A "Hair-Trigger Society" and the Woman Who Felt Something in Anna Burns's *Milkman*

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> I didn't have those other thoughts until later, and I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were—if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there? At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. I had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, but I did not know intuition and repugnance counted.
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> —Anna Burns, *Milkman*

Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) connects a young woman's experience with gendered and sexual power to the behavior, prejudices, and tacit understandings that undergird a society locked in sectarian conflict. A "hair trigger" is a fitting objective correlative for the extreme sensitivity and closeness to violence that dominate the unnamed time and place of the novel's setting, during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.[1] Though saturated with those real-world dynamics, the novel turns its attention from specific historical events or statistics toward how implicit

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1. Ian McBride (2017: 15–16) describes "two patterns of conflict," a vertical one "between republican insurgents and the security forces of the British state" which many viewed "as a form of anticolonial struggle, a continuation of the IRA campaign of 1919–1921," and a horizontal one in which "the IRA campaign was activated and fueled by street disturbances between Protestant and Catholic crowds. Patterns of residential segregation, rioting along territorial boundaries, and localized bursts of ethnic cleansing, or 'burning out,' were all recurrent features of the history of Belfast since the 1830s." For wide-ranging perspectives on the Troubles and ongoing commemorations, see Smyth 2017a; Leahy 2019; Hayes and McAllister 2015; and O'Callaghan 2006.

but widely understood norms (the "ground rules") have shaped what constitutes sexually inappropriate or abusive behavior. The ratio of attention paid in the above passage to the political and the interpersonal reflects the novel's overarching approach: challenging the subordination of social concerns to outright violence and sectarian conflict. By exploring the implications of violence, fear, and repression for individuals in the community, Burns's novel confronts problems of gendered and sexual power by exposing their relationship to sectarian politics.[2]

Whereas James Wood identifies a tension in the "big, ambitious contemporary novel" between world-building and the revelation of a particular individual's feelings and consciousness, in *Milkman* those seeming extremes are not mutually exclusive. Burns's novel develops its storyworld indirectly by refracting it through the experiences and feelings of a single human being—a young character-narrator known only as "middle sister"—who grows up in a largely Catholic neighborhood in late 1970s Belfast, though she never names the neighborhood or city. Neither does she name characters, but instead refers to them relationally (as, for instance, "maybe-boyfriend" or "third brother-in-law"). Those titles illustrate without declaring both a communicative insularity and a context-appropriate wariness of naming names, given what happens to suspected informers: she references their "disappearance" (Burns 2018b: 141), "being called to mortal account as an informer" (189), and "the number of informer corpses stacking up in local entries" (108). The timeline spans several weeks during which she is stalked and harassed by a much older, married republican paramilitary called "milkman," whose name she gives a lowercase "m" until her friend communicates his elevated status by "g[iving] him a capital letter" (197). Only after his death does middle sister learn that "Milkman" is actually his proper name.[3] Middle sister receives milkman's unwanted attention with dread, though his advances are too covert for her to rebuff him openly. Both the broad social norms and the specific responses of her family, friends, and neighbors, who do not believe her when she denies a relationship with him, lead her to discount her "intuition and repugnance" (6). In depicting these specific circumstances, the novel illuminates how the constraints of "tribal identification" (24) and socially

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2. On intersections of nationalism, gender, sexuality, and violence in Northern Ireland, see Kitchin and Lysaught 2004; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank 2000.

3. Reviewer Catherine Toal (2018) links the name "milkman" to an "in-joke that is never made explicit" but that connects him to the Irish Republican Army (IRA): "the IRA delivered petrol bombs in milk-crates to doors at the corner of each street."

enforced conformity in the storyworld normalize violence, misogyny, and sexual predation by discouraging individuals from speaking out or trusting themselves. Paradoxically, then, the novel's rendering of one individual's feelings is precisely what achieves the detailed world-building.

The novel's form—a first-person retrospective narration—makes that paradox possible. "I didn't have those other thoughts until later . . . twenty years later" (6), she says, narrating over a decades-long distance in time—a fact that most reviewers overlook when they mischaracterize her voice as a teenager's.[4] Filtered through the critical lens of extended hindsight, the narrative benefits from the wisdom of age and from the development of vocabularies and opportunities to name abusive behavior. Moreover, her narration is not merely homodiegetic (narrated by a character) but in fact autodiegetic: she tells her own story, for her own purpose, and in her own way.[5] In this fictional autobiography, her reflections and commentary are baked into the narrative mode itself. Middle sister's digressive narration both conveys her fear and bewilderment at the time and calls attention to the present act of telling.

The narrator's often ironic self-consciousness is significant for reasons beyond her revelation of the world and the self. While the retrospection locates her problems in the past, and her references to the narrative present emphasize that pastness, the contemporary context she speaks into—sometime in the early 2010s—makes it not so past, after all. In the past decade, Northern Ireland has seen sectarian violence surge, especially in Derry and Belfast, and, as Jim Smyth (2017a: 6) notes, arguments about how to remember the Troubles "converged [in 2012] with the so-called decade of centenaries." The novel's implied narrative present also coincides with unfolding revelations about abuses of sexual power and sexual predation in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and beyond, and with growing pressure and agitation—including a rise in nationalist and xenophobic responses to immigration—in the UK about its relationship to the European Union. The significance of those developments coalesces in the near-coincident 2016 Brexit referendum and 2017 launch of the #MeToo movement. Brexit raises the real possibility that a reconstituted Irish border, now also the only land border between the UK and the EU, will exacerbate the violent resurgence in North-

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4. A notable exception is Wills 2019.
5. On homodiegesis and autodiegesis, see Genette 1980: 245.

ern Ireland.[6] Meanwhile, the global and public #MeToo conversations about pervasive sexual abuse contextualize the harassment middle sister endured. As reviewer Ron Charles (2018) writes, "Despite taking place 40 years ago, 'Milkman' vibrates with the anxieties of our own era, from terrorism to sexual harassment to the blinding divisions that make reconciliation feel impossible. This is a #MeToo testimony in the context of a civil war." Written before and published just after those events, Burns's novel stands at the nexus of these political and cultural flashpoints,[7] bringing into the present the connections between national and sexual politics that dominate the narrator's experience of Troubles-era Northern Ireland. This is middle sister's experience writ large: different and also strangely the same.

"The Maybe Territory of Not Knowing": Epistemologies of Large-Scale Fiction

Though slightly shorter than the average large-scale novel, *Milkman* offers a comparably immersive world-building and epistemological exploration. Middle sister's description of her relationship status as in "the maybe territory of not knowing" illustrates the tenuous nature of intimacy in her world and exemplifies her larger critique of intellectual rigidity. Critics have developed the generic designations "encyclopedic," "maximalist," or the "big, ambitious novel" to describe works not just large in scale but also composing worlds from excessive content (like data or information) that is possibly knowable (as in a totality) by a knowing figure, for example, a writer or narrator with authority to know and convey. The term "encyclopedic" has referred to both a descriptive narrative category and a self-aware process of composition. Edward Mendelson (1976: 1269) asserts that encyclopedic narratives earnestly "attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge." For Hilary

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6. The New IRA, a splinter group formed in 2012 that opposes the peace process, views any structure or personnel dedicated to border control, even for customs checks, as markers of illegal foreign occupation and therefore legitimate targets. See Mapping Militants Organization 2019; Beresford 2019.

7. Burns finished the novel in 2014 but, in a 2018 interview with Tom Gatti, notes "the publication was very timely, in terms of the sexual scandal and abuse issues, and whether you're believed or not" (Burns 2018a). Clare Hutton (2019: 353–54) addresses this concurrence of events in the context of the Booker Prize. See also Inocencio Smith 2019, which reviews it as a #MeToo novel.

Clark (1992: 96), by contrast, the process of collecting, editing, and recomposing knowledge produces rather than reflects a reality.[8] Both Mendelson and Clark discuss the writer, while more recent scholarship addresses the narrator. Mark Greif (2009: 27–28) observes that the third-person narrator in post-1970s big, ambitious novels "accomplish[es knowing] through countless limited and idio-syncratic characters . . . with an encyclopedic or superhuman range that must belong to the author but is never acknowledged as an authorial possession." "Narrative omniscience" is one element of Stefano Ercolino's (2014: 100) taxonomy defining the "maximalist novel," where a "narratorial gaze capable of perceiving from *above*" controls the narrative flow to enable "a totalizing representation of reality." These are knowing narrators, whether singular or collective, that share the capacity to perceive a wide and full world, and to convey and comment on how it works. Burns's novel does not embrace excess for its own sake, but does explore what can be known and conveyed, and by whom.

Milkman resonates most with James Wood's approach to the big, ambitious novel, especially his term "hysterical realism," introduced in a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. He most engages with these epistemological questions when he implies that humanness and life are recognizable concepts. What he deems "hysterical" traits, others like Clark might say signal self-awareness: the exu-berance and parody of sprouting "stories and substories," implausible circum-stances, and a level of absurdity that produces caricatures rather than credible people (Wood [2000] 2005: 178). He characterizes them, though, as shortcomings because they privilege world-building over character: "the characters who inhabit the big, ambitious contemporary novels," he argues, "have a showy liveliness, a theatricality, that almost succeeds in hiding the fact they are without life" (2005: 182). By seizing on Zadie Smith's (2000) statement in an interview that the writ-er's job is to "tell us how the world works" rather than "how somebody felt about something," Wood establishes an opposition between rendering the world and depicting a single convincing human. What he finds most objectionable in *White Teeth*—the failure to render even one human's feelings or consciousness—is precisely what Smith claims to be the writer's job.

Milkman shares with Wood a preoccupation with the relationship between

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8. Other critics, particularly Ewijck 2011, follow on Clark's (1992: 95) challenge to a "totalizing project," questioning whether a totality is possible, ideal, or communicable. See Carl Gutierrez-Jones 2011; Letzler 2012.

the world and the means of rendering it, though they approach it differently. Wood, a "champion of realism" (Staiger 2008: 636), implicitly takes as given that there is a real world and a specific means of rendering it. He characterizes the ostensible realism of these "hysterical" novels as a disingenuous departure from their realist predecessors: "this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality—the usual charge—but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself" (Wood 2005: 179). In other words, the novels borrow the assumed epistemologies of realism, where the storyworld credibly approximates the recognizable real-world, but fail to offer credibly fleshed-out, feeling human characters. Jeffrey Staiger (2008: 636) explains that Wood's idea of realism relies on our senses of "what is lifelike" but also of "what is consistent with the [author's] stylization of the world. . . . Realism becomes as much a matter of *persuasion* as verisimilitude" (italics mine). More than objectively real, the narrative persuades us of its truth. The most persuasive form is free indirect discourse which, Staiger argues, creates a "dramatic intimacy by limiting [the writer's] exposition to the character's point of view, to what the character thinks and sees" (637). Though I dispute that free indirect discourse, and the dramatic intimacy it enables, are necessarily features of realism, Staiger's and Wood's attention to what is essentially mimesis is spot on: certain narrative forms eliminate excessive narrative telling (diegesis) in favor of showing immediate character experience, thoughts, and feelings (mimesis). The resulting character-reader intimacy enables those forms to convey worlds and characters that credibly correspond to their real-world referents.[9] Wood's longing for the human, for life, implies a longing for mimesis that, he suggests, the "zany" and often incoherent ambitious novel lacks. Narrative omniscience and absurdity both require a readerly suspension of disbelief, though for different reasons, while the consistency of other forms—like free indirect discourse or retrospective narration—bolsters their mimetic credibility. In different ways, both Wood and *Milkman* attend to how narrative form constructs a believable storyworld.

Milkman's means of offering a recognizable world and plausible characters contests Wood's implied oppositions between the world and the single human being, and between mimetic realism and narrative absurdity. Instead, "how the

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9. I have argued elsewhere that such intimate, mimetic forms are modernist. See other discussions of large-scale fiction relative to historical moments or literary periods in Mendelson 1976; Clark 1992; Clinton 2002; Greif 2009; Gutierrez-Jones 2011; Ercolino 2014; Saint-Amour 2015.

world works" and "how somebody felt" are each revealed through the other, precisely because Burns's self-conscious narrator is persuasively credible. The novel features various large-scale fiction characteristics: first, it portrays the knowledge and ideologies of a culture as Mendelson describes, where its lack of "national" cohesion is itself a feature.[10] Second, the narrator is self-aware that, in composing her story, she is constructing a reality while telling, as Clark has argued. Third, the telling exhibits a "diegetic exuberance" that Ercolino (2014: 71–76) describes. Burns's narrative, though not encyclopedic or maximalist in terms of sheer quantity of information, is certainly voluminous, in part because of various "hysterical" traits: the narration is often distractingly digressive, with stories mushrooming within stories, leading many readers to find the novel difficult.[11] Reviewer Dwight Garner (2018) calls it "a willfully demanding and opaque stream-of-consciousness novel," though the narrative is not a transcription of thoughts but a story told, however meandering.[12] Absurd events and characters— caricatures, even—also abound: one night, for example, middle sister comes across a fight so slow and stylized—a "modern, stylistic *art nouveau* encounter" (Burns 2018b: 273) with cigarettes dangling artfully off the men's lips—that the watching crowd, who are "used to chronological and traditional realism" (273) and therefore to judging content by its form, do not recognize the fight as real.[13] Such bizarre events look like hysterical realism but serve a mimetic end: they depict middle sister's experience of an extreme and surreal world, while her exuberant digressions provide significant personal and local history. These hysterical traits depict a persuasively authentic storyworld; as reviewer Claire Kilroy (2018) remarks, "everything about this novel rings true."

Though mimesis and absurdity are seemingly opposed, the story is believable because it comes from middle sister's experience with a tension among what

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10. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the novel of excess that fits in one day, is the more suitable encyclopedic novel of Irish national culture. The "Ithaca" episode abandons the pretense of narrative for a catechistic form that asks its own questions and answers them at length. Whereas Mendelson conveys earnestness, Joyce, like Burns, embraces irony and offers formal experimentations in early episodes that convey a persuasively "real" Dublin without the realism. Though middle sister's discourse shares rhythms with Molly Bloom's internal monologue in "Penelope" and with Stephen Dedalus's stream of consciousness in "Proteus," *Milkman* lacks the radical syntactic experiments and is clearly a telling.

11. Sam Leith's (2018) review catalogs critics' various such characterizations.

12. Other reviewers also call the style "stream-of-consciousness"—see Miller 2018; Inocencio Smith 2019.

13. See White 2021 for my fuller reading of this and other scenes.

she perceived, what others believed, and what she could do about it. She could not, for example, dissuade her mother that rumors about her clandestine relationship with milkman were untrue. His assertion of power and the community's mistaken certainty about the affair undermine her agency and credibility, even with herself: "There was no overt sense here that he could be transgressing so that again perhaps I was mistaken and he wasn't transgressing" (Burns 2018b: 136). She is keen, then, to assert a narrative credibility without replicating claims to absolute knowing and power that she has come to mistrust. The first-person, past-tense form makes reconciling the two possible; with the protagonist as constant narrator, the experiencing and telling selves are separated only by time, marked by statements like "it was only much later that I came to realise" (92). With the consistent critical distance between the narrative present and the story, Burns avoids what Wood ([2000] 2005: 191) sees as a problematic inconsistency of narration in *White Teeth*, where "Smith as narrator, as writer" inserts extradiegetic commentary that disrupts otherwise tight free indirect discourse. By contrast, Burns's narrative consistency provides a means and authority to comment from within the storyworld.

By the same token, that authority is rooted in a subjective rather than objective relationship to events and the community. Middle sister's critical distance comes from hindsight and erudition; her insight comes from gazing through time, not from above. She is self-aware about the challenge of negotiating between her powerlessness to speak then and her power to tell now. As a result, her narrative is both explanatory and exploratory, spontaneous and unguarded, but also grounded and assertive. Her self-referentiality in the telling process accounts for her digressions, sprouting stories, and absurdity. She knows that stories about her world strain credibility: after summarizing her community's attempts to address "women's issues" as "Rape and all that jazz was practically what it was called," she then says, "I'm not making this up" (Burns 2018b: 311) as if to reassure an imagined audience that either shares her incredulity or disbelieves her account. If the absurd is not verisimilar, it is certainly persuasive; she uses it to convey a truth about how circumstances surrounding sectarian and gender politics could undermine an individual's belief in her own perceptions. The self-awareness of her telling, then, is precisely what makes the world and its humans seem real. Absurd characters are no less human for being absurd; her experience no less plausible for being subjective; and her narration no less credible for being self-conscious. The novel's epistemological critique is literary as well as social: it

challenges the implication that only narrative omniscience can render a knowable reality. By linking narrative omniscience to storyworld omnipotence, the novel implicitly critiques the problematic claims to certainty and authority that bolster abuses of power—by state actors, paramilitaries, sexual harassers, even community gossips and bullies—in the real world. Driven by these big ambitions, *Milkman* foregrounds a single feeling human by letting that human speak for herself.

"Sinister, Omniscient Milkman": Living in the World

Middle sister uses coded language and implication to convey her community's behavioral and communicative norms, an appropriate choice given the novel's context. The scope of that context is both narrow and vast: on the one hand, the plotline covers just a few weeks, and is situated in a specific, though unnamed, district widely recognized as the working-class Catholic enclave, Ardoyne.[14] On the other hand, middle sister contextualizes her experience in the centuries-long and island-wide struggle against British imperial rule that she calls "800 years of the political problems still to be sorted" (254). Her coded language, like the euphemism "political problems," fleshes out the storyworld by alluding to without explicitly describing the complexity of the Troubles and of narratives about it. As historian Ian McBride (2017: 14) explains, "The antagonism between unionists and nationalists has variously been viewed as an ethnic conflict, a clash of cultures, an anticolonial struggle, or a terrorist campaign; some think it is about national self-determination, and others see it as an expression of religious sectarianism." Scholarship about representations of the Troubles—literary, historiographical, commemorative—reveals the impossibility of achieving neutrality or consensus. As Laura Pelaschiar (1998: 17) remarks, "The writing of a novel in and of Northern Ireland, no matter what the motives, will inevitably be read in itself *also* as a political act, an adoption of a political viewpoint in a world which is a minefield of economic, religious, and political sectarian divisions."[15]

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14. Ardoyne was one district where Catholic families were burned out by loyalists without police intervention, an event that Burns renders from one child's perspective in the "Thursday, 1969" episode of *No Bones* (Burns 2001: 11). See also Cathal Goan's (2017) personal essay on growing up in Ardoyne during the Troubles.

15. Scholarship attests that the political context continues to shape the critical reception of Troubles fiction; categorizations of fiction generally correspond to watershed moments, particularly the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Neal Alexander (2009) and Birte Heidemann address the "retrospective" tendency of Post-Agreement novelists, which Heidemann (2016: 65) argues makes them

As if to avoid this problem, *Milkman* glances without directly looking at the subject. Burns's first novel, *No Bones* (2001), more explicitly mobilized conflict discourses in dated vignettes—with titles including "Triggers, 1991," "Safe House, 1992," or "A Peace Process, 1994"—though the terms' political significance merely shadows their reference to events in the protagonist's life, for example when Amelia seeks a safe house to live among women after her release from a psychiatric ward. In *Milkman*, the political is even more refracted through the personal, particularly in its coded language. Catherine Toal (2018), whose review asserts that *Milkman* credibly renders real life in Ardoyne, describes that language as authentically representative with its "uncanny combination of the colloquial and the ceremonial in Northern speech." Clare Hutton (2019: 366) characterizes it, by contrast, as middle sister's particular adaptation, "a unique lexicon which fuses her own coinages with colloquialisms, euphemisms, and a kind of stretched and heightened Hiberno-English." Together, their interpretations identify middle sister's language as both authentic and idiosyncratic, illuminating the conflict without explaining it: "At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said 'their side did it' or 'our side did it,' or 'their religion did it' or 'our religion did it,' or 'they did it' or 'we did it,' when what was really meant was 'defenders-of-the-state did it' or 'renouncers-of-the-state did it' or 'the state did it'" (Burns 2018b: 21–22).[16] Middle sister treats this historical context as assumed, avoiding any mention of specific historical events or terms like nationalist, unionist, republican or loyalist. Instead she explains sides by acknowledging differences relative to religion or to the state, and to cultural norms, geographical boundaries, or linguistic tells: "As regards this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, matters didn't stop at 'their names' and at 'our names,' at 'us' and 'them,' at 'our community' and 'their community,' at 'over the road,' 'over the water' and 'over the border'" (24). She

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"more political than ever." In categorizing fiction in generic terms, Eve Patten's (1995) call for greater irony and self-reflexivity—to supplement common approaches like realism, the thriller, the romance, or the liberal humanist commentary—now seems prescient. See also Magennis 2018 for a survey of fiction by Northern Irish women from 1921 to 2015 and Davey 2010 on the body in contemporary women's Northern Irish fiction.

    16. Hutton (2019: 365) notes that "renouncers-of-the-state" or "defenders-of-the-state" are middle sister's unique terms. She argues that this lexicon—which portrays both middle sister's "increasing confusion" and "her estrangement" from her community—is designed to "force a reconsideration" of the events and culture at the time, implying a primarily Irish audience for the novel (365, 366).

references without spelling out the connotations of these boundaries on the Irish sea, the once-militarized border between north and south, and the mostly segregated but often contiguous neighborhoods especially in Northern Ireland's cities. Tribal differences are often visible only to insiders: there are right and wrong brands of butter and tea, shops, place names, schools, prayers, hymns, and "how you pronounced your 'haitch' or 'aitch'" (25). These cultural markers are unstated but universally agreed: "all ordinary people also understood the basics of what was allowed and not allowed" (22).

Middle sister's evasion of real-world terms is useful and political: she avoids both having to affix a narrative to the Troubles and having her narrative circumscribed by existing discourse about the Troubles. Instead, she expresses the violence and trauma through personal examples: her eldest brother moves to the Middle East "for a bit of peace and quiet and sunshine instead" (274), while her "longest friend" is the only member of her family not yet killed because of the conflict (133). By setting the terms of her own language, she avoids settling for binaries that are inadequate for describing this world's complexity. Her own terms harness the illustrative power of binaries while complicating them and critiquing binary thinking itself.

With a narration that both explains and explores, Burns's novel projects a difficult-to-define audience, giving too much information for those who know the culture but using coded enough terms to confuse those who do not. David Letzler (2012: 308) summarizes this phenomenon in the encyclopedic novel as the "experiences of being over- and under-whelmed by textual data." Of course, that audience experience replicates middle sister's own liminal position: on the one hand, she is enmeshed in the culture, a product of it and its linguistic particularities, which lends her some authority to explain it. On the other hand, she is singular in that culture, with idiosyncratic speech and habits, and therefore somewhat of an outsider within. She narrates, therefore, as a knowing representative of her world and as an individual still trying to understand it. Thus, *Milkman* consistently negotiates between simultaneous, interrelated aims: to illuminate the world through one human's experience, and to render the human as product and part of that world. The character is no mere vehicle for revealing the storyworld, and neither is the storyworld—with its political and cultural particularities—a mere backdrop to that character's revelation.

Middle sister depicts a patriarchal and aggressively heteronormative society during this period of sustained political conflict, where the greatest perceived

power lies at the intersection of nationalist politics and hypermasculinity.[17] Social norms follow accordingly. Conformity and tribal allegiance are enforced by threat of violence, social pressure, and constant surveillance—by the state, by renouncers or defenders, and by neighborhood gossips. The republican renouncers are "iconic noble fighters in pretty much the whole of the community's eyes" (Burns 2018b: 119), but that nobility obscures abuses of power expressed as homophobia, misogyny, and sexual violence. The average male citizen performs his manhood through insistent rejections of queer stereotypes; he endorses physical strength, blue-collar work, and football, and rejects cooking, owning coffeepots, and appreciating sunsets. This is "'I'm male and you're female' territory" (8), middle sister says, characterizing certain men's misogyny as a blend of disregard, predatory pursuit, and, ultimately, violence toward women:

> They don't see you as a person but instead as some cipher, some valueless nobody whose sole objective is to reflect back onto them the glory of themselves. Their compliments and solicitousness too, are creepy. They're inappropriate, squirmy, calculated, rapacious, particularly as not long afterwards—or not long before as in my case—you know it's going to be insults, threats of violence, threats of death and variations on stalk-talk. (133)

She connects her individual feelings of dread and powerlessness to disparities of gendered and sexual power in the broader culture. She also presents gendered and political power in binary terms that often overlap—paramilitaries/ordinary people, male/female, explicitly threatening/insignificant—establishing the basis for framing the world in a normative or nonnormative opposition.

That opposition proves more complex, however, when she considers the experience of others who, like her, are both in the community and marginalized, who suffer under the double oppression of colonialism and a compulsory normativity. These community members—the closeted and compulsive, the depressed, psychotic, homicidal, suicidal, or otherwise mentally ill whom she calls "beyond-the-pales"—are publicly visible, sometimes pitied, and generally avoided. The most eccentric seem initially like caricatures more than characters, a feature that Wood connects to "hysterical realism." "Tablets girl," for example, is a "tiny demented person" (183) known for poisoning people in clubs, including her own sister and

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17. Scholars who link the misogyny, aggression, and sexual entitlement that characterizes hypermasculinity to the colonial condition suggest that the colonized man, feminized under sustained subjugation, overcompensates by exerting power over the still more powerless. Ashis Nandy (1983) introduced the term "hypermasculinity" to describe that dynamic. See also Valente 2010 on British colonial discourses about gender, particularly in Ireland, and Victorian manliness.

the narrator. Middle sister's interest in understanding her, though, outstrips her absurdity. After milkman kills tablets girl, her sister allows middle sister to read "a private missive written by some aspect of tablets girl to another aspect of herself" (262), which had been hidden in a doll's belly. Evidently, she was tormented by fear, signing the letter to herself from "*Faithful Terror Of Other People And Not Just On Difficult Days*" (266). Middle sister's empathic effort to understand her and others beyond their nonnormativity gives them greater complexity as characters and transforms a normative/nonnormative binary into a more nuanced spectrum.

That spectrum contextualizes three significant male characters' different relationships to political, gendered, and sexual power. Somebody McSomebody, "a nice wee boy" (51) in middle sister's mother's view, performs his political standing and masculinity through violent attempts at a "romance-advancement plan" (129) with middle sister. Everything about him, though, is over-the-top, making him something of a caricature: his family, all dead now, were all renouncers, but his noisy "peddling of superhero freedom-fighting" (132) betrays him as a pretender. His too-explicit and too-violent demands to possess middle sister—after threatening suicide in a letter, he holds her at gunpoint in the women's public toilet, punches her and then hits her with the gun because she won't date him, all while referring to himself as "us" (305–10)—attest to his marginal status rather than confirming his masculine power and sexual entitlement.

Middle sister's "maybe-boyfriend," so called because of their mutually-agreed-upon fear of commitment, is a social outlier who passes as mostly normative. He is a hoarder who displays his masculinity through a love of car parts and through his apparently secure heterosexuality: he enjoys a mutually passionate sex life with middle sister, takes her to look at sunsets, and listens to her talk about novels. Maybe-boyfriend seems like a promising alternative to the standard homophobic man; after all, he shares his house (and a coffeepot) with his best friend, chef, an eccentric "brickie" who talks constantly to an imaginary cooking assistant and whose queerness is an open secret. Her eventual discovery that they share a mutually loving relationship, though, suggests her own relationship served at least partly as cover for maybe-boyfriend's same-sex desires. If he was maybe her boyfriend, he was also maybe someone else's, hiding in plain sight. Given the open expressions of feeling and affection that middle sister witnesses between maybe-boyfriend and chef—a passionate kiss, a domestic familiarity, a genuine and sustained intimacy—the performance of heteronormativity clearly obscured maybe-boyfriend's much more complex gender and sexual identity.

Milkman is the real thing in every way: a legitimately prominent renouncer, he is married but unashamedly seeking a girlfriend in middle sister without regard for her consent and with an entitlement the community legitimizes. He appears and disappears without warning, asks questions that are actually assertions, and makes clear that he knows her family, her schedule, and where she lives, works, and takes classes. "Sinister, omniscient milkman" (106), she calls him. He is all-powerful, including over her story: he is the reason for her narration and their encounters define its timeline. He is also opaque, his intentions oblique: he never explains himself, never asks for anything, hardly looks at and never touches her. Yet she and the whole district get his message: he wants to have her, and everyone believes he already does, in part because of his community status. He is neither a caricature nor a dynamic character, but rather a figure of power and certainty. In the storyworld and the narration, to borrow a metaphor from W. B. Yeats, he is "a stone / To trouble the living stream" ([1921] 1996, lines 43–44).

Middle sister, by contrast, is a fluid character, partly culpable for marginalizing others but also capable of self-reflexivity, even at the time. After all, while she is fully enmeshed in her culture's nuanced pressures, behavior, and communicative norms, she is also a "beyond-the-pale," as longest friend reveals midway through the novel. She has always been odd because of her practice of "reading-while-walking": she reads (and annotates) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels while vigorously walking the streets, a high-visibility practice that likely drew milkman's initial attention. Now, with milkman's very public targeting of her, she tries to confound the gossips spreading rumors about them by taking on a "terminal face—nothing in it, nothing behind it, a well-turned-out nothing" (176), a strategic, performed affectlessness that alienates her further.

The consequence extends beyond her social marginalization, though, as her performance detaches her from her own voice, intuition and, ultimately, her feelings. When directly confronted by her mother and boyfriend about her relationship to milkman, she can explicitly deny it. Milkman, though, is never direct, so she cannot explicitly tell him off: "There was still my lack of certainty as to whether or not there was anything to tell. . . . That was the way it worked. Hard to define, this stalking, this predation, because it was piecemeal. A bit here, a bit there, maybe, maybe not, perhaps, don't know. It was constant hints, symbolisms, representations, metaphors" (181). He wields power by maintaining a plausible deniability—a tactic no doubt important to his political work—which sows in her self-doubt and silence. "I couldn't see in those days how I could speak

of this dilemma I now found myself in" (64), she says, a dilemma in which, on the one hand, she accurately assesses his intentions and implicit threats—to blow up maybe-boyfriend, for example. On the other hand, that assessment is based in her intuition, which does not rise to the level of certainty. Instead it produces a somatic response characterized by sudden shivers, shudders, and feelings of numbness in her legs, all of which she describes as an "the underside of an orgasm, how one might imagine some creepy, back-of-body, partially convulsive shadow of an orgasm—*an anti-orgasm*" (79). She experiences a gulf between what she perceives physically and intuitively, what is knowable, and what can be expressed. What had been a strategy of evasion, her facially performed lack of affect, becomes a condition in itself—an anti-feeling: "My seemingly flattened approach to life became less a pretence and more and more real as time went on. . . . My feelings stopped expressing. Then they stopped existing. And now this numbance [*sic*] from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible. My inner world, it seemed, had gone away" (177–78). In contrast with omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent Milkman, she cannot effectively feel, know, or speak.

Surprisingly, middle sister's marginalization, self-doubt, and detachment from herself enables a burgeoning critical distance: "I came to understand how much I'd been closed down, how much I'd been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness by that man. Also by the community, by the very mental atmosphere, that minutiae of invasion" (303). She begins to connect her individual human experience to the larger storyworld culture, an insight that informs how she identifies problems as a narrator. Her exploration reveals that community norms do not just marginalize others but actually shape nonnormativity. For example, though mental illness and singular or sustained trauma from the political problems do not stand in easy cause-and-effect relation to each other, her experience suggests they are unquestionably concurrent. She connects the actions and suffering of those whose problems directly affect her—McSomebody and maybe-boyfriend, like tablets girl before them—to real causes in the storyworld. The decimation of McSomebody's entire family, she realizes, clearly "had unhinged him" and "must account, at least in part, for his losing grip so spectacularly" (133); she took maybe-boyfriend for granted while disregarding and underestimating chef as "the bent guy, the harmless guy" (292). The culture of normativity produced these caricatures, but her realization about her own part in normative exclusion reframes them as human characters.

The broader community likewise bears culpability for granting milkman such power. Middle sister therefore turns her critical eye to the men and women alike who uphold political, gendered, and sexual norms with varying degrees of conformity and complicity. Their failure to acknowledge the experience of undervalued community members normalizes abuse: "people here were unused to words like 'pursuit' and 'stalking,' that is, in terms of *sexual* pursuit and *sexual* stalking. . . . If such a thing was entertained to go on, hardly even then would our society take it seriously. It would have been on a par with jay-walking, maybe less than jay-walking, given it was a woman's thing" (182–83). The offenses do not exist without descriptive language, and cannot be named without being acknowledged. No such acknowledgment occurs, though, because the community persistently hews to the values and language available within existing frames of knowledge and experience. Those frames are shot through with common, destructive feelings:

> I didn't know shame. I mean as a word, because as a word, it hadn't yet entered the communal vocabulary. Certainly I knew the *feeling* of shame and I knew everybody around me knew that feeling as well. In no way was it a weak feeling, for it seemed more potent than anger, more potent than hatred, stronger even than the most disguised of emotions, fear. At that time there was no way to grapple with or transcend it. Another thing was that often it was a public feeling, needing numbers to swell its effectiveness, regardless of whether you were the one doing the shaming, the one witnessing the shaming, or the one having the shame done unto you. (53)

Her experience with this unnameable feeling is everyone's experience. Though not in "the communal vocabulary," shame permeates the architecture of their world. It animates a network of vectors—doing, witnessing, having it done—that ensnare and implicate everyone, while also producing the worst kind of isolation: a shared, public feeling experienced individually. What one person feels, everyone feels; what everyone feels, though, each feels alone.

The feeling human individual and the world she inhabits are therefore mutually constitutive. The shared, intransigent condition has roots, moreover, in a link between communicative norms and an epistemological rigidity. Implication and tacit understanding only function where meaning is generated in a shared cultural framework. As becomes clear one night in middle sister's adult evening French class, experiences that challenge or operate outside that framework evoke confusion and resistance. When the teacher reads a literary passage describing the sky and "the sky in this passage she was reading from wasn't blue. . . . Someone in the class—spokesperson for the rest of us—naturally couldn't stand it" (69).

The classmates, from different areas and backgrounds, nonetheless all object to the reading ostensibly on the grounds that theirs is a course in foreign language, not literature: "If we wanted figures of speech and rhetorical flourishes, with one thing representing another thing when the represented thing could easily have been itself in the first place, then we'd have gone to English Literature with those weirdos down the hall" (70). The terms of their protest, though, expose their preference for literal representation of an objective reality: the "thing could easily have been itself." The figurative alternative, by contrast, would replace their objectively knowable reality with a reality constructed by the rendering. Their response to the teacher's suggestion that they look at the sky during sunset reveals their fear of such a subjective approach:

> If what she was saying was true, that the sky—out there—not out there—whatever—could be any colour, that meant anything could be any colour, that anything could be anything. . . . So no. After generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be. (72–73)

The hyperbolic representation of precedent—generations, centuries, millennia—parodies a principled speech of someone doubling down on their resistance to change. When faced with total relativity, they opt for the safety of received, official wisdom and the known—how the world works and what things mean—even if the known (including the terms on which they are living) is circumscribed, unstable, terrifying, or conflicts with what they perceive with their own eyes. Such relativity poses an existential threat not just to what they know but also to the world as knowable. To see differently would be to leave behind the uncertainty that they know.

When middle sister considers seeing differently, though, she discovers "the subversiveness of a sunset": "instead of blue, blue and more blue—the official blue everyone understood and thought was up there—the truth hit my senses. It became clear as I gazed that there was no blue out there at all. For the first time I saw colours, . . . these colours were blending and mixing" (76–77). Her description recalls French impressionist paintings, created *en plein air* to capture the atmospheric changes occurring before the artist's eyes. That style embraced the fundamental subjectivity of perception, a "reality" relative to the viewer in that specific moment. Middle sister's experience suggests that individual, subjective perception might lead away from knowing but toward a truth. That truth contrasts with suspect claims to omniscience and objectivity: in milkman's projection of power

and knowing, in the community's insistence on a one-to-one correlation between a thing and its rendering, or in the omniscient large-fiction narrator. With a cultural insider's tacit understanding and a critical distance from the social periphery, middle sister draws on her storyworld experience to inform her narration. She renounces received normative wisdom in favor of perceived evidence before her, whether evidence of another's complexity or of the truth conveyed through subjective experience. She earns her authority to elect the purpose and means of her telling: to convey a recognizable world not through encyclopedic excess or projected omniscience but through an individual—a thoughtful narrator— as she reframes her own felt experience.

"I Can See Now, of Course": Looking at the World

Middle sister's authority to explain, explore, and critique her world comes from her retrospective narration, which highlights the difference between the time and context of her experience and of her telling. That formal choice contrasts with Seamus Deane's Troubles-related *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Burns's *No Bones* (2001). Deane's novel, set in Derry, spans 1945 to 1971 and uses a consistent but unnamed first-person narrator who matures while learning his family and regional history throughout the novel. *No Bones*, set mostly in Belfast from 1969 to 1994, picks up more or less where *Reading* leaves off historically—the novel opens with, "The Troubles started on a Thursday. At six o'clock at night. At least that's how Amelia remembered it" (Burns 2001: 11)—and shifts between various first- and third-person-limited narrators. Both novels are structured by chronologically dated vignettes that immerse in immediate experience instead of articulating a clear or consistent moment of narration. Unlike such narratives of the moment or narratives offering an omniscient view, *Milkman* uses a consistent first-person narrator speaking from a fixed present. The autodiegesis raises the stakes because the narrator's doubt about her perceptions then, and her self-consciousness about the present telling, conflict with the authority that telling her own story implies.

Middle sister's narrative focuses less on the events themselves than on how they affect her. The first sentence gives away the most startling events: "The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died" (Burns 2018b: 1). Rather than crafting her narrative for suspenseful or dramatic effect, she pads

the relatively few significant events—her encounters with milkman, her meeting with longest friend, her poisoning by tablets girl—with substantial digressions.[18] In the novel's one-hundred-page third section, for instance, four events happen: middle sister attends her evening French class, goes walking, declines milkman's offer to drive her home, and finally accepts a lift from "real milkman," her mother's friend who actually works delivering milk (68–166). Those events prompt extensive digressions, though, during which she explains, among other things, the area's history and gender politics (including the local feminists called "issues women"); her father's depression and institutionalization; real milkman's beyond-the-pale status; and her genius "wee sisters." The plot and the narrative do recede in these expansive explanations. Her digressions blur the distinction between the experienced then and the telling now, which is likely why reviewers like Charles (2018) say "the tragicomic voice belongs to 'middle sister,' an 18-year-old woman" or, like Laura Miller (2018), attribute the perspective to a "skeptical teen-age narrator."

Careful attention to the details, though, reveals that middle sister's narrative is reliably crafted. When mapped out based on orienting phrases, such as "I said yes, that I'd go with him on Tuesday, which was that coming Tuesday—that evening after my run" (Burns 2018b: 44) or "Now, nearly two weeks on" (256), her chronology appears tight and consistent. The digressions, then, comprise a method with multiple simultaneous effects: first, they express the fright, confusion, and repression that middle sister and others experienced at the time. Second, they build out context not extradiegetically but as mental associations prompted by something in the young character's immediate present. Third, they signal the volume of underlying information and the pressure she feels to explain the context. She makes seemingly minor contemporary pop culture references to illustrate her explanations: to a TV show about hoarders (37); to Walter Mitty, the protagonist of a 1939 James Thurber short story called "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and a 2013 feature film (116); and to haute couture designer Jean Paul Gaultier and a 2012 perfume advertisement claiming to offer exclusive access to the quintessential French kiss (273, 275, 294). Though Clare Hutton (2019: 350–52) reasons—based on a realization "twenty years later" (Burns 2018b: 6)—that middle sister narrates from the late 1990s, just after the Good

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18. Digressions are part of Ercolino's (2014: 74–75) "diegetic exuberance," though middle sister's digressions do not undermine the central subject or plot as, he argues, maximalist novels do.

Friday Agreement, the above allusions, along with her reference to clandestine park behaviors in the seventies, eighties, and nineties (7), situate the narrative present in the early 2010s and highlight the amount of time elapsed since these experiences.

The pop-culture references also provide a shorthand for contextualizing her specific storyworld in broader western culture by addressing larger issues: how reality TV turns mental illness into public spectacle; how men with fantasies about their mythical status manipulate others to bolster themselves; how celebrity status becomes its own currency; and how advertisers use popular media to commodify passion. She implies a cultural backwardness when she explicitly contrasts "what is now the era of psychological enlightenment" with the time "way back when enlightenment didn't exist yet" (37), while also mocking the self-congratulatory indulgence of contemporary discourses around therapy, recovery, or self-help: "This too, was before the days of consciousness-raising groups, of personal-improvement workshops, of motivational programming, basically before these modern times when you can stand up and receive a round of applause for admitting there might be something wrong with your head" (60). She makes this critique without recourse to an extradiegetic voice.

Middle sister even explicitly marks her active choices as a narrator. She recalls three separate instances in which other characters address her directly by name, assuming an intimacy with her that is not always welcome. When the "paramilitary groupies," girlfriends of other renouncers, corner her in the toilet to teach her their ways, they speak her name, "crossing over and shunning the interface" (127) to declare her one of them. McSomebody says her name twice while wooing her, also in the toilet (131), and tablets girl's sister calls her by name in a way that "felt warm, friendly, it felt a relief" (267), conveying a desire for connection despite the circumstances surrounding tablets girl's death. Notwithstanding the different contexts, the narrative phrasing is uncannily similar, with only slight variations of "[he/she/they] said my name, my first name, forename." That repetition highlights their occurrences. Moreover, she never actually narrates her own name, seeming more interested in the fact of direct address. When quoting McSomebody's speech, she even interrupts her own quotation to omit her name: "'We get a little enervated, a little nervous'—and here he said my name, my first name, forename—'because just beforehand,' he went on, 'we have this feeling . . . '" (131). By taking pains to avoid saying the name, she draws greater attention to the excision. Her exaggeratedly self-referential move shows with-

out declaring these moments' significance, in which others breach norms about naming and explicit communication. She, by contrast, buries the spoken name in layers of narration, narrating *about* the address rather than rendering it directly. Like the self-conscious exercise Hilary Clark describes, middle sister's narration is an exercise in simultaneously constructing and editing, of choosing what to include and what to omit.

The narrator often takes such self-consciousness to the absurd, parodying the circumstances by rendering the serious comically. The names she gives other characters, for example, also feature in others' quoted speech, as when maybe-boyfriend confronts her about the rumors by asking, "'Does he know, maybe-girlfriend,' persisted maybe-boyfriend, 'about me?'" (284). The clunky name contrasts with the seriousness of his clear hurt. In another instance, the narration quotes an implausibly formal diatribe by one of maybe-boyfriend's neighbors. He suggests maybe-boyfriend is politically disloyal for acquiring part of a Bentley, which might have borne a Union Jack. The rhetoric implies the acquisition might garner the renouncers' attention, suspicion, or punishment:

> "All I'm saying is," [the neighbor] said, "is that I'm not sure I'd capitulate, that I'd want a bit of car, no matter how unique, if it sported national self-gratifying con-notations, if it meant subsumption of the right to my own sovereign, national and religious identity, even if that particular car didn't sport those connotations and demands for subsumption on all its models and range. It's that I'm bewildered," he stressed, "that anyone from 'our side of the road' would let their proclivity for car bits override what should be an instinctual recoil from the other side's symbolism and badges." (29)

Middle sister draws attention to the discrepancy between the vocabulary and rhetorical skill of this pages-long speech and the stream of slang responses from maybe-boyfriend's loyal friends that follow: "*Toe-rag. Twerp. Pishpot. Spastic. Dickhead. Cunning-boy-bollocks. No offence or anything but. I'm only sayin' but. No harm to you like but*" (33). Given the likely informality of conversation among friends ogling a new car part, their responses are far more plausible than the formal diatribe. The implicit threat and the thinking behind it ring true; the discourse does not. By juxtaposing low discourse with high, and low-stakes auto-part acquisition with high-stakes tribal disloyalty and retaliatory threat, she suggests that lofty or noble ideas cover for what amounts to knee-jerk reactivity, intimidation, and violence. Her narrative irony makes the point without her saying it outright.

Middle sister dedicates the story's final episode, which occurs the day after milkman is killed and which bookends the digressive seventh section, to a comedic

scene of children playing that illustrates the sectarian and gender politics and suggests a vision for the future. The district's little girls have been inspired by an internationally famous ballroom-dancing couple from the area—maybe-boyfriend's parents, in fact—to dress up and dance through the streets, as if celebrating the end of middle sister's ordeal. Among them are her preternaturally intelligent wee sisters (aged seven, eight, and nine) who regularly insist on having literature—by Thomas Hardy, Franz Kafka, Joseph Conrad, Edward Albee (276, 249)—read to them. Unlike their grieving, unhappily married, banished, and drunken older sisters, wee sisters are cheery and intellectually curious, if also "wild" and "ghoulish" (147). The little boys won't dance with them because they "wanted to continue throwing miniature anti-personnel devices at the foreign soldiers" (315) and play "Renouncer Hero Milkman" after the "latest martyr killed" (341), so the girls assume responsibility for their own experience. They "double-up and take turns at being both" or, better yet, because they would all prefer to play the "glamorous, super-beautiful [. . .] amazing championship" woman, they "dispensed with the father, either pairing off themselves as two supremely costumed waltzing women, or else just pretending to have a male prop dancing partner" (315).

Both boys and girls occupy a fantasyland, but the boys' fantasy replicates the unidimensional and unchanging form of masculinity that middle sister associates with a "toys outlook": "it was a game—more toy soldiers on toy battlefields, more toy trains in the attic, hard men in their teens, hard men in their twenties, hard men in their thirties, in their forties, with the mentality being toys even if it was far from toys these men were playing with" (312). Instead of boys mimicking men, the men remain boys, though their serious game produces and perpetuates a grim social reality. The girls, on the other hand, mimic the famous couple whose "play" enabled them to escape Northern Ireland and attain global visibility and acclaim. When faced with the boys' disinterest, the district girls embrace whatever queer alternatives facilitate their own ends by adapting their initially heteronormative gender performances to a spectacle of unself-conscious gender bending. Middle sister stages the ends of her persecution and story against this backdrop, as if to endorse and celebrate these young women's resilience when they work together.

What seem like trivial moments convey middle sister's forceful commentary; their comedic elements actually bolster the plausibility of the world because they signal her narrative self-awareness. Heidi Pennington (2018: 13–14) argues that the "overt fictionality" of the fictional autobiography—such as the explicit references to the act of composing while telling—exposes the fundamental narrativity

through which fictional and real-world selves are constructed, and which readers recognize. Burns's novel moves beyond the direct reader address of the perhaps best-known fictional autobiography, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, by replacing Jane's earnest "Reader, I married him" with middle sister's ironic rendering of the otherwise plausibly recognizable world. Its absurdity broadcasts that her novel offers no objective or so-called realist view. Middle sister seems emotionally real not because an omniscient narrator or a commenting author says so, but because she self-consciously tells her story, in retrospect, as the person who lived it. What undermined her credibility at the time—her position as a community member and also an outsider within—is the basis of her credibility as a narrator.

From that position, she depicts the storyworld frankly, authentically, and critically, demonstrating how the "political problems" shaped the culture, daily life, and even individuals' relationships to themselves. She also, though, reveals that those problems offer too simple or narrow a frame to account for the complexity and multidimensionality of lived experience, with grave consequences. This is politics not just as cause but also as cover, where disparities in social and sexual power go unacknowledged and therefore unaddressed. It is a cautionary tale for our contemporary moment in which such dynamics are ever-present and globally pervasive. Burns's novel links nationalist and sexual politics to the entrenched thinking—the certainty of one's own rightness—that produces power imbalances and sustains conflict. Her story suggests approaching skeptically the seemingly hopeful narratives about recent events—about the power of a democratic referendum, the endurance of a negotiated peace, and the progress toward gender equality and sexual justice—in light of more reactionary responses that reduce nuance by doubling down on righteous certainty. The resulting polarization is visible in reactionary ideologies of isolationist nationalism and xenophobia, and in the revived recourse to violence in Northern Ireland. Such uncritical thinking also characterizes polarized responses to #MeToo, where some insist without nuance that we "Believe Women" and defend the absolute terms of callout culture, while others—including many in power—unquestioningly circle the wagons around the accused. Brexit and #MeToo might seem unrelated or old news, but Burns's novel lays out the epistemological terms, and social and personal outcomes, of the postures surrounding those events.

Milkman thus joins other big, ambitious novels by speaking about and into moments of singular historical and cultural significance. Most large-fiction scholarship argues that the immense novel marks a cultural shift relative to a historical

or literary moment. Mendelson (1976: 1269) asserts that encyclopedic narratives' setting in the near past places them in "mimetic or satiric relation *to the world of the reader*" (italics mine). Those terms are especially resonant with *Milkman* in light of Wood's and Smith's 2001 articles published shortly after the 9/11 attacks, in which they revive their public conversation with higher and more serious stakes. For Wood (2001), the moment demands that we end the "false zaniness of hysterical realism," calling instead for "the kind of novel that shows us that human consciousness is the truest Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the newly dark lights of the age." Smith (2001) answers Wood's earnest pleading with her own plea for humor and for novels that "will be equal to these times and to what I feel and what you feel and what James Wood feels; that is, this fear that has got us all by the throat." Wood's request is as lofty as Smith's is modest. He wants human consciousness, she wants humor.

For Burns, they're both right. Though they emphasize different approaches, they share a sense that the novel can and must respond to a dark and fearful historical turn, and Burns's novel does just that. She speaks back to the conversations about the big, ambitious novel in a way they might both admire: she renders a world refracted through the thoughts and voice of one human, and does so with humor and irony. She shows the culture inside from the narrator's experience as an internal outsider. She offers a feeling character forced by her experience into numbness: a character whose feeling is anti-feeling. She illustrates the community's insularity and implicit communication through indirection and coded language: a teller that tells without exactly telling. She conveys a critical commentary through absurdity and ironic self-referentiality: a narrator that narrates about narrating. Her ambitious novel, in short, is both mimetic and satiric, of middle sister's world then and of our own, now.

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