discussion of skin. Magennis details both the importance of physical touch, through a discussion of hapticity, and the 'experience of being a person with skin' (90), in terms of whiteness, fragility, and sensuality. As Magennis notes, while touch can be, and in these texts often is, a form of intimate connection, it can equally be framed in terms of violence and abuse. Magennis's reading of her chosen texts will be especially pertinent to scholars and readers interested in questions of embodiment and corporeality; her survey of recent writing on these themes is diverse and persuasive. The chapter enriches the earlier discussions of intimacy by concentrating on questions of proximity and difference. In emphasising bodily relation, Magennis provides a way to move away from abstract critical paradigms to more nuanced representations of individual and collective bodies.

The fourth chapter of the monograph takes a different approach, focusing solely on Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018). In part, as Magennis acknowledges, this arises from the novel's critical and commercial success: it is likely to be the text with which many readers of this monograph will be most familiar. The novel is used to reflect on all of the themes and approaches thus far discussed. The discussion is equally rooted in personal responsiveness: Magennis sets out to explore 'how the novel feels' and 'to develop an understanding of a gut feeling about the book – how it establishes a climate of repression that affects the body and the body as a tool to navigate away from bad feeling' (137). This is, particularly in a monograph on these topics but perhaps more

generally, a crucial framing. Magennis's work opens a space to acknowledge how much critical work stems from the reader's own intimate relation with the text. Such admissions do not erect a binary opposition between 'theory' and 'feeling', but rather foreground the importance of the reader's own embodied relation with the material they discuss. This is one of the chief merits of the monograph, and perhaps its greatest importance to scholars in other fields: in foregrounding the role of the self who reads and writes the work Magennis provides an example of a rigorous critical framework that does not elide the personal. If this move is increasingly found in theoretical texts, it still remains surprisingly unusual in critical monographs of this nature, and should be celebrated.

Magennis's analysis draws from affect theory to examine the importance of shame in the novel; she also highlights the importance of a focus on a teenage girl, while the majority of previous Troubles novels have centred on male protagonists. These two strands are brought together in a reading of the novel as a complex assertion of 'the power of female solidarity' (144). While many critical accounts of *Milkman* thus far have focused primarily on linguistic style or politics in its narrowest sense, Magennis persuasively argues that the novel emphasises the pervasiveness of misogynistic violence in every society. Throughout the chapter Magennis's analysis is rigorous, innovative, and informative: this will emerge as the keystone analysis of Burns's work for future critics. The turn Magennis takes at the chapter's end, however, is even more surprising.

Magennis first traces the physical symptoms of anxiety experienced by Middle Sister, Burns's protagonist, and details the way Burns depicts trauma as stored in the body. Drawing on a *Vanity Fair* interview with Burns, in which the author speaks of the influence of B. K. S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* on her work, Magennis uses yogic teachings to inform her reading of physical activity in the novel. This is a potentially risky move, as yoga is not depicted in the novel itself, but Magennis's insights are completely convincing, and will encourage readers to rethink Burns's work. Framing Middle Sister's journey in the novel as 'a return to herself through a relationship with the body in motion' (167) is a persuasive and original critical intervention, and encourages new ways of reading for physicality in contemporary texts.

*Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* ends with 'two hopes for the future'. The first is addressed to critics, who are encouraged both to examine new writing in these terms, and 're-evaluate the intimate history of Northern Ireland' (174). The second is addressed to writers, whom Magennis hopes will 'continue to explore intimacy

and sexuality in ways that challenge received orthodoxy about what it means to live in a Northern Irish body' (174). Consequently, the final words of the monograph are not Magennis's, but consist of a series of reflections on intimacy from twelve of the writers she has discussed. While author interviews have sometimes been appended to monographs focused on a single writer, such as in Rose Harris-Birtill's excellent *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World* (2019), which like Magennis's volume is published in Bloomsbury's *New Horizons in Contemporary Writing* series, this range of creative responses is unusual and very welcome. The majority of the authors use the themes discussed by Magennis as an opportunity to reflect on their own work: the responses include a range of approaches to the idea of intimacy, and diverse perspectives on individual experience, but each demonstrates the centrality of Magennis's argument to our understanding of contemporary Northern Irish writing.

Ending the volume with these reflections is an unusually generous critical act, and reflects the openness of the monograph as a whole. *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* will of course be invaluable to scholars of Northern Irish literature: it suggests new possibilities for studies of drama and poetry as well as fiction, and provides a useful framework through which to consider more recent writing. Magennis's focus on short stories as well as novels is unfortunately rare in discussions of contemporary fiction, and provides a model of engagement. The monograph will be equally useful, however, to scholars from a much broader range of disciplines. Magennis provides an example of engaged, responsive, and personal criticism which more scholars should emulate. Great care is taken to ensure that the argument is clear to all readers, and always rooted in the texts under discussion. There is little if any separation between scholarly and creative pursuits: indeed, one of the book's chief merits is its suggestion that all writing emerges from and through bodies, and that those bodies are always contextualised and placed. Magennis writes, that is, as if literary criticism matters. This should not be a surprise, of course, and yet the sense of passionate personal engagement that is apparent throughout the book is a welcome development.

As Magennis notes several times, much of this book was written and edited during the recent pandemic lockdown. For many scholars this has been a period not only of general anxiety, but professional anxiety as well. Many of us have had conversations wondering if we were doing enough to show why literature mattered, or if criticism was a solipsistic pursuit. *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* provides an excellent example of a way forward: it is fundamentally a communitarian project, reaching out to scholars, authors, and readers from a variety of perspectives and experiences to begin

a new conversation. The volume makes a significant contribution to our understanding not only of emergent themes in contemporary writing, but also of how critical writing is a form of engagement. Magennis's work is an invitation for new voices, critical and creative, and new ways of thinking, and will be enjoyed by many readers.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**Reference**

Caldwell L. (2021) *Intimacies: Eleven More Stories*, London: Faber.

