

Marisol Morales-Ladrón, editor. *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film*. Peter Lang, 2016. Pp. vi, 352. £50.95. ISBN: 9783034322195.

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This collection of critical essays deals with the institution of the family as a means of presenting a current picture of dysfunction in the various types of households in Ireland. Edited by Marisol Morales-Ladrón, it is divided into three sections. The first is a comprehensive introduction to home and family, as well as an overview of the crisis of these two entities. The following section, which forms the main body of the work, focuses on Irish narrative and filmic discourses of dysfunction. It includes five essays, one by the editor herself, along with others by Inés Praga, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar, Juan F. Elices and Rosa González-Casademont. The final section consists of three interviews, one with the writer Emer Martin and two with film directors Jim and Kristen Sheridan, respectively. The organisation and structure of the chapters is comprehensive and cohesive, and gives the reader a progressive insight into the concept of the contemporary Irish family as depicted in narrative and film.

The innovative nature of this work serves to raise awareness of the wide variety of family configurations in the country. Many of the new familial patterns already existed in the past, coexisting with traditional nuclear ones, although they were not entirely accepted by society or seen on equal terms. Such forms of households sometimes even lacked a neutral descriptive term, referred to only in derogatory ways. Thus, in the introductory chapter, the editor assesses the transformation of the perspective on families in contemporary Irish narrative and filmic discourses. As she notes, achieving social inclusion has been particularly significant for families that do not conform to the old compositional rules imposed in Ireland by both the patriarchy and the Catholic Church.

With this in mind, the mere inclusion in the various chapters here of neutral, non-derogatory labels for those family cells that do not conform to traditional patterns, such as “de facto” or “solo-parent” families, among others, is itself a new departure in the academic discourse. Such dysfunctional family arrangements have previously been addressed by scholars such as Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975/1977;



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History of Sexuality, 1978; *Abnormal*, 1999/2004; *Psychiatric Power*, 2003/2006), in his study on the institution of the family, and, albeit briefly, by some writers on Irish culture, these including Declan Kiberd (*Inventing Ireland*, 1995) and Eve Patten (“Contemporary Irish Fiction,” 2006).

The variety of forms that a family can take illustrates how households are not necessarily cohesive and stable entities. The current book refers to the “familiar fallacy” (6) and to suppressed emotions and traumas in the psychosocial growth of people. Gender stereotypes, it is noted, have contributed to the oppression of women and children within the family. Although the distress and control exerted over some family members is considered to be particularly acute in the representation of dysfunction in contemporary narratives, families which were not previously seen as idyllic in traditional terms are here not necessarily considered dysfunctional.

Interestingly enough, this volume develops a gender approach to the institution of family and explores how such literary and filmic discourses are articulated. The representation of family conflicts and crises is examined by Marisol Morales-Ladrón in her essay, “Portraits of Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Women’s Narratives: Confined to the Cell, Lost to Memory,” discussing the novels of eight contemporary female Irish authors from the last four decades: Julia O’Faolain’s *No Country for Young Men* (1980), Deirdre Madden’s *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), Lia Mills’ *Another Alice* (1996), Mary O’Donnell’s *The Elysium Testament* (1999), Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), Jennifer Johnston’s *Foolish Mortals* (2007), Claire Keegan’s *Foster* (2010) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir’s *You* (2010). In these works, traumatic events of family violence from the past are revisited in healing therapeutic processes that allow the characters to continue with their lives despite the heavy burden of having being abused.

Similarly, Inés Praga’s contribution, “Home Revisited: Family (Re)Constructions in Contemporary Irish Autobiographical Writing,” looks at nostalgia in writing about the past. She examines domestic violence, insanity, alcoholism and repression as represented in life writing, both fictional and non-fictional, in two groups of texts: four autobiographical novels, Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992), Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* (2003), and John Banville’s *The Sea* (2005) and *Ancient Light* (2013); and four memoirs, *Are you Somebody?* (1996) and *Almost There* (2003), both by Nuala O’Faolain, *Memoir* (2006) by John McGahern, and *Country Girl* (2012) by Edna O’Brien. This study revisits Catholic Irish families in the past and explores the ways in which writing about memories from childhood and past periods of life can produce cathartic experiences

that may help “to map the invisible route home” (158), following the seminal essay *Space and Irish Cultural Imaginations* by Gerry Smyth. Praga makes a detailed examination of autobiographical writing and its varieties, asking in particular how memory is dealt with, and taking into account its reliability by means of the autobiographical pact between the writer and the reader, following Philippe Lejeune’s eponymous essay *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975). The autobiography is also analysed in this section from the point of view of gender and how it is typically configured around a young man who reflects his experiences, these including an absent father and an unhappy or invisible mother.

In the third chapter, “Family and Dysfunction in Ireland Represented in Fiction Through the Multicultural and Intercultural Prisms,” Asier Altuna-García de Salazar also concentrates on family and dysfunction in Ireland, considering multicultural diasporas, displacement, poverty, emigration, drinking, domestic violence and single parents from a transcultural perspective. Her discussion covers novels and short stories by Hugo Hamilton, Emer Martin, Colm Toibin, Roddy Doyle, Cauvery Madhavan, Nena Bhandari, Mary O’Donnell, Margaret McCarthy and Marsha Mehran. The texts by these authors, of both Irish and foreign origins, provide evidence of socio-cultural changes brought about by both globalisation and the Celtic Tiger, together with the recognition of women’s rights and the secularisation of society, challenging the outdated patriarchal system and its traditional power structure.

In the following chapter, “Familiar Dysfunctionalities in Contemporary Irish Satirical Literature,” Juan F. Elices analyses Anne Haverly’s *One Day as a Tiger* (1998), Mark Macauley’s *The House of Slamming Doors* (2010) and Julian Quinn’s *Mount Merrion* (2013) as a means of addressing the issue of the dysfunctional Irish family from a satirical perspective. This study shows how family values, which were ridiculed repeatedly in writings in the past, are still viewed from a critical perspective in the current literary scene in Ireland. It is argued that satire as a stylistic device helps to convey the weaknesses of the family and reaffirms its vulnerability and instability as a religious and historical unit.

Rosa González-Casademont then presents the institution of the family in “Representation of Family Tropes and Discourses in Contemporary Irish-Themed Cinema,” focussing on the representation of changes to the family unit in films that depict different Irish family contexts and atmospheres. This essay deals with an extensive international corpus of sixty-six cinematographic works from the years 1980 to 2010. While the breakdown

of the nuclear, heterosexual family is represented as a symbol of the devaluation of dominant traditional ideologies, the family cell continues to be perceived as a solid nucleus of solidarity in times of crisis. González-Casademont shows how cultural artefacts in general, and Irish-themed films in particular, problematize the values and cultural constructs of a society and bring to light new issues that have already emerged in society and which will continue to be present for years to come. By analysing films made in the Republic, it is clear that the traditional image of the Emerald Island is abandoned in favour of more urban and complex settings that devalue the traditional equation of the family as a symbol of the nation. The family icon is no longer so fruitful in contemporary cinematic discourses, which tend to lack the perspective of an Irish national culture.

The final section of the book comprises three interviews. In “From Escaping to Facing Dysfunction: An Interview with Emer Martin,” Asier Altuna-García de Salazar claims that Martin’s writings capture the issue of family dysfunction, diaspora, dislocation, oppression, violence and patriarchy, among other topics. Martin’s writing depicts dysfunction with her characters struggling to come to terms with an oppressive Irish past that does not afford them the opportunity to develop fully as individuals. This can be seen in her novels *Breakfast in Babylon* (1996), *More Bread or I’ll Appear* (1999), *Baby Zero* (2007), and *The Cruelty Men* (2016). The interview also deals with her short stories “Teeth shall be Provided” (1998), “A Sacrificial Shoe” (1999) and “The Pooka at Five Happiness” (1999), how these represent dysfunction in Ireland, and how more broadly her work captures the issue of dysfunction in Irish society and history.

Rosa González-Casademont interviews both Jim and Kirsten Sheridan in “‘There is no point in making local stories that are not universally true’: An Interview with Jim Sheridan” and “‘Ireland is a tough one when it comes to filming’: An Interview with Kirsten Sheridan,” respectively. In the former, Jim Sheridan discusses his films set in Ireland, *My Left Foot* (1989), *The Field* (1990), *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *In America* (2002) and *The Secret Scripture* (2016). These focus on the family, depicting a dysfunctional form of life, and are particularly popular in countries with a Catholic culture. The second interview, with Kirsten Sheridan, deals with Kirsten’s views on the recent Irish family and how it engages with the nuclear family in Ireland. Her film *Dollhouse* (2012) reflects the social-familial vacuum in Irish society through a group of drunken kids who exist outside traditional structures of authority, and she believes that families are quite confused in Ireland “because the bigger picture is confused, you know,

the state is confused” (336). Kirsten Sheridan argues that Ireland is a very young country and that this is probably the reason why Irish literature and cinema have child protagonists, in that they can serve as an allegory for the Irish nation itself (339). Thus: “Sometimes I feel that once we are not at war with England, Irish people go ‘what do we do now?’, ‘what’s our function?’ And we haven’t really rebelled against the governments, or the banks in any shape or form like the Greeks have” (339–40).

In sum, this book provides an in-depth and scholarly treatment of the concepts of home and family, and will itself stimulate further research into issues of family from an interdisciplinary perspective, looking at the multifarious faces of contemporary Irish narrative and filmic production. The sound evaluation of the topics raised in the volume result in well-argued and persuasive conclusions, which extend our understanding of diverse aspects of family dysfunction, yet which also reflect the fact that the family remains an icon of Irish culture.

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