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Reflecting Realities in Twenty-First-Century Irish Children's and Young Adult Literature

The past four decades in Ireland have seen profound cultural, political, economic, social, sexual, and religious transformations that have propelled the country's process of reinventing itself from an inward-looking, conservative, predominantly rural, Catholic country to becoming a multicultural, metropolitan, and secular nation. The story of Irish childhood has powerfully intersected with this series of transformative events in modern Irish history. Indeed, children and the conceptualisation and treatment of childhood have been central to these transitions as well as the associated scandals which catalyzed challenges to the authority of the old order and the Catholic Church's traditional dominance. These controversies included the clerical child-abuse scandals, the Ireland-US adoption scandal, the death of Ann Lovett in 1985, the X case and subsequent landmark Irish Supreme Court ruling regarding Irish women's right to an abortion, and generations of injustices against pregnant women and girls sent to Magdalene Laundries and mother-and-baby homes. Global images of Ireland moved from 'De Valera's dream of a nation of romping, sturdy children, athletic youths and comely maidens, to one in which innocent boys and girls were incarcerated in industrial and reformatory schools where they were demeaned, abused, and brutalized';¹ locally and nationally, Irish institutions and individual citizens grappled and continue to grapple with inconvenient truths about historic and contemporary dissonances between the idealized regime of untroubled childhood innocence and the demanding social and political realities in which Irish young people live.

Childhood is constructed and mediated within a myriad of power relationships, contexts, identities, nostalgia, historical legacies, and socio-cultural forces: 'If we want to understand the way in which a culture envisions itself, we might look no further than the stories adults tell and retell to their children'.² Cultural representations of

young people and texts for young audiences are intertwined with ambivalent desires, hopes, and anxieties around the status of young people, children's agency, and the adult management of youth's radical potential. Observing the emancipatory and regulatory histories and impulses of children's literature, Kimberley Reynolds argues that these texts provide 'a curious and paradoxical cultural space... [that] is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive'.³ There has been a rich Irish tradition of writing and storytelling for children for more than three centuries with authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Jonathan Swift, Lady Mount Cashel, L.T. Meade, Padraic Colum, Sinéad de Valera, Patricia Lynch, Cathal O'Sandair, and Eilís Dillon imagining and exploring the evolution of Irish childhood. However, the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a 'vast and vivid achievement in writing for children'⁴ which accompanied the contemporaneous oscillating financial, social, and cultural expansion and contraction of Ireland and its increasing presence and confidence in international arenas during the last two decades. As Jane Elizabeth Dougherty states, 'this common trope, of an Ireland being reborn or coming of age, was matched by an outpouring of Irish maturation narratives ... [and] as the nation came of age, so too did the Irish child'⁵.

Links between the past and the present have been dominant concerns 'in much contemporary Irish writing and in Irish culture in general' yet 'the focus on the Irish past has also been accompanied by an obsession with Irish childhood'.⁶ In 1997 Robert Dunbar remarked that 'the world of Irish children's literature is a strange, complex, and fascinating place',⁷ and a distinctive aspect of Irish youth literature's strangeness and complexity then and now involves the negotiation and mediation of history alongside the potential of young people for embodying, envisioning, and enacting change. Reflecting upon developments in Irish publishing and how children's literature was increasingly engaging with change, continuity, and the realities of modern Irish society during the first decade of this century, Valerie Coghlan suggested that Irish children's literature was 'achieving a new degree of maturity— that it can be "of Ireland" while not necessarily preoccupied with a traditional Ireland'.⁸

WOMEN'S WRITING, WOMEN'S VOICES AND ENVISIONING GIRLHOOD

A key development in this recent literature 'of Ireland' has been the increasing visibility of women's writing and the interrogation of traditional representations and regimes around women's and girls' histories, voices, and lived experiences in Irish history, media, and culture. Over the last decade, the elision of Irish girls, women, and women's writing

has been challenged and defied by increased visibility, publication, public discourse, and grassroots activism around women's reproductive rights, such as the Repeal the Eighth campaign, the representation of women in Irish theatre (*Waking the Feminists*), marriage equality, and systematic gender biases in literary, cultural, and political institutions. Although there has been a long tradition of Irish women children's authors as well as a robust wave of novels during the 1980s and 1990s which explored the travails and preoccupations of girlhood (by writers such as Joan O'Neill, Marita Conlon-McKenna, Siobhán Parkinson, Elizabeth O'Hara, and Maeve Friel), 'in Irish literary tradition ... childhood has become a male genre' and 'by contrast, few readers, whether casual or scholarly, can readily name an example of the Irish literary girlhood'⁹.

In 2004 Patricia Coughlan pronounced that 'much unfinished business remains to be done in Irish psyches'¹⁰ particularly when it comes to women's narratives or those of other silenced and elided voices. During the last fifteen years, Irish youth literature has been increasingly engaged with proclaiming the importance, and advocating for due recognition, of Irish girlhoods.

There have been many works by Irish male authors of youth literature which involve girl protagonists (e.g. Aubrey Flegg's 2003 historical novel, *Wings Over Delft*, Roddy Doyle's exploration of four generations of girls and women in the 2011 novel, *A Greyhound of a Girl*, and the headstrong Valkyrie of Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant* series comprising twelve books to date). However, few of these are explicitly feminist or even pass the Bechdel test (a measure of representation of girls and women in cultural works, examining whether the work features at least two named women who talk to each other about something other than a man). A recent exception involves Peadar Ó Guilín's horror duology *The Call* (2017) and *The Invasion* (2018) which recognises the empowering importance of female relationships and presents multiple young female characters with complexity, vulnerability, and agency.

Recent years have seen a momentum of explicitly feminist and social-change-oriented publications for children and authored by Irish women. Drawing upon the centenary anniversary of Irish women's suffrage in 1918 as a platform for education and awareness-raising of all-too-often neglected or erased women's creative and cultural histories and voices, publications such as Sarah Webb and Lauren O'Neill's *Blazing A Trail: Irish Women Who Changed the World* (2018) and Siobhán Parkinson's *Rocking the System: Fearless and Amazing Irish Women Who Made History* (2018) aim to provide inspiring role models for girls, and to explicitly recognise and respect the vibrancy, diversity, and importance of girl characters and their creators. In the same year Children's

Books Ireland presented its 'Bold Girls' national project, which celebrated twenty contemporary Irish women writers and illustrators for young people, provided anti-sexist recommended reading lists promoting gender equality, and nationally advocated for girls' agency, voices, and empowerment.

Susan Cahill has argued that recent post-Celtic Tiger writing by Irish women such as Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* (2013) alert 'us to the ways in which Irish literature refuses to see or hear the teenage girl'.¹¹ Contemporary Irish women creators of young-adult (YA) literature have been especially committed to exploring and disrupting what Cahill terms the 'critical invisibility'¹² of teenage girls in Irish culture and literature. Since its emergence in the US publishing sector in the late 1960s, YA literature usually involves at least one teenage protagonist, is preoccupied with adolescent desires, anxieties, and scenarios, and is widely marketed and packaged for 12–18-year-olds rather than younger children. While YA has evolved, and issues around its classification and audience are debated (e.g. due to adults now comprising a significant proportion of readers of YA texts), narratives of 'coming of age' constitute the generally agreed markers for YA literature. Indeed, what Alison Waller has called the 'very in-betweenness or liminality'¹³ of YA literature echoes the liminality and transitional status of adolescence itself. Conceptualized as unstable, transitional, dynamic, and ostensibly naturally rebellious, adolescence is regarded as 'an othered subjectivity' with adolescents 'watched at all times for signs of "impurity", and ... scapegoated as unclean things, ejected from the social body if they are seen to make the wrong moves of identification within the webs of ideological signifiers laid before them'.¹⁴ Adolescent female bodies are subjected to even further surveillance, regulation, and adult ambivalence due to their unsettling liminal position between the borders of childhood and womanhood, purity and fertility, and innocence and experience, as well as their 'striking biopolitical potential ... [to] physically and metaphorically embody the future because their bodies will birth the next generation'.¹⁵

Although Irish YA fiction can be traced back to the 1990s, early Irish YA novels such as Margrit Cruikshank's *Circling the Triangle* (1991) were reluctant to recognise or engage with adolescent sexuality or desire: there was 'no mention of the protagonist's awareness of his body or physicality, his desires or gratifications' in that novel.¹⁶ While works such as Jane Mitchell's *When Stars Stop Spinning* (1993) did address some 'taboo' aspects of youth experience such as homelessness, violence, and drug abuse, Irish youth literature in the 1990s and 2000s was slow to recognise or address subjects such as teenage pregnancy, the realities of female embodiment, reproductive freedoms, and institutional child abuse in past and contemporary Irish society.

Marita Conlon-McKenna's 2003 historical novel set in the 1960s, *A Girl Called Blue* (the only Irish book for children to date set in a religious institution), does describe harsh aspects of this experience, 'but in deference to the age of her readers, mainly in the 10 to 13 age group, her use of the binary cruel nun/kind nun ameliorates the vicious punishments inflicted on the girls'.¹⁷

This sanitising approach and the adult desire to protect young people's 'innocence' from dark and disturbing topics and truths tends to dominate much of late twentieth-century Irish youth literature into the first millennium. Siobhan Dowd's works during this first decade of the twenty-first-century provide powerful exceptions to what Pádraic Whyte in 2011 called the 'continued refusal at a cultural level' in Irish YA fiction up to that time 'to engage with some of the more controversial subjects common to YA fiction'.¹⁸ Set in a claustrophobic Irish village in 1984, Dowd's first novel, *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006) was loosely based on a true story of teenage pregnancy, potential incest, and dead babies that rocked the country's complacency and religious hypocrisy. Dowd's posthumous novel, *Bog Child* (2008), which won the Carnegie Medal, was also set in the 1980s amidst the backdrop of the Troubles. Unsentimentally confronting the Ireland of prehistory, violations of female bodies, and the multigenerational ripple effects of trauma and violence, *Bog Child* explores borders, ideas of nation, conflict, self-sacrifice, human frailty, love, death, and the potential of redemption.

Dowd's work is no longer a rare or isolated example of confronting difficult topics in YA literature. The last decade has witnessed the emergence and success of a cohort of Irish women YA authors such as Sarah Crossan, Louise O'Neill, Deirdre Sullivan, Móra Fowley-Doyle, and Sarah Maria Griffin who continue this exploration of the nexus of power, sexuality, and adolescent female embodiment. Their works pose uncomfortable, important questions around power, abuse, trauma, misogyny, and historic as well as contemporary discriminations and violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland. For example, Louise O'Neill's best-selling novel, *Asking For It* (2015) – inspired by real-life Irish and international rape trials, sexual assaults, and misogynistic uses of social media – helped catalyse national conversations and debates in its unflinching confrontation with rape culture, slut-shaming, revenge porn, and consent. Throughout the novel, O'Neil emphasises the hypocrisies and double-standards around adolescent sexual activity and the lack of sex education available for Irish young people – a controversial issue, which the recently-designed Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme in Irish primary and secondary schools is designed to address. Her 2014 dystopian novel, *Only Every Yours*, and her 2018 novel, *The Surface Breaks*

(a feminist retelling of 'The Little Mermaid'), also address toxic masculinity, patriarchal power, and adolescent female agency.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY IRISH YOUTH LITERATURE AND THE GOTHIC

Much of this Irish women's YA writing engages with the Gothic, understandably so, considering Catherine Spooner's assertion that 'the body at the centre of many contemporary Gothic narratives is definitively an adolescent one'.¹⁹ There has been a long Gothic tradition in Irish literature with contemporary Irish children's authors such as Darren Shan, Derek Landy, and Peadar Ó Guilín drawing upon Gothic tropes in their explorations of childhood innocence, resilience, vulnerability, and curiosity. The Gothic's fascination with the body, unequal power relationships, family secrets, and trauma holds particular affinity with Irish youth literature when contextualised within 'the wake of successive revelations of physical, psychological and sexual abuse of children at home and in state-funded institutions' and the 'Gothic nightmare ... of fear, terror, and enforced silence' that characterised 'childhood in Ireland during the twentieth century'.²⁰ 'Teen Gothic'²¹, as Glennis Byron and Sharon Deans have termed a recent phenomenon in YA Gothic texts, possesses an intriguing potential for empowering its adolescent protagonists and for envisioning and enacting transformative change regarding inherited hegemonic norms and power relationships. Refuting Roberta Seelinger Trites's argument in her influential book, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, that although 'the surface intention of most YA novels is ostensibly to legitimize adolescence', mainstream YA fiction teaches 'adolescent readers to accept a certain amount of repression as a cultural imperative',²² teen Gothic, instead, depicts how adolescent agency and power can challenge, subvert, and successfully defy existing hegemonic power structures.

The last few years have seen a flourish of Irish YA writing that may be classified as teen Gothic along with its empowering vision of adolescent might. Three novels by Irish YA women authors (all published during 2019) particularly embody teen Gothic's capacity and commitment to bestow to the teenage reader 'an alternative viewpoint which allows them to see the world in a different way and crucially allows them to escape the didactic and instructive nature of "realist" texts':²³ Sarah Maria Griffin's *Other Words For Smoke*, Moira Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples*, and Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*. All three novels are explicitly set in and engage with Irish history and culture, and this intensifies the disturbing resonance of the violent histories and traumas that their female characters must survive. In a 2007 essay, Celia Keenan reflects on how 'all culturally

specific references' in the majority of turn of the millennium Irish youth literature had either been eliminated or rendered parodic, and she ruefully concludes that 'the local has ceded to the global'²⁴ and that this globalizing trajectory would likely continue and even intensify. These works of Irish YA 'witcherature' (literature of the fantastic with witch characters) defy that homogenizing impulse in their devoted, explicit sense of Irishness, their many Irish historical and cultural references, their details of Irish landscape and setting, and their use of Hiberno-English. Literary witches hold a 'perennial literary fascination ... [and] in a #MeToo world, where Donald Trump – a fan of the term "witch-hunt" – is US president, it is really no surprise that female writers are examining the role of the witch in new ways'.²⁵ The symbolic resonance of the witch is further intensified when merged with female adolescence, ambivalences around the potential power of teenage girls, and the backdrop of Irish histories of injustice against women and girls.

In the 'Acknowledgments' for *Other Words for Smoke*, Sarah Maria Griffin muses that 'if a whole country could be a haunted house, [she] can think of no more accurate site'²⁶ than Ireland. Like Fowley-Doyle and Sullivan's novels, *Other Words for Smokes* excavates the haunting of Ireland's past and present by institutional misogyny, the denial of female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, the Irish state's complicity with the Catholic Church, and the macabre history and legacy of mother-and-baby homes. Griffin skilfully deploys time shifts, narrative frames, and perspectives to create a lyrical anatomy of the costs of power, control, obsession, rivalry, and desire in a small Irish town which is 'pleasant, but for the disquieting presence of the old Magdalene laundry by the river ... leering history'.²⁷ A generation before the novel begins, 'some nameless girl' died 'in childbirth beneath the statue of the Virgin Mary' and the monstrous 'wrong of it tore a cut in things'²⁸ through which two monstrous supernatural predators arrive: one feeds on fear and the other on love. Griffin sensitively presents the ordeals and journeys of her queer witch characters while starkly delineating the realities of homophobia and the purity-policing of female bodies and sexualities in both 1970s and modern-day Ireland.

Similarly, sixteen-year-old Maddie, the lesbian protagonist in Deirdre Sullivan's lyrical *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*, discovers her witchcraft while grappling with internalised shame, family traumas, and living in a town where teenage girls have mysteriously gone missing for generations in the surrounding mountains: 'so many missing girls, lines and lines of them, like beads on strings.... A girl can turn into an ellipsis so easily'.²⁹ A particularly stark confrontation with Irish historical abuses and ongoing, contemporary violations of female bodies involves Maddie, her mother, and her sister encountering the list of names of all

the girls whom a supernatural predator has abducted, murdered, and mutilated across generations. The devastating list spans three and a half pages, comprising the names of women who infamously died due to Irish medical and legal institutions and whom Ireland failed, including the name of Savita Halappanavar, an Indian woman living in Ireland whose death led to the passing of the 2013 Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. Sullivan's novel, while unwavering, is also concerned with the importance of hope and ultimately presents the potential for young people to effect change on both an individual and collective level.

Moira Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples* is likewise committed to re-inscribing queer women, confronting multigenerational traumas, and repudiating Ireland's long tradition of stigmatizing and erasing non-conforming female 'bad apples'. In exploring the curse on her family tree, protagonist Deena unearths the stories of her female ancestors and traces a centuries-long familial and national trajectory of marginalization and violation of women and girls. A pivotal moment occurs when Deena and her friends spend the night in an abandoned former mother-and-baby home which uncannily combines openness and enclosure, the past and the present, destruction and the possibility for transformative change: 'the front door was open: a great black mouth.... It looked like there were building works going on during the daytime. As if they planned to tear the place down or build it up, start anew'.³⁰ After conversing with the ghosts of the young women committed there, Deena is compelled to give voice to their silenced stories, realising that 'there are no bad apples.... The curse isn't on our family.... It's on every woman in this country. Kept in shame and silence for generations. Kicked out, locked up and taken away. Their children sold in illegal adoptions; their babies buried in unmarked graves'.³¹ The teenagers agree that the only way to break this toxic cycle is to 'tell your story and the story of your family. You speak your truth. You shatter the stigma'.³² In the Author's Note, Fowley-Doyle states that this novel 'was, in part, fuelled by rage'.³³ While the novel is indeed fiery and nears being polemical at times, her protagonists successfully harness outrage and advocacy 'in order to bring necessary secrets to light, to heal wounded families, and to affect the world around them'.³⁴ The novel ends with Deena enacting feminist activism within her family and her school, coming out as a lesbian on her own terms, wearing a Pride pin, and organizing a student petition to secularize Irish education and separate church and state.

THE POTENTIAL FOR QUEER NARRATIVES AND CHALLENGING RACIAL HEGEMONIES

Although Whyte noted that representations of homosexuality 'in YA fiction in Ireland are limited'³⁵ apart from rare exceptions like

Tom Lennon's 1993 *When Love Comes To Town* (considered the first Irish YA novel to involve a gay protagonist), Irish youth literature has been demonstrating a slow but gradually increasing recognition and representation of queer identities and sexualities since the legalisation of same-sex marriage by popular vote in 2015. In addition to the queer characters in *Other Words For Smoke*, *All The Bad Apples*, and *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*, Claire Hennessy's *Like Other Girls* (2018) features a young bisexual woman facing an unplanned pregnancy, and Meg Grehan's *The Space Between* (2017) involves a teenage lesbian narrator. In Shirley-Anne McMillan's 2019 YA novel, *Every Sparrow Falling*, her queer teenage characters grapple with Northern Ireland's social and religious conservatism and homophobia, as well as the threat of reparative therapy. The youngest queer character to date in Irish youth fiction is Stevie, the eleven-year-old protagonist of Grehan's 2019 verse novel, *The Deepest Breath*, and this sensitive exploration of a child's coming-out experience offers an exciting potential for challenging heteronormativity in Irish children's literature.

As welcome as these texts and their disruptions to sexism and heteronormativity are, the population of Irish youth literature has been and continues to be overwhelmingly white and written by majority-culture authors. While there are some examples of people of colour and intersectionality in recent Irish YA fiction (for example, the biracial and bisexual Finn in Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* and Nell, the bisexual girl of colour protagonist of Griffin's 2016 debut novel, *Spare and Found Parts*), whiteness is all too often presumed and practised as 'a master signifier ... the screen against which any "other" culture is projected; it embodies the universal, making any other ethnicity the particular, the curious, the deviant'.³⁶ In her 2016 study of the pervasiveness of whiteness and the racialization of Irish identity in Celtic Tiger Irish children's fiction, Cliona Ó Gallchoir states that the 'relative silence in the field of Irish children's literature on the subject of race since 2004' is 'arguably suggestive of a lack of faith in a truly inclusive Ireland'.³⁷ This 'relative silence' of Irish youth literature is particularly significant in light of recent debates on social media and advocacy movements in UK and US youth literature publishing. Since 2014, awareness-raising campaigns and non-profit organisations such as #reflectingrealities, #weneeddiversebooks, and #ownvoices have sought to challenge white privilege, ethnocentricity, and embedded norms around gender and sexualities, and class and able-bodiedness, while seeking to promote anti-racist, intersectional, and authentic writing and illustration which respects and recognises the diverse experiences and identities of all young people. According to the 2018 *Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature* report published in September 2019, only seven percent of books feature

a Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) character and only four percent of books involve BAME characters as protagonists.³⁸

The representation of the 'new Irish', characters of colour and marginalized ethnic minorities such as Irish Travellers, in Irish youth literature is similarly troublingly deficient. While Lucy Caldwell acknowledges in her 2019 collection, *Being Various: New Irish Short Stories*, that 'it has never been more apparent' that 'Ireland is going through a golden age of writing', she describes how she would like 'to look, too, at where the new ways of Irish writing might take us' and 'to read, in future iterations of [that] anthology, stories by Polish-Irish, Syrian-Irish, Traveller voices'.³⁹ Twenty-first-century Irish youth literature, while admirably dynamic in its engagement with girlhood and increasingly evolving in its recognition of diverse sexualities, still suffers from what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas terms 'an imagination gap'⁴⁰ around race, ethnicity, and intersectionality. Acknowledging and addressing this gap would involve a committed and systematic review, re-conceptualization, and re-design of the ideologies, infrastructures, and power systems of youth publishing and youth storytelling, including the active commissioning of new stories, mentoring diverse talent, and the decolonizing of systems of reviewing, literacy education, editing, book retailing, marketing, and librarianship. As Thomas states, this radical, emancipatory process ultimately 'requires decolonizing our fantasies and our dreams'.⁴¹ Irish children's and young-adult literature to date has demonstrated an exciting and deepening potential for posing important questions around power, relationships, identities, and experiences, yet there are still more tales to tell, new storytellers to speak, and a wider range of realities to reflect.

NOTES

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