Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987–2007

Liam Harte
Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel
1987–2007
READING THE NOVEL

General Editor: Daniel R. Schwarz

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Some parts of this book have been previously published, though all have been revised and expanded for publication here. Different versions of the Introduction and Chapters 4, 5, 8 and 9 have appeared in the following forms: “‘Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again’: Irish fiction and autobiography since 1990,” in Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices,
The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981)\(^1\)

Our mistake was to assume that we could be at home in a single nation. We fed ourselves on ideologies of violence and instant salvation, the illusion that history is a continuum moving forward to its perfect destiny. We thus forgot that we can never be at home anywhere. Perhaps it is one of the functions of writers and artists to remind the nation of this. To expose the old ideologies. To feel in exile abroad and also when one returns home. To remain faithful to the no-place (*u-topos*) in us all.

Neil Jordan, “Imagining Otherwise” (1988)\(^2\)

This book examines some of the most well-known and critically feted works of contemporary Irish literary fiction, all of which were published during a twenty-year period that witnessed accelerated change in virtually every sphere of the country’s economic, social, cultural, political, and religious life, and which was paralleled by an uncommon flourishing of literary and artistic creativity.\(^3\)
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It is written primarily for third-level students of Irish literature and culture, and as such my textual choices have been significantly influenced by university syllabi at home and abroad, though my chief guide has been my sense of the moral and aesthetic quality of the fiction itself. I have also drawn on my extensive experience of teaching and writing about Irish fiction outwith Ireland over the past two decades, of which this book is the latest fruit. As the select number of novels chosen for analysis indicates, this study does not purport to be comprehensive in its scope or set out to offer a final account of a subject whose defining characteristic is its thematic and stylistic diversity. Nor am I trying to recommend a canon of contemporary Irish fiction: we are much too close in time to this literary corpus to achieve anything approaching a settled perspective on it. Moreover, eight of the nine novelists whose work is discussed in this study are still flourishing, and I suspect every reader will wish certain authors had been represented by a different novel.

In terms of its methodology, this book does not advocate any one critical approach to the Irish novel or seek to clothe it in an overarching theory, not least because most of my chosen works resist or exceed conventional critical categories. Instead, I adopt freely as I see fit from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, guided by the resonances and refractions of each text. Such a pluralistic approach means that no single thesis or expository framework governs my analysis. Direct, close engagement with the individual texts matters more to me than elaborating a fixed critical position or adhering to a particular academic mandate. Rather than provide a stocktaking of literary trends or parse the contemporary canon according to various “isms,” my aim has been to offer substantial and detailed critical readings of some of the works I consider to be the most sharply provocative and keenly insightful recent fictional enquiries into particular aspects of Irish history, culture, and society. That “some” is worth stressing: the book could easily have expanded to twice its eventual size, given the richness of the primary sources from which to choose. As it is, all nine of the novelists discussed here have won international acclaim for the literary excellence of their human and social portraiture. Between them, they have garnered an array of prestigious citations and awards, including the Costa Book of the Year Award (Sebastian Barry), the European Prize for Literature (Edna O’Brien), the Guardian Fiction Prize (Seamus Deane), the Impac Dublin Literary Award (Colm Tóibín), the Irish Times/Aer Lingus Literary Award (John McGahern and Patrick McCabe), the Man Booker Prize (Roddy Doyle and Anne Enright), and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award (William Trevor).

But even without such garlands, there are good grounds for ranking the accomplishments of the contemporary cohort of Irish novelists highly and for devoting serious critical attention to their contribution to the unsettling and remaking of the national imagination that has accompanied the country’s
reinvention of itself since the 1980s. The artistry, diversity, and incisiveness of these and other novelists’ narrative responses to the changing life of the times in general, and to the complexities of a mutating Irish culture and identity in particular, has made for universally compelling works of fiction that have extended and consolidated the Irish novelistic tradition after Joyce, intellectually, affectively, and imaginatively. “The Irish novel is intensely related to the body politic,” observes Colm Tóibín, and in the work of the nine novelists under discussion here the narration of the nation takes on a heightened interrogative and sociological complexion. Each of these writers strategically collapses the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience and to explore the gap between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity, and place. The interconnected themes of history, memory, and belonging – all fiercely contested categories in Irish cultural discourse – are therefore central to the book’s focus. So too is the ideology of the nuclear family, which circulates through these eleven novels with cyclonic persistence, fanning the warring energies that permeate the parent-child relationships they portray. Although they exceed any single story we might wish to tell about them, all of these novels were composed at a time when the artificially constructed narratives of Irishness that claimed cultural authority since the foundation of the state were giving way to a rich diffusion of voices and perspectives, inflected by a complex interplay of competing artistic, political, and social agendas. Each of these authors participates in this process of renegotiating received meanings of nationality and creating spaces for a revised rhetoric of Irishness, just as each seeks a literary language, rhythm, and form that might match what Fin-tan O’Toole described as “the angular, discontinuous, spliced-together nature of contemporary Irish reality.” Some do it by offering charged portrayals of individuals and communities in chronic crisis; others by fashioning scenarios that foreground contradiction, contingency, and open-endedness; and others still by focusing on protagonists whose singular choices and stigmatized identities unsettle authorized narratives of belonging. Generational and attitudinal differences notwithstanding, all nine novelists find deficiencies in totalizing narratives of the past, refuse to fix the nation in unambiguous paradigms, and pose awkward, complex questions about the adequacy of nationality as a foundational fiction for the self.

Having situated my chosen novels within a particular sociohistorical matrix, it behoves me to provide some calibration of the realities with which they engage, though I do so in the full knowledge that any scene-setting survey can but skim the surface. A small sampling of social and political contexts must be made nonetheless. Few cultural critics would disagree that the Ireland of 1987 was a society in the throes of political and economic crisis, with optimism in
short supply within both jurisdictions on the island. Writing in July of that year, the journalist Tim Pat Coogan described the country as “a world trouble spot” that infiltrates “the subconscious of television viewers and newspaper readers [through] such words as ‘hunger strikes’, ‘IRA’, ‘Paisley’, ‘murder.’” He was, of course, referring to Northern Ireland, which was still mired in an intractable bloody struggle between two mutually exclusive sets of nationalisms. The situation got bleaker still on November 8, 1987, when 11 people were killed by an IRA bomb at a Remembrance Day ceremony in the Fermanagh town of Enniskillen, an atrocity that inflamed murderous sectarian divisions even further. Meanwhile, the Republic was enduring its own social and economic purgatory, as Coogan noted: “at the time of writing, there are more people unemployed (240,000) than work in manufacturing industry or as farmers. Forty percent of the Irish population depends to some extent on social welfare.” These statistics would have been much worse were it not for emigration, the “mirror in which the Irish nation can always see its true face,” as Liam Ryan so aptly described it at the time. The latest – so-called “third wave” – of emigration peaked in the 1987–1989 period, during which an estimated 172,000 people left the Republic, the great majority of whom went to Britain. Coogan’s account of his chance meeting with six recently arrived Irish graduates on a London bus in September 1986 provides a snapshot of the nature and scale of this scattering:

All six had just qualified as civil engineers and they had with them the previous Sunday’s Sunday Press, which carried a large picture of their graduating class – of the 47 beaming young faces in the photograph, only one had a permanent job in Ireland, two had temporary work, and the other 44 were emigrants. Very few, initially at least, were working as engineers. My six had worked as labourers, temporary barmen, whatever they could get, in some cases at jobs lasting only four or six days each. […] They had been doubling up in friends’ bedsitters, sneaking into hostels after hours with illegally-held keys, and generally subsisting in a variety of ways never envisaged by themselves or their parents as they worked their way through sixteen difficult, costly years of education.

Seven years later, in late 1993, the commentator John Waters was so dismayed by the ongoing effects of this still-unstanched human exodus that he sounded an extravagant death knell for a moribund nation:

Walk into almost any town in the west of Ireland and take a deep breath. You will inhale the smell of the decomposition of the Irish economy. This is the smell of Appalachia. If you do not believe the evidence of your own lungs, look up the
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most recent census figures which show that every county and town in the west of Ireland suffered dramatic population losses in the five years to 1991. We are losing our people at a frightening rate. [...] This country is finished. A year or two ago, I might have added an ‘unless we do X or Y...’ But the time for unlesses has run out. Our condition is terminal; it is just a matter of a few years.¹¹

While it is easy in retrospect to smile at how spectacularly wrong Waters’ controversy-courting pronouncement was soon proved to be, his despair is a useful barometer of national morale on the eve of the Republic’s improbable 1990s economic revival. For by the time the few years in question had elapsed, this seemingly doomed polity had transformed itself into a booming high-tech economy, one suffused with optimism and cultural confidence and experiencing previously unheard-of levels of prosperity. Ireland’s astonishing makeover from pauper to prince was driven by a variety of factors, some of which originated from outside the country and some from earlier political choices and shifts in government economic policy (though time would expose the profound, and profoundly consequential, lack of political vision behind the country’s slavish embrace of global capitalism). Economist Daniel McCoy summarizes the key drivers of growth as follows:

EU membership and access to the Single Market; Ireland’s low corporation tax rate and a large multinational presence, particularly from the U.S.; a high proportion of the population of working age; increased participation in the labor market, especially by females; a reversal of the trend of emigration toward immigration; sustained investment in education and training; coordinated social partnership agreements; and a more stable public finance position.¹²

The social effects of sudden prosperity soon became graphically apparent in the form of hyperconsumerism, urban gridlock, breakneck building projects, soaring property prices, and a dramatic increase in immigration from central Europe, Asia, and Africa, which peaked at almost 110,000 in the twelve months to April 2007, and was both the herald of a multicultural future and a trigger for racially motivated attacks on foreigners.¹³ The benefits of the boom were far from evenly distributed, however, and the exclusionary processes it produced fuelled rising levels of social inequality, criminality, homelessness, alcohol consumption, and suicide.¹⁴ Nevertheless, by the century’s end, Ireland Inc. was being touted as the poster child of globalization, topping the index of the most globalized nations on earth in 2000 and 2001, as measured by the Washington-based Foreign Policy magazine.¹⁵ With an annual average growth
rate of 6.5% throughout the 1990s, the Republic’s economic resurrection drew favorable comparisons with the “tiger” economies of East Asia, prompting a London-based economist with the investment bank Morgan Stanley to coin the appellation “Celtic Tiger” on August 31, 1994, a term that, as Colin Coulter notes, would soon “slip its moorings” and “come to operate as a widely recognized and understood master signifier for a very particular and essentially hegemonic reading of the nature of contemporary Irish society.”

By coincidence, August 31, 1994 was also the day on which the IRA declared “a complete cessation of military operations,” an announcement that proved to be the first of several watershed moments in the Northern Ireland “peace process,” shorthand for the province’s tortuously slow transition from protracted civil conflict to a negotiated political settlement between unionism, nationalism, and the Irish and British governments. When the resultant Belfast Agreement of 1998 created the conditions for economic regeneration north of the border, many were persuaded that a tamer cousin of the phantasmal beast running amok down south had emerged. Nine years later, just before the rampant Tiger vanished like the Cheshire cat’s grin, the world’s media again reverberated with the words “IRA” and “Paisley,” but this time in circumstances that would have been utterly unimaginable to Coogan and his readers two decades earlier. In May 2007 Sinn Féin (the IRA’s political alter ego) and the Democratic Unionist Party, still led by Ian Paisley, reached a historic agreement to share power in the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, thus clearing the way for the cogovernance of the province by the “extremes” of nationalism and unionism. Both parties were returned to power in the 2011 Assembly elections and, at the time of writing (spring 2013), still lead a multiparty coalition. Bone-deep ethnic and sectarian divisions persist behind these power-sharing arrangements, however, and sporadic paramilitary violence continues to threaten the province’s political and economic future, as does the embittered alienation of those socially deprived communities that have not felt the benefit of any peace dividend.

These, then, are some of the significant milestones on Ireland’s journey from the “creeping catastrophe” and “petty apocalypse” of the 1980s to socioeconomic and cultural revitalization in the 2000s, during which Irishness became for a time a fashionable global brand, having been “sanitised and made remarkably accommodating to the dominant elitist project of subservient assimilation into multinational capitalism; robbed of reference points from a rich and subversive history.” The story of societal and attitudinal change is much more complex than this limited summary allows, however, and, as in any society, whether “in transition” or not, a proliferation of continuities and counter-currents complicate conventional linear notions of change and development. From many (poorer) people’s perspective, little changed fundamentally during
the years of Ireland’s intensive economic growth and it wasn’t hard to discern the undertow of nineteenth-century currents beneath globalized surfaces. So while it is necessary to acknowledge the radical displacement of long-standing historical patterns, we should also bear in mind the enduring antinomies of modernity and tradition in the new Irish commercial culture of the 1990s and 2000s. Take the example of Catholic religiosity in the Republic. On the face of it, the sudden surge in levels of personal affluence in the 1990s quickened the trend toward secularism and accelerated the jettisoning of traditional social and moral orthodoxies, although money was not the sole or even the primary factor in these developments. The decline in the authority of Catholic churchmen on state and society was already underway by the time the nation’s coffers began to swell, as a more critically aware and less deferential populace rejected the idea that civil law in a pluralist society should be based on the teachings of one religion. The scandal generated by the revelation in 1992 that Eamon Casey, the high-profile Bishop of Galway, had fathered a son with an Irish-American divorcée eighteen years earlier had a seismic impact on the ordinary faithful, exposing the moral hypocrisy of an all-pervading institution in Irish life. To observers such as Colm Tóibín, the news was not wholly unexpected:

For years, it had been clear that something like this would have to come into the open. In the mid-eighties, rancorous battles had been fought over divorce and abortion, and the liberal side – our side – had lost. There were times when we felt the country was going to burst at the seams with hypocrisy.20

Yet as Tóibín goes on to note, the scandal proved to be “only one of several previously unimaginable incidents that began to transform both the moral and the political climate of Holy Catholic Ireland.”21 The bishop’s transgression soon paled beside the litany of horrific crimes committed against children and vulnerable young adults by pedophile priests and religious leaders, which were routinely covered up by the church hierarchy until their widespread media exposure in the 1990s and 2000s. Years of official investigation into the chronic emotional, physical, and sexual abuse inflicted upon children in various religious-run institutions culminated in the publication in 2009 of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, commonly known as the Ryan Report, which outlined the crimes of more than 800 known abusers in over 200 institutions during a period of thirty-five years. An Irish Times editorial described the Report as “the map of an Irish hell” and starkly set out the consequences of the findings for the nation’s self-image: “We have to deal with
the now-established fact that, alongside the warmth and intimacy, the kindness and generosity of Irish life, there was, for most of the history of the State, a deliberately maintained structure of vile and vicious abuse. [...] Abuse was not a failure of the system. It was the system."22 "Never before," observed one commentator, "has a single, formerly powerful, and highly respected sector of Irish society turned, within little more than a decade, into a focus for almost universal contempt and condemnation."23

And yet despite the damage done to its temporal power and influence by these clerical scandals, the Catholic Church did not wither. Catholicism remains the dominant religion in the state, in spite of the church’s crisis of credibility and the rise of religious pluralism. Census results from 2002 and 2006 showed that, although religious practice was in decline, the great majority of the population (90% and 87%, respectively) still identified themselves as Catholic, and pilgrimage sites such as Lough Derg in County Donegal and Knock in County Mayo have continued to thrive.24 Indeed, Knock, the site of a reported Marian apparition in 1879, made national headlines in late 2009 and again in 2010 when several thousand people flocked there in response to predictions by a self-proclaimed visionary of an imminent apparition by the Virgin Mary. In scenes that recalled earlier outbreaks of magical devotionalism at times of socioeconomic crisis, the credulous and the curious stared at the sun for hours, camera phones and digital recorders in hand. From this, one might conclude that whereas the Catholic Church’s psychosexual stranglehold has weakened, the grip of folk religion on many Irish minds endures.

Any account of the peculiar nature of Irish modernity must therefore attend to what sociologist Carmen Kuhling terms “the diverse and antagonistic character of the transformations that have accompanied Ireland’s experience of accelerated modernization.”25 She herself borrows Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” to make sense of the contradictory cultural tendencies that characterize a society being reshaped in the furnace of globalization and the communications revolution. Her claim that “The experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities – an experience of liminality,”26 chimes with film historian Martin McLoone’s memorable assertion that Ireland in the swinging 1990s inhabited “a cultural space somewhere between its nationalist past, its European future and its American imagination.”27 Such diagnoses speak to the pervasive sense of fragmentation and unease that was one of the most notable corollaries of the country’s newfound prosperity and economic self-confidence. Reflecting on the international marketing of Irish cultural distinctiveness in the 1990s through such forms as the theme pub and the musical extravaganza Riverdance, Terence Brown concluded: “In such phenomena, Irish identity, rather
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than remaking itself in acts of imagination, seemed bereft of significance, a simulacrum in a world of simulacra, where meaning had been hollowed out to allow for the easy transportation and assembly of Ireland Lite.”28 But perhaps the most succinct summary of the depthless nature of Irish capitalist modernity was provided by the commentator who declared that “Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, not Irish, nor Anglo-Irish.”29 A vivid verdict to be sure, but not a recent one, considering the writer was Daniel Corkery and the year not 1991 or 2001 but 1931. I cite his remarks as a reminder that anxieties about the instability and inauthenticity of Irish cultural identity are by no means new. Flux rather than fixity has been the historical norm, a point that should be borne in mind at the same time as we acknowledge that each generation fashions its own diverse set of responses to an identity that has long been perceived as being out of joint.

The specific novelistic challenges presented by the splintering of the grand récit of Irishness under the impact of 1990s globalization were succinctly set out by Fintan O’Toole in a 2001 Irish Times article:

What has happened, essentially, is that the emergence of a frantic, globalised, dislocated Ireland has deprived fiction writers of some of their traditional tools. One is a distinctive sense of place. To write honestly of where most of us live now is to describe everywhere and nowhere [...]. The other troublesome change is the collapse of the very notion of a national narrative. Throughout the 20th century, it was possible for Irish writers to tell stories which seemed in one way or another to relate to a bigger story of revival, revolution, repression and collapse. [...] These days, it is by no means clear what the big story of Ireland actually is, or indeed that the whole notion of 'Ireland' as a single framework has any validity.30

Given these challenges, critical evaluations of the effectiveness of literary novelists’ negotiation of the relationship between the social and the imaginary orders during this era of long-term cultural shifts have tended to be quite negative. Before the 1990s were out, George O’Brien was expressing concern at the lack of concerted fictional treatment of social change: “All too few contemporary Irish literary novels portray the shifts in class structure, the political fallout, the moral challenges, the conflict of outlooks that have typified Irish life of late, and in doing so has lent the airs and graces of modern democracy to Ireland at the present time.”31 While sympathizing with the novelist’s predicament, Declan
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Kiberd also bemoaned the paucity of meaningful fictive engagement with the dynamics of a rapidly changing society:

There is no Trollopian *The Way We Live Now*, much less a Tom Wolfe-style *Bonfire of the Vanities* even among our younger writers. The pace of change may be just too fast for most, for it is never easy to take a clear photograph of a moving object, especially when you are up close to it. Nothing, after all, is more difficult to realise than the present – we are always at its mercy more than we are its masters.32

Others took a more critical line, indicting the contemporary generation of novelists for their stubborn fixation with the past. In a 2010 broadside, the Berlin-based novelist Julian Gough stirred up controversy by caricaturing Irish “literary writers” as “a priestly caste, scribbling by candlelight, cut off from the electric current of the culture,”33 an analogy that recalled Joe Cleary’s critique of Irish literary and cinematic production during the 1990s:

Far from suggesting a climate of radical innovation or dramatic new departures, nearly all the most critically lauded and commercially successful Irish works of that decade continued to be very strikingly invested in ‘the dark ages’ of the mid-twentieth century rural Ireland that the country had supposedly left behind. [...] The Celtic Tiger of the 1990s may have been attempting to get as far away as fast as it possibly could from de Valera’s Ireland, but in the literary, dramatic and cinematic worlds that Ireland continued to be the biggest business in town.34

While it is true that Ireland’s difficult history, including the revolutionary ferment of the 1916–1923 period, has been the focus of much recent Irish literary fiction, such criticisms miss several key points about novelists’ uses of the past, the most obvious being that the turn to history and to personal and collective memory is directly related to the need for a fuller, more historicized understanding of the present. Steven Connor’s observation that in the postwar English novel “every representation of the past is a historicizing of the present, making it possible to inhabit or belong to one’s present differently,”35 is no less applicable to the contemporary Irish novel. Furthermore, to speak of the recent past as if it were unproblematically knowable and definitively “over” is surely misguided. As Hilary Mantel reminds us: “The past is not dead ground, and to traverse it is not a sterile exercise. History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it.”36 We must also acknowledge the degree to which contemporary Irish novelists have been self-consciously
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preoccupied by the conditions of possibility under which history is narratable, by the methods by which a conflict-laden past can be known, and by the ethics of historical representation. Recent years have seen the publication of several notable metaphistorical novels – Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry* (1999), Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea* (2003) – that self-reflexively grapple with the problems of historicism and ironize the uses of historical memory in the formation of modern Irish identities, individual and collective. While none of the works discussed in this study fall directly into this category, at least three – *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark* and *The Gathering* – foreground, at the level of form as well as theme, the challenges of narrating obscure, not-fully-known, and still-troubling histories in socially realistic modes. These three novels are also among the most striking fictional renderings of one of the defining preoccupations of contemporary Irish novelists: the damaging psychic and cultural legacies of violent histories of both the hidden and overt kinds. The haunting repercussions of sublimated memories, unspeakable secrets, and unprocessed histories run like a dark thread through the fabric of recent Irish fiction, making the wounded, traumatized subject one of its most representative figures. Traumatized individuals, claims Cathy Caruth, “carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess,” a pathological condition that is bound up with a profound epistemological crisis that “extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access.”

Caruth might be describing here the crisis that afflicts the protagonists of several recent Irish novels, in which there is a sustained attempt to explore the psychological and political effects of repressed or unknown histories and lay bare the social forces and cultural institutions that reinforce trauma at a national level.

Not all contemporary Irish writers deal in catastrophic histories and traumatic memories, however, or promote a view of the past as deeply operative in the present. Such themes are wearyingly burdensome to a postnationalist novelist such as Colm Tóibín, who would like to see the culture rid itself of its “terrible obsession about Ireland and Irishness, about tradition, identity and history.” For Tóibín and others, the emergence of a posthistorical Irish consciousness proves more imaginatively quickening than a brooding preoccupation with national identity and the postcolonial agendas that are often associated with it. The fault lines between those who cling to the traditional markers of cultural distinctiveness and authenticity and those who espouse a new cosmopolitan individualism are beginning to be mapped fictionally with varying degrees of seriousness and levity. For example, in Harry Clifton’s short story, “A Visitor from the Future” (2007), the depthlessness of Ireland’s globalized culture
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perturbs Ann, a disaffected university tutor. Her attempt to interest her students in an older Ireland, one in which “people were continuous with themselves, and everything could be named,” exposes deep attitudinal and generational schisms, leaving her with a “strange sense that the country she came from was levitating into a weightless, valueless space where everything equalled everything else. These things – disintegration, discontinuity – are not threatening but good, the best of them told her. Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again.” Anne Haverty’s *The Free and Easy* (2006) offers a more caustic critique of this vision of a present and, by implication, a future from which history has been evacuated. The novel, which satirizes the pretentions and snobberies of the Dublin *nouveaux riches*, stages a contest between those who want to preserve and opportunistically reinvent the nation’s heritage as a saleable commodity and those who wish to jettison tradition completely. What unites these seemingly polarized positions is a postmodern view of the past as an agreed-upon fiction. Affluent Irish modernity, the novel suggests, is underpinned by a willful amnesia and a pernicious effacement of history, traits personified by Seoda Fitzgibbon, the glamorous wife of a corrupt businessman, for whom the perpetual present is the primary ground of personal and socioeconomic success:

‘You can forget the last century. And you can definitely forget the century before. Ireland as we know it – and let’s thank whoever or whatever – was born some time around nineteen ninety-four. Or ninety-six?’ She smiled. ‘Let the historians fight about the year. Historians like to have something to fight about.’

There is a caveat to enter here, however, lest we pin the social realist label too firmly to the lapels of contemporary Irish novelists or predicate our analysis of a diverse literary corpus on a simple correspondence between literary text and social text. The hiatus between the phenomenal world and the fictive universe, between language and reality, complicates realism’s implicit claims to transparent representation. So while it is perfectly valid to argue that “the novel is not simply the product and the reflection of certain social conditions but actively contributes to producing them as the very conditions of its own reception,” we must also acknowledge that there is more to fiction than social realism, and none of the writers included in this study would want their work to be read solely or perhaps even primarily in terms of its relation to sociohistorical realities. Patrick McCabe, for instance, observed that “naturalism or realism only really provides maybe a third of the story” and John McGahern remarked in a late interview that “life is of very little use to fiction; it has to be re-imagined or changed or
altered in some way.”⁴³ Then there is the striking passage in Edna O’Brien’s memoir, Country Girl (2012), in which she recalls how, as a budding writer, she antagonized her writer-husband, Ernest Gebler, by describing a road as blue in a short story:

He erupted, saying there was no such thing as a blue road, but I knew that there was. I had seen them, I had walked on one, the hot tar smearing the white canvas of my new shoes. Roads were every colour, blue, grey, gold, sandstone and carmine. He was categorical about it. It was as if by saying it, I had defied some inalienable truth. He had to be right about everything and if he was crossed, a look of hatred came into his eyes, but to be crossed by me, a literary flibbertigibbet, was ridiculous, believing as he did that he owned me.

But in secret I clung to the blue road, while knowing that somewhere, in the distance, like a glacier, it would come between us.⁴⁴

The scene has a paradigmatic quality about it: to express herself, the apprentice female novelist must struggle against the patriarchal monopoly of literary realism and be prepared to pay an emotional price for adhering to her personal artistic vision.

Such moments remind us of the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the literary imagination and social reality in Ireland. Historically, realism has “never been less than profoundly problematic”⁴⁵ for Irish novelists, successive generations of whom have cavilled at the rebarbative anomalies and inadequacies of society and bemoaned their resistance to figuration within the representational frame of the realist text. In the 1830s Maria Edgeworth famously found it “impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see.”⁴⁶ Over a century later, Sean O’Faolain complained that the postrevolutionary social milieu was too “unshaped” to yield to the realist novelist’s pen and wrote it off as “stuff for the anthropologist rather than the man of letters.”⁴⁷ That this argument about Ireland’s lack of social density hasn’t gone away is evidenced by the remarks about language, form, and representation made by several of the novelists under discussion here. Tóibín, for instance, has spoken of his sense of being involved in the creation of an Ireland “which hasn’t yet solidified”⁴⁸ and Anne Enright has expressed her impatience with culturally determined notions of realism in Ireland, explaining: “My impulse is towards the real. That’s where I am trying to get.”⁴⁹ The frustration of this same impulse – the struggle to render in prose fiction the texture of what O’Faolain called a “thin”⁵⁰ society – bears
heavily on the novel that we shall consider in Chapter 2, McGahern’s Amongst Women, about which the author said in a 1990 interview:

Ireland isn’t like other places where the novel has flourished, in that it is so structureless. It has no formed society, no tradition of manners. Because of that, the form of the novel or the shape of a sonnet aren’t available to an Irish writer in the same way, which is a pain in the arse because they are a great saving of time. This is true of the novel more than any other form: by its history and nature, a novel is a whole world, it is more social than other forms. Here, though, you don’t have a proper society. The whole country is made up of families, each family a kind of independent republic. In Amongst Women, the family is a kind of half-way house between the individual and the society.51

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which this perception of the inadequacy of Irish society has affected contemporary novelists’ confidence in moving between the social and the aesthetic domains. Certainly, the diversity of views held by these nine writers on the role of social commentary and commitment in fiction is quite striking, the primacy of politics and history in their work notwithstanding. Anne Enright, the youngest of the nine, is reluctant to have her work appreciated only for the light it throws on contemporary Irish society, explaining: “I don’t write about Ireland so much as from Ireland.”52 The reverse is true, arguably, of Edna O’Brien who, although she left the country in 1958, has rarely strayed from Ireland in her imagination, and whose House of Splendid Isolation, discussed in Chapter 6, is part of a provocative 1990s trilogy based on headline-grabbing real-life events. Roddy Doyle is in the O’Brien mold, though he shares Enright’s resistance to rigid national categorization: “I would say, rather than being an Irish writer, I’m a writer who happens to be in Ireland. But having said that, I’ve been here for more than fifty years. And I’ve seen some extraordinary social changes.”53 Coming from a Dublin working-class background, Doyle forthrightly embraced an engagé position from the outset of his career, seeing himself as “socially committed and politically engaged” and believing that it is “important to upset and outrage people.”54 Contrast this with William Trevor’s presentation of himself as an unaligned storyteller: “I don’t really want to make any statement. I see the writing of a story as creating an impression, and that impression is going to communicate itself to somebody else. That’s all I seek to do.”55 Even if we allow for a measure of disingenuousness, Trevor’s outlook is far removed from that of Seamus Deane. A product of post-partition working-class Derry, Deane has always championed politically committed art and criticism, and since the 1970s has been a combative arbiter of the terms in which Irish cultural history can be retrieved and appraised. Moreover, his anti-revisionist
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and anti-unionist politics are the antithesis of those espoused by Sebastian Barry, Enright, and Tóibín, the last of whom was one of the most trenchant critics of Deane’s groundbreaking *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), which Tóibín regarded as canonizing a narrow and anachronistic version of Irish literary nationalism.\(^{56}\)

Curiously, Tóibín himself tends to regard his own fiction as something of a politics-free zone, telling one interviewer:

\[\text{I think society in my novels is like the background colour in a portrait. I am more interested in the intricacies and secreries of the self than I am in politics and society. They have to be there but most of the thinking I do is about character itself. […] I think I feel free not to bother too much with large political questions in the novel, or dramatisations of change, because I am, when not writing novels, really alert to them, and interested in them. I follow them and I know them. But I keep the novels pure.}^{57}\]

Not only is the concept of purity that Tóibín invokes here puzzling – especially when one considers Edna O’Brien’s observation that “everything is political: one’s upbringing, the culture in which one grows up, even religion is political, whether we like it or not”\(^{58}\) – it is also undercut by the novel of his we shall discuss in Chapter 4, *The Heather Blazing*, which is an intensely political work. This discussion is preceded by a critical appraisal of *The Butcher Boy* by McCabe, whose reflections on the relationship between societal change and the artistic imagination wryly warn against myopically reading novels as social or political bulletins:

\[\text{I have always been of the opinion that the fictional chroniclers of epoch-making, glacial movements of history will tend to be authors who, when they first sat down at their desk, were convinced that their chosen subject involved being bitten by a crab at the age of seven or rejected by a woman at the age of 21, theirs among the first eyebrows to raise when it emerges their story is, in fact, about the displacement of millions and the collapse of empire.}\(^{59}\]

In the textual readings that follow, therefore, I try to provide contextual interpretations of my chosen texts and attend to the particularities of the writing itself, while remaining alert to the fact that these novels are as much about the state of being alive as they are about the state of the nation. Often, of course, ontological and national concerns go hand in hand. The trilogy of novels by Doyle that is the subject of Chapter 1 appears to be much more
invested in representing the alienated lives and relationships of working-class
denizens of 1980s Dublin than in calibrating the nation’s political or cultural
health, until we realize that Doyle’s privileging of the raw, colloquial utterance
of his culturally invisible Dubliners carries a pungent political statement about
social inequality and class prejudice before the influx of global capital during
the boom years. Context also incorporates matters of literary tradition and
influence and, as one would expect, the work of these nine novelists bears
the marks of many antecedents, from Stendhal and Henry James to Ernest
Hemingway, James Baldwin, Angela Carter and, inevitably, James Joyce. Back
in the mid-1970s Denis Donoghue claimed that “The contemporary Irish
novelist looks for a tradition capable of telling him what has been done and how
he ought to proceed: instead he finds Joyce, an overbearing presence.”60 Forty
years on, this is no longer a truth that can be universally acknowledged. While
it remains the case that some contemporary Irish novelists continue to regard
Joyce as a tutelary figure – chief among them Edna O’Brien, who said of her
stylistic and moral mentor that “In the constellation of geniuses, he is a blinding
light and father of us all”61 – I suspect few would now speak of Joyce as possess-
ing a “peculiar, impregnable, frightening authority,”62 as John Banville did in
1990. The easing of this monumental anxiety of influence is audible in Deane’s
response to a question about literary models for Reading in the Dark – “I tried
not to think of Joyce but of course he was there anyway”63 – and in McCabe’s
sense of Joyce as an enabling contemporary rather than a stifling predecessor:
“I remember picking up a copy of Dubliners and thinking ‘This could have been
written yesterday’. […] [S]omehow just the sheer brilliance, the art of Joyce
made it seem so contemporary, it was absolutely mindblowing.”64 Enright is
even more animated about the liberating impact of Joyce’s example and keen
to seize the opportunity to possess and extend his legacy through her own
work: “I pilfer freely from Joyce, I have no problem doing that. […] It’s not a
competition with Joyce. […] Joyce did not throw a shadow, he cast a great light.
He made it possible to write about anything at all.”65 But it is perhaps Tóibín
who provides the most radical updating of Donoghue’s thesis. Echoing Samuel
Beckett’s claim that “The artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no
kith,”66 Tóibín insists on the necessary solitariness of the creative imagination
and reminds us that every artistic work is its own freshly created universe:

The imagination at work is always alone, no matter how strong a tradition or
sense of community. The mind making images does so singly, in moments of
fierce concentration, suddenly, as though this had never been done before, as
though the task of now were the only task there ever would be.67