

Jacek MYDLA

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE WEANS
A Survey of Troubled Procreation and Hope
in the Contemporary Northern Irish Mystery Thriller*

Northern Irish authors are keen on making their detectives, many of whom have families with children, alive to a sense of duty and obligation to protect the vulnerable and bring to justice those who have violated their rights. Though there are many crime thrillers in the world where the family life of the detective, if it exists at all, is decoupled from the wider social and criminal abuse of women and children, the risk to which Irish detectives expose their families and the protection they feel compelled to offer them seems notable in the frequency of its appearance as one of the main themes in the plots.

In this article I look at a selection of novels which represent the genre of the mystery thriller, with the aim of seeing how they treat the ideas of maternity and childbearing, and whether those ideas can be related to that of hope. For the literary material, I have chosen contemporary Northern Irish novels, where—for a number of reasons—mothers and children figure prominently. More specifically, I will concentrate on the theme of unwanted pregnancy in three of Claire McGowan's novels. So far, none of her six novels in the Paula Maguire series have been translated into Polish, which is all the more reason to discuss them in a Polish journal.

Perhaps, before we examine the fiction, it is worthwhile to note that the Polish language suggests a connection between pregnancy and hope, namely, in an expression commonly used to describe pregnancy: “być przy nadziei,” i.e., “to be in a hopeful state,” “to be expecting.” The expression suggests that the birth of a child shapes the future in a literal sense; after all, procreation carries the suggestion of pushing life forward, and not only the life of the parents, but also the life of the community and the nation. In McGowan's novels, which feature a female investigator who herself carries the burden of unplanned pregnancy, and thus of choice, there may be little room for unwavering optimism. On the contrary, figures of pregnant women, and of women for whom pregnancy is an issue fraught with significance that goes beyond

* I owe a debt of gratitude to Anne Keithline, with whom I spent multiple hours reading and discussing the novels prior to the submission, and who then helped me give the text a thorough revision, following the reviewers' suggestions.

the personal dimension, become, as it were, nuclei of conflict and they do not simply because the genre thrives on conflict, but also and primarily because of the larger Northern Ireland context, which McGowan has chosen for the setting.

In the first part of this article, I will examine chosen examples of the fictional treatment of the above-mentioned themes in four contemporary male Northern authors: Adrian McKinty (born in Belfast in 1968), author of the Sean Duffy thrillers¹ (among them *The Cold Cold Ground*,² *Rain Dogs*,³ and *Police at the Station and They Don't Look Friendly*⁴); Stuart Neville (born in Armagh in 1972), author of *The Ghosts of Belfast* (aka *The Twelve*)⁵ and the Jack Lennon thrillers (among them *Collusion*⁶ and *Stolen Souls*⁷); Brian McGilloway (born in Derry in 1974), author of the DI Benedict Devlin mysteries (among them *Borderlands*,⁸ *Gallows Lane*,⁹ and *The Nameless Dead*¹⁰) and the DS Lucy Black mysteries (among them *Little Girl Lost*¹¹). In the main part of this article, I will discuss the first three Paula Maguire novels by author Claire McGowan (born in Rostrevor, County Down, in 1981): *The Lost*,¹² *The Dead Ground*¹³, and *The Silent Dead*.¹⁴ Even though in the male novelists' work childbearing and children characteristically play a major, and in some cases a crucial, role, it is McGowan who gives procreation—and specifically unplanned and unwanted pregnancy—a prominent position, which has to do with the fact that the main protagonist, forensic psychologist Dr Paula Maguire, personally struggles with the issue of unplanned pregnancy, a situation which places her in the very midst of the choice debate.

With the exception of McKinty, the above-named novelists depict post-Good-Friday-Agreement (1998) Northern Ireland, a world which has its prom-

¹ The term 'mystery thriller' is more capacious than 'crime novel.' In the mystery thriller, the culprit may remain criminally active for almost the entire duration of the investigation. The discovery of the victim's body, which triggers an investigation, does not stop the culprit, and we can expect another murder. Even so, the two basic activities—crime and detection—remain separate.

² See Adrian McKinty, *Cold Cold Ground* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012).

³ See Adrian McKinty, *Rain Dogs* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015).

⁴ See Adrian McKinty, *Police at the Station and They Don't Look Friendly* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2017).

⁵ See Stuart Neville, *The Ghosts of Belfast* (New York: Soho Crime, 2009).

⁶ See Stuart Neville, *Collusion* (London: Harvill Secker, 2010).

⁷ See Stuart Neville, *Stolen Souls* (London: Vintage, 2012).

⁸ See Brian McGilloway, *Borderlands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007).

⁹ See Brian McGilloway, *Gallows Lane* (London: Macmillan New Writing, 2008).

¹⁰ See Brian McGilloway, *The Nameless Dead* (London: Macmillan, 2012).

¹¹ See Brian McGilloway, *Little Girl Lost* (Leicester: Charnwood 2012).

¹² See Claire McGowan, *The Lost* (London: Headline, 2013).

¹³ See Claire McGowan, *The Dead Ground* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2014).

¹⁴ See Claire McGowan, *The Silent Dead* (London: Headline, 2016 (2015)).

ises for a peaceful future, but which is haunted—in the case of *The Ghosts of Belfast*, literally so—by the Troubles, i.e., the thirty-year-long conflict which claimed thousands of innocent victims, mothers and children among them. Concern for the fate of vulnerable women and children is the distinguishing characteristic of contemporary crime fiction in general; it is a challenge to find a novel in which these are not the victims. Claire McGowan addresses head-on, as it were, the specifically Irish complication: the anti-abortion laws.¹⁵ Persistently and even somewhat obstinately, she works the issues of child abuse and teenage pregnancy into the fabric of her plots, making topical the dilemma of choice, or rather the limited scope of choice left for women. One tends to think that this strategy may be a way of addressing the future for an Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, in the midst of negotiating its prospects while it is still troubled by the difficult and painful legacy of the sectarian conflict *and* the failure to protect potential victims.

As I have just suggested, it would be farfetched to argue that concern with the victimisation of women and children is a distinctive feature of the contemporary Northern Irish crime thriller. Children, adolescents and women are the ‘easy’ and—alas—predictable target of illicit actions and operations; on the whole, they are the potential victims of the mechanism of patriarchal oppression. Contemporary crime novels consistently bring to the attention of the readership treacherous areas of contemporary life and the fate of those who are doomed to inhabit those areas. Northern Irish authors are keen on making their detectives, many of whom have families with children, alive to a sense of duty and obligation to protect the vulnerable and bring to justice those who have violated their rights. Though of course there are also many crime thrillers in the world where the family life of the detective, if it exists at all, is decoupled from the wider social and criminal abuse of women and children,¹⁶ the risk to which Irish detectives expose their families and the protection they feel compelled to offer them seems notable in the frequency of its appearance as one of the main themes in the plots. The concern for the wellbeing of the protagonists’ families thus runs parallel to the main concern of the plot,

¹⁵ Shortly before the submission of this article in September 2019, the abortion law in Northern Ireland changed; for more information, see, for instance, Marie-Louise Connolly, “Northern Ireland Abortion Law Changes: What Do They Mean?” at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-50125124> and Suyin Hayes, “After 158 Years U.K. Lawmakers Have Voted to Decriminalize Abortion in Northern Ireland: The Fight’s Not Over Yet,” <https://time.com/5634762/northern-ireland-abortion-law-impact/>.

¹⁶ For instance, in Robert Galbraith’s (J. K. Rowling’s) *Career of Evil* (2015), where the domestic violence and sexual abuse suffered by women and children are major concerns, the detectives—Cormoran Strike and his assistant Robin Ellacott—are unmarried and have no children of their own.

where typically those protagonists are involved in the finding and protection of women and children.

EXAMPLES

Before we turn our attention to McGowan's Paula Maguire series, let us briefly look at some selected 'uses' of childhood in nine Northern Irish novels.

McKinty's Sean Duffy novels, as already mentioned, are set during the Troubles of the 1980s. Concern with children figures prominently in them, both on the professional and personal levels. *Rain Dogs* is a good example. Set in 1987, the typically protracted and increasingly frustrating investigation finally leads Duffy and his RUC colleagues¹⁷ to an institution for adolescent offenders whose inmates have been abused by paedophiles, a conspiracy which may involve celebrities and high-ranking politicians, and which may have been a source of profit for Loyalist paramilitaries.

In the final chapters, there is a significant change of focus, as Duffy's girlfriend—separated from him for some time now—asks him to accompany her on a ferry boat trip to Liverpool. With bitterness, he calls the infamous route “the Great Abortion Trail,” “walked by thousands of Irish women and girls every year.”¹⁸ The final turnaround in this personal side plot comes with the girlfriend's decision to keep the child. Consequently, in the most recent instalment of the Sean Duffy series, we see Duffy in the new role of the father, with a family to protect. Like other Northern investigators, Duffy puts his family at risk simply by doing his job. For example, the desire to keep his identity unknown has made Duffy's boss decide to use IRA hitmen in an attempt to wipe away Duffy and Duffy's family.¹⁹

¹⁷ The Royal Ulster Constabulary, or the police service of Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

¹⁸ M c K i n t y, *Rain Dogs*, 335. In accompanying his girlfriend, Duffy commits a crime: “Abortion is illegal on the island of Ireland. On both sides of that porous, wiggly border. Assisting someone in the procurement of an abortion is a criminal offence under the catch-all clause of the *Offences against the Persons Act (1861)*.” Ibidem, 328 (italics in the original).

¹⁹ It is characteristic of the Northern mystery thriller that the protagonists, most of them detectives, have a Catholic background. Neville's Gerry Fegan is a Catholic and even though he may not otherwise have much in common with Duffy and Devlin (and even though he kills a Catholic priest for the latter's complicity in the murder of some British soldiers during the Troubles), his background remains a fact. Duffy—unlike Devlin—is not a practicing Catholic, but his background is impossible to ignore. And indeed, sometimes it becomes a major motivating force behind his actions, as when he says “Sancta Maria” over his sleeping girlfriend, pregnant but at this point determined not to keep the child. See M c K i n t y, *Rain Dogs*, 331.

In Stuart Neville's *The Ghosts of Belfast*, a supernatural thriller which has already earned the position of a classic,²⁰ the figures of two children play a crucial role in the plot. First, there is the ghost of a child, who appears with its also-ghostly mother. Innocent victims of a Republican bombing, they are now among the twelve ghosts that haunt the main protagonist, Gerry Fegan, a former Republican hitman, now seeking redemption through bloody reckoning. The child and its mother reappear throughout the novel, including in a pivotal moment at its climax. However, it is a real child, Ellen, spiritually in tune with the ghosts, who eventually brings about the much-desired pardoning for Fegan at the end of the novel. The thriller quality has to do with the fact that Fegan has taken under his protection two vulnerable persons: Ellen and her own mother, Marie.

With the twelve ghosts departed to their place of rest, the sequel, *Collusion*, focuses almost exclusively on Fegan's mission to protect the mother and the daughter. The presence of three extremely dangerous males, mutual antagonists, one expressly hired to kill the two vulnerable females, raises the thrills of pursuit and escape a notch higher. By the end of the novel, Marie and the two assassins are dead, but Lennon, the actual father (albeit estranged from his wife and daughter for six years), has been able to save Ellen's life and now is determined to ensure her safe future. But the battle is far from over. In another novel in the Jack Lennon series, *Stolen Souls*, Lennon is struggling to manage his roles as a single father and protector of his daughter, while solving the case of, presumably, the first Irish serial killer, a religious psychopath who preys on teenage girls.

Children and adolescents have a pronounced position in the plots of Brian McGilloway's novels. *Borderlands*, the first in the DI Benedict Devlin series, depicts an investigation into the murder of a sixteen-year-old girl starting on 21st December 2002. By the time a second murder has been committed, this time of a young man, it is clear that the solution lies in the past and that the events of the present will not make sense unless the detective reopens the twenty-year-old case of the disappearance of a prostitute, Mary Knox. The investigation leads to the place in which Mary (was) disappeared²¹—the Three

²⁰ See analyses in Fiona Coffey, "'The place you don't belong': Stuart Neville's Belfast," in *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, ed. Elizabeth Mannion (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 91–108; Brian Cliffe, *Irish Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 39–44, and Jacek Mydla, "The Fertility of the Supernatural: Stuart Neville's *The Ghosts of Belfast*," *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature* 43, no. 2 (2019) (Gothic Explorations: Studies in Literature and Film): 51–9.

²¹ The word "to disappear" has a special meaning in this context, as a police inspector explains: "At the time, the IRA has 'disappeared' quite a few people: informers, non-informers, people who spoke out against them in the local shops. Disappeared and never seen again. Provos wouldn't admit it then, but it's coming out now. Tortured them to find out what they'd said, then dumped the bodies on building sites." McGilloway, *Borderlands*, 135.

Rivers Hotel, the name referring to a point “where the rivers Finn and Mourne merge into the Foyle.”²² Here McGilloway stages the final and deathly confrontation between Mary’s daughter, Yvonne, bent on avenging the death of her mother, and Thomas Powell, Jr., son of a wealthy player from the previous era who had had Mary killed to prevent her exposing his fraud.

This resolution makes the plot vaguely reminiscent of the Gothic classic, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where, too, the story told in the present recounts retributive action for transgressions committed in the past. Little wonder then that at the end of *Borderlands* we hear an echo of the same Biblical motto about the sins of the fathers visited on the children to the third and fourth generation.²³ Says McGilloway’s inspector about Mary’s children and their murders: “In each case, they decided on transferring the punishment for the sins of the father onto the children.”²⁴ This, incidentally, also basically sums up the plot of a Joe Spain novel, *With our Blessing*,²⁵ which depicts the abuses of Magdalen Laundries in the Republic of Ireland. A glaring manifestation of ruthless patriarchalism, these institutions served to deal with the issues of illegitimate (i.e., out-of-wedlock) pregnancy and single motherhood by separating the female “offenders” and “sinners” from the “respectable” part of society.²⁶

Even in cases where Northern Irish detectives do not have families of their own, their sense of personal connection with cases involving young people and women seems unusually keen, perhaps stemming from their close sense of identity with their communities. In McGilloway’s *Preserve the Dead*, we are reminded of a case which Lucy Black, a detective with no children or partner of her own, has not been able to solve:

The picture of Mary Quigg stared down at her. Mary was a child with whom Lucy had had some dealings when she’d first joined the PSNI’s Public Protection Unit. Mary’s

²² Ibidem, 22.

²³ Horace Walpole famously quoted this verse (cf. Numbers 14:18) in the 1764 preface to *The Castle of Otranto* (“the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation”). See Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (London, Paris, New York & Melbourne: Cassell and Company, Limited), 4. See also Bible Hub, “Numbers 14:18). See also The New American Bible. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM, and The Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/numbers/14-18.htm>. Interestingly, Owen Dudley Edwards, himself a mystery-story author and a Sherlock Holmes scholar, used it in his 1970 study of the source of the conflict in Northern Ireland: *The Sins of our Fathers*. See Owen Dudley Edwards, *The Sins of Our Fathers: Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Dublin and London: Gill and Macmillan, 1970).

²⁴ McGilloway, *Borderlands*, 198.

²⁵ See Joe Spain, *With our Blessing* (London: Quercus, 2016).

²⁶ *Sex in a Cold Climate* is one of the documentaries about the notorious laundries. See *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Ireland 1998, directed by Steve Humphries, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43y-YN-2YgiY>. See also a feature film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, United Kingdom and Ireland, directed by Peter Mullan, 2002.

mother's partner had murdered both her and her mother, when he set the house alight and took off with as much money as he could steal. He had never been charged with the killings, having fled to the Republic.... Mary Quigg's picture remained and would do until her killer ... finally paid for what he had done.²⁷

It is the empathetic zoom-in and close-range perspective of authors such as McGilloway which allows us to see how the recent and Troubles-affected past has influenced the lives of small communities and their most vulnerable members.

I will conclude this part of the article by quoting a passage from McGilloway's *Gallows Lane*, showing us the detective's return to the sanctuary of a peaceful home. The idea of a safe future personified in children is given here a memorable expression:

It was while I was sorting through old toys that I heard a noise through the baby monitor. Assuming Shane was stirring for a bottle, I went into his room. He was already standing in his cot, his arms gripping the vertical bars, a juvenile prisoner. When he saw me, he raised his arms to be lifted and fell backwards, landing softly on his rump. He giggled once with pleasure, then said, "Daddy." He seemed to take even himself by surprise and repeated it, clearly, beaming with pride at his achievement.... I kissed him lightly on the forehead as he clung to my shirt and found myself smiling. On such small victories must the future be built.²⁸

PREGNANCY AND HOPE IN MCGOWAN'S PAULA MAGUIRE THRILLERS 1–3

In the remaining part of this article, I will examine the idea of motherhood in three of Claire McGowan's Paula Maguire mysteries. The three novels may be said to be a unit due to the fact that they encompass a crucial period in the life of the protagonist, Dr Paula Maguire, a chartered forensic psychologist and a member of the MPRU, or Missing Persons Response Unit.²⁹ In the first novel, *The Lost*, Paula returns to her hometown, Ballyterrin, and becomes a member of the Unit.³⁰ Towards the end of this novel, she realises that she

²⁷ Brian McGilloway, *Preserve the Dead* (London: Corsair, 2015), 102. PSNI stands for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

²⁸ McGilloway, *Gallows Lane*, 218–9.

²⁹ Naturally, the complexion of these issues changes as the series advances and Paula's life evolves; some of the matters discussed here are eventually resolved or simply change in significance. I have chosen to focus here on the first three novels specifically because of the way Paula's pregnancy brings to the fore the issues central to my paper.

³⁰ Ballyterrin is a fictional town on the border between the North and the South, i.e., Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As we find out at the beginning of chapter four in *The Lost*, "Ballyterrin meant 'Border Town' in Irish, the place names mangled and anglicized from long centuries of colonization." McGowan, *The Lost*, 28.

is pregnant. Not only is this discovery completely unexpected, but there are two potential fathers. One is Aidan O'Hara, her boyfriend from before she had left Ballyterrin at the age of eighteen, a local patriot and the editor of the *Ballyterrin Gazette*. The other is her current boss and head of the Unit, Guy Brooking, a married Englishman with a troubled family life. At the beginning of the second novel, *The Dead Ground*, Paula is two months pregnant and has to decide whether she wants to keep the baby, the other option being a flight to England to have an abortion. Towards the end of the book, her pregnancy becomes one reason why she herself becomes a target and a potential victim, the plot revolving around a mentally unstable woman who—unable to have children of her own—steals other people's, born and unborn. At the beginning of the third novel, *The Silent Dead*, we again meet Paula, who is now seven months pregnant, no longer able or indeed willing to conceal her pregnancy. In the course of this novel, Paula gives birth; towards the end, Aidan proposes to her, though it remains unknown whether he is the actual father.

Paula's own impending maternity is complemented by a second plot involving motherhood: the mysterious disappearance of Paula's own mother in 1993, when Paula was thirteen years old (she is thirty in *The Lost*).³¹ When back in her home town, Paula unofficially reopens the case of her mother's disappearance; by the end of the third book, there is still no evidence that her mother is dead, even though Paula's father has remarried, having obtained a certificate that confirms her death.

In terms of plot arrangement, Paula's unceasing search for her missing mother runs parallel to the official investigations conducted by the MPRU and the police. This is only one of the many examples in which McGowan makes present and painfully relevant the country's troubled and oppressive past.³² At the beginning of McGowan's *The Lost*, the MPRU start searching for two fifteen-year-old girls who have gone missing, one from a "respectable" Catholic family, the other from the local traveller community.³³ Soon the body

³¹ What brings Paula and Aidan together is the fact that the latter lost his father during the Troubles: "John O'Hara ... was shot dead by paramilitaries at the paper's office in 1986." Ibidem, 289 (the paper being *The Ballyterrin Gazette*). Now Aidan is the editor. Aidan's father's editorial (see ibidem 171–2) openly attacked the existing legal system, with its strict—and arguably inhumane—anti-abortion legislation.

³² Concern with unquiet past as a distinctive feature of Northern Irish crime fiction has found some noteworthy expressions in *Little Girl Lost*. A nurse's comments on the state of Lucy Black's father, now suffering from Alzheimer's: "Maybe he's living in the past. Let's face it, it's the national condition in this country." M c G i l l o w a y, *Little Girl Lost*, 140. When, at some point, her mother says to Lucy in an attempt to reassure her, "The past is the past," Lucy answers, "No, it's not.... It's still infecting the present." Ibidem, 311.

³³ Needless to say, I do not use the word "respectable" to express racial bias. I want to point out that McGowan makes the readers aware of the social divisions and tensions of both the relatively small

of the Catholic girl, Cathy, is found. Autopsy results show that the girl was two months pregnant; subsequent investigation uncovers other cases of the abuse of teenage girls—the team’s head’s own daughter—by the male leader of a Christian “Mission” that recently set up a chapter of sorts in Ballyterrin. The end of the novel reveals that not only has Cathy been killed by her own mother, but that this woman had herself been a victim of sexual assault and impregnation by her father at the age of twelve:

Yes, I’m Angela McGreavy. Yes, I got pregnant when I was twelve and they made me have the wean. And they took her away and sold her to America and I had to live in that home until I was eighteen.³⁴

By “that home” Angela here means an institution for cases like hers: an illegitimate pregnancy, which traditionally was regarded as disgraceful.³⁵ The abusive father got away with his crime:

At me day and night, and then when he gets me in trouble, he looks the police in the eye and he says, ‘Officers, my daughter’s a liar, she’s been going round with boys, now you will take her and lock her up.’³⁶

The reader is here expected to be shocked by at least two elements: the incestuous abuse of the girl and the practice of selling Irish children to foreigners. It is gruesomely ironic that the child—now an “American” woman in her twenties—has returned to Ballyterrin to find her parents. Moments before her suicide, Angela makes two statements which condemn the oppressive system: “Your da was my da. Happens all the time, especially in Ireland”³⁷; “Nobody helped me when I was twelve, did they?... My Cathy, some fella pawing at her the same way. Still no abortion allowed in this country.”³⁸

These familiar themes return in *The Dead Ground*, yet with greater force and intensity. The events involving violence and sexual abuse against women and children come thick and fast, making the thematic preoccupations of the

Ballyterrin community and the Irish society in general—addressing these issues is a significant feature of the contemporary crime novel. In view of the final shocking revelations at the end of the novel, the phrase “the façade of Catholic respectability” seems fully justified. See Sharon T i g h e - M o o n e y, “Irreconcilable Differences? The Fraught Relationship Between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland,” in *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond*, ed. by Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien (Manchester University Press, 2018), 199.

³⁴ M c G o w a n, *The Lost*, 355.

³⁵ An institution like the Magdalene Laundries, called Safe Harbour, which—given the context—has a bitterly ironic sound to it. See *ibidem*, 58.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 360.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem* 356.

book almost too rich at times. The book opens with the kidnapping of a day-old infant born to a Polish immigrant couple; soon, a second infant goes missing. These events are followed by the murder of a local pro-choice activist (“abortionist”), as well as a bizarre kidnapping, when the activist’s daughter, almost “ready to pop,” is found with her belly slit open, bleeding to death, the child gone (a case of “foetal abduction”³⁹). The second infant’s body is eventually found in the backyard of its own family’s home; it transpires that, rather than having been kidnapped, the child had accidentally drowned, and its mother had lied to the police. Paula herself is kidnapped by a madwoman who wants to perform a Caesarean section on her, which would kill both her and her baby. This being prevented, another tale of abuse is brought to light: the perpetrator is a woman that had been made pregnant by her own grandfather, ostensibly a devout Catholic, who, after the birth of the child, attempted unsuccessfully to kill it, only soon to succumb to a heart attack, as though struck down in punishment. Later, having gotten married and become pregnant again, the woman lost another child in horrific circumstances, which left her mentally impaired, and with a pathological craving for a child that “would love her.”⁴⁰ Her mental condition is supposed to explain her atrocious actions, and, to an extent, exonerate her. To make matters more complicated, the madwoman has been assisted by her sister. The latter is now a Christian visionary who sees the Virgin Mary and has been helping women—among them a friend of Paula’s—who struggle with infertility. The result of this avalanche of events, past and present, is an indelible impression of the multigenerational victimization of women and children.

In the third novel, the themes of (unwanted) pregnancy and absent motherhood are joined by that of retributive justice against those who would harm innocent women and children. The plot of *The Silent Dead* involves a search for no fewer than five missing people, all adults, who have been responsible for a bomb massacre in which a dozen innocent civilians were killed (“sixteen dead and hundreds wounded”⁴¹), including children. Right from the start, the search for the missing people is combined with murder inquiry, as the novel opens with the discovery of the body of one of the so-called “Mayday Five.” Yet, despite the fact that the missing people in this book are all adults, the themes of maternity and childhood are ever present. First of all, Paula is now seven months pregnant and keenly self-conscious of it. Numerous passages remind the reader of her condition; her belly, in particular, is always before the reader’s eyes:

³⁹ M c G o w a n, *The Dead Ground*, 238.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 374. “She doesn’t love me. She knows I’m not her mother.” Ibidem, 370.

⁴¹ M c G o w a n, *The Silent Dead*, 31.

She shifted on her swollen feet. The bulk of her belly meant the only way she could comfortably stand was with one hip jutted out, leaning on it, and she didn't think such an insolent pose would cut it before the altar. She'd already seen the priest's eye travelling over her stomach and then pointedly not looking at it. Catholics —they were good at pretending things that did exist didn't. And vice versa.⁴²

The room buzzed with chatter, and as usual men outnumbered women, so Paula, her belly huge, drew every eye.⁴³

But always there was the pressing bump of her child, reminding her that some mistakes just couldn't be ignored.⁴⁴

And so on. Juxtaposing these passages also reveals Paula's preoccupation with the problems of visibility and acknowledgement—what is seen and what is not seen; what is ignored, and what is imagined. The physical growth of Paula's swelling belly, and her intense awareness of it, are thereby linked with the Troubles-era dilemma of the dangers of seeing what one has seen, and the incentive, agonizing though it might be, to un-see it. In such passages, the religious, personal and cultural elements of pregnancy are united with the lingering memory of the Troubles.

Also central to the plot is the figure of a girl, Kira, whose narrative runs parallel to the main action. Kira is haunted by the memories of her sister, Rose, one of the victims of the bombing. Living with the painful memory of her beloved sister, Kira herself is another victim in that she cannot stop living in the past. Although the actual retributive action is performed by adults (members of a support group who meet regularly to remember the victims and to keep the memory of the atrocity fresh), the revelation that it was Kira who invented the scheme comes as no surprise. The killings of the Mayday Five, for which Kira is responsible, are brutal, verging on the sadistic; one of the Five, now a mother of three, is buried alive after a protracted scene of attempted escape, barefoot, through dense woods.

However, McGowan stops short of identifying Kira as an unsympathetic, irredeemable villain. Paula herself identifies and sympathizes with Kira, reflecting through the narrator that "the girl was the same age Paula had been when her mother went, similarly lost, grief stricken."⁴⁵ This shared sense of the lost mother figure turns out to be more pertinent than even Paula anticipates. Eventually, it is revealed that Rose was not Kira's sister, but her *mother*. As Kira says to Paula:

⁴² Ibidem, 3.

⁴³ Ibidem, 62.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 171.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 83.

‘Mammy [actually the grandmother] used to say things, when she’d drunk too much. So I asked Jamesie – that was Rose’s boyfriend. I knew she used to go out with him way back. He said he was my dad. Rose was having me, only she was too young, she was fifteen, so they pretended I was Mammy’s and Rose didn’t see Jamesie again for years.’⁴⁶

What Paula thinks at this point is also significant; I expect that the reader may take a while to take in this piece of information:

‘That must have been very difficult.’ Paula’s mind was racing. It was common practice in Irish families, the youngest member actually being the first grandchild.⁴⁷

But Kira’s response is not what Paula might have expected:

‘Not really.’... ‘I knew, you see. I could tell Rose loved me. She talks to me sometimes, still. She said she’d have gladly died like that, instead of me, if that was the choice she had to make. You’d do the same, wouldn’t you, miss? For the little girl? You’d die for her. That’s what it means when you really love someone.’⁴⁸

In this scene, then, the novel attains a truly Christian bonding between the protagonist and the underage offender. McGowan does not cite the Gospels, but may depend on the reader’s recalling one of the most significant passages therein: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (Jn 15:12–14).⁴⁹

Given this context, it is a bit less surprising that McGowan lets Kira go virtually unpunished. At the end of the novel, the family, broken as it is, reunite:

Kira [visiting the cemetery] smiled, and turned to go back to the car where Jamesie was waiting for her. She shut the gate to the graveyard with a squeak, and she didn’t look back.⁵⁰

This is how the novel ends. McGowan seems to be saying here that there is a future for this family, like there is a future for Paula’s relationship with both potential fathers of her child. All these relationships have had to leave behind a painful past, a past marked by violence, loss, and mourning, but also have been strengthened into a new life by forgiveness, reconciliation, and the need

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 349–50.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 350.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ The New American Bible, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM.

⁵⁰ M c G o w a n, *The Silent Dead*, 372.

to look not behind, but ahead. By hope. This is precisely what, early in the novel, Paula thinks when she feels the yet unborn life inside herself:

Under her smock and cardigan, she stroked the firm rising bump of her pregnancy. This was flesh and certainty, a fresh start, untainted by the past, of the fear she would be born into. Paula just hoped the baby wouldn't see where she was.⁵¹

If feelings such as this were suppressed or if there were no room for them, there would be no hope.

Claire McGowan, like her fellow Northern authors, starts with the mystery thriller's persistent preoccupation with the "sins of the fathers" and accompanying traumas of the past, and from there explores ways to break free from this painful legacy. To be sure, the central mysteries of McGowan's series have not been entirely dispelled by the end of the third novel; Paula will keep on looking for her mother and other missing persons, and the father of her own child is yet unknown. Yet, as the third novel closes, the heroine has successfully met the challenges of her personal life and is now ready to build a hopeful future for herself, her chosen partner and their new-born daughter. Paula is definitely a liberated woman, fully aware of how oppressive the old mores have been. She understands how wary women, especially young women, have to be of the human predators, particularly those who approach them clad in sheep skins of piety and respectability. Through Paula, McGowan has prepared her readers to welcome and embrace pro-choice legislation on the horizon in real life, while at the same time books such as *The Dead Ground* make readers alert to the bare fact that the ability to choose does not by itself solve the dilemmas that unplanned pregnancy brings to a woman: "'How do you decide?' she [Paula] burst out. 'In this kind of situation, when it's impossible? How do you choose?'"⁵² No matter how difficult and perilous Paula's homecoming has turned out to be, her decision to keep her baby may be read as a gesture of reconciliation with her roots and her Catholic background—and a repudiation of the Troubles-era agony born of the necessity to un-see what has been seen.

While there is little doubt that children in the novels of McGowan personify and embody the future, both on a personal (familial) and national level, the author, like her contemporaries, sees complications. That women and children need protection goes without saying, and in both real life and fiction, the legal systems in Northern Ireland and in the Republic attempt to live up to this imperative. Things become less clear-cut when—as is repeatedly the case in McGowan's stories—the people who should be protected

⁵¹ Ibidem, 118.

⁵² M c G o w a n, *The Dead Ground*, 251.

somehow fall through the cracks, or are deliberately ignored due to stigma or other circumstances, especially if they are victims of abuse. A recurring motif is that investigators are finding it hard to uncover the truth in a post-Good-Friday-Agreement society bent on leaving the troubled and oppressive past as far behind as possible. Without a personal connection tying a detective to a case, institutional blindness can obscure the facts or make cases vulnerable to political, religious or financial influence. Maybe that is why McGowan and her fellow Northern Irish writers tie their detectives to their cases with such intense personal bonds, involving and even endangering not only themselves, but their families. These authors seem to be saying that while any victims still exist of crimes born of the past, especially those rooted in the system of patriarchal oppression and The Troubles, the fragile peace remains at risk. Even at best, under such conditions, the danger exists that the 'peace' Northern Irish society currently enjoys simply may never translate into 'peace of mind.' If we do not maintain a sense of personal, empathetic and imaginative connection with the victims of past crimes—precisely like that between Lucy Black and Mary Quigg—closure and healing may never be ours.

Although an analogy between author and protagonist may be risky, I would like to conclude by suggesting a parallel between Claire McGowan's novels themselves and the Missing Persons Response Unit they depict. Like Paula Maguire, Claire McGowan has been seeking to persuade us that difficult cases involving the most vulnerable in our society should not be lost sight of; that the efforts of an investigation, no matter how risky for the well-being of the detective and her child, are worth making. No matter how complex the narratives and the web of moral complications, they deserve the effort of proper investigation, which will ensure that a hopeful future remains open.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cliff, Brian. *Irish Crime Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Coffey, Fiona. "'The place you don't belong': Stuart Neville's Belfast." In *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*. Edited by Elizabeth Mannion. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Connolly, Marie-Louise. "Northern Ireland Abortion Law Changes: What Do They Mean?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-50125124>.
- Dudley Edwards, Owen. *The Sins of Our Fathers: Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Dublin and London: Gill and Macmillan, 1970.
- Fay, Marie-Therese, Mike Morrissey, and Marie Smyth. *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Cost*. London: Pluto Press, 1999.
- Galbraith, Robert. *Career of Evil*. London: Sphere, 2016 (2015).

- Haynes, Suyin. "After 158 Years U.K. Lawmakers Have Voted to Decriminalize Abortion in Northern Ireland: The Fight's Not Over Yet." <https://time.com/5634762/northern-ireland-abortion-law-impact/>.
- Kennedy-Andrews, Elmer. "The Novel and the Northern Troubles." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*. Edited by John Wilson Foster. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- McGilloway, Brian. *Borderlands*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007.
- . *Gallows Lane*. London: Macmillan New Writing, 2008.
- . *Little Girl Lost*. Leicester: Charnwood 2012.
- . *The Nameless Dead*. London: Macmillan, 2012.
- . *Preserve the Dead*. London: Corsair, 2015.
- McGowan, Claire. *The Dead Ground*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2014.
- . *The Lost*. London: Headline, 2013.
- . *The Silent Dead*. London: Headline, 2016 (2015).
- McKinty, Adrian. *The Cold Cold Ground*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2012.
- . *Police at the Station and They Don't Look Friendly*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2017.
- . *Rain Dogs*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2015.
- Mydla, Jacek. "The Fertility of the Supernatural: Stuart Neville's *The Ghosts of Belfast*." *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature* 43, no. 2 (2019) (Gothic Explorations: Studies in Literature and Film): 51–9.
- Neville, Stuart. *Collusion*. London: Harvill Secker, 2010.
- . *The Ghosts of Belfast*. New York: Soho Crime, 2009.
- . *Stolen Souls*. London: Vintage, 2012.
- The New American Bible. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM.
- Spain, Joe. *With Our Blessing*. London: Quercus, 2016 (2015).
- Tighe-Mooney, Sharon. "Irreconcilable Differences? The Fraught Relationship Between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland." In *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and beyond*. Edited by Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. London, Paris, New York and Melbourne: Cassell and Company, Limited.

ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Jacek MYDLA, *It's All About the Weans: A Survey of Troubled Procreation and Hope in the Contemporary Northern Irish Mystery Thriller*

DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-11

This article relates the idea of hope to themes of motherhood and childhood as handled by contemporary Northern Irish crime authors. The main part of the article discusses the theme of pregnancy in Claire McGowan's Paula Maguire mystery thrillers.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, mystery thriller, the Troubles, pregnancy, maternity, hope

Contact: Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, Department of Philology, University of Silesia in Katowice, ul. Gen. S. Grot-Roweckiego 5, 41-205 Sosnowiec, Poland

E-mail: jacek.mydla@us.edu.pl

<http://www.ikila.us.edu.pl/index.php/pracownicy/item/695-jacek-mydla>

Jacek MYDLA, "Maleństwa – tylko one się liczą". Wątki trudnej prokreacji i nadziei we współczesnym północnoirlandzkim thrillerze kryminalnym

DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-11

Artykuł odnosi pojęcie nadziei do prokreacji i bada, w jaki sposób współczesny północnoirlandzki kryminał (ściślej: thriller kryminalny) przedstawia postaci matek, ojców i dzieci. W głównej części artykułu, autor omawia temat „trudnej prokreacji” w serii powieściowej autorstwa Claire McGowan, w której główną postacią jest psycholog-kryminalista Paula Maguire i gdzie jednym z zasadniczych wątków jest nieplanowana i niechciana ciąża.

Słowa kluczowe: Irlandia Północna, thriller kryminalny, wojna domowa (the Troubles), ciąża, macierzyństwo, nadzieja

Kontakt: Zakład Teorii Literatury i Kultury, Instytut Kultur i Literatur Anglojęzycznych, Wydział Filologiczny, Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach, ul. Gen. S. Grot-Roweckiego 5, 41-205 Sosnowiec

E-mail: jacek.mydla@us.edu.pl

<http://www.ikila.us.edu.pl/index.php/pracownicy/item/695-jacek-mydla>