

Writing the Stories of the Celtic Tiger

AN INTERVIEW WITH LITERATURE SCHOLAR
MARIE MIANOWSKI

Economic analysis has no monopoly on how to examine economic history. The death of the Celtic Tiger is a phenomenon that can be represented in graphs, in tables, in charts, and also in prose. Irish novelists have taken to the page to account for what life was like on this island during the Celtic Tiger and after 2008, and their work is too often overlooked in policy discussions. A de-facto assumption may be at play that what cannot be counted cannot be considered. Such strident empiricism would be hard to defend philosophically or politically, but a culture persists which holds that the policy expert might consider the Arts in her spare time, but for research, a certain understanding of Science prevails.

When we remember the role that literature has played throughout modern Irish history, any omission of writers from our group of interlocutors would be tragic. Marie Mianowski is Professor of Literature at Grenoble Alpes University. She studies Irish literature and has written extensively on the reflection of the Celtic Tiger era and its aftermath in the contemporary novel. Her book *Post Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Irish Fiction* was published by Routledge in 2016.¹ I interviewed her about that book and more broadly about how the novel can be a window through which we consider the impact of the economic crash and subsequent recovery on Irish society.

Kevin Hargaden (KH): You begin your book – *Post Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Irish Fiction* – with the claim that “literature is one place where the question of Irish identity for the future can begin to be imagined.” Can you elaborate on how that might be the case?

Marie Mianowski (MM): *I mean that the question of Irish identity for the future can be imagined in other art forms also, as well as in society at large, in the workplace, with friends, within families. But literature is one of those places where imagination can take shape into characters’ lives, projects and ideas, and in turn give shape to a possible future. Some of the works of fiction mentioned in my monograph also show how difficult it is to imagine a future that would escape a cycle of doom and gloom. Most novels inscribe the recent events in Irish society and economy as part of a wider cycle, as if history kept haunting the present and the future. I have devoted a whole section to Colum McCann’s fiction because, although Irish-born, McCann is now often defined as a transnational writer. Maybe it is the transcultural nature of his writing which makes him create such a sense of optimism in his fiction and make empathy the central ethos of his writing.*

The sentence you mentioned at the beginning of my book is also a reference to Jeff Malpas’ definitions of place, which I quote extensively. Jeff Malpas is a philosopher who has written about what it means to think topographically. His thinking is grounded on phenomenology. Jeff Malpas claims that, better than either philosophy or even geography, literature can describe and speak about place, because literature can reveal the fundamental foundation of space and place. My own claim is that contemporary Irish fiction reveals multiple aspects of Irish identity through the representations of place, space and landscape.

¹ Marie Mianowski, *Post Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Irish Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

KH: You claim that “Irish fiction reflects the rapid changes of society and Irishness” – can that be inverted so that Irish society and Irishness are shaped by fiction?

MM: *It is always possible to play on words and there would be some truth, of course, in saying that some aspects of Irish society and Irishness and some parts of Irish society are defined by fiction and poetry – James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, ancient poets and today’s poets. But what I meant was much more down to earth. Irish fiction today depicts immigrants from Eastern Europe and from Africa. It addresses issues of homelessness, single mothers, drugs, abortion... Irish fiction was traditionally also about exile and emigration, joblessness. It is anchored in life.*

What I mean is that fiction addressing the Celtic Tiger issue and the post-Celtic Tiger moment was slow to come, but it did come. And while Irish society was still struggling (is still struggling) to understand how the Celtic Tiger and the crisis that followed came about and what lessons can be drawn from its causes and effects, fiction may have something to tell us about phenomena that run deep in Irish society, in Irish culture, mythology, folklore. It can expose relationships to the spiritual world – and not only to religion. It can expose its relationships to power – and not only to money. It can expose its relationships to the “other” – and not only the British, or the uncanny – but to “others” from other parts of the world.

KH: I love your description of the characters in the first part of Anne Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz*,² that they “are embarked in a race against themselves, in which all boundaries tend to disappear from sight.” That novel brings the larger unfolding macroeconomic reality into dialogue with the characters’ fragile domestic lives. Is *Forgotten Waltz* an example of how the novel can explore the “in-between space” of real lived lives in a way that is often impossible with the regular tools of social analysis?

MM: *Yes, I am absolutely convinced that fiction – novels, but also shorter fiction, and poems too – are worth studying specifically because they give the reader access to what we can call the ontological nature of place, they reveal something fundamental about being in a place.³ But what you say is also right: fiction, prose or poetry give access to the in-between nature of real-lived lives, to the complexity of being-in-the-world at any moment in the history of humanity. Literature gives access to that without the mediation of any critical tools of analysis or any intermediary discourse. I don’t mean to say that theoretical tools are not useful or necessary to understand and read literature critically – whether philosophical, sociological, anthropological, or geographical. They are not only useful but necessary to contextualise and understand the contexts of events and of the emergence of certain types of discourse. But when one reads literature there is also an emotional, empathic understanding of what the characters experience and of what language creates poetically, which gives the readers access to the complexity, not only of living in a specific society, but also of imagined societies, and potentially, of future possibilities.*

KH: The “ontological nature of place” is a challenging concept, but I understand that fiction can expose the settings and relationships that give structure to our lives. Can you unpack that idea of the “in-between space” some more?

MM: *The notion of “in-betweenness” is difficult to develop in a few words as the “in-between space” refers to different things depending on the novel studied and the context. In McCann’s fiction it refers first to the rift between the emigrant’s homeland and his destination in a foreign land. It is the space in between the two twin towers materialised by a rope on which a tightrope walker is walking in *Let the Great World Spin*.⁴ But it is also an internal in-between space, a way of being into*

2 Anne Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2011).

3 For those interested further in this idea of ontology of place, the work of Jeff Malpas is essential: Jeff Malpas, “Putting Space in Place: Philosophical Topography and Relational Geography,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 2 (April 2012): 226–42, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d20810>; Jeff Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape,” in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 3–26; Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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the world, in between life and death. Place as in-betweenness is also a form of what Malpas calls “emergence,” at once bounded and dynamic, the locus where metamorphosis and regeneration can take place through the characters’ modes of perception. In this in-between space, time still goes on and characters change, while relationships to place and between the characters are regenerated.

But, really, this “in-between space” is not a general concept, it is first descriptive and then it can be understood in the context of the works of fiction studied and analysed as a means to represent a more abstract and complex place where characters reveal the fragile balance of life and the challenge of keeping that balance.

KH: Since the “official” account of contemporary Irish identity likes to foreground the way in which our economy is built around technology, what is the significance of Enright emphasising the “shattered galaxy” that the web often represents?

MM: Again, I don’t think it should be understood only metaphorically. First and foremost Enright’s fiction in this novel describes real life: the internet has actually modified the way and the places where people work, play and interact with each other, communicate with each other or escape each other’s attention, cheat on one another. What fiction can reveal to readers, in ways they are not necessarily aware of, is the extent to which the internet has modified people’s relationships to time and space, being and place. So in *Forgotten Waltz* I think the use of technology can be read at different levels as a key factor in transforming the economy and society, but also people’s relationships to place, to reality and to one another. Anne Enright questions those various transformations but I don’t think technology is a metaphor. What is certain is that, through fiction, readers have access, at once, to all the levels in which technology has transformed life. And this makes for a transforming reading experience too.

KH: Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart*⁵ interrogates how “a community can be shaken at its roots because it has lost most of its former references.” Can you elaborate on how fiction can help us relate the easily accounted-for economic decline with the apparently much more nebulous harm that follows for communities?

MM: It is not easy to do but it is something that Donal Ryan’s novel achieves remarkably well in giving voice to members of a community in 21 chapters, each narrated by a different character. In many ways, in this novel, place and landscape represent a suspended moment of crisis between the spectre of a repetitive past and a ghost-like future. But the representations of place and landscape are also symptomatic of the difficulty in imagining the future, never mind to start building it. In this novel the post-Celtic Tiger period is presented as a suspended historical moment, in-between two historical eras.

Ryan’s narrative displays the crumbling of a community, as all the usual and reliable boundaries and landmarks have failed its members. The symbolic parricide is symptomatic of a community who wants to forget the past. And yet the contribution from the dead father, Frank, at the end of the novel means that his voice cannot be extinguished even after he has passed and his son has pissed on the embers of his house’s remains. The past ought to be considered and taken into account to build the future. As in Enright’s novel with Evie’s illness and her awkward status in the narrative, the abducted child of Ryan’s novel – Réaltin’s child – embodies the confiscated future of Ireland and questions Ireland’s capacity to seize the moment, acknowledge new definitions of place and construct its future.

KH: *The Spinning Heart* was one of the landmark novels touching on the Celtic Tiger’s “construction and destruction.” What can we learn from the possibility of the novel to inform our social understanding?

Jeff Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape,” in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 3–26; Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

5 Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart* (Dublin: Doubleday Ireland, 2012).

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MM: Bobby Mahon's destiny reveals the difficulty facing a community trying to come to terms with its past and for its members to look together towards the future. Bobby embodies the scapegoat around which the community gathers as the Celtic Tiger's sandy foundations crumble, while at the same time the foundations on which the community stood have been shaken (religion, social landmarks) without having found any stable replacement. The community dreads the nightmarish repetition of history without being able to hold on to new strongholds and build a future for all.

But I don't think novels should be read as social tools to inform the public's social understanding. Otherwise I'm afraid fiction loses its freedom, and it is that freedom which makes a work of art, sometimes, for certain people, and at certain times, a life changer. Novels may inform our social understanding but they should not be read like guidebooks. In fact, and first of all, they should be read. And are they actually read?

KH: One of the novels you discuss at length, Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know*⁶ deals with explicit theological themes. What does contemporary Irish writing reveal about the place of Christianity in Irish society?

MM: *It is a complex question and one on which I have only worked a little on in studying novels and poems related to the scandal of the Magdalene Laundries. But religion, and spiritual life in general, are a research topic I wish to work on in the coming months and years – and not only Christianity but other religions as well, especially in the context of immigration and emigration.*

KH: You suggest the Celtic Tiger has emerged as a sort of mythic chapter in Irish memory. Myth is usually generative of new potentialities. Talk to me more about literature and myth in this context.

MM: *In a book I edited a few years ago⁷ I first used the word "myth" in relation to landscape following the writing of Ashis Nandys. "Myth" does not denote a mystified realm of irrational superstition but "as a form of thinking that remains interpretively open to both the past and the present."⁸ With this definition in mind, I mean that the Celtic Tiger is connected to other chapters of Irish history and that in the greedy manner in which land was bought, houses were built, riches were consumed, there was an echo – easily heard in many works of fiction today – of the Irish Famine, of evictions, of generations of exiles, as well as the notion that the situation is too good to last and that one day or another emigration will start again, evictions and so on.*

I don't mean to say what is represented in fiction is true and that it will happen. But it represents elements and currents that run deep down in contemporary Irish fiction and relates it to works and beliefs of the past. The question is: what can readers in Ireland hear in today's fiction and how will it help them imagine and build their future?

KH: Finally Marie, if you could recommend three novels related to the crash, what would they be?

MM: *The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan, The Devil I Know by Claire Kilroy and Mike McCormack's Solar Bones⁹ (which is not included in my monograph because it had not yet been published when my monograph went to press).*

6 Claire Kilroy, *The Devil I Know* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

7 Marie Mianowski (ed.), *Irish Contemporary Landscape in Literature and the Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

8 Quoted in David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 4.

9 Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016).