

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Anna Burns

Milkman

Presented by: Craig Jordan-Baker

Set in the 1970s during the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, *Milkman* is a novel exploring the silence, myopia and the compartmentalisation needed to survive in a place of political, psychological and spatial schism. The time known as 'The Troubles' (1969-1998) was a period of internecine military, paramilitary and political conflict in Northern Ireland, currently one of the four countries making up the United Kingdom (U.K.). The conflict centred around the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, with some wanting a united Ireland (Nationalism/Republicanism) and others wishing to remain as part of the U.K. (Unionism/Loyalism). The conflict was exacerbated by sectarianism and discrimination against the minority Catholic population, who largely desired Irish unity. The Troubles officially came to an end in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement where both Unionists and Nationalists agreed to share political power within the state.

In its simplest form, *Milkman* follows 18-year-old 'middle sister' as she attempts to avoid the menacing advances of an unnamed paramilitary within her community known only as 'Milkman'. Given Milkman's heroic status as a 'renouncer of the state', middle sister finds herself unable to prevent his stalkerish behaviour, or the cacophony of rumour which concludes they are lovers, and that middle sister is playing an irresponsible and dangerous game with an older man.

In almost all of her actions, middle sister finds herself under observation from within her own community ('our side') and from without ('the other side'). This is added to by the assumed omnipresence of military personnel and agents from the 'country over the water'. By resisting what her community sees as normal behaviour (she has the 'perverse' habit of walk-reading 19th Century novels and refuses to either confirm or deny rumours), middle sister comes to realise that, '[w]hat you don't offer- especially in volatile times- people will make up for themselves'. Her response of external 'numbance' to her bloody, insidious and ever-suspicious world comes with a significant mental cost, and middle sister states 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'. Coupled to this, the gender politics of middle sister's society, where men are often lionised and women are cast as mothers, temptresses or lunatics, adds an additional layer of suffocation. Middle sister's story then is one of a failed attempt at having a private life, and of a corresponding failure to know her private self.

Milkman is remarkable for a number of stylistic features, most prominently its non-standard naming conventions. Instead of the use of proper names ('Holly Smyth', 'Sean Jordan'), the novel adopts associative designations. This not only includes the familiar 'ma' (mother) and 'da' (father) but, 'third sister', 'maybe-boyfriend', 'pills girl' and 'longest friend', among others. The naming system of *Milkman* serves to emphasise how identity is constituted by relation to others, rather than a given name marking a distinct individual. Within the world of *Milkman* this diffusion (and loss) of identity across the community is further emphasised by the uncapitalized status of 'names' (i.e. 'third sister', not 'Third Sister'), which subverts the convention of names being marked as proper nouns by capitalisation. These features chime with the novel's overall emphasis on suspicion, guardedness

and communities who have made lives out of the Northern Irish adage, 'whatever you say, say nothing'.

With its focus on the Troubles, Milkman builds on Burns' previous novels *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007). The publication of *Milkman* though brought Burns' work and life to a significantly higher public profile and the novel won the 2018 Man Booker Prize, along with broad praise across the British and Irish press. Since its release in English, the novel has been translated into French, Russian, Chinese, Czech, Finnish, Danish, Spanish and Dutch, among others.

Since the U.K. vote to leave the European Union in 2016, Northern Ireland and its politics have come into focus in a way they have not since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998. Arguably, this macro-political attention has been forced on a British public and political establishment that would rather say nothing about Northern Ireland. The success of novels such as *Milkman* serve to highlight the living legacy and aching complexity of the period we euphemistically call, 'The Troubles'.

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