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Cherchez les femmes

Estudos de Literatura Policial



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Tana French's Crime Novels: Dublin After History

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*Thank God that's over and done with. Time to forget the past
and move on to mobile phones and shopping malls and self-
esteem.*

Kerry Hardie

The Strange Case of the Emerald Noir

The notorious popularity of crime fiction, in its multiple subgenres, has led to a steadfast if slow recognition in critical discourse. Yet, this is a matter of fierce debate: in academic contexts it is still deemed to be simple entertainment with no aesthetic value to speak of; as such, academia resists its legitimation as *literature*. Ireland is a case in point.

Irish noir, however, has enjoyed such a boost in recent years that the genre cannot be ignored by academia and what's happening in the field is worthy of note. The received knowledge speaks of a weakness, or even an absence of crime fiction,¹ in a country of copious literary production, a position that can be found summarized in Ingrid Black's assertion: «the odd literary maverick aside, it had never been a particularly popular native form» (Black 2011: 14).² As it is starting to become evident from emerging critical work, this view is highly debatable.

¹ For the purpose of this essay I shall not be discussing the other possible denominations of the genre in its multiple variations and shall be using «crime fiction» as an umbrella term.

² «Ingrid Black» is the pseudonym of Eilís O'Hanlon and Ian McConnel, a husband-and-wife writing team.

It cannot be denied that an explosion of the genre took place in the 1990s when, out of «The North», a body of serious crime novels used the Troubles as matter for a fictional reckoning with history. Indeed, the context provided ample material for treatment in this mode. Back in the 1990s I was reading *Of Wee Sweetie Mice and Men* (1996), by Colin Bateman, *Eureka Street* (1996), by Robert McLiam Wilson and Eoin McNamee's *Ressurrection Men* (1994).³ Meanwhile, in the Republic, back then no novels of this kind were getting critical attention.

When using a strict codification of the genre, Peter Tremayne⁴ is frequently mentioned as the precursor of crime fiction in the Republic. *Absolution by Murder*, the first Sister Fidelma historical mystery, came out in 1994 and Tremayne has thirty novels to his name up to the present. The series offers no doubt as to its genealogical classification and it has generated a legion of fans, gathered around the «International Sister Fidelma Society», which meets every two years, thus bearing witness to the popularity of historical crime fiction as a subgenre.⁵

If Tremayne's Fidelma does not raise problems as far as genealogical classification goes, «genre» is still to a wide degree a way of reading. As is often the case when a particular genre comes into fashion, an archeological critical work comes up with a plethora of forerunners, and there's plenty of those to be found in Irish literature. This archeology has come up with – for instance – Brehan Behan's *The Scarperer* (1963), or, even prior, Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer* (1925). It should be understood, however, that only now are these novels *read as* crime fiction: the genealogical tag emerges from the ways of reading far more than from the novels' narrative strategies, for genres are hybrid and their readings are determined by the context. Take the *Scarperer*: it is a picaresque narrative; yet, picaresque is not in fashion, and the novel does let itself be read as crime;

³ Bateman's novels are satires characterized by gallows humour. He has kept writing in a similar vein; *Belfast Confidential* (2005) is probably the better-known novel of the Dan Starkey series. McLiam Wilson – a brilliant writer – on the other hand, has moved to journalism and published no novels since 1996, much to my regret. Much the same could be said of another astounding northern Irish writer, Ronnan Bennet, whose dark novels include politically-related crime, and who has published no novels since *Zugzwang* (2006). McNamee went on to write other novels based on «true crime», namely his «Blue Trilogy»: *The Blue Tango* (2001), *Orchid Blue* (2010), and *Blue Is the Night* (2014).

⁴ Pseudonym of Peter Berresford Ellis, an historian and specialist on Celtic Culture. Born in England of an Irish father, the action of his novels take place in 7th century Ireland and his inclusion in the corpus of Irish Literature is not an issue.

⁵ For a discussion of the historical fiction subgenre, as well as the issue of genre hybridity, see Bebianno, 2001.

thus, it is *as crime* that it is recovered and addressed in the present climate.⁶ *The Informer*, on the other hand, up to now has been read as a realist novel *tout court* on the issues of war, identity and guilt. Both these and other novels are now being reread and reclassified to fit the times.⁷

One is bound to ask where to set the limits of this ever-expanding field. In fact, Irish fiction is awash with novels addressing the wars and the Troubles, whose plots quite often allow for a reclamation for crime fiction's genealogy – thus belying the received idea that such tradition was absent.

This reconfiguration process is not particular to Ireland, nor, indeed, exclusive of crime fiction: every literary piece can be retrieved and appropriated by different genre's narratives of origin, as one well knows from the story of the novel itself. Ian Campbell Ross puts the problem quite clearly:

Crime fiction has a long history. Whether that history goes back nearly two centuries or three thousand years depends, though, on how we choose to consider what exactly constitutes that body of writing. (Ross 2011: 14)

Following this line of argument, Ross goes on to give his explanation of the apparent plenty in Britain by contrast with the apparent Irish dearth: «the reasons may lie in the ways in which the critical codification of the genre took place in Britain and Ireland». (Ross 2011: 19). If one expands the genre as far as to include 19th century Gothic – as Ross does – then the Irish *corpus* of crime fiction grows exponentially. On the other hand, it should also be noted that even when using a more exacting reading grid, Ross' overview of Irish crime fiction from the 19th up to the first half of the 20th century still comes up with a significant number (see Ross: 2011, 22-28), thus proving that the received knowledge of a «scarce tradition» may well be the result of the previous absence of critical attention. There's a body of work to be excavated: «the often-forgotten Irish crime fiction of the past, which waits patiently in the shadows for its historian» (Ross 2011: 36).

A critical reading of the archeology process itself is in order; this is, however, beyond the scope in this essay. Suffice it to keep in mind the inescapable

⁶ Colin Bateman's novels could also be read as picaresque narratives.

⁷ For a long but by no means comprehensive list of authors and works which can now be read as forerunners of contemporary Irish crime fiction, see Burke 2011, «Editor's Note», pp. 9-11; and Ross 2011: 22-28.

hybridity of the literary text, its openness to different readings and accept that most crime fiction is also open for a reading in another frame. Take, for instance, Tana French's *The Likeness* (2008): it is certainly a police-procedural. We have a crime, a detective team, a list of suspects, and the narrative follows the process of building knowledge out of fragments and clues; like most crime fiction, it is built around «not knowing» and «the will to know». And yet, *The Likeness* may well be read as a «Big House Novel», a subgenre with a robust tradition in Irish Literature.

Very much the same could be said of most of Tana French's novels – and, indeed, of a fair amount of contemporary crime fiction: they're not set to formulae and the writing transgresses the boundaries of genre, which I find very satisfying, even if it is not to the liking of all readers. In a review of French's first novel, *In the Woods* (2007), Marilyn Stasio is critical of this transgression: «[French] *overburdens* the traditional police-procedural form with the weight of romance, psychological suspense, social history and mythic legend» (Stasio 2007, my italics). I would argue that the effect of transgressions of genre expectations is to open up the novels to deeper readings and deeper satisfactions for the reader – not to speak of the challenges it provides for critical work. On the other hand, there's a process of cross-pollination here, as Rosemary Johnsen well argues: «as the study of crime fiction continues to develop as an international scholarly field, the genre itself is flourishing in its interrelations with literary fiction» (Johnsen 2014: 139). Still, it's fascinating to note that Johnsen writes of «the genre» and of «literary fiction» as pieces from different cloth, thus reproducing the marginalization that she seeks to overcome.

This persistent marginalization – even if unwittingly – can be found in other critical work. For instance, writing for *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (2005), Pádraigín Riggs and Norman Vance place Colin Bateman's and Éoin McNamee's work in the genre «Troubles Novels», with no reference whatsoever to «crime fiction». Actually, most, if not all «Troubles Novels», could be placed in a wide variety of genres. But it comes as no surprise to read Caroline Magennis, in «Fiction from Northern Ireland, 1921-2015» (2018: 365-382), applying precisely this category, which renders crime fiction invisible. Using as a starting reference Kelly Craighton's *The Bones of It* (2015), Magennis writes of fiction written by women which «deals with topics more usually considered by male novelists: violence against women and the state of the paramilitary 'hard man' in the post-peace process in Northern Ireland» (2015: 378-379). It is remark-

able how the grammar of the genre is thus erased. If, as it seems, a cross-pollination between public popularity and academic legitimation is happening, both processes have different timings: scholarly work lags far behind popular acclaim. Or, in other words, the popularity does not entail immediate critical visibility (see, for instance, Johnsen 2014: 132-133).

In the recently published *Irish Crime Fiction* (2018), Brian Cliff points out the scarcity of critical work on the genre, *despite* its popular success signified in the big hit of the Irish Crime Fiction Festival, at Trinity College, Dublin, five years earlier, and a brain-child of Cliff's. Back in November 2013 attendance was free – circumstances have changed since then. «Murder One. Ireland's International Crime Writing Festival» (cf. <http://www.murderone.ie/about-murder-one>) took place in November 2018, and the ticket sale for the 2019 edition is soon to open. This event is part of the wider phenomenon of Literary Festivals which have taken root just about everywhere and are thick on the ground in both Ireland and Great Britain: crowds pay up front to see and listen to their favourite authors, in readings and interviews, and quite often events are «sold out» well in advance. In this particular field, the precursor is the «International Sister Fidelma Society Conference», whose 7th edition took place in Cashel in September 2019 (<http://www.sisterfidelma.com/main.htm>). Up north, «NOIRELAND. International Crime Fiction Festival, Belfast» is having its 2nd edition in March 2019 (<https://www.noireland.com/>), at the Europa Hotel.⁸ That Ireland has room for these many crime fiction festivals is in itself food for thought – and for the possible perception of the existence of «two Irelands», as far as crime fiction goes. Noireland is the brainchild of David Torrns, who established the «No Alibis» Bookshop, in Belfast, back in 1997.⁹ These phenomena are, however, quite recent in historical terms, and the discourse of scarce production in the Republic in the last century is still very much in place, and true up to some point; as always, there's an attempt to explain the phenomenon.

⁸ The Europa Hotel is famous for being «the most bombed hotel in the world» (36 attacks during the Troubles). I should add that the North is banking on its violent past and «war tourism» is going strong.

⁹ The resilience of this Belfast bookstore exclusively dedicated to crime fiction deserves to be noted and it has contributed to the vitality of the genre in the North. On the other hand, «Murder Ink,» famous bookstore in Dawson Street, Dublin, closed down in 2010, another victim of the migration of fiction to big companies – and, one should add, to digital support. The bookstore «No Alibis» is the setting of Colin Bateman's *Mystery Man* (2009), a crime fiction comedy which is also a homage to David Torrns.

In an article published in *The Irish Times*, on the 21st November 2009, cultural critic Fintan O'Toole argued that such scarcity was due to the absence of great urban spaces and of an economical situation friendly to this kind of fiction. Thus, the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s,¹⁰ with its economic boom and correlated increase in gang-related crime, would explain the emergence of the genre. O'Toole's argument is quite seductive; yet, as a cultural journalist, he's not obliged to sustain his argument as academics are supposed to – and I find it difficult to sustain it. After all, crime stories are not dependent on urban spaces or, indeed, the actual existence of organized crime. O'Toole comes up with yet another explanation, again very seductive: due to the smallness of the communities, including Dublin, until the second half of the 20th century, anonymity – a supposed requirement for the mystery – was impossible: everyone knew everyone else and everything that was happening (cf. O'Toole 2011). Again, this is not sustainable, given that quite a lot of crime fiction is set in small communities, Andrea Carter's contemporary mysteries, set in Inishowen, being a case in point (see Carter 2018). I would also add that provincial Dublin of the 1950s has provided Benjamin Black – aka John Banville – with plenty of material for his Quirke series.¹¹

Underlying O'Toole's argument is the idea that crime fiction is necessarily born of the material conditions of the community – as if crime fiction were not *fabulation*, but a kind of *document*, obliged to the same veracity one requires of the social sciences. O'Toole unwittingly forgets that even realist fiction is, first and foremost, *fiction*. I would argue that it is fiction which produces more fiction: mimesis happens between texts and is not dependent on social reality for its existence. One needs not to go further than the «whodunnit» of the English country house or small community to see the frailty of the argument. Or take the «Nordic Noir»: now very much in fashion and having contributed to the boom of the «Emerald Noir», it certainly did not arise out of the urban problems

¹⁰ The term «Celtic Tiger» was first coined by the economist Kevin Gardiner, in 1994, when comparing Ireland's economic boom to the «Asian Tigers» economies. It has since gained currency in all fields.

¹¹ Black's Quirke is a ruthless reckoning with de Valera's Ireland and a string of (true) crimes committed by Church and State. Particularly poignant are *Christine Falls* (2006), which addresses abortion and the adoption-ring, controlled by the Catholic Church, of children born out of wedlock; and *Holy Orders* (2013), featuring the sexual abuses visited upon institutionalized children by men of the cloth. Unsurprisingly, the crimes of the Church also feature in quite a few novels by other authors, such as Jo Spain's *With Our Blessing* (2015) and Claire McGowan, *The Lost* (2013).

of Oslo, Stockholm or Copenhagen. Long before it took off this century, much due to the global success of Stieg Larson's *Millenium* trilogy (2005-2007) (see Bergman, 2014), Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö had written the now famous Martin Beck's series, starting with *Roseanna*, first published in 1965.¹²

On the other hand, one of the possible partial explanations for the relative scarcity of crime fiction in Ireland until the 1990s might be the cultural isolation of the country up until the 1970s, under the strict citizen's control and invigilation by a rather conservative state in cohorts with the Catholic Church.¹³ The list of prohibited publications in the «Censorship of Publications Act» of 1929 addresses the expected issues – «indecent or obscene or (...) advocated the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage or the use of any method, treatment or appliance for the purpose of such prevention or such procurement» – but also publications which «devoted an unduly large proportion of space to the publication of matter relating to crime». This, of course, covered crime fiction magazines, mostly from the United States of America, easily affordable and instrumental for the propagation of the genre.¹⁴

It's highly possible that the «scarcity» discourse results from the absence of legitimation – and that's where the universities have a role to play. The first university course on crime fiction was created precisely by Ian Campbell Ross, in the School of English, at Trinity, in 1990, in the face of the hostility of the Department (Meier and Ross 2014: 11).¹⁵ Almost three decades later, critical studies are still thin in the field, as Cliff claimed as recently as 2018. It's worth to take a look at what's happening.

From an overview of recent essays covering crime, two trends emerge: there's plenty on true crime but far less on fiction; there's little critical discourse, as

¹² Published in Portuguese translations by Caminho, in the 1990s.

¹³ Article 44.1. of the Irish Republic's Constitution of 1937 stated in no uncertain terms: «The State recognizes the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of citizens». This section was deleted by the Fifth Amendment of The Constitution Act 1972, following a referendum.

¹⁴ See list in «Censorship of Publications Acts, 1929 to 1967 Register of Prohibited Publications», available in the Republic of Ireland's Ministry of Justice website: <http://www.justice.ie/en/JEI.R/Registrar%20of%20Prohibited%20Publications%202012.pdf/Files/Registrar%20of%20Prohibited%20Publications%202012.pdf> (Access: December 2018).

¹⁵ As an undergraduate of Anglo-American Studies, at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, I took a course in crime fiction as early as the academic year 1981-1982. In November 2000, Gonçalo Vilas-Boas and Maria de Lurdes Sampaio hosted the «Encontro de Literatura Policial» at the University of Oporto, to the best of my knowledge, the first academic event in the field to take place in Portugal.

compared to fans' or authors testimonials. Looking at *The Sister Fidelma Mysteries. Essays on the Historical Novels of Peter Tremayne*, edited by Edward J. Kielley and Robert David Wooten in 2012, for instance, one finds that there's plenty of essays written by amateurs while literary criticism is absent. On the other hand, *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (2011), edited by Declan Burke, includes two very useful critical essays. Apart from these, however, the volume includes only interviews and personal narratives by authors – mostly men – on the process of writing, as well as short-stories. I find also significant that Niamh O'Connor, crime reporter, author of true crime reports and also crime novelist, for this volume has chosen to write about true crimes.¹⁶ Burke may well be right when he writes, in his introduction to the volume: «for the most part Irish crime writers are more celebrated outside of Ireland than they are at home» (2011:10). In 2014, the journal *Éire-Ireland* had a special issue dedicated to «Irish Crime Scene since 1921». Of its nine essays only three address fiction – one of which only partially – while most deal with law, history and crime journalism, covering petty criminality, sexual crimes and the political violence in the context of the Troubles. This can be taken as yet another evidence of the frailty of the critical work.

Along with the occasional essay, *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, a collection edited by Elizabeth Manion, as well as Brian Cliff's 2018 monograph, *Irish Crime Fiction*, may well indicate that the tide is turning in academia – possibly riding the Nordic Noir market phenomenon. The word is that it was Val McDermid, awarded Scottish author, who coined the expression «Emerald Noir»,¹⁷ a variation of the now very popular «Nordic Noir», of which I am also a fan. It is a brand that sells, yet I would tend to agree with Declan Burke's caution, back in 2014: «'Emerald Noir' is unlikely to ever rival 'Nordic Noir' as a global phenomenon (...).»¹⁸ Four years later, his reading is still to be disproved.

¹⁶ O'Connor's detective, DI Jo Birmingham, a divorced mother of two, gives material for a good discussion of feminist rewriting of characters – (cf. O'Connor 2010) – not the aim of this essay.

¹⁷ McDermid came up with «Celtic Crime», «Hibernian Homicide» and «Emerald Noir»; the last one stuck, perhaps due to the «Nordic Noir» resonance. See McDermid in interview to Gerard O'Donovan for *The Telegraph*, in 8th March 2011: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8368248/Val-McDermid-why-Irish-crime-fiction-is-all-the-rage.html> (Access: January 2019).

¹⁸ In <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/book-reviews/emerald-noirs-genrebending-take-on-the-crime-novel-30726270.html>. (Access: December 2018). The comparison has now entered the lingo: Johnsen is a case in point, putting it in terms of «one route to an international influence» (2014:139).

If not in the critical work, a glimpse in bookshops or crime festivals' programmes prove the prolixity and variety of contemporary Irish crime. Anyone familiar with Irish literature – and, indeed, with Irish literary criticism – will acknowledge that there is an excess of identity-focused writing, and it seems that discussion on crime is no exception. In her interview with Tana French, Claire Coughlan claims:

The explosion of crime fiction in Ireland in recent years has coincided with a new appraisal of what it means to be Irish, which in turn has seen the genre occupy a more central position on the Irish literary spectrum. (Coughlan 2011: 341)

Could it be that this obsession with Irishness is yet little more than *a way of reading*? As Black puts it hilariously, «in Ireland [...] national traits are cultivated the way some countries grow rhubarb» (Black 2011: 12), and goes on to praise the new writing coming out because «freed from the tyranny of authenticity» (*idem*: 15).

In such cases a view from the outside might be helpful. In the «Foreword» to *Down These Green Streets*, American bestseller crime novelist Michael Connelly states: «But then I started reading the stories and the essays and I came to realize there is a universal language in the crime story. What Tana French does in Dublin I try to do in Los Angeles. (...) We're all in this together and there is only the language of storytelling» (Connelly 2011: 12). This statement makes perfect sense: if novelists use «the matter of Ireland» for their stories, that does not make «Irishness» the issue. Again, looking from the outside, I find Irishness problematized only in a few stories set in the North and which deal with the history of the Troubles and its aftermath – Brian McGilloway's Benedict Devlin and Lucy Black series would be a case in point. Apart from a few exceptions, even when documenting the changes in Irish contemporary society – north and south of the border – crime fiction has moved beyond the obsession with identity to focus on issues that pertain to all humans anywhere, such as how to survive poverty and personal loss.

One could make a case for «class» as a central issue in recent crime fiction. While the rural poor and the urban middle-class occupy the heart of 20th century Irish fiction, it could be claimed that the contemporary urban working-class has his writer in Roddy Doyle, most famously in his Barrytown Trilogy, three novels adapted into movies that had great impact in the 1990s: *The Commitments*

(1987, film 1991); *The Snapper* (1990, film 1993); *The Van* (1991, film 1996). However, this trilogy is a pastoral,¹⁹ given that even if the characters have fierce fights, it's still a family connected by love and a sense of loyalty to the clan. Furthermore, the Rabbittes, a working-class family from Dublin, are «great crack», as the Irish idiom goes. There's no such romance in Tana French's portrait of Dublin's working class.

Cherchez la femme: Irish Women Crime Writing

The last decades have seen a strong international movement in self-conscious feminist criticism which has both promoted contemporary women's writing as well as reclaimed writing by women of the past, thus reconfiguring national literature canons. I won't be going into this here: the specialized literature is abundant. Suffice it to say that this movement is very strong in Irish Literature. Crime fiction, understood as a male genre, particularly in the hard-boiled American tradition, has been addressed from a feminist perspective, which includes the reclaiming of women writers for the canon as well as critical work on novels understood to comprise feminist rewritings of the tradition (see Peach 2006; Munt 2005). It is my perception, however, that in Ireland crime fiction written by women has largely been kept in a ghetto.

Irish feminist rewriting of the canon has its stronger and symbolical referent in the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature, Vols 4 & 5: Women's Writings and Traditions* (2002). Two thick volumes which were more than a decade in the making, they sought to redress women's absence in the literary canon, only too apparent in the previous (also thick) three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, a huge project coordinated by Seamus Deane (see Bourke 2002; and Deane 1990). Crime fiction, however, is excluded from this extensive work with the ambition of being all-inclusive. Furthermore, as scholars well know, apart from providing useful cartographies for different fields, anthologies are powerful tools to promote literary work: one quite often firstly comes across an author in an anthology – not to speak of the fact that they are quite useful for teaching and, thus, assured promotion of authors. On the other

¹⁹ It must be said, however, that Doyle's latter novels *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *Paula Spencer* (2006), are far darker and deconstruct the romance of the working class.

hand, critical surveys are also useful for teaching and also powerful tools: they set what is to be remembered and what forgotten. Having said this, it should be noted that crime fiction is absent from *A History of Irish Women's Literature*, edited by Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir as recently as 2018.

Or almost absent. In fact, Susan Cahill's essay for this volume, significantly titled «Celtic Tiger Fiction,» includes a section under the symptomatic head «Chick Lit and Crime Fiction» (Cahill 2018: 437-439). The coupling is noteworthy because, if crime fiction is on probably the way out of being labeled «trash,» certainly not the same can be said of «Chick Lit.»²⁰ Also of note is the title of the immediately following section in Cahill's essay, «Aesthetic Creation». The critic thus opposes – perhaps unwittingly – the trashy subgenres to literature «proper», showing how legitimization is a long way off. Cahill puts in a good word for Tana French (cf. p. 438), by linking her with recognized «serious» authors such as Anne Enright and Éilís Ní Dhúibhne; it should be noted, however, that this is written by way of a critical essay by Shirley Peterson, which goes to show the importance of critical work done from *within* the field by recognized scholars (cf. Peterson 2016).²¹

It goes without saying that writing by women authors is not necessarily «feminist» – nor does it need to be. Yet, there is quite a number of women writing crime fiction who need to be made visible but do not need greater scrutiny than male writers. The list is long, comprising both excellent and indifferent novels sprouting in response to a growing market. Without aiming at being exhaustive I would name Andrea Carter, Arlene Hunt, Catriona King, Claire McGowan, Gemma O'Connor, Jane Casey, Jo Spain, Kelly Creighton, Liz Nugent, Niamh O'Connor and Tana French. A visit to sites concerning the genre does provide far more names; yet, as expected, not everyone riding the wave provides sufficient pleasure in the reading and it is the responsibility of critical work to value good writing. One of the arguments for discrediting crime fiction is that it is just «formula writing,» providing for the modest pleasure of «reading for plot». Simple repetition may satisfy most readers; however, the legitimization of the genre as literature requires looking beyond it. Repetition makes for boring reading – and literature, even «entertainment literature» is not in the business

²⁰ One of the many crime fiction subgenres now exant might be called «Crime chick lit», Sinéad Crowley's D S Claire Boyle series being an example. See Crowley 2014.

²¹ It must be said that Peterson (2016) also reads French's work as emerging out of the post-Celtic Tiger, a reading which I find rather limiting.

of boring; «good writing» – that elusive category – must be driven by character and work on language as well as plot. If formula books are defined by plot, what makes a «genre book» literature is the development of character. I would claim that it is also what makes it transnational, in the sense that it is a representation of the human in all its complexities, even if the material social circumstances of the characters are diverse and linked to a specific time and place.

Labeling a novel as «feminist» is also an ambiguous issue. Johnsen's claim that «[Gemma] O'Connor's feminism is notably absent from French's work» (Johnsen 2014: 126-127) is highly arguable. I take as «feminist» the figuration of characters and of power relations that question gender stereotypes and provide positive role models for women, that is, «feminist» in the sense that they reconfigure femininity and masculinity. Thus, Claire McGowan's Detective Paula Maguire is an example of feminist rewriting of characters. Paula has a set of behaviours that might be characterized as «male»: a single 30-year-old woman with no children, who left her hometown in the borders for Dublin and then London, traumatized by the Troubles, the disappearance of her mother and a love story gone wrong, Paula is no «lady». One might even say that she behaves «disgracefully»: she can't cook or keep her fridge stocked, she drinks pints of Guinness with the lads and does not fear physical confrontations. Last but not least – and because the codes of sexual behaviour are still the rule of thumb to distinguish the male and the female of the species – when she has one-night stands, she can't wait for the man to be gone in the morning with no necessity of small talk or of feeding him breakfast, a typical male character behaviour.²² This simple gender inversion of characters can be found in feminist rewritings across genres²³ and it is recognizably «feminist» in the sense that it reconfigures women. It has a long tradition in crime fiction: Sara Paretsky's Chicago private eye V.I. Warshawski has been doing the rounds since 1982 (see Paretsky 1982). In this sense, Tana French's novels are feminist; they are, however, far more concerned with problematizing the human in general – our fears and desires, hopes and despairs, the daily concerns that happen to be set in Dublin but could also be called our own in another place.

²² See, for instance, *The Lost* (2010), the first book in the series.

²³ Feminist rewriting of fairy-tales would be a case in point. See Bebiano 2013.

Tana French: Dublin After History

What follows is not a spoiler: I won't be addressing plot.

The received knowledge is that crime fiction, particularly in its police-procedural subgenre, is a privileged form of social analysis and critique. Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad novels are read in precisely this way by Claire Coughlan (2011), Rosemary Erickson Johnsen (2014) and Shirley Peterson (2016), critics who stress the depiction of the Celtic Tiger and of the following recession in the discussed novels. However, I would claim that while the events take place in these recognizable contexts, they fall second place to other issues. For instance, *Broken Harbour's* abandoned new housing estate, and Whitethorn House, the «Big House» in *The Likeness*, are related to Ireland's property boom and its collapse, featuring its victims and their anxieties; yet this is merely the *setting* and not the *focus* of the novels. Actually, in all novels of the series, the crimes committed are never socially or economically motivated: on the contrary, in each and every case they are deeply personal. Thus, the novels address the complexity of the human, rather than the material conditions and the social dynamics they inhabit.

French has published six Dublin Murder Squad novels so far: *In the Woods* (2007); *The Likeness* (2008); *Faithful Place* (2010); *Broken Harbour* (2012); *The Secret Place* (2014); and *The Trespasser* (2016), each set in a different milieu and addressing a human emotion – jealousy, fear, loss, thirst for revenge, love gone wrong. What makes Tana French stand out amongst contemporary Irish women crime fiction writers²⁴ is the complexity of her characters, both the protagonist detectives as well as the perpetrators of the crimes. Her plots take a backstage part: they are even difficult to follow, when not highly implausible. No knowledge of the genre, deep that it might be, does make room for the reader to guess who did the killing – or the reason thereof. Both reader and protagonist detective are left in the dark until the very end and the solution – when it comes – is far from satisfying because there's no rational explanation: the motives lie in the killers', emotions, quite often involving delusion. If there is a pattern to French's Dublin Murder Squad Series it's the emotional root and the irrationality of the murders committed as well as of its perpetrators, thus frustrating the

²⁴ Living in Ireland for a number of years, French was actually born in the United States of America; her inclusion in the Irish *corpus* is consensual.

search for knowledge that, according to Todorov, characterizes the genre (Todorov 1981: 72-73). The process of looking for truth governs the plot, as is the convention; however, the solutions do not rely on «proof», but on the confessions of the killers, which leave room for reasonable doubt. Characters lie – a characteristic of the genre – but the detective protagonists also lie; they are unreliable narrators. Furthermore, the multiplicity of the narrative voices adds to the difficulty of perceiving what «really happened».

What we find here is rather distant from the political gangs of the fiction set in the north, as well as from the economic gangs south of the border: we're faced with the banality of both victims and perpetrators. When a body is found in a ruined house in the Liberties – *Faithful Place* – or in the grounds of a posh school – *The Secret Place* – or in a Victorian terrace house – *The Trespasser* – or in a new housing estate – *Broken Harbour* –, it is not economics or the material circumstances in which the characters live which explain it: it all gets down to love and hate – but mostly, love.

Rob Ryan, Cassie Madox, Frank Mackey, Stephen Moran, Mick «Scorcher» Kennedy and Antoinette Conway are the detective protagonists and voices in which we are told the stories. Other *gardai* cross the path of the narrative, but they hold simple roles, such as Roche, whose function is that of the «sexist pig» who pesters his female colleagues to see if they can «take the heat» (French 2016: 114). Or such has been his role, so far – it might well change in further novels. As it happens, each novel is told in a different voice and from a different perspective; thus, we get to know the characters from the outside at a certain point and might well be surprised when we get to know them from the inside in another novel, narrated in their own voice. For instance, Mick «Scorcher» Kennedy, the star detective of the squad, is disliked by most, and Frank Mackey deems him a «narcissist» in *Faithful Place*; in *Broken Harbour*, however, told from his perspective, Kennedy turns out to be a kind human being who takes loving care of his demented sister, Dina, and who reveals deep empathy for the characters at the center of the tragedy of the novel, including the one who turns out to be the murderer.

In the case of Mick Kennedy, the secret involves the traumatic experience of his mother's suicide when he was a child; personal trauma is also present in the childhood of Rob Ryan, the narrating voice of *In the Woods*. However, if not all the characters have had traumatic experiences,²⁵ all have secrets and personal

²⁵ In «Voicing the Unspeakable: Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad» (2016), bringing in both trauma

demons to live with. Antoinette Conway longs for her unknown father; Frank Mackey's perfect bourgeois life hides a past in a working class neighbourhood and a violent father; Cassie Madox is perhaps the darker and most elusive subject – not by accident, she works Undercover –, and her secret is yet to be disclosed.

The (fictional) Dublin Murder Squad is the elite of the *Garda Síochána* – the Republic of Ireland's police corps – only surpassed in status by the Undercover Unit. Throughout the six novels, the group of men and women that comprise the squad is fairly stable, with the occasional rookie coming in and the occasional drop-out unable to sustain the pressure – Richie Curran, in *Broken Harbour*, is a case in point. What I find remarkable is that to be accepted in the Murder Squad is presented as the ambition of every *garda*, signifying social promotion and an escape from the city's council estates, a strategy that places class and social mobility issues as the axis of the novels.

Antoinette, Moran and Mackey hail from «the wrong side of the river» – North Dublin – and police work grants an escape from the council houses; yet they represent different attitudes towards class and the social structure. The differences are seen at its best in *The Secret Place*, involving the murder of a sixteen-year old boy at St. Colm, an upper-class school for boys, and its neighbor and correspondent for girls, St. Kilda. The case is assigned to Steve Moran – the narrator – and Antoinette Conway. On arriving at St Kilda for the first time, Moran's thoughts tell us of the class difference, but also of his ambivalence and longing to belong:

Maybe I should have hated it. Community-school me, classes in run-down prefabs; keep your coat on when the heating went every winter, arrange the geography posters to cover the mould patches, dare each other to touch the dead rat in the jacks. Maybe I should have looked at that school and wanted to take a shite in the portico. It was beautiful. I love beautiful; always have. I never saw why I should hate what I wish I had. Love it harder. Work your way closer. Clasp your hands around it tighter. Till you find a way to make it yours. «Look at that», said Conway. Leaning back in her seat, eyes narrow. «This is the only time I'm sorry I'm a cop. When I see a shitpile like this and I can't petrol-bomb it to fuck». (French 2014: 35)

theory as well as postcolonial theory, Shirley Peterson reads all of French's novels as «trauma narratives»: «These police procedurals illustrate how the detective genre can express, through both subject and narrative method, the destabilizing influence of trauma on both individual and communal levels» (108). To my mind, this reading is contrived, and is an example of the influence of post-colonial criticism in contemporary Irish literary studies.

Where Moran sees beauty and something to aspire to, Conway sees the other side, the enemy, something she not only does not wish to access herself but wishes to «petrol-bomb it to fuck». Language is significant here: foul language is a common device to characterize working class people, and one which French uses; it's also part of the conventional «police talk». However, neither Moran nor Mackey make use of it, thus distancing themselves from their class or origin; on the other hand, Conway uses it frequently, claiming and asserting her roots. In *The Secret Place*, it's also part of the gender role inversion, her toughness contrasting with Steve Moran's mildness and politeness, in the line of the feminist rewriting of characters.

If there's a dimension of social realism in French's novels, it's in the way class and social mobility is portrayed. In this process, access to education has replaced the possession of land – central to 20th century Irish fiction – as the main asset for ambitious young people, with the «Leaving Cert» as the threshold and the symbolical first goal to be achieved. In *The Trespasser*, where we find that Antoinette is the mixed-race daughter of a single mother who chars for a living, we are told:

That lasted till I was twelve and got detention for something, and got an earful from my ma about how she wasn't having me end up like her, with no Leaving Cert and no hope of anything but minimum-wage. (French 2016: 1)

While Conway's voice comes out as a ranting, in *The Secret Place* Steve Moran, her partner, tells a very similar story as an achievement, something to be proud of:

Two years behind me, in training. Got out of uniform one year behind. Made Murder the same time I made Cold Cases. Cold Cases is good. Very bleeding good for a guy like me: working-class Dub, first in my family to go for a Leaving Cert instead of an apprenticeship. (French 2014: 14)

Also noteworthy is that «the other side» of the class divide is signified by the posh schools for teenagers, but also by Trinity College, which comes up in the PhD students inhabiting the Big House in *The Likeness*, as well as in the geography referred to by Mackey in *Faithful Place*, set in The Liberties, a self-conscious working-class area with its own ethos: «it's a ten-minute walk from Trinity Col-

lege and the snazzy shopping on Grafton Street, but back in my day, we didn't go to Trinity and the Trinity types didn't come up our way» (French 2010: 19).

Education is represented as the only chance for social mobility, but it comes at a price, as exemplified in Frank Mackey's case. It's a rather common story: the sacrifice of the older siblings so that the younger could get a chance, as explained by Shay, Frank's older brother:

What makes you any smarter? Just because me and Carmel were out of school the second we turned sixteen? Did you think that was because we were too thick to stay? Shay was leaning forward, hands clenched on the edge of the table, and there was a patchy fever-red flush coming up on his cheekbones. «It was so we'd be putting our wages on the table when Da wasn't. So you could eat. So the three of you could buy your schoolbooks and your little uniforms and get your Leaving Certs». «(...) 'Without me, you wouldn't be a cop today. You'd be nothing. You thought I was just mouthing off when I said I'd die for family? I damn near did it. I lost my education. I gave up every chance I had'». (*idem*: 139)

The working-class ethos implies «to die for family», even when family kills (and it does). Family dynamics and the complexity of feelings between siblings, as well as between parents and children are an important feature in all novels, setting them in an uncertain geography: it may be Dublin, but one quite often forgets it's Dublin; it could be anywhere where people breed, and love seems never to be enough to go around.

«Crime» comes in many forms. Arlene Hunt's novels, for instance, focus on contemporary criminal phenomena, such as human trafficking, fictionalized in *Undertow* (2008). In this kind of novels «bad guys» are set apart from «normal» people and crime can be identified and fought, if not eradicated. In Tana French, it is the «normal» people who commit crimes, both petty crime and the gross killings at the center of the plots. The Liberties are no strangers to crime, as Frank Mackey makes clear:

Cops like me are the reason why you never get posted where you're from. If you want to get technical, everyone I grew up with was probably a petty criminal, one way or another, not out of badness but because that was how people got by. Half the Place was on the dole and all of them did nixers, specially when the beginning of the school year was coming up and the kids needed books and uniforms. (*idem*: 34)

Working class neighbourhoods have a history of resistance to the state and law, as clearly expressed when neighbours gather for a drink under different pretexts: «the crowd settled down, gradually, and started swapping police-brutality stories and discussing whether Mr Daly could sue» (*idem*: 94). Swapping stories is another important feature in these novels, where certainties are few and open to be disproved by another voice, sometimes in another novel further down. Knowing that all characters lie, and that the quest for knowledge is bound to be a failure, all we're left with are the stories, in their multiplicity, as the lucid voice of Antoinette Conway tells us towards the end of *The Trespasser*:

Another story. None of the rest were true straight through, not one. Victims, witnesses, killers, Ds, all frantically spinning stories to keep the world the way they want it, dragging them over our heads, stuffing them down our throats (...). (French 2016: 454)

«Another story» has replaced «history», in this and other novels. Stories help us making sense of our lives – and it must suffice.

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