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# The Novels of Deirdre Madden: Expanding the Canon of Irish Literature with Women's Fiction

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THE NOVELS OF DEIRDRE MADDEN:  
EXPANDING THE CANON OF IRISH LITERATURE WITH WOMEN'S FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Carly J. Dunn

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2014

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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Title: The Novels of Deirdre Madden: Expanding the Canon of Irish Literature with Women's Fiction

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In this first comprehensive study of Deirdre Madden's novels, I examine her work through a variety of critical lenses, and position Madden within the contexts of Irish fiction and women's fiction. I consider Madden's significance as an Irish writer who situates herself among various traditions and themes: nature and place writing, mother-daughter relationships, the Irish "Troubles," expatriate experiences, art and the artist, and children's literature. Feminism provides the groundwork for many of my analyses, but I also discuss Madden's work ecocritically, historically, and aesthetically, exploring ideas concerning literary influence and intertextuality as well. I begin by outlining the primary problem that this study seeks to address—the lack of scholarship not only on Madden, but on modern Irish women fiction writers in general. I also sketch a brief history of Madden's career as a writer, a career that spans more than thirty years thus far. My purpose is not to examine Madden's novels one by one, but rather to fit her writing into existing traditions and argue for her place within these traditions, even, or especially, when she defies them.

I include analyses of all eleven of Madden's novels within different scopes and contexts, thereby demonstrating that her work is sufficiently rich to reward multiple critical approaches. Although discussion of each novel appears in more than one section,

I examine her children's books in a separate chapter. Drawing from an interview I conducted with Madden in June 2012, I also explore Madden's literary influences and elements of intertextuality within her writing.

I conclude by suggesting subjects for future studies of Madden and raising questions that will still need to be addressed. In a broader context, I assert that the field of Irish studies in the United States must break away from its male-dominated history and include more women writers. In both a scholarly and pedagogical sense, Irish studies has made progress in terms of gender equity, but more needs to be done. Madden's work, along with the work of her female contemporaries, has been marginalized and under-appreciated, and thus this study is both necessary and timely.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have guided and supported me as I worked to complete this dissertation, and they all deserve my sincere gratitude. First, I owe Dr. James M. Cahalan, my director and mentor, more thanks than I can adequately express. From the beginning of my program and through the completion of this project, Jim has worked patiently and tirelessly with me, sharing his extensive knowledge and providing encouragement when I needed it the most. I could not have asked for a better director. I also must thank Dr. Christopher Kuipers for his time and guidance. My many chats with him helped me to more effectively manage my time, and his advice on how to approach children's literature became crucial in shaping my chapter on Madden's children's novels. Much of my grounding in feminist theories comes from Dr. Lingyan Yang's thought-provoking course on multiethnic American women writers, and thus I owe her a great deal of thanks not only for her time spent on this project, but also for introducing me to such powerful feminist literary criticism.

I must acknowledge and thank the source for this dissertation: Deirdre Madden. Her inspiring work has changed the way I view myself and the world around me, and I continue to enjoy rereading her compelling novels. Madden was kind enough to allow me to interview her in June 2012, and the three hours we spent together only increased my admiration of her as a writer, as a teacher, and as a woman.

Dissertation progress ranks as a top topic of conversation among all of my friends here at IUP, but I want to thank Amanda Lagoe in particular for her friendship,

encouragement, and kindness. I would often rely on her when I needed a sympathetic ear or a reassuring smile.

I am so lucky and grateful to have the unconditional love and support of my family. My parents, Susan and Stephen Dunn, have provided me with a wellspring of love, hope, and encouragement as I progressed through my program and this dissertation. They have patiently listened as I've worked through ideas, offering perspectives that I had not considered. In my sister and brother, Samantha and Andrew, I have two best friends who are always only a phone call away when I need to talk, and I cannot imagine having completed this project without their support.

Finally, I must thank my partner, Adam, whose love, companionship, encouragement, and support have been crucial to the completion of this dissertation. I have often turned to him with a "how might I phrase this" question or a "don't let me get distracted from writing tomorrow" request. He has never failed to make me laugh when I need to clear my head, and in him I find true understanding and joy.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive study of Deirdre Madden’s novels is long overdue. In this dissertation, I examine Madden’s eleven novels—including her three children’s novels—through a variety of critical lenses, and I situate her work among a variety of writing traditions, both Irish and non-Irish. As with many Irish women who write fiction, Madden’s work has suffered critical neglect, yet she is part of a longstanding tradition of Irish women writers. As the first comprehensive study of Madden’s work, this dissertation offers a pluralist approach. Feminism, my central theoretical framework, provides a groundwork for many of my analyses, but I also discuss Madden’s work ecocritically, historically, and aesthetically, exploring ideas concerning literary influence and intertextuality as well. I examine her work mostly in specifically Irish contexts, so I cite many Irish feminist theorists and critics—more than thirty of them altogether (several in this introduction and then more in my body chapters—as well as numerous other scholars, from Ireland and elsewhere, useful to my other critical perspectives. My approach reflects the arguments of many feminists that we need to attend to the variety of “feminisms” rather than be satisfied with a single, monolithic “feminist theory”—and, even more, my intention to demonstrate that Madden’s novels are rich enough to reward multiple critical approaches.<sup>1</sup> Future studies of Madden’s work that follow a single

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<sup>1</sup>A great many feminists have argued that we need to be talking about “feminisms” rather than only “feminism,” in order to recognize the diversity of feminisms, both culturally and critically. For just one example among many in this regard, see Chilla Bulbeck’s *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. Moreover, feminist approaches often interact with other theories, as in the case of ecofeminism—a link between feminism and the ecocriticism that I pursue in my next chapter, even though my own approach there is not specifically *ecofeminist*. See, for example, Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein’s *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism*.

theory may prove useful. However, my purpose here is not to confine myself to one approach, but rather to open the doors to her work, to place her within the writing traditions where she belongs, and to argue for a canon of Irish fiction that embraces not only Madden, but other neglected women writers as well.

At least since the time of the publication of the monumental, three-volume, controversial collection of Irish literature, the *Field Day Anthology* (1991, with Seamus Deane as general editor)—which inadequately represented Irish women writers—Irish literature scholars have recognized the progressive yet still lagging state of critical scholarship on Irish women writers. The oversights of *Field Day* were subsequently addressed, as two additional volumes were published, the fourth and fifth (2002, edited by Angela Bourke), that concentrate solely on Irish women writers. Since then, numerous studies of Irish women writers have emerged, and while we should certainly celebrate the widening body of critical studies, we must aspire to go one step further and widen the canon. Indeed, much of the scholarship on Irish women writers focuses on an already established list of authors—such as Lady Augusta Gregory, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O’Brien, Edna O’Brien, and Eavan Boland. In 2006, Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt succinctly expressed the need to expand the canon of Irish women writers: “The recent blossoming of works by and about Irish women is heartening; so much more needs to be said and done” (4).

Deirdre Madden (b. 1960) is one such writer for whom “more needs to be said and done.” Her eleven novels have received numerous awards, including the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1987 and, in 1989, the Somerset Maugham Award—a British award given by the Society of Authors to the best writer under the age of thirty-five

(she's now 53). Two of her novels were shortlisted for the esteemed Orange Prize in Fiction, an honor she shares with other shortlisted writers such as Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Emma Donoghue. Furthermore, Madden's first children's novel won the Eilís Dillon Award. Her work has been translated into Swedish, Norwegian, French, German, and Spanish. Despite such recognition, Madden's impressive body of work received no comprehensive study before this dissertation.

Many first-rate novelists have recognized Deirdre Madden's contributions to both Irish literature and fiction writing in general, yet the field of Irish studies, both scholarly and pedagogical, has yet to catch up with her. In their blurbs for *Molly Fox's Birthday*, both Richard Ford, the excellent American novelist, and Madden's Irish contemporary Anne Enright offer Madden the highest praise. Ford writes,

Deirdre Madden's prose is crystalline, understated, apparently effortless yet artfully suitable. She really does not remind me of anybody I've read before. And yet, like other formidable writers—Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood and Elizabeth Bowen come to mind—she is after something intrinsic and riddling but essential in us all, something that probably doesn't exist until we've read every word this book contains. It is ambitious work. Madden is a first-rate novelist.

More succinctly, Enright writes, “Madden is one of our finest writers.” Having read all of Madden's works several times, I not only agree with these assessments, but I believe they further warrant more critical attention towards one of Ireland's “finest writers.”

Madden's professional writing career began with the 1986 publication of *Hidden Symptoms*. Madden's debut novel—which won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature—takes place in Belfast during the Troubles of the 1980s and centers on Theresa, a student at Queen's University whose life is irrevocably altered after the brutal murder of her twin brother Francis two years ago. Instead of relying on plot, narrative drives the novel, as Theresa's conversations with Robert—a lapsed Catholic who desperately tries to disengage from his working-class family and enjoy an intellectual life—reveal her inner struggles with memory and reality. These conversations, along with Theresa's meditations on her past, her brother, and her own convictions, explore ideas such as the burdens of religion and forgiveness, the fascism and hatred inherent in nationalism, the nature of violence, and the effects of self-reflexivity coupled with repression. The title of this novel refers to a third character: the city of Belfast. Belfast serves as the antagonist that, “before 1969 had been sick but with hidden symptoms” (13). Now the violence exposes the diseased state of the city, disrupting notions of identity, home, family, and place. In a 2008 BBC Radio interview, Mariella Frostrup asked Madden why the period of the Troubles serves as a backdrop for her first novel (and for her fifth, *One by One in the Darkness*). Madden responded by explaining, “Even though the political situation in the North has thankfully changed very much . . . with the suffering of so many people, it's not as if everything's over and it's alright now.” She goes on to articulate that the question of how people go on with their lives, with their painful and indelible memories, is, unfortunately, unresolved. Madden emphasizes that such questions “need to be looked at and examined still.” In her debut novel, she does just that.

Turning away from the political and national forces that surround *Hidden Symptoms*, Madden sets her second novel in an unnamed Irish countryside. *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), which received the Somerset Maugham Award, alternates between two narratives: Jane's life, a Gothic tale detailing events from her childhood up through her marriage to James, and the story of Jane's twin daughters, Sarah and Catherine. The disjointed structure enables the secrets that permeate the novel to remain hidden, and as with *Hidden Symptoms*, Madden suggests that she is not interested in a simple conflict-resolution tale, for again her characters enjoy neither resolution nor absolution. A sickly child who becomes a burden to her aunt when both her parents burn to death in a house fire, Jane's story is tragic from the beginning. Her marriage to James disconcertingly lacks any true affection, and Jane cannot find comfort in her home, her husband, her neighbors, or even her own body. She suffers an emotional breakdown after her first baby is stillborn. The flashbacks to Jane's life alternate with the present life of Sarah and Catherine, who each live under the weight of a secret and struggle with their knowledge, but neither sister knows the burden of the other. As the novel progresses, the secrets are gently, never directly, revealed. We learn that Sarah's affair with Peter—who lives with his mother in a nearby cottage—is actually incestuous, and although the truth is only hinted at, he is the half-brother of Sarah and Catherine. We also learn that Catherine suffers from a terminal illness, and only Sarah knows. *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* is Madden's first mother-daughter, female-centered novel. Madden depicts a claustrophobic world of isolation, skirted truths, and uneasy suspicions. The alternating structure of the narrative, along with the details and realities of Jane's,

Sarah's, and Catherine's lives, forge a tradition and bond between mothers and daughters, from generation to generation.

Madden's third novel, *Remembering Light and Stone* (1993), takes place not in Ireland, but in Italy. As an Irish writer who lived abroad in Europe for almost fifteen years, Madden writes the transnational novel with an intimate knowledge of the foreigner's experience. Aisling, the protagonist, left Ireland years ago and has been living abroad. She struggles with her identity as an Irish woman living in Europe, for she cannot forget her past in Ireland, nor can she fully embrace her life in Europe. Again, the novel relies on Aisling's thoughts, memories, and conversations with her American boyfriend, Ted, and avoids any sense of chronological plot or conflict-resolution structure. *Remembering Light and Stone* considers the nature of travel, the concept of home, community identity, the choice of solitude, and the difficulties that arise when solitude is abandoned in an attempt at companionship. Aisling's past in Ireland, her childhood, torments her. Madden reveals few specific details, but she adamantly reinforces that Aisling's past haunts her. Aisling grew up on a farm in Ireland with an abusive father and a family life that inadvertently contributed to her natural wariness of families and her insistence on a private, solitary life. She suffers from nightmares and constantly feels uneasy about herself. Over the course of the novel, Aisling gradually heals the wounds of her past, and in the end she returns to Ireland and decides to stay. Her time abroad provides her with the perspective she needs in order to return. Madden never intends for Aisling's return to come as a surprise, for Aisling reveals at the beginning of the novel that, "The contrast with Italy was a help, but in many ways I felt I could have gone anywhere, so long as it was far away and provided me with privacy, so

that I could forget all about home for a while, forget all about Ireland, and then remember it, undisturbed” (2).

Combining aspects from her first three novels—the effect of place and location, the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters, and the search for identity in an unfamiliar land—Madden’s fourth novel, *Nothing Is Black* (1994), features three women living on a remote coastland in Donegal. Claire is a painter who enjoys her life of solitude, until her cousin Nuala comes from Dublin to stay for the summer. Nuala has recently lost her mother and given birth to her first child. The effect of these two events becomes shockingly evident to her and her husband when she begins, and then continues, to engage in kleptomania. In a reconfiguration of the classic pastoral escape, Nuala decides that in her cousin’s quiet seaside village she can begin to heal in a way that the crowded chaos of Dublin will not allow. Once in Donegal, Nuala meets Anna, a Dutch woman who spends half her year in Ireland and half in the Netherlands. Anna’s solitude stems from her estrangement from her daughter, Lili, who has never forgiven her mother for her parents’ divorce. As Claire, Nuala, and Anna spend their summer together, contemplating their choices in life and the realities they have had to face, they grow to understand one another and themselves.

Madden returns to Northern Ireland and the Troubles in her fifth novel, *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), and to an exploration of the futility of violence and the complexities of families. This novel, which was short-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction, centers on the Quinn family—Charlie and Emily Quinn, and their three daughters Helen, Cate, and Sally. As with *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, the narrative alternates between past and present, from the three Quinn sisters’ childhood during the escalating

violence of the 1970s, to their present in 1994, shortly before the IRA ceasefire agreement. As with *Hidden Symptoms*, the violence of the Troubles penetrates into the family home, for Charlie Quinn is shot dead in his brother's house. His brother, Brian, who lived next-door, had affiliations with the IRA, and the two British loyalists who burst into his home wearing Halloween masks mistake Charlie for Brian.

This novel follows the Quinn sisters for one week, two years after their father's murder. Cate is living in London and working for a fashion magazine. She has tried to erase her history, most notably by changing the spelling of her name from Kate to Cate. She prefers Cate, because she feels Kate is too Irish, too country, and does not reflect her modern, urban lifestyle. Helen lives in an upscale development in Belfast, a neighborhood with sterile, identical townhouses, but she returns to her childhood home to stay with her mother almost every weekend. She is a lawyer, and many of the clients she defends are charged with IRA-related murders. The youngest sister, Sally, lives at home with their mother and teaches at a local school. Cate unexpectedly announces that she will be leaving London and returning home for a week, and as the week unfolds, the Quinn women learn how to confront their loss, articulate and accept the choices they have made as a result, and find a way to live.

Madden's sixth novel, *Authenticity* (2002), deviates slightly from her previous work in that it features both a male and a female protagonist. *Authenticity* most decidedly centers upon the nature of art, the life of an artist, and artistic integrity. Roderick and Julia are both artists; Roderick is twenty years Julia's senior and established in his career, whereas Julia is just starting out, trying to make a name for herself. They are lovers, and their lives are unexpectedly interrupted by William, a middle-aged businessman who

traded in his passion for art in order to have a successful, lucrative career, a wife, and a son. Like most of Madden's work, *Authenticity* asks more questions than it answers as it considers the many facets of an artist's life: the alienated artist, the inspirations, the joys and the consequences of success, the inevitability of failure, the varying forms of fulfillment, the frustrations an artist faces, and the community aspect of art. Madden explains her interest in art as a subject for writing in her interview with Frostrup. She says that writing and painting are similar in that they both involve "processing various ideas and emotions and synthesizing them, translating them into an object which is separate from you." The result, according to Madden, is that "other people can engage with it without engaging with you."

Madden's 2008 novel, *Molly Fox's Birthday*, incorporates many of the themes that have come to characterize her style: female friendship, the life of an artist, and self-reflexivity. *Molly Fox's Birthday*, which was short-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction, takes place over the course of one day: June 21, the longest day of the year. This day is also Molly Fox's birthday, yet it is the unnamed narrator, rather than Molly, whom we follow throughout the novel. The narrator stays at Molly's house in Dublin while Molly is working on a play in New York. Molly works as a stage actress, and the narrator—her best friend for twenty years—is a playwright. As with much of Madden's work, thought and memory rather than plot move the narrative along, and the narrator, who is suffering from writer's block, considers her friendship with Molly and her own life in general as she goes about her day, waiting for inspiration. In her BBC interview, Madden revealed that it was a bit difficult to achieve proper "pace and balance" in the novel, since "not much happens in real time." Over the course of the day, the narrator's

thoughts wander beyond her friendship with Molly to a third friend, Andrew Forde. Andrew is a successful art historian with a new television series, and he comes from a working-class Protestant family in Belfast. The narrator met Andrew at school, and once Andrew met Molly, the friendship extended three-ways. In her introspective quest for inspiration, the narrator must confront her suspicions and fears that Molly intruded upon her friendship with Andrew, taking him from her and replacing her as his closest confidant. *Molly Fox's Birthday* is an exploration of life—how one comes to know, if one can ever truly know, someone else's life, how one build friendships, how one build one's own life and deals with failure and success, and how one can find inspiration in everyday events.

Before she wrote *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Madden decided to expand her career path and attempt to write a children's chapter book. The result was *Snakes' Elbows* (2005). This children's novel—and winner of the Éilís Dillon Award—tells the hilarious story of millionaire Barney Barrington's return to his childhood town of Woodford. Mischief and chaos ensue when the town's other millionaire, Jasper Jellit, tries to steal Barney's extensive art collection. *Snake's Elbows* is a moral tale, complete with starkly drawn lines between the good guy, Barney, and the bad guy, Jasper, and animals that talk to one another and ultimately save the day. The lessons of the novel, however, go beyond notions of greed and kindness. For example, Madden exposes the cruelties of commodity fetishism. Each time Jasper throws a lavish party, insisting on every ostentatious detail, his dogs not only witness the intense labor of Jasper's workers, but they suffer their own mistreatment as well. Moreover, the source of Jasper's wealth, which is unknown for much of the novel, is revealed to be through illegal arms dealings.

The novel makes it clear that Jasper is egregiously offensive and immoral, and that his “career” is as well.

Madden’s second children’s novel, *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* (2007), is another animal tale, and again her animals can communicate with each other and understand human speech, but humans cannot understand them. Like *Snake’s Elbows*, *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* makes a case against greedy materialism while also teaching the importance of kindness towards animals. Kiera is visiting her Aunt Emily over the holidays, and helping out in her aunt’s pet shop. She soon realizes that Aunt Emily does not actually sell her pets; rather, her pets live together in the shop as friends and neighbors. When Mrs. Henrietta Fysshe-Pye moves to the village and wants to buy pets, we learn just how resilient and loyal to each other the animals are. Kiera and Aunt Emily are actually minor characters in the story, as the animals take over the narrative and organize to save their friends from Mrs. Fysshe-Pye’s cruel and greedy ownership.

After writing *Molly Fox’s Birthday*, Madden returned to children’s chapter books. *Jasper and the Green Marvel* (2012), the sequel to the award-winning *Snake’s Elbows*, again features the mischievous Jasper Jellit, who once again hopes to get his hands on priceless objects that belong to someone else. In *Snake’s Elbows*, Jasper coveted Barney Barrington’s artwork; in *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, he desires an emerald necklace. The novel is another animal tale, yet this time it is up to Jasper’s pet rats, Rags and Bags, and Nelly, the bat who serves as Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley’s constant companion, to save the day. As with Madden’s other two children’s books, valuable lessons are taught in a fabulously entertaining way.

In 2013, as I was finishing this dissertation, Madden published her latest, eleventh novel, *Time Present and Time Past*. This novel, which has earned fine praise in its early reviews, continues to explore the themes that underlie much of her work—time, memory, and experience—through the main character, Fintan Buckley. Due to the timing issues surrounding the novel’s publication and my own dissertation progress, I address *Time Present and Time Past* only briefly in my conclusion. Future studies of Madden’s work will have the opportunity to examine this latest novel more thoroughly, as both a text in itself and also how it fits into Madden’s body of work.

This overview points to the richness of Madden’s work. Clearly, female characters dominate throughout, and she addresses several feminist themes, such as relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters, and also the connections that women have to the natural world. Despite the quality of her work, however, she has received relatively little critical attention. This fact reinforces what Michael McLoughlin noted in his 2002 review of her novel *Authenticity*: “Deirdre Madden must be one of the least hyped Irish writers, but she is one of those whose work deserves the most fanfare” (qtd. in O’Hare 196).

Ironically, despite being so under-“hyped,” Madden’s work invites comparisons to many writers already firmly located within the Irish women’s canon. For example, her concise, introspective style often echoes Jennifer Johnston, most precisely in her *Troubles* fiction, and her tendency towards familial relationships—especially mother-daughter ones—follows the path frequently tread by Edna O’Brien. When Madden sets sail for Italy in *Remembering Light and Stone*, it is difficult to not think of Julia O’Faolain’s *The Irish Signorina*, also featuring a young Irish woman in Italy. Moreover,

Madden's emphasis on conversation to drive her novels suggests the influence of Elizabeth Bowen. Despite these connections, Madden has suffered a fate all too common among Irish women writers. She is briefly included in studies that address broad themes—such as Heather Ingman's *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* and the edited volume by Liam Harte and Michel Parker, *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*—but until now, her work has yet to be featured as the subject of a single, full critical study.

In 2000, Christine St. Peter published *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, and she notes in her introduction that “very few critical studies of Irish women's fiction have been produced” (3). The pioneering work was Ann Owens Weekes' *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (1990), which focused entirely on fiction writers. Since 2000, over a dozen have been published, but too few critical studies of single authors exist. Instead, Irish women writers are given only brief consideration in books that cover anywhere from eight to more than fifteen writers. A noteworthy exception is the 2011 publication of *Anne Enright*, as part of the Irish Academic Press series “Visions and Revisions: Irish Writers in Their Time.” The desire to critically showcase the rich variety of Irish women writers and the desire to thoroughly examine one single writer are understandably competing urges. For an author such as Madden, however, the trend towards the showcase model has resulted in an essentializing discourse on her writing, because much criticism on Irish women authors focuses on the northern Irish “Troubles.” Most critical studies of Irish women writers that include Madden highlight her two Troubles novels, and as with St. Peter's study, Madden is often included in the chapter covering writers from the North. As a result, eight of her eleven

novels are often ignored because they do not follow the general characteristics of Northern Irish writing. If the systematic exclusion of much of Madden's work from the emerging canon is not startling enough, consider the fact that Madden herself does not identify herself as a Northern Irish writer. In a recent interview with Marisol Morales Ladrón, Madden responded to a question about the Northern Irish label: "I would always call myself an 'Irish writer' and I would be quite resistant to the definition of 'Northern Irish writer' because, I suppose, I don't like or respect the concept of Northern Ireland" (245).

Madden's commitment to writing is evidenced by her impressive education. She was born in Northern Ireland on August 20, 1960, and grew up in Toomebridge, County Antrim. She was born in Northern Ireland on August 20, 1960 and grew up in Toomebridge, County Antrim. Raised as a Catholic in a place where such religious labels denote socioeconomic status—with Catholics historically oppressed by Northern Irish Protestants—Madden attended St. Mary's Grammar School in Magherafelt, County Derry. She then earned her Bachelor of Arts with honors from Trinity College, in Dublin, in 1983. Madden was awarded a Master of Arts with Distinction from the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, in 1985. At UEA, she attended Malcolm Bradbury's creative writing school. According to a recent article in *The Guardian*, it is generally acknowledged that Bradbury's courses are among the most highly esteemed in the field of creative writing, and Madden's fellow alumni include Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and Anne Enright (Barnett).

Madden served as writer in residence at University College, Cork in 1994, and at Trinity College, Dublin in 1997. Also in 1997, she was elected to Aosdana, an Irish

association of artists and writers. Significantly, artists and writers are not allowed to apply to the organization. Rather, current members nominate new members, and the association caps membership at 250. Madden is a member alongside esteemed writers such as Brian Friel, Marina Carr, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Edna O'Brien. Her dedication to writing as an art has earned her many fans among fellow writers, and writers such as Richard Ford, Colm Tóibín, Paula Fox, and Anne Enright have praised her work in the blurbs they have provided for her novels.

At the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing at Trinity College, Dublin, Madden currently teaches creative writing as well as literature courses such as “A Novelist’s View of the Novel.” She actively engages in the continuation of Irish literature scholarship, and in 2009 she was one of two keynote writers at the annual conference for the Spanish Association for Irish Studies. More recently, Madden was a featured author at the 2013 Dublin Writers Festival.

Since 1986, Madden has been connecting to readers with her fluid expressions of human experiences and conditions. My first encounter with Madden’s work, when I read *Hidden Symptoms*, left me captivated by her spare prose and shrewd insights. By resisting chronological plots, her novels swept me into the lives of her characters, while also urging me to recognize elements of myself—as a woman, and as a human being living in an inter-connected world. One can thus imagine my surprise when I discovered that her work had received relatively little attention, both critically and pedagogically. At the outset of this project, therefore, I was determined to fill what I saw as a major gap in Irish literary studies by offering an expansive critical analysis of Madden’s entire body of work; all of her books are novels. My research and writing processes, along with my

interview with Madden, led me, however, to broaden my scope. Although Madden's work—not only her novels but also how they compare with and fit into other literatures—remains the primary focus, this project also seeks to address two additional elements that ultimately grew into motivating forces: common practices in scholarship, especially Irish scholarship, and common practices in readership.

Scholarship and readership share a similar feature in regards to the selection and treatment of authors. To first address scholarship, in my own research, I have often noted, with frustration, the lack of thorough coverage of individual Irish authors beyond the most famous ones—what I call the “usual suspects”: Yeats, Joyce, Synge, O'Casey, Beckett, Heaney, and mostly only other celebrated men, with the partial exception of Maria Edgeworth and Lady Augusta Gregory. More recently, Edna O'Brien and Eavan Boland have joined their ranks, but other women writers are often marginalized in small sections in books that cover dozens of writers under one or several umbrella themes. In 2013, many new books were published on Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Heaney, Synge, Wilde, and Yeats. Comparatively speaking, women writers did not enjoy as much attention, with single volumes published on Mary Lavin, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, and Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin.

Recently, critical studies have appeared that either focus on Irish women writers or include them, but these studies generally fail to provide any reader with a full sense of a single author's body of work. In addition to Christine St. Peter's book, which, as I mentioned, includes a short section on Madden's “Troubles” novels, in the chapter covering women writers from the North, there is the more recent study by Heather Ingman, *Irish Women's Fiction: From Edgeworth to Enright* (2013), which offers a brief

synopsis of each of Madden's novels—excluding her children's novels, for that field requires “separate consideration” (xvi)—and a bit of extended discussion of *One by One in the Darkness*. In all, however, fewer than ten pages are dedicated to Madden and her work. To be fair to Ingman, she acknowledges in her preface that she intends “to draw an outline of Irish women's fiction from the nineteenth century onwards” (xv), rather than provide extended analysis of any single writer.

While I applaud Ingman's continuous efforts to bring Irish women fiction writers to the forefront of conversation—she has published several volumes on Irish women writers—I would argue that the time has come for single-author studies of these writers. The multitude of survey-style studies, beginning with Ann Owens Weekes' *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (1990) and continuing through the current work of not only Ingman and St. Peter but also Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Patricia Coughlan, Tina O'Toole, and Elke d'Hoker, to name a few, has succeeded bringing Irish women fiction writers closer to the forefront, but more must be done. Without single-author studies of these writers, scholars and general readers alike can understand broad sketches of their work, but that, of course, must be seen as only a starting point. Writers such as Madden, Clare Boylan, Mary Rose Callaghan, Emma Donoghue, Éilís ní Dhuibhne, and Julia O'Faolain each warrant individual studies dedicated to their work. With recent full-length critical examinations of Mary Lavin and Anne Enright, it's clear that the field of Irish studies is moving in the right direction, and scholars should strive to continue in this direction.

The connection between scholarship and readership occurred to me after I interviewed Madden in June 2012. She spoke at length about what she sees as a leading

result of book awards and book clubs: the tendency for readers to read only one novel by any given author, rather than get to know an author's body of work. Book awards, such as the Man Booker Prize and the Orange Prize in Britain, "definitely do alter a person's profile or a writer's profile," according to Madden, and put their career onto a "different level." For readers, Madden explains, there's "so much out there" that readers will "look to [the major book awards] for guidance and say, 'Okay, X has won this award.'"

Although Madden understands the nature of being a fiction writer, she sees the widespread effect of book awards as a less than ideal way to approach fiction: "I do think it's a pity in a way that there's so much focus on that because it can distort things, if you know what I mean, if it's all down to that, and there's a huge huge focus on it. But that's just the way it is I suppose, as well." Similarly, book clubs influence readership in a way that is perhaps more preventative than informative. Madden explained to me,

And the book clubs, I don't know if it's the same in the States, the book clubs, as well, are very influential. And one of the things I think is a pity about them, more so than with the awards, is I think readers have become far more focused with *a book*, rather than a sort of body of work, or a career. When I was young and I read John McGahern's *The Barracks*, I thought it was wonderful. Therefore I wanted to read his other books as well. I think nowadays readers are much more, "this has won the Booker so we read that in the book club," but they don't necessarily read the other books. It's the next book, if you know what I mean. They're not so interested in writers' careers or their whole world; it's "this book is very successful" or "there's a lot said about this." (personal interview)

Madden's argument about the influence of book awards and book clubs also holds true here in the United States, with Oprah's Book Club books prominently on display in the front of any Barnes and Nobles, and the fact that from 2001 to 2005, at least one novel that was shortlisted for or won the Booker prize in each of these years was later made into a successful film, thus further popularizing these novels for the general public. For example, Yann Martel was virtually unknown in the United States until his 2001 novel *Life of Pi* won the Booker Prize and went on to sell over ten million copies worldwide. Then in 2012, the novel was made into an Academy-Award-winning film, thereby increasing readership once more. To my knowledge, however, Martel's other works never attracted such fame. As Madden told me, readers concern themselves primarily with award-winning books and book-club titles, and then "it's the next book" in the long line of "this book is very successful."

The connection, then, between scholarship and readership centers on the scarcity of full coverage of specific authors beyond the most famous ones. Much as readers focus their attention on the popular book or the winning book, and then move on to another author, volumes of scholarship that cover multiple authors tend to be, as Madden put it, "not so interested in writers' careers or their whole world." It is precisely for this reason that I argue for more single-author studies, especially in the field of Irish women authors, rather than only thematic-style studies that fit several, often at least a dozen, writers under similar themes.

For a writer such as Madden—who has published, since 1986, eight adult novels and three children's novels—it is simply unjust and misleading to consistently relegate

her to a few pages in a broad study, under a generalized sub-heading. For example, a volume edited by Liam Harte and Michael Parker, *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (2000), includes Madden in the section entitled “Reconfiguring Identities: Recent Northern Irish Fiction.” More recently, Madden is afforded ten pages in a volume edited by Elke D’hoker, Raphaël Ingelbien, and Hedwig Schwall, *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (2011). Sylvie Mikowski’s chapter is entitled “Deirdre Madden’s Novels: Searching for Authentic Woman.” In both of these examples, Madden and her work are reduced to geography and gender, despite the fact that she does not consider herself a Northern Irish writer, and, furthermore, she resists the idea that her work is concerned primarily with women.

While studies such as these are indeed important in terms of linking writers with common themes, they should supplement the more substantive, more thorough studies of any single major author that I am arguing for. Moreover, more full-length single-author studies will, in time, eliminate the need, or perhaps the trend, to publish studies on groups of Irish women writers, rather than regularly including them alongside their male counterparts. For such groupings ultimately suggest that Irish writers are inherently male, and that Irish women writers must be treated separately, even differently.

My purpose is not to examine Madden’s novels one by one, but rather to fit her writing into existing traditions and argue for her place within these traditions, even—or especially—when she defies them. When it comes to the idea of fitting into traditions, Madden presents a difficult case. Much of her work centers on women, yet as Sylvie Mikowski has noted, Madden’s “position as to the role and identity of women cannot easily be labeled feminist” (245). In this regard, Madden aligns herself with Edna

O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston, and Julia O'Faolain, for as James M. Cahalan has pointed out, these writers have "found feminism too limiting in their own careers" (*Double Visions* 4). In a similar fashion, Madden's fiction about the Troubles resists categorization, for she avoids taking sides and refuses any direct or detailed display of the violence. Perhaps her resistance to labels contributes to the relative lack of critical attention she has received.

In an attempt to honor Madden's nuanced approach towards writing, an approach that defies simple labels, I have arranged my study of Madden's work thematically. Some of her novels are discussed in multiple chapters, as they fit into multiple categories. In my next chapter, Chapter 2, I explore ecocritical approaches to three of Madden's novels—*Nothing Is Black* (1994), *Remembering Light and Stone* (1993), and *Hidden Symptoms* (1986). While it's true that all of her novels demonstrate a strong appreciation for landscape and a firm understanding of the central role that environments play in our lives, these three novels highlight a few key tenets of ecocriticism, such as the pastoral and pastoral retreat, deep ecology, and urban considerations. In Chapter 3, I approach Madden's work from feminist perspectives. Although Madden does not consider herself or her work to be strictly feminist, she does feature primarily women characters as she explores introspective ideas about place, time, and memory. This chapter examines the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008) and *Nothing Is Black*, as well as the relationships between sisters in *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) and *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*. In Chapter 4, I deal with Madden's novels that take place during the Troubles. Although much has been said about these Troubles novels, I offer new approaches to *Hidden Symptoms* and *One by*

*One in the Darkness*, and also more briefly discuss in this chapter *Molly Fox's Birthday*, which does not take place during the Troubles (it is set in the early 2000s), but instead includes ideas concerning the sorrowful legacies of that turbulent time. In Chapter 5, I explore the role that art and artistry plays in *Nothing Is Black, Authenticity* (2002), and *Molly Fox's Birthday*. In each of these novels, the central characters are artists—painters, contemporary abstract artists, playwrights, and stage actors. Madden demonstrates a keen interest not only in the roles that art plays in society today, but also in the lives of the artists themselves. Chapter 6 discusses Madden's three children's novels: *Snakes' Elbows* (2005), *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* (2007), and *Jasper and the Green Marvel* (2012). Since children's literature is a distinct field, these novels are treated separately, but I also address how writing children's literature has affected Madden's approach to her novels for adults. In my conclusion, I briefly discuss Madden's latest novel, *Time Present and Time Past* (2013), comparing it to her other works and suggesting how it fits into current studies of Irish fiction. I also point towards future studies of not only Madden in particular, but of Irish fiction in general.

In each body chapter, I also address the ideas of influences and parallels. As is the case with every writer, Madden has several literary influences, including Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, and Henry James (interview with author). As a writer who earned a Bachelor's degree in English from Trinity College, Dublin and a Master's degree from University of East Anglia, and who teaches creative writing at Trinity, however, Madden is extremely well read, and parallels can be drawn between her work and the works of other authors, both male and female, as well as Irish and non-Irish. Complications arise with the idea of literary influence. In a special issue of *Modern*

*Language Quarterly*, one devoted to discussions of literary influence, Andrew Elfenbein explains that “any discussion of influence is a conjectural history” (483) and that “literary history can operate at different levels, from the specificity of word-by-word quotation to the breadth of sensibility, movement, or milieu” (484). Thus, I am not attempting to suggest that particular writers have influenced Madden in any monolithic way, for as Harold Bloom notes, “all literary influence is labyrinthine” (31). Rather, I will trace out elements of intertextuality between Madden’s work and the works of other authors, examining how her texts have interacted with other texts. In addition, I will consider the literary and historical contexts of her novels, especially the context of contemporary Irish women’s fiction.

Many authors and texts that undoubtedly influenced Madden will not be included, for I do not want to stray too far from my primary purpose—examining and analyzing Madden’s work and situating her within the canon of Irish fiction, especially Irish fiction written by women. The writers whom I connect to Madden vary from chapter to chapter, depending on the literary and historical contexts. At times, such as in my chapter on Madden’s “Troubles” fiction, I provide backgrounds and contexts that clearly focus much more on women writers than men. This is not to suggest that only texts written by women have influenced Madden in this genre (and in that chapter I recognize some of the most relevant male authors). However, since Madden is one of many Irish female fiction writers whose work has suffered scholarly neglect, and since my own chief focus is not on gender differences in literature, I have chosen to situate that particular chapter primarily within Troubles fiction written by women. Although I include sections where I discuss Madden alongside other women writers, I have not forgotten Katie Donovan’s

powerful pamphlet, *Irish Women Writers: Marginalised By Whom?* (1988), and her claim that women writers should not be examined as a separate category:

Isolating women writers into a single category has the self-defeating effect of further marginalising them from the literary mainstream. If their claims to be given an equal place alongside their male peers are to be taken seriously, women writers must be pushed into the flood, there to sink or swim on their own merits. (5)

While I agree with Donovan, I do not think that individual sections that focus on women writers contradicts the idea of gender equity in literary criticism. Yet to argue for more attention for Irish women authors is not to deny their many connections also to both male Irish writers and non-Irish authors, as Madden herself has underscored by noting her debt to Henry James.

Another goal of this project is to show that fiction written by women, even fiction that is not only written by women but also features primarily women characters, can be analyzed through not only feminist lenses, but others as well. For example, I discuss *Nothing Is Black* in three of my five subsequent chapters—variously considering it in the contexts of ecocriticism, mother-daughter relationships, and the life of the artist. In this regard, I hope that my dissertation will encourage multiple readings of Madden's work, and the works of other writers as well, for cross-disciplinary approaches to women's fiction allows for the celebration of its richness and depth.

At this point, I must note that personal preference (always a key factor in literary criticism) played a role in decisions about which novels to include in each chapter. If I were to rank Madden's novels (not including her children's books) according to my own

preferences, *Nothing Is Black* would tie for first place with *Remembering Light and Stone*, while *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* would come last. For this reason, *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* appears in only one chapter, whereas *Nothing Is Black* appears in three. Furthermore, Madden's latest novel, *Time Present and Time Past*, was published towards the end of my writing process, so I include only a brief analysis of its strengths and how it may fit into Irish studies in general. Future studies of Madden will have the opportunity to offer more in-depth analyses of *Birds* and *Time*, filling in gaps as necessary—and to consider future books by this author whose career is still very much in midstream.

## CHAPTER 2

PLACE, LAND, AND HOME IN THREE NOVELS:  
ECOCRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Routinely emphasizing the importance of landscape and place, Deirdre Madden's novels easily lend themselves to ecocritical approaches—specifically, examinations of place and home, the pastoral, the interconnectivity of life, and the urban. In exploring these themes, I will focus on three of Madden's novels: *Nothing Is Black*, *Remembering Light and Stone*, and *Hidden Symptoms*. The idea of the pastoral retreat; the tenets of deep ecology; the connections among landscape, home, and self; and the political and social forces that shape urban places allow for ecocritical readings of these novels, and also serve as reminders of how the Irish sense of place resonates deeply within their literature.

Ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s as a field of study that focuses on the natural world and connects the human to the non-human, and functions as a reaction against anthropocentric assumptions. Pioneering ecocritical texts include Jonathan Bates's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1996), and *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. These texts, however, focus on British and American literature, and despite its twenty-year history, ecocriticism has been only recently employed by critics and scholars of Irish literature. Ironically, the field of "green studies" has ignored much of the writing coming out of the so-called "Emerald Isle." There are currently only two books of Irish ecocriticism: *Out of the Earth:*

*Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010), edited by Christine Cusick, and Tim Wenzell's *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (2009). Moreover, these two books follow the regrettable pattern of neglecting women writers—Cusick includes only four women writers in her book, out of a total of twelve, and Wenzell includes only two, among many.

Marisol Morales Ladrón, in a preface to her 2009 interview with Madden, offers this concise overview of major themes in Madden's work:

Madden's literary production is extremely wide and diverse, although the main aspects that characterise her fiction could be summarised in the following: the psychological exploration of the minds of her characters, mainly female, who reflect on the dynamics of a changing world; the introduction of different perspectives in the narration that contribute to offer a myriad of realities; the confrontation of characters by past events and their final resolutions, which usually involve a reorientation in their lives; the effect of Northern Irish politics on the troubled lives of many characters, even in those novels that do not deal directly with the conflict; and, finally, the exploration of the role of the artist, and the function of art and creativity in a global and all-too modern society. (245)

Ladrón's statement accurately reflects Madden's work, and indeed some of my subsequent chapters will address these characteristics that Ladrón identifies. However, missing from the list is an ecocritical sense of how Madden's novels—her characters, plots, and themes—connect to the natural world or to the urban landscape.

Deirdre Madden's novels easily lend themselves to ecocritical approaches—specifically, examinations of place and home, the pastoral, the interconnectivity of life, and urban places. Rather than attempt to fit all ten novels into one of these three modes, however, this chapter will focus on three novels in order to more fully trace out the relationships between humans and non-humans, the natural world, and the urban environment.

### **Pastoral Retreat, Home, and the Connections between Deep Ecology and Human Empathy in *Nothing Is Black* and *Remembering Light and Stone***

The pastoral is widely acknowledged as a key starting point for ecocriticism, not only because it stretches back into the classical age, but also because Rachel Carson employed the pastoral mode in her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* (1962). Her opening chapter paints an idyllic American countryside:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings . . . In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings . . . Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life. (1-2)

As is well known, Carson then devotes the remainder of *Silent Spring* to documenting the dangers of pesticides, warning about their effects on the land, animals, and on us. By beginning with the pastoral, Carson draws on a longstanding literary convention. The pastoral tradition in literature reaches back to the writing of Virgil—his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*—and the imagined Arcadia. Today, shepherds and songs no longer mark the pastoral convention, for as Terry Gifford points out, “the pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (2). Crucial to the pastoral mode is the concept of retreat and return, escape and exploration. Pastoral retreat functions as “a device for reflecting upon the present” (Gifford 46). Thus, when Nuala in *Nothing Is Black* reaches a crisis in her life, she retreats to her cousin Claire’s home in a rural and remote village in County Donegal, leaving her home in urban Dublin—and her husband and child—for the entire summer. Claire’s life in the countryside of Donegal and Nuala’s pastoral escape to that countryside illustrate two key features in Irish writing: the Irish sense of place and the inner solace that can be found through landscape and the natural world.

A strong sense of place resonates deeply throughout Irish literature. Images of James Joyce, for example, are inextricably connected to images of Dublin, and one would be hard pressed to discuss J. M. Synge without mentioning the Aran Islands. When describing the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen, Joanna Tapp Pierce borrows a remark from ecocritic Neil Evernden: “There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (51). The various manifestations of place attachment are best described by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, the leading pioneer of place studies: “Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort

may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time” (159). Ireland’s women writers are firmly rooted in this tradition, for their attachment to place extends beyond depictions of locale and into elements of nature, family, home, and daily activities. Deirdre Madden is no exception.

A crisis of family and home spurs Nuala’s decision to spend the summer in Donegal. Exactly one week after announcing her pregnancy to her mother and sharing in all the excitement and joy she knew would result, her mother died. Nuala could not recover from her loss: “Grief wasn’t the half of it. It triggered in her a loss of confidence, as if she’d woken up in the middle of life, not knowing how she’d got there. When the baby was born in the autumn, she’d been ashamed to tell anyone how disappointed she was” (37). In a strange attempt to compensate for the loss of her mother, for the feeling that something had been stolen from her, Nuala enters into a cycle of compulsive materialism—buying expensive items she does not need with the hope that with each new handbag or jacket, she would feel fulfilled: “There’d always been a faint hope, though, hadn’t there? Every time she went into the changing room there was always the idea that when she stepped out and looked in the mirror, she would see someone else looking back at her, her old self would have vanished. But when that failed to happen, it still wasn’t enough” (22).

Eventually, Nuala’s buying turns into stealing—not from shops, “because that would make her a thief, and that was inconceivable” (39). Instead, Nuala takes teaspoons from hotel restaurants, promotional ashtrays, bowls full of sugar packets and sweetener, and other items that seemed to have no value (40). None of these items, bought or taken,

provide her with the comfort she longs for, and when Nuala's husband, Kevin, discovers her kleptomania, they both agree she will go to Donegal to stay with Claire for the summer.

Donegal is not an arbitrary destination, not simply a place for Nuala to get away for a while. Her mother was born and raised in Donegal, and despite the fact that her mother moved to Dublin, "changed her accent, and tried to convince everyone, not least herself, that she had never lived as she dismissively put in, 'up the country'" (15), Nuala hopes to feel closer to her mother by moving to the area she grew up in, and to find in that place the solace that the material world could not offer. Kevin expresses his doubt in Nuala's sense of place attachment, but Nuala insists, firmly stating: "Yes, but it's part of my background, whether I like it or not, so maybe it would be good for me to get to know it" (116). According to geographer Tim Cresswell, place is "a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" (11), and Nuala believes she will better understand her own life and her world if she understands and becomes part of the place where her mother grew up. Her crisis, then, ostensibly the loss of her mother, also concerns the loss of herself.

Nuala's life in Dublin reveals very little of her family history, or even her own personal interests. She and Kevin own a restaurant, "a popular and long-established feature of the Dublin social scene" (91), but Nuala is actually quite indifferent to food. Seemingly, Nuala is content with the social and financial success of her restaurant, without realizing how little self-satisfaction she truly enjoys. She tells Claire,

"I know you may find this hard to believe, but I'm not really very interested in food. I have to pretend, of course, because of the restaurant.

It wouldn't do for the image. I look after the money side of the busy, and Kevin and the chef take everything to do with the menu planning. But because we run it together I have to play the part when journalists come to do features for the food pages." (32-33)

After Claire learns this revealing bit of information regarding Nuala's lifestyle—one that feeds the bank account rather than the soul—she begins to see in her an “air of glumness, of knowing that there was something amiss, while not quite knowing what it was” (34). Nuala reminds Claire of “an animal moulting” (34), and Claire realizes that Nuala has come to Donegal to work things out within herself, to find out about herself, and to come to terms with herself. She does not offer Nuala any advice, believing that “this was something she would have to work through for herself, and she could have done a lot worse than come to Donegal to do it” (34). Claire understands the healing powers of the landscape around her, and she understands Nuala's desire to connect with the place of her mother's childhood.

The Irish notion of being “part” of a place reaches back to the nineteenth century and beyond. For example, Maria Edgeworth's novel *Castle Rackrent*, published in 1800, introduces the genre of the Irish Big House novel, and her final Irish novel, *Ormond* (1817), features a protagonist who discovers his identity in a specific region of Ireland: the Lough Rea region in the midlands (Cahalan, *Irish Novel* 24). Moreover, the title character in Emily Lawless's 1892 novel *Grania* remains deeply connected to the land that surrounds her on her island of Inishmaan. Indeed, Lawless explicitly describes Grania's attachment to her island: “To her Inishmann was much more than home, much more than a place she lived in, it was practically the world . . . She had grown to it, and it

had grown to her. She was a part of it, and it was a part of her” (63). The Great Blasket Island produced several Irish writers, most notably Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Peig Sayers, whose respective memoirs—*An t-Oileánach* (1929) and *Peig* (1936)—tell the stories of life on that subsequently abandoned island. Moving to the urban scene, the terms “James Joyce” and “place” are hardly separable, given that Joyce wrote entirely about Ireland, specifically Dublin, in his major texts, and he famously claimed that if Dublin were to be destroyed, it could be reconstructed through his writings. The writings of less famous Irish authors also reflect a strong sense of place attachment. Mary Lavin, for example, often set her short stories in the farmlands of County Meath, where she grew up, and Molly Keane’s novels explored the leisure-filled world of the Irish Big House, complete with hunting, gaming, and a general sense of boredom. Other writers concerned with place include Val Mulhern, Edna O’Brien, Brendan O’Carroll, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. But the list goes on and on. Indeed, what Irish writer has *not* been concerned with place?

In *Nothing Is Black*, Nuala’s desire to become part of her mother’s childhood landscape after her mother’s death reflects how place connects not only to life, but also to grief and loss. This theme was taken up by Marina Carr, two years after the publication of *Nothing Is Black*, in her 1996 drama *Portia Coughlan*. *Portia Coughlan* centers on the role of place within the vast realm of grief, and the title character repeatedly returns to the place of her twin brother’s drowning. Both Nuala and Portia enact what A. Norman Jeffares articulated in 1977: “This is what the Irish writer realises Irish space can do for him or his character; it can take them out of time, out of the past—a thing particularly to be hoped for—into a blessed sense of timelessness” (37). True to Jeffares’ valid (though

male-focused) claim, both Nuala and Portia seek to escape to a place that will become a timeless world where their mother and brother, respectively, continue to live and thrive. Moreover, Nuala and Portia also follow in the tradition of Elizabeth Bowen's characters—again in Evernden's phrase, "individual[s] as a component of place, defined by place."

Claire's remote village in Donegal represents the antithesis of Nuala's busy city life in Dublin. The nearest town, a fisherman's town, is thirty minutes away, and the road from the town to the village runs along the coast, "overlooking headlands and small pale beaches" (3). A stretch of bogland separates the town from the village, with moist brown peat rather than the "lushness and prettiness people often expected to find in the countryside" (3). Indeed, the town Madden describes could be Killybegs, Ireland's premier fishing port. Killybegs sits on the northwest coast of Ireland, surrounded by cliffs, sea, and bogland. Life in Claire's village reflects a simplicity long forgotten amidst industrialization and the rise of city life: "baking because it was the only way to get fresh bread; buying fish locally and gutting and cooking it; carrying in turf for the fire" (5). Typically, when members of the village are at home, they live their key in the front door, and a general sense of trust makes the village a community.

Claire embraces these simplicities and allows her surrounding landscape to be a source of daily comfort and interest—walking to the cliffs behind the house when she feels a sense of claustrophobic pressure, allowing the sounds of the sea and wind to calm her, appreciating how the colors of the natural world vary day to day and how much they depend on the light of the sun. Claire's innate sense of the natural world defines her in a way that recalls Mary Lavin's characters. In *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted*

*Tradition* (1990), Ann Owens Weekes describes Lavin's stories as a "blending of life with art, of matter with spirit, of sky with land, of rock with water, of past with present" (149). *Nothing Is Black* could be described in exactly these same terms, with Claire—who is a painter—exhibiting a deep ecological sense of landscape, and Nuala attempting to connect with the natural world as she negotiates her past with her present.

As a branch of ecocriticism, deep ecology does not lend itself to one definition. In general, deep ecologists recognize the intrinsic values of nature without considering human benefits or objectives. Deep ecology is therefore thoroughly ecocentric as opposed to anthropocentric, and "it identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans with the ecosphere" (Garrard 21). Claire's life in Donegal—shaped by the necessity to buy local food, bake bread, and avoid post-modern consumer capitalism—reflects many of the values that deep ecology demands. As Nuala explores the landscape of Claire's village, she realizes how disconnected she is from the natural world. The circumstances surrounding Nuala's presence in the village, however, suggest that she will be unable to connect with the natural world as fully as Claire does. After all, Nuala's retreat to the countryside will be followed by a return to the city.

As she sits on a secluded spot on the beach behind Claire's house, Nuala gazes at five birds sitting on the rocks. She wonders why she has come to Donegal for the summer, and admits to herself that although she does not know, "bafflement had become her natural state over the past year, so it no longer upset her that she didn't have ready answers for everything" (35). As Nuala works through her memories, searching to find

solace within herself, she recalls that Claire told her the birds were called cormorants.

When a new flock of birds lands, Nuala stops thinking about her own life, and begins to assess her relationship with nature:

She didn't know what they were called either, and frankly admitted to herself that she didn't care. Before coming here, she had never realized there were so very many different types of birds, and secretly she wondered what point there was to it. Whole species could have vanished overnight, and she would never had missed them. (42-43)

Nuala further wonders how many different types of rain there are, for Donegal seems to experience more types than she ever knew existed. These thoughts lead her to wonder if wood, freshly washed up onto the beach, could be interesting, and where all the bits of pottery and plates she finds on the beach come from. She insists that there must be a reason for all this, but once again, she is baffled (43).

Nuala's inability to connect with her surrounding landscape renders her pastoral retreat somewhat ineffective. As a result, she decides on a whim to escape into town late one afternoon and spend the evening alone. Sitting in the local chipper, eating cod and chips, Nuala wonders, "what was it about her life, what choices she had made (or failed to make) that she had ended up getting her thrills by stealing ashtrays and sneaking off to spend the night alone in a dreary B&B, eating fish and chips doused in malt vinegar?" (84). She admits that she simply does not know, nor does she understand. If the pastoral is "a device for reflecting upon the present," then Nuala cannot fully access or employ it, for she only truly reflects upon her present circumstances once she has escaped the countryside and returned to Donegal's urban center—the town.

What are the implications of Nuala's inability to embrace the pastoral? In one sense, Nuala's retreat from her retreat, her return to the town, represents a celebration of modernity. During the mid 1990s, Ireland "enjoyed a remarkable economic boom which enormously increased national self-confidence" and in 1994, the same year *Nothing Is Black* was published, an economist from London dubbed this boom "the Celtic Tiger" (Brown 381). For the first time in history, Ireland stood alongside other modernized nations as a global force, embracing the urban and thereby distancing itself from its longstanding reputation as a nation of fairytales, folklore, and green countryside. As Lawrence Buell articulates, the pastoral can be enlisted "as a vehicle of national self-definition, specifically as a way of envisaging Europe's 'new' worlds" (52). Thus, by rejecting the pastoral in favor of the town, Nuala redefines Ireland as an urban center rather than a rural periphery.

In this regard, the Dublin restaurant Nuala owns with Kevin embodies Ireland's new, globalized status. When she insists that the restaurant serve traditional Irish food—"bacon and cabbage, colcannon, boxty, things like that"—Kevin accuses her of being cynical and wanting "a restaurants for tourists" (33). He understands, as does she, that the concept of a traditional Ireland with cabbage-eating Irish exists only in the minds of the tourists. In the end, Nuala convinces him that if they offer "the very best of Irish food, traditional dishes cooked to perfection," then they would attract both tourists and locals, and enjoy success (33-34). The fact that Nuala's predictions are correct suggest that Dublin's newfound status as a vacation spot for travelers and globe-trotters creates an atmosphere perfect for the simultaneous exploitation of both the tourists' dream and the locals' nostalgia.

Nuala differs from Claire in her ability and willingness to embrace a globalized Ireland, for Nuala's life is driven by success. Claire, on the other hand, enjoys what Yi-Fu Tuan describes as a "gentle, unselfconscious involvement with the physical world" (96). *Nothing Is Black* ends with Claire pondering the true values of a life that extends beyond oneself, a life not caught up in the greedy forces of capitalism and globalization: "Sometimes it was easy to forget that life was driven by necessity. The world today conspired to induce such forgetfulness. What was worth knowing in life? The limits, the severe limits of one's understanding and abilities, the power of love and forgiveness; and that life was nothing is not mysterious" (151).

The differences between Claire and Nuala extend beyond their acceptance of globalization, beyond their levels of connectivity with the natural world, for connection with nature leads to connection with oneself. Claire enjoys daily contentment with her life. In her 2008 article on memory, nostalgia, and identity in *Nothing Is Black* and Bernice Morgan's *Waiting for Time*, Louise Sheridan argues that "Claire exiles herself in Donegal" (24) and that she purposefully refuses to "establish herself in a community" (25). Such a reading ignores the facts that Claire, like everyone else in her village, leaves her key in her door when she's home, that she chats easily with Rita, the owner of the local shop, and that she has visited with Anna, her neighbor for six months of the year, many times. Although alone, she does not feel lacking in companionship; she remembers her ex-lover Marcus, but can pinpoint exactly the moment she knew they were not meant for each other. This moment is not a lovers' quarrel or a discovered infidelity; rather, it is a moment of unshared humanity. Sitting in an outdoor café in Paris, Claire notices an old woman begging in the street. Nobody stops to give her anything, as if they do not even

see her, as if “her poverty had rendered her invisible” (150). Claire points her out to Marcus, who had also failed to notice her,

“Before God,” she said, “we are all like that.” She could see that this angered him: she had known it would, but she persisted. “Don’t you see how the people shun her? In her weakness and destitution they recognize something of themselves, and it frightens them. They want to deny it, so they try to pretend that she doesn’t even exist.” He stared at her coldly, and she realized then that their life together was over. (150)

Claire’s deep appreciation for the world around her extends into a highly developed sense of humanity. Marcus, who abhors the quiet life of the countryside and considers Claire’s lifestyle to be a mistake, cannot see the social injustice unfolding before his eyes.

Sheridan claims that Claire’s life lacks agency, and that she—along with Nuala and Anna—represents “a problematic passivity that means they sacrifice certain aspects of their identities rather than attempt to negotiate and reconcile every role they wish to fill” (23). Again, however, this reading ignores important features of Claire’s life, such as the fact that she chooses to rent rather than purchase her home in Donegal. Claire has no desire to “settle down and build a little domestic empire around herself,” and she knows that if she bought the house, “she would immediately feel restless and trapped” (108). Comparing her choices to Kevin’s, Claire feels pity and a bit of sadness as she considers how he attended art school, but then abandoned art in search of “an entirely different area: business or computing or whatever would bring prosperity” (111). When Kevin comes to visit Nuala, Claire is shocked by how much he had aged. She wonders, “What had ravaged him? Nothing, she discovered with surprise when she looked at him

more closely. He was glazed with money, that was the problem” (110). Returning to thoughts on her own life, “living in spartan rented rooms, always strapped for cash, [her] creative energy and intellectual curiosity as intense as ever. To Kevin it was pure folly. To Claire, it was life, and a good life” (112). Claire recalls her time spent traveling and all that she had seen, and finds security in knowing that she “preferred the complexity of the soft light she found in Ireland. It allowed the land, the sky, the ocean to each have their own place. She would never live far from the sea again, its vastness a comfort . . . She would never have believed that it would be possible to feel so much at home” (112-13). Indeed, Claire’s passivity, far from being problematic, is a strength; her life, a life of courageous decisions and remarkable humanity, certainly does not lack agency.

Environmental philosopher William Vitek articulates what can be gained from a lifestyle like Claire’s:

Rediscovering the landscape and our place in it requires new ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and the natural world, and offers new challenges as well. Slowing down, staying put, opening our senses, practicing humility and restraint, knowing and caring for those around us, and finding our natural place in the natural world are simple yet significant steps in the rediscovery of place and the sense of community it holds. (1)

Although Claire has achieved this new way of thinking and enjoys the stability of knowing her natural place in the natural world, the notions of place, community, and home often present Irish writers with struggles and negotiations. Histories of famine, landlords, forced migration, and ongoing violence have destabilized any fixed concept of

place and home. For some writers, most notably J. M. Synge, the land, the rocky coasts, and the rough seas present daily challenges; concepts of home and community are in constant struggle with the unpredictability of the natural world. For writers such as Edna O'Brien, close-knit Catholic communities in rural Ireland offer young women little comfort as they live in fear of the violent and often drunken men in their lives. From the widow's perspective in several of the short stories of Mary Lavin, the land surrounding the home presents new challenges, represents harsh economic realities, and fails to soothe the fear and anxiety that sets in when darkness falls. Although Madden's second novel will not be discussed in detail in this chapter, a passage in *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* suggests the competing and conflicting elements of the Irish home:

This is her home. The great sense of space given by the wide sky and the flatness of the land is belied everywhere by the melancholy want of colour. Now she is literally seeing the place in its true colours, for the brightness of spring will be spurious in an area which is truly sad, drab, and dead. If you have been born here you can never belong elsewhere. If you have been born elsewhere, you can never belong here. (22)

Indeed, the "great sense of space" and the "wide sky" offer the notion of freedom both within the home and from the home. Similarly ambiguous, the passage begins and ends with a sense of pride in the home, whereas the "sad, drab, and dead" realities of the home suggest a lurking darkness that one cannot escape.

Aisling, the narrator of Madden's 1992 novel *Remembering Light and Stone*, articulates the nuanced and dynamic qualities of landscape and home: "I have a theory, a strange, maybe silly theory of my own, to do with landscape: I think that each particular

landscape has its own period of time, its own moment in history when it is, or was, most in harmony with the society which exists in it” (30-31). Aisling continues to explain how, although she loves the regions of Italy where she lives, at times their beauty annoys her and she misses “the violence of nature” (31). While describing the Burren in County Clare, the place where she grew up, as one that is “full of threat,” Aisling admits to missing and longing for the “strange, stark beauty, the bare grey stone and grey sky” (2), and the “tiny orchids growing in the cracks in the rocks” (31), but she also makes clear that the place instills a feeling of “psychic violence” in her when she is there (32).

Aisling’s relationship with her childhood home and landscape reflects the confusion often felt by the Irish in relation to notions of home—both in Ireland and in the Irish Diaspora. The late Frank McCourt—arguably the best known Irish-American writer of the past quarter-century—described the immense hardships of growing up in Limerick in his acclaimed bestselling and Pulitzer-Prize-winning memoir *Angela’s Ashes* (1996). His blending of humor and tragedy suggests a strained yet sentimental relationship with Limerick. In a particularly memorable passage, McCourt wrote:

The happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests, bullying schoolmasters; the English and all the terrible things they did to us for 800 long years. (11)

Beneath his humor lies the stark reality that for many Irish men and women, the concept of home carries the burdens of violence, poverty, alcoholism, religion, and nationalist bitterness. For Aisling, the violence of her childhood leaves her wary of and annoyed by any landscapes that appear too perfect, too beautiful. That perfection and beauty does not resemble reality for Aisling, for McCourt, and for many other Irish women and men. Reality presents itself more accurately in the remarkable challenges that nature overcomes—such as those the orchids growing out of cracks in the rocks.

Early in the narrative, we learn that Aisling left Ireland in search of a less homogeneous life, and, more importantly, in search of a way to reconcile her memories of violence and pain. Language has served as her tool for escape, and she tells her lover Ted, “My leaving had been premeditated, and deliberate. I had studied languages so that I would be able to move to another country with more facility . . . I had had so many unhappy experiences in Ireland, that I wanted to put distance between myself and that place” (37-38). She moves to Paris and finds work as a translator, and when a broken heart renders her unable to cope with her surroundings, she moves to southern Italy, again working as a translator and English tutor.

Living and working first in French, and then in Italian, Aisling lives in translation. In his essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin explains what can be achieved through another language:

In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularly impressive manner, at least it

points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation. (75)

By living in translation, not permanently, but for ten years, Aisling seeks to reconcile her present with her past, and to know Ireland in a way that she could not know it before.

Recognizing that she has learned about her own country “simply by not being in it,”

Aisling admits that, for her, escape was more important than destination: “The contrast with Italy was a help, but in many ways I felt I could have gone anywhere, so long as it was far away and provided me with privacy, so that I could forget all about home for a while, forget all about Ireland, and then remember it, undisturbed” (2).

The novel ends with Aisling’s decision to return permanently to Ireland, and thus we are left wondering about the ultimate degree of her success in forging a new relationship with Ireland and with her memories. For the reader, many unanswered questions remain: Will she fully reconcile with her brother Jimmy (for their relationship became quite strained after years of Aisling declining invitations to come home)? Will she be able to overcome the “psychic violence” that fills her upon entering her childhood home in Clare? Madden thus indicates that Aisling’s success is to be determined, since living in translation, following Benjamin’s claim, will “not reach ‘it’ in its entirety”—and for Aisling, the “it” represents a new identity, one that merges her past with her present and allows her to move forward in life.

In many ways, Aisling resembles Claire. As loners, both women allow the remarkable qualities of the natural world to comfort them simply by being present; moreover, both women recognize the startling injustices of their world, and they recognize a bit of themselves in the poor and destitute. Although her ultimate success in

utilizing language to forge a new identity remains unclear, what is clear is that living in a foreign culture and language has provided Aisling with a unique perspective on humanity, and a heightened sense of empathy. Aisling recalls eating dinner in a restaurant in Rome with her boyfriend at the time, Ted. A young girl, about six years old, comes in and tries to sell roses to the diners. Her face bears the markings of violence—a cut above her eye, a bruise fading on her cheek, and a look of complete exhaustion. Aisling watches as each diner, one by one, ignores her; some do not even look up from their food when she approaches. After asking Ted to buy a rose from the girl, Aisling explains to the reader how the moment affected her: “I recognized the child. Seeing her made me want to withdraw, and I felt a terrible sense of despair” (5-6). Having grown up in a violent home, Aisling understands all too well the evils of the world, and she often turns to nature as an escape. She remembers telling Ted how the natural world can offer comfort:

Sometimes I like to think about seals swimming in the ocean, or of a whale rising out at sea. I like the timelessness of nature, of animals. If you see a seal, it looks as it would have looked had you seen it a hundred, a thousand years ago. I like the otherness, the completeness of animals. Sometimes, I told him, when I’m feeling really down, I like to think about animals and how they live. It makes me feel that there is some beauty and mystery left, something other than the way I live. (75)

Despite the fact that nature cannot truly achieve timelessness, as forces such as erosion, extinction, and human overpopulation continue to threaten and destroy the natural world, Aisling’s need to find something stable, reliable, and beautiful in the world reveals an

instinctive understanding that the material world ultimately amounts to nothing. She remembers that on a particular day in Rome, when the traffic, dust, and pollution became almost too much to bear, she suddenly made eye contact with a man driving a Landrover. In that moment, Aisling realizes the “absurdity” of our “stupidly big” vehicles, our “jewels and expensive clothes,” and she sees “the weakness and smallness of things which are now great or powerful” (7-8).

Along with recognizing the absurdity of our material obsessions, she considers time and space and knows that “out of the thousands and millions of years during which there had been life,” our overly-industrialized existence is “an aberration” (7). Once again, the foreigner, living in translation, perceives that which others overlook. Bakhtin tells us that “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present” (291). Thus, Aisling’s ability to live within different languages gives her access to ideas that allow her to negotiate between the present and past, and reach that “hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation” (Benjamin 75).

This ability to see beyond the spectacle of the world and glimpse the frail mortality of her own society leaves Aisling feeling conflicted throughout the ten years she spends searching for peace and an identity separate from her Irish background. Although she appreciates the life she has set up for herself, and cherishes her books, music, and independence, she suffers from nightmares and at times does not recognize herself in the mirror. The name Aisling means “dream” or “vision” in Irish, and stems from the Gaelic literary genres of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In an aisling

poem, a woman—the female personification of Ireland—visits the poet and declares a prophecy (Welch 9). The most famous aisling figure is Cathleen Ní Houlihan, most commonly known as the central character in Yeats's 1902 one-act play of the same name.

In *Remembering Light and Stone*, Aisling's name bears significance because she presents herself as the antithesis to the aisling prototype. Rather than in a dream world, Aisling lives in grotesque nightmares. In the corner of her mind, the image of a hanged woman lurks during both her waking and sleeping hours (32, 45). Her horrific dreams haunt her sleep; in one dream in particular, maggots are gnawing at her scalp, and the more she tries to brush them out, the more her scalp tears and bleeds until her hair is "seeping with blood" (67). These nightmares suggest that Aisling rejects her own name. Lawrence Buell discusses Heidegger's concept that to name something means that we consider the place to be worthy of our "dwelling" and that "we are capable of dwelling" (66). Following this claim, Aisling's nightmares serve as a rejection of not just her name, but also her body. She is uncomfortable in her own skin, and she reflects upon her inability to feel and live like a wholly complete person: "It wasn't other people who bothered me, it all came from inside myself, and the feeling was so strong that it was as if there were another person inside me, a dark self who tormented me. My self was split in two, and one half threatened the other, the weaker half" (65). Although Aisling can see beyond the spectacle of the world, she cannot come to terms with herself; she struggles to live and dwell comfortably in her own body and mind.

Ironically, by perceiving the true, temporal nature of our civilization and world, she exiles herself from it, and by seeking happiness from something more organic than

commercial consumption, she often finds herself depressed and miserable. Nevertheless, Aisling refuses to live any other way, and she explains,

What really annoyed me though was when [my neighbor] Franca set herself up as a model of happiness, and said that I too could be as happy as she was. She was always telling me that I thought too much. It only complicated things, and made you miserable. I hated it when she talked to me like this. It was certainly true that I wasn't happy a lot of the time, but I didn't believe that putting your brain on ice could make much significant difference. If the price of consciousness is misery, then I'll take that any day, rather than dumb bliss. (46-47)

Despite her inner conflict and isolation, however, Aisling's refusal to live in a cloud of "dumb bliss" actually allows her to connect to the world in a way that ignorant happiness prevents. She sees how politics shape the world, often not for the better, and she understands the extent to which "people's lives [are] at the mercy of political forces" (23). In order to gain the broadest and least biased view possible on world events, she buys as many newspapers from as many parts of the world that she can find and afford. Aisling reads the papers "very intently, trying to recognize what the human cost would be of the things reported there" (23). Although she lives a solitary life, she connects more deeply to both the natural world and the global world than any of the more socially or financially successful people she knows.

Aisling's search for contentment in the natural world also reflects her tormented past. She has had to start over many times in her life—first leaving Ireland to escape from the violent memories, then leaving Paris to escape from a broken heart, and then

leaving northern Italy for southern Italy to escape an overwhelming sense of misery. The novel begins on the day before Aisling returns to Ireland after living abroad for almost ten years. Importantly, the novel also begins on the longest day of the year: the summer solstice. In ancient times, and today in more agricultural societies, the summer solstice, as Ker Than writes, serves as “a reminder that a turning point in the growing season had been reached” (n. p.). Aisling’s decision to return home after ten years abroad suggests that she has also reached a turning point in her personal growth. She spends a week alone in her childhood home, negotiating between her old self and the self she created during her ten years abroad. One evening at dusk, “a beautiful still evening,” she walks up to the top of a hill, stands under the “deep, radiant blue” sky, and looks out over the sea (179). As Aisling watches “the light bleed slowly out of the sky in a long, midsummer dusk,” she thinks of Italy, and immediately and firmly decides that she will return to Italy only to pack her things and settle her accounts, and then move home permanently (180). Perhaps by constantly striving to understand and connect with the world around her, she prolonged her own self-discovery, but Aisling willingly pays that “price of consciousness.” She achieves personal growth not at the expense of, but as an added benefit to achieving true human empathy.

The summer solstice holds further significance as a turning point in the novel. The novel takes place in 1989, during tumultuous, revolutionary, liberatory months in Eastern Europe, and Aisling reflects on the fact that while she and Ted are admiring frescoes in a church, others were struggling to keep their lives intact:

People in Prague were climbing into the West Germany embassy gardens. They were putting their children and a few suitcases into their tiny cars

and driving away from their homes. They didn't know where they would end up, but hoped against hope that it would be better than their present circumstances, thinking that it could hardly be worse. (25)

The fall of the Berlin Wall represents a turning point for Europe, and indeed for the entire world. For Aisling, these events provide a lens through which she can consider not just her own life, but the lives of others, the conditions they live or suffer through.

By constantly striving to see beyond her own life—whether by reading newspapers from around the world or contemplating the lives of others—Aisling achieves independence of spirit and thought, as well as true consciousness. She embodies Jessica Benjamin's definition of existence: "A condition of our own independent existence is recognising the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognising the other" (53). Indeed, as Aisling points out to the reader, everyone who is old enough remembers the weekend when Germany opened the Berlin Wall; many still recall what they were doing the weekend of November 11, 1989. However, awareness and celebration of such an event does not equal true recognition of the other. Aisling compares such joy to when someone else has a baby: "you can afford to be delighted because you're not the one who's going to be changing its nappies or seeing to it when it cries in the middle of the night." In other words, the joy and celebrations across the world amounted to nothing more than "a simplistic pleasure . . . You could console yourself with the thought that it was the end of something bad, without bothering yourself too much about whether it was the start of something good" (79). Personal happiness, or a moment of joy, masquerades as genuine empathy for the other.

Importantly, the novel takes place during the reign of Margaret Thatcher in England and at the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the United States, when privatization and individualism were promoted and embraced at the expense of community, human connectivity, and global and ecological awareness. When Thatcher infamously proclaimed that "there is no such thing as society," she affirmed, cemented, and celebrated what Val Plumwood calls "the dualised, hyperseparated self" (159). This self, Plumwood explains, "can have no basis or reason to empathise with the other or to consider the other as more than the instrument of its independently defined needs" (159). Aisling resists living as a "dualised, hyperseparated self," and she recognizes that the Western celebrations for the fall of the Berlin Wall are more about the human desire for "easy optimism" (79) and less about a moral concern for the other; as Plumwood notes, for the hyperseparated self "reasons for considering the other morally will have to consist of ways of presenting or disguising the other as really the self in some extended guise" (159). Aisling—like Claire—locates her optimism in the natural world, in the idea that there is "some beauty and mystery left" (75). In considering others, she strives for empathy, not self-satisfaction. As a result, Aisling does not forge a single, individualized path towards self-discovery; rather, she embarks on a complex web of journeys through mind, body, and spirit.

In exploring the concepts of place and home, elements of the pastoral, and the interconnectivity of life, Madden demonstrates a wide variety of ecocritical concerns in *Nothing Is Black* and *Remembering Light and Stone*. The search for identity and contentment must coincide with consideration for and appreciation of the other—both the human and non-human Other.

## **Urban Ecocriticism: Belfast as a Map of Tension and Class Structure in**

### ***Hidden Symptoms***

In 2001, Michael Bennett identified a crucial gap in the developing ecocritical traditions: examinations of the urban. Because the movement began with studies of Wordsworth and British Romanticism on one side of the Atlantic, and Thoreau, Emerson, and the American pastoral tradition on the other side, “the movement itself has been very slow to survey urban environments” (296). Bennett explains that these genres and other forms of nature writing fail to “represent the complex interactions between political choices, socioeconomic structures, and the densely populated ecosystems that shape urban environments” (296). Moreover, because more people now live in urban areas than in the countryside, the urban environment plays a more crucial role than ever before in ideologies and cultural practices.

Fredric Jameson explains how Kevin Lynch—in his classic work *The Image of the City* (1960)—conceives the city experience as “the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality” (Jameson 353). This conception, Jameson claims, serves as a “spatial analogue” of Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology. By combining the two concepts, Jameson concludes that “this positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structure in which he or she is situated” (353). The city, then, acts as a paradoxical cultural space where individuals are limited by social structures, yet they also attempt to utilize the freedom of anonymity

that a city provides to move from one social sphere to the next. That same anonymity, however, when combined with the urban reality of violence, can produce a feeling not of freedom, but of terror.

In Madden's debut novel *Hidden Symptoms*, the city of Belfast enacts these varying—often competing—roles. Belfast serves as the antagonist to the two protagonists, Theresa and Robert. For Theresa, the city represents chaos, terror, and unrelenting darkness; for Robert, however, the city offers social mobility—the opportunity to literally walk away from his working-class background. Discussing Belfast's dynamic history, and offering alternative ways to view the city, Neal Alexander states, “As the city moves through the various stages of its history it can also be seen to undergo a concomitant process of relocation, as inhabitants and observers from various periods position it differently upon their mental and narrative maps” (10).

To follow up on Alexander's claim, I argue that *Hidden Symptoms* does indeed display how inhabitants from even the same period will “position [Belfast] differently upon their mental and narrative maps.” The very first conversation between Theresa and Robert, before they even exchange names, exemplifies their opposing views on the city. Robert approaches Theresa in a café and asks about the article she is reading. Her reply—“Trash”—leads him to ask why, and she explains that the article is trash because “it supports the view that Belfast, bombed, blitzed, beaten and bankrupt though it may be, is undergoing some sort of literary renaissance, that it is becoming a type of cultural omphalos, which I think is a nonsense” (11-12). She then finds out, as does the reader, that Robert is the author of that article. In this moment, Belfast possesses two competing identities: the city that provides a home for the brutal, nonsensical violence of the

Troubles, and the city that provides a cultural center for someone who wishes to escape from a sterile, working-class upbringing.

Geographical details further enforce Belfast's ability to represent cruelty to one person while simultaneously representing mobility to another. Theresa remembers the first time she visited the house of her friend Kathy, in Harberton Park. Harberton Park is located in Malone, a mostly Protestant area, and the "large, elegant detached house" (22) with "fat, red velvet chairs with cabriole legs" (96) suggests that Kathy lives a comfortable, upper-middle-class life. Theresa, on the other hand, lives in West Belfast, a predominantly Catholic, working-class area of the city. She accepts a ride home from Robert one afternoon, and the narrator notes that "he drove up the Falls Road," towards the area where both she and his sister live (35). The Falls Road has played a significant role in Belfast's history. In 1970, British troops sectioned off an area of the Falls Road and placed it under curfew. According to Tim Pat Coogan, from July 3 to July 5, they "saturated" the area with C. S. gas and wide-scale violence, and left some people dead and many others wounded (262). Coogan further describes the event known as the Rape of the Falls:

Sixty civilians and fifteen soldiers were treated for injuries. Homes were wrecked, furniture smashed and thrown into the streets, and needless petty offence offered to the Catholics. For example, there were some incidents, which lost nothing in the subsequent recounting, of crucifixes being smashed and holy pictures thrown into lavatories. (262)

Both Theresa and Robert, thus, grew up in working-class Catholic families under the constant threat of sectarian violence. Although Theresa has stayed in West Belfast,

Robert—in an attempt to escape his working-class background—has moved closer to the center of the city, near Queen’s University.

The violence of Belfast has permanently affected Theresa’s life, and her feelings towards her own city, for her twin brother Francis was brutally murdered two years earlier, in what appeared to be a “purely sectarian” crime (132). As early as 1941, Sean O’Faolain described Belfast as the “rash of this stinking city” (Alexander 8). Theresa looks at the ugliness of the city, and appreciates the fact that at least now, the city’s bleak appearance, with “streets of houses with bricked-up windows and broken fanlights” mirrors its true nature, for any attempt to appear normal, as it did during her childhood—prior to 1969—would only be “a prosperous façade over discrimination and injustice” (13-14). She further articulates why the present-day ugliness of Belfast offers more security than the previously forced normality:

Belfast was now like a madman who tears his flesh, puts straws in his hair and screams gibberish. Before, it had resembled the infinitely more sinister figure of the articulate man in a dark, neat suit whose conversation charms and entertains; and whose insanity is apparent only when he says calmly, incidentally, that he will club his children to death and eat their entrails with a golden fork because God has told him to do so; and then offers you more tea. (14)

In 1969, the first peace walls were erected in Belfast to separate Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods; the year also marked the outbreak of the contemporary “Troubles.” For Theresa, these walls, and the surrounding ghettos of destruction, crime, and poverty represent the true Belfast.

Indeed, throughout the 1980s, Ireland—both Northern and the Republic—witnessed drastic changes as the depressed economy catalyzed the degradation of cities and suburbs. In the same year that Madden published *Hidden Symptoms*, Dublin author Val Mulhern published *Very Like a Whale*—a novel that tracks and comments upon the changes Dublin suffered in the 1980s. When her protagonist, Ben, returns to Dublin after four years abroad, he is shocked to discover a completely different Dublin:

In Dublin the destruction of the city's most typical buildings had begun of course long before he had gone away, but he hadn't been so conscious of it. Now he had the disturbing feeling that his own city had vanished during his absence and he hadn't even seen Stephen's Green yet. His mother had warned him about that. (28)

Later in the novel, while discussing a recently deceased, drug-addicted friend, Ben asks Julie why she is leaving Dublin. In response, she articulates the state of the city in the mid-1980s: “Because this is a dead city and I should have realised it before. Guilt-ridden, hopeless and dead, and I've had enough” (130).

Both *Hidden Symptoms* and *Very Like a Whale* feature a prominent Irish city—Belfast and Dublin, respectively—as a suffering, desperate character, in a sense. Mulhern, then, mirrors Madden's technique of representing the city in its ugly, violent historical moment. Concerning the state of Dublin and Ireland in general, Terence Brown explains, “The startling statistic that in some Dublin suburbs the crime rate had been rising by more than 50 percent a year was symptomatic of the systemic malaise that afflicted Irish society in the 1980s. So too was the steady increase in drug abuse among the young” (317). Mulhern's Ben and Madden's Theresa bear witness to the suffering

state of their cities; they offer their keen observations and sharp reflections as testimony to the destruction and defilement of Irish urban centers.

Although she appreciates the “what you see is what you get” appearance of the city, Theresa views Belfast with contempt and fear. Since the day her brother was murdered, “Belfast was poisoned for her” (44). His killer was never identified, and as a result, Theresa imagines this killer “as a great darkness which was hidden in the hearts of everyone she met” (44). Even the most banal location, a city-centre pub for example, is transformed into a map of potential evil, and everyone becomes a suspect. By providing anonymity to the murderer, Belfast allows everyone to be guilty.

Because of Belfast’s culpability in Francis’ murder, Theresa prefers to remember him away from the city. She often thinks of their trip to Italy together, and she cherishes these memories the most. Any thoughts of the city fill her with dread, and her mind sometimes floods with “morbid fantasies concerning her mother” (50). She imagines “Mammy walking out of the house and having half her head blown away by a stray bullet. Mammy in a shop when a bomb explodes and her body bursting into a scattered jumble of bloody pieces. Mammy being burnt alive in a firebombed restaurant” (50). Theresa tells herself that these thoughts are foolish, but the simple fact remains to feed her fears—“Francis had been killed and Belfast was small: it might well happen again” (50). The novel offers no resolution for Theresa; she does not escape the sense of evil darkness enveloping the city and herself.

Unlike Theresa, Robert appreciates much of what Belfast has to offer. He takes advantage of the segregated geography of the city and uses it to achieve upward social mobility. As with Theresa, Robert grew up along the Falls Road, and his sister now lives

in their childhood home with her husband and son. His modern flat near Queen's University, and his possessions—"the pale wicker furniture, his French theatre posters and a cunning little water-colour of two deck chairs"—comfort him, for "their power as symbols of successful escape from the squalor that was home was, to him, undeniable" (18). He visits his sister's home only out of duty, to spend time with her and her family. Despite the fact that Robert succeeded in escaping from the home and lifestyle of his childhood, the sight of the "little red-bricked terraced house always oppressed him and filled him with a powerful sense of the need to escape" (15). Robert seems to fear the possibility that he might not have escaped; he might have remained a working-class Catholic living off the Falls Road his entire life. Even the idea that "if he really wanted, he need never go to that grim, narrow street ever again" does not comfort him, for the dread of 'what if' is stronger than the reality of what is (15).

While visiting his sister, Robert desperately wants "to flee the place." He despises the décor of the home, for it resembles so many other low-income homes, and he wonders, "Was there a working-class parlour in Belfast that lacked these fittings?" (16). Normally, after visiting his sister, Robert immediately returns to his flat and takes a hot shower, for "there was, he thought, a smell in his sister's house: not a bad smell, but the smell of people and cheap food: a smell of poverty" (17). The décor of his flat erases any trace of his humble, Catholic roots. When Theresa visits for the first time, she immediately notices how "the room screamed of the persona he had created for himself: short of whitewashing the walls and writing I AM AN INTELLECTUAL in large red letters, it could not have been made to 'say' more" (25). By moving out of his poor,

Catholic neighborhood and acquiring tasteful, thoughtful artwork and furniture, Robert achieves upward social mobility.

Robert also abandons his faith as part of his rise to the top, since “Catholic” in Belfast is often synonymous with “working-class.” He has never experienced sectarian violence like Theresa has, and he does not see the sharply drawn religious lines that define the city. In a conversation with Theresa he declares that he is not a Catholic, nor does he believe in Catholicism or God, for “religion’s a lot of eyewash as far as [he’s] concerned” (46). For Robert, Belfast is a “dull and tedious” city that plays no role in shaping his identity (101). Theresa, however, scoffs at this notion:

Just tell me this: if you were found in the morning with a bullet in your head, what do you think the papers would call you? An agnostic? No, Robert, nobody, not even you, is naïve enough to think that. Of course you don’t believe: but there’s a big difference between faith and tribal loyalty, and if you think that you can escape tribal loyalty in Belfast today you’re betraying your people and fooling yourself. (46)

Understanding all too well how Belfast marks a person from birth as either Catholic or Protestant, and how that mark remains regardless of where someone lives or what someone claims to believe, Theresa takes umbrage at Robert’s claim. Theresa and Robert’s conversation parallels Jameson’s claim regarding “the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structure in which he or she is situated” (353), and the idea that the city presents unyielding social structures while also offering some type of mobility.

Tim Creswell explains that place is “not simply an outcome of social processes though it [is], once established, a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression and exploitation” (29). As both a place and a character in *Hidden Symptoms*, Belfast presents itself as a map of cultural ideologies, practices, and fears. The narrator describes and personifies Belfast as “an introverted city, narcissistic, nostalgic, and profoundly un-European” (80). This description, however, is only one of many ways to experience the city, for as Theresa notes, “each place [is] conceived in the memory, language, and discourse of others, then [takes] life in [their] own imagination” (70).

## **Conclusion**

As is the case with many Irish authors, Madden’s work has not previously received ecocritical attention. It is clear, however, that ideas surrounding landscape, place, identity, and home are central to much of her work, including novels not discussed in this chapter. For example, the opening passage of *One by One in the Darkness* suggests the competing and conflicting elements of the Irish home: “Home was a huge sky; it was flat fields of poor land fringed with hawthorn and alder. It was birds in flight; it was columns of midges like smoke in a summer dusk. It was grey water; it was a mad wind; it was a solid stone house where the silence was uncanny” (1). Indeed, the “huge sky” and the “birds in flight” offer the notion of freedom both within the home and from the home. Similarly ambiguous, the “columns of midges like smoke” and the uncanny silence provide a sense of claustrophobia, while the “grey water” and the “mad wind” offer an eerie sense of lurking evil and darkness. The nuanced characteristics that an

Irish home and landscape take on over time become crucial to the unfolding story in *One by One in the Darkness*. Similarly, the land that surrounds the home in *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* reflects the oscillating mood of the story and its characters, and the unnamed narrator of *Molly Fox's Birthday* decides on a spontaneous drive through County Antrim, where she grew up, in order to calm her nerves.

The consistency with which Madden infuses her novels with elements of landscape and home suggests that her efforts are somewhat subconscious rather than wholly deliberate. In other words, connecting her characters with their surrounding environments seems to come naturally to her in the writing process, as is the case with two of her literary inspirations: Edna O'Brien and John McGahern. In exploring the concepts of place and home, elements of the pastoral, and the interconnectivity of life, Madden indeed demonstrates a wide variety of ecocritical concerns, and she insists that the search for identity and contentment must coincide with consideration and appreciation not only for others, but also for the ecosystems that surround us.

## CHAPTER 3

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES—AS MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS,  
AT HOME AND IN THE NATURAL WORLD

In 1976, Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born*, and after three decades and two subsequent editions (1986, 1995), it remains a classic feminist text. The section entitled “Motherhood and Daughterhood” explores the complex, conflicted, passionate, connected, yet distanced relationships between mothers and daughters. Rich explains why this section, the ninth of ten, stands as the “core” of the book (218):

This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. (225-26)

She further details how the mother-daughter relationship has suffered neglect at the hands of patriarchy: “The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture” (237).

Many Irish women writers, especially in recent years, have sought to remedy this neglect through their powerful narratives, exploring and discovering the realms of “deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.” For example, Jennifer

Johnston's *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000) features Clara, a woman who, as she struggles to recovery from both a broken heart and a major surgery, relies on but also resents her mother's influence. The disconnect between Clara's frustration with her mother's advice and her ready acceptance of her mother's food and kindness contributes to Clara's inability to heal. Her conflicted relationship with her mother reinforces her inner conflict when the truth of her surgery is finally revealed to be an emergency hysterectomy. Struggling with the feelings of being less than a full woman, Clara sees her mother as a constant reminder of that which she will never achieve.

Other Irish writers such as Anne Enright, Mary Lavin, Kate O'Brien, Mary Leland, Molly Keane, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne have portrayed the relationships between mothers and daughters as reactive mixtures of tenderness, love, frustration, and contempt. Enright's recently published memoir *Making Babies* (2012) reflects on motherhood, from the joys of breastfeeding to the agony of an infant's never-ending cries. Keane's novel *Good Behavior* (1981) features Aroon St. Charles, a young woman desperate for love and affection in an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family as their aristocratic lifestyle crumbles around them. Aroon's mother responds to her daughter with cold indifference throughout the novel, and Aroon finds herself wholly incapable of pleasing the narcissistically detached woman. In short fiction, Lavin's "A Family Likeness" (1985) provides a snapshot of the often uneasy links between generations of women. Ada spends the afternoon with her daughter and granddaughter, Laura and Daff. She watches Laura with a critical eye, offering unwanted advice on motherhood; Laura responds coldly, resenting the interference and judgment. Over the course of the day, Ada reveals that her own mother frustrated her when she was raising Laura, and her memories of the formidable

woman become “too painful to contemplate” (25). Yet with an inherent sense of pride, she details how beautiful her mother was, and that Laura is “the living image of her” (27). Lavin thus establishes that grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters are connected in a chain that is both vertical and cyclical.

Like Johnston, Enright, Keane, Lavin, and many other Irish women writers, Deirdre Madden rises to the challenge posed by Rich in her claim that “this cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story” (225). Six of her ten novels consider mother-daughter relationships as sites of joy and bitterness, connection and estrangement, honesty and secrets. Rather than espouse a particular analysis of mother-daughter relationships, Madden explores the various ways they develop and unfold.

### **Representations and Rejections of the Mother and Mother-Daughter Relationships in *Molly Fox's Birthday***

“The idea of her had been constant” (142). This claim, spoken by the unnamed narrator of *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008), tersely summarizes a prominent characteristic of Madden's writing: the omnipresence of the mother. Even in novels where the mother is not a primary character, she remains a driving force, and her influence penetrates the lives of others. Madden offers subtle and nuanced analyses of the mother and the mother-daughter relationship, analyses that reach beyond traditional familial narratives. Often, the women in her novels reject either the mother or motherhood, or both. Rejection of the mother—and essentially any form of matrophobia—reigns as a common

trope in mother-daughter narratives, but Madden achieves what Paola Splendore praises in her discussion of contemporary family plots:

In novels written over the past twenty years both in England and other anglophone countries the “resurgence” of the mother-daughter theme clearly expresses the wish to go beyond the usual iconography, not only by reversing certain literary stereotypes like the Oedipal plot but also by questioning the new feminist reappraisal of the maternal. While highlighting the relationship between plot and gender, the new novelists’ representation of family life and in particular of the mother-daughter relationship reveals highly innovative traits, particularly in the skill and depth of analysis, sharpened by the tools of psychoanalytic, cultural, and feminist criticism. (188)

Madden’s writing style tends to reflect what Splendore emphasizes in her claim: “the skill and depth of analysis.” Rather than focus on plot and action, Madden seeks to achieve a sense of perspicacity through her characters; in negotiating between past and present, between memory and observation, she invites readers to contemplate rather than conclude.

Such contemplation serves as the backdrop for *Molly Fox’s Birthday*. As the unnamed narrator, a playwright and close friend of Molly, spends the day—June 21, the longest day of the year—in her best friend Molly’s Dublin home, she slowly realizes the impossibility of ever fully knowing another woman. The structure of the novel works like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces: aspects of Molly and her life, her choices, begin to fit together but never form a complete picture. The setup of this novel, then,

suggests an unmistakable connection to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The similarities between the two novels, and between Joyce's Molly Bloom and Madden's Molly Fox, will be discussed further in Chapter 6, but it is worth noting here that both Mollys have distant, complicated mother-daughter relationships. Molly Bloom's fifteen-year-old daughter, Milly, enjoys a somewhat closer relationship with her father, Leopold, who dotes on her, than she does with her mother. In fact, Molly seems to harbor resentment for her daughter's youth, beauty, and popularity. After thinking about the fact that she used to receive the same attentions and flirtations that Milly now receives, Molly bitterly states, "shes always making love to my things too few old rags I have wanting to put her hair up at 15 my powder too only ruin her skin on her shes time enough for all that all her life after of course shes restless knowing shes pretty with her lips so red a pity they won't stay that way I was too" (631). It's clear, however, that Molly loves her daughter, for she is also upset that Milly refused a goodbye kiss "at the Broadstone going away" (631). The Broadstone was a railway station in Dublin until 1937, and Milly, who never actually appears in the novel, has left her parents and is living in Mullingar, County Westmeath, above fifty miles from Dublin.

Since Milly never appears in *Ulysses*, and Molly is assigned only one chapter devoted entirely to herself, their complex relationship is never fully explored. In *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Madden develops what is arguably a feminine version of this aspect of *Ulysses*. She uses a single day in Dublin to examine the relationship that Joyce does not, for one of the slowly revealed aspects of Molly Fox's life is her estranged relationship with her mother. Molly suffers from a female version of the Oedipus complex. Nancy Chodorow explains that "in the classical account of the feminine oedipus complex, a girl

totally rejects her mother” (140), and according to Luce Irigaray, “the Oedipus complex states the law of the non-return of the daughter to the mother, except in the *doing like* of motherhood. It cuts her off from her beginnings, her conception, her genesis, her birth, her childhood” (105). As we learn from the narrator, the twenty-first of June is Molly’s birthday, a day she refuses to celebrate because of a childhood trauma. On her seventh birthday, Molly’s mother walked out on the family, and she has never forgiven her (101). In ignoring her birthday—indeed, not even her best friend knows how old she is—Molly effectively “cuts her[self] off from her beginnings, her conception, her genesis, her birth, her childhood.”

The narrator further recalls how little she truly knows of Molly’s family life, after more than twenty years of friendship:

Over the few years I had known her she had drip-fed me bits of information. A suburban childhood in a semi-detached house. A father who had worked at some kind of office job, who died just after she left school and of whom she always spoke warmly, whom she had evidently loved. A younger brother who was deeply troubled in himself (I had not yet met Fergus at this stage, but I had heard him weeping behind the closed door) and to whom she was fiercely loyal, viscerally close. A mother who she almost never mentioned, and then always disparagingly.

(96)

This brief snapshot of Molly’s family reveals not only her estrangement from her mother, but the fact that her brother, Fergus, lives with deep psychological inner conflict.

Molly’s psychological state has always remained intact. She mentions her mother from

time to time, with a sneer or a “dry laugh,” accepting the fact that her mother is “out there somewhere, living her life” (96). Fergus’s life amounts to little more than a series of odd jobs, short-lived relationships with women, sporadic hospitalization for his mental instability, and his fierce closeness with Molly. Molly, on the other hand, has achieved theatrical stardom. As a highly acclaimed stage actress, she travels, receives awards, and is occasionally recognized in public by her fans. When Fergus experiences a mental breakdown, he turns to Molly, for she has always made him a priority in her life.

The difference between Fergus and Molly amounts to an inversion of the mythology that serves as the basis for Irigaray’s theories on patriarchy and motherhood. Irigaray explains how according to the mythology that still underlies Western society, the woman must remain mad. In describing—and offering a rereading of—the Greek tragedy the *Oresteia*, Irigaray argues that after Orestes kills Clytemnestra, both he and his sister Electra go mad. The madness, however, is meant only for the woman: “Electra, the daughter, will remain mad. The matricidal son must be saved from madness to establish the patriarchal order. It is the handsome Apollo . . . who helps him to recover from his madness” (37). Following her argument, the mother must first be removed in order to achieve patriarchal norms, and then the daughter must stay in a state of powerlessness, or madness, so that she requires a man’s constant presence and control. For Molly, however, this myth plays out only partially. After removing her mother from her life, Molly becomes independent and successful, but Fergus becomes unstable. Because Molly is the one who helps Fergus recover from his bouts of madness, and because she has never married or committed herself to any man, patriarchy is never firmly established in her life.

Molly expresses her rejection of patriarchal norms most clearly in her relationships with other men. In describing how much Molly loves to read, the narrator states, “Yes, Molly loves reading, more than anyone else I know, and she has plenty of time for it because her emotional life takes up not time at all” (48). She then remembers exactly what Molly once said regarding her relationships: “*I’m only really interested in casual relationships. Cream off the best of someone and then move on. Anything else is a waste of time*” (48, emphasis in original). The narrator assures readers of Molly’s firmness in this belief, for in twenty years Molly “has never been in a serious long-term relationship”; she has never “cared deeply” for someone, yet “there is never any lack of men keen to be with Molly Fox” (48). In preferring such casual relationships with men, Molly rejects the traditional female roles of wife and mother. Her primary interests instead are herself and her brother, her own happiness and his security. She also rejects the classic Freudian analysis of sexuality and mother-daughter relationships, for Freud understood female sexuality only in terms of a woman’s desire to reproduce. In a critique of Freud’s account of female sexual development, Chodorow explains that “nowhere in this account does she want sex for anything except reproduction and the restitution of her wounded narcissism” (142). Although Molly’s sexuality is never explicitly discussed, her desire for casual relationships suggests that she appreciates sex in terms of pleasure, but not in terms of reproduction.

Despite her apparent acceptance of her mother’s abandonment and despite her own seemingly satisfied life, Molly, in another sense, never recovers from the loss of her mother; she makes motherhood a primary force in her life. Rich explains how the loss of the mother may cause a woman to devote a great portion of her life to some form of

mothering: “But the ‘motherless’ woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may spend her life proving her strength in the ‘mothering’ of others” (243). Molly’s devotion to Fergus, the constant care she provides him, amounts to a type of mothering. Moreover, the narrator never quite knows exactly how much Fergus needs this mothering from Molly. In one quick, explosive scene, the narrator meets Molly’s mother by sheer coincidence, while waiting in a hotel lobby for Molly to arrive. When Molly does arrive, the surprise of seeing her mother produces a hostile mixture of anger and protective instincts. Rather than greet her mother, she shouts, “You’re to leave Fergus be. Do you hear me? Stay out of his life.” She dismisses the reply and continues, “Is it not enough that you’ve driven him mad? Do you want to kill him too?” (139). This unprompted outburst, in the middle of a hotel lobby, is completely uncharacteristic for Molly, who tends to be shy in public. Her mother’s response serves to complicate and confuse any sense the reader has of Molly and her brother: “The only thing wrong with Fergus is that he won’t stand on his own two feet. You won’t let him . . . And anyway Fergus wants me to see him. Why do you think I’m here? Who do you think told me he was in the hospital again?” (139). The question lingers for the remainder of the novel—does Fergus need Molly’s devotion and care, or does Molly need Fergus to need her?

Moreover, does Molly’s devotion to Fergus indicate her selflessness in the sense that she puts the needs of her brother first, or does it indicate her selflessness in the sense that she has no true self without her brother? Irish feminist critic Moynagh Sullivan describes the latter state of selflessness in terms of victimization by patriarchal norms:

The only feminine position or state imagined . . . is self- (lessness—the mother object), as with Eve, whose likeness is to be found not in her own reflection, but in the indentificatory mirror of Adam’s subjectivity. The like in relation to which a woman must construct herself is the male (as sister, lover, mother, and daughter) and thus she becomes phallically constructed. Effectively then, love between (literary/symbolic) mother and daughter is, in Irigaray’s words, “rendered impossible by the patriarchal regime.” (258)

Indeed, Molly constructs herself, she shapes her identity, as sister and mother to Fergus. The narrator learns from Fergus that “it wouldn’t be possible for Molly to go more than a couple of days without speaking” to him, and he tells her this with an “unconscious egotism” and a “little smile” (150). The narrator—as well as the reader—is left to wonder how Fergus interprets his sister’s devotion. Does that little smile indicate Fergus’s gratitude or his amusement towards his sister’s constant care? In this scene, Molly appears not as the liberated, successful woman who rejects the notion that she needs a man to make her a wife and mother in order to find fulfillment, but rather the opposite. Molly appears as a woman who, in an act of symbolic matricide, fully rejects her mother and attempts to replace her—indeed *needs* to replace her—by mothering Fergus.

The true nature of Molly’s mother remains ambiguous throughout the novel. Although Molly paints a harsh image of an abandoning, selfish, manipulative woman, few concrete examples are given to support her claims—other than the fact that she left on Molly’s seventh birthday. Furthermore, Fergus’s depiction of her wholly contradicts

Molly's. He asserts that Molly and their mother are quite alike, though Molly hates and rejects the idea of being at all like her mother. He says,

Remote. She's a nice person but she's hard to get to know. She doesn't like people to get close to her emotionally. You can get to a certain point and then she draws back, becomes distant, and that can be hard to take. But it's just the way she is . . . I actually think they're quite alike, Mummy and Molly, but Molly hates me saying that. It's true though, isn't it? Molly's the best in the world and I don't know how I'd have got this far in life without her, but she's remote in that same way. She doesn't like anybody to get too close. (152)

Based on what the narrator already knows about Molly, her casual relationships, her insistence against commitment, and her habit of revealing very little about herself even in a close friendship, Fergus's claim that Molly and her mother are alike holds true. Rich describes a woman's struggle with the concept of becoming her mother: "Matrophobia . . . is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" (235, emphasis in original). Indeed, Molly suffers from matrophobia in her hatred of her mother. Fergus details how deep the resentment runs, claiming that, "she can't tolerate being in the same room" with their mother (153). According to Fergus, Molly blames their mother for everything, believing that "Mummy's a monster, and everything's her fault. End of story" (154). Irigaray, in "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," explains that the rejection of the mother—what she calls matricide, even when actual murder does not take place—functions as a cornerstone "in the whole of our society and our culture" (36). As a result, she says, "the mother has become a devouring monster"

(40). Indeed, Molly's own act of matricide serves as a type of cornerstone to her own life.

Molly's hatred of her mother is understandable, given that fact that she walked out on Molly on her seventh birthday. However, Molly has never taken the time to consider the possible reasons why her mother left. In her explanation of matrophobia, Rich explains that it is "easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely" (235). If Molly truly fears becoming her mother, fears that perhaps they have much in common, then that explains her wholehearted rejection of her. It also explains her behavior, her casual sneers about her mother, and her outburst that day in the hotel lobby.

Fergus, on the other hand, sees his mother differently. He tells the narrator that his mother was a victim of her gender and her generation:

She had been brought up in a generation where it was what was expected of a woman, and so a great many married and had children, whether it suited them or not. At least my mother had the self-knowledge to realise what she had done, and you have to give her credit for that. I think a lot of women were in the same position but they couldn't see the damage they were doing. By the time she understood the situation, it was too late, in that Molly and I had arrived on the scene. So I think that the whole time we were small she was wondering should she stay or should she go—which would do the least harm. (155)

Through Fergus' eyes, their mother deserves sympathy and support. Molly is forty years old, and the novel takes place in the present, so her mother would have grown up in the first half of the twentieth century, and would have been married by the late 1960s. Women in Ireland during those decades were expected to marry and bear children. In Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking feminist text *The Second Sex* (1949), she details the long history of marriage and childbearing expectations for women. In the 1960s, specifically in Ireland, however, with the strict control of the Catholic Church, not only was marriage still encouraged, but "contraception by artificial means was legally made difficult and was forbidden by the church" (Brown 199). Fergus and Molly's mother would have married during a time when marriage rates were increasing rapidly in Ireland, especially for young men and women in their early twenties (Brown 247). Under the sexual obligations of marriage and the prohibition of birth control, their mother would have had no choice but to bear children. Her situation fits Irigaray's bleak description of the life of a woman: "As for life, it has to be said that rights are unevenly distributed, and that they have become mainly duties, especially for women: the duty to have children, sexual duties. No legislation protects women vis-à-vis their lives" (201). If Fergus's and Molly's mother left her family in order to protect her own happiness, should she be forgiven? The narrator is left asking herself this question.

**Motherhood, Sisterhood, and Connecting to Home in *Nothing Is Black*, *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, and *One by One in the Darkness***

Of all Madden's novels, *Nothing Is Black* presents the most powerful examples of what Rich calls the cathexis between mothers and daughters (225). This novel features

two mother-daughter relationships, and provides glimpses of a third. Nuala's relationship with her mother, as detailed in my previous chapter, provided her with tenderness and joy. Thus, she cannot cope with her mother's death; her grief overwhelms her. Anna, however, does not enjoy a similarly warm relationship with her daughter. Whereas Nuala clings to the traditions and memories she cherished with her mother, Anna accepts that after years of desperately trying to rekindle a relationship with her daughter, she will remain estranged. This estrangement filters down throughout every aspect of her life. Like Aisling in *Remembering Light and Stone*, Anna embraces the hybrid life of the foreigner in order to escape from her unresolved past. Unlike Aisling, however, Anna is not an Irish expatriate, for she lives in her native country of Holland and, in following "a pattern which suited her perfectly," escapes to Ireland for six months each year. Thus, the novel does not follow in the tradition—made famous by Joyce through Stephen Dedalus—of leaving and one day returning to Ireland.

For Anna, a coastal village in Donegal, what she calls "a neutral place," provides refuge from the feelings of bitterness and failure that surround her in Holland. In Holland, Anna faces the constant, oppressive reality that her daughter will not speak to her, and, after the sudden death of her ex-husband, reconciliation is not an option. According to Roberta Rubenstein, "typically the desire to return home is regarded as the expression of a regressive wish to return to a less complicated moment in history or personal experience" (3). For Anna, however, home does not provide a "less complicated moment in history," and only by forging a new identity as a foreigner in Donegal can she reconcile her past with her present. Anna's original home is in Holland, but because her daughter has rejected her there, Holland feels like only half a home. Her six-month split

between Holland and Donegal represents Anna's torn identity: She is a mother, yet at the same time, due to the circumstances with her daughter, she is not a mother.

Not only does Anna's hybrid identity complicate the concept of home, but, perhaps more importantly, it subverts the long-standing expatriate tradition in Irish writing. This literary tradition was made famous by Joyce, who not only left Ireland himself, but who also embodied the tradition in Stephen Dedalus. At the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen decides that he will leave Ireland. He studies in Paris, and returns to Ireland in *Ulysses*. Other writers have followed this convention. Kate O'Brien set several of her novels in Spain, and in *Mary Lavelle* (1936) the title character decides to spend time in Spain in order to find her identity before her marriage to John: "To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance, to belong to no one place or family or person . . . Spain!" (33). This female bildungsroman ends with Mary returning to Ireland, having decided to break off her engagement and live off her inheritance money until she can find work. A later exemplary text, Julia O'Faolain's *The Irish Signorina* (1984), features Anne Ryan, who leaves her home in Dublin for Tuscany, and the novel's ambiguous ending leaves the question of whether or not Anne will remain in Tuscany, rather than return to Dublin. In *Nothing Is Black*, however, Nuala does not leave Ireland to find her identity after her mother's death; instead, she leaves Dublin for Donegal. It is Anna who leaves her home country, yet she travels *to Ireland* to deal with her ex-husband's death and her daughter's contempt for her. Madden, then, achieves what feminist theorist Adalgisa Giorgio describes as the tendency for women writers to "use their narratives on mothers and

daughters as a forge for the creation of new writing modes . . . [and] the subversion of established genres” (29).

Anna first visits Donegal immediately after the death of her ex-husband. Her daughter Lili, who blames her for the divorce, tells her not to bother attending the funeral. Although she expects her trip to be nothing more than a brief escape from a difficult time in her life, Anna cannot bear to return home to Holland, and to the fact that Lili has cut her out of her life; thus she begins her six-month pattern. Anne Fogarty claims that many contemporary Irish women writers “return obsessively to the scene of the mother’s death and deploy it as a narrative marker which gives a definitive shape to the daughter’s story” (88-89). In *Nothing Is Black*, Madden writes against this trend, for it is Lili’s father’s death that provides the narrative marker and ultimately shapes the mother’s story into a forging of dual identities—one in Holland and one in Ireland.

Taking steps to ensure that she can truly embrace an alternative identity in Ireland, Anna does not discuss her life in Holland with her neighbors in Donegal. Even Claire, who knows Anna quite well, reflects upon the fact that she knows “precious little about her life back in Holland,” for Anna is “exceptionally reserved.” For many years, Claire assumed Anna was divorced, until Anna casually remarked one day that her husband was dead, which is only a half-truth, since he died as her ex-husband. By abandoning her Dutch identity, Anna attempts to enter into Irish culture and become, in the Donegal community, an insider, yet her inherent outsider status cannot be shed, and thus she never fully achieves insider status.

In a recent article, “Power and Positionality: Negotiating Insider/ Outsider Status Within and Across Cultures,” Sharan Merriam and her five co-authors explain that the

boundaries between the two positions are not clearly delineated. Indeed, Anna's position in Ireland reflects this blurred distinction. Living in the small Donegal village for six months each year, she has made friends with the local people and she feels that she knows and understands more about the area. As Claire puts it, "What Anna doesn't know about Irish customs and mythology isn't worth knowing" (31). Although her extensive cultural knowledge impresses Claire and other locals, when Anna begins to develop an Irish accent, her neighbor Nuala finds it to be irritating, and imagines that "her own culture must have been pretty bland if she was able to slough it off like that and effortlessly absorb another" (122). In another brief, but telling scene, Anna attempts to explain the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland to Nuala, but Nuala interrupts with the statement that, of course, she already knows (123). They then enter a church, and Nuala feels unnerved and perplexed by the fact that Anna continues to talk and laugh in her normal tone of voice. Anyone raised in Catholic Ireland, as Nuala was, would recognize Anna's behavior as inappropriate, especially when she makes such comments as, "If God existed, he would die of loneliness" (124). Thus, Anna's cultural and historical knowledge provides her with some sense of insider status, but her behavior often marks her as an outsider.

In addition to her practical knowledge about Ireland, Anna achieves an intimate relationship with the Donegal community, for her friends in the village often confide in her. In fact, for Rita, the local shop owner, Anna is the only person with whom she can speak frankly. In this regard, she embodies what Merriam and her co-authors call "the outsider's advantage . . . being seen as non-aligned with subgroups, thus often getting more information" (411). A typical visitor sees only the quaint, quiet community, so

Anna feels relieved as she grows to understand the darker sides of life there, for it means she is “really getting to know the place in which she had chosen to live” (70). On the other hand, however, Anna often “sees their confidences as isolating.” She knows that the locals she has become friends with “only trust her because she is an outsider” (68). Thus, not only does Anna embody dual, simultaneous identities, but she also occupies dual cultural spaces: Those of the insider and the outsider.

Anna’s insider/outsider positioning gains significance when considered against the backdrop of her broken relationship with her daughter. In many ways, her situation in Ireland mirrors her situation with her daughter: she negotiates an insider/outsider status as a mother. Anna simply cannot *not* be Lili’s mother; on the other hand, Lili goes to great extremes to ensure that Anna does not feel like her mother. As a woman and a mother, she does not truly fit comfortably anywhere—neither in Donegal nor Holland, not as part of her daughter’s life nor wholly removed from it. She pleads with Lili, begging to be accepted back into her life. From friends back in Holland, Anna hears occasional news about Lili. The most striking blow comes when Anna learns that her daughter has had a baby; at that point she realizes just how fully she has been shut out of Lili’s life. As a character in the novel, Anna is secondary to Claire and Nuala, and Madden provides sparse detail about the specifics of her feelings and struggles. However, Anna endures the most difficult hardship. By positioning Anna as a non-essential character and offering only glimpses into her life and her struggle with her estranged daughter, Madden also positions the reader as an outsider in Anna’s life. Readers cannot know Anna intimately because a part of her—the part of her that will always be a mother—has been closed off, thereby fracturing her identity as a woman.

Published six years before *Nothing Is Black*, and twenty years before *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Madden's 1988 novel *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* stands as a precursor to the themes addressed in the 2008 novel, and also marks the first time that Madden addresses the relationships between sisters, as well as mothers and daughters. *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* alternates between two stories: Jane's life, from her childhood through to her adult years and finally to her death, and the lives of her twin daughters, Sarah and Catherine. The novel's meandering, introspective structure works to maintain the tension in this subtle and dark story, but seems less sophisticated than the well paced puzzle structure of *Molly Fox's Birthday*. Furthermore, while both novels reject the mother, suggesting the fear of becoming her, only one—*Molly Fox's Birthday*—uses that fear to provide additional depth to the character. Indeed, as Madden's first attempt to write the complexities of mothers and daughters, *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* seems a bit underdeveloped when compared to her later work. The two narratives are not equally split: Jane's story takes up much more of the novel than that of her daughters. As a result, Sarah and Catherine, as characters, seem a bit superficial and are difficult to understand—yet their story contains the primary conflict of the novel.

Sarah and Catherine's narrative takes place two years after their mother's death. In flashbacks, the narrator reveals that while Catherine continuously mourns her, Sarah grieves for only four days. During those days, she feels the weight of her mother's death "upon her heart and mind," and she cannot believe the simple fact that her mother will never again be in their home (30). However, her mood shifts suddenly:

And then, amazingly, on the fifth day after the death, she awoke in the morning to the exact converse of these feelings, for she felt relief and a

great sense of lightness, as though some terrible constraint had been lifted from her. Rolling over in bed, she had whispered into the pillow, “Thank God she’s dead.” (30)

Despite such a shocking declaration, the remainder of the daughter’s narrative does little to explore why Sarah feels such relief at her mother’s death, save for one scene. The day after Sarah’s proclamation to herself, she tries to sort through her feelings in her head and tells herself several times over that she “did love Mama.” However, she knows that “only now when her mother was safely dead could she admit to the knowledge which qualified that; she had been afraid of her too, and had often even hated her for her cold self-possession” (31).

After accepting this realization, this relief that her mother would never again be a force in her life, the narrator articulates Sarah’s deepest fear:

All her life, Sarah now saw, had been an unconscious struggle against her mother, for she had been afraid that she would grow up to be just like her: just as cold, just as calculating and just as self-contained. Perhaps if she had lived she would have beaten Sarah and made of her what she wanted; but her death was her failure, her death gave victory to her daughter.

Sarah could not feel or even imagine her mother’s spiritual presence after her death, nor did she want to. (31)

After this brief flashback to the days following Jane’s death, the narrative returns to the present rather than flesh out Sarah’s feelings further. Because her sentiments are never fully explored, one must wonder about their sincerity, especially given Sarah’s age. At sixteen years old, Sarah is in the middle of her adolescence, and thus her struggle against

her mother seems less than shocking. Moreover, the novel points towards uncanny similarities between Jane and Sarah— similarities that Sarah could never be aware of, but may intrinsically sense—yet never develops the connection. For example, when Sarah claims her indifference towards her mother’s death—“I don’t care that she’s dead. We’re not. We’re alive” (31)—she unknowingly echoes the statement Jane made years ago, before the girls were born, when their farm hand Gerald died: “I don’t care that he’s dead. We’re not. We’re alive” (127). Such remarkable parallels in sentiment and thought occur several times, but readers are given only a frustrating glimpse at Sarah and Jane as daughter and mother, for much of the Sarah-and-Catherine narrative takes place after Jane’s death. Thus, readers gain only a limited sense of Jane’s relationship with her daughters. This lack of development lends a sense of incompleteness: Madden never traces out the complex nature of the mother-daughter relationship, but rather hints at it and then moves on.

What Madden does trace, in vivid detail, are the setting and landscape of *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, and how the women in the novel relate to their land and home. Sarah’s sentiment about her home in the country, on a wide stretch of land—almost one hundred acres—that borders a lough, “a huge expanse of water, where so many wild things lived” (17), centers on the idea of innate connection. Having been born and raised on this land, Sarah and Catherine belong here, embodying Sarah’s claim that “if you have been born here you can never belong elsewhere. If you have been born elsewhere, you can never belong here” (22). Their mother, Jane, however, was raised in the city; she never grows fully comfortable on the farm after marrying James. Jane “felt ill at ease in the countryside,” and “the flat earth and the wide, wide countryside

frightened her” (47). As an orphan, she never quite belonged anywhere, and here on the farm, her home after she marries James, she finds that her lack of connection does not resolve itself. One of the primary reasons for her feeling is the fact that Jane does not truly love James. She grew up very lonely, never knowing love, and when they began to date, she often thought about “how strange and wonderful it was to watch” him fall in love with her (15). In time, she began arranging opportunities to secretly observe him, discovering that “to see his face change, to see the relief and the tenderness and the love with which the mere sight of her filled him with was the highlight of the entire evening. *It made her feel dizzy with power* (15, emphasis mine). Jane does not quite love James; rather, she loves the fact that he loves *her*, for she never felt loved growing up as an orphan. She admits that “the thought that there was something quite basically wrong with the relationship did drift into her mind occasionally, but she always quashed it” (15). Jane’s ambivalence, and the resulting struggles she has to find contentment in her new life with her husband on their farm, suggests that marrying a man, even a good man, cannot “fix” a woman. Jane remains sad and lonely in her marriage, and thus she cannot fully connect with her home.

The differences between Jane’s relationship with the land and that of her daughters also suggests the ultimate impossibility of dominating a landscape and truly making it one’s own. A relationship with land demands the same time and patience to develop as does a relationship with a human being. Essayist and poet Deborah Tall discusses this impossibility in her essay “Dwelling: Making Peace with Space and Place.” According to Tall, “When the landscapes in which we find ourselves are not diffused with *our* meanings, *our* history or community, it is not easy to attach ourselves

to them. It cannot be a natural connection, but must be a forged one. It is easier to turn inward from a strange land than to attempt to bridge the gap” (110, emphasis in original). In *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, the farm, the lough, and the seasonally changing landscape are not diffused with meaning for Jane; they do not share her history, and she seems unwilling to devote a great deal of time and patience to both her land and her marriage. Thus, she has no natural connection with her home, only a forged one. When she is pregnant with Sarah and Catherine, after years of living on the farm, Jane still considers her home as something belonging to the pasts of others rather than to her own present:

In the silence she tried to imagine it as the home in which a family—her family—would live, but she always failed to overcome the idea of it as a place bound to the past. She could think only of the people who had lived there and were now dead, rather than of the people who would live there, and who were yet to be born. (122).

In recognizing that a place—her home and surrounding landscape—has a history outside of hers, one that she can never understand, Jane submits to the authority of nature. From her home she can hear the wild birds, and “to her the noise of the birds was the noise of nature: implacable, uncompromising, cruel: something which could not be contained or controlled” (47). There is little anthropocentric about Jane: she respects nature’s indifference to her, and dreads its brutal capabilities.

In contrast to Jane, Sarah and Catherine, having been born and raised on the farm, know their land as they would an intimate friend. The novel begins in January, and the new year brings the serene peacefulness of the winter landscape. Living on a farm, Sarah

and Catherine associate each season with different types of both pleasure and labor. Moreover, their closeness as sisters allows them to enjoy their landscape together, in contrast to the experience of their mother, who never felt fully close to anyone. The first snows of winter transform their farmland into a “magical” world, “for it fell straight down on a windless night and covered everything, absolutely everything down to the smallest leaf with a crust of airy snow which held the light and sparkled” (21). They admire the beauty of the snowflakes and their pure, white, untouched surroundings. This beauty is fleeting, however, for as the snow begins to thaw, a “dull, unreflective and damp” quality replaces the sparkle (22). Sarah is reminded of how miserable the daily farm labor can be in winter: working through “cold and bleak” days, through the “thick fog and chill,” with everything—tools, wires, and ground—made more dangerous by the constant dampness (34).

Spring brings new growth. The girls plant tulip bulbs, and while looking at them in their early stages, Catherine finds comfort in the promise of their bloom:

She knows that they have reached the point of being five short yellow spikes, but they will continue to grow, and when they are in the light they will grow further. They will be like stiff green flames unfurling, hard and vibrantly green, and then the green flower will come and grow and the colour will blush into it; in her mind’s eye the flower grows and gains colour, and she finds this promise of spring a comfort, the same comfort she feels when, on a summer evening, she sees the late light slant thick through the window and fall upon the wall in a broad gold bar; gliding the air through which it passes. (92)

Spring also brings the joyous day when the first lambs of the year are born. Sarah and Catherine celebrate these new lives with their father, and the day is always marked by “conviviality of the family” (115). The girls once again begin to encounter birds’ nests across their land, nests “made of interwoven twigs and fine green moss” (133)—and their father can often tell them which types of birds built which nests. When summer comes, Sarah and Catherine enjoy warm, clear evenings but dread the mayflies, for they “were like one of the plagues with which the God of Israel cursed Egypt” (22). Unlike their mother, however, the girls do not fear their surroundings or feel like strangers on their farm, but accept the changes, the beauties, and the hardships that come with each new season. Their ability to feel completely at home stems from the fact that they have no forced relationships in their lives, as does their mother, who enjoys the fact that her husband loves her, but does not truly reciprocate the feelings.

Although Sarah and Catherine share a bond as identical twin sisters, their relationship to each other revolves around secrets and differences. In her study of relationships between sisters, theorist Deborah Tannen asserts that “siblings are indeed emblematically close . . . But siblings are also emblematically unequal because they are age-graded: the older sibling has authority and power over the younger” (“We’ve Never Been” 210-11). Tannen goes on to state that even when she spoke with twins, they “typically identified the one born minutes earlier as older, and the one born minutes later as younger” (211). As twins, Sarah and Catherine, however, resist such a categorization, for the narrator of the novel never reveals who was born first. As such, each sister claims an authority over the other; each keeps a secret from the other in order to protect her.

These two secrets are the crux of the novel's plot, which centers primarily on how Sarah and Catherine live, day by day, with the intimate knowledge that each has of the other.

Tannen's study also points to the idea of a "Master Narrative by which sisters are expected to be close and similar" (227). Madden writes somewhat against the grain of this master narrative, for Sarah and Catherine are indeed close, but their personalities are quite different. At one point in the novel, Peter, who lives in the neighboring cottage, thinks to himself, "The difference that there can be between sisters! And twin sisters at that!" The third person omniscient narrator goes on to reveal that Peter's "fondness" for Sarah "is offset by his deep dislike of Catherine, a dislike which has grown in recent years into contempt" (69). Of course, one can look back to a novel as classic as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) to find a narrative that highlights the differences between sisters, but as twins, Sarah and Catherine are even more strikingly different.

Because they do not consider one to be older than the other, Sarah and Catherine go to great lengths to protect each other, and the inner struggles that they suffer for this protection highlights their impressive bond of sisterhood. Sarah, who admits that she "cannot understand the way in which her sister's mind works" (23), hides from Catherine the fact that she is dying, for Catherine's doctor does not want her to suffer the stress of knowing. Catherine, however, has a secret of her own. She has discovered that Peter is actually their half-brother, and as she watches Sarah develop a romantic relationship with him, she hides the truth to shield Sarah from pain and humiliation. Despite their differences and their secrets, Sarah and Catherine live as one person divided into two. During an argument, at a moment when neither sister understands the other's perspective, Catherine looks at Sarah and sees "not the distance of anger and misunderstanding that

there is between them, but the closeness which she feels. For when Catherine looks at Sarah, she sees herself divided” (89). In another scene, Sarah is brought to tears by a segment on a talk show, where twin sisters, separated at birth, are reunited for the first time (38). When the novel ends, the sisters still have not shared their secrets, but they share a moment of unique intimacy:

Again they fall silent, and they are both thinking the same thought: “Tell her now.” The intimacy and the honesty of the night is unexpected and unusual, and both sisters feel that if ever they can confide in each other, it must be now. Still they do not speak, but they can sense a curious tension, for as they strain for the courage to tell they each become conscious that the other is not sensing this and opening herself to listen, but that she also seems to be on the point of confiding something. And each suddenly feels that the other knows her secret; that she will speak and her sister will reply, “I know.” (131)

The novel ends on a combined note of joy and sorrow. It is Easter morning, and Sarah has brought Catherine a cup of tea and a chocolate egg. Sarah knows her sister is dying, and she has discovered the truth about Peter by reading Catherine’s diary, something she has never done before, yet perhaps something that Catherine wanted her to do. The sisters wish each other a happy Easter, and the novel comes to an end. The strength of their bond has been slowly, yet beautifully, detailed.

In *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, Sarah and Catherine’s narrative centers on the secrets that each sister keeps from the other, but also reveals the inner workings and hardships that inevitably come with farm life. In a reversal of the typical gendered

division of labor, the responsibility for the farm falls more on Sarah than on James, their father. On many days, James stays inside while Sarah works the land:

He claims that he is sick and refuses to get out of bed so that all the farm work falls to Sarah. His illness is a lie: he is too depressed to face life on those days, and too ashamed to admit it. He will not hire a farm hand, and on the days when her father cries off, Sarah is still and exhausted by nightfall. (34)

Western patriarchal tradition positions women in the home, the domestic space, and men outside in nature, but in *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* Madden presents a young, capable woman working the land, tending to cattle, and supporting her family.

Moreover, these same Western dualisms continue to support the Enlightenment ideas of the highly rational man and the overly emotional woman. Madden destabilizes this paradigm, for Sarah's role as the primary laborer becomes more crucial on the days that James' depression confines him to his bed.

Notions of home, landscape, and a woman's connections to them are significant in almost all of Madden's work, but *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* and *One by One in the Darkness* stand out as the novels that focus on the relationships between sisters.

Although *One by One in the Darkness* primarily concerns the difficulties involved when a family must try to move on, after suffering through the pain and loss caused by the Troubles, the novel also provides a much closer glimpse into the complexities of sisterhood. The three Quinn girls, Helen, Cate, and Sally, have grown into mature women. They lead separate lives; they have made difficult choices, and they have distinct personalities. At one point in the novel, after chatting with a colleague who

rarely speaks to her sister and who claims that “it’s not big deal” because they “have nothing in common with each other,” Cate finds herself baffled:

What did she have “in common” with Sally and Helen, except that they were sisters? Surely that was the whole point of family. It was to change strangers into friends that you needed some kind of shared interests, beliefs, or aspirations, but with your sisters, what you had ‘in common’ was each other. (88)

Madden alternates, from chapter to chapter, between the girls’ childhood years and their present, adult years. Through this structure, she provides glimpses of their childhood experiences—school days, trips to their grandmothers’ homes, confused questions about adult phrases such as “the shotgun wedding,” and excursions with their Uncle Peter in his rowboat. As adults, their lives have taken different directions, yet they still rely on each other’s strengths when needed. Cate’s thoughts about her sisters and Madden’s structure of the novel both enact Tannen’s idea about sisters: “A sister is someone who owns part of what you own: a house, perhaps, or a less tangible legacy, like memories of your childhood and the experience of your family” (Tannen, *You Were Always* 9). As women, Cate, Helen, and Sally are quite different in their personalities. Their Uncle Brian often remarked that when they were children, “I never saw three sisters that were as close, and I never saw three sisters that were as different,” and Cate knows his statement still holds true, for “if they hadn’t been sisters, they would never have been friends” (8).

Each of the Quinn sisters has retained some element from her childhood in her adult life. Cate, for example, admits that although she enjoys her life in London, she finds herself seeking out items that remind her of her years growing up in Ireland, “things

which had in them something of the intensity, the wildness she remembered from those days.” Jars of brown, speckled eggs, reminds her of boat trips with Uncle Peter, her sisters, and her cousins to an island just off the shore and before the grey waters open up to the bay. Flowers, furniture, and other random items would recall different memories, and “even when the associations weren’t particularly pleasant, she appreciated them for the access they gave her to her own past” (149). In a completely different way, Sally has also held on to part of her childhood. She now teaches in the same school she attended, along with her sisters, when they were children. She has also chosen to live at home with her mother, supporting her in her years as a widow. Of the three sisters, Helen has latched onto a childhood memory with the most tenacity. She works as a defense attorney, and quite often defends men accused of IRA-related crimes. Having grown up during the height of the Troubles, knowing the fear that takes over when RUC soldiers enter one’s home and question one’s family, or take one’s uncles and hold them overnight, Helen devotes her adult life to defending IRA men. Currently, she is defending a Catholic man accused of shooting and killing a taxi cab driver. Although Helen’s father was murdered by paramilitary Unionists, she does not condone IRA violence, but she feels lucky to have been hired by a firm that takes on “a certain amount of work on terrorist cases” (165).

Although the three sisters have brought some element of their childhood into their adult lives, they cannot fully understand each other’s choices. Helen and Sally wonder why Cate moved to London; Cate and Helen wonder how Sally can enjoy living at home and teaching in the same school they all attended as children; Cate and Sally cannot fathom how Helen defends the men she defends, how she can live with that violence in

her daily life. Nevertheless, the sisters support one another, and their lives embody Tannen's description of adulthood: "When we're children, our parents and siblings make up our worlds. Though our worlds ostensibly widen when we're adults, on some level we still live in our childhoods and our childhoods live on in us" (*You Were Always* 16).

Although *One by One in the Darkness* is not specifically about the Quinn women as sisters, and *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* is not specifically about Sarah's and Catherine's relationship as sisters, Madden makes some effort in both novels to explore the different types of relationships that sisters can have. The fact that each woman differs significantly from her sister or sisters strengthens the idea that a unified idea of not only womanhood, but also sisterhood, does not exist. Sarah and Catherine both keep important secrets from each other, but each does so in an attempt to protect the other. Cate, Helen, and Sally share many details about their lives with one another, but know when to hold back and keep information to themselves. In exploring the bonds between sisters, Madden suggests that the idea of closeness between sisters can take many forms, and can include keeping secrets, sharing moments of tenderness, and recalling memories, both pleasant and terrifying. She further suggests, perhaps most importantly, that sisters do not have to be alike to be close, and do not have to truly understand one another; rather, they simply have to love one another.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of Madden's novels feature women—as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and friends. Nonetheless, she does not consider herself to be a feminist writer. In fact, when I asked her about her many novels about women, she suggested that perhaps

these novels are as much about men as they are women, citing the importance of Andrew Forde in *Molly Fox's Birthday*, and the fact that male characters outnumber the female ones in *Authenticity*. While it is true that Julia Fitzpatrick is the only woman who is central to a story that otherwise centers on Roderic Kennedy, his brother Dennis, and William Armstrong, Madden's work undoubtedly features more central women characters than men. Nevertheless, her point brings to mind the fact that she is not first Irish woman author to resist the feminist label. For example, the poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill makes it clear that she does not concern herself with feminist labels, for, as James M. Cahalan notes, "she would rather be viewed as a poet writing among women and men, not just as a 'woman poet' or 'feminist'." In terms of novelists "Jennifer Johnston and Julia O'Faolain have also found feminism too limiting in their own careers" (*Double Visions* 4). They do not want to feel pigeon-holed, to be identified only as feminist or women writers; after all, male authors, Irish and otherwise, are not confined to the status of "men writers." Like these fellow Irish women authors, Madden resists the feminist label.

Interestingly, Edna O'Brien, who has been a leading literary influence on Madden, encountered resistance of her own in terms of the canon of feminist literature. Cahalan explains that "some feminists have steered clear of her work because her women characters constantly seek to resolve their problems and find happiness in romantic relationships with men, despite the bad relationships they themselves and their mothers have with men" (*Double Visions* 114). If O'Brien—who unquestionably writes about women, their lives, their experiences, their loves and losses, and has been a contemporary pioneer in doing so since 1960, has faced resistance in the feminist canon—and Ní

Dhomhnaill and Madden openly resist the label, then how should we approach Irish writing, especially fiction, that is not only written by women, but also primarily concerns women? I assert that Madden takes a step in the right direction, as do these other writers, by resisting the narrow labels. Women's writing, even when it's about women, can and should be viewed through lenses beyond those of feminism. For example, I discuss *Nothing Is Black* from an ecocritical perspective in chapter 2, and in chapter 5 I approach the novel in terms of its relationship with art. Thus, although the novel certainly can be discussed through a feminist lens, as I do in this chapter, that does not necessarily mean that it is a completely feminist text or that Madden is solely a feminist writer. This is not at all to say Madden and these other Irish authors are *opposed* to feminism; indeed, at the same time that she has not wanted to be known only as a feminist or woman writer, O'Brien remarked that "one woman in *Ms.* magazine pointed out that I send bulletins from battle fronts where other women do not go. I think I do" (qtd. in Cahalan, *Double Visions* 119). It is not inconsistent for a writer such as O'Brien—or Madden—to be proud of writing about women powerfully at the same time that she does not want to be known only as a "woman writer." In a similar vein, while women's writing, even women's fiction about women, can be categorized as feminist, it can simultaneously fall into other categories as well. *Molly Fox's Birthday*, *Nothing Is Black*, *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, and *One by One in the Darkness* are all beautiful portraits of women in their daily lives; they are also powerful examples of how multi-faceted women's fiction about women can be.

## CHAPTER 4

THE NORTHERN IRISH TROUBLES AND THE INSURMOUNTABLE LEGACIES  
OF GRIEF AND LOSS

Since the outbreak in Northern Ireland of the contemporary “Troubles” in 1969, many Irish writers have attempted to capture the essence and experience of decades of violence, struggle, and strife. The history of the period, however, proves to be just as complicated as any effort to represent it. In this chapter I will examine representations of the Troubles in Madden’s novels, in the contexts of the history of the Troubles, as well as some treatments of it by a few other Irish women novelists whose work is comparable to Madden’s and has sometimes been influential on it.

My decision to focus here primarily on the context of the work of women authors, rather than both women and men, stems primarily from a fact that informs much of my work on Irish women fiction writers: In terms of fiction, male authors have been prioritized in scholarship, yet, as Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt points out, “so much more needs to be said and done” with Irish women authors (4). Of course, it would be remiss of me not to make note of the large number of male authors who have written about the Troubles, and the fact that Madden undoubtedly would have read and been influenced by many of them. In their respective studies of Northern Irish Troubles fiction, Michael Parker and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews include chapters on Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal* (1983), Benedict Kiely’s *Proxopera* (1987), Brian Moore’s *Lies of Silence* (1990), and Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* (1996).<sup>2</sup> With the exception of *Reading in the Dark*, since it was published the same year as *One by One in the Darkness*, Madden was

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<sup>2</sup> Both Kennedy-Andrews’s *(De-)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (2003) and Parker’s *Northern Irish Literature, 1975-2006 Volume 2: The Imprint of History* (2007) are excellent sources to consult for further study on Irish Troubles fiction.

most likely influenced by some if not all of these texts, especially MacLaverty's *Cal*, which was adapted as a successful film (starring Helen Mirren) in 1984, just one year after MacLaverty's novel was published. Interestingly, both *Hidden Symptoms* and *One by One in the Darkness* approach the Troubles in a way that somewhat parallels *Cal*. MacLaverty's novel follows Cal McCluskey, who has been reluctantly involved with the IRA, as he tries to live with the guilt and self-hatred that has consumed him ever since he was accessory to (as driver) the murder of a Protestant police officer. Madden's novels, conversely yet similarly, follow Theresa and the Quinn sisters, as they attempt to live with the grief, anger, and sorrow that has taken over their lives ever since their brother and father, respectively, were shot by anti-IRA Unionists. Thus, both authors deal with the question of how to move forward; whereas Madden asks this question in terms of victims, MacLaverty asks in terms of a perpetrator, as well as the wife of the victimized police officer. Undoubtedly, Madden's work has been influenced by, and is certainly comparable to, a number of her fellow authors, both women and men.

There are studies of Troubles fiction that use gender in a comparative way. For example, James M. Cahalan's *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1999) offers an analysis of Irish fiction based on gender, and his chapter entitled "Gender And History in Trouble(s): Jennifer Johnston, Bernard MacLaverty, Julia O'Faolain, and William Trevor" provides an examination of Troubles fiction that centers on differences between male and female authors. In this chapter, Cahalan offers analyses comparing and contrasting Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* to MacLaverty's *Cal*, and O'Faolain's *No Country for Young Men* to Trevor's *Fools of Fortune*. My own purpose here is related but different: to highlight women's fiction on

the Troubles, specifically Madden's, and since, as I explain in my introduction, so many studies of Irish fiction marginalize women authors in favor of men, I also intend to show that women have produced enough Troubles fiction to sustain a study of their own, at the same time that I keep my main focus here on Madden's novels rather than attempt a fuller study of such women's fiction.

As I have outlined in my introductory chapter, Madden was born in 1960 and grew up in Toomebridge, County Antrim in a Catholic family. She attended St. Mary's Grammar School, and received her Bachelor's degree from Trinity College, Dublin, then her Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of East Anglia. Her parents were devout Catholics, and Madden grew up "used to the idea of holy water from places like Lourdes or Fatima, or Easter water from the midnight ceremonies," and "the blessed candles that were kept wrapped in tissue in the spare room in case someone fell ill and the priest had to come to the house, or the relic of St. Anthony" (Madden, "Looking" 26). Madden spent ten years living abroad, and now resides in Dublin, but she still considers Northern Ireland to be her home, and she returns "very, very often" (interview with author). Despite her evident personal connection to the Troubles, Madden resists discussing her life in any further detail. In her 2008 interview with Mariella Frostrup, Madden responded to a question about whether or not her writing comes from her childhood:

No, I don't think it's from my childhood. I am, maybe, quite a reserved person, and I think nowadays there is a tendency for people to talk an awful lot about themselves, and what has happened to them and how they feel. But it may not necessarily give you the whole person; there is this

impression that it contributes to complete transparency, but I'm not sure that that is the case. (n.p.)

Although Madden resists sharing details from her years growing up during the Troubles, she explained to me that even when she's not writing about Northern Ireland and the Troubles, it is still "a sort of presence . . . and maybe that's more related to my own life. I don't know, like having been away from it." She concludes, "I suppose the main thing is that, having grown up there at that particular time, it's a very big part of my formation and I suppose you could say that coming from the North and living at that time is very big influence on me" (interview with author). Thus, although Madden does not believe that personal experiences and childhood memories are necessarily part of an author's work, she clearly acknowledges how the Troubles has, in some ways, shaped her as a writer. Madden's debut novel, *Hidden Symptoms* (1986), assumes a prior knowledge of the history and events of the Troubles, whereas *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) includes versions of specific, significant historical events of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the election of the Catholic civil rights leader Bernadette Devlin to Westminster and the resignation of Lord O'Neill, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. As a Catholic growing up in Toomebridge, County Antrim, in between Belfast and Derry, Madden writes with an intimate knowledge of the history of that era, as well as the events that led to the Troubles.

A brief outline of the historical and political contexts of these aspects of Madden's work seems in order. The Act of Union in 1800 annexed Ireland as part of Great Britain, forming the United Kingdom. As a result, the Irish Parliament was dissolved and Ireland was represented by the British Parliament in Westminster, London.

Efforts to restore home rule to Ireland were attempted later, and three separate Home Rule Bills—from 1886 to 1912—were brought to votes and defeated by either the House of Commons or the House of Lords. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)—an organization formed in the mid-nineteenth century with the singular goal of an independent Ireland—decided that the war was an opportunity to overthrow the busily engaged British government. This attempt to use the Great War to their advantage resulted in the Easter Rising of 1916.

The Easter Rising failed in less than a week, and fifteen men were executed by firing squad over the course of ten days (Hachey and McCaffrey 131). Interestingly, the majority of the Irish population, especially in Dublin, took little or no interest in the Easter Rising, and considered the rebels to be nothing more than promoters of violence and anarchy—until the series of executions. The decision to execute the fifteen prisoners over the course of a week-and-a-half allowed sympathy to build among not only the Irish, but also throughout the Western world. In the May 10, 1916 issue of the London *Daily News*, George Bernard Shaw published an article that explains the ultimate consequence of the executions. After first proclaiming the injustice of killing prisoners of war, Shaw accurately anticipated the resulting public opinion:

This danger [of being captured and killed] only adds in the same measure to his glory in the eyes of his compatriots and of the disinterested admirers of patriotism throughout the world. It is absolutely impossible to slaughter a man in this position without making him a martyr and a hero, even though the day before the rising he may have been only a minor poet . . .

The military authorities and the English government must have known that they were canonizing their prisoners. (qtd. in De Rosa 488-89)

Shaw's predictions proved to be true: the Easter Rising galvanized the people of Ireland to demand independence from Great Britain. In the 1918 elections, members of the Sinn Féin party won seventy-three seats, and assembled themselves in Dublin rather than enter the British Parliament at Westminster (Hachey and McCaffrey 134).

By 1919, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had formed and was staging a series of guerrilla wars against British authority (135). The British responded with violence and arrests, and the Anglo-Irish war continued until a truce was called in 1921. Both sides signed and ratified a treaty that divided Ireland—into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. The Free State consisted of twenty-six counties and was self-governing, but still part of the British Empire; Northern Ireland consisted of six counties and was (and still is) part of the United Kingdom. The treaty and partition did not, however, end the political violence in Ireland. A civil war broke out between those who were pro-treaty, accepting that although not a republic, an Irish free state was satisfactory in order to avoid more bloodshed, and those who were anti-treaty, rejecting anything short of an Irish republic.

The Civil War lasted for only one year (1922-23), but its historical legacy continued through the Troubles of the 1970s and 1980s, as evident in Madden's two novels about the Troubles, and as also reflected in *Molly Fox's Birthday*, in which the Troubles continue to reverberate in very recent times, despite the peace that resulted from the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The defeat of the anti-treaty Republicans ensured the survival of the Irish Free State, but the IRA and Republicanism remained strong forces in

Ireland. In 1948, the Republic of Ireland Act was introduced, and in 1949 the Irish Free State became the independent Republic of Ireland, but IRA violence periodically continued to erupt in Northern Ireland (Hachey and McCaffrey 193). The partition that divided the country also created a situation where the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland became second-class citizens to the Protestant majority. In any local or county government in the North, Catholics did not have access to equal representation, and many businesses refused to hire Catholics, resulting in higher rates of unemployment and poverty (215). Moreover, members of the police force—the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)—were exclusively Protestant, as were the supplemental B-Special forces, and these forces had the authority to “arrest and imprison suspected nationalist enemies of the state without ordinary legal procedures and to detain them in jail for an indefinite period without trial” (215). The ease with which the RUC could enter a Catholic family’s home, question or interrogate them, and arrest and detain the men of the household is captured in Madden’s *One by One in the Darkness*.

Given the low quality of life for Catholics in Northern Ireland, the drive for a fully united Republic of Ireland was replaced with the desire for equal citizenship. Thus, when the IRA launched a campaign of terrorism in Northern Ireland from 1956-1962, it failed and the IRA essentially disappeared for a time (Hachey and McCaffrey 217). However, when the Civil Rights movement swept across the United States, Catholics in Northern Ireland became galvanized and inspired. They joined with other moderate and liberals in the North—socialists, Republicans, Protestant liberals, and others—and peacefully marched for civil rights in 1968. Members of the Quinn family in *One by One in the Darkness* take part in the marches, and Madden provides a glimpse of how they

were perceived through the eyes of both a child and an adult. As with the Civil Rights movement in the United States, their efforts were met with violence and harassment (218). Despite the fact that the movement had no interest in challenging the existence of Northern Ireland as a political state, the RUC, the B-Special forces, and Protestant extremists violently interrupted the peaceful marches and demonstrations. Four primary confrontations took place in 1968 and 1969—two in Derry, one in Belfast, and one in Burntollet, about five miles outside Derry—and in August 1969 the violence escalated beyond the control of the police or government; the British government sent troops to Northern Ireland (Moody and Martin 344). Madden takes us right to that moment in *One by One in the Darkness*, as Emily Quinn tries to comfort her friend, who is forced to flee her Belfast home and stay with her sister in Newry, “by saying what a good thing it was that the British government had decided to send troops to Northern Ireland” (95). Many others, however, including Brian Quinn, deeply resent the British army’s presence.

From 1969 to 1998, when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, Catholic and Protestant violence defined Northern Ireland. On both sides, acts of terrorism and random retaliatory murders created an atmosphere of fear for all citizens, especially those living in the Derry and Belfast areas. This fear is evident most clearly in Theresa in *Hidden Symptoms*, who cannot escape the idea that anyone she sees in Belfast might be the Protestant who murdered her twin brother, Francis. Catholics also lived in fear of unwarranted police raids and indefinite internment in jail, for any Catholic could suddenly be accused of being an IRA sympathizer. July was an especially dangerous month, for the annual Protestant marches to celebrate victory at the 1690 Battle of the Boyne were often met by Republican violence. Indeed, Theresa’s livid reaction to the

suggestion that these marches are nothing more than “folk culture” (45), and her vehement insistence that the marches are about hate, and “hate is never harmless” (46), shows just how deeply offensive these marches were to Catholic communities. These decades of the “Troubles” affected the lives of every citizen of Northern Ireland, and are well represented across the various genres of Irish literature.

In fiction, Irish novelists have written the experiences of the Troubles from a variety of perspectives. Up through the mid-1970s, poetry and drama reigned as the genre to examine the Troubles, but as Michael Parker notes,

In the years between 1975 and 1985, however, there was a surge in the number of literary novels published, many the work of gifted women writers such as Jennifer Johnston, Una Woods, Anne Devlin and Deirdre Madden. Not surprisingly, issues of gender come increasingly to the fore in this fiction, as for the first time since the Troubles began the voices and perspectives of women characters gain sustained attention. (xvii)

Parker goes on to describe the works of these writers, but his analyses often overlook issues of gender or reduce brutal violence towards women as “ritual humiliation” (21). These female writers that Parker lists, along with several others, employ different methods to explore the experiences of the Troubles, and particularly to depict the impact the violence has on not only everyday citizens, but often women in their daily lives.

In the mid-1970s, novels such as Jennifer Johnston’s *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977) depicted the senseless brutality of the IRA and the ease with which a person could become an innocent victim. Kathleen, one of the two protagonists and a local schoolteacher, suffers a brutal attack by Brendan’s friends in the IRA, for they view her

engagement to a British soldier as a crime against the nation. Almost a decade later, Madden followed Johnston in her depictions of not only the IRA, but the paramilitary Loyalists and the RUC as well. She makes it clear that Catholic and Protestant militants are no different from each other; both engage in random acts of kidnapping, torture, murder, and terrorism. Many Troubles novels, especially those written by women, also consider how the violence forces its way into the home. Historically, the home has been the woman's sphere. In Ireland, this is especially true, given the language of the 1937 Constitution. Forced entry into the home, then, is a violent act against a woman even before physical violence occurs. Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* and *The Old Jest*, published two years later, take up this theme, as does Edna O'Brien's 1994 novel, *House of Splendid Isolation*. Madden follows in this tradition with *One by One in the Darkness*, depicting the invasion of not just the home, but specifically the kitchen, the room that traditionally belongs to the woman of the house, and also serves as a make-shift family room for gatherings and conversations.

Many women's Troubles novels of the late 1970s on through the 1980s follow in the tradition of a realist aesthetic—with narrative, confessional, biographical structures. Published in 1984, Una Woods' novella *The Dark Hole Days* presents two alternating narratives—in the form of diaries—to reflect how deeply the Troubles infiltrate the lives of the younger Irish generations. Woods' prose, spare yet sharp, speaks for all of Northern Ireland: Inevitable victims living with fear, some live through the Troubles, some do not, but all are victims nonetheless. This widespread fear is evident in almost all of the characters in Madden's Troubles novels—children and adults alike. Emily Quinn sits at the kitchen window, waiting to see the car pull up to the house, anytime her

husband or children or husband are out. Charlie Quinn trembles and sobs at the idea that one of his daughters could have easily been killed had they been in Belfast on that Friday afternoon, when twenty-two bombs detonated in a span of seventy-five minutes (129-30). The young Quinn girls are shocked to learn that the older brother of one of their classmates was killed when the bomb he was planting exploded. And in *Hidden Symptoms*, Theresa lives in constant fear and isolation after the death of her brother.

Mary Beckett's 1987 novel *Give Them Stones* employs the tone of a fictional autobiography to tell the story of Martha Murtagh growing up and living in Belfast as a Catholic. Through Martha, readers journey through decades of struggle in Northern Ireland, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Falls Road curfew, from unwarranted interment by the British police to unwanted solicitation by IRA Provisionals. In this short novel, Beckett achieves multiple perspectives. In many ways, in *One by One in the Darkness* Madden builds on Beckett's work, providing multiple perspectives as she takes readers through the 1960s and 1970s, and into the years just preceding the 1994 IRA ceasefire.

Some more recent Irish women's fiction, including Madden's, alludes to the Troubles and the resulting violence, but does not take up that violence as a primary theme. In Johnston's *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000), for example, the narrator only gradually reveals that Lar's wife and child were killed in an IRA terrorist explosion in Belfast two years earlier. For one brief moment, the novel takes a political turn as Lar bitterly finishes the story of their death with a tone of disgust for the terrorism. This tone increases when Lar states with a cold irony that his wife and infant daughter died "so that Ireland should be free from the centre to the sea and hurrah for liberty says the Shan Van

Vocht” (127)—with the Shan Van Vocht as the Anglicized phonetic spelling for Sean Bhean Bhocht, the Irish for “Poor Old Woman” (the personification of Ireland) and also the title of an old Irish ballad that celebrates the day the country breaks free from Britain. Through the death of Lar’s wife and daughter, Johnston proves that such a day will be no cause for celebration when it is achieved through acts of terrorism. Lar’s story, however, takes up only a small part of the novel, which centers on Clara.

In a similar vein, Madden includes the legacy of the Troubles in *Molly Fox’s Birthday* (2008), yet this legacy is addressed in fewer than ten pages. Neither *The Gingerbread Woman* nor *Molly Fox’s Birthday* would be classified as a “Troubles novel,” yet the Troubles find their way into them nevertheless. We learn that Andrew Forde’s brother, Billy, who lived in Belfast and was “deeply involved in Loyalist paramilitary activity” (197), was murdered; he was shot, and his body was “found on the mountain” (41). Madden reveals just how saturated with violence Northern Ireland had become by the 1980s, as the unnamed narrator of the novel shares with us her response to Andrew’s phone call about his brother’s death:

I’m ashamed to say that this murder had barely registered with me when I’d heard it on the radio, for such events were a commonplace in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and ’80s. One became numb to them and only became aware of the full creeping horror when, as now, there was a personal connection. (41)

Madden shares very little about Andrew’s reaction to his brother’s death, for how can such feelings be adequately expressed? Moreover, Madden’s chief concern has never been the immediate violence of the Troubles, but rather the question of how to move

forward. Andrew does not share his feelings with the narrator, who is his best friend, and she is “shocked” at how fully anger and rage replaced his sorrow (42). Towards the end of the novel, Madden both reminds readers that both sides of the conflict were responsible for the “creeping horror” of the Troubles, and reveals that Andrew still struggles with the memory of his brother, especially with the idea of talking to his young son about the uncle he never met. Andrew explains to the narrator,

Billy was killed. But it’s also highly likely that he himself killed people too. He was deeply involved in Loyalist paramilitary activity, and there’s not the slightest doubt about that. Coming to terms with the idea that he was murdered was one thing. That he killed people, innocent people, is something else entirely. (197)

Despite Madden’s brief and limited glimpse into the legacy of the Troubles in *Molly Fox’s Birthday*, an unspoken but evident reality surrounds the conversations about Billy. The year is 2008. Andrew, who was raised Protestant, and the narrator, who was raised Roman Catholic and has a brother who is a priest, are very close friends. Northern Ireland has not joined the Republic of Ireland. It remains a part of the United Kingdom, and none of the violence, including Billy’s death and the murders he committed, amounted to anything other than pain and grief.

Furthermore, as the violence of the Troubles occurs in both novels in the past, not the present, and as both were published after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Johnston and Madden show that ceasefires and peace agreements have done little to alleviate the suffering already caused.

The brevity of this overview points towards the voluminous body of Troubles fiction written by women.<sup>3</sup> Several critics have already located Madden in this body of work. Her two novels set during the Troubles—*Hidden Symptoms* (1986) and *One by One in the Darkness* (1996)—avoid direct engagement with the conflicts. Indeed, she does not write thriller plots nor do her primary characters witness violence or bloodshed firsthand. Instead, Madden’s writing explores the impossibilities of moving forward from the pain, suffering, and loss. Explaining this theme from a more positive perspective, Michael Parker states that in Madden’s work, “the stress of dealing with absence features prominently in characters’ attempts to reimagine their lives” (67). When looking at her work as a whole, Parker’s optimistic phrasing is accurate. However, in Madden’s Troubles fiction, any attempt at a successful reimagining of life proves futile.

### **Faith, Despair, and Existential Crisis in *Hidden Symptoms***

As discussed in Chapter 2, Madden’s debut novel tells the story of Theresa, a young Catholic woman who struggles to deal with the fact that her twin brother Francis was murdered two years ago in an act of random sectarian violence. Published in 1986, the novel was written in and takes place during the tumultuous and dangerous years of the Troubles. The early 1980s were marked by the fasting and death of the famous Provisional IRA member Bobby Sands. During his sixty-six-day fast, his name was put on the ballot for a seat in Parliament in the upcoming April election, and as an

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed study of Troubles fiction written by women, see Christine St. Peter’s *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2000), especially chapter five, “‘The War That Has Gone into Us’: Troubles from the North.” Also see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews’s *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (De-)constructing the North* (2003).

imprisoned IRA man, “Sands defeated former Unionist cabinet minister Harry West by a vote of 30,492 to 29,046” (Hachey and McCaffrey 224). However, Sands died on May 5, 1981, resulting in outbreaks of violence in the Catholic areas of Belfast and an even wider divide between the Catholic and Protestant communities (224). Then, with the much disputed signing of the Anglo-Irish Accord of 1985, further unrest erupted along both sides of the conflict, and the year’s total for politically charged murders was fifty-five (225-26). Many of the sectarian murders in 1985, surprisingly, were in fact Catholics who were killed by IRA members—ostensibly their own people—because of supposed or “casual” involvement with the Protestant side (226). Indeed, the historical backdrop of this Belfast novel is saturated with violence and politics, a world in which nobody was safe.

Beginning in late June and continuing through to early September, in the mid-1980s, *Hidden Symptoms* never allows the Troubles to stray too far out of sight, for even in an early scene when the reader is taken into Theresa’s home for the first time, the local news station reports on “the funeral of an RUC reservist who had been ambushed on his way to work earlier that week” (15). Beginning in 1985, “the IRA and the splinter Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) had begun to focus on members of the security forces, resulting in the deaths of no fewer than twenty-three members of the RUC” that year (Hachey and McCaffrey 226). Later in the novel, Robert recalls seeing news reports “where the casual camera showed bits of human flesh hanging from barbed wire after a bombing” (30). In another scene the July marches are discussed, and the novel ends with Theresa dreading the coming winter that will also bring the second anniversary of Francis’ murder (122).

Through Theresa and Robert, Madden explores how trauma affects faith, how despair pushes a person into a crisis of self, and how attempts to live as an apolitical, liberal agenda may ultimately be in vain. Madden positions Theresa, suffering an existential crisis and possibly on the verge of nihilism, against Robert, who clings to a liberal humanistic aesthetic and constructs his life into a simulacrum of what he sees as an ideal life in Belfast. Despite their many arguments and discussions, neither character emerges victorious.

Much of Theresa's inner conflict centers on her current state of isolation and loneliness, and she lives with the despair of knowing that she will exist in in this state for the rest of her life. She does not know how she will live without Francis, and this question of "how" plays a central role in the novel. For these questions about how people continue to live through their grief and pain informs much of Madden's work on the Troubles. In his examination of *Hidden Symptoms* as a decidedly pessimistic postmodern text, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews provides an explanation for Theresa's anguish that somewhat neglects Madden's main points: "Theresa despairs because she is aware of the alienation of the subject from its object. The death of her brother stimulates her anguished awareness that the subjective world, constructed in language, is always necessarily at a remove from reality" (148-49). This assertion does hold true, for Theresa herself declares, "I write about subjectivity—and articulation—about life pushing you into a state where everything is melting until you're left with the absolute and you can find neither the words nor the images to express it," and when Robert then says that "it sounds frightening," Theresa replies, "It is" (28). However, Kennedy-Andrews misses a crucial and quite simple point about Theresa's despair. Francis was her twin; she located

a great deal of her identity within him, and now she must “go on living without him,” for he was “taken from [her] and tortured and killed” (138). Kennedy-Andrews goes on to conclude, perhaps a bit prematurely, that Theresa suffers as a Neo-Platonist, with her “age-old desire of Plato’s troglodytes only ever able to watch a reflection of the real thing flickering on the walls of the human cave” (151). Indeed, Theresa struggles with the disconcerting concept that what she sees and the memories of what she used to know are somehow inaccurate, and thus she will always be alienated from their realities. After dreaming one night about her childhood school, for example, she awakes in grim confusion:

On waking she had been puzzled, for she had dreamt of doors and windows in places which she sensed were not quite right, and now she could not remember what the school had really looked like. Was her waking memory accurate, or had the dream been the truth rising to the surface now after of the passing of years? Everything was confused: never again would she be able to picture the school to herself with any confidence; now all was a jumble of dream and supposed reality. And never again could she ask Francis for confirmation or clarification, because Francis was dead. She was alone now, and at the mercy of her own memory and imagination. (32-33)

This passage certainly supports Kennedy-Andrews’s claim, but it also shows Theresa suffering from much more than her Platonic removal from reality. She also suffers from the insurmountable isolation and loneliness that haunts her and will continue to haunt her for the remainder of her life. After waking from this dream, Theresa breaks down and

cries. As her body shakes with grief, she finds herself “thinking that it was impossible for her to continue living without him, that she needed him as she needed air. She did not believe that she could bear the loneliness of being in this world without him” (33). In Madden’s interview with Frostrup, she explains the importance of writing about the Troubles, about characters such as Theresa, and also Andrew Forde in *Molly Fox’s Birthday*: “The suffering of so many people, it’s not as if everything’s over and it’s alright now. I mean, how people do live with the memories and the pain of the things that have happened there in the past is still something that I think needs to be addressed.”

Theresa’s utter loneliness—a despair caused by purely sectarian violence—pushes her into an existential crisis. Early in the novel, she considers how her brother’s murder was “only one of hundreds and the case short, obscure: what of those whose losses were famous and had made the English papers, *Newsweek*, history?” (19). In short, Theresa wonders what it means that Francis’ death may ultimately be meaningless. As she faces this thought, the rain comes down softly, and her conclusion both questions the values of life itself and succumbs to the fact that we are helpless in life: “So little mattered. The temptation to make one’s response as big as the disaster had to be resisted, for in truth what could one do, save collapse down to the horror of little details and keep living” (19). This hopeless sentiment is in contrast to Theresa’s thoughts in the opening pages of the novel, when she remembers how as a little girl “she thought that the saddest thing she had ever seen was a Bavarian barometer with a little weather man and a little weather woman. It was so sad that always when Hans was out Heidi was in and vice versa: never together, always alone, so near, so far, so lonely” (9). She recalls the day she tried, “in pure compassion,” to pull the other out so they could be together, but ended up breaking

it and it was thrown away (9). Michael Parker prematurely attributes this incident to “suppressed aggression” (71) rather than recognize it as proof that Theresa once possessed a blissfully innocent view of the world.

The crisis of being alive in a seemingly meaningless world so alters Theresa that her rare smiles appear when she remembers the notions she had when she was younger, and these notions take on new meaning as her despair increases. For example, she recalls how her “heart ached” upon seeing single-serving cans of soup in the supermarket and picturing the lonely people who buy them, who probably live on a pension, and who “might at any moment be plunged into darkness by an expiring meter” (9-10). This seemingly innocent image of the lights going out—with the electric shut off—while a man drinks his can of soup becomes morbid as Theresa confronts not just loneliness but mortality and death. The plunge into darkness, the suddenly expiring meter, both could happen to anyone at any time, for as she now knows, “Francis had been killed and Belfast was small: it might well happen again” (50).

Part of Theresa’s despair also stems from her confrontation with the reality of her life ahead of her: “All of July to get through. All of August. All of September. All of her life” (45). As a student studying English at Queen’s University, Belfast, one who claims to “know a lot about literature” and to have “read a great deal,” Theresa is an intellectual who would be familiar with well known continental philosophers and theorists. Her statement reveals her struggle with what Nietzsche describes as “eternal recurrence.” In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes,

*The greatest weight.*—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you

now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” (273)

Interestingly, in a flashback scene, Francis states his belief about this idea. While looking at a small boy, tossing pebbles into a lake in Italy, Francis says to Theresa, “When you think of that and continue to look at him he ceases to be a particular small boy and becomes the eternal small boy. We’re all that like. Everything we suffer has been suffered before, everything that gives us joy has been enjoyed before. Nothing is new: but that doesn’t make it any easier to suffer” (87). For Theresa, such knowledge provides no comfort, and the realization that “for every moment of every day until she also died, his death would be there, and if she forgot about it for a moment, a week, a year, even if it were possible for her to put it from her mind forever, it would not change the truth” (34) becomes her greatest weight.

A crisis of faith and being overwhelms Theresa. She considers the possibility that there is “no God and no plan, so that all this was chaos and there could never be any justification or explanation and might really was right” (52). The city of Belfast becomes “poisoned” to her; Francis’s killer is not a single person, but rather “a great darkness which was hidden in the hearts of everyone she met,” and this darkness has “dragged” the

world down to the level of evil (44). As the summer continues, her sadness deepens and “practically her every thought was an unhappy one . . . she was being quietly ground down by constant nagging, absolute distress” (82). But Nietzsche sees eternal recurrence as a way out of descending into nihilism; he sees the positive aspect of accepting this greatest weight:

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (274, emphasis in original)

In other words, to accept eternal recurrence is to acknowledge the consequences of one’s actions and live one’s life in such a way that one would willingly live it again.

The knowledge that Francis believed in living in such a way, and in an eternal and omniscient God, helps Theresa slowly want to climb out of her crisis and find a shred of hope. She thinks back to a day in Rome with Francis when he described how it feels to know that God loves you. He said, “Everywhere I look, I see only eyes, God’s eyes, God telling me what He did for me and wanting to know what I’m doing for Him; God looking and looking and wanting me to try to look steadily back” (53). After she reacts with a shudder, proclaiming that such a feeling “sounds terrible” (53), Francis explained how the alternative—“not being looked at at all”—is “infinitely worse,” for then one dies having never understood or loved fully (53-54). In remembering this exchange, Theresa realizes that “he had known even then the best and most dreadful truth” (54).

This truth, then, is what she must strive to know in order to replace the cold darkness in her heart with love. After such a painful loss, however, she cannot fully heal. Although Theresa knows that Francis rests peacefully with God, and despite her desire to learn how to live and love now that he is gone, she cannot move forward and find comfort. The novel ends with Theresa looking in the mirror, barely recognizing herself. She has just broken down in front of Robert, for he suggested that her religion, her belief that God exists and Francis is in heaven, must provide her comfort and help her to “get over these things” (137). In response, she cries out,

What about me? I loved Francis as dearly as I loved my own life, but he was taken from me and tortured and killed. I have to go on living without him, and I have to go on believing in God, a good God, a God who loves and cares for me. Do you think that’s easy? I have to believe that my brother’s death was a victory. I have to forgive the people who killed my brother; I have to try to love them as I loved him. I have to try to think of *them* as brothers while in my heart I want to hate them: and then you dare to speak to me of comfort? You tell me what’s easy about belief. You tell me where the comfort is. (138)

In this final, explosive scene between Theresa and Robert, Madden reveals that the ultimate legacy of the Troubles—of the violence and the terrorism—lies not within the political victories or losses nor within the Republican or Unionist or Catholic or Protestant rhetoric, but rather with the victims on both sides, victims who may never find comfort or peace again.

As a contrast to Theresa's story, Madden also explores the possibility of living through the Troubles but remaining completely detached from its politics and its violence. Robert attempts to live the objective life of a liberal humanist. According to Kennedy-Andrews, "the liberal humanist avoids extreme political commitment," and in "refusing to be recruited to any other party or creed, the liberal humanist privileges individual sensibility and self-fulfillment above all . . . and [does] not allow his life to be determined by traditional values or loyalties" (14). This description fits Robert, who was raised as a Roman Catholic but now considers himself to be an apolitical, intellectual atheist. He avoids political discussions if he can, for "the whole Northern Irish political issue wearied and bored him" (76).

Early in the novel, Robert is presented as a man content in his beliefs but aware of his tendency towards cold insensitivity. Awake in bed one night, he thinks about the ease with which "he could take huge mysterious lumps of evil into his consciousness and the only worrying result was that he did not worry" (29). Living in Belfast has numbed him to the horrors of violence: "He had looked at so many ugly and evil things, unsubtle as a lorryload of dead meat, and he had said in his heart that this was how things were" (30). Robert has never experienced the violence firsthand, but only through various news reports. He remembers one such report, "where the casual camera showed bits of human flesh hanging from barbed wire after a bombing. Firemen shovelled what was left of people into heavy plastic bags, and you could see all that remained: big burnt black lumps like charred logs" (30). Admitting to himself that "he could look at such things and be shocked and eat his tea and go out to the theatre and forget about it," that "he

could cope when it did not involve him personally” (30), Robert embodies that characteristic which Derry native and highly influential critic Seamus Deane denounces.

In his essay “Canon Fodder: Literary Mythologies in Ireland,” Deane writes against those who “actually do believe that there is a stable place called ‘culture,’ to which you can retreat from the shouts and cries of the street, from the murder and mayhem that takes place there, and that you can go into the realm of humanist subjectivity in which literature or great art prevails” (27). With his “arty clutter of books and prints and rugs and trinkets” that he “accumulated so assiduously” (Madden, *Hidden Symptoms* 88), Robert easily fits Deane’s description of the liberal humanist, and Kennedy-Andrews supplements Deane by adding that such a belief system “interpellates the reader to see the Troubles in a ‘common sense’ way which only reinforces and perpetuates the dominant perspectives and values of the Northern Irish statelet” (15). Both Deane and Kennedy-Andrews, therefore, would see Robert as Theresa’s antithesis: whereas her reality was abruptly and unfairly taken from her in the murder of Francis, Robert lives in “a ‘hyperreality,’ a world of self-referential signs” (Kennedy-Andrews 150).

Madden, however, does not condemn Robert as quickly. She presents him with sympathy and suggests that by the end of the novel he has realized the futility of trying to remain completely neutral and escape the political realities that surround him. In the middle of the novel, sometime in early July, Robert, Theresa, and Kathy—Robert’s girlfriend and Theresa’s friend—mention the flags that are being put up to prepare for the July twelfth marches. For Theresa, these marches represent nothing but fascism and hatred. She exclaims,

“I think that the way in which society tolerates the Orange Order is ridiculous . . . I mean, they even encourage them by televising their tasteless marches. Can you imagine the National Front or the neo-Nazis being treated like that? Can’t you just hear the television commentary? ‘And the sun is smiling down today on the men of the Ku Klux Klan.’”  
(45)

Her assessment is certainly not invalid, for July, as I noted earlier, tends to be the most violent month in Northern Ireland. Even in the years following the Good Friday Agreement, the July twelfth marches have sparked riots and uprisings. In fact, during recent Orange Order celebrations and marches, riots erupted; according to a report from BBC News on July 13, 2012, “Twenty police officers were injured and up to 10 shots fired at police after trouble flared overnight in Ardoyne, north Belfast” (“Owen Paterson”).

Ever determined to remain apolitical, Robert responds to Theresa’s claim by telling her that she is overreacting. In defending the marches, he states, “The Twelfth processions are not that bad. They’re just a bit of folk culture. They are vulgar, I’ll grant you that, but surely it’s best to let them march; isn’t it harmless that way?” (45-46). Vehemently, Theresa asks how an organization with so much hatred for a group of people—in this case, Catholics—can ever be harmless, and she reminds him that if he were found shot dead in morning his murder would be considered a sectarian crime of Protestant versus Catholic, despite his claims to be an atheist (46). In short she tells him, “Don’t believe one half of the liberalism you hear” (47).

In this heated exchange, Robert seems to be a naïve fool—unaware of the daily realities that surround him. Later in the novel, with the summer coming to an end, Robert admits to Theresa that the Troubles do not interest him because he does not understand them (105). This simple statement reveals much, for he prides himself on his intellect and makes every effort to lead the life of an intellectual. As a writer, Robert equates the inability to express a sentiment with failure, and he takes his work very seriously. Following the death of his mother several years ago, he and his sister Rosie disagree about the wording for her memorial cards, and “for well over an hour they struggled hopelessly to find the words they needed until Rosie at last turned violently on Robert and shouted, ‘And you’re fucking well supposed to be a writer!’” (113). The incident is brief and they quickly reconcile, but only because Robert hides his hurt: “She did not fully realize what she had done. She would never know that her words had cut him to the heart” (113). In this scene Robert’s insecurities about his professional skill appear as an underlying force in his personality and his choices.

In Madden’s work, separate and ostensibly unrelated scenes often complement each other: Viewing one scene through the lens of another provides new perspective. Parker notes this quality as well: “Madden is a writer who merits and requires close reading, since her work is so deftly textured” (183). Robert’s conversation with Theresa—when he admits that he does not write about the Troubles because he does not understand them—must be understood in the context of the flashback scene with Rosie, for it reveals the double-edge sword of his fear: that perhaps he may not be the intellect he thinks he is, but perhaps it is safer to simply never find out. Theresa, of course, challenges him about his weak explanation:

God curse your indifference. What does understanding matter? Nobody understands. Some people say that they can see both sides, but they can't. You can only ever see one side, the side you happen to be on. But you haven't the guts for that, Robert: you haven't the guts to be partial, ye spineless liberal. (106)

What Theresa does not realize is that Robert cannot see either side. He does not know what his political beliefs are, nor does he understand that the violence and horrors of the Troubles have crept into his life as well as everyone else's lives in Belfast. His lack of basic understanding frightens him, and Robert—who has always remained calm against the force of Theresa's outbursts—coldly tells her to leave (106).

If Robert deserves Deane's criticism of the liberal humanist, believing in the "stable place called 'culture,' to which you can retreat from the shouts and cries of the street" (27), then Madden offers him, at the very least, a way out of such futile thinking. At the end of the novel he finally discovers the truth about Theresa's past: Her twin brother was brutally murdered two years ago. Until now he has never bothered to wonder what might lie underneath her adamant convictions and her seething hatred of sectarian displays of us versus them, such as the Orange marches. After reading newspaper accounts of Francis' murder, however, he faces a "dreadful new reality," and as he looks up and surveys the people in the library, "it shocked him to think of the evils and sorrows which might be in their minds and hearts: no one could see or guess the things which they might have done or endured" (133). In this moment, Robert painfully realizes that his precious library and the other places of culture he visits are not immune to the horrors of the Troubles, and he has never been as insulated as he once thought. In this quick

moment of recognition, of knowing the impossibility of truly remaining detached, Madden exposes the futility of attempting political neutrality within the context of the Troubles.

Through Theresa—her convictions and her grief—*Hidden Symptoms* can also be read as a political novel, but not as a staunchly pro-Catholic, pro-IRA novel. Her struggle to forgive the men who murdered Francis, and her knowledge that horrific acts of violence occur on both sides of the conflict—as reflected in the funeral of the RUC reservist she sees on television—lead her to desire not revenge or Catholic victory, but peace and equality. The final line of the novel suggests hope: “Shivering, she crossed to the hearth, knelt down and tried to rekindle the dying fire” (142). That dying fire may be interpreted in several ways—as faith in herself, faith in her soul, in humanity, and in the afterlife where Francis rests peacefully. The possibility for a rekindled hope subtly presents itself earlier in the novel when Theresa, upon seeing a dead butterfly in a cobweb in her attic, recalls a few lines of poetry she had memorized for an exam:

Upon the dusty glittering windows cling,  
 And seem to cling upon the moonlit skies  
 Tortoiseshell butterflies, peacock butterflies,  
 A couple of nightmoths are on the wing.  
 Is every modern nation like the tower,  
 Half dead at the top? (32)

These lines are from the fourth and final stanza of William Butler Yeats’s “Blood and the Moon” (1933), and the rest of the stanza, though not quoted in the novel, points towards

the terrible realities of life—violence, blood, and power—but allows for a realm of reconciliation:

Is every modern nation like the tower,  
 Half dead at the top? No matter what I said,  
 For wisdom is the property of the dead,  
 A something incompatible with life; and power,  
 Like everything that has the stain of blood,  
 A property of the living; but no stain  
 Can come upon the visage of the moon  
 When it has looked in glory from a cloud. (lines 47-54)

In his essay “Nietzsche and Shelley in ‘Blood and the Moon,’” critic Joseph O’Leary concludes that in this final stanza, “Yeats refuses such bitterness, because he postulates beyond the ineradicable antinomies of this life an ideal realm where they are reconciled,” a “realm where all conflict is dissolved” (145). In a similar way, Theresa struggles to refuse such bitterness and restore her belief in a life worth living, a life that will eventually lead her to the ideal realm where Francis now rests.

In *Hidden Symptoms*, Madden grapples with the question of how to move forward and continue living in a world where terror and violence become your reality. Ultimately, she provides few answers, for despite Theresa’s rekindling of the fire at the end of the novel, she still has not quite figured out how to live. Madden leaves readers with an image of Theresa as cold and alone in her empty house, and we can only hope that she succeeds in relighting the fire and warming her soul. For Robert, he leaves the novel “feeling wretched” (139), because the comfortable, insulated world he has created

for himself has been shattered by the unexpected knowledge of Francis's murder and the realization that his assumptions about Theresa and her bitter personality were misplaced and mistaken. Neither character emerges victorious in the novel; resolution is not achieved. As Madden shows, the brutality of the Troubles allows for no winners; each side loses in the end, and all are left with the struggle to move forward.

### **Re-examining the Troubles in *One by One in the Darkness*: History, Media, and One Family Trying to Move Forward**

Published in 1996, *One by One in the Darkness* shares many similarities with *Hidden Symptoms*. Both novels deal with the loss of a family member two years prior, and both enact the struggle to continue living once such a painful loss has been suffered. Centering on the Catholic Quinn family, *One by One in the Darkness* tells the story of Emily Quinn and her three daughters, Helen, Kate, and Sally, living in the Northern Irish countryside two years after Charlie Quinn, husband and father in the family, was shot and killed by masked Protestant terrorists. As with *Hidden Symptoms*, Madden's concern in this novel is the question of how one moves forward with the grief, the pain, and the loss that the Troubles have inflicted on so many families. Kennedy-Andrews characterizes *One by One in the Darkness* as a more optimistic novel than *Hidden Symptoms*, but as this analysis will show, realism rather than optimism marks the tone of the novel.

When read alongside *Hidden Symptoms*, *One by One in the Darkness* can be viewed as a re-examination of the Troubles: a look at what has changed and what has remained the same. Moreover, the structure of the novel—chapters that alternate between the present week, shortly before the start of the IRA ceasefire of 1994, and the

sisters' childhood years in the 1960s and 1970s—lends itself towards a comparative reading. Together, these two novels encompass four decades of the Troubles, from the 1960s until just before the start of the 1994 ceasefire. The Quinn sisters grew up during the beginning of the conflict. Their father, uncle, and cousins participated in the first civil rights marches and protests in 1968, which were altogether peaceful, and then lived through the terrors of the subsequent protests, when families watched on television as violence erupted, and then waited in fear for their loved ones to return home. The sisters hear their father and uncle talk about the 1972 events known as Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday, and they attend the funeral of their classmate's older brother, who died when the pipe bomb he was planting exploded. Theresa's story in *Hidden Symptoms* takes place during the early 1980s, years marked by kidnapping, murder, retaliation murder, torture, and bombing. As she discovered when her brother was kidnapped, tortured, and killed, innocent civilians were no safer than paramilitaries. The second narrative of *One by One in the Darkness* returns to the present, with the Quinn sisters, now adults, living their own separate lives just before the 1994 ceasefire. The years between Theresa's story and the Quinn sisters living as adults were plagued with more violence; again, nobody was truly safe.

*One by One in the Darkness* highlights media reports as illustrating one of the most salient differences between the early years of the Troubles and the later years. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, the media took an active interest in depicting the civil rights marches, the riots and protests, the violence in the streets, and the eventual murders on both sides of the struggle. After Charlie's brother Brian and his two young sons,

Johnny and Declan, march in the first civil rights march in Northern Ireland—from Coalisland to Dungannon—Charlie decides he will take part in the next one.

The Coalisland march was held on August 24, 1968. Bernadette Devlin, a young Irish Member of Parliament and political rights activist, gives an account of this first march, in which she participated, in her autobiographical account of Northern Ireland, *The Price of My Soul*. She describes the beginning of the march as a carnival-type event: “At Coalisland there were masses of people milling around, selling civil-rights rosettes, eating oranges, and generally behaving as if they were at a carnival” (92). With rebel songs and a “sort of good-natured, holiday atmosphere” (93), the demonstration was indeed family-friendly. Upon reaching Dungannon, however, the marchers clashed with the police. Narrowly escaping the eruption of a riot, the marchers managed to remain peaceful and sang the civil rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome.” They sat in the streets until midnight singing rebel songs and enjoying the camaraderie (95).

Devlin’s account of the march is echoed by Johnny and Declan as they tell the three Quinn girls how exciting it was: “It was great. We all sat on the road and sang rebel songs. There was nothing the police could do to stop us. Get your daddy to bring you along the next time” (65). Neither Madden nor Devlin mention anything about media coverage of the peaceful demonstration. Local interest, however, for the event flourished. By allowing the young Johnny and Declan to give the account of the march, Madden emphasizes the somewhat innocent nature of this first demonstration and the excitement that surrounded it. Catholics in Northern Ireland were finally demanding to be treated as equal citizens, and the marches began with the optimistic hopes and joys.

Both Charlie and his brother Brian take part in the next march. The narrator, who presents Helen's, Kate's, and Sally's lives from a third-person, omniscient point of view, explains, "At home now, all the talk was about civil rights, and their father said that he wouldn't miss this march" (66). By this point, Helen, Kate, and Sally are also caught up in the excitement of the civil rights movement, but although they beg for permission to join their father and uncle on the march, they are not allowed. This march will be in Derry and has been banned and declared illegal, for the Protestant group The Apprentice Boys were having a march on the same day (66). The decision to forbid the girls from joining their father turns out to be the right one, for when the girls return home from an outing with their grandmother, their father and uncle are not home yet and they see the coverage of the riot on the television:

But when they got back to the house, they heard that the march hadn't gone off peacefully. There had been riots, and when their father and Brian didn't come home at the time they were expected, the children could see how worried their mother was, although she tried to hide it. The police had blocked the march and baton-charged the marchers. On television, they watched black-and-white pictures of crowds running, of people with blood on their faces and shirts; of men being pulled along the ground by the hair, or being beaten where they lay. They saw a man, one of the organisers, pleading for calm and reason, and before he could finish what he was saying, he was struck in the stomach with a baton. (71)

In this brief account of the October 5, 1968 march in Derry, Madden shows how quickly the Civil Rights movement, soon before the outbreaks of the Troubles in 1969, morphed

from an exciting surge of hope to a worrisome and terrifying affair—a terror that enters the private sphere of the home in the form of vast media coverage, leaving wives and mothers in a state of panic until their husbands and sons return home. Devlin’s account of the bloody march confirms Madden’s; she witnessed the beatings and declares that “the police just went mad” (Devlin 99).

The fact that the Quinn girls and their mother watch the riot and the beatings on the television is significant because the Derry march became international news. According to Devlin, “Derry was on every newspaper in Ireland, every newspaper in Britain. It was being flashed on every television screen in the world. Telefis Eireann (the Southern Ireland television network) had a smart cameraman who filmed the whole thing, and sold the film to every company who could get their hands on it” (99). When Charlie and Brian return home in the novel, Brian’s face is badly cut, and Charlie, “angry and shaken,” tells his family, “There was no sense in what happened today . . . They just hammered the living daylights out of people” (71). His next statement reveals the most crucial outcome of the widespread media coverage. The narrator explains that Charlie was happy and relieved to know that it had been on television, and Charlie bitterly speaks the truth when he says, “I suppose it would have suited them better for all this to have been kept quiet” (71). Indeed, Devlin confirms that “Ireland was up in arms” over the violence that erupted (99). Thus, “the Unionist government did the civil-rights movement a favor. They gave it life in one day. Without the police, it would have taken much longer to get off the ground” (99). Madden’s narrator tells us that more civil rights marches were organized that year, but Charlie and Brian did not take part in all of them. Nevertheless, “all the talk at home now was about civil rights, and how things would

have to change” (71). In the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, the years leading up to the outbreak of the Troubles, the media took an active interest in the marches, the riots, and the violence. The world was made aware of the conflict that was brewing, and talk of the movement dominated the homes of those living in Northern Ireland.

Fast forward to 1994, when the second narrative of *One by One in the Darkness* takes place, and the marches and demonstrations have been replaced by guerilla-type warfare of murders, both specific and random. Helen lives in Belfast and works as a lawyer in local terrorist cases. Her friend David is a journalist, and in a conversation about the nature of journalism in regards to the Troubles, the striking difference between the level of world interest from the late 1960s through the 1970s, compared to their present day, appears to be in direct proportion to the excitement the violence could achieve. Explaining how he at least has the benefit of having been raised amidst the horrors and knows the seriousness of the conflict, David summarizes the attitudes of most journalists:

I knew from the first that what was going on here wasn't exciting or glamorous. In fairness, I don't think any of the local reporters think that. They mostly grew up here, so they know the score. You get a lot of foreign journalists over here for a while when things get particularly bad, but as conflicts go, it's never been fashionable. Maybe in the sixties, early seventies, it was different, when there was a lot of street fighting, riots, but as far as the rest of the world, and the world media are concerned, it's too localised. The background isn't exotic enough, and anyway, it's never been a full-blown war. There's nothing to get gung-ho about in a body

being found in a wet lane somewhere in, say, Tyrone, on a cold, bad night.

(50)

David and Helen distrust and dislike the media's attitude towards the Troubles in the 1990s. Both their fathers were innocent victims of the violence, but both their fathers were wrongly portrayed as IRA members in the newspapers that reported their murders. The tone of such reports suggests that the men got what was coming to them, and as IRA members they should have expected it. Because the murders that regularly take place in Northern Ireland cannot achieve the glamour and excitement of the street riots in the earlier years of the Troubles, the media tend to portray each crime as a black and white, simple affair. After a British tabloid reported Charlie's death "coldly and without sympathy, much being made of Brian's Sinn Fein membership, and the murder having taken place in his house," Emily filed a formal complaint, which was promptly rejected (47). Helen, in particular, despises this type of reductionist journalism:

"But there's something about the whole nature of it," Helen argued, "about taking things and making stories about them, and that's all it amounts to: making up stories out of a few facts, and presenting them as though that interpretation was the absolute truth. That's what I can't stand." (50)

In another scene, Kate recalls returning to work in London, having been on leave since her father's death, and realizing that many of her colleagues who read about his murder in the newspaper assumed that he was an IRA member, for although the news report did not explicitly state his membership, there were enough implications to lead readers to such a faulty conclusion. They treated her with "a coolness and reserve" (91)

that Kate did not know how to respond to, and she feared the day she would have to face their assumptions. In these scenes, Madden shows how outsiders are not fit to deal with or comprehend the complexities of the Troubles, or if they are, they choose the easier route of simple binaries and reductionist conclusions. In the earlier, more exciting, more devastating years of the conflict, the late 1960s through the 1970s, the horrendous violence of the Troubles drew attention and widespread media coverage. Into the 1990s, however, the third decade of the violence, the media decided that the thrill was gone. In *One by One in the Darkness*, Madden offers her critique of such lazy journalism and argues unequivocally for a more nuanced, even paradoxical, understanding of the Troubles.

Both narratives in *One by One in the Darkness*—the Quinn sisters' childhood years in the 1960s and 1970s and their present in 1994—are marked by segregation and violence. When Helen, Kate, and Sally are young, their parents often take them to the coast on a warm summer's day, driving through Protestant villages such as Ballymena and Broughshane on their way to Antrim. The girls remember seeing the Union Jack flags and the Orange arches, knowing that these symbols signify their outsider status (75). By identifying which areas in Northern Ireland are Protestant and which are Catholic, Madden depicts Northern Ireland as a fragmented territory—a series of towns and villages rather than a unified province. The girls recall when Derry is under siege, and when rioting spreads to Belfast, their mother's friend Miss Regan must flee from her home and live with her sister. Eventually, the British army arrives in Northern Ireland, and helicopters land in the fields near the Quinn home (95-96).

Late one night, British soldiers take Brian and the third Quinn brother, Peter, from their home and hold them in internment, interrogating them for two days under threats and acts of violence. A few months later, the eldest brother of one of Helen's school friends dies while "planting a bomb at an electricity pylon over near Magherafelt" (103). He was nineteen, and loyal to the Republican cause. As adults, the Quinn sisters face the horrors of the Troubles firsthand: Their father is gunned down by masked Unionist terrorists while drinking tea in Brian's kitchen; they mistake him for Brian, who is a Sinn Fein member but does not engage in any illegal Republican activity. In the two years following his murder, Helen defends a Catholic terrorist who kills a Protestant taxi driver, and Sally fears the day when someone will attack or bomb the Catholic elementary school where she teaches five-year-olds. Thus, Madden leaves no doubt that Northern Ireland and terrorism are indelibly related, regardless of which side one is on. From a political point of view, the novel offers no sympathy for the political and military forces of Northern Ireland; it passes stern judgment on both sides of the conflict and has no patience for martyrs, heroes, or so-called freedom fighters.

Although Madden condemns Northern Ireland politically, she undoubtedly respects it aesthetically. Her deep regard and appreciation for the landscape of the region pervade the entire novel, and her connection to her homeland, the beauty she sees in it, comes through in the opening statement of the novel: "Home was a huge sky; it was flat fields of poor land fringed with hawthorn and alder. It was birds in flight; it was columns of midges like smoke in a summer dusk. It was grey water; it was a mad wind; it was a solid stone house where the silence was uncanny" (1). At the start of the novel, Kate is flying home for the week, to just outside County Antrim. As her plane descends upon

Belfast she sees first Belfast Lough, then Lough Neagh. Kate's reaction to these places shows just how intrinsically connected she is to the landscape of Northern Ireland:

Lough Neah appeared, a cold expanse of grey water, and then she saw fields and farms. [Kate] stared intently at the land, as if trying to wring some knowledge from it, as if she were seeing it for the first time, although in fact it couldn't have been more familiar to her, the type of landscape *against which she still judged all others*. A flock of sheep, stained blue as a mark of ownership, scattered in fright in a field beside the runway. (4-5, emphasis mine)

In both these passages, Madden invites readers to view Northern Ireland through her eyes. She details the landscape and landmarks with care and precision throughout the novel.

As readers, we are invited to see beyond the nasty politics, the violent bloodshed, the severe segregation, and contemplate the beauty of the Northern Irish landscape in all its innocence and splendor. Indeed, Madden's descriptive details invoke a picturesque countryside, not a tormented one. Uncle Brian's house sits "a short distance from a curved bay, where there were yellow wild iris and the shiny green rushes" (14). In addition to the "twisted apple trees" that grow behind the house, "there were fruit bushes too, with squashy currants and hard, hairy gooseberries, glassy and green, that tasted bitter and made your mouth feel dry" (14-5). One can sail out into the lough, where tiny islands house seagulls that lay their eggs in nests throughout the sand. Outside the Quinn home, the roads rise and fall, "lined with hedges in their autumn colours, and bright with berries" (67). The overall effect of these descriptions is to point towards an

understanding that even amidst the terrible atrocities that regularly occur, Northern Ireland is home to many people—people who love the land, the loughs, the mountains, and the sky that surround them, but abhor the violence.

### **Conclusion**

In *One by One in the Darkness*, Madden employs a realistic tone of voice to examine the Troubles from the 1960s until 1994, shortly before the IRA ceasefire. Through the Quinn family, the impossibility of escaping or comprehending the horrors of the conflict manifests as a fact for anyone living in Northern Ireland. This novel was published in 1996, so Madden would have been writing it just after the IRA ceasefires of 1994. In this regard, the novel reminds us, as does *Hidden Symptoms*, that the violence of the Troubles never truly ends. Times of peace may come, but families, friends, and loved ones still must try to live with seemingly insurmountable pain and grief. This question of moving forward, or how to move forward, informs much of Madden's work. Moreover, Madden is not interested in taking sides in her explorations of the Troubles; she sees a beautiful landscape, a place she calls home, that has been plagued by useless violence for decades. Madden asks us, as readers, to consider the suffering that the Troubles has caused, and to remember that peace agreements have not, and cannot, heal the thousands of families who became victims.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE ROLE OF ART AND THE LIFE OF THE ARTIST

As both a novelist and a creative writing professor, Deirdre Madden understands how to express the life of the artist: the inspirations, the joys and consequences of success, the inevitability of failure, the varying forms of fulfillment, the frustrations, and the community aspect of art. In a variety of forms, art is central to several of her novels, and her characters include an accomplished painter, an aspiring artist, a hopeful painter turned businessman, a stage actress, and a playwright. The life of the artist, then, rather than art itself, is featured as a developing theme in Madden's work. Through four characters in two novels—Claire in *Nothing Is Black* (1994) and Julia Fitzpatrick, Roderic Kennedy, and William Armstrong in *Authenticity* (2002)—Madden explores what it means to choose to live as an artist. The narrative arc of these four characters ultimately suggests that the artist's life, especially if the artist is a woman, is difficult to fully comprehend. The life of the artist, in all of its motivations, creative forces, and artistic visions, is, to borrow the words of William—who is the only character among the four to not pursue art as a lifestyle and career—"a small, sealed, rather beautiful but utterly inaccessible world" (98). Madden also attempts to show, as the title of *Authenticity* suggests, what makes a real artist. After *Authenticity*, in *Molly Fox's Birthday* Madden further muses on how well even a close friend can truly know an artist. In addition to the somewhat enigmatic life of the artist, Madden emphasizes the difficulties that women face in pursuing such a life. As I discuss Madden's treatment of

art and the artist in this chapter, I will also explore key literary influences, specifically James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James.

The subject of art in literature, especially in Irish literature, cannot be adequately discussed without referring to Joyce. Through his alter-ego, Stephen Dedalus, Joyce explores the meaning of art, the artistic vocation, and aesthetic philosophies. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the undergraduate intellectual Stephen explains the principles of art to Lynch:

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (149)

When Lynch protests this idea that art should not move a person to a deep sense of feeling, whatever that feeling may be, Stephen expounds on his theory further, telling Lynch that art and beauty should move a person towards a sense of stasis:

Beauty expressed by the artist cannot awaken in us an emotion which is kinetic or a sensation which is purely physical. It awakens, or ought to awaken, or induces, or ought to induce, an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged, and at last dissolved by what I call the rhythm of beauty. (150)

Thus, Stephen rejects art's ability to create energy—the kinetic emotion—and he vehemently argues for the lauding of art and artists who can create an “esthetic stasis.”

Madden's theories of art directly conflict with Joyce's, at least as expressed through Stephen.<sup>4</sup> In a 2012 interview with Teresa Casal, she discussed art in various forms—painting, writing, composing, stage acting, and sculpting. Casal asked Madden to provide her own definition of “great art” (408). In her reply, Madden articulated a theory that opposes Stephen's well-known philosophy: “I think it has something to do with energy, with the work holding and manifesting an extraordinary energy for as long as it exists . . . You can almost feel the energy coming off it; it can pull you across the room” (408). Great art, then, creates something that is anything but static, according to Madden, and she depicts this philosophy in a conversation Claire has about art: “You must respond to art with your nerves and your heart, she insisted. When you look at a painting, you should *feel* something. If not, then there's something amiss” (60, emphasis in original).

### **Understanding Art and the Artist in *Nothing Is Black and Authenticity***

Beginning with Claire, Madden's first artist is presented as a woman who has chosen a life of relative solitude in order to devote herself fully to her work: painting. Claire's depiction in *Nothing Is Black* represents the starting point in Madden's trajectory of artist exploration. Many of the ideas concerning art in *Nothing Is Black* suggest the influence of Henry James, much more than Joyce, and not surprisingly, for Madden names James as one of her primary influences in writing (interview with author). James's 1890 novel *The Tragic Muse* offers theories of art that align with Claire's

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<sup>4</sup> The genre of this text should be noted. As a bildungsroman, *Portrait* does not provide a character who is completely representative of Joyce himself. As a young man, Stephen is not fully mature; rather, he is self-centered and somewhat misogynist. Madden, then, offers theories of art that conflict with the theories present in *Portrait*, not with Joyce himself.

insistence that art must be approached “with your nerves and your heart” (60). *The Tragic Muse* centers on two aspiring artists: Nick Dormer and Miriam Rooth. Similarly to Claire, Miriam declares, “In the presence of art, *great* art, her heart beat so fast” (121, emphasis in original). Later in the novel, Nick reflects on the difference between art and politics, and concludes that, unlike politics, “Art was *doing*” (555, emphasis in original).

In many ways, Claire is the main character—her house provides the primary setting of the novel; the title phrase, “Nothing Is Black,” is taken from Frida Kahlo’s notes on color that she read as a young adult (106); and the novel begins and ends with Claire. Nonetheless, we still know relatively little about her, especially compared to the other two primary characters, Nuala and Anna. With Nuala, the details of her downward spiral toward a minor breakdown are revealed, bit by bit. We learn how she attempted to provoke her husband, Kevin, for “she wanted him to understand that there was something wrong; she was asking him to help her” (22). Her “experiments,” as she calls them (22), her attempts to find a way to pull herself out the rut she found herself in, are described even though they fail. Just before her first act of kleptomania, we are provided with a partial explanation for her depression: her mother, who has recently passed away, used to always shop with her on Fridays. They would spend the entire day in town, and “only now did she appreciate just how much she’d loved that” (23). Nuala cannot recover from her mother’s death, for “grief wasn’t the half of it” (37). Her mother dies one week after reacting with sheer delight and joy at the news of Nuala’s pregnancy. Thus, when her daughter is born, Nuala cannot reconcile becoming a mother with the loss of her own. The baby does not bring joy into Nuala’s life; in fact, “when the baby was born in autumn, she’d been ashamed to tell anyone how disappointed she was” (37). In addition

to details about her state of mind, readers are given an inside look at Nuala and Kevin's marriage and business together, a glimpse of their bickering and some insight into how their marriage was "a complicated system of bargain and compromise" (101).

Anna, a character more minor than Nuala, also receives detailed attention. The history of Anna's marriage and her relationship with her daughter, Lili, explains how she began her routine of living in Donegal for six months of the year and in her home country of Holland for the other six months. Her husband, at age forty, left her for his nineteen-year-old secretary, only to return ten months later and ask to be taken back. Lili, who was ten at the time, has never forgiven her mother for refusing him. When he dies, over ten years later, Anna, at Lili's request, does not attend his funeral. Lili exiles Anna from her life, rarely speaking or agreeing to meet with her. We witness their argument that took place three years prior, the last time Anna saw her daughter, and we learn of Anna's painful shock when she finds out from a friend in Holland that Lili has had a baby; Anna didn't even know she was pregnant.

Scattered glimpses into Nuala's and Anna's lives nonetheless add up to a fairly detailed portrait of their personalities, relationships, and feelings. In contrast to this, Claire remains, comparatively, a bit of a mystery, despite the fact that she appears to be the main character. Early in the novel, she thinks about how some houseguests in the past, those who are close friends, would ask her why she chooses to live in such an austere manner—in a small, sparsely furnished cottage in a town in the far west of Ireland, where simplicity is the only option, with always the possibility of running out of money. Other than this passing thought, there is no mention or even suggestion that Claire has close relationships with anyone. Her closest friend, Alice, died several years

ago, and she has not seen nor heard from her former lover, Marcus, in years (11). We learn a bit about her friendship with Alice and her time with Marcus, and these two relationships strongly influenced Claire, yet we know relatively little about the Claire of the present.

Her primary work centers on an exhibition in Dublin scheduled in autumn, and she is painting a series of body parts, attempting to maintain a sense of both abstraction and wholeness in each one: “Now she painted bones and muscles as though they were not just beautiful abstractions, but also parts of a strong and vulnerable body. Well, that was what she had tried to do, and she still wasn’t at all sure that she had succeeded” (138). Claire’s motivation to paint the human body, her process of painting—for instance, whether she studies textbook images or works from her own knowledge—and her specific analysis of her work are all left to the reader’s imagination. Given the details on Nuala’s and Anna’s present states, Claire seems to be something of an enigma.

The suggestion, then, is that these inner aspects of an artist’s life cannot be accurately depicted. Alice, in fact, articulates this idea. Claire recalls Alice’s explanation of a painting’s simultaneous strength and frailty: “No, what I’m saying is that it’s so much more that it’s beyond comprehension, it’s almost eerie. That’s the magic of it, the only magic I could ever believe in. To take things and make something charged with that sort of knowledge and energy. It’s worth devoting your life to that” (139-40). Although she begins by referring to paintings themselves, she shifts to the painter, whose world is also beyond comprehension. In contrast to Nuala and Kevin, who own a restaurant and can discuss the details, the ins and outs, of their work quite easily, Claire’s work as a painter, *how* she is able to “take things and make something

charged with that sort of knowledge and energy,” cannot be explained. This idea that the artist remains, to some degree, a mystery, is also present in *The Tragic Muse*. Nick Dormer’s friend, Gabriel Nash, who encourages him to follow his dream of becoming a painter, explains, “You *never* find the artist—you only find his work, and that’s all you need find” (498, emphasis in original). Maddens depicts Claire within a similar vein, never allowing readers to truly “find” her.

Two aspects of Claire come across in great detail: her deep appreciation for color, and the choices she had to make, as a woman, to live as an artist. In her thoughts and feelings towards color, readers catch a tiny glimpse of how Claire views the world in terms of art. Even as a small child, Claire was fascinated by color:

“Mammy, Why is black black?”

“Because it isn’t white.”

“But why?”

“Justice, child, give over with your questions!” (105)

Through color, we learn how Claire became an artist:

But Claire didn’t give over. Throughout her childhood she persistently asked such questions, not to be difficult or contrary, but because she genuinely wanted answers. The subject of colour was important to her even then. Her mother gave her short shrift especially when she demanded to know the colour of people’s souls. Her father took it all more patiently. (105)

Throughout the novel, the narrator asks questions, presumably in Claire’s voice—which further reinforces her role as the clear protagonist—about color in relation to feeling:

“Daddy, why have some birds got blue eggs and some speckledy eggs?” (105). “What colour was ice? Water? The sun?” (108). “What colour is happiness? Some people think it’s yellow, but it’s really pale blue. Depression: grey, not black, unless it’s really severe, in which case it’s red” (111). We also witness her admiration of what color can do to a setting, day by day:

The view from the window never bored her. It was different day by day, and she liked the act of concentration it required to look at it every morning and paint it as though she were seeing it for the first time ever. Not just how things looked, but what one could actually see was dependent on the weather. It was extraordinary how the colours could vary from one day to the next, now vivid, now murky. Sometimes the red and white lighthouse would be obscured by the heavy rains and mist that came in off the Atlantic, sometimes it dominated the picture, bright against the grey sky and the sea. (19-20)

Claire’s fixation on color represents the bulk of what readers learn about her life as a painter. Passing comments and extensive passages about her devotion to color provide the most intimate details of her life. We come to understand her firm belief in the relationship between color and light: “Where she lived provided ample proof of how colour depended on light. Things could look drab, then suddenly vivid when the sun broke through” (27). Claire’s relationship with color suggests synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon that affects how one perceives the five senses. In essence, the stimulation of one sense, such as sight, will cause an involuntary reaction of another sense, such as touch. In many instances, such as when she explains the colors of human emotion, Claire

seems to feel color when she sees it, and if she is indeed a synesthete, then her work as a painter becomes all the more powerful.

In addition to elaborations about color, Claire's technical considerations—size, medium, essence—are briefly considered, but much of what drives Claire as an artist are left to the reader's imagination. One might wonder how she chooses her subjects: What led her to paint parts of the human body? What is it about her paintings that leaves her unsatisfied? Is she nervous about her upcoming Dublin exhibition? Does she regularly feature her work in galleries and shows, or is this event something of a premiere? All of these questions are left unanswered. Readers come to know the Claire of the past—the Claire who was friends with Alice in art school, the Claire who loved Marcus and traveled with him—but never quite come to understand, or as James put it, “find,” the present Claire, who has chosen a life of solitude and austerity in order to devote herself to art.

In addition to her enigmatic life as an artist, Claire has had to make difficult choices in order to live as both a woman and an artist. Through Claire, Madden begins her exploration of the particular sacrifices that one must make in order to pursue an artistic career. Claire lives on a very limited budget, for her paintings have not catapulted her into a lucrative career as a successful artist. She is not particularly bothered by this, however, for she understands the nature of being an art school graduate:

There were several possible directions one could take upon leaving art college. A few people became successful painters, or went into related careers as photographers, designers or suchlike. Some became teachers. Others, like Kevin, accepted that they would make good only by forgetting

about art and moving into an entirely different area: business or computing or whatever would bring prosperity. And then there were people like Claire who continued working for years at an art which brought them neither fame nor money, living in spartan rented rooms, always strapped for cash, their creative energy and intellectual curiosity as intense as ever. To Kevin, it was pure folly. To Claire, it was life, and a good life. (111-12)

There are three implications embedded in this paragraph. First, it is clear that Claire could have chosen a different life upon finishing art school; she could have sacrificed painting in order to earn enough money in an artistic-related field to live well. However, her sense of self as an artist, her “creative energy and intellectual curiosity,” would diminish over the years and she would cease to be a painter at all, as is also implied. And finally, it appears that most people, including Nuala’s husband, cannot understand why Claire would ever choose such a financially unstable lifestyle.

Claire’s choices, then, have left her isolated. In fact, as the summer comes to an end and she thinks about Nuala’s upcoming departure, she knows that most likely they will never see each other again, despite having become friends during Nuala’s summer stay. The reason for this is focused on not only issues of money, but also what Claire calls “a complex web of social pressure and conformity which drew some people together and kept others apart” (112). Claire’s choice to live as an artist rather than find success and money in another career means that she holds true to values and beliefs that many others would find, as Kevin does, “pure folly.” As Claire considers the truth of her future relationship with Nuala, she recalls what Marcus once said to her regarding relationships

and money: “Take your yearly salary, and then dismiss the possibility of ever getting close to anyone who earns half as much as you, or twice as much as you . . . Never underestimate the force of social pressure. That’s what makes society run” (112).

Regardless of whether or not Claire fully believes in this theory—at the time she accused him of cynicism—she has chosen an isolated life in Donegal, where her values and the general values of society cannot clash. Her artistic integrity and energy can remain consistently strong because money and possessions—which ultimately lead to the desire for more money and more possessions—do not burden her. Madden’s depiction of Claire as an artist who lives a rich inner life, yet rejects the notion that money and material possessions are necessary goals in life, again conflicts with Joyce’s depiction of Stephen Dedalus’s philosophy of art, and adheres to James’s discussions of art.

According to Margaret Mills Harper in *The Aristocracy of Art in Joyce and Wolfe*, Stephen views art as a means to rise in status and wealth. She explains, “The creation of a self-image as an abstractly aristocratic artist as a way of satisfying a desire to escape from a lower-class background is intrinsic to *A Portrait*, on both thematic and structural levels” (6). Issues of aristocracy and class do not concern Claire; indeed, wealth does not motivate her, despite having none. Moreover, Harper asserts that Stephen seems to view the lower-class world with contempt:

We watch him begin to see the squalor surrounding him as a lack of beauty; the crassness, the lack of a desire for the beautiful. Once he is in sure command of beauty, he will have the perspective he needs: as an artist he will reside in an unchanging palace from which to look down on the disordered, ugly world of his family and Dublin. (7)

Claire views the world through a wholly opposite lens, one that adheres to the ideas that James's Nick Dormer subscribes to, when he gives up his seat in Parliament to pursue a career in painting, and is asked if he thinks "there's a nobler life than a high political career." He responds, "I think the noble life's doing one's work well" (473). For one, Claire believes in the futility of materialism, asking herself, "Why pretend life is anything other than transitory? Why pretend you are anything other than utterly alone in your existence?" (109). She lives a humble life, trying only to do her work, her painting, as best as she can. A more important distinction, however, is that Claire views the world with love rather than contempt. She recalls the moment she knew that her relationship with Marcus was over. During an afternoon drinking wine at an outdoor café in Paris, Claire notices a destitute woman: "At the gates of a nearby church, an old woman was begging. The passers-by ignored her: no one gave her anything, and most of them looked straight through her, as though her age and poverty had rendered her invisible. Claire looked at her face: it was hard to imagine that she had ever been young" (150). Like the other people who passed by, Marcus had not noticed the woman either, and Claire irritates him when she claims, "Before God we are all like that . . . Don't you see how the people shun her? In her weakness and destitution they recognize something of themselves, and it frightens them. They want to deny it, so they try to pretend that she doesn't even exist" (150). Marcus, believing that Claire must "despise people," asks her what she feels when looking at the world, when looking at a scene such as this one. Claire responds: "Love" (150). Thus, Claire rejects Stephen Dedalus's philosophy about art and the world and embraces James's. In her book discussing women writers who write portray women artists in their work, Roberta White offers her explanation of how

Claire views the function of art, explaining, “Art, for her and presumably for Madden, is an expression of love for the world in the face of universal loneliness, knowledge of annihilation, and the force of necessity” (143). White further notes the connection between *Nothing Is Black* and Virginia Woolf:

The seashore setting, the presence of the lighthouse, and the mingling of artistic effort with feelings of grief for a lost friend [Alice] constitute, not just a nod, but a tribute to Virginia Woolf. There is even a moment recollected near the end of the novel when Alice’s “ghost” seems to return, as Mrs. Ramsay’s “ghost” did [in *To the Lighthouse*], to haunt and perhaps inspire Claire as a painter. (146-47)

Thus, not only does Madden resist Joyce and embrace James in her novel, but she also does so in favor of Joyce’s contemporary, another modernist writer, and one who displayed more gender consciousness than Joyce.<sup>5</sup> One of Woolf’s chief concerns, as evidenced in several of her works, such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, is the particular difficulties faced by women who wish to live as artists. Madden speaks to this issue in her own, subtle way. Although she does not fully engage in any overtly feminist ideas, she does ask readers to at least consider the assumptions and social forces underlying women and their careers.

In addition to the material and economical choices that Claire has made in order to live as a painter, she also has had to consider her role as a woman in society. Despite having fully rejected the “clutter of domesticity” (109), she has had to consider how she

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Joyce’s work is not devoid of gender consciousness. For example, in “Eveline,” Joyce’s first exploration of a female character, he depicts a woman’s struggles with patriarchy. In “The Boarding House,” Joyce provides a sympathetic view of the pressures that young women face in terms of social status and marriage.

might live as both an artist and a mother. During her time in art school, Claire had a relationship with a man whom she thought she loved. Once their relationship became sexual, however, her feelings changed; she realized she did not truly love him, and they ended it. When she realized she was pregnant, she examined her options. Given the abortion laws in Ireland, her options were to raise the baby herself or give the baby up for adoption. As Claire imagines herself as a mother, and the fact that she may have to drop out of art school in order to raise the baby, she finds herself leaning towards adoption.

In a café one afternoon, while watching an apparently well-off woman feed her baby little spoonfuls of pudding, “Claire gradually realized that without even being aware of it, she had bought society’s message: that some women were entitled to have children and some women were not. This woman was one of the former; Claire was not” (52). She further reflects upon the “hidden contract” of society: “You could have your painting and an austere life, or you could have children. You weren’t allowed to have both” (52-53). In an interesting and surprising twist, however, Claire decides that she can, indeed, have both. She spends the next few weeks “calm and content, as she settled down with the decision she’d made” (53). It is unclear where Madden stands on the idea of society’s “hidden contract,” for in the fourth month of her pregnancy Claire suffers a miscarriage. Does the miscarriage suggest that Madden—who is married but also has no children—believes that the true artist should be childless? Although the answer to this question is not apparent in the novel, it is noteworthy that none of Madden’s female artists have children. Anna, who has an estranged daughter, works as an interior designer, but little is known about her background: Did she attend art school? Does she think of herself as an artist? One also cannot help but wonder if Claire’s flashback to her

pregnancy is intended to remind readers that pregnancy can be a dilemma for women, and it is a dilemma that many women face alone. According to White, “Madden risks an affirmation: her portrait of Claire offers an extremely cautious, almost grudging endorsement of the life of art, while insisting, as noted above, that severe economies of body and spirit are required of the Irish woman artist” (143). Woolf would most likely agree with this assessment. And while “almost grudging” may be a bit of an overstatement, White’s assessment of Claire could also be applied to her austere lifestyle, the “severe economies” of her home and finances.

Through Claire, Madden begins an exploration of the artist’s life that she will continue, more intently, in two later novels. Her next novel dealing extensively with art, *Authenticity*, widens her examination of art and artist’s lives, and shares the same subtle questions about the differences between male and female artists that are suggested in *Nothing Is Black*. *Authenticity* features Julia Fitzpatrick, a young artist whose work is not painting but rather contemporary mixed media; Roderic Kennedy, a middle-aged, successful painter; and William Armstrong, a middle-aged lawyer who gave up his desire to be an artist in order to achieve higher economic status. Like much of Madden’s work, *Authenticity* does not utilize chronological plot lines; rather, glimpses of a character’s past combined with the activity of his or her present result in an introspective look at three people and the consequences—both positive and negative—of the choices they have made throughout their lives. And, as the title suggests, Madden is concerned with the idea of the authentic artist: How does one become an authentic artist, and what does it mean to simply not be cut out for a career in art?

In many ways, Julia and Claire are similar characters; in fact, Claire can be viewed as a precursor to Julia. Early in the novel, as we get to know Julia, we learn that, like Claire, her interest in art began when she was a child, and also like Claire, her father encouraged it. The narrator tells us, “This is why Julia thinks she became an artist: because of a game she used to play with her father when she was a child” (27). The game involved memorizing a picture as much as possible, and then being quizzed on the details of it. Once Julia’s father realized how much she enjoyed studying the pictures, he bought her “a large book full of colour reproductions of old-master paintings” (28). Her father encouraged her even more, suggesting that she consider what it’d be like to actually paint an object, and Julia attempted to do just that. The details provided by this direct narrator—who is more direct than the narrator of *Nothing Is Black*—offer a fuller glimpse into Julia’s decision to become an artist.

In *Authenticity*, Madden attempts to delve further into the world of art, but as with Claire, much about Julia’s motivations and creative energies remain unknown. The first time her work is described, when William visits her exhibition in a Dublin gallery, one cannot help but wonder where the idea came from, and what aesthetic goals she aimed for:

Julia’s work consisted of a series of long wooden boxes, each sealed in front with a pane of glass. Over the glass hung a veil of white ribbons that fluttered and twirled in the draught made by a freestanding fan. This meant that the contents of the boxes could only be glimpsed rather than plainly seen, like things partially concealed by the branches of trees. One box contained rolls of fur, of thick wool, of pleated muslin, heaped

together and piled up against the surface of the glass. They made one long to touch them, which was of course impossible. In another box were displayed on shelves a series of china cups and saucers, each one perched precariously, as though they might fall at any moment. (97)

There are four boxes in total, and although they are all described in great detail by the narrator, Julia never speaks about them. We are left wanting to talk with her about her work, ask how she conceived of the idea and what she was hoping to achieve. Again, Madden does not provide these answers, and thus the inner workings of an artist's creative world are left for the reader to decide.

Unlike Claire, however, Madden explores Julia's motivations more deeply, and the reader can induce that, for her, art is about gaining knowledge of one's self. Her second piece in the gallery is a set of two tunnels, each made from a collapsed tube and lined with different fabrics and materials. To experience the work, one removes one's shoes and crawls through, feeling the surrounding fabric and the tunnel closing in at the collapsed section. The implication is fairly clear, and later in the novel, confirmed: The tunnels are designed to represent vaginas. When Julia tells Roderic how uncomfortably shocked William was when he experienced her work, Roderic responds, "I'd have thought taking off his shoes and crawling up a fake vagina was just what he needed" (145). Julia's goal seems to center on how individuals respond to her work. She does not appear to be interested in achieving some aristocratic notion of high art; rather, she sees art as something that connects to the self, perhaps unlocks some undiscovered part of the self.

In a later, telling, scene, William visits Julia in her flat, and she asks for a favor. She asks if he will smell the turf smoke coming from her fire, and write down everything it recalls to his mind, for she is working on a project in which she arranges a series of scents, and asks people to consider what they bring to mind. Eventually, the scents and participant's responses will be exhibited somehow. In doing this, William writes a detailed account of an intimate moment that he shared with his father when he was ten, and admits to Julia that up until that moment in her flat, he had forgotten that memory, "forgotten it for all these years" (264). He then tell her, "I feel that I'm giving you something private. Something precious" (265). Julia responds by affirming that he has done just that, thus the permission she asked for first. The final two lines of the chapter provide deep insight into how Julia feels about her art. William asks, "Is this what art has become?" Julia replies, "This is what art has always been" (266).

For Julia, then, art does not exist on a pedestal. Rather, artists, art, and the people who view the art constitute a type of triangular force. In this particular project, the artist, Julia, requires the help of volunteers. She asks for a small piece of their memories, and in return they often are reminded of some detail about themselves or their lives. Once on display in a gallery, the art can reach out to any number of viewers, and each will experience the artwork differently. Julia's art is never in stasis, but operates on a continuum of experience and change. In this way, Julia's art suggests another connection to James's *The Tragic Muse*, for Nick Dormer's sister, Bidy, passionately advocates to him for the importance of art and artists in a community: "Don't you think art's necessary to the happiness, to the greatness of a people? Don't you think it's manly and honourable? Do you think a passion for it's a thing to be ashamed of? Don't you think

the artist—the conscientious, the serious one—is as distinguished a member of society as anyone else?” (573). Consistent with Bidy’s claim that art is a vital component to society, Julia approaches art with a desire to affect people’s lives, to tap into their memories and release their buried emotions.

Like Claire, Julia resists that values commonly held by society regarding women. Standing in line in the supermarket one day, Julia watches the woman in front of her and considers her life, based on her looks and the items in her grocery cart—“gin, dog biscuits, a cake in the shape of a football, a bag of carrots already washed chopped” (64). She has a moment similar to Claire’s own realization about the assumptions regarding women’s roles in society:

To look at her confirmed what Julia had surmised: mid thirties, sober suit and briefcase, wedding ring and a cluster of diamonds. This will never be me, Julia thought; and at that, she suddenly perceived the other woman’s life in all its strangeness and complexity . . . Julia saw her paying a telephone bill; saw her collect her son from a football match. All of these actions, no matter how small or banal, contributed to maintaining the strange, elaborate artifice that would someday vanish, as though it had never been. And although the woman’s life was alien to Julia—in many ways she was out of sympathy with the values that underpinned it—there was no denying its immense pathos. (64)

Like Claire, Julia does not share in the values that many women her age do, nor in the values that society tends to hold for women. Her relationship with Roderic, who is twice her age, is grounded on mutual interests and attraction; they both maintain their separate

lives. “We try not to live too much in each other’s pockets,” she explains to William, “We each have our own lives, our own circle of friends” (297). Julia does not explicitly rule out the possibility of marriage and children, but Roderic has three daughters already, and one of his primary concerns is repairing their estranged relationships. In a heated discussion with William, who suggests that her relationship with Roderic will ultimately be problematic due to the age and children issues, she rallies against the norms that people seem to expect:

Second, there are no problems or difficulties between Roderic and me, but we’re getting a bit fed up with other people trying to make out that there are, people who hardly know us. I put it down to jealousy. So there’s an age difference—so what? I have everything I want in Roderic. Do you understand that? Do you hear what I’m saying? *Everything*. (298, emphasis in original)

It’s clear from this emphatic response that Julia has often come up against people who assume that she will soon, if not eventually, desire marriage, children, a house, and security, and thus further assume that her relationship with Roderic must amount to no more than a fling.

In terms of lifestyle, Julia’s does not conform to any normal societal standards. Her tiny flat, one where the living room becomes a bedroom thanks to a fold-out couch, alarms William, whose career as a lawyer offers him a lifestyle of wealth and comfort. To make ends meet, Julia works part-time at the antique shop below her flat, and otherwise she accepts her meager means if it allows her to pursue her work as an artist. In Julia, Madden returns to the idea that the Irish woman artist—perhaps any woman

artist—must accept that she cannot abide by pursue the traditional path of a woman and also dedicate herself to art: one would ultimately suffer.

The contrast between Roderic’s and Julia’s lives and William’s life show that one must be willing to give up many of the luxuries in life in order to pursue art, much as Nick Dormer gives up his seat in the House of Parliament in order to become a painter. Julia’s flat, with its blanket-covered sofa to conceal the tears and stains, boxes for tables, and “a bookshelf constructed from planks and bricks,” reveals her meager means as she works to become a successful artist (55). She will not compromise her art in order to achieve success, though. As Roderic tells her,

You’ve thought your situation through. That’s your strength. By your own admission, what you do isn’t fashionable. You’re working away at your own view of the world, and you’re refusing to tweak it at the edges, to blur it or falsify it in any way so as to make it more palatable to the powers that be, more commercial, more acceptable—whatever. You’re determined to be absolutely true to your own vision. It’s one of the things I admire most about you. It’s also, if I may say so, the reason why you’re living in a glorified hole in the wall, on loose change and cups of tea.

(230)

Roderic’s main point is that Julia lives as an authentic artist—refusing to sacrifice her creative energies for a quick path to money or success. He knows all too well how difficult the journey can be. After years of struggling financially, “the bits and scraps of teaching, the not having a regular salary, the knowing you won’t be able to have a house or a car or anything much in material terms for a long time, if ever” (128), he has

achieved fame and success. Despite Julia's present and Roderic's past state of affairs, they are never presented as anguished, starving artists. Both find fulfillment in their lives, even when they are struggle with their work. Julia has turned her tiny, under-furnished flat into a warm and cozy home, and she feels no shame. As Roderic articulates to his brother comparing his life to a typical middle-class life with job security, marriage, and money, "I just couldn't live that other life. You know that. It doesn't of course mean that it's a bad life, or wrong in itself, just not right for me. And to try to deny that would be to do great harm. I would be doing no favours to anyone" (128-29).

William's current situation in the novel has been brought about by doing exactly what Roderic explains he could never do. When Julia first meets William, he is sitting alone, obviously depressed, and contemplating suicide. She extends a stranger's kindness to him, accompanying him home to his large suburban house, where he lives with his wife and two children. Over the course of the novel, Julia and William develop a friendship—Roderic is civil but curt with him—and we learn that he loves art, and even has some skill with the paintbrush. However, he became a lawyer to please his overbearing father, a man who was "always banging on about achievement" and who "nagged" his brother out of his desire to be a physics teacher, instead pushing him to pursue a doctorate (295). Now, he is suffering a mid-life crisis, believing that he wasted his life in failing to pursue art, in studying law and becoming a wealthy, married man. He cannot find happiness in his career, nor his wife—on whom he has cheated several times. In Julia, William finds a companion to share his passion for art, and she helps him rediscover his talent, talking with him about technique and providing feedback on his

work. Although he enjoys having art as an active part in his life, he tells Julia that his biggest fear “is that I’ve left it too late” (294).

Ultimately, William allows his biggest fear to devour him, and he commits suicide. Julia, who has recently had a falling out with William, tells Roderic that when she last saw William, “he said that art could destroy lives and that it had almost destroyed his. I told him that he was wrong but now I understand” (378). Roderic replies, “It isn’t art that’s the problem. It’s when it’s thwarted or denied, that’s where the danger comes from” (379)—thus reinforcing the importance of feeding one’s artistic passions, and the powerful impact art can have in one’s life.

In *Authenticity*, Madden develops her own philosophies on art and the life of the authentic artist. Her novel, however, never comes across as didactic. Just as Julia designs her artwork to create a unique, personal connection with each person who views it, readers can discover their own interpretations of art in *Authenticity*. Without a doubt, the novel encourages readers to consider color and light with more appreciation, while allowing a reader’s experience to remain “a small, sealed, rather beautiful but utterly inaccessible world,” to borrow William’s words (98).

### **The Writer, the Theater, and the Art of Friendship in *Molly Fox’s Birthday***

After two novels featuring painters and abstract artists, Madden turns her interest in art towards the theater in *Molly Fox’s Birthday*. Here, she explores the friendship between three friends: the unnamed, first-person narrator who is a successful playwright; Molly, a stage actress; and Andrew, a renowned art historian. In doing so, Madden offers a detailed analysis of the writing process. More than any of her artist characters,

and not surprisingly, Madden is able to provide her readers with an intimate look at a writer's mind. For Madden, it is an obvious truth that a writer must inherently also be an artist. In her interview with Casal, Madden states, "I feel very strongly that to be a writer is to be an artisan. You're making an object, a poem, a story or a novel, in the same way that you might make a basket or a piece of pottery. You're using language as your material, but the concept is the same" (407). In *Molly Fox's Birthday*, the unnamed narrator experiences a full day's worth of writer's block as she tries to begin what will be her twentieth play. Interestingly, this is Madden's only novel to feature an unnamed narrator, and she explains her reasoning in a 2010 interview with Irene S. Levine:

I liked the idea of knowing a great deal about a character—pretty much her whole life story—and yet not knowing her name. Usually it's the other way round: when you present or describe someone, the first thing you say is "This is. . ." and you name her. So it was a way of holding something back, of signaling a bit of distance between the reader and the narrator.

(n.p.)

The distance that Madden creates also emphasizes one of the primary questions posed in the novel, for in the narrator's musings, as she struggles to write her play, she also ponders how well she knows Molly and Andrew, her two best friends. Just how well, she wonders, can anyone really *know* anyone else?

In many ways, *Molly Fox's Birthday* is Madden's answer to Joyce's *Ulysses*. The processes of thought and memory are central to both novels, and Madden seems to be showing that stream of consciousness is not necessary for such a theme. Clarity and directness define the writing style of the novel, yet not without poignancy. Like Joyce,

Madden sets her novel over the course of one full day—June 21, the longest day of the year, and just five days after Bloomsday. This is also Molly Fox’s birthday, and the narrator is staying in Molly’s Dublin home while she visits New York City and then travels to London. Thus, *Molly Fox’s Birthday* shares three more similarities with *Ulysses*: Dublin, Molly, and the summer solstice. Famously, *Ulysses* follows Leopold Bloom through Dublin on June 16, and of course his remarkable wife’s name is Molly. Both Mollys are known to others in these novels for their voices. Molly Bloom is a relatively well known opera singer, and Molly Fox is a stage actress known specifically for her arresting voice. In terms of the summer solstice, it appears twice in *Ulysses*—once in the beginning and once at the end. First, in “Circe,” Stephen realizes that the solstice is near: “Yes, evening will find itself in me, without me. All days make their end. By the way next when is it Tuesday will be the longest day” (42). Then, in “Ithaca,” Bloom states, “tacitly appreciative of successful narrative and confidently augurative of successful achievement, during the increasingly longer nights gradually following the summer solstice on the day but three following, videlicet, Tuesday, 21 June (S. Aloysius Gonzaga), sunrise 3.33 a.m., sunset 8.29 p.m.” (561). These nods towards *Ulysses* are not intended to frame *Molly Fox’s Birthday* as a contemporary version of Joyce’s acclaimed novel, for other literary references abound as Madden takes her readers on a journey through the narrator’s thoughts and reminiscences as she spends June 21 at Molly’s house in Dublin. References to Virginia Woolf—whose 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is a woman’s *Ulysses*—Chekhov, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and, most prominently, Oscar Wilde, abound throughout the novel.

These references suggest that the writing process—at least for the unnamed playwright—does not exclude an author from thinking about other people’s work. Quotations from Oscar Wilde occur to her throughout the day, yet she never experiences what Harold Bloom terms “the anxiety of influence.” As readers, we are allowed an intimate look at her writing process: how seemingly unrelated ideas come together to form a play. Of course, in all the different fields and varieties of art, Madden knows writing the best, and, unlike her depiction of her other artist characters, she invites readers into the inner world of this playwright narrator.

The narrator is very frank about the fact that she has no idea what her next play will be about—and the fact that her writer’s block is partially caused by the fact that this will be her twentieth play, and her nineteenth play was a flop. All she knows is that somehow the play will indirectly concern a strange image she saw a few years ago while riding the tram in Munich: a man, also on the tram, holding a hare “cuddled to his chest as one might carry a baby” (53). Somehow, this memory will serve as her route to the play she is trying to write:

I knew that the man and the hare were the trigger for the play I was going to write. That is not to say that it would be about them. They would not appear in it, would in all likelihood not be described or even mentioned. But I knew that by going through them, by grasping imaginatively something about them, I would be able to get at what I needed to know and then I would be able to write the play. (53-54)

Unlike Claire and Julia in *Nothing Is Black* and *Authenticity*, who share little about their specific motivations to paint the human spine or create boxes with objects in them, the

narrator in *Molly Fox's Birthday* tells us exactly how she will be inspired to write this play. The man with the hare led her to thinking about “animals and their relations to humans, how we anthropomorphise them, how we project things onto them” (171). The fact that she has no idea, and will never know, about the relationship between the man and the hare—“Perhaps he had been going to kill it and eat it. Perhaps he had been going to breed it or sell it. Or perhaps it was a pet, a companion, as a cat might be. Perhaps he was on his way to give it to someone as a gift, a bizarre love gift” (172)—makes the spectacle even more fascinating. From this brief, odd encounter on the tram in Munich, the narrator will find the spark to ignite her next play.

Towards the end of the day, Andrew visits Molly's house, and he and the narrator sit and chat in Molly's backyard garden, enjoying a glass of champagne. Suddenly, she remembers a time in France when she saw a sign for a lost dog, along with one line of text: “*Attention! Il est très merchant avec les enfants!*” and from this the narrator knows that the dog is dangerous around children, and that the owner thinks of the dog as her or his only family member (173). Somehow, this memory sparks something in her mind: “Remembering this years later in Molly's back garden on a summer evening, drinking champagne with Andrew, I knew at once that this person [the owner] would be the central character in the play I was going to write” (173). The narrator now wishes that Andrew were not there, for then she could satisfy the urge to go directly to her office and write. Writing inspirations, for this author, come suddenly, and from the most unlikely sources. She jots down ideas in her notebook, tries to connect them into a storyline, and attempts to flesh out several ideas before finding the one that works, the one that will

grow into a play. At times, “working” on a script means nothing more than staring out the window, waiting for ideas to fuse together in her mind.

This inner look into the act of writing a play allows readers to gain a sense of the narrator as an artist, a writer. Her writing process is very introspective, and, through the various notes she jots down and the memories she ponders, a play begins to form.

Madden describes her process similarly:

When you're writing a novel there are times, particularly at the start of the project, when, I find, you need to be quite passive and vague. You need to be receptive, to day-dream a bit, to follow stray thoughts that might or might not lead somewhere and become useful. The trick is to know when to move on from that phase to a more focused and active mindset. If you don't get it right, you do end up wasting time and procrastinating, stuck on something that's going nowhere. (Levine)

We see the narrator following her own stray thoughts throughout the day. Sitting at her desk, she examines her notebook, filled with crossed-out ideas and random remarks and questions. It will take her an entire day of musing to figure out what direction her play will take.

In addition to this approach to forming the general plot of the play, the narrator also must get to know her characters. The process of knowing her characters ultimately leads to the formation of the play. The narrator shares her ideas on how character formations develop:

For me, as a playwright, the creation of a character is like listening to something faint and distant. It's like trying to remember someone one

knew slightly, in passing, a very long time ago, but to remember them so that one knows them better than one knows oneself. It's like trying to know a family member who died before one was born, from looking at photographs and objects belonging to them; also from hearing the things, often contradictory, that people say about them, the anecdotes told. From this, you try to work out how they might speak and how they might react to any given circumstance, how they would react with other characters whom one has come to know by the same slow and delicate process. And out of this comes a play, where, as in life, people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say, where they act against their own best interests and sometimes fail to understand those around them. (7-8)

This long passage marks the first time, throughout Madden's work, that readers are afforded an intimate knowledge of the artistic mind and the artistic process. The art of theater, for Madden and for the narrator, concerns reality. Of the narrator's nineteen plays, we learn about a few of them, and they seem simple in design, yet they explore complex issues and realities of life—how place and home matter differently to different people, the pain of realizing that a supposed friendship is actually nothing more than a temporary convenience, and now, in the workings of her newest play, the relationships we have with the animals in our lives. The narrator's description of forming characters suggests the influence of Aristotle, who emphasizes in the *Poetics* that characters should not deviate from themselves, that they should respond and act in a way that remains faithful to their own development. Aristotle argues that characters "must be true to life" and that they must be consistent, and if they are inconsistent, then they must be

“consistently inconsistent” (28). Achieving such consistency, as the narrator well knows, is a painstaking process that cannot be rushed. She refuses to move forward with any character that she does not fully believe in and trust—hence her notebook filled with scratched out beginnings and unfinished ideas.

Despite the intimate examination of the narrator’s world as a playwright, the novel also takes up the issue—featured in several of Madden’s novels—of how well a person can truly know another, especially when the person in question is also an artist. Madden seems to suggest that, perhaps more so than others, artists live in two different worlds: the world around them, with friends and family and acquaintances, and the psychological and spiritual world of artistic vision. One of the gradual realizations in *Molly Fox’s Birthday* centers on the possibility of knowing Molly Fox. The narrator, who thinks of Molly as “without a doubt my closest woman friend” (5), spends much of her day pondering her knowledge of Molly, asking one the several questions that lie at the center of the novel: “Who, in short, is Molly Fox?” (9). Over the course of her long day at Molly’s house, the narrator realizes, through past memories and present encounters, that the Molly she thought she knew does not wholly exist.

For example, upon once again seeing the life-size fiberglass cow in Molly’s garden, the narrator recalls the moment she was first taken aback by it, and how she had agreed with Molly that it was “fabulous” (24). Today, considering that moment, she admits, “This was a lie. The fake cow was absurd, and it baffled and astonished me that Molly of all people should buy such a thing and put it in her garden. I mean, what was the *point* of it? . . . What bothered me most about this was that I had thought I knew Molly well. We had been friends for over twenty years” (24-25, emphasis in original).

In confessing that she never once believed in the wonder of the cow, she questions her motives that day, wondering why she had not just told Molly the truth. In this moment she realizes that there are elements to their friendship that she has misjudged. Later in the day, as she considers the paradoxical nature of Molly's relationship to things—her “acquisitive nature, her fondness for things” but her “complete non-attachment to them” (85)—and she admits that she cannot understand how Molly functions.

By the end of the day, the narrator has discovered that friendship, at the core of its nature, can be its own sort of art form. The realities of it are often difficult to judge, and a particular friendship can be viewed, even by the people in it, in various ways. In different moments throughout the day, she considers the idea of presenting a version of oneself. For actors like Molly, transforming into someone else becomes a career, whereas the narrator's brother Tom, a Catholic priest, recognizes his responsibility to be whatever his parishioners need at a given time. In friendships, we often do the same—stepping into roles when necessary and even misrepresenting the truth of something, for both selfless and selfish purposes. At one point in the novel, she realizes that her understanding of Fergus, Molly's brother, came from the “version of him” that Molly presented (165). Similarly, the narrator admits her feelings of surprise and shame when she sees how much she misunderstood about her brother Tom. During his first visit to her in London, the narrator tells us, “I found it hard to realise that I didn't really know him as well as I had thought. He struck me as very much the country priest, the farmer's son, and his accent was stronger and more marked than I'd realised until now” (87). Such moments of revelations between the narrator and her friends occur throughout the novel,

with Molly, Andrew, Tom, and even David, another actor who both Molly and the narrator had worked with.

Much like art, a deep friendship contains within it a great deal of mystery. In her interview with Casal, Madden expresses a view of art that mirrors her depiction of friendship:

I do believe that there's something mysterious at the heart of great art. We live in an age that thinks everything can be analysed, can be broken down into its component parts and then we'll understand it, but I don't believe this to be true. There are some things you can't just explain away. Great art is inexhaustible. Every time you engage with it you'll see something new, some aspect of it will be revealed to you. It's a living thing. (408)

In a similar way, a great friendship is also inexhaustible, and cannot be fully broken down and understood. Madden emphasizes this at the end of *Molly Fox's Birthday*, when the narrator and Andrew enjoy champagne and conversation in Molly's garden. In their exchange, Andrew reveals something that she never suspected, despite the twenty-plus-year friendship: just how deeply his brother's death affected him, and continues to. Andrew and his brother Billy were never particularly close, and after Billy—a paramilitary loyalist in Northern Ireland—was murdered, Andrew rarely spoke of him. That evening in the garden, however, he shares things with her that he's never shared with anyone, and only then does she realize the depths of what Andrew has suffered. Just before Andrew leaves, the narrator tells us, "I was suddenly aware of how his look had softened over the years, and why" (205). Like great art, a true friendship is a "living thing," and each passing year brings new depths and understandings.

## Conclusion

Through *Nothing Is Black*, *Authenticity*, and *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Madden reveals deep appreciation for art and the artist. Drawing from Henry James, she writes with an ambitious curiosity about various forms of art and those who produce it, without ever valuing one specific type of art over another. Her references and nods to other artists—including Joyce and Wilde in *Molly Fox's Birthday*, and the Swiss painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti in *Nothing Is Black*—suggest that artists live in a continuum with one another, sharing ideas, debating philosophies, and seeking inspiration, through the texts and images that they create.

## CHAPTER 6

ANIMAL ADVENTURES, EDUCATION, AND SUBJECTIVITY:  
NOVELS FOR CHILDREN

The field of children's literature involves an unfortunate history of critical dismissal. In many institutions of higher education, this literature is considered only in elementary education, as tools for teachers to help children learn to read and to enjoy books. Children's literature, often referred to as "kiddie lit," thus suffers neglect in academia. The term "kiddie lit" performs the same function as "chick lit": to render the texts as unworthy of serious critical attention, in a manner characterized by Jan Susina as "disturbing and shortsighted" (vi). Its rhetorical undermining in literary criticism has succeeded, for as critic and theorist Beverly Lyon Clark notes, "although children's literature has continued to garner enthusiasm in the popular press, the more academic gatekeepers all but ignored it in the middle to late twentieth century" (xii). Today, however, the field enjoys a surge of critical attention, in large part due to prominent scholars such as Seth Lerer, whose publications on children's literature culminate with *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), along with an annotated edition of *The Wind in the Willows* (2009). And of course the massive popularity of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels has impressed children's literature upon a huge and diverse audience so pervasively that it has forced more people to take it seriously. The title of Lerer's book clearly points towards the subdivisions within the field of children's literature, for Aesop's fables are often published in the form of picture books, with images helping young readers understand the ideas of the text. The *Harry Potter* novels, however, are chapter books, and they require more advanced readers with

each successive book. A seven-year-old, for example, could begin reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, but the final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, may not be appropriate. Thus, *Sorcerer's Stone* can be categorized as children's literature or fiction, whereas the last few books in the series belong, more appropriately, in the field of young adult fiction. Most publishing companies include a suggested age range as part of the publication details; hence, the field of children's literature, encompasses several categories. It is now more widely accepted that children's literature, especially chapter books and young adult fiction, can and should be examined through the same critical and theoretical lenses as any other types of literature.

In addition to her eight adult novels, Deirdre Madden has written three children's novels: *Snakes' Elbows* (2005); *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* (2007); and *Jasper and the Green Marvel* (2012). All three of these are chapter books written for an eight-to-ten-year-old audience. When Madden lived abroad, she often sent letters to her young niece, enjoying how "playful and fun" such writing could be, but she never thought that she herself could be a children's author. After completing her sixth adult novel, *Authenticity*, she decided to try something new. As a creative writing teacher, Madden consistently encourages her students to try a different genre—even one they never before considered experimenting with—telling them, "If you think you can't, give it a whirl" (interview with author). As a writer and a teacher of writing, Madden respects each genre for the fresh possibilities they can offer.

Deciding to take her own advice, and with the spark of an idea in her head, Madden wrote *Snakes' Elbows*. Immediately, she was struck by how her writing process for this novel differed so greatly from her process when she wrote novels for adults. In

the most basic sense, she was able to write children's novels much more quickly than she could adult novels, for their narrative-driven structure allows for easier plot development. As she put it, "First chapter, introduce the first character. Second chapter, introduce the second character. Third chapter, introduce the conflict." Then, she thinks about what might be funny to write into the book, or how could she introduce chocolate into this or that chapter, and other entertaining and satisfying ideas. Conversely, ideas and issues drive Madden's adult novels; they are more nuanced and contemplative, not at all plot or narrative-driven, and therefore the writing process moves slowly along as the novel takes shape. Writing for children, Madden states, has also led her to think differently about how she writes for adults (interview with author). This difference is evident in *Time Present and Time Past*, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

Achieving immediate success as a children's writer, Madden won the Éilís Dillon Award, which is awarded to a first-time writer of a children's book and named after a late, great author in this field, for *Snakes' Elbows*. The field of Irish children's literature has enjoyed a surge in the past thirty years, in terms of both literary and scholarly production. In 1989, the *Children's Books in Ireland* magazine was first published, and in 2002 the magazine changed its name to *Inis* (island). This well respected magazine publishes book reviews and articles on Irish children's literature, and several critical guides to Irish children's literature have been published in the past twenty years. Popular writers include Patricia Lynch, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, Marita Conlon-McKenna, Walter Macken, Eoin Colfer, and Roddy Doyle—other established authors turned children's writers.

Despite the recent proliferation of Irish literature for children, Madden's children's books are not particularly Irish in style or tone. For children like Madden, growing up in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, there were not many children's books written by Irish authors available, except for such works as the children's novels of Eilís Dillon, after whom the award in this field was named, the one that Madden won, as I have mentioned earlier. Indeed, as a child in Northern Ireland, Madden explained to me, it was "a real novelty" if you had a book that was set in Ireland (interview with author). She happily asserts that such a situation is "absolutely not the case now because there are a huge number of Irish writers for children . . . there's a huge literature that's very culturally related to Ireland." Madden grew up reading, rather than Irish texts, what she calls "quintessentially English" texts such as the Beano and the Dandy comic series, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, the *Winnie the Pooh* books by A. A. Milnew, and the work of Enid Blyton. She describes how her children's novels come out of her own childhood imagination and what she would have read when she was around seven years old. Thus, as she explains, "The tone of these books is quite English—I wouldn't even say British—I'd say English" (interview with author). And any author who considers writing children's books today must think of J. K. Rowling's phenomenal success. Madden wrote her first children's novel in 2005, just as Rowling's penultimate *Harry Potter* novel was released. Given the Englishness of Rowling's renowned series, her work perhaps stands as motivation for any children's author—especially for one originally from Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom—to adopt the English tone made famous by classic English novelists such as Kenneth Grahame and Roald Dahl.

Madden also recognizes the fact that she has no children of her own as another possible reason for why her children's novels reflect an English rather than Irish tone. She speculates that if she had children of her own, or at least more children in her life, her work might have expressed something more related to their lives in Ireland (interview with author). The genesis of her children's work, then, was more literary-based than psychological. This chapter will explore Madden's three children's novels—their tone and themes—as well as provide background to her experience becoming a writer of children's books. In a comparative sense, this chapter will also examine exactly how her novels carry an English tone, and how they fit into the vast body of scholarship on children's literature. Also, there is an interesting connection between her children's books and her most recently published novel, *Time Present and Time Past* (2013). Although I will further discuss this latest novel in my conclusion, it is her only novel with strong connections to her children's work; thus, I will introduce it in this chapter, and address it more thoroughly in the conclusion, given that it's the concluding novel, at least at the moment, for this novelist in mid-career.

All three of Madden's children's novels are animal stories, with human characters present but not running the show. Animal tales stand as a benchmark tradition in children's stories, reaching as far back as Aesop's fables and still thriving today in books such as the *Curious George* series, television shows such as *Wonder Pets*—which stars a guinea pig, a turtle, and a duckling—and just about every Disney animated movie ever released. For quite some time, the primary purpose of children's literature was religious instruction. Today, however, one could argue that children's literature provides as much for entertainment as instruction, while also serving as a lens to view history. As early as

1993, Jan Susina pointed out that “to make sense of children’s texts, critics are obligated to look beyond the texts themselves to those cultural and social forces that help produce and generate their sales” (vii). More recently, the editors of *Crosscurrents of Children’s Literature: An Anthology of Texts and Criticism* (2007), J. D. Stahl, Tina L. Hanlon, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, explain how children’s literature can be central to understanding a particular culture or history: “Children’s literature is an arena in which conflicting ideas about values and practices confront each other, often in swirling crosscurrents” (1). The word “arena” indeed suggests that entertainment will take place alongside ethics. What Madden enjoys about this confrontation is the fact that children possess a very straightforward sense of right and wrong, good and bad. They easily identify the good, kind character in a story, and his or her antagonist. Such simplicity results in an “arena” that has as much room for silly entertainment as it has for moral lessons.

Animal tales in particular offer opportunities for an entertaining combination of lessons and laughter. In his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Children’s Literature* (2009), children’s literature theorist David Rudd quotes Kenneth Grahame: “Every animal, by instinct, lives according to his nature. Thereby he lives wisely, and betters the tradition of [hu]mankind” (243). Before Grahame’s *The Wind and the Willows* became a popular animal tale, English novelist Anna Sewell had published *Black Beauty*. This 1877 bestselling children’s novel anthropomorphizes animals—horses, to be specific—in order to teach children how to “better the tradition of mankind.” With the exception of *Black Beauty*—which tells the heartbreaking tale of a horse’s journey through several different owners, and particularly highlights the excruciating and

violently rigorous life of a London cab horse—many animal tales are quite humorous. For an animal’s innate ability to live wisely often results in an innate ability to find itself in hilarious predicaments, as Curious George always does, and thereby have to find a way out.

Although Madden does not write her children’s novels with a didactic purpose, she understands that children enjoy a story of good versus evil, and as with the fairy tales they grow up reading, they will root for the good guy and rejoice in the punishment of the bad guy (interview with author). She also recognizes that children relate to the relationship that an animal has with its master, for this relationship mirrors that which a child has with his or her parent. Both pets and children must do as they are told, and are often misunderstood or outright ignored. Thus, it is not surprising that in each of Madden’s three children’s novels, the animals work to save the day for the often oblivious protagonist “good guy”—sometimes after several attempts to communicate the danger to him or her. In the midst of this work, they desperately avoid encounters with the antagonist “bad guy,” who often behaves as if the animals do not deserve proper attention and care. Her three children’s novels share similar features. All three are animal stories, and each novel features at least one human, adult character who acts more like a petulant child than an adult. The animals tend to be more clever and responsible. Rather than equally divide the three, in this chapter I will focus primarily on Madden’s debut children’s novel, *Snakes’ Elbows*, due to the significant overlap of theme and narrative structure.

### **Kindness, Literacy, and the Arts: *Snakes' Elbows* as a Guide for Children**

*Snakes' Elbows*, Madden's first children's novel, tells the story of the shy, wealthy, and kindhearted Barney Barrington, who moves back to the town of Woodford—much to the annoyance of the mischievous, ostentatious Jasper Jellit, who prides himself on being the richest man in town. The plot is simple enough: Jasper, self-important and hot-tempered, becomes enraged when Barney, humble and patient, outbids him for a famous painting, and thus sets out to steal the painting from Barney's home one night. To save the day for Barney and his painting, Dandelion, the stray cat Barney welcomed into his home, and Cannibal and Bruiser—Jasper's two Alsatian dogs who, despite their names, are quite sweet-tempered—team up to rescue the painting and catch Jasper red-handed.

The novel has received positive reviews from leading Irish and British publications. Children's book author and critic Debbie Thomas writes in *Inis* magazine that *Snakes' Elbows* is a novel that she wishes she had written (43), praising it as “a slice of wise and playful brilliance” that deals with “sophisticated issues” with “a simplicity that [her] 4-year-olds could grasp” (44). In another review, Jemima Owen of *The Guardian* calls the novel “a light-hearted and entertaining read,” and notes that it is “written in a chatty style reminiscent of Roald Dahl.” Thomas's review points towards the didactic nature of the novel. For example, Jasper earns his millions as an illegal arms dealer—indeed not a profession one normally sees in children's books—but the novel makes it clear that Jasper is egregiously offensive and immoral, and that his “career” is as well. Owen's review supports Madden's own claim regarding the English tone and style of her writing. A British novelist born in Wales in 1916 and educated in England, Dahl

wrote dozens of stories for children, many of which are still widely read today. His most popular children's work include *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *Matilda*.

A brief comparison of *Snakes' Elbows* with Dahl's *Matilda* will easily exemplify Madden's claim regarding her English tone and Owen's likening of Madden to Dahl. Both novels engage with the reader in a conversational style, with phrases such as "to tell you the truth" and "as I said before." In the first chapter of *Matilda*, the narrator describes young Matilda's own brilliance and her neglectful parents:

And by that I mean sensitive and brilliant. Matilda was both of these things, but above all she was brilliant. Her mind was so nimble and she was so quick to learn that her ability should have been obvious even to the most half-witted of parents. But Mr and Mrs Wormwood were both so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter. To tell the truth, I doubt they would have noticed had she crawled into the house with a broken leg.

(10)

Notice the matter-of-fact way of describing Matilda's parents and the sardonic humor. The opening chapter of *Snakes' Elbows* includes a description of the famous statue in Woodford: the Albert Hawkes statue. Unfortunately, nobody in town quite knows who Hawkes was or why he deserves his statue:

The people of Woodford didn't even think of him as Albert Hawkes, and had long since stopped wondering what he had done to be famous. They simply spoke of The Statue and used it as a place to meet before heading

along to do something more interesting, such as going to the cinema or to an ice-cream parlour. The Statue was a bus terminus. I hate to have to tell you this, but the odd passing dog used to lift its leg against the plinth and no one thought this an outrage or indeed cared at all. (9-10)

Both passages employ a light, straightforward tone to convey a basic idea with a bit of dry, droll humor, and Madden addresses the reader directly. Dahl and Madden maintain this type of tone throughout their novels, intertwining witty remarks with their narratives. A decade before Madden, however, Rowling found phenomenal success in her *Harry Potter* series, which also adopts a tone similar to Dahl's. The opening paragraph of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* utilizes a similarly type of dry, sardonic humor that characterizes a distinctly English tone:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense. Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. (1)

In addition to tone, *Matilda*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and *Snakes' Elbows* portray their villains as quick-tempered and dishonest characters who love to shout. *Matilda's* parents serve as the villains in Dahl's novel, and the father is often seen

shouting insults at his daughter. For example, in just one of the many instances where Matilda receives a harsh scolding, her father becomes very red in the face as he shouts, “Who the heck do you think you are . . . The Archbishop of Canterbury or something, preaching to me about honesty? You’re just an ignorant little squirt who hasn’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about!” (25-26). In this scene, Matilda is chastised simply for expressing her dislike for her father’s dishonest practices as a used car salesman. In *Harry Potter*, the first villains are also parental figures— Harry’s Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, who have custody of him (Voldemort does not become the primary villain until Harry begins his new life at Hogwarts). Early in the novel, as the family drives to the zoo, Harry mentions that he “had a dream about a motorcycle,” and in response, “Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: ‘MOTORCYCLES DON’T FLY!’” (25). In a similar scene in *Snakes’ Elbows*, the villain Jasper berates the staff at his house as they prepare for his latest party:

Jasper was not a sweet-tempered man at the best of times but now he was unbearable. “Look at the state of the lawn!” he screamed at the gardener. “Call that a cake, do you?” he thundered at the pastry cook. “You think that’s good wine?” he bellowed at the cellar man. The odd thing about this was that everything was perfect. (33)

Examples of outrageous outbursts by Jasper, Matilda’s father, and Uncle Vernon, continue throughout the three novels.

Madden invests her novel with a number of lessons and values for children. Kindness reigns as the standard moral teaching in children’s literature, and *Snakes’*

*Elbows* is no exception. Exhibiting unfailing kindness and humility throughout the novel, Barney distinguishes himself from Jasper in every way possible. On his first day in Woodford, a reporter harasses him at his home, and despite his sincere desire that he be left alone, Barney maintains civility with the rude man, for he does not possess the curtness necessary to deal with such intrusive people. The following day, he meets Wilf, a local man who asks to be hired as his assistant and butler, and who is astonished at the generous pay and complimentary boarding that Barney offers. The concept of greed clearly does not cross Barney's mind. In one of the most telling scenes regarding Barney's upstanding character, Wilf assumes that he will be fired, for the local newspaper has discovered and reported that prior to being hired by Barney, he was homeless and had spent time in jail. The report refers to Wilf as a "roofless ruffian" who "slept under bridges and on park benches" and who is "no stranger to Woodford prison" (46).

Ashamed and humiliated, Wilf tells Barney that he understands if Barney wants him out of his house immediately, but Barney expresses more concern than indignation. He sympathizes with Wilf, stating that it must have been horrible to be homeless, and he listens to Wilf's story about his arrest, and considers the circumstances. Barney will not hear of firing Wilf, declaring that his home is now Wilf's home and nothing will change that. In this exchange, Madden demonstrates to children how we must not live in judgment of each other nor jump to conclusions about each other, and how a homeless person is still a person, and not inherently a bad person. Indeed, Wilf becomes Barney's most trusted companion and friend; his loyalty and care becomes something Barney relies on constantly. Furthermore, this instance suggests to children that they must not believe

everything they see or read; rather, they should ask questions and determine the truth for themselves. In embedding these crucial lessons into one brief scene, Madden demonstrates apt skill in writing children's novels that instruct as well as entertain.

Another lesson on kindness focuses on the importance of treating animals, especially one's own pets, with love and care. The three heroes of the novel—Dandelion, Cannibal, and Bruiser—receive vastly different treatment. Dandelion is found as a stray and taken in by Barney. Underfed and cold, she immediately takes to Barney's affectionate care and delicious food. In turn, she becomes his devoted pet, striving to do her very best to prevent the theft of his painting. Cannibal and Bruiser, however, are consistently abused by Jasper, and as a result they neither owe him nor give him any true loyalty; rather, they team up with Dandelion against him. In one example of cruelty, Jasper feeds his dogs chocolate, knowing it will make them sick, out of sheer curiosity—wondering just how sick they will become. Even more horrendous is his habit of underfeeding Cannibal and Bruiser in an unsuccessful attempt to keep them ill-tempered and more ferocious towards the people of Woodbury.

Ultimately, Jasper's animal abuse harms him more than it harms the dogs, for when Barney asks the police officers how they discovered that Jasper was the painting thief, one of them explains that among other suspicions, his treatment of Cannibal and Bruiser labeled him as a probable criminal: "And then when I saw how mean he was to his dogs I knew he was a bad egg, and so everything followed on from there" (198-99). Through Jasper and Barney, Madden ensures that even the most cursory readers will understand that animals are not toys but living creatures that deserve our care and respect,

and who will reciprocate such respect. Moreover, a person's treatment of animals reflects his or her personality, and thus can affect one's reputation and character.

Granted, kindness towards others and towards animals are commonly found values in children's literature—appearing, in fact, not only in *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* and *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, but in the *Harry Potter* series as well. The young wizards and witches at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry take a course called “The Care of Magical Creatures,” where they learn how to properly feed and take care of other living creatures in their magical world. In *Snakes' Elbows*, however, Madden also explores two much richer themes: language and art appreciation.

The ability to communicate ideas plays an important role in this novel, for the conflict develops in part because of breakdowns in communication and understanding. The major conflict of the novel commences when Jasper breaks into Barney's house in a failed attempt to steal his newly purchased painting, the Haverford-Snuffley Angel. He eventually succeeds in stealing all of Barney's beloved art, and throughout the whole ordeal only Dandelion, Cannibal, and Bruiser know his evil plans. As animals, the cat and two dogs can communicate with each other; thus, before Jasper's first attempt at theft, Cannibal and Bruiser warn Dandelion to beware. That evening, Dandelion knows Jasper is lurking in their house, and with the best effort she can muster she tries to convey her thoughts to Barney: “‘Behind you!’ Dandelion thought. If only this trick worked with human beings! If only she could plant an idea in Barney's mind as she could with Cannibal and Bruiser. ‘BEHIND YOU!’” (121).

Unfortunately, she cannot communicate with Barney, and despite her endeavors to make him understand, he remains oblivious to the attempted robbery and to the fact

that his cat foiled Jasper's plans and saved the painting. Rather than receive praise, in fact, Dandelion is scolded for what Barney interprets as mischievous behavior.

Dandelion, with her struggle to communicate with Barney, reminds readers of perhaps the most well known literate animal: Charlotte—the word-spinning spider in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952). In that popular, classic children's novel, Charlotte writes phrases into the webs she spins in order to save her friend Wilbur the pig from the slaughtering axe of Farmer Zuckerman. Literacy achieves a more overt presence in White's novel, yet Madden seeks to strike a chord of empathy with her readers and allow the lesson to naturally follow.

In his chapter on children's animal stories, David Rudd explains how logocentrism functions as a primary issue when the animals are not fully anthropomorphized and cannot talk to humans: "Language, then, creates the very categories through which we experience the world, and, to a certain extent, we are forced to genuflect before these . . . we are nevertheless trapped in the alienating prison-house of language, so can never capture the real animal" (247). By "capture," Rudd refers not to trapping or ensnaring the animal, but to understanding its true character or essence. In other words, if language is what signifies our reality, and if animals—in the case of *Snakes' Elbows*, Dandelion—cannot master human language, then animals and humans can never share the same reality and thus will always exist separately from each other.

Although Rudd defines this condition of existence through negative terms—"the alienating prison-house of language"—Madden attempts to locate a useful lesson in it. Children will inevitably relate to Dandelion's predicament: the frustrating struggle to communicate clearly with an adult. Many children today go through speech therapy,

whether it be for childhood apraxia (a condition where the brain struggles to send the right movements to the mouth), autism, or other speech development problems. For these children, Dandelion's efforts to communicate will be something they can sympathize with, and perhaps take comfort in the fact that they are not alone. Moreover, Dandelion's own exasperation, knowing that if only she could tell Barney what Jasper was up to, she could prevent the crime, reinforces the idea that the ability to communicate should be sought after and achieved. During the climactic moments when Jasper succeeds in entering Barney's home unnoticed and steals the paintings, Dandelion desperately tries but fails to tell Barney what is happening: "Throughout all of this, Dandelion watched helplessly. She knew exactly what was happening, but there was nothing she could do or to stop it" (141-42). Later, at the police station, she again finds herself unable to communicate, and "she would have given eight of her nine lives there on the spot for the gift of speech. She imagined herself telling the police in a low calm voice exactly what had happened" (143). In empathizing with Dandelion's plight, children who read *Snakes' Elbows* may gain a higher appreciation of the importance of language and communication, "the very categories through which we experience the world."

Ever the careful writer, Madden emphasizes that although language serves as our essential in communication, it wields immense power and can easily be manipulated. In the town of Woodford, the local newspaper—*The Woodford Trumpet*—reports on the events and persons of interest, with Jasper's and Barney's activities often making the first page. The articles often blur the truth, however, in order to present a certain image or bias. For example, Barney is accosted by a reporter on his first day back in Woodford, and the man demands to know why Barney is eating beans on toast instead of champagne

and smoked salmon for lunch. Despite the fact that Barney declares his preference for the simple lunch, the front-page headline in the newspaper the following day reads, “We Spill the Beans on Barmy Barney!” and the article that follows explains how “mad millionaire” Barney loves expensive food but hates spending money, so he eats beans because they are cheap (26). Later in the novel, *The Woodford Trumpet* reports on Barney hiring Wilf, calling Wilf a “roofless ruffian” and a “violent villain” (46), and when Barney takes in Dandelion as his pet, the newspaper again attempts to exploit him as a Scrooge: “Too mean to buy himself a beautiful expensive with long soft fur and big blue eyes, Barmy Barney has chosen instead a miserable little stray with short fur and thin whiskers” (49).

Readers immediately recognize the newspaper’s bias and its untruthful treatment of Barney. Because Barney does not crave media attention and refuses to allow reporters to enter his home, he is unfairly painted as a parsimonious and eccentric man. Jasper, on the other hand, relishes the spotlight; he provides reporters with as many exclusive interviews as they will publish. As a result, the *Trumpet* portrays the villain as a generous man who serves his town well. Madden represents the newspaper as fickle and self-serving for two purposes. First, she cautions readers against believing everything they read. Even a newspaper—an ostensibly trustworthy source—can skew the truth. Context and bias, she emphasizes, must always be considered, and readers must learn to judge for themselves the accuracy and fairness of a report. Reading responsibly means learning how to identify elements of propaganda and faulty rhetoric. Madden hopes her young audience will realize that reading is an active, rather than a passive, activity.

In addition to this didactic purpose, Madden's inclusion of such a ridiculous newspaper serves as a clever social commentary. The lazy journalism in *The Woodford Trumpet* and the town's eagerness to read it every day both reflect and mock our contemporary culture's obsession with tabloid media. In Britain and the United States, the paparazzi routinely stalks celebrities, reporting and photographing their everyday activities and presenting such mundane material as actual news. As consumers, we perpetuate the system of tabloid journalism through our addiction to it, purchasing the magazines and combing the Internet for the latest reports from the celebrity world. Explaining how children's literature entertains while critiquing social institutions, critic Áine Nic Gabhann states, "Historically, literature for children has often had a role to play in expressing dissatisfaction with society. As far back as 1865, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* entertained and delighted children, while at the same time satirising many of England's revered institutions" (15). While the British tabloids—and the American, for that matter—may not be revered institutions, they are certainly firmly established, long standing institutions, and Madden satirizes them with clever, tongue-in-cheek humor. Although we may laugh at the ludicrous newspaper in the novel and cringe at its rude reporters, we also should recognize that we are complicit in the same tabloid system we criticize.

Along with highlighting the importance and power of language, Madden emphasizes art appreciation in her first children's novel. Indeed, the subject of art appears in many of her adult works, and Madden clearly believes that children can, and should, learn to appreciate art at an early age, if given a playful and fun introduction. Art, for Madden, includes not just painting and sculpting, but stage acting, writing, and

music composition. Readers are first introduced to Barney Barrington through a newspaper report announcing his return to Woodford after moving away as a small child. The celebration for his return stems from the fact that he is a famous pianist, who “went on to stun the world with his skill on the ivories” (14). Having earned millions of dollars in record sales and sell-out concerts, all with his skill on the piano, Barney returns to his hometown, after more than sixty years away.

At the end of his first day back, after being harassed by townsfolk and reporters, he finds solace in his music:

He went to his room where his piano was. No matter how bad he was feelings, even if the weather was cold and wet, even if he was lonely and people were being horrible to him, playing the piano always made him feel better. He loved listening to beautiful music, and to make that music, to be at the centre of that wonderful sound, to be a part of it, was the sweetest thing. (24-25)

By introducing the idea early on in the novel that music can be a comfort when one is lonely or sad, Madden instills her young readers with a sense—for some readers a heightened sense, for others a wholly new sense—of music appreciation. With the state of today’s education systems, where music and art programs are systematically being cut back due to decreased budgets and capitalist administrations that fail to see the value in the arts, the need to teach children about the joy and beauty of music has never been greater.

Of course, music may be the center of Barney’s world, but the Haverford-Snuffley Angel painting stars as the center of the novel’s primary conflict. As with

music, Barney admires and appreciates paintings. Early in the novel, while he is still moving into his new home, a huge truck arrives to deliver his collection of artwork. Immediately, Madden makes it clear that artwork serves not just an aesthetic, but also an emotionally fulfilling, purpose:

Barney loved his paintings so much. Seeing them again was like meeting old friends after many years. Because he had spent all his life living in hotels he had only ever been able to have one painting with him at any given time and the others had been kept in store until today. Taking them out of their boxes was like opening presents; it was like Christmas and his birthday all rolled into one. Some of the pictures were huge and filled a whole wall. Some were tiny and looked as if they had been painted using a brush with only one hair. (31)

This description presents the idea that art can serve as a companion and friend, something to find joy and excitement in. *Snakes' Elbows* was immediately preceded by *Authenticity* (2002), a novel that highlights the importance of art, and features both an accomplished painter and an aspiring painter. *Authenticity* is immersed in ideas about the importance of art, and Madden seems to have taken those ideas and represented them in a manner that children will understand and enjoy. Throughout *Snakes' Elbows*, readers will also encounter examples of what may be viewed as the opposite of aesthetic appreciation and emotional fulfillment: commodity fetishism.

In *Jasper*, Madden exposes the cruelties of commodity fetishism. Each time Jasper throws a lavish party, insisting on every ostentatious detail, his dogs not only witness the intense labor of Jasper's workers, but they suffer their own mistreatment as

well. Jasper's greedy nature, his insistence on owning the best of everything money can buy, leads him to try to steal the Haverford-Snuffley Angel painting. Desiring the painting for its artistic beauty, Barney wants the painting not out of greed, but out of respect for its merit. He recalls seeing it when it was on loan to an exhibition: "It was one of the loveliest things I've ever seen in my whole life" (79). He considers how wonderful it would be to be able to admire the painting every day. Jasper, on the other hand, desires the painting for purely materialistic motives. Talking to himself about the prospect of purchasing it, he says, "If you owned it you could close it away, and then nobody would ever be able to see it . . . Even if it cost lots of money now, you could probably sell it for lots more in the future. And everybody would be dead impressed that you were rich enough to spend all that money on a piddling little painting" (80). Clearly, the evil Jasper cares nothing for art's beauty nor for the joy to be found in it. He considers art to be nothing more than a status marker.

Barney's collection of art displays a variety of interests and tastes. Hoping that children will be able to see his art in their minds, Madden describes it with brief detail: "there was a painting of a ship sailing off into the sunset. There was the castle on a cliff beside the sea. There was the beautiful woman with a yellow butterfly balanced on the tip of her finger—oh, there were so many of them, more than I could ever tell you, and each one was more wonderful than the one before" (31). Later, we are introduced to a painting of "a handsome man in a dark red robe and a velvet hat" (74) and "a bowl of wood strawberries on a crisp white linen cloth" (74-75). Notice that none of these descriptions are particularly detailed—thereby inviting readers to imagine for themselves exactly how each painting might look, and maybe even attempt to paint it themselves.

*Snakes' Elbows* concludes as any traditional children's novel should, with the bad guy caught and punished and the good guy living happily ever after. Jasper the bad guy is arrested for theft, and the discovery of his stockpiling of weapons for internationally arms dealing only adds to the charges against him. Meanwhile, Barney's paintings are recovered, and he adopts Cannibal and Bruiser, renaming them Prince and Cuddles to better reflect their personalities. Rather than keep his impressive art collection for himself, however, he donates it all to the Woodford Art Gallery so that everyone in town can appreciate and experience the joy of art. As for the famous Haverford-Snuffley Angel, he keeps that for his own enjoyment, but loans it to the gallery every January for display. The novel ends with Jasper in prison, Barney hailed as a hero, and the entire town celebrating the marvelous paintings in their gallery.

In *Snakes' Elbows*, Madden not only highlights the importance of kindness, humility, and generosity, but she also emphasizes the rewarding acts of caring for animals and appreciating the arts. Although she did not set out to write a didactic novel, the lessons emerge out of the funny and suspenseful plot. The novel may have an Irish author and an English tone, but its themes are more widely international.

**Values, Teamwork, Identification, and Subjectivity in *Jasper and the Green Marvel* and *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily***

Written as a sequel to *Snakes' Elbows*, *Jasper and the Green Marvel* picks up where its predecessor left off: Jasper is released from the Woodford prison, having served his time for his crimes against Barney Barrington. The title of the opening chapter, "Jasper Walks Free!" suggests an already familiar character, but Madden assures

readers that prior knowledge of *Snakes' Elbows* will not be necessary to enjoy this new story:

How Jasper Jellit came to be in Woodford prison in the first place is such an extraordinary story that you could write a book about it. In fact I've already done just that. The book is called *Snakes' Elbows*, and if you've read it you will know what a bad lad Jasper is. If you haven't read it, don't worry, you'll still be able to follow this new story with no trouble at all. (2)

With this passage, Madden not only suggests that the novel is less of a sequel and more of a continuation in the tales of Jasper Jellit, but she also re-establishes her conversational, English-like tone and style that addresses readers directly, with a slightly dry humor and sharp wit. Moreover, many children's books, including Rowling's, are published in a series so that readers can follow their favorite, or in this case, the most mischievous, character from one story to the next.

As expected, and as seen in *Snakes' Elbows*, traditional values such as kindness and honesty filter through the novel, and Jasper's habits of selfishness and dishonesty ultimately participate in his downfall. Madden, however, does not content herself with simply presenting the same lessons once more; rather, she imbues her newest novel with teachings that speak directly to many of the challenges facing young people today.

Upon his release from prison, Jasper finds himself penniless and homeless—a far cry from the wealth and luxury he once knew. Of course, that wealth and luxury were hardly earned, for he acquired his riches by purchasing weapons and arms and selling them under false pretenses to countries in conflict. Now he is faced with the task of

providing for himself, learning the value of hard work, and starting from scratch in life. Browsing through the town newspaper, *The Woodford Trumpet*, Jasper hopes to see job advertisements that match his own desires for work. Madden gives readers examples of what he wanted to find. A perfect advertisement would read, “WANTED: SOFA TESTER, Must be very lazy and good at doing nothing for hours on end. Excellent pay. No experience necessary” (7). Jasper would also like to find an ad that states, “We are looking for an assistant to the chef in our Five Star Restaurant. The successful candidate will be required to eat lunch and dinner every day and then tell the chef whether or not he’s any good at his job” (8).

Unfortunately, the job advertisements that Jasper actually finds do not reflect his wishes at all, for all the jobs involve manual labor. One advertisement seeks hard workers “to dig holes in the road, whatever the weather,” and another looks for a “washer-upper,” ready to work long hours in a busy hotel (8). Jasper’s disappointing job prospects mirror the bleak situation facing many young people today. With rising unemployment rates across the globe, today’s youth must be prepared for a less than ideal job market. Granted, Madden’s novel is geared toward eight-to-twelve-year-old children, an audience too young to be thinking about employment. Nevertheless, the stories we read and love as children tend to stay with us, so Madden’s reach is not exceeding her grasp when she cautions against unrealistic expectations on the job market.

Finding himself unskilled and unaccustomed to hard work, Jasper resorts to deceit in order to secure a comfortable position. Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley—who debuted in *Snakes’ Elbows* as the elderly lady selling the Haverford-Snuffley Angel painting in order to raise funds to restore and maintain her crumbling estate—advertises for a live-in

position as a gardener for her property. Having sold the painting for one million (the novel never designates a specific type of currency), she has indeed been able to renovate her home and grounds, which are known for their lavish gardens. The fact that he has no knowledge of flowers, plants, or herbs does not deter Jasper, for he charms his way into the position, allowing Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley to believe he has an extensive background in horticulture.

As one may expect, his false credentials cause him continuous trouble as he desperately tries to fake his way through each day as a gardener. Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley's cook, Mrs. Knutmegg, identifies Jasper immediately as a fraud, and thus she assists in bringing about his downfall when he attempts to tie up the two women and rob the estate. Jasper exits the novel just as he exited *Snakes' Elbows*: in prison. Had he taken his opportunity at a second chance more seriously, securing a job—albeit a humble one—and learning to work hard and allow success to follow, he may have enjoyed a more fruitful future. Laziness, deceit, and a heightened sense of self-importance have produced nothing but more trouble and more misery, leaving him exactly where he started.

One of the most interesting features of *Jasper and the Green Marvel* is Madden's choice of animals to serve as first pets and then heroes. In *Snakes' Elbows*, the most obvious animals for pets—cats and dogs—end up saving the day. For *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, however, Madden selects not the most popular and beloved cats and dogs, but the typically despised and feared rats and bats. Jasper leaves prison at the start of the novel with two rats in his shirt pocket, Rags and Bags, who became his companions in his cell. Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley not only allows an entire bat colony to live in her attic, but

she feeds them regularly and keeps one as a companion, Nelly, who hangs from a feather on her hat. As would be expected, Rags, Bags, Nelly, and all her bat friends are gentle creatures; moreover, they realize their diminished status in the world and know that they are highly misunderstood creatures. In her discussion of perspective and subjectivity in children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva notes, "animals in the vast majority of stories are used to empower the readers who do not identify with the characters but rather feel superior to them" (196). In the case of *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, child-readers undoubtedly will be unable to identify with the cruel Jasper, or even the elderly and naïve Mrs. Haverford-Snuffley; thus, they will immediately locate their subjectivity in Rags, Bags, and Nelly—the animals of the story.

In her chapter on how the concept of difference functions in children's literature, critic Lynne Vallone explains how "within children's literature, the impulse to confront notions of difference cannot be separated from questions of identity—figuring out who the protagonist (and the child-reader) might become both in relations to others and in the surrounding world" (183). Applying this concept to Madden's use of ostracized and feared animals, one might read an ethic of difference into the novel. Because they are rats and bats, Rags, Bags, and Nelly live as outcasts, the unpopular kids, the ones who never fit in. As the characters that drive the plot of the novel, working to thwart Jasper's plans to locate and steal the Green Marvel necklace, the two rats and the bat are the protagonists, with Jasper serving as the antagonist. Child-readers will thus identify with these often denigrated animals; with hope, they will also learn—as they become caught up in the dramatic and comic action of the story—not to judge based on appearances, and that common stereotypes tend to be misleading. The novel employs what Vallone

describes as an “ethics of resistance.” She explains, “An ‘ethic of resistance’ argues that difference should neither be effaced nor explained away, but celebrated, rejecting and resisting the narrative of conversion” (183). In Madden’s novel, the rats and bats do not pretend to be otherwise. In fact, their unique qualities, such as scavenging for food and hanging upside down, respectively, are described with pride. Ultimately, these often feared creatures become heroes, and readers find themselves cheering as Rags, Bags, and Nelly thwart Jasper’s plans.

Ideas about identification and subjectivity are also found in Madden’s children’s book that does not feature Jasper. Published in 2007, *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* precedes *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, but does not include any characters or storylines from *Snakes’ Elbows*. However, the novel does include animals as protagonists, as do both Jasper tales, and many other children’s books. Despite this similarity, *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* significantly differs from Madden’s other two children’s novels: it features children alongside its animal-heroes. Eight-year-old Kiera spends the summer with her Aunt Emily, helping Emily in her pet shop. Ryan is the young son of Mrs. Henrietta Fysshe-Pye, who has just moved into Emily’s town, Gillnacurry. As an adventure tale, the novel details the exciting and magical events that occur when the haughty and materialist Henrietta buys three mainstay animals from Emily’s pet shop. Often, child-readers are expected to identify with child-characters, but Madden creates a variety of identification options for her readers. Kiera and Ryan are afforded a relatively limited number of pages—and with over a dozen animal characters who are given specific detail, the novel avoids a singular protagonist and offers the opportunity for readers to find identification points in several characters rather than one.

By refusing to abide by “the firm belief that young readers should be encouraged to ‘identify’ themselves with one of the characters, normally with the protagonist” (Nikolajeva 188), Madden allows her readers to interpret her characters independently: readers can choose favorites, evaluate personalities, and perhaps partially or wholly identify with whomever they prefer. Nikolajeva, with a “thirty-year career in children’s literature” (188), implicitly praises texts that offer such choices:

Contemporary scholarly studies, especially those leaning on narratology and reception theory, emphasize the importance of the readers’ ability to liberate themselves from the protagonists’ subjectivity in order to evaluate them properly . . . This ability is an essential part of reading competence, which enhances sophisticated readers’ ideological and aesthetic appreciation of the text. (188)

*Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* lacks a true, solo protagonist, and readers are free to find aspects of identification in characters other than Kiera and Ryan: Mulvey the cat, with his sneaky but endlessly caring ways; Bubbles the terrier, whose excitement often cannot be contained; Presto the rabbit, who believes in and lives by magical spells; Noreen the snake, who has learned to accept that people tend to fear her before they come to know her; or Captain Cackle the parrot, who enjoys being thrust into the center of attention and invents wild tales to maintain the intrigue.

In terms of ideology, Madden adheres to several of the same ethics she promotes in her two Jasper tales—kindness to animals (even the snakes and rodents), tolerance for others who are different, and a distinct distaste for commodity fetishism. Kindness and tolerance are demonstrated through the varieties of interaction between the animals, and

Madden criticizes commodity fetishism through Henrietta, who, although not quite a villain, is clearly the antagonist of the novel. Throughout the story, Henrietta's desire to always have the biggest, most expensive items lead to more and more chaos. The other characters, including her son Ryan, recognize the ridiculousness of her obsession with material items. Like Jasper, Henrietta acts more childlike than Ryan and Kiera—the children—act. As Ryan tries to explain to his mother that everything does not have to be the largest and most expensive, she continually brushes him off, barely acknowledging that he has spoken at all. As Lynne Vallone explains,

Many late twentieth- and twenty-first-century children's books feature comic and cynical views of the failures of adulthood in nurturing, educating or even conversing with contemporary youth. In these books the difference between adult and child favours the child not because of any greater intrinsic worth of childhood so much as because the adult values depicted are limited to consumerism, competition, and social climbing.

(181)

Thus, Madden's Mrs. Henrietta Fysshe-Pye represents an archetype of the type of adult found in many modern children's novels. Experienced young readers will recognize her foolishness immediately, and sympathize with Ryan as he quietly tries to explain a bit of common sense to his mother. In the end, when Henrietta finally listens to Ryan, their exchange makes it clear that Ryan is more of a grown-up than his petulant mother. Ryan gently explains to her, "you are my mummy and I do so love you, but sometimes you make mistakes . . . Sometimes small things are better than big things. There's no *need* to try and impress people" (227, emphasis in original). Henrietta's eyes fill with tears as

she replies, “You’re right. I’ve been so selfish. I only thought about what I wanted and I didn’t listen to anyone else” (227). Ryan forgives his mother, and she promises to never act so foolishly again. The resolution centers upon Henrietta’s values, for “consumerism, competition, and social climbing” caused her to sacrifice maturity and compassion.

*Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* ends on several joyous notes: Emily and Fintan, her friend who secretly loved her throughout the novel, are married and have twins; Kiera continues to visit every summer and holiday; Henrietta and Ryan move to a wonderful cottage and Ryan finally gets the pets he always wanted, and Emily’s pets remain happily in her pet shop.

## **Conclusion**

While it’s true that Madden’s children’s novels seemingly include few connections to her novels for adults, she explained to me that writing children’s books has caused her to “think differently” about how she writes for adults. This difference is most evident in her latest novel, *Time Present and Time Past*, for she adheres, for the first time, to a chronological structure and plot, and small events in life, such as a business lunch or dinner with the family, gain new significance. Granted, there are still mysteries in her latest novel, mysteries with adult themes that often are not included novels aimed for children, but Madden seems more content, after having written three children’s novels, to break away from ideas concerning memory and interconnectivity, and allow the seemingly mundane details of a person’s day dictate the course of the story. This change—a change that would only be noticed by those familiar with her body of work—suggests the crucial importance of children’s literature, even to writers who tend to shy

away from it. In returning to her own beginnings as a reader in childhood, Madden forged a new path in her present career as writer. From an analysis of Madden's experience in writing children's novels, the somewhat systematic neglect of children's literature in higher education becomes evident, as well as the isolation of it into elementary education programs. That marginalization does much more than irresponsibly heightening certain authors over others, but rather hinders any understanding of an author's individual perspective, who may have influenced an author, and how an author came to embrace her or his particular style of writing.

Madden's three children's novels are a delight to read, even as an adult. While not overly didactic, each novel contains valuable lessons about friendship, teamwork, and the things that matter most in life. The stories contain adventure, excitement, surprises, and a great deal of humor. Madden's friends have told her that they see more of her personality in her children's novels than in her adult novels (interview with author), so anyone wishing to explore her work should not overlook *Snakes' Elbows*, *Jasper and the Green Marvel*, and *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily*.

## CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSION

In this first dissertation on Madden, I have sought to introduce her work and analyze it as much as has been feasible here. As I have shown, her novels are rich with ideas, styles, and themes, and given the relatively little attention paid to her work thus far—as well as the works of other Irish women writers—the gaps in Irish literary criticism are too large for any single project to fully fill. As I conclude this project, I will outline some of the questions that still need to be addressed in terms of Madden and her work, and I will also introduce her latest novel, *Time Present and Time Past*, published in June 2013. In addition to arguing for more critical scholarship on Madden's work, I will suggest how her work might be represented in university curricula, and how the humanities might benefit from including her work in university courses. Finally, I dedicate a portion of this concluding chapter to an exploration of my connections to Madden's work, and although this section is more personal than scholarly or critical, I believe it is necessary. Literature, great literature, will change a person; moreover, great literature forges connections between people and cultures. When this happens, when literature touches a person, stays with that person, and creates connections for that person—as Madden's work has done for me—it ought to be celebrated.

Further examinations of Madden's work are necessary—particularly more about her role as a feminist writer and as a transatlantic writer. For both of these subjects, it is important to note that Madden herself would resist such classification; however, it will be up to future analyses of her work to determine exactly how she fits or does not fit into

such categories. For now, these terms will have to suffice, given that the majority of Madden's main characters are women and that she focuses the inner nature of women's lives, and transnational elements influence not only her own life as a writer, but the lives of several of her characters as well. I have explored feminist, transnational, and other aspects of Madden's work in this dissertation, but they deserve further consideration in future scholarship, also as her career continues and she published more novels. As I stated in my introduction, my purpose here is not to examine Madden's novels through one monolithic theoretical lens, but rather to explore the multitude of lenses that her work lends itself to, to point towards the possibilities for complex literary analysis. Other theories could be applied to her work, as I hope future scholars will do. For example, a future study could consider her work through the lens of psychoanalysis, due to the introspective nature of her writing. Nevertheless, Madden's position as a woman who writes primarily about women offers an immediate space for future study.

As a feminist writer, or at the very least a writer whose primary subjects are women and the concerns of their daily lives, Madden can be placed alongside major writers of international Anglophone literature—such as Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, Alice Munro, and Doris Lessing— as well as among such well established contemporary Irish women novelists such as Edna O'Brien and Jennifer Johnston. All of these authors explore women as lovers, artists, friends, sisters, mothers, daughters, wives, and individuals in society. There are more questions that will need to be explored further, beyond my discussions of them in this study: What traditions and histories of women's writings influence Madden's writing—what is she drawing from? In what ways does Madden resist essentialist definitions of women? What does it mean, or what can we

gather, from the fact that Madden does not consider herself to be a feminist writer? Further studies of Madden's position as a feminist writer will need to answer these questions more fully, drawing on authors such as those listed above in order to trace a history of themes and approaches and arrive at a new categorization; if Madden resists the term "feminist," how, then, can we properly address her work that focuses so extensively on women? Here Edna O'Brien, the senior contemporary Irish female novelist, offers a guiding light, for she, too, did not want to be pigeonholed as a feminist, feeling that this is too limiting a term. Indeed, though "some feminists have criticized" her "for not being a sufficiently liberated feminist" because she has written "about women obsessed with and victimized by their relationships with men," much of her work can nonetheless be read as "strongly feminist" (Cahalan, *Double Visions* 118). Madden's work resembles O'Brien's in this regard.

Another way to situate Madden, as I have noted, is to consider her transnational status. Having lived abroad in Europe for ten years, she has the ability to write about Ireland from a detached perspective that is rare. Much like Julia O'Faolain, when she tells the story of those who spend significant time abroad, she writes with authority. As with O'Faolain in *No Country for Young Men*, however, Madden's time abroad does not diminish her idea of herself as an Irish writer, for she enacts a deep interest in the effects that Irish history has had and will continue to have on its people. In this way, Madden can also be compared to Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. Experiences abroad are featured in the works of these writers, as well as experiences living in Ireland. A study that compares the transnational works of O'Faolain, both Kate and Edna O'Brien, and

Madden has yet to be undertaken. It would be interesting to examine how these writers engage with ideas of memory, place, and home as their characters spend time abroad.

There is also more to be done with Madden and ecocritical ideas and themes. In much of her work, she shows a deep admiration for the landscapes of Northern Ireland. For example, in *One by One in the Darkness*, Cate flies home to Belfast, and as the plane lowers over Lough Neagh, she stares at the land, regarding it as “the type of landscape against which she still judged all others” (5). In *Nothing Is Black*, Claire’s landscape in Donegal, which is not part of the North but does rest on the northern tip of the Republic, is described in highly appreciative detail, and the unnamed narrator in *Molly Fox’s Birthday* uses the drive from Belfast to the farmlands of Antrim to find peace in a time of chaotic sorrow. How does Madden’s treatment of Northern Ireland’s landscape differ from her treatment of its politics? How can one separate a love for a region with a scorn for that region’s politics? What role does literature, including Madden’s, play in negotiating the politics and lives of a tumultuous community? These questions need further study, and Madden’s work can itself facilitate such studies. Furthermore, ecocriticism about urban places is still, in many ways, an emerging field. Madden’s treatment of Belfast and Dublin as not only cities, but also characters, encourages further inquiries into urban studies. For example, Robert McLiam Wilson’s novel of Belfast, *Eureka Street* (1996), was published ten years after Madden’s novel of Belfast, *Hidden Symptoms*. How do these two studies of Belfast compare? In terms of Dublin, Madden depicts a vibrant, at times decadent Dublin in *Time Present and Time Past*—yet she expresses doubts about the city’s financial future. She was, of course, writing with a twenty-twenty hindsight into the now infamous financial collapse, but what other works

situate Dublin in these years, with or without such hindsight? Questions such as these can inform further studies of not only Madden's work, but of contemporary Irish fiction in general.

Another question deserving further study is the influence other kinds of writers have had on Madden. She names Edna O'Brien and John McGahern as her two primary Irish influences, but she also deeply appreciates the work of Russian writers, especially Dostoyevsky, as well as that of Henry James. Interestingly, Madden's appreciation of Russian writers places her within another Irish tradition, for this interest began earlier in Irish fiction writers, such as Daniel Corkery and Liam O'Flaherty. The "peasant" writings of Maxim Gorki, for example, appealed very much to O'Flaherty, who was himself a peasant from the Aran island of Inis Mor. With O'Brien and McGahern, Madden shares a concern for themes regarding isolation, place, and memory, and her writing style often demonstrates poetic fluidity reminiscent of these two acclaimed authors. In her appreciation for Henry James, Madden can also be compared to Irish author John Banville, and in many ways, his novel *The Sea* (2005) shares structural similarities with Madden's work. Both writers engage in a style of gradual revelations about characters, and their plots—arranged through examinations of memory—are therefore non-chronological.

In addition to questions concerning Madden's own influences, it would also be interesting to discover what effects Madden's work has had on younger authors. For example, Lucy Caldwell's first novel, *Where They Were Missed* (2006), explores the repercussions of the Troubles in a manner similar to *One by One in the Darkness*. Half of Caldwell's novel takes place in Belfast during the Troubles, and half takes place ten years

later, in the south of Ireland. Moreover, the Troubles half of the novel is seen through the eyes of Saoirse, the narrator, when she is a child, and she is ten years older in the post-Troubles half. Similarly, the Quinn sisters are children during the Troubles chapters of *One by One in the Darkness*, and they are young women, in their late twenties to early thirties, in the post-Troubles chapters. What other up-and-coming Irish writers has Madden influenced, and what will shape her legacy as she continues to write?

In future studies of Madden's current work, more consideration should be given to her most recent novel. As I approached the end of this project, Deirdre Madden published her eleventh novel, *Time Present and Time Past* (2013), and it has earned fine praise in its early reviews. This novel centers on Fintan Buckley, as he attempts to negotiate the realities of his present with images and flashbacks—sometimes imagined flashbacks—of the past and with visions of the future. A paradox involving the power of time versus the meaninglessness of time has interested Madden for quite some time. Aisling, in *Remembering Light and Stone*, realizes the utter frailty of our lives as she watches the traffic go by on a busy afternoon in Rome, and it suddenly occurs to her that she is standing on the ruins of a powerful civilization, and that one day someone will stand on the ruins of ours. On the one hand, she considers, all our materials, all our wealth, mean nothing against the forces of time, yet on the other hand, hundreds of years have not affected a drastic change on human beings. Madden's interest in time is also evident in the structure of many of her novels. Both *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* and *One by One in the Darkness* alternate past and present as she moves from chapter to chapter. Also, *Authenticity* and *Molly Fox's Birthday* are organized without any specific

or alternating chronology; rather, the novels move back and forth, through past and present, without any set pattern.

As I read *Time Present and Time Past*, a surprising, disappointing realization crept over me: I did not enjoy it as much as I enjoyed reading her previous novels for the first time. I admit this with hesitation, for I have only read the novel once thus far, and, as I will discuss later, Madden's work requires multiple readings before a full sense of what she is doing can be gained. With confidence, I expect this novel to grow on me, as did a few of her other novels that did not strike me immediately, but rather penetrated my consciousness with repeated readings. I can identify my chief concern with this latest novel—the prose. Madden's writing in *Time Present and Time Past* adopts a much more straightforward style than her prior works. The sentences are often basic, and I had been looking forward to the often lyrical, consistently beautiful prose that I know she can achieve. It would be remiss of me, however, to suggest that my criticism of this novel is the final word, or even that it is altogether fair, given my intimate knowledge of her earlier novels. I will offer my initial response to the novel, but I will follow with a powerful review that offers a perspective that convinces me to reread the novel as soon as possible.

In my opinion, in her previous explorations of time, Madden achieves a fluidity of narrative that she does not quite reach in *Time Present and Time Past*. The writing style in this novel is more straightforward and simple, with such repetition of sentence structure that certain punctuation usages began to stand out in a somewhat distracting way, such as the reliance on semicolons and colons to join related or corresponding ideas. Moreover, the novel's main concern—Fintan's increasingly strange experiences with

time and with images he sees—does not come across as wholly believable, and perhaps the writing style contributes to this problem. In one of the earliest incidents of his altering state of mind, Fintan sits in a café enjoying a slice of carrot cake, when he suddenly recognizes the dessert in front of him, and the text on its label, as something very foreign:

But it isn't just words and language that are becoming strange to him, it is objects too. What had been in the cardboard sleeve now looks unspeakably bizarre to him: the moist terracotta crumbs; the coarse bright-orange shreds laced through it; the heavy parchment-coloured cream in which is embedded a thing, a hard, dark wrinkled thing that looks like the pickled brain of an elf. And now, like the fading of a dream, Fintan gradually becomes aware of the object before him for what it is: a half-eaten piece of carrot cake with a walnut on top. (10)

While there is nothing particularly wrong with this passage, it fails, for me, to leave a strong impact. Fintan goes on to consider how he had a similar experience earlier that day, during lunch with a business associate. He recalls the moment when, “the other man had stopped being a person with whom Fintan was communicating, and had become instead a kind of phenomenon which he was observing. It was as if the air had thinned out and the man was like something that had dropped out of the sky” (10-11). Fintan's experiences with time and space are reminiscent of Aisling's in *Remembering Light and Stone*, yet her experiences feel more human, and are captured with more fluidity.

On that hot afternoon in Rome, Aisling's experiences with feeling out of time and place connect more effectively to the reader. She tells us, as she watches the traffic go

by, with starts and stops, “Suddenly this happened and I found I was looking into the face of a man driving a big white Landrover. And it was the strangest thing, because I felt that I was looking at a person from an ancient civilization. I saw the whole scene in terms of both time and space, and I saw its absurdity. . .” (7). This first-person narration, a rare form for Madden, lends credence to the experience of feeling out of time and space. In third person, the incident sounds too forced, and it is difficult to ultimately know Fintan the way a reader can come to know Aisling.

Perhaps the reason why *Time Present and Time Past* strikes me as less effective is the fact that Madden is attempting to engage simultaneously in ideas regarding time and space and in a major phase of contemporary Irish history: the “Celtic Tiger” economy of the 1990s and the resulting financial collapse. The story takes place during the time of the Irish economic recession, and unlike in the case of Madden’s previous works, we are immediately afforded an exact moment in history to locate ourselves: “It is Ireland in the spring of 2006 and failure, once an integral part of the national psyche, is an unpopular concept these days” (2). In terms of the Irish economy, Madden writes with the knowledge that both she and her readers know what is to come: utter financial crisis and a shattering of the illusions that the Celtic Tiger upheld.

A clever foreshadowing infuses the novel with a sense of doom, a sense that Fintan’s comfortable life in Howth is hurtling towards an end, and nothing can be done to prevent it. For example, as his wife Colette leaves the house the morning of Fintan’s experience with the carrot cake, she thinks of her home as something “intact and sealed like a snow globe, a little closed world onto itself” (43). She never imagined, with her modest upbringing, living so comfortably in a house in Howth, “beside the sea, with the

boats and the harbour, in such a house” (47), with three children, two already in university. After this brief moment of appreciation, the omniscient third-person narrator takes over, and one cannot be sure if the following sentiment belongs to Colette, or to this unknown entity telling their story:

But it was fragile too, and could be destroyed, as a snow globe can be broken, reduced in an instant to fragments of glass and the gimcrack contents that had been magnified and made magical by the water. Their lives could be overtaken by calamity; the dark act of some blank force could bring it all to an end tomorrow. (44)

As readers in both Ireland and the United States well know, much of the current economy amounts to nothing but “gimcrack”—sound bites and grand speeches but little effective action—so that what people thought of as their economic status suddenly becomes a mirage, “made magical by the water.” Only Fintan’s mother, Joan, recognizes the fragility of the economy. She is presented as a type of woman difficult to characterize: some readers will find sympathy in her, while others will find disdain. Either way, she, almost seventy and widowed, follows the county’s economic situation intently, and she knows what is to come:

She reads every last little article in the business pages of *The Irish Times* every day and is convinced that the good times are going to end and sooner rather than later. Anybody should be able to see it coming, she thinks. The problem is that people don’t want to know, they want to think that the money will keep flowing forever. Well, they’re in for a shock.” (15)

As we now know, Joan's foresight reigns true, and while we are not privy to the fate of the Buckley family, the ominous remarks here and there add up to a pessimistic vision of their future.

Admittedly, my initial response to *Time Present and Time Past* seems a bit harsh. As I stated earlier, however, Madden's work takes its time in revealing its complexities. In a review published in the *Irish Times*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, a prolific and acclaimed Irish author, praises Madden's latest achievement in prose:

Even the prose is careful not to draw attention to itself. Initially the writing seems too spare, even flat; gradually one appreciates how alive it is. Is the writer questioning the value of fiction itself? Refuting EM Forster's famous reluctant acceptance that "oh dear, the novel tells a story"? There is precious little in the way of dramatic story in this book. Oh dear. And yet it is full of everyday tales, simply told, and they are more than enough.

(n.p.)

Ní Dhuibhne concludes her review by once again affirming the novel's art: "Elegantly written, deeply reflective and beautifully shaped, this rich and luminous novel is more daring than it seems. It is an understated little masterpiece." Indeed, upon reading this review, I questioned my own reading of the text—I must have missed something. As I suggested earlier, my own reading of *Time* was, in part, shaped by my intimate knowledge of Madden's prior works. As with many other authors, however, Madden is experimenting with new styles and attempting new modes of expression, and I look forward to rereading her latest work with this, and with Ní Dhuibhne's review, in mind.

For me, at least for now, the strength of Madden's latest novel is its timeliness, for the current financial crisis in Ireland, and throughout the United States and Europe, has led to a heightened interest in and awareness of economic issues across the humanities. I am hesitant to assert that she accomplishes anything significant in regards to how we perceive time and space, but *Time Present and Time Past* does successfully explore a subject that is as universal as time: money. In fact, this latest novel makes Madden an even stronger contender for more inclusion in university courses, given the current popularity of Celtic Tiger and related economic discussions. In Spring 2013, Dr. Wes Hamrick, at the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, offered a course entitled "Banks, Bailouts, and Irish Literature." The primary course objective was to "read contemporary Irish literature and film in light of the social and economic changes taking place in Ireland in the last two decades" (Hamrick). Course readings included Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* (both the 1987 novel and the 1991 film), Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (both the 1996 memoir and the 1999 film). Among these texts and this subject matter, Madden's *Time Present and Time Past* would be a timely fit in an updating of this interesting syllabus; of course, the novel was published after Hamrick's course began. Current trends in Irish Studies, as I asserted in my introduction and will continue to outline later in this chapter, suggest that advocacy will be necessary in order to find this timely novel on reading lists in universities.

*Time Present and Time Past* can find an immediate home in the ever-growing field of Celtic Tiger literature, but much of Madden's work has yet to be situated alongside other comparable writers. At this point, only her two "Troubles" novels—

*Hidden Symptoms* and *One by One in the Darkness*—have received significant critical attention and provoked comparisons to other fictional accounts of life during the Troubles. It seems that because she is from Northern Ireland, having grown up in County Antrim, she gained automatic status as a Northern Irish writer of the Troubles with the publication of her first novel, *Hidden Symptoms*. There is still, however, more to be done with Madden and the Troubles. Characters in both *Molly Fox's Birthday* and *Time Present and Time Past* are affected by the violence of the Troubles, and although that violence is not a central theme, as it is with *Hidden Symptoms* and *One by One in the Darkness*, its presence in the background suggests the infiltrating affect of those decades of turmoil. However, while it is clear to me that more must be considered in Madden's relationship with the Troubles, this is essentially the only context in which she has received critical attention, and thus I want to argue for more studies of her other novels before returning to her role as a writer about the Troubles.

As I have persistently pointed out, critical attention to Madden has been sparse, and unfortunately, her situation is not unique, for many Irish women writers of fiction experience similar critical neglect. Clare Boylan, for example, has published at least a dozen novels and short-story collections, many of which have been well received by critics, yet little has been accomplished in terms of critical analyses (beyond reviews) of her works. Similarly, Mary Rose Callaghan has published seven novels, which are also well received, a number of shorter works, and a non-fiction study of Katherine Parnell, more commonly known as Kitty O'Shea. Nevertheless, she joins Madden and Boylan in the category of under-represented Irish women fiction writers. Ita Daly and Emma Donoghue also fall into this category, as do older generations of women writers,

including Molly Keane and Julia O’Faolain. Keane and O’Faolain, however, have received more attention than the more recent women novelists, but there is still more that can be done. Many of these writers, like Madden, focus primarily on women—their lives, struggles, memories, and desires. It’s also worth noting that the Irish novel began with a woman’s novel: Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800). In *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*, James M. Cahalan declares *The Real Charlotte* (1894), by Edith Somerville and Martin Ross (a pseudonym for Violet Florence Martin, Somerville’s cousin), to be “the greatest Irish novel of the nineteenth century” (94). There is a large body of scholarship on Edgeworth and a fairly sizeable one on Somerville and Ross, yet scholarship on subsequent Irish women novelists is inadequate. Is it a coincidence that, in a nation with a strong legacy of patriarchy, women writers writing about women receive relatively little critical attention? Could an academic publishing company begin a series of critical studies on these neglected writers? It seems that the answer would have to be yes, if we, in the field of Irish literature, have any interest in expanding the field and distancing ourselves from the legacy of the *Field Day* controversy, which I discussed in my introduction. I want to return, in the rest of this conclusion, to larger pedagogical and scholarly issues.

As outlined above and in my introduction, Madden’s work has been routinely underrepresented—even in Irish studies programs and courses in U. S. colleges. A disappointing trend in Irish studies in this country—one that may be actively contributing to the lack of focused attention paid to Ireland’s women writers—can be found in pedagogical tendencies. In examining syllabi for Irish literature courses at multiple colleges and universities across the United States, I have found a male-dominated focus

in text selection, and again, women writers are underrepresented. For example, at the University of Connecticut, an institution with a strong Irish studies program, their course on Irish Literature to 1939 includes only one woman writer: Maria Edgeworth. The semester is dedicated to Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Wilde, O'Casey, and, on a minor level, a few other male writers (Jacobus). There is no mention of Sydney Owenson, Emily Lawless, Somerville and Ross, Lady Gregory, Katherine Tynan Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, or Molly Keane. Although this syllabus dates back to 1999, University of Connecticut's Professor Mary Burke's offerings for her Fall 2013 sections of early and contemporary Irish literature list only Lady Gregory and Marina Carr in terms of women writers, alongside Wilde, Joyce, Yeats, Synge, Heaney, McCabe, Martin McDonagh, and Conor McPherson (Burke). A similar course syllabus at California State University at Sacramento states, "Representative figures will include W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, John Synge, Sean O'Casey, Sean O'Faolain, and Frank O'Connor" (Madden, "Syllabus"). At Boston University, the 300-level Modern Irish Literature course shows a similar gender imbalance. Elizabeth Bowen is the only female novelist studied, and, with the exception of poets Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan, women are again underrepresented. The rest of the syllabus is dedicated to Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, Friel, Roddy Doyle, and Brendan Behan (Doody). A glance at syllabi from colleges and universities across the country upholds this disappointing trend in representation.

I asked Madden for her perspective on the role that colleges and universities play in representing authors, after offering my opinion about the heavy emphasis on "the usual male suspects" and not enough emphasis on women writers, except for a select few. She

acknowledged that Trinity College, Dublin offers a great deal of variety, including courses on women writers, and she also confirmed, from her own experiences, that students rather enjoy encountering new writers and should be able to encounter them more often. Madden told me,

It is very difficult because there's so many good people . . . and I think that you're right. What makes the difference, I should say, of how writers are successful, if you want to put it that way, and I think there is one thing, like the awards, book club, and even the straight-down-the-line marketing side, and the universities are important as well. (personal interview)

Madden went on to discuss how many writers do not actually concern themselves with such issues of representation; for them, their progress in their own work remains the focus, and what happens after that is largely tertiary. The field of Irish studies, however—the scholarship produced and the courses offered—must concern itself with moving beyond the traditional figures and expanding the canon to include more diverse voices, and certainly more women's voices. I would also like to see Irish women novelists included more often in university courses that are not specifically Irish-related—such as courses on women's literature, twentieth and twenty-first century fiction, and transatlantic literatures. As a starting point, however, Irish studies programs must take a firmer grip on the reins in forging these paths.

In addition to colleges and universities, Irish studies organizations, such as the American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS), must take a more active role in expanding the Irish canon. Many of the Irish studies conferences I have attended in the past, where professors and scholars of Irish literature present their work, are similar to current course

offerings in that they are male-dominated in terms of subject matter, and Irish women novelists are underrepresented. In anticipation of the argument that “we have to have Yeats and Joyce,” I would say that Irish studies has reached a point where the appropriate response may be that their inclusion must not come at the expense of writers whose contributions in Irish literature have not yet been fully recognized.

As I come to the end of this project, I am compelled, as I have stated, to read *Time Present and Time Past* yet again, for much of Madden’s work requires multiple readings to truly gain a sense of what it’s all about. Truth be told, I did not care for a few of Madden’s novels when I first read them, but I was also approaching them with an academic frame of mind: What can I say about this? How can I fit it into such-and-such an idea? What will I do with this novel? For example, I remember my initial frustration with *Molly Fox’s Birthday*—its seeming lack of structure and purpose baffled me. After multiple readings, though, the beauty of the novel became more and more apparent: I began to recognize its insightful, introspective look at the complex art of friendship, and its celebration of various forms of art. In short, Madden’s work demands much more insight than I initially gave it. Her contemplative and complicated perspectives on ourselves and our world are challenging, and readers, myself included, must be cognizant of the necessity of multiple readings and multiple meanings. Some readers may be turned off by the reality that Madden’s work must be absorbed slowly; it cannot be rapidly consumed. Yet is that not also the case with Ireland’s most celebrated authors, such as Yeats and Joyce?

Unfortunately, rapid consumption of information has become the rule rather than the exception, with the proliferation of e-books, Wikipedia synopses, online Spark notes,

and even summaries of the news and current events rather than detailed accounts. As I read through Madden's work multiple times, each time more slowly and carefully, I also became aware of just how far general reading habits have fallen, and how much Madden is asking us, through the complexity of her works, to slow down and relearn—or for some, to learn—how to read critically, deliberately, carefully, and slowly. For this reason, perhaps above all, Madden's work deserves our attention. In the United States today, the humanities are suffering—through both spending cuts and declining enrollments that result from our society's general disregard for the skills fostered in the liberal arts. When students are discouraged from critical thinking—and such discouragement is what it means to neglect the humanities—they are more likely to take any and all information at face value. A case in point: In the introductory literature courses I have taught, to non-English majors, students tend to read stories and poetry in exactly the same way—they read for plot and plot only. The idea that other motivating forces are operating beneath that “plot,” and such a term indeed does not quite apply to poetry, initially baffles them, and this is a potentially dangerous state for students to be in, for it renders them vulnerable to rhetorical manipulations and other forms of deceit.

One way to begin to address the crisis in the humanities, the questions regarding the “usefulness” of the field, is to look to postmodern writing and its challenges. Without a doubt, Madden's work can be classified as postmodern. In fact, Andrea Beck's *Documentation on Kaleidoscope of Postmodernism: Irish Narration from the 1970s to the 1990s* (2004) includes a discussion of *One by One in the Darkness*, and further studies in postmodernism should include more of Madden's work. The sheer complexity of postmodern writing challenges students to create meaning, discern motivation, and

interpret subtext. I think that anyone with a realistic frame of mind would agree that these skills hold value outside the literary world: they are necessary for modern life. An author such as Madden encourages and reinforces such skills, and American universities would do well to follow her lead—and the lead that so many other postmodern writers have taken. This is also an avenue to take Irish literature out of the sometimes confining realm of Irish literature: to put authors from across the globe in conversation with one another, for a global perspective is necessary in today's world.

I look forward to more work from Deirdre Madden, and the rest of the literary world should, too. Her experiments with aspects of time, memory, place, relationships, violence, and art are much needed contributions to a world that has bowed down to forces that disregard humanity. I am also eager to reread Madden's work without feeling the pressures of academic writing and deadlines, for her work can be enjoyed again and again for the sheer pleasure it brings.

The fact that Madden's work has received relatively little critical attention has served as a major motivating force for me as I worked on this project. My connection to Madden's work, however, goes deeper, in a personal way, than my own appreciation for it and my frustration at the lack of critical attention. Perhaps in a way that highlights her commitment to strong female characters, Madden's work has become a source of bonding between my mother and myself. I have always enjoyed a close relationship with my mother, whom I affectionately call Mama, but in Madden, we find a literary connection that was previously but unknowingly missing. After reading *Nothing Is Black*, I recommended it to her, lending her my copy and insisting that she would enjoy it. And she, not surprisingly, was eager to know more about what I was so passionately

studying. The novel struck her more deeply than I could have imagined. She has never fully articulated what, exactly, moved her so wondrously, but she finished *Nothing Is Black*, called me immediately, and told me how much the novel moved her, how it articulated thoughts and emotions that she herself recognized but never quite knew how to express.

I had already planned to travel to Dublin in that summer of 2012 for an interview with Madden, and my mother explained that after reading that novel, she knew she should come with me, that somehow the novel represented a sign that we should go together. And we did. I will always remember this special trip that we took, what we talked about and what we experienced. While in Dublin, she began reading *Remembering Light and Stone*, and fewer than forty pages in, she put the book down and remarked, with astonishment, “She’s a genius.” It was late at night and we did not really discuss it, but my mother found in Madden what I had found, and knowing that made me feel all that much closer to her. Even more so, my mother’s assertion solidified something that I already knew but that she questioned: the depths of her own intelligence. In one novel and a fraction of another, she recognized a quality of ideas and shrewd insights into humanity, ones that I did not realize until I had explored much more of Madden’s work. Since our trip, my mother has bought a few more of Madden’s novels, and we are hoping to introduce my nephews (her grandsons) to Madden’s children’s novels. I look forward to when she reads more of Madden’s work, so that we can discuss and critique it over lunch some afternoon. Years ago, we called these discussion-meals “chat and chews,” and the term has stuck. In Madden, I find another reason to enjoy a chat and chew with my mom.

Although *Nothing Is Black* is the novel that sparked my mother's interest in Madden, I will also always associate it with my father. Before I decided to focus my dissertation on Madden, I studied Irish literature in general, particularly women novelists, as well as the Irish language. I look forward to returning to general Irish literary studies and the language. In the summer of 2010, I planned a trip to Ireland for two reasons: The paper I submitted to a conference in County Limerick, "Ireland and Ecocriticism," had been accepted, and I also registered for a two-week course in the Irish language at the Oideas Gael language program in the Gaeltacht of Glenn Cholm Cille, in southwestern County Donegal. My father decided to accompany me on the trip. We flew to Limerick for the conference, and then rented a car and drove to Donegal. He stayed for the first few days of my program, and when classes were over each day, we drove around Donegal and experienced its beauty firsthand. In *Nothing Is Black*, Madden beautifully details the wondrous landscape that is Donegal, and when I read the novel, one year after my trip with him, I could picture the landscape exactly as she describes it, and I found myself remembering the joy of our trip, and the remarkable man who is my father. We stood together in awe at the cliffs of Slieve League, and we fumbled, as tourists do, as we tried to take pictures of ourselves with the majestic scenery as our background. We marveled at the fishing port in Killybegs, the largest port in the Republic of Ireland. Getting to Slieve League, and traveling back and forth between Killybegs, where his hotel was, and Glenn Cholm Cille, was a challenge. The roads were narrow, and we were not used to driving on "the other side of the road." I have hilarious memories of driving through Donegal with my father, each of us shouting at the other when it seemed we would swipe the side mirror of a parked car or scratch our own side mirrors on the stone

walls that lined the seemingly impossibly narrow roads. Our time together in Donegal was short, for he only a few days before driving back to Limerick to fly out of Shannon Airport. Nevertheless, in those few days we experienced as much of the beauty of Donegal as we possibly could, and so when I read and reread *Nothing Is Black*, the passages that describe the landscape resonate with me in a way that goes beyond the fact that I have been there, for the trip to Donegal with my father stands as a special experience that only he and I can share. I share these memories because I admire my father, his intelligence, his perseverance, and the depths of his ability to love. It's important to me that he ended up playing a part as I pursued graduate study in Irish literature, and I think of him and our wonderful trip with every reading of *Nothing Is Black*.

In addition to forging a unique connection between both of my parents and me, Madden's work has changed the way I view myself and the way I view the world around me. Just recently, for example, I was in San Francisco, and I found myself astonished by the number of homeless people. Soon enough, I realized that these people approached me for money only when I pulled my map out, for such an action marked me as a tourist, and they have learned how easily the locals can ignore them. This sad realization brought to mind Claire's experience in *Nothing Is Black*, when she sees how people ignore the woman begging in Paris, "as though her age and her poverty had rendered her invisible" (150). Claire angers Marcus by explaining the righteous denial most people have towards the poor: "Before God, she said, we are all like that . . . Don't you see how the people shun her? In her weakness and destitution they recognize something of themselves, and it frightens them. They want to deny it, so they try to pretend that she doesn't even exist"

(150). I thought of this scene in San Francisco, and realized Claire was right: Poverty renders a person invisible, so that members of society do not have to face their own potential for weakness. Although Madden does not write with a didactic purpose, and does not consider ethics and morality to be primary concerns in her writing, there are moments throughout her novels that ask us to examine society and humanity with a more critical eye. Moreover, these moments ask us to allow for interpersonal connections with people we would otherwise ignore; these moments call for a renewed sense of pluralism, of our shared commitment to one another, in a time that seems to privilege individualism. Part of the beauty of Madden's work rests on the fact that a reader need not be a literary critic to understand the humanistic themes and to see the ultimate futility of a system that makes society subservient to the individual. In asking readers to reexamine themselves, Madden enacts the undeniable fact that literature can be, and ought to be, a powerful force in society.

I hope that this dissertation will encourage more critical studies of Deirdre Madden, as well as other underrepresented Irish women fiction writers. The field of Irish literature has come a long way in terms of gender, but more work needs to be done. This work must be shared by scholars and educators if we intend to also increase readership. I think readers across the United States would enjoy reading Madden's novels, and younger readers will find delight in her children's books. Furthermore, most of her novels are about two hundred pages long, a suitable length for college courses. It has been both a challenge and a pleasure to complete this project, and I look forward to seeing what shape and direction the field of Irish studies takes in the future.

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