



*Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, edited by Liam Harte and Michael Parker. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 271. \$49.95 cloth.

This is a collection of a dozen essays, by as many different scholars, on Irish fiction (mostly novels) since about 1960, particularly of the 1980s and 1990s, with some references back to earlier parts of the twentieth century. On the one hand, as perhaps with any such collection, it is a diverse rather than unified book, with some essays stronger and more interesting than others, as detailed below. On the other hand, more specifically than the generic title on its cover, this book slants in a particular direction and, co-published and edited by Macmillan in London, it might as well have been subtitled something like "British and Irish scholars do theory." With the sole exception of one Canadian, it appears from the contributors' notes that these are natives of Ireland and Britain (teaching mostly on that side of the Atlantic), giving the book a fairly inward-looking cast that seems slightly odd in this increasingly globalized age. Even more specifically, the editors and several of their fellow contributors seem to have emerged out of the Raymond Williams school of British cultural studies (though some contributors have different orientations). The earnest determination here to "do theory" is reflected in the book's subtitle—the word "tropes" does not invite the general reader—and the very dense, British-styled notes attached to the essays. This is not a book destined to make contemporary Irish fiction more accessible to a wider readership; these are specialist critics talking only to other specialist critics. While they discuss quite a few authors, the editors admit in their introduction that this collection is in no way comprehensive; for example, it does not discuss William Trevor, one of the most important contemporary Irish novelists.

The feminist essays in this collection are among its strongest contributions. "Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction" is a detailed, searching study by Ann Owens Weekes, a pioneering scholar of Irish women writers. This essay is distinguished by the wide sweep of her historical knowledge. After outlining the relevant contexts of the misogynist Irish Free State and the points of view of such earlier authors as O'Casey, Kate O'Brien, and Somerville and Ross, Weekes focuses on Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston, and Clare Boylan, working her way from Lavin's *Mary O'Grady* (1950) all the way to Johnston's *The Illusionist* (1995). She concludes that these writers "have given voice to their own, but not to their mothers' generation" (121), finding new freedom for themselves but leaving the women of the earlier Free State—which was anything but free for women—essentially voiceless.

Whereas Weekes concentrates on mothers and daughters, Christine St Peter's complementary essay, "Petrifying Time: Incest Narratives from Contemporary Ireland," is devoted to "father-daughter incest in Irish fiction" (125), showing how Edna O'Brien, for example, has become increasingly politicized in her attacks on that problem in such novels as *Down by the River* (1996). (Trevor may be ignored in this book, but Edna O'Brien is cited by several of the essayists.) Antoinette Quinn's chapter on Emma Donoghue examines her lesbian novels *Stir-fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995), celebrating a fresh perspective that is politicized but not doctrinaire: Donoghue refuses to "construct a monument" either "to gay pride or to gay victimization," advocating "mutual understanding and acceptance," critiquing "lesbian separatism" and bringing "the Irish lesbian novel out of the ghetto" (164).

Gender issues in male writers are given attention in this book as well. In "Re-citing the Rosary: Women, Catholicism and Agency in Brian Moore's *Cold Heaven* and John McGahern's *Amongst Women*," Siobhán Holland concludes that both these prominent novels expose "patriarchal discourses about women." And Joseph McMinn ends "Versions of Banville: Versions of Modernism," an essay that mostly emphasizes how devoted Banville has been to "art for art's sake," with a tantalizing though brief discussion of his "representation of women" (93), suggesting that "there is a self-critical kind of misogyny within Banville's fiction" (95).

Especially in view of these thoughtful discussions of gender issues, it is surprising that the editors themselves seem to be wearing blinders on gender in their own final essay, "Reconfiguring Identities: Recent Northern Irish Fiction." Despite that broad title, Harte and Parker actually limit themselves to just two novels, Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) and Bernard MacLaverty's *Grace Notes* (1997). Their attention to these two recent works' impetus toward Northern reconciliation is commendable and upbeat, but especially after reading such incisive analyses of gender issues in earlier chapters, here the reader expects Harte and Parker to mention the fact that one novel was written by a woman and the other by a man and suggest what significance that fact might hold for us. It may be very well to unify Madden and MacLaverty under the banner of a supposedly progressive new way forward for Northern Ireland, but would it not also be worth considering how gender issues play a role in their novels, especially after we have been sensitized to such issues by previous essays? These concerns were certainly brought to the editors' attention. Their selection of one female author and one male author in their own essay creates the expectation that gender would at least come up, but it never does, leaving the reader with an unfinished feeling at the end of their book.

Closely allied to Harte and Parker's essay is Richard Kirkland's "Bourgeois Redemptions: The Fictions of Glenn Patterson and Robert McLiam Wilson,"

which attends to two very recent writers in need of discussion, but is cluttered with Marxist jargon (beginning with a page of Trotsky) to the point that it becomes difficult to appreciate and see Patterson and Wilson through the tangle of Kirkland's rhetoric. A much more accessible analysis is offered by Richard Haslam in "The Pose Arranged and Lingered Over": Visualizing the 'Troubles,'" which critiques, for example, the "photographic" point of view of MacLavery's *Cal*, in which voyeurism and violence come together, thus linking gender and sectarian issues.

At this point, thinking about contemporary Irish fiction, one might imagine that it's mostly all about women and the "Troubles." But not quite. Tom Herron retreats from the North to a differently troubled Southern republic in "ContamiNation: Patrick McCabe and Colm Tóibín's Pathographies of the Republic," reading them as "articulating many of the tensions, elisions and contradictions within twentieth-century Irish politics and culture that have become the focus of revisionist attention" (171). Gerry Smyth zeroes in on Dublin, explaining how "Northside realists" such as Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle have had to overcome both the traditionally Irish pious preference for the countryside over the city and the Joycean image of a Dublin quite unlike the gritty streets of, for example, Doyle's novels. For many of us, to think "Dublin" is to think "Joyce," but Smyth rightly points out that in fact, in the case of this overgrown capital, we are now "witnessing the dissolution of the traditional idea of the city and the advent of a related but radically altered urban space for which the word 'Dublin' is no longer adequate" (21).

For many others, to be Irish is to be exiled, living and writing elsewhere, as George O'Brien perceptively considers in "The Aesthetics of Exile," which begins, "It seems only a slight exaggeration to say that without exile there would be no contemporary Irish fiction." Much like Ann Weekes's chapter, this one is informed by the spacious scope of O'Brien's analysis, which takes into account developments in Irish society and the Irish novel over time, as part of understanding the novels of John McGahern, Brian Moore, Edna O'Brien, Ian Cochrane, Colm Tóibín, and Colum McCann (among others). He concludes by quoting Joseph O'Connor: "Being an emigrant isn't just an address [. . .] it's actually a way of thinking about Ireland." O'Brien intuitively understands these writers because he is himself a southern Irish native living and teaching in America. Editor of a recent special issue of the *Colby Quarterly* on contemporary Irish fiction, he knows and cites some of the best work on the subject from both sides of the Atlantic, in this otherwise often British-focused collection of essays.

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