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Narratives of apprehension: crime fiction and the aftermath of the Northern Irish Troubles

Abstract:

With over four hundred produced between 1969 and 1998, the thriller was the most popular fictional form of representing the Northern Ireland Troubles. Critics, however, were highly dismissive of the genre, claiming it offered little more than clichés and stereotypes, and that it marked the enthronement and reiteration of a problematically reductive take on the conflict. The Belfast Agreement (1998) signalled the official end of the Troubles and the beginning of what many hoped would be a new era in Northern Irish history. The decades since the Agreement era have witnessed a remarkable resurgence of interest, both critically and creatively, in crime fiction, and in the ways in which the hermeneutic codes of the genre might be brought to bear on the various legacies of the Troubles. For a new generation of Northern Irish crime writers, academic critics and literary novelists the possibilities and limitations of genre fiction have provided an arena in which key issues might be theorised and thought through; these include the challenge of dealing with the past, questions about truth recovery and transitional justice, and the need within the region to achieve some form of closure on the traumatic events of recent years. Far from continuing a process of ideological reductionism, post-Agreement crime fiction has exemplary value. Drawing inspiration from the police procedural, the comic thriller and the noir-ish *Weltanschauung* of hard-boiled detective fiction, it contains a series of idiosyncratic and sophisticated responses to the aftermath of political conflict.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

Like the region itself, Northern Irish crime fiction has endured a vexed and difficult history. The Troubles is the euphemism given to the prolonged period of sectarian conflict, lasting from 1969 to 1998, in which a total of 3,685 people lost their lives and a further 50,000 suffered serious injury as a direct result of political violence. When it comes to literature, it is generally thought that poetry, rather than prose, offers the most sustained and meaningful interrogation of the causes and consequences of this conflict. We might well dub this ‘the Heaney Effect’, for such is the power and popularity of Seamus Heaney’s work, particularly in America, that he is often invoked as both the first and the last word on the situation. Writing in the 1990s, the Nobel Prize winner described poetry as a form of artistic ‘redress’, an attempt to refashion and respond to the situation, ‘the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality’ (1995: 1). Heaney, of course, belonged to a remarkable generation of Northern Irish poets – one that included Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson – and the esteem in which their work is held can be seen in the comment from Fran Brearton, whereby ‘The Troubles raised the stakes for Northern Irish art, casting the poet in the role of truth teller and first hand witness’ (2012: 224).

If Northern Irish poetry has been tethered to high-minded concepts such as truth telling and bearing witness to atrocity, then what about other genres? What about crime fiction, for example? How has it sought to represent the collapse of Northern Irish society and the subsequent chaos of the Troubles? Remarkably, with over four hundred produced during this period, the thriller is the most popular and widely read form of Troubles fiction. The critical fortunes of this sub-genre, however, are diametric to those enjoyed by its distant literary cousin, the poem. From its very inception, the Troubles thriller has been regarded as the black sheep of the Northern Irish literary family. As early as 1976 Richard Deutsch would excoriate the genre for its ‘cliché-ridden explanation of the conflict’ (150). Two years later, J. Bowyer Bell would coin the phrase ‘Troubles trash’ in his attempt to throw out the genre, consigning it to the rubbish bin of literary history (1978: 21). By 1990, the fecund nature of the form would lead Eamonn Hughes to suggest a process of cultural contamination, with the thriller actively impeding the development of a more mature and sophisticated Northern Irish fiction. As recently as 2003, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews’ definitive study, *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (De-)constructing the North*, would comment: ‘the reductive nature of popular fiction, its tendency towards cliché and stereotype, means that the Troubles thriller has shaped, reinforced and given wide circulation to unhelpfully simplified ideas and images of the Northern Irish conflict’ (41). If poetry, then, has been an enabling and affirming discourse, it would seem that crime fiction, and the thriller in particular, have only served to disable and obscure readers’ attempts to grapple with the complexity of the Northern Irish situation. If the poetry sought to look the Troubles square in the eye, then crime fiction was a suspicious attempt to avert one’s critical gaze. If the former attempted to prize the lid off the reality of the Troubles, then the latter denoted a fantasy of containment, a negation of the conflict through the endless repetition of sensationalism and escapism.

Against this backdrop, the 1990s marked a radical turning point in both the lived and literary history of the region. Paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 led to all-party peace talks between local politicians and representatives of the British and Irish governments. These culminated in the signing of the Belfast Agreement (1998), a negotiated peace settlement that for many people (the Provisional IRA included) signalled the official end of the Troubles. Writing at the time, the journalist Francine Cunningham wondered about the effect that this peace might have upon the local literary culture: ‘Now that the ceasefire has been announced,’ she asked, ‘what will happen to all the Northern Ireland writers? Where will they go for their material?’ (24). Far from engendering an imaginative crisis, however, the advent of peace in Northern Ireland ushered in a new era of artistic reinvigoration. Moreover, one genre in particular has been at the vanguard of attempts to respond to the new dispensations that have arisen in the wake of the Troubles: crime fiction. Why has this been the case? What is it about crime fiction that has allowed it to come to the fore? Why has the genre provided writers and critics with a new landscape in which to interrogate the past and attempt to make sense of the present? Neal Alexander’s work on Northern Irish fiction can help us to begin answering these questions. For Alexander, the defining note of post-Agreement fiction has been its ‘retrospective’ mood. Northern Irish fiction, he argues, has been preoccupied with ‘recreating a particular moment in the past in an effort to illuminate the North’s contemporary predicament’ (2009: 272). This analeptic orientation – the looking over of one’s shoulder, the perennial backward glance – aligns with one of the key tropes of crime fiction; namely, the task of imaginatively reconstructing the past in order to realise a sense of moral justice and social restoration in the present. This constitutive element within the crime genre has afforded the genre a unique and felicitous vantage point from which to view and interrogate the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict. Moreover, the resurgence of crime fiction speaks to the ways in which fantasies of competence and control, whether realised or frustrated, remain a crucial part of the social, political and cultural DNA of Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Troubles.

This essay is an attempt to begin mapping this terrain. It charts the ways in which both critics and novelists have sought to re-imagine the possibilities and limitations of crime fiction, and in the process re-evaluate the genre’s relationship with the political conflict in the North. It follows three lines of inquiry: firstly, at a critical level, the revisionist reinterpretation of the Troubles thriller; secondly, the turn to forms of crime narrative by a number of the region’s literary novelists; and thirdly, the emergence of a new generation of critically acclaimed and internationally renowned Northern Irish crime writers. Underpinning my analysis is a belief that the boundaries between these three modes of writing – literary criticism, ‘serious’ fiction and popular fiction – are, in fact, porous, enabling the cross-pollination of ideas from one domain to another. In the critical sphere, Aaron Kelly’s seminal text *Utterly Resigned Terror: The Thriller and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (2005) has acted as a lodestar for a number of scholars (Neal Alexander, Shameem Black, Stefanie Lehner, Laura Pelaschiar, and myself) with a desire to seriously engage with the criminographical fiction emanating from the region. These critical encounters coincided with a period in which three of the region’s most celebrated novelists (Glenn Patterson, Eoin McNamee and David Park) turned to the hermeneutic codes of

crime fiction in an attempt to theorise the search for closure, both psychological and historical, that has been a defining motif of the post-Agreement era. Following these literary interventions, a new coterie of Northern Irish crime writers has emerged, bringing this subject matter to the attention of international audiences. Whilst some of these writers sought to redeploy the formal codes of the thriller in a post-Troubles setting (for example, Stuart Neville), others looked to alternative subgenres such as the comic thriller (see, Colin Bateman) and noir fiction (see, Adrian McKinty) in an effort to chart the moral and political complexities that have accompanied the end of the conflict. Far from being a singular, reiterative and reductively disabling discourse, then, Northern Irish crime fiction has exemplary value. It has evolved into a burgeoning and heterogeneous body of writing, containing a range of innovative perspectives, which ask important questions about the nature of ethno-religious conflict and the challenge of securing peace and reconciliation.

My own work, as both an academic critic and a crime writer, straddles the nexus between these two modes of writing. Set in post-Troubles Belfast, the D.S. O'Neill series – *Dark Dawn* (2012) and *When Sorrows Come* (2014) – deploys the police procedural in order to inspect the social, economic and political realities of the 'new' Northern Ireland. As both titles suggest, the series is inflected with a noir sensibility, maintaining a cynical distance from the official propaganda that has accompanied the end of the Troubles and the resumption of 'normal' life in Northern Ireland. In this paper I do not comment directly on my own work as a crime writer in this field. It is, I believe, for others to judge the significance of the D.S. O'Neill books and their contribution to this important moment in Irish literary history. Instead, by examining the work of other critics and practitioners in the field, my aim is to explore the ways in which crime fiction has served to unpack the key issues of the period; these include, questions about how to remember and forget the conflict; the rights of victims' families; the quest for forms of (transitional) justice; and, the need to know the truth about the past and what role, if any, a truth commission might play in this process. Far from a suspect accretion of clichés and stereotypes, then, post-Troubles crime fiction illustrates the claim by Rita Felski that 'the pleasures of literature are often tied up with epistemic gains and insights into our social wellbeing, insights that are rooted in, rather than at odds with, its distinctive uses and configurations of language' (16).

Critical openings

2005 was something of an *annus mirabilis* in the history of the Northern Irish crime novel. It witnessed the appearance of Aaron Kelly's critical volume, *Utterly Resigned Terror*, and the publication of two landmark novels – Glenn Patterson's *That Which Was* and Eoin McNamee's *The Ultras*. In these books, two of the region's most celebrated literary novelists looked to the machinations of genre fiction in order to address the legacies of the Troubles.

Kelly's revisionist critique, *Utterly Resigned Terror*, focused on the historical reception of the Troubles thriller, questioning its dismissal and neglect by a generation of literary critics. Drawing his theoretical co-ordinates from the Marxism of Fredric Jameson and the emergence of Irish post-colonialism in the 1990s, Kelly

launched a highly politicised attack on the disregard with which the Troubles thriller has historically been greeted. In contrast, he outlined a tri-partite model of evolutionary development, with the form transforming in key ways throughout its history. For Kelly, the earliest Troubles thrillers were those penned by British journalists, sent to Northern Ireland to cover the Troubles for the UK press. Adopting a postcolonial idiom he maintains such depictions ‘partake in the continuance of an existing sedimentation of British discourse about Ireland stretching back hundreds of years ... repeat[ing] and renew[ing] British versions of Ireland and the Irish as exotic, uncontrollable, intractable, violent, mysterious: in short, as Other’ (2012: 508). The second wave of Troubles thrillers came to the fore in the 1980s. Here, former military personnel turned to mass-market fiction as a way of both cashing in on, and ethically repositioning, their own involvement in the conflict. Again, for Kelly, these outsider perspectives were about reaffirming the legitimacy of British interventions in Ireland, casting the British army as the reluctant arbiters in a bitter civil war being fought out amongst the irrational and irascible Irish (511). The third wave of Troubles thrillers were those penned by local writers and included Maurice Leitch’s *Silver’s City* (1981), Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal* (1983) and Brian Moore’s *Lies of Silence* (1990). Kelly highlighted the class bias embedded in such narratives, claiming they actively elided the underlying socio-economic causes of the conflict. In such texts, political violence is attributed to the intrusion of a pathological terrorist presence upon the putative normal life of the bourgeois individual. These arguments are, of course, part of a broader movement of legitimisation that characterised critical responses to mass-market fiction in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Building on ground-breaking work by critics like Julian Symons (1972) and Stephen Knight (1980), key texts such as *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999) and *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003) helped bring the genre, in its broadest sense, in from the critical cold, subjecting it to sustained and systematic forms of scholarly analysis. A number of important monographs followed including books by Martin Priestman (1998), Andrew Pepper (2000), Lee Horsley (2001 and 2005), Leroy Panek (2003), Stephen Knight (2004) and Charles Rzepka (2005). In the Irish context, Kelly’s book opened the door for a generation of younger critics to reconsider the relationship between the Troubles and crime fiction, to take the latter seriously and read it as offering a series of meaningful confrontations with the historical, political and cultural narratives that have given shape and informed our understanding of both the region and the conflict.

Literary crime fictions

Kelly’s seminal work on the Troubles thriller formed the major component of a PhD which he completed at Queen’s University Belfast in 2002. He then went on to work as an academic at the University of Edinburgh, where, among other things, he supervised my own PhD on contemporary Irish fiction. It was in the early 2000s, prior to Kelly’s Edinburgh move, that the Northern Irish writer Glenn Patterson took up a role in the Creative Writing program at Queen’s University in Belfast. Patterson’s previous work had shied away both from the subject matter of the Troubles and from popular forms of fiction. His 2005 novel *That Which Was*, however, took its narrative

co-ordinates directly from detective fiction, using the trope of an historical investigation to examine the challenge of remembering and forgetting in the aftermath of political conflict. In an interview at the time, Patterson spoke of a similar aesthetic turn in the work of a number of his contemporaries: ‘This occurred because the past wasn’t completely dealt with ... The present is bedevilled still by issues that have to do with the past and there was a question of how have we accounted for the *actions* of the past. I think that all of these [literary thrillers] come out of that imperfect peace’ (quoted in Hicks: 107). Thus, it would seem that if post-conflict societies must deal with the consequences of their traumatic past, then they must also engage with the narrative habits and structures through which they have previously attempted to represent and make sense of this past.

Set in the aftermath of the Troubles, *That Which Was* centres on a young Presbyterian minister named Ken Avery. One day, after Sunday service, Avery is approached by a stranger who tells him he needs to talk. Readers are introduced to Larry, a man who looks ‘crushed, from the inside out’ (11). In the privacy of the minister’s office, Larry makes a startling confession: he has blood on his hands. He killed people during the Troubles and is tortured by the flashbacks. The revelation is made all the more startling when Larry admits he can’t recall who the victims were, where he killed them, or when the terrible events took place. Thus, at the heart of *That Which Was* lies a paradox: an act of remembering that is, at the same time, also an act of forgetting. In Patterson’s hands, Larry’s traumatic memory acts as a cipher for one of the defining antinomies of the post-Troubles era, the sense of limbo, of a place unable either to remember the past or to forget about it and move on.

It is through the narrative arc of the crime novel that Patterson sets up and attempts to resolve this crisis. In *That Which Was* Avery turns amateur detective in the hope that by resolving the mystery of Larry’s past, he will afford him some form of relief from his traumatic memory (McGuire 2015a: 60). As a character, Avery is similarly imbued with a potent degree of symbolism, a gesture toward the bourgeois belief that decades of atavistic tribalism might be remedied by a mixture of compassion, determination and rational thinking. Beyond the Northern Irish context, *That which Was* illustrates one of the definitive challenges facing all post-conflict societies; namely, how to deal with the past in a way that both honours the dead *and* frees the present from the burden of an insurmountable ideological debt. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that in post-conflict societies we have a ‘duty to remember’, an obligation to harness the past and use it to construct alternative and ameliorative futures (9). In a similar vein, human rights scholar Louis Bickford maintains that if post-conflict societies wish to secure a democratic and peaceful future then they must confront ‘the demons of the past’ (1097). With this in mind, it is notable that Patterson’s foray into crime fiction serves to rebut and cast aspersions on such views. *That Which Was* disrupts any straightforward assertion that the past can be readily recovered and brought to bear on the problems of the present. Avery’s investigations reveal both Larry, and his memory, to be even less reliable than they initially seem. Insofar as it deliberately plays with generic expectations, it is highly notable the book ends with the mystery resolved but with no satisfactory conclusion or sense of meaningful restoration.

In the promotional tour for *That Which Was* in 2005, Patterson shared the stage of the Edinburgh International Book Festival with another Northern Irish writer, Eoin McNamee. McNamee's book that year, *The Ultras*, also made use of the crime genre in order to re-examine the unfinished business of the Troubles. In marked contrast to Patterson's cozy mystery, McNamee looked to the shadowy landscapes of the noir thriller in his interrogation of the region's clandestine past and the ongoing repercussions in the present. A similar *modus operandi* characterised *Resurrection Man* (1989), McNamee's fictional account of the Shankill Butchers, the notorious murder gang that terrorised the streets of Belfast in the 1970s, kidnapping Catholics whom they tortured and decapitated. *The Ultras* (2005) is also based on real life events, using the murder of a British soldier, Captain Robert Nairac, at the hands of the IRA in 1977, to explore issues of state-paramilitary collusion during the Troubles. It is McNamee's fusion of fact and fiction that distinguishes his dalliance with the crime genre. As he comments, 'There is something out there in the world of fiction ... it is writers looking to engage with real people and real events, and stitch them into their fiction in a way that is hard-nosed and relevant and edgy ... In fiction of this kind you get a sense of a kind of truth being displayed. And you're not going to get it any other way' (McNamee, 2004: 28). As Stefanie Lehner has argued, far from obscuring the truth, of hiding behind clichés and stereotypes, McNamee's work entails a concerted attempt to access the unofficial and undisclosed aspects of the North's murky past (2007: 513). Key issues include the complicity of state forces, both police and army, in the murder of innocent civilians, and the personal pathologies that were given unrestricted license by the rampant sectarianism of the Troubles.

At the level of plot, *The Ultras* is structured around the retrospective investigations of a disgraced former cop, Blair Agnew, and his attempts to construct an archive of the life and death of Captain Robert Nairac. Agnew's 'lonely blizzard of paper' – news clippings, military histories, old police documents – is offered as a foil to the deliberate acts of disinformation that characterised the operations of both the paramilitaries and the British army throughout the Troubles (19). Remarkably, the narrative arc of *The Ultras* anticipated the real life work of the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), a police unit established in 2005 and tasked with re-investigating the 3,269 unsolved murders that were committed during the Troubles. What *The Ultras* reveals, however, is that much of the truth about the past, whether for political or psychological reasons, remains too incendiary to be exposed to the cold light of day (McGuire 2015b). Like Patterson before him, McNamee denies readers any sense of a neat or satisfying conclusion regarding the role of the state in fermenting the chaos that afflicted Northern Irish society. If the classic thriller strived to assert the existence of a black and white morality, a world in which the 'goodies' and 'baddies' were readily discernible, McNamee's noir-ish sensibility problematises this worldview, exposing instead the miasma of grey within which Northern Irish history continues to operate.

David Park is the third Northern Irish writer to have turned to the thriller in his attempts to grapple with the legacy of the Troubles (McGuinness 2009; Black 2011; Lehner 2011). His 2008 novel, *The Truth Commissioner*, was awarded the Ewart

Biggs Memorial Prize and was selected as a BBC Radio 4 'Book at Bedtime'. It has since been made into a full-length feature film that premiered in February 2016. The novel depicts a fictional Northern Irish truth commission, modelled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Taking its plot co-ordinates from the classic detective story, the book focuses on the case of Connor Walshe, a teenage boy who was 'disappeared' (murdered and secretly buried) by the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) during the Troubles. Solving this mystery is situated within the broader need to uncover the truth about the past and heal the scars left by thirty years of bitter civil war. In this sense, Park's text offers an important rehearsal space in which both the potentiality and inadequacy of a Northern Irish truth commission might be enacted and analysed. *The Truth Commissioner* questions prevailing attitudes about both the necessity and efficacy of state sponsored truth seeking. This contrasts prevailing attitudes concerning the fundamental importance of such initiatives to the process of post-conflict peace building. Kofi Annan, for example, the former secretary general of the United Nations, argues that 'while the truth is painful, burying the past is much less likely to lead a country to a healthy future' (quoted in Hayner, foreword). By investigating the unsolved murder of Connor Walshe, *The Truth Commissioner* confronts such assertions, compelling readers to reconsider whether truth is, in fact, a pre-requisite for the kind of social reconciliation that many demand in the wake of ethno-religious conflict.

The Truth Commissioner begins with a flashback to the night of Connor Walshe's death. In high thriller mode, the boy sits trapped in a car as it hurtles through the dark heartlands of rural Ulster. He is taken to a farmhouse where he is interrogated and beaten. Throughout this episode his terrorist captors remain an amorphous, faceless presence. They are described as a set of 'shadowy shapes', undefined yet merciless in their treatment of the boy (28). In her essay of 2009, the critic Laura Pelaschiar identifies such aesthetic strategy in terms of 'terrorising the terrorist', depicting him (and it is nearly always a he) as an anonymous bogeyman, a sinister presence, devoid of either a moral compass or a political consciousness. *The Truth Commissioner* deliberately reactivates such classic thriller tropes in order to question their legitimacy and utility in the post-Agreement present. As the narrative shifts back to the post-Agreement era, these figures are re-presented, this time as fully formed characters. We witness their doubts about the past along with their continued desire to avoid personal responsibility for Walshe's death. A key character is Francis Gilroy, a former paramilitary turned politician and the current Minister for Children in the Northern Ireland Assembly. As the commission hones in on the truth, Gilroy's role in the boy's death risk's being made public, an event that could bring down the government and lead to the collapse of the entire peace process. Working through the secret service, the British Government step in and sabotage the truth commission, setting fire to the building and all the records pertaining to the investigation. Thus, the book illustrates the claim by Michael Ignatieff that whilst 'a truth commission can winnow out the facts upon which a society's arguments with itself should be conducted ... it cannot bring these arguments to a conclusion' (173). Like Patterson and McNamee before him, Park offers a cynical conclusion; namely, that truth remains too explosive for it to play a role in the tentative process of rebuilding trust within Northern Irish society.

Northern Irish crime fiction: the next generation

If the post-Agreement novel has been highly attuned to the narrative possibilities of crime writing, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a distinct and diverse body of Northern Irish crime fiction. The popularity of Stuart Neville, Adrian McKinty and Colin Bateman has brought the subject matter of Northern Ireland to the attention of international audiences, opening up new discursive spaces in which the region is reconceptualised. Stuart Neville's highly acclaimed debut, *The Twelve* (2009), published in the US as *The Ghosts of Belfast*, imbues the action thriller with a Gothic sensibility that is distinctly Irish. The effect is to lay bare the sense in which the Northern Irish present continues to be haunted and disturbed by the Northern Irish past. The book centres on Gerry Fegan, a former IRA hitman, who is tormented by the ghosts of the twelve people he killed during the Troubles; they are five soldiers, two paramilitaries, a police officer and four civilians, including a teenage boy and a baby in its mother's arms. To assuage his guilt Fegan must avenge their deaths by killing the senior figures in the Republican movement who commissioned the original killings. *The Twelve* makes use of a familiar thriller plot, pitting Fegan's individual talents as a hitman against the collective energy and animosity of his former paramilitary masters. One of the most significant aspects of the book, however, is the way in which Neville's appropriation of the Gothic serves to resituate the thriller amidst one of the most deeply ingrained themes in the history of Irish writing. Neville's is an action packed re-enactment of James Joyce's famous claim from *Ulysses* (1922), whereby in Ireland 'history' was deemed to be 'a nightmare' from which one must ultimately try to awake (34). Tracing a constitutional Gothic strain within Irish writing from Charles Maturin, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker in the nineteenth century, to Elizabeth Bowen and John Banville in the twentieth, a spate of critics have found in such fiction analogues for the political and cultural complexities of colonised Ireland (McCormack 1991; Deane 1994; Pittock 2008). Neville's *The Twelve* belongs to this tradition, illustrating the ongoing relevance of such dynamics and the notion that if a society cannot find a way of dealing with the past, it is condemned to be haunted and revisited by it.

One of the most significant aspects of post-Troubles crime fiction is the diversity of approach that characterises creative interventions in the field. In his Sean Duffy series, Adrian McKinty combines noir fiction, the police procedural and the true crime novel in order to revisit and re-examine Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. Sean Duffy, a Catholic detective in an almost entirely Protestant police force, lends a uniquely Northern Irish slant to the hard-boiled staple of the detective as the alienated outsider. Like McNamee before him, McKinty draws upon a range of real life events as the source material for his fiction; these include the IRA hunger strikes, the Brighton hotel bombing of 1984, and the British infiltration of the IRA through the use of the notorious double agent 'Stakeknife'. The series also features cameo appearances from well-known figures such as Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley. As was the case for McNamee before him, the porous nature of the boundaries between fact and fiction is crucial to McKinty's aesthetic. The Sean Duffy books continually reiterate the sense in which the Troubles were themselves defined by the cultivation of epistemological uncertainty on all sides. After all, the very nature of a terrorist

campaign is predicated upon the perceptions of paramilitary omnipotence through the use of particular kinds of violence – bombing, assassination, and so on. Readers are reminded that throughout the Troubles everyday life was imbued with the sense of a hidden reality, one lurking beneath the surface of the apparently normal world. Encounters with strangers – in a pub, in a shop, in a workplace – assumed a secondary meaning, an unspoken sense that the person you are talking to might be someone altogether different from whom they appeared to be. The Sean Duffy series is intimately concerned with this interstitial space between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary, history and its discursive enthronements. Through it, McKinty offers a series of productive alignments between detective fiction's quest for epistemological certainty with our own desire both to perceive and apprehend the truth about the past.

Undoubtedly the most prolific crime writer to have emerged in the wake of the Troubles is Colin Bateman. A former journalist, Bateman made his literary debut in 1995 with *Divorcing Jack*, the first instalment of the Dan Starkey series. He has gone on to publish twenty-four novels, including the Mystery Man series and *Murphy's Law* (2002), which was turned into a successful BBC television series starring James Nesbit. Bateman's preferred form is the comic thriller, with all of his books offering a deeply ironic take on both the conflict itself and the ways it has been mediated and mythologised within previous Troubles fiction. The irreverent tone of Bateman's work is evident in the titles his books, which include *Driving Big Davie* (2004), *Belfast Confidential* (2005) and *The Day of the Jack Russell* (2009). The subversive undercutting of Hollywood movies discloses the iconoclastic sense of humour through which Bateman attempts the 'parodic refunctionalisation' of popular fiction about Northern Ireland (Pelaschiar 2009: 59). His books are carnivalesque in intent and ironically invert the ideological assumptions encoded within the dominant modes of Troubles writing. Bateman's goal is to 'expose the limits of unequivocal and "one-eyed" theories and praxis, be they cultural, political or rhetorical' (Pelaschiar 2009: 60). And so, the novels contain all the hallmarks of the Troubles thriller: narratives are fast-paced, replete with shootings, black mailings and kidnappings; plots are convoluted and feature stock character types such as the evil paramilitary, the crooked politician and the prying journalist. Where Bateman radically departs from his straight-faced predecessors, however, is in his refusal to legitimise or unquestioningly accept this hackneyed and over-stylised vernacular. And so, in contrast to the dynamic and determined heroes of the thriller, Dan Starkey is a stunningly ordinary and uninspiring character. A journalist on a local newspaper, he is fond of a pint and has a mild coca-cola addiction! Throughout the novels, Starkey is portrayed as an innocent abroad, unwittingly cast into a series of threatening situations from which he must attempt to extricate himself. Thus, the books undermine any notion that the Troubles are a staging ground for a grandiose confrontation between the forces of good and evil, or the competing ideologies of republicanism and loyalism. Bateman's terrorists are the very opposite of the patriotic freedom fighters enthroned within the discourse of physical-force nationalism. Far from a disciplined and elite force, the men of violence are a collection of 'potatoes' (Bateman's phrase). Their war is little more than a series of half-planned and poorly executed acts of barbarity. Bateman's use of black humour as a discursive weapon could be described as an idiosyncratically Northern Irish response to the Troubles. Such tactics are highly reminiscent of work

for the local stage and the work of important playwrights like Martin Lynch, Christina Reid and Marie Jones, all of whom make extensive use of sarcasm and wit in order to undermine official accounts and affirm a sense of indomitable spirit among those civilians who bore the brunt of the violence during the conflict.

Conclusion

The diverse attempts by Northern Irish writers, to revisit and reinvent old forms, are indicative of the broader political dynamics that have defined Northern Ireland in the wake of the Belfast Agreement. For, it is worth noting, the post-Agreement era has been characterised as much by continuity as it has by change. Whilst the IRA's bombing campaign may have ceased and the group officially disbanded, the underlying ideologies of Irish Republicanism, and its counterpart Ulster Unionism, remain as intransigently in place as ever. Moreover, they are now officially encoded within the consociational nature of the Belfast Agreement. Thus, the serialised nature of the crime genre makes it one of the most fitting fictional templates through which to examine the co-existence of stasis and change within the region. These fictions testify to what Aaron Kelly, evoking the work of Antonio Gramsci, identifies as an 'interregnum' in contemporary Northern Irish life. In Gramsci's words, 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; and in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (2009: 1). As the region attempts to escape the paralysis of its political past, crime fiction will, one imagines, continue to play an important role. It will continue to look back and attempt to recover the truth about the past, continue to ask difficult questions about the limits and possibilities of transitional justice, and continue to strive for a restoration of the social order, even when such aspirations seem to be little more than the stuff of paperback fiction.

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