BELFAST
RELIABLE
NEWS

04 *Tell*

“There is no human situation so miserable that it cannot be made worse by the presence of a policeman.”

Brendan Behan

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Before I took two months off, to come to Belfast to work on my photographic project on divided societies – which of course was nowhere near finish after the two months, in fact, I’m still here – I’ve spent a lot of time reading. I loved the danders to the library through early morning Zurich, descending to the underground levels of the old building and walking through endless corridors of shelves full of books. Politics, history, military, art, literature, law, anything broadening my mind regarding Irish complexities was welcome. The history of Ireland is primarily a history of exploitation, famine, migration, and demands for independence. After so many dives into stories of colonialism, miscarriages of justice, doomed battles and human suffering, I subconsciously read my way into the literary section, though ignoring Ulysses and Finnegan’s Wake, straight into crime fiction’s haven. Probably muttering on an even deeper subconscious level Walter Benjamin’s

“No matter what trail the flaneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime.”

When I walk into NO ALIBI on Botanic Avenue – THE bookshop for crime fiction, THE bookshop for inspiration, one of the few survivors in this neoliberal rage against small business and independent thinking – I can choose from a wide range of award winning local crime fiction writers. That hasn’t always been the case. For a long time crime fiction was snubbed upon, wouldn’t have been accepted in the grand world of high literature, and the same verdict fell on romance, science fiction or graphic novels. This literary bias mirrors an underlying class bias, a much bigger issue here in Belfast than in Switzerland. (I have to say that my mum, a professional bookseller herself, looked down on crime fiction wholeheartedly, though this had nothing to do with class snobbery but with her inability to bare the suspense.) The situation has considerably improved and it’s widely accepted by now, that the best crime novels are written by working-class writers and feature working-class heroes with working-class villains that chase each other in blue-collar towns and estates.

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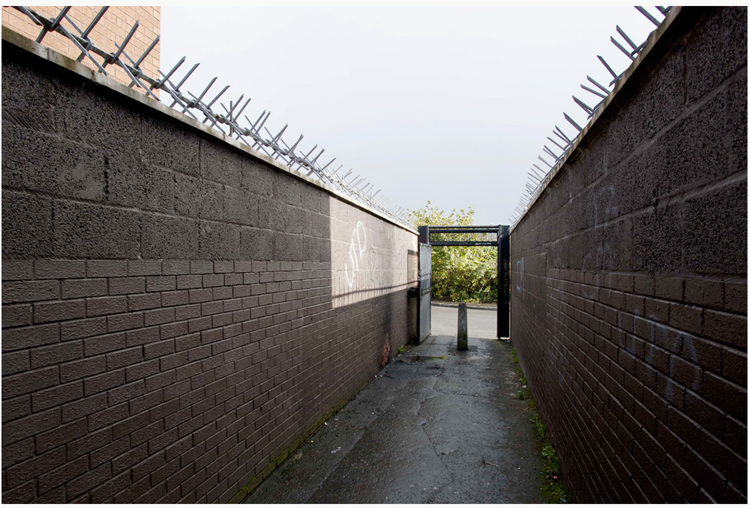
Until the early 1990s, many thrillers on Irish matters were written by non-Irish people characterising the Irish as the jolly ploughboy, the Irish rebel, the romantic gunman, the brutal and misguided terrorist. In prison for bombing the Brighton Hotel in 1984, Pat Magee wrote his PhD on the representation of Irish Republicans in Troubles fiction. Most striking, he found, was that

“Britain is rarely depicted as part of the problem; never mind, as republicans would argue, the problem. Various permutations of the formula reveal a blarney-spouting thug with a ‘ferrety look’ and halitosis or ‘the Fenian world of rotten teeth and puffy botched skin’. In this murky light, the violence attributed to republicans results from an ingrained bloodlust and is not the effect or symptom of profound political grievances.”

It’s much harder to explore and express what has happened by drawing from experience, talking about things that you know, feel, smell, fear, live through than helping yourself to widely recognised and accepted narratives. But cliche is dangerous and turns quickly into banalities. It is important to contest prejudices and stereotypes by humanising the characters and correct misrepresentations for the sake of adequate understanding.



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Belfast, an economical mecca in the empire turning provincial backwater after partition and war-zone during the conflict. A bleak, eerie, ghostly place, with military structures, soldiers and helicopters, eternal rain and fog, bomb sites and a dying industry. A place where suspicion, fear and violence were moulding hearts and minds and dark things were happening – a perfect location for crime stories. But there was a very defined lack of interest from editor, to writer and reader to delve into dark things when what you had outside your door were dark things happening and where you had to consider your word carefully.

"Many of us walked a tightrope with the IRA at one end, and the British Army and loyalist paramilitaries at the other. You had to be careful abut what you said and wrote. Words could kill. If you said the wrong thing, you might never be seen again. The phrase whatever you say, say nothing *was a mantra for survival."* Sharon Dempsey, writer

(Something that journalists, solicitors and politicians still need to consider today, if they don't want to get into the backsight of officially disbanded but still existing paramilitaries.)

But it's not just the paramilitaries or non-Irish upper-class that made it difficult for the crime fiction genre during the best part of the last century. There was also State and Church. Rigorously they spread their protective wings over a potentially mislead people by confiscating immoral crime novels from ferry passengers at the ports. There you go.

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Over twenty years into the peace process, society based on tit for tat, based on revenge and vengeance merge into a more civilised society where the responsibility for revenge is passed to the state. Writers obviously feel more at ease to explore the violent past in a new imaginative form, navigate this potential minefield and retelling the story of Belfast. With time and distance it's easier to tackle sensitive issues that haven't completely gone away. People have suffered, people live with trauma as a result. It's not something to make light entertainment out of. And it's not something that a portion of Irish humour would shy away from. Something I learned at NOIRLAND, the crime fiction festival that in 2017 took place at the most bombed Hotel in Belfast – the EUROPA.

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Adrian McKinty grew up in a Protestant housing estate during the Troubles but eventually moved to Australia, where, in order to write, he pulls down the shades and puts on a soundtrack of gusty rainfalls. He is the author of the Sean Duffy thrillers, a series of books where the hero, a Catholic policeman in the 1980s is confronted not only with a civil war in the streets of Belfast, but with sectarian skirmishes from within his workspace and threats from the republican as well as the loyalist paramilitaries. During an interview with Martin Doyle, book editor of THE IRISH TIMES, Adrian pointed out how much fun it was for him to create this character:

Martin Doyle:
Was Sean Duffy always going to be a Catholic policeman?

Adrian McKinty:
Oh absolutely. I was going to put him up in my house where I was born and grew up, I was going to put him in my street as well, with all my neighbours under fake names and I thought: What would annoy those neughbours the most? Well first of all, he's gotta be a Catholic. That's gonna really really tick them off. Second of all, he's gonna be a policeman, they're not gonna like that. A Catholic and a policeman, he's gonna have authority over them, that's gonna tick them off. And third of all I'm gonna make him bohemian. This middle-class guy, bohemian, he knows who the Velvet Underground are."

During the Troubles, Catholics made up only around 7% of the police force. For Catholics, it was a dangerous career move, not only because policing in a war zone IS dangerous, but because it wasn't in the IRA's ethos to take part in protecting a state that in their view – and in the view of about a third of its population – was illegitimate. Or as Sean Duffy in GUN STREET GIRL stoically puts it,

"It certainly didn't help that I was a Catholic. A Catholic in Carrickfergus was bad enough, but a Catholic policeman? My life expectancy could be measured in dog years."

Whilst this line really makes me laugh, the situation today is not altogether different, if not as harsh, not as obviously absurd anymore. The Royal Ulster Constabulary is now the Police Services of Northern Ireland and Catholics make up around 32% of the organisation. On the upper echelons Catholics (as well as women, but that's not a Belfast speciality) are a rare species.

The threat against Catholic police officers from dissident republicans, who didn't buy into the peace process, is still ongoing. In 2010, a bomb under constable Peadar Heffron's car exploded and left him with an amputated leg. The year after, constable Ronan Kerr was killed and in 2009, constable Stephen Carroll responded to an emergency alert where he was shot dead. In this specific case it's not so clear who really was behind the attack. Two men are in prison, but the case is weak and talk of miscarriage of justice is loud.

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After the PSNI replaced the RUC in 2001, a 50/50 recruitment policy – one Catholic recruit for every one person from a Protestant or other background – was set in place, it ran until 2011. Today the numbers of Catholic recruits are falling dramatically and the call for a return to 50/50 comes not only from nationalist politicians, but from the Catholic Primate Eamon Martin himself. Another plan to push the numbers is to establish a Catholic Police Officers Guild to provide pastoral care for practising Roman Catholics in the police service. And by the way, with only a few more Catholics, the PSNI GAA might even survive.

Back in the days, local authors were told to place their stories in Glasgow or Liverpool. Nobody wanted to be reminded of Belfast, that desolate failure of a town, that awful place where all the terrorists come from. They didn't see how inspiring this – in their view – societal and cultural backwater was. How an artist could meander through the darkness of a society pushed to the extreme, and explore it forensically. How a talented writer could turn horrific realities into suspense and entertainment without trivialise the actual event. Crime calls for a dark city full of lost and hopeless souls. Belfast lends itself to crime fiction.

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With the end of daily acts of sectarian violence and relative peace in the streets of Belfast, there is now space for dark writing.

Paul Burke, Nothing in Isolation: Irish Crime Fiction, The Troubles and The Last Crossing, 08/05/2020
Sharon Dempsey, Nordy Noir Knocks at the Door, 01/01/2019
Aaron Kelly, The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969, 2005
Patrick Magee, My Troubles with fiction, 22/10/2015
Adrian McKinty at NOIRLAND, 28/10/2017