



**Morales-Ladrón, Marisol.** *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film.* Bern: Peter Lang, 2016. 352 pp.

The family institution is one of the main pillars of most societies. This micro-structural institution, which constitutes the base for the formation of most nations, has been continuously discussed, exposed, changed and rearranged for thousands of years and has been represented through innumerable forms of art over the same period. If it cannot be said to be the mainstay of humanity, the family might at least be recognized as being at the core of the primary social, political, historical and cultural aspects of the formation of contemporary Ireland. As it was proposed in *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film*, “institutionalized through nationalist, religious, moral and political discourses, the family has functioned as an icon of Irish Culture” (1).

In the political sphere, throughout the twentieth century, the familial establishment has been especially exalted and great efforts were made by the Irish Government to protect and ensure the special role of women in maintenance of the family as a pillar of an ideal society. The Constitution of Ireland from 1937, for example, made formal distinctions between men and women, such as the recognition of the particular role of women in the private sphere of society as a homemaker, wife and, most especially, mother.

Besides the effort of the State and the Church in order to create the patriarchal, Catholic and devoted family structure, *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film* brings to the surface cultural representations that exemplify out-of-the-norm families. More than that, “the dysfunctional family was not a singularity of modern times but rather a feature in Irish Society, no matter how concealed it was from public discourse” (7).

Edited by Marisol Morales-Ladrón, *Family and Dysfunction* proposes a careful examination on the representation of the dysfunctional family in filmic and literary productions from the last four decades in Ireland. She divided the book by approaching the topic into these categories: Women’s Writing, Autobiography and Memoir, Multiculturalism and Transculturalism, Satire, and Cinema.

In the first chapter, “Portraits of Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Women’s Narrative: Confined to the Cell, Lost to Memory”, Marisol Morales-Ladrón discusses the representation of the dysfunctional families as proposed by Irish women writers since the 1980s. For that, eight novels were selected: Julian O’Faolain’s *No Country for Young Men* (1980), Deirdre Madden’s *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), Lia Mills’ *Another Alice* (1996), Mary O’Donnell’s *The Elysium Testament* (1999), Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), Jennifer Johnston’s *Foolish Mortals* (2007), Claire Keegan’s *Foster* (2010) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir’s *You* (2010).

This chapter focuses on “how women writers have constructed different notions of identity, contending that their role challenging traditional views of motherhood, unearthing taboo subjects and mainly denouncing abuses with the (patriarchal) order has been as outstanding as underestimated” (31).

The study about *The Gathering* by Anne Enright developed in this chapter seems to be particularly interesting for two main reasons: firstly, the novel was published during Celtic Tiger economic boom and, secondly, because it deals with one of the traumas of the contemporary Irish society: children’s sexual abuse. It is known that in the turn of the century many accusations came up in Irish media concerning this issue which had never been openly discussed. According to the Emilie Pine in *The Politics of Irish Memory*, “Almost as much as of the abuse itself, it is this discovery that is shocking – that the cruelties perpetrated against children, the most vulnerable members of society, were systematically ignored in defense to a culture of silence and amnesia” (PINE 2011, 22). In this regard, Morales-Ladrón says “At a superficial level, *The Gathering* can be seen as a bleak but also comic story about such universal themes as life, love and death, while at a deeper lever it becomes clear how it successfully discloses the devastating effects of trauma caused by child abuse, focusing not only on the troubled victim but also on the distressed next akin survivors” (58).

Morales-Ladrón presents a very detailed analysis on eight novels historicizing social and ethical changes occurring in Ireland in the last decades through these female fictions.

In the second chapter, “Home Revisited: Family (Re)Constructions in Contemporary Irish Autobiographical Writing”, Inés Praga discusses semi-autobiographical novels (Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*, Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People*, John Banville’s *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*) and memoirs (John McGahern’s *Memoir*, Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girl*, Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are you somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O’Faolain* and *Almost There*, and Hugo Hamilton’s *Every Single Minute*) that “recall the experience of growing up in mid-century Ireland evoking a Catholic childhood and home” (85).

For that purpose, Praga considered two essential tropes “the writer’s establishment of an imaginary home and the (re) construction of an imaginary family” (97). Here, again, these narratives are closely examined, including works that were once banned by the Irish Censorship such as McGahern’s *Memoir* and Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girl*. Both writers had to leave Ireland. Praga concludes that “It is evident that the works analyzed do not make the home a shelter or the family a stronghold, although they ratify the healing power of writing” (133).

Chapter Three is titled “Family and Dysfunction in Ireland Represented in Fiction through the Multicultural and Intercultural Prisms” by Asier Altuna-García de Salazar. The critic turns to the influence of immigrants in the Irish family. The topic is broad as it entails “issues of race, colour, ethnicity, stereotyping, mixed-race marriages and children, asylum seekers and their families realities, migrant and diasporic families

to Ireland, second and third generation Irish people with different cultural backgrounds, multi-ethnic couples, access to family reunification, various denominational families, citizenship issues with regard to infants born in Ireland of migrant couples and lone parents” (140), among others. With so much to be addressed, it seems that there is enough material for a whole new book. However, Salazar looks at works by Hugo Hamilton, Emer Martin, Colm Tóibín, Roddy Doyle, Cauvery Madhavan, Nena Bhandari, Mary O’Donnell, Margaret McCarthy and Marsha Mehran, through the lens of multiculturalism and transculturalism; the result is a well-structured and updated view of contemporary and global Ireland.

In the fourth chapter, Juan F. Elices deals with “the most dysfunctional and undefinable literary modes” (201): the Satire. In “Familiar Dysfunctionalities in Contemporary Irish Satirical Literature”, Elices mainly addresses Anne Haverty’s *One Day as a Tiger*, Mark Macauley’s *The House of Slamming Doors* and Julian Quinn’s *Mount Merrion*, “all of them suitable representatives of how the use of satire succeeds in presenting an overtly farcical portrait of the family and the moral and ideological foundations upon which it has been traditionally sustained” (202). Elices also produces an innovative perspective when analyzing the satire (which is not recurrently examined by literary critics in contemporaneity). In addition, the narratives selected are recent.

Chapter Six by Rosa González-Casademont is named “Representation of Family Tropes and Discourses in Contemporary Irish-Themed Cinema” and discusses Irish filmic familial representations. Before starting the analysis of a number of works, González-Casademont considers some extra-and para-cinematic factors. This introduction is quite useful for the reader who is not familiar with Irish filmmaking history and its social and financial context. Among the films studied is *The Ballroom of Romance* adapted from a short-story by William Trevor and exhibited in São Paulo during the Irish Film Festival hosted by University of São Paulo in 2010.

Throughout the analysis from the second half of twentieth-century up to contemporary times, González-Casademont suggests that “Irish cinema is no longer bound by the postcolonial imperative to ‘explain what it means to be Irish’ but by the compulsion to create stories that will connect with a wide audience” (292).

The last three chapters are dedicated to unprecedented interviews with the writer Emer Martin and the two film directors Jim Sheridan and Kirsten Sheridan. The last two were selected “on account of the differing meaning and centrality the family unit has in their Irish-set films” (23).

*Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film* approaches the dysfunctional family in a very innovative way at different levels: firstly, it recalls narratives written by women which were marginalized throughout the twentieth century; then it turns to memoirs and autobiographies which form a traditional genre in Irish Literature, it keeps its pace by returning to the margin when looking at some novels through multicultural lens; next it portrays a discussion on a non-commonly reviewed genre, the satire; lastly it elaborates a very detailed account on Irish filmmaking in the

last four decades with contributing interviews with the film directors. Moreover, the book also carries an external perspective from very well-known Spanish scholars adding to its already original nature.

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### **Works cited**

Pine, Emily. *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011