

Book Review

Nicoleta Stanca. *Defiance of “Magdalenes”. Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction.* București: Editura Universitară, 2023. Foreword by HE Paul McGarry, Ambassador of Ireland to Romania and Postscript by Professor Anne Fogarty, University College, Dublin. ISBN 978-606-28-1570-7. 247 pp.

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The idea of the title of this volume on Irish fiction, *Defiance of “Magdalenes.” Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction*, occurred to the author, as Nicoleta Stanca confesses (13-14) after coming across, in a library in Dublin, a study dedicated to the Magdalene Laundries, namely *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries. A Campaign for Justice*, published in 2021. Accounts of the Magdalene laundries and of the recent initiatives to cope with these traumatic events in Ireland, such as the Magdalene Oral History Project, the Magdalene Memorial Committee, the Magdalene Names Project, the Magdalene Survivors Project and Magdalene Restorative Justice, are absolutely impressive. The efforts of those involved in the process of restoring justice to the Magdalenes should be wholeheartedly supported. Gradually, after decades of silence, confessions revealed the horrors of the carceral regimes of these institutions meant to shelter female victims of various types of abuse. The state authorities were deeply disturbed by the personal confessions of the survivors, the legal actions, the cultural projects and the publications dedicated to restorative actions for these women called Magdalenes.

This is part and parcel of Irish history. Nicoleta Stanca’s study, *Defiance of “Magdalenes.” Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction*, has been introduced by HE Paul McGarry, Ambassador of Ireland to Romania, according to whom it

explores the female characters in a range of novels by more contemporary Irish writers. Of course, the Ireland of today is very different from the State in its infancy. We like to think of ourselves as modern, liberal, outward looking, welcoming difference. We value our writers and artists because of the insights they bring to our lives – not just to reflect society. The novels that are considered here, by William Trevor, John Banville, Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry and Colm Tóibín while coming from a particularly Irish place, have

universal appeal and contribute hugely to our understanding of ourselves (9-10).

The female characters in the novels under scrutiny in Nicoleta Stanca's book reveal in a covert way that their representations are part of a similar same cultural project. The fictional protagonists have been treated as symbolical "Magdalenes." Apart from the obvious detail of the historical period when the fiction was published, 2002-2020, coinciding with further Magdalene Laundries restorative actions, an aspect worth mentioning is the forging within a common consciousness by Irish contemporary writers of the "Magdalene" figures of Lucy Gault, Isabel Osmond, Veronica Hegarty, Rosaleen Madigan, Katherine O'Dell, Roseanne Clare, Lilly Bere, Katherine Proctor, Eilis Lacey and Nora Webster, the protagonists of the novels to be discussed in the chapters of the volume reviewed. Each of them challenges a stereotypical feminine role. Yet, they defy the system in a gentle, subtle manner, meant to restore harmony, possibly as followers of another famous Magdalene, St. Mary Magdalene, who chose to remain faithful to Christ.

The following contemporary Irish novels have been analyzed in the volume by Nicoleta Stanca: *The Story of Lucy Gault*, 2002, by William Trevor; *Mrs. Osmond*, 2017 by John Banville; *The Gathering*, 2007; *The Green Road*, 2015; *Actress*, 2020 by Anne Enright; *The Secret Scripture*, 2008; *On Canaan's Side*, 2011 by Sebastian Barry and *The South*, 1990; *Brooklyn*, 2009; *Nora Webster*, 2014 by Colm Tóibín, some of which have already been translated into Romanian in recent years and therefore the author considered it appropriate to explore them as part of a wider project of the reception of Irish literature in Romania.

The Story of Lucy Gault, William Trevor's novel, is the story of a girl, Lucy, who runs away from home to protest against her parents' decision to leave their house under the pressure of those who wanted to lay hands on their land; she gets back to Lahardane but her parents, not finding her, leave in exile; she continues to live there feeling guilty but hoping that reconciliation will come. Through Lucy's eyes, refusing to leave her home, Ireland, becomes overwhelming. It looks like the characters resemble Thomas Hardy's doomed protagonists. There are no real villains, just victims of fate. Lucy's suffering identifies her, according to Stanca (49), with a story of the Protestant "Big House" and of the whole local community.

John Banville's *Mrs. Osmond* is discussed in chapter II of the volume as a sequel to Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*. If much of James' novel consists of the marriage project (courtships, proposals and refusals), the other part is made up of revelations that trouble Isabel Archer's existence (the marriage, the affair, Pansy as Mme Merle's daughter). Similarly, Banville's

novel consists of two parts: reinforcement of the realization of Isabel's mistake in marrying Osmond, her confessions related to the dark secrets of the relationships and entanglements and, secondly, the project of freeing herself. This is what turns Isabel into a genuine "Magdalene" across time, according to Stanca, from 1881 (James' novel) to 2017 (Banville's sequel).

What Anne Enright did in *The Gathering*, in *The Green Road* and *Actress*, three of her best productions, was to recover a certain dimension of motherhood in order to dismantle idealized Irish maternity, claims Stanca in the chapter dedicated to the analysis of the female novelist recent Laureate for Irish Fiction. The beginning of *The Gathering* introduces the idea of memory as vital for the character-narrator, Veronica, in the attempt to find out the truth, accept her brother's suicide and reconcile with her mother, her family and her own self. The materialism of the Celtic Tiger generation, the Irish family and diaspora come under scrutiny in *The Green Road*, through the family gathering at the mother's call before selling the family house. Katherine O'Dell, the actress imagined by Enright, may have been created as a character to respond to and challenge, through her willingness to embrace Irish clichés – an Irishness shaped across the Atlantic as if a commodity to be sold. These stories "expose fractured family bondings but also challenge the idea of doomed mother-child connection in contemporary Irish society" (147).

Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* introduces old and hospitalized since young, Roseanne, who relives the tragedies and joys of her life through her secret journal found in the end by her doctor and son. Raised in rural Ireland in the 1930s, her life is affected by internal war and a troubled family life. When she marries, her prospects of happiness are shattered for good. For a comparative view of racial discrimination and bigotry on both sides of the Atlantic, *On Canaan's Side*, another wonderful story by Barry, could be invoked. 89-year old Lilly Bere recounts the story of her life, attempting to make sense of the violence that surrounded her both in Ireland and across the ocean. She is writing against the background of the American "promised land," but the story-writing takes place in the aftermath of the suicide of her grandson, who had fought in the Gulf War. Barry and Enright, as well as Colm Tóibín, to whom Nicoleta Stanca dedicates the fifth chapter of her book, are seen as representative of a second generation of contemporary trauma novelists in Ireland (158).

Colm Tóibín's first novel, *The South*, combines motherhood and exile, announcing the more recent works also analysed in the volume. *Brooklyn* focuses on the experience of a young female protagonist who leaves Ireland for America in 1950, as a story of departure and disruption but, interestingly, the novel explores both the 1950s context, when the story is set,

and also the 2009 context of the novel's publication in relation to Irish immigration. Motherhood and widowhood are depicted in *Nora Webster* against 1960s and 1970s Enniscorthy, Ireland, which proves stifling for the female protagonist through small-town interference, silence, a dysfunctional community and family, thus family life needing healing.

Nicoleta Stanca concluded that the recent Irish novelists chosen to be discussed in this book created strong and challenging female characters, defiant of the mainstream Irish society, thus proving that their literary efforts merge into a common cultural project, i.e. the dissent of the metaphorical "Magdalenes" in the novels: Lucy Gault, Isabel Osmond, Veronica Hegarty, Rosaleen Madigan, Katherine O'Dell, Roseanne Clare, Lilly Bere, Eilis Lacey, Nora Webster and Katherine Proctor.

Through her analysis of the major female characters in the recent Irish novels mentioned above, Nicoleta Stanca drew some conclusions regarding the post-nationalist novel in Ireland in general, considering that it is concerned with representations of social trauma, micro-histories, family narratives, diaspora connections and transatlantic journeys, exile and migration, memory and identity construction, globalization and consumerism.

In *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Peter Boxall has argued that the novel is founded on its contradictory interests in the social and the communal, on the one hand, and in the private, on the other. In her Postscript to Stanca's book, Anne Fogarty states:

yet these counter-impulses, as he contends, far from being liabilities explain fiction's ability to illuminate and comment on reality while also standing back from it. Nicoleta Stanca's detailed and informative engagement with recent Irish fiction equally bears out the value of this multi-faceted body of work that links the personal with the public and recasts in many different ways several of the key questions of our times about the nature of the self, the function of gender roles, and the effectiveness of the institutions, political systems, and national and international boundaries that we create and uphold. (246).