

Making Nora Barnacle Smile: Irish Crime Fiction

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In the last ten years, there has been an explosion of crime fiction in Ireland, and a testament to the quality and international validation of the genre, is the fact that the Shamus award, the most coveted of crime fiction prizes, was won by Ken Bruen for the best novel of 2003. The novel was *The Guards*, the first of a series of books that feature Jack Taylor as a private investigator, set in the city of Galway, Ireland. Bruen is not the sole exponent of Irish crime writing although he is deservedly the most successful and internationally well-regarded. I would suggest that a number of factors conspired to bring about the birth of Irish crime fiction, or Irish noir, as it is sometimes known. In this article, I hope to show how some of the major social changes that have occurred in Ireland in the last twenty years, created the social sphere to nurture crime fiction, and conversely, how the genre has been an important voice in re-imagining Ireland in the twenty-first century.

One of the most significant developments in Irish history in the last decade has been the progress made in the peace process. The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 meant that at least some of the division, rancour and violence that plagued modern Ireland for so long began to be resolved. The tense environment of Northern Ireland and its ideological, political and religious conflicts provided the ideal environment for crime fiction. Shaun Clarke, the pseudonym of W.A. Harbinson, is one crime writer who has written on Northern Ireland. He was born in Belfast in 1941 and served in the RAAF (The Royal Australian Air Force). Best known for his SAS (Special Air Force) series, he has also written several novels set in his home town. The plot of *Red Hand* (1998) happens in Belfast in 1999, and pivots around Ulster Loyalists, for whom the eponymous red hand is an established symbol. His novels *Underworld* (1997), *Green Light* (2000) and *Night Rider* (2001), also deal with the Troubles. Jack Higgins, whose writing career began in the late 1950s, was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in England, but raised in Belfast. He has published over 60 novels, several of which deal with the fraught political situation in Northern Ireland. *Confessional* (1985) is about a hit-man called Cuchalain whose actions serve to worsen the cycle of violence between the IRA and British intelligence. His later novels about the North, such as *Angel of Death* (1995) and *Drink with the Devil* (1996), tap into the tenuous political climate of those years by imagining scenarios that threaten the peace process. In the first, terrorists plan to put an end to the truce by carrying out an assassination, and in the second, a loyalist prisoner escapes from a high security prison in Britain with the aim of purchasing arms, posing a threat to the peace process.

Not all writers find crime fiction a suitable vehicle for dealing with domestic politics, however. A case in point is the writer Eoin McNamee (who uses the pseudonym John Creed for his crime novels). McNamee's debut, *Resurrection Man* (1995), achieved critical acclaim for its portrayal of Victor Kelly, a killer who roamed the streets of Belfast in the 1970s. But McNamee's crime novels tend to use Ireland as a setting for global politics, such as *The Sirius Crossing* (2002), in which Jack Valentine investigates the presence of American Special Forces in Ireland some two decades ago in a trail that leads back to the White House. Setting novels about global politics in Ireland, however, does verify the outward-looking perspective that contemporary Ireland espouses. It is no surprise that crime fiction is deemed suitable for expressing this definition of the country in European and global contexts, as its origins are foreign to Ireland. Aaron Kelly's book, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (2005), provides an interesting account of how the genre and the region had a mutual effect on each other, as regards representing the Troubles and the mode of this representation.

The boom in crime writing in Ireland has coincided, not coincidentally, with the economic boom that has been dubbed the Celtic Tiger. And of course, the increased prosperity and economic success of the country brought about new confidence and engendered a more consumerist society than had existed previously, sometimes accompanied by ruthless greed and ambition. In Bruen's novels, Irish identity itself becomes a consumer commodity that is eagerly desired by tourists and immigrants. In *The*

Killing of the Tinkers, Jack meets a Romanian called Chaz who wears Aran sweaters, a woollen jumper associated with the West of Ireland. When they go for a drink together, Chaz bids him 'sláinte', an Irish word meaning 'good health', to which Jack responds, 'whatever' (Bruen 2002, 79). Often in his novels, the native Irish are depicted as cosmopolitan, even acquiring American modes of speech, whereas it is the immigrants that appear more traditionally Irish in habits and customs. This is an important deconstruction of Irish identity, because the behaviour and social codes regarded as 'Irish' are shown to be transferable. The set of signifiers of Irishness is portrayed as not belonging to a particular racial group, but available to any who choose to identify with them. His novels show how arbitrary national identity is, an ultimately liberating stance, because it rejects the categorisation of people into Irish and non-Irish and represents identity as altogether more fluid. Although his writing is anti-racist, many of Bruen's characters suffer prejudice because of their ethnicity. This is evident in John Creed's *Black Cat Black Dog* too, when an immigrant goes missing and the protagonist Jack Valentine asks if the police have been contacted. He is told that 'Police don't give a damn about migrant workers' (Creed 2006, 62). Affluence and very low unemployment attracted immigrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers in large numbers for the first time, and very little mainstream literature has dealt with the new demographics of Irish society that have resulted. Because of this, Bruen's claim that 'only crime novels are grappling with the taboo areas realistically' (Bruen 2004), may well be justified.

These major social changes meant that Ireland became an ideal setting for crime fiction. With burgeoning cities came law-breaking and violence. As Bruen puts it, 'I didn't want to write about Ireland until we got mean streets. We sure got 'em now' (Bruen 2004). In his short story, *The Dead Room*, Taylor remarks that 'every day in our new prosperous country, there was at least one rape and one murder. When I was a child, we had one murder a year. But that is indeed another country' (Bruen 2005, 18).

Gene Kerrigan has explored the greed that has incited both the business success and the increase in crime in his two novels, *Little Criminals* (2005) and *The Midnight Choir* (2006). Both novels deal with the relationship between criminals, victims and law-enforcers, and suggest in different ways that the ambitious desire to achieve the status symbols of wealth and success are the common motivating factor in the three groups of characters. In *Little Criminals*, the Detective Inspector John Grace muses that 'All of them, whether they lived in ghettos or mansions, had their own vision of the life they were entitled to. And the urge to acquire whatever the vision demanded – money, sex, status ... And if getting what they wanted meant breaking a law or breaking a head, so be it' (Kerrigan 2005, 171)

The 1990s in Ireland also saw several major political figures being tried and in some cases, imprisoned, for corruption. Between this and the scandals that emerged about clerical sexual abuse, it seemed that few of the old pillars of authority were left unchallenged. Cormac Millar taps into the new zeal for exposing corruption in his two novels about white-collar crime, *An Irish Solution* (2004) and *The Grounds* (2006). In the first, Seamus Joyce is the head of the Irish Drug Enforcement Agency. When his help becomes enlisted by an ambitious minister who wishes to convict some important figures in Irish drug-dealing, he begins to suspect corruption in his dealings with the government and the police. The second features the same protagonist, this time back in Ireland to secure the takeover of an Irish university by the American establishment, *Finer Smaller Campuses*. Yet again, the greed and corruption of modern Ireland are in evidence when Seamus unwittingly becomes embroiled with a high profile property developer who has a special interest in the University, and when, during his stay in Dublin, the President of the college is murdered.

The modern state of Ireland came of age in the 1990s, finally separating the State from the Catholic Church, and legalising divorce and homosexuality. The new Zeitgeist of uncovering the silenced, taboo issues of Irish history created a perfect context for the incorporation of crime fiction into Irish literature, as this new medium provided a forum for a different way of analyzing Irish society that was unrelated to the old order of religious authority. In Bruen's *The Magdalen Martyrs* for example, the history of the Magdalen laundries is deliberately juxtaposed with the modern investigation. Jack Taylor tries to find a woman who formerly ran an institution where his friend's mother spent time. The Magdalen asylum is described in short interludes from the contemporary story: 'During the endless sessions of rosaries and prayers at the Magdalen, in the days before it finally closed, the girls thought of

but one thing: they thought of a day when they'd be able to have a space to breathe and associate beads with something other than punishment' (Bruen 2003, 236).

Technological advances too impacted on the advent of crime fiction, felt by Irish consumers in widespread access to satellite television and the internet. This meant that the Irish were already familiar with many of the traits of American crime fiction, through television and films. With Ireland now participating in the same consumer-driven society, the appropriation of American crime fiction onto an Irish context was relatively easy because the groundwork had already been laid. Gerry McCarthy notes that 'Irish noir has a unique power. It describes a violent clash of world views, where the old primal brutality takes on the heartless modernity of the new order' (McCarthy 2006). In this way, the fusion of American crime-fiction with an Irish setting embodies the cultural clash between the older, traditional, more insular Irish society, with the newer society that affiliates itself with mainstream Western culture, and particularly with America. In Bruen's *Priest*, the traditional Catholic hegemony doesn't clash completely with the new technological society: in some ways, it appropriates it. Taylor is aghast when he discovers that the candles in his local Church have become automated, and the enclosed order of nuns, the Poor Clares, have gone online, claiming that they accept all major credit cards (Bruen 2006, 138).

This article is not a comprehensive survey of Irish crime-writing, because that would require a longer forum, but it does provide a selection of recent Irish crime fiction, analyzing the various ways in which developments in Irish society have created the space for crime fiction, and how the genre has responded, commented on, and reacted to these. As a form, crime fiction not only tackles topical issues that very often are not dealt with in mainstream Irish fiction. Its European and American origins mean that it exemplifies the globalised, centrifugal contemporary Irish identity. Bruen's edited collection of short stories, *Dublin Noir*, sums up the overlap between internationalism and Irishness that characterizes Irish crime fiction in theme and in form. The collection includes writers from Ireland, Europe and the USA, including both insider and outsider perspectives on the country. Notably, though the collection is part of a relatively new genre in Ireland, it locates itself within Irish literature as an agent of transformation and deconstruction and does not shy away from comparison with famous Irish writers of the past: 'If you want it Dublin', says Bruen in his introduction, 'then you want it...dark as the smile on Joyce's face when he found he was on the index of banned books' (Bruen 2006, 10). Samuel Beckett's famous dictum, 'only connect' is appropriated to describe the connection between countries all over the globe in these crime stories about Dublin. And the book also includes the Galway perspective on Dublin, which Bruen relates to Joyce's wife Nora, who was originally from Galway, first meeting Joyce when she traveled to Dublin for work. Crime fiction is firmly embedded in an Irish history of dissent and unconventionality, when he remarks that, 'If nothing else, we knew it would make Nora Barnacle smile' (Bruen 2006, 11).

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