



Carregal, José. *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2021. pp. 218.

Published in 2021 by the University College Dublin Press, *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction* is a comprehensive but not exhaustive book by the Spanish scholar José Carregal. Based in the University of Huelva, Spain, Carregal has focused his research on gender and sexuality in Irish writing, particularly in the works by Keith Ridgway and Colm Tóibín. In *Queer Whispers*, Carregal analyses a selection of twenty-four novels and eleven short stories published between 1982 to 2018. Borrowing the term agnosia, the “cognitive inability to recognise or understand the significance of what is being seen” (Pine qt. Carregal 3), from the critic Emilie Pine, Carregal explores how fiction provides a space for recognition and resilience to render homosexuality in Ireland. For Carregal, the narratives negotiate the relationship between the silence (and silencing) of same-sex experiences in Irish society and the search for a language capable of embracing these experiences.

Chapters one, two and six delve into the lives of lesbians in Irish fiction from the late 1980s to the Celtic Tiger period in the 2000s. Concerned with the relationship between silence and language, the chapters present a development in the politics of representation, from the lack or refusal of the characters to identify themselves as lesbians to the liberal subjectivity of homonormative identity. Themes such as the invisibility of lesbian social experience and desire under a Catholic and patriarchal ruled country are addressed in the three chapters. In this regard, “‘I Don’t Even Know How to be a Lesbian’: Isolation and Vulnerability in the 1980s and early 1990s Irish Lesbian Fiction” is a good representation of how the characters negotiate their identities and sexual desires within a social environment that negates and silences lesbian identity. In the first chapter, Carregal analyses the novels *Interlude* (1982) by Maura Richards, *The High Road* (1988) by Edna O’Brien, Linda Cullen’s *The Kiss* (1990), and *A Woman’s Love* (1994) by Padraig Standún.

The author dedicates chapters two and six to the fiction of Mary Dorcey and Emma Donoghue, respectively. “‘Coming Clear of Years of Camouflage’: The Feminist Politics of Mary Dorcey’s Lesbian Fiction” focuses on the short stories “A Country Dance,” “The Husband,” and “Introducing Nessa” from the 1989 collection *Noise from the Woodshed* and the novel *Biography of Desire* (1997). Different from the overall perspective of lesbianism taken by the narratives in chapter one, Dorcey’s novel and short stories adopt a language that highlights the potentiality of solidarity and a sense of community through sexuality, imbued within feminist politics.

In “‘The Room Feels Warmer When You’re In It’: Lesbian Relationships in Emma Donoghue’s Contemporary-Set Novels,” the analysis of the novels by the prolific writer Emma Donoghue centers on lesbian identity in the 1990s and 2000s, marked by the tensions between the politics and discourses of feminism and liberalism. The novels analyzed by Carregal, *Stir-Fry*, *Hood*, and *Landing*, represent a range of situations, such as coming-out struggles, grief, lesbian widowhood experience, migration, and long-distance relationship.

Chapters three, four, five and seven tackle gay lives represented in Irish fiction. In a similar approach to the chapters dedicated to lesbian representation, Carregal presents a range of social and historical moments through the narratives analysed, from coming-out stories, followed by sexual subcultural practices, the effects of AIDS to the Celtic Tiger. Silence acquires another meaning in chapter three, “‘Men Without Refuge’: The Subculture of Cruising in Irish Gay Short Stories.” Silence and silent codes are an invitation to sexual intercourse, essential to the gay sex subculture in public spaces. Carregal explores how the short stories “Graffiti” by Keith Ridgway (1994), Joseph O’Connor’s “The Hills Are Alive” (1992), and “At the Station” by Michéal Ó Conghaile (2012) provide a representation of gay cruising beyond the sexual act per se as a way of forming bondings and affective connections. The analysis also points out internalized homophobia and the dangers of sex in public spaces in a homophobic society.

Chapter four, “‘Love is War’: The Irish Gay Coming-Out Novel,” consists of narratives crossed by coming-out and coming-of-age structures, having as background the upbringing environment within a Catholic educational system, gender normative policing, and social and familial homophobia. For Carregal, the novels tackle mental health issues, such as depression, as a direct result of the sexual repression in gay lives. The author analyses Desmond Hogan’s *The Ikon Maker*, Damian McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel*, Tom Lennon’s *When Love Comes to Town*, Jarlath Gregory’s *Snapshots*, and *G.A.A.Y.: One Hundred Ways to Love a Beautiful Loser*.

The AIDS epidemic and its effects on Irish society is the main topic of the fifth chapter. The language about homosexuality discussed in the narratives of the previous chapter appears in “‘The Only Real Way to Fight Evil is to Hold Someone’s Hand’: The Cultural Narratives of AIDS in Irish Fiction” charged with the Catholic ideology of AIDS as a punishment, shame, silence, as well as the stigma of seropositive gay Irish men endured as the consequence of the social misinformation. Keith Ridgway’s “Andy Warhol,” Anne Enright’s *The Green Road*, and Desmond Hogan’s *Farewell to Prague* explore the effects of AIDS epidemics abroad, reinforcing the migration and exile of much of the queer Irish population had to face in order to live and express their sexuality. Nonetheless, Micheál Ó Conghaile’s short story “Lost in Connemara” and Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* shift from the experience of the city to the parts of the Irish countryside.

The representation of gay sexuality and identity during the Celtic Tiger beyond the tropes of gay identity as the epitome of Ireland’s modernity is the theme of chapter seven. The works analyzed articulate the representation of the historical present marked by the liberal ideology of individualism and consumerism and the consequences of such ideology on the lived experience of gay people in Ireland. Carregal assertively encapsulates the experiences represented in the narratives by choosing the expression used by Keith Ridgway in his short story “Angelo” in the title “‘He Did Not Fit the Bill as a Gay Man’: Narratives of Gay Life and Identity in Celtic Tiger Ireland.” With few exceptions, the gay lives narrated do not fit economically as a successful example of the Celtic Tiger and they do not perform the neoliberal lifestyle celebrated and diffused by the Irish media as gay identity. The chapter discusses topics such as the Catholic Church sex scandals (Belinda McKeon’s *Tender*, Colm Tóibín’s “The Pearl Fishers,” and Keith Ridgway’s *The Long Falling*), same-sex paternity (Tom Lennon’s *Crazy Love*), gay prostitution (Keith Ridgway’s “Angelo” and *The Parts*), and gay immigrants in Ireland (Frank McGuinness’s “Chocolate and Oranges”). Thus the focus is less on the celebratory aspects of economic success during the Celtic Tiger than the rendering of how social class affects and intersects with sexual identity, gay subjectivity, and desire.

The last chapter delves into queer characters in Irish historical fiction written by Emma Donoghue, Sebastian Barry, Jamie O’Neill, and John Boyne. The novels discuss historical events such as the 1916 Rising (O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys*), the Great Famine and Irish migration to the United States (Barry’s *Days Without End*), and the aftermath of the Irish Civil War and its implication to homosexual people (Boyne’s *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*). Although the invisibility of lesbian sexuality appears again

in *Life Mask*, Donoghue reclaims the story of the English sculptress Anne Damer in order to redress the historical silence on lesbian sexuality.

As highlighted in the book's introduction, the study still lacks a discussion on the representation of bisexual, transgender, and intersex identities, as well as the fiction produced by queer authors who do not conform to the paradigm of nationality and race established as the Irish literary canon. However, this conscious silencing cannot be considered as a critical issue but as an invitation for this topic to be expanded. With *Queer Whispers*, José Carregal becomes an authoritative figure in the studies of gay and lesbian fiction produced in Ireland. His book, written in an accessible and straightforward style, is both a foundational step for those starting their academic research on queer literature in Ireland and also an entry-level reading guide for gay and lesbian Irish fiction itself.

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Notes

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