

# RECKONINGS

2021



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# RECKONINGS

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Anything we consider in 2020 and beyond will be through a prism of this year's extraordinary events. The way we read novels continues to be shaped by the seismic events of the last few months, and throughout this year it feels like the world has been facing different reckonings: in how we treat each other, our expectations of society and of our governments and how we interact with the world around us. Similarly, many of the novels we are excited to be publishing in 2021 look at fundamental changes in attitudes, areas, people's lives or institutions – a coming to terms with the inevitable – a reckoning.

There are families being torn apart by past indiscretions and tragedies, an elite all-girls boarding school facing all-too familiar allegations, and the reckonings that come with midlife and looking at the choices we've made. We find the everyday heroes of war in a group of librarians who chose to take a stand, we meet the residents of a forever permanently-changing Soho, the hidden and disappearing other side of Cornwall and we finish an 'unholy trilogy' with a well-known cast of Corkonian characters returning home to face the music...

We have asked each of our authors to introduce their novels and share an extract, giving you a taste for the different reckonings their characters find themselves facing and the background to how they came to be. There is a wonderful array of characters within these novels and we can't wait for you to meet them.



# The Art of Falling

DANIELLE McLAUGHLIN

There's a dream I remember from childhood, more of a nightmare, really, although the usual monster under the bed trope is absent: I am walking down the rough path at the front of our house. There is grass growing up the middle, thick with tall daisies. I am picking these daisies, one by one, gathering a fat bunch. The day is calm and sunny, the sky clear. There is just me and the daisies, adding them to the bunch, one by lovely one. The sun continues to shine down. And then I pick the wrong daisy, the sense of dread descends. The wrong daisy looks exactly like all the other daisies. No way to distinguish it, no forewarning, nothing to give any clue until the stem is snapped and then, of course, it is too late.

I recognise it now as an anxiety dream, anxiety being a feeling that pervaded my childhood, continues into adulthood where I have learned of ways to live alongside it. And my brain no longer needs to process fears through the guise of innocuous looking but lethal daisies when I have a Twitter account. Twitter that place where nuance goes to die has cornered the market for anxiety based on fear of punishment for doing a bad thing when we thought we were engaging in an entirely harmless activity or sentiment, perhaps even a good thing. Recently I removed the Twitter app from my phone. Self care. My writing and creativity is already the better for it.

This sense of being called to account for something we didn't know we did, of being unfairly punished, or punished in a sense that is out of proportion is an acutely modern one. There's a line in one of my favourite Janice Ian songs, 'At Seventeen', that refers to payment due exceeding accounts received 'at seventeen.' In *The Art of Falling*, demand for payment has been made on accounts of various kinds, the characters impacted in a range of ways from the practically financial to the emotional to the social standing, the way they are viewed in the personal and professional communities in which they live their lives.

In post-crash Ireland, Nessa, my main character is paying the financial price for her husband's Celtic Tiger investment decisions. But she also is paying an emotional price for her husband's affair with the mother of one of her daughter's school friends, a woman she has to continue to see at school gatherings and on the street. She feels that she is unfairly taking the brunt of her daughter's anger when it is her

husband who has imperiled their family unit. In the same way that in a war those who give the orders are not the ones to die, so it is with love and affairs in terms of who suffers the brunt of the hurt. Reckoning will come but we know not the day nor the hour, and we don't know who will pay the ferryman. Who will pay the price and in what proportion.

Affirmations had a moment in the self help genre a little while ago. The premise being that if we tell ourselves something often enough, we will eventually come to believe it. This is a way of getting through life, of getting from where we are to where we want to be. But when something happens to shatter the illusion of truth, when things are very different to how they present, what happens then? Art communicates stories. But what if we have been telling ourselves the wrong story. The novel also raises the question what do we do with art when facts come to light that change how we think about it, and its maker? And in our certainty about what a piece of art means and represents, how much can we ever claim to know. Where does the value of a piece of art lie, and is it something that is moveable, detachable? How much does the art world of which Nessa is a part, where she earns her living, bolster existing systems of power? How much of what we fete in the world of art is another form of affirmation, telling ourselves what it suits us to here, not questioning enough whether it is true.

The difference between how people, things and ideas are presented and how they really are.

A reckoning is on the way, but will it be a fair one and who will pay, and how much?

A counting up. A balancing of books. Nessa thinks her husband had made up for not marrying up by cheating up. As if the abacus of love involves different weighted beads at different life stages, depending on what is at stake.

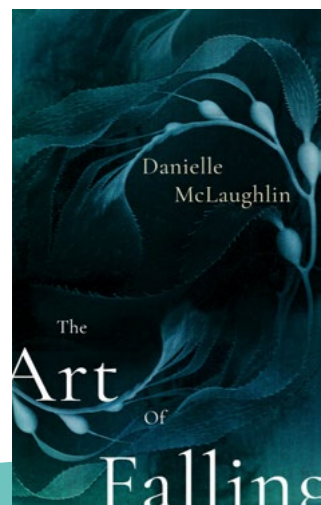
And with people rightly being lauded as brave for putting truths out there, can there also be a bravery involved in keeping truth to oneself?

Who paid the price for Nessa's past transgressions, who will pay the price now, who will be collateral damage. In climate change the generation that caused the damage, not the generation that will pay the highest price, as with Brexit. The people who voted in Trump not the people most suffering harm under his presidency.

The anger of revolution when the bill is unfairly distributed. Another kind of reckoning. Life an on-going reckoning, a never ending recalibration.

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Alice Herbert



'I'm afraid we're running behind,' Loretta Locke had said on the doorstep, 'my mother took a bit of a turn.' The first time she'd used that phrase, 'a bit of a turn', Nessa had been alarmed, but it turned out that Loretta used it to mean anything from a mild stroke to a fit of bad temper.

'Is she all right?' Nessa stepped over the leaves of an encroaching plant and onto the porch. Things grew with lush vulgarity here. Maybe it was the sea air: all those tiny particles of seaweed, all those hapless microorganisms blown inland to fertilise reedy fields.

'Oh, Mother is absolutely fine.' Loretta inclined her head to the small room at the end of the hall where Nessa usually spoke with Mrs Locke. 'I've left you the newspaper.'

They were standing outside the studio where Robert Locke had worked on a number of his better-known pieces. Before the Lockes came to the house in the late sixties, the room must have been a sitting room. It was wide and bright, with two tall windows looking out to sea, another smaller window to the side, a ceiling with subdued cornicing and one bare lightbulb in the centre. *Gravity*, nominated for the Turner in 1985 and now in the national gallery, had been conceived and shaped in this room. *Venus at the Hotel Negresco*, known locally as 'the Chalk Sculpture', was here still. Over seven feet tall, it commandeered the room, part human female, part abstract. The 'chalk' wasn't strictly speaking chalk at all, but a soft gypsum Locke had experimented with, fleetingly, in his middle years. Come September, the sculpture would move to a more fitting space in the gallery in the city, and the studio would move with it – the door, the floor, the ceiling. Even the dust would be transported. 'I'll be in here, if that's all right,' Nessa said, indicating Locke's studio. 'I've one or two things to check.'

'Of course,' Loretta said. 'We won't be long.' Locke's daughter was in her late forties, tall and lean with close-cut auburn hair. She wore the kind of clothes that elicited politeness from shop assistants. That day it was tailored navy trousers, a striped blue and white shirt under a camel-coloured sweater.

It was humid, dull, save for a dazzle of light miles out at sea, and Nessa hadn't worn any tights. She noticed that her legs, pale, and dappled here and there with old bruises, complemented the floorboards. She'd already measured every inch of this floor on her hands and knees, photographed it, sketched it on gridded paper over a series of afternoons in preparation for the gallery's acquisition of the studio. She'd marked in pencil the exact location of Robert Locke's chair; his workbench still with its rasps and chisels; the cast-iron statue, half stoat, half man, that had stood so long in one place that when she'd moved it, she'd found two perfect imprints of its clawed iron feet on the floor. She had liaised with the conservationist, commissioned the survey and the elevational drawings. She had tagged; she had devised a computerised archive. Already some things had been packed into boxes with typed labels on the outside, a catalogue number in the top right-hand corner.

The Chalk Sculpture stood in the middle of the room. It had achieved notoriety some years before when it came to be regarded as embodying fertility powers. The public had sought it out in their hundreds; they came in a spirit of supplication, less to marvel at what critics had described as the piece's 'gritty transcendence', its alien, unsettling beauty, than to plead their case.

Nessa walked over and touched a hand to the swell of the figure's belly. The sculpture had once languished for a period in a disused cowshed in Clonakilty, before the farmer, reportedly tired of it, delivered it by tractor and trailer back to the Locke women, Robert Locke being dead by then. Nessa touched a finger to the indent in the centre of the chalk-white belly. A groove had formed from the already water-damaged gypsum being eroded by the hands of pilgrims. Nessa wondered about these people, who'd flocked not to consider Robert Locke's genius but to beg for babies. She had rescued the sculpture from such indignities. But when the gallery had set about acquiring it, parts still had a dung-ish tinge from the years in the cowshed. The conservationist had spent days with a small brush engaged in the complicated process of cleaning without erasing.



# When I Ran Away

**IONA BANNISTER**

When you wake up years after the worst day of your life and the pain still isn't gone how do you keep going? When the greatest catastrophe you can ever imagine actually happens, what happens next? Is it possible to keep your kids close to you but not close enough to know about your fear and pain so they don't inherit it? We are now all living through a time we could never have imagined; or at least, if we imagined it, could never have believed would become our reality. When the years move past this time, as they inevitably will, what will happen to our pain, the collective and the individual grief? Where will it go?

*When I Ran Away* is about the pain that stays with us after tragedy and how we live with it, through it, and beyond it. It is the story of working class Staten Islander, Gigi Stanislowski, and her experience of grief over the loss of her brother on 9/11, a time of collective tragedy with many parallels to what we're coping with today. Gigi tries to move on as a woman, daughter, wife, and mother but finds that her difficult childhood and her grief permeate her life, regardless of moving away to London or marrying a charming Englishman or having a baby and creating what looks like the perfect middle class life. In fact, it is the birth of her second child that, rather than giving her hope, pushes Gigi right to the edge, in the way that only motherhood can, where she will either be subsumed by her pain or rise out of it to be present for her children and still able to love. (Don't worry, she has a wicked sense of humour too- it's not all about grief!)

I created Gigi out of my own experiences as a New Yorker during 9/11 and the difficult emergency births of both my children after I moved to London many years later. I did not recover resiliently from either of those experiences and over time, the trauma of those events compounded and began dominating my everyday life, manifesting as anxiety, panic and phobias. But I came to realise that my difficulty with recovering from those events had many roots beyond the events themselves. There was the trauma I inherited as a child from my parents' and grandparents' experiences of war, displacement and immigration. There was the pressure of being the career-building working mother with small children in a foreign country with little support. And then there was the great invisible weight of the emotional labour of family life that is overwhelmingly carried by mothers, regardless of their identity or marital situation.

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Rachael Duncan



Desperate to create certainty in an uncertain world, my anxiety sought to control every situation and predict every eventuality for myself and my children, a sentiment I believe many women and mothers have felt. This meant that suddenly, even mundane interactions with the world - doctor's visits, lifts, train journeys, supermarkets, driving - became laced with fear and danger for me. Add to this anxiety my maternal guilt that my children would be negatively affected by my fragile mental health. I was afraid my children would assume, by osmosis, my exhausting fear of everything. I wrote Gigi's story because I wanted to expose and share this part of motherhood that we are ashamed to admit and afraid to discuss, even though almost every mother we know has experienced it.

During this unprecedented time all of us are feeling great uncertainty about the future and a loss of control over things we once took for granted: holidays and hugs; school; riding the bus; being at the bedside of a dying parent; not waking every day to learn the name of yet another person murdered by police. *When I Ran Away* is about taking hold of that grief and pain and anger and not letting it go, because the truth is that there is some pain, like Gigi's, that can never be let go. But what we can do is accept that the pain exists, understand that bad things will happen, and that the unimaginable sometimes does become real. And while we can't control our future, what I hope Gigi will show readers is that we can take the time to grieve and mourn; to embrace one another; to remember and to be sad. We can make moments of happiness in the dark. We can show our children how to feel those feelings instead of swallow them; how to rest a weary heart before trying to bounce back. What I hope Gigi shows readers, and what I think is at the heart of her story, is that we may never get over our pain; but we can, and will, get through it.

I push open the heavy church door and stand on the stone steps pulling my robe closer, wishing I had changed before I walked out on my family this morning. It's August. I'm in long sleeves and Harry's old track pants, I mean sweatpants, whatever they call them here - tracksuit bottoms? And I should be fine, I should be hot, actually, but not in London. It might as well be autumn this morning. I keep waiting for the heat. Today in New York it's probably hot-hot, spike-in-the-murder-rate hot, steam-rising-off-the-sidewalk-after-the-rain hot. Not here, though. Arms crossed against the chill, keys and wallet and phone in my hands, I walk to the corner shop to buy some smokes.

August. When it's August-hot then I remember the last weekend with Frankie at the Jersey Shore; the Saturday barbeques at Matty's mom's house that we'd been going to since we were kids; the Brooklyn Cyclones game we went to with Dad. When the heat of August pours out of the sun like syrup then I feel the days before we lost him on my skin. And the memories have a place to stick.

That summer before he died was day after day of heat, sudden summer rain that left us just as hot, Technicolor sunsets over New Jersey seen from the deck of the ferry, cold beer and cigarettes on the fire escape of his new apartment. He moved into a building on Victory Boulevard with Matty and they couldn't afford A/C but that didn't take the shine off it being their first place. I came over after work once a week. We'd go up to the roof and look at the disco-ball shimmer of Manhattan against the black sky, and that's when he would talk, lay out his plans, map his future. I was proud of him, the boy I raised. We didn't know that we were looking at his grave.

When August comes around and I feel like I can stand it, I listen to his voice. I kept my old answering machine and re-saved his messages until I figured out how to get them recorded. Two messages: "Jeez, how you doin', just seeing how you doin' 'cuz you had that thing today at work, love you bye." And then: "Jeez, I'm short this month for Ma's bills, I need \$65 if you got it, OK? It's OK if you don't got it, but if you got it. Bye." His voice in August.

Today I'm like a broken compass. I can't find north. It's never warm here. There's twelve and a half beautiful summer days every year when London is lush and full of light and green and the people rise up and strip down and lay in the sun. But today is grey and misty and my memories are mixed up. I left my kids and I should be home packing Johnny's bag for soccer camp and taking Rocky to baby music but instead I'm buying cigarettes at the corner store.

I buy a little half-pack. Ten cigarettes patiently waiting in a slim box. So European. Like those tiny two-person elevators and eating cheese for dessert. I walk down to the common - it's called a common instead of a park - to sit on a bench. Mist hovers over the grass. It feels like it's rained, but it hasn't. That's just the morning air here, so thick you can see it. So thick you can take a bite out of it. I strike a match and light a cigarette. But the air is so damp and heavy that I can't tell the difference between the mist and the rising smoke. Smoking is one more thing that's not like it is at home.

I've been holding my wallet, keys and phone in my hands all this time. When I left the house I reached for the diaper bag out of habit. I hate that bag. The main zipper's broken from overstuffing, the shoulder strap's fraying. The front utility pockets always spewing their guts of baby wipes, chewed-up board books and empty baby food pouches. I couldn't stand the sight of it. So I just grabbed the essentials and walked out of the house. That's what happens when you escape a burning building or a war. You grab what you can. And run.

*That's very fucking dramatic, Gigi, don't you think? Who are you at war with? Who burned down your house?*

I stand up from the bench and start walking toward the high street. I don't know why they call it "high" instead of "main". I look over my shoulder as I leave the common to enter the stream of pedestrians on the way to the Tube and I see a woman pushing a stroller walking the opposite direction. Fit, firm and looking good for thirty-something with a baby in her turquoise Lululemon outfit. I wonder if she's ever felt like me. Probably not. She's not shuffling in the streets in men's sweatpants and a bathrobe so I'd say that alone puts her several levels of functioning above me. You never know, though, I guess.



Extract



## The Paris Library

JANET SKESLIEN CHARLES

During *le confinement*, as we in France called the period that stretched from March 17 to May 11, people were required to carry a document – signed and dated down to the hour – that stated their purpose for being out in the world (a trip to buy groceries, for example) or face a fine of 135 euros. I spent these months staring out the window, writing and not writing, and reflecting on life and death, on the choices we make and the walls we build. I write because I want to bring those walls down.

Growing up in rural Montana in the 1980s, I fully expected the Soviets and Americans to annihilate everyone in their bid for nuclear supremacy. Across the Great Plains, among weeds, wildflowers, and wheat fields, one thousand Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles had been planted like potatoes. Once detonated, these missiles could travel to Russia in thirty minutes – the same time it took me to get ready for school. One was located a mile from our family farm.

Back then, the news was never good, and the enemy was always the same: nameless faceless masses behind an Iron Curtain. Perhaps it’s reassuring to think that the enemy is from somewhere else. Trump wants to build a border wall, another Iron Curtain call, to keep ‘them’ out. Brexit accomplishes the same goal. But the enemy is not the other. The enemy is apathy. This fact has never been so apparent. I watched as many Americans refuse to wear masks, even as the daily infection rate soared past 70,000 cases. I read Dominic Cummings’s outlandish excuses for gallivanting over England during lockdown.

Each individual choice matters, there is a reckoning. Until we can come together and make a communal decision to care for one another by taking precautions – wearing masks in public, washing our hands more often, foregoing that indoor party, staying home when possible – we will see the numbers of deaths increase. Nearly every country in the world has been impacted by the virus, a reminder that we really are in this together.

How we live matters. Helping one another matters. *The Paris Library* brings to light the true story of librarians during World War II, when an international team of booklovers worked to keep the American Library in Paris open. It was a dangerous mission: they faced surprise inspections from the Nazis, and one of the librarians was shot by the Gestapo.

During the Occupation, the Nazi ‘Library Protector’ decreed that ‘certain people’ could not enter libraries. Jewish people were banned, so librarians delivered books so that their friends and readers did not become isolated. The team of librarians refused the trope of ‘us’ or ‘them.’

*The Paris Library* is about community, about the importance of coming together during a hard time, whether it is the death of a loved one or a war. In the World War II sections of the book, librarians defied the Nazis in order to bring books and solace to readers. In the modern sections of the book, the women cook food for folks who have suffered a loss. Perhaps one time period seems more riveting than another, but at its heart, the action is the same – caring for one another, refusing to let others become isolated.

I hope that my novel will spur people to act in small ways to make the lives of others around them easier, whether it be donning a mask, delivering a meal, starting a conversation, or sharing a book. I also hope that people will realise that there is no ‘them’. No Tories vs. Labour. No Democrats vs. Republicans. No locals vs. migrants. There is only ‘us’. We are in this together. We have to band together to fight for the kind of future that we want. I hope this means more inclusion, more listening, more compassion.

Libraries and books are a haven. Novels are a point of departure not only for discussions but for friendships. I hope as readers discuss this book with friends, they will ask not only what they would have done during the war, but what they will do today to make life a little better for the people around them.

This has been a hard year, with many facing situations that range from isolation to bankruptcy. Yet seeing the creative ways that people have come together – on Zoom or socially distanced – to help one another has been heartening. My sister, a teacher, delivers summer school packets to kids in difficult situations. Drive-by graduation celebrations so families can fete an important milestone. Online book tours so that authors and readers can connect. Our creativity in the face of the pandemic shows that we can make good choices, we can connect, we can surmount any difficulty – together.

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Alice Herbert



Few shots were fired in France, though the situation remained tense along the Maginot Line, where generals were certain the enemy would attack. We’d dispatched hundreds of books to the soldiers there. Several wrote back, kindly sending tokens of appreciation: a watercolour of a kitchen on the Maginot Line, sketches of an enemy plane they’d shot down, a packet of cigarettes. Margaret and I read a letter from a British captain:

*It was so kind of you letting me have that wonderful packet of books. I do so appreciate what you are doing for us and consider it most important to give the men all the recreation possible. We want to express to you all our gratitude for the beautiful work you’re doing among us soldiers. For what you did in the last war and for what you are doing now, we’re most thankful.*

Our Soldiers’ Service operation had grown so large – thousands of donated books, dozens of volunteers – that businessmen in the neighbouring building lent us an entire floor. Piles of novels and magazines reached to the ceiling, a literary Tower of Pisa. Miss Wedd baked us scones and recorded statistics about the books we sent. That autumn, we shipped 20,000 tomes to French, British and Czechoslovakian troops as well as to the Foreign Legion. Like Miss Reeder, I felt especially proud of our service to individual soldiers. I felt less proud of the fact that I’d barely spoken to Bitsi.

Maman grumbled that I was never home any more, and Paul joked that he had to volunteer if he wanted to spend time with me, but I found that, like Rémy, I ‘needed to do something’. As bereft as I felt without him, I knew it had to be worse for the soldiers who were far from home. I tucked cards of encouragement into their books.

Feeling uncertain about the future, I often checked the last page of a novel, hoping for a happy ending. In *Villette*, 823: *Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart: leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return.* I wished I could tear ahead in the story of my own life to reassure myself. The war would end. Rémy would come home. Paul and I would marry.

Exhausted again tonight, I fell into bed with a book.

*Mr Rochester crossed the floor and seized my arm, and grasped my waist. He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance . . .*

*‘Never,’ said he, as he ground his teeth, ‘never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand! [And he shook me with the force of his hold.] I could bend her .... the savage beautiful creature!*

*‘Of yourself, you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence – you will vanish ere I inhale your fragrance. Oh! Come, Odile, come!’*

‘Odile!’ Maman banged on the door. ‘It’s past midnight.’ Picking up a pen and paper, I wrote:

*Dear Rémy,*

*I could read all night, but Maman will pester me until I turn out the light. Today was another hectic day. The Library is as busy as ever – subscribers who left at the end of August are back, and we’re doing our best to get books to you all. Paul comes to take crates to the station. Margaret says he’s there for me, but I’m not sure. I don’t know how he feels. We’ve never said ‘I love you.’ We’re never alone. Perhaps I keep him at arm’s length. It hurts to hope. I worry his feelings for me will disappear.*

'Lights out, Odile!'

1 December 1939

Dear Odile,

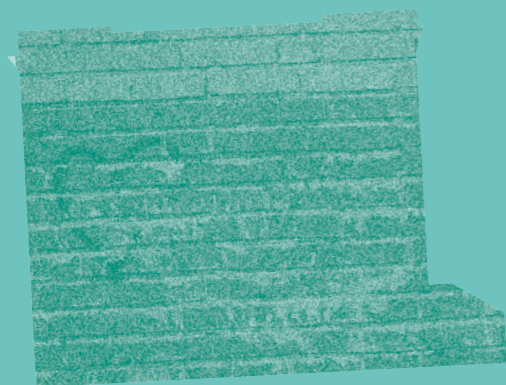
Thanks for the book! *Jane Eyre* is as feisty as you. How clever to write your impressions in the margins! Turning each page feels like we're reading the novel together. Why on earth do you sympathise with Mr Rochester? He's a cad! I'm starting to doubt your taste in men.

Margaret's right – Paul volunteers to be close to you. It shouldn't hurt to hope. It should give you thrills, like a plateful of stars set before you, shimmering with possibility. I didn't ask for leave at Christmas. Many soldiers in my squad have children, and I want them to be able to spend the holidays with family. I'll try to get back to Paris in the spring. You didn't mention Bitsi. There's something gloomy about her letters. I get the impression she doesn't spend time with friends, doesn't ever have a laugh. She goes to work and back home. With her brother mobilised, she's doubly miserable. It kills me to think she's unhappy. I don't want her to be alone.

Please take care of her for me.

Love,

Rémy



Extract

8



## All Girls

EMILY LAYDEN

When I sat down to write the book that would become *All Girls*, I wanted to do two things. First, I wanted to write something that took really seriously the experience of teenage girlhood, in all its depth and capacity; second, I wanted to do that through the lens of an all-girls school. I wanted to write about what it must be like to come of age in a place that promises you the world – when the world is still not yours for the taking, and when the place itself has become the type that enshrines institutions over individuals.

I spent most of my twenties teaching English at boarding and independent day schools, the majority of them all-girls. And the truth is that I loved it – I loved teaching generally, and the immense privilege of talking about books all day. Most of all, though, I loved working with young women, who impressed me daily: with their intellect and wisdom; with their humor and authenticity; with their courage and persistence. My students made me laugh, challenged my thinking, kept me honest.

The truth is, that for all the ways teenage girls drive our discourse and shape our culture, they are rarely given credit for the multitudes they contain. For many young women, to come of age is to become aware of the extent to which their bodies and their tastes are commodified while their voices are silenced and their experiences trivialised. Even in these elite, single-gender spaces – schools built for the advancement of women and girls, erstwhile feminist beacons – girls are not fully shielded from this reality.

Although it would be fair to call *All Girls* a “MeToo” novel – indeed it was crafted at the height of the MeToo era, when many boarding schools (like so many other institutions) were reckoning with their own legacies of abuse – the extent that it fits the categorisation is not limited to its grounding in a story about sexual assault and cover-up. I think often of MeToo's related mantra, “Believe Women.” At its core, this is a call to make space for and legitimise the experiences of women; it is a lesson in the imperative of taking women's stories seriously.

It is not only the victim who struggles to be listened to and validated at Atwater, the fictional girls' boarding school where the novel takes place: the institution's handling of Karen Mirro's case highlights for all of its students that their physical safety is nowhere guaranteed, and that their worth is weighed conditionally. Atwater's students are not merely reckoning with the prevalence of sexual violence, or with the problem of organisational non-transparency; theirs is the

realisation that even here, at a place that purports to be a protector, defender, and champion of women, they will have to fight to be heard.

From the outset, *All Girls* was designed as a polyphony: each character brings to the scandal her own burdens and perspectives that inform her capacity to process it; each voice functions as a unique filter on Karen Mirro's allegation and the school's response. Each girl's personal history *matters* – in terms of her ability to make sense of the accusation, the bureaucracy that shrouds it, and the implications it has for her own health and safety. The girls struggle with mental illness; with familial estrangement; with the contours of their sexuality; with trauma, racism, and classism. But also: they are united by the manner in which they flounder after and insist upon the very fact of their personhood, so swiftly and regularly refused.

Ultimately, *All Girls* is an attempt to do justice to the anger that accompanies this very denial – and the marvel of its twinned optimism. From my experience in the classroom, I know that more than anything else a teenage girl is hopeful: she manages to be smart and funny and genuine and brave despite her growing awareness of how the world will try to constrain and diminish her. The scandal that drives the book is really just a mechanism for casting society's subjective regard for young women in harsh relief. It allows us to explore how a place like Atwater loses itself, and to witness the power girls have to change the course of this history: through the triumph of their intellect, the vastness of their empathy, and the wonder of their sincerity.

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There are no major highways into the northwest corner of Connecticut that comprises Litchfield County. Travelers from the more densely populated suburbs of New York – from Westchester and Long Island, from Danbury and Greenwich – find themselves frustrated by the path of winnowing thoroughfares, turnpikes and interstates splitting again and again like capillaries from an artery. No matter the starting point, the final approach to Atwater requires navigating Litchfield’s web of two-lane county roads, flanked in most cases by farmland and medium-thick deciduous forest, the only signage suggesting lowered speeds around particularly treacherous curves. In this corner of New England – like the PCH in certain parts of Southern California; like the pavement that cuts between oil fields outside Odessa – these are the roads meant for windows down and music on loud. This is where teenagers wrap themselves around telephone poles.

The vandal – if vandalism is what you wanted to call it – clearly knew this when she considered her options. (Unlike the question of whether the act was vandalism, there was near-unanimous agreement that the culprit was, in fact, a she.) She clearly knew that families dropping their daughters off at school had their pick of county routes to zig and zag across, like ants to the nest. She might have also known that the nearest billboards were at the interchanges and highway overpasses near Waterbury and Hartford; she might have further estimated the number of students who drove that way and decided: *Not enough*. When she placed her order with Vistaprint – the label was printed neatly on the back of each poster board – for one hundred eighteen-by-twenty-seven-inch signs and one hundred stands, it was with the understanding that the best approach was a scattershot one, shrapnel blasted across the entire county. She likely researched Connecticut laws and local ordinances regarding yard signs and public property and determined that what she was planning was *probably not* illegal, not exactly, but that it was best to plant the signs under the cover of darkness on a night as close to Opening Day as possible.

And so when the residents of Kent and Goshen and Roxbury woke one morning in late August, the day the boarding school at the heart of their suburban-rural community was set to open for the academic year, and made their way to the little main streets and intersections that held their corner stores and gas stations, they found their roads peppered with little black rectangles, low and squat and set thirty feet from the pavement. It wasn’t until they passed two or three that the words coalesced into meaning, the *rs* and *ps* sorted and organized by a fogged morning brain. Longer still it took to identify the purpose of these campaign signs in a nonelection year, and so the phrasing of the placards planted like seeds in a fifteen-mile radius from The Atwater School settled confusedly onto the surrounding community. A RAPIST WORKS HERE, they read, the message positioned next to a sepia-toned photo of a schoolhouse steeple, haloed in black like an antique portrait.

They were gone almost as soon as they’d popped up, lingering only for a day or two, so that those that remained withered like mailbox balloons after a birthday party, wilted and random, more frequent the farther you traveled from campus. They guessed the school came around and tore them up, or maybe it was their neighbors for whom the vulgarity of the signs was too much: Who wanted to look at that word every day? Who wanted to think about that kind of violence? Because of this, few of them had the chance to look up the URL that slugged the bottom of each sign, the one that might have directed them to a petition to extend Connecticut’s statute of limitations on rape and sexual assault, a kind of activism that might have struck them as surprisingly reasonable given the shock of the headline and the tabloidishness of the signs. In time, the townspeople for whom Atwater was a kind of ivory tower would decide the words on the yard signs weren’t meant for them, not really, and the act of vigilante justice would fade in their memories to a kind of sad and misguided prank. They were used to this kind of thing, the whispers of scandal that accompany the very, very privileged. It was never any of their business.



## Misplaced Persons

SUSAN BEALE

*Misplaced Persons* is above all the story of a family. Neil and Marcy Yardley are eighteen years into what was meant to be a five-year placement in Brussels when the wheels come off their previously happy marriage. Their world is thrown into uncertainty.

Neil is British; Marcy is American. Their sole link to Belgium is Neil’s job, which isn’t living up to expectations, but for their three children, it is the only home they have ever known.

For the big decisions in life – which education and qualifications to pursue, whom to marry, if and when to have children – we take our time, weigh the pros and cons, search our hearts. But our lives are shaped far more by small decisions, the ones we make every day, often with little to no thought, for the sake of convenience, to keep the wheels turning. Life is a road filled with forks we rarely notice we’re taking as the dishes and laundry pile up and we’re fifteen minutes late getting started on dinner. That next meeting or business trip always seems too important to miss when there’ll be another parent-teacher’s night in a couple months.

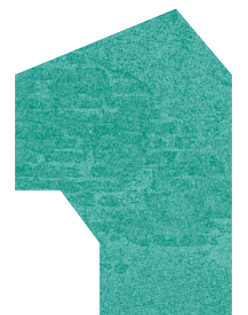
There’s no household HR department writing up job descriptions. Responsibilities get divvied up willy-nilly. There’s that one time you do something and then the second time because, well, you did it that time before, and suddenly you own it. Don’t expect thanks. You want a cookie just for doing your job? Cracks become fissures and then chasms that will fill up with resentment if you’re not careful. There comes a time when we all scratch our heads and wonder how it was we ended up here.

For most of us, that reckoning arrives in midlife. We’re not yet old, but there is no denying we’re a bit off our prime and we know it’s only going to get worse from here on out. The lie we’ve been telling ourselves for decades – the one about eventually getting around to doing all the things we said we’d do, reaching all the goals we’d set for ourselves – is laid bare. The clock that’s been quietly ticking away in the background suddenly gets loud.

By the time we reach midlife, we’ve made our share of mistakes, trade-offs and compromises and with them, inescapably, comes regret for things we’ve done, of course, but mostly for the stuff we haven’t. It turns out everything has a cost. Midlife is when the bills come due, which is what makes it such fertile ground for a novel.

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The pharmaceutical company's office was in a business park near the airport. When Marcy left Fabrice, she took the outer ring road, la grande ceinture, in the opposite direction from home. Late afternoon was the worst time for traffic, but there were two binbags of stuffed cuddly toys in the back of her car that she wanted to drop off at the refugee centre. If children were walking from Greece to Belgium, she could spend an extra hour in the car.

It was the photo of the little boy that did it, transformed Marcy from sympathetic observer to actor. That child, practically a baby, really, lying face down at the water's edge where he had washed ashore. Chubby cheeked, arms flopped at his side, palms up, little bottom raised ever so slightly, looking all the world as if he were sleeping. Her own children had slept like that, with a kind of reckless abandon that sent her heart into her mouth.

'Want to help yourself; help someone else,' her nan used to say. Nan, who had only Poppy's small pension to live off, but who nonetheless made donations to Shriner's Hospital, the March of Dimes, the Salvation Army and a list of other charities which ran as long as her arm: Nan who bought cookies from every girl scout who came to her door, despite being a diabetic; who tossed loose change in every collection jar she came across, and ate overcooked spaghetti at countless church suppers. Nan, who was the happiest person Marcy had ever known.

Marcy could not help that poor little boy, or his brother, but thousands of others were headed north this autumn with only the clothes on their back, and at home there were closets full of things her children never wore. She had done culls before, of course, but never so ruthlessly or so gleefully: seven large binbags filled with trousers, shirts, jumpers and winter coats. She had delivered them to a smiling, effusively grateful young woman at the donations desk of the refugee charity and left with a stupid grin plastered on her face. People would be warmer, thanks to her. The sense of euphoria lingered for hours and when, inevitably, it faded, all she could think of was getting it back.

Radio Nostalgie was there to entertain her in the stop and go traffic and, by lucky chance, it was Eighties Hour. She knew the words to all the songs, apart from the French ones, and since the kids weren't with her, she could sing along as loud as she liked without their howls of embarrassment.

There was a sense of having turned a corner, that the hellscapes of the past couple months was at last behind her. Autumn always made her hopeful. In Ohio, it was a time of blue skies, of trees aflame in yellow, orange and red. After the heat and humidity of summer, the arrival of cool, crisp mornings was like biting into the first apple of the season, fresh and invigorating; infused with all the possibility of a new school year. The feeling stuck despite seventeen Septembers in damp, colourless Brussels.

The Bangles 'Manic Monday' came on and Marcy cranked up the volume. It had been the unofficial anthem of her senior year in high school, the song belted out at every party and quoted in many a yearbook entry, her own included. She bounced in her seat, do-do-do-dootley-dootley-do-ing along with the song's keyboard hook before joining Susanna Hoffs singing lead. The lyrics rolled off her tongue as if it was 1987 and she was in her mother's car driving to the mall, the sleeves of her blazer rolled up, oversized bow in her permed hair, and lace, fingerless gloves on her hands. Beneath the upbeat, cheerful melody, it was the lament of a harried woman, working to support herself and a deadbeat lover. Had high school Marcy noticed? Would she have cared? It was, she thought, a defiantly optimistic time. Reagan had declared it was morning in America and despite the steady stream of plant closings that, at one point, left her father out of a job for eighteen months, she had never doubted it was so.



## Hot Stew

FIONA MOZLEY

Sometimes I'm asked how I know when a piece of writing is finished. I reply that, in my opinion, it's never finished: it simply gets to a point where it is wrapped up, sent off, printed and, hopefully, read. Its many possible versions remain somewhere – in my head, my notebooks, my computer, on my editor's computer, in the email conversations that bounce between us – and the novel continues to change once it falls into the hands of readers, with each constructing their own world from the words I have put on the page. I still find myself thinking about my first novel, *Elmet*, and its ending – its reckoning. I find myself imagining new outcomes, new possibilities. When I do public readings, I continue to edit, adding or subtracting words to make the sentences flow differently or applying emphasis in different ways. These changes depend on the venue, the audience, my mood. Sometimes I underline sections in pencil, or cross out whole paragraphs.

A work in progress is like a swarm of insects. The wasps, bees, midges or flying ants are the characters, the scenes, the fragments and half-ideas, the not-quite ideas I can't quite bring myself to abandon, the many possible words that can be spoken, the many more words that must be left unsaid. It is my job to collect them, pin them down and arrange them into some sort of meaningful taxonomy. What remains can be described as 'finished', but only in the sense that an insect that has been set in a display case can be described as 'finished'. It has been preserved; it will remain intact; it is offered up for scrutiny.

My second novel, *Hot Stew*, is going to print almost as I write this. The version that exists currently is the one that will be pinned, and the only version that will ever be read. This is, in itself, a reckoning. Indeed, the word comes from the Old English, *recenian*. When this language was spoken in the central and eastern parts of Britain, *recenian* meant 'recount' or 'relate'. In other words, it described the moment at which a story was told, when it left the imagination of one person and was offered up to the imagination of another.

Today, 'reckoning' has many meanings. To reckon is to think; to reckon is to guess. To reckon with is to struggle with or wrestle with, particularly a difficult concept. A reckoning is an apex of some kind. It is the moment at which an accumulated tension can no longer hold. There must be either deflation or conflagration.

In *Hot Stew*, as with *Elmet*, there is a reckoning but, unlike *Elmet*, the story does not end at this point. I decided that I wanted to explore not only moments of conflict but, after the dust has settled (perhaps literally) the possibility of reconciliation. This wasn't always my intention for the novel, but something I decided upon as the project began to take shape. Perhaps I felt it was what I needed from the book, or perhaps it was what I felt readers might need from the book, but I wanted to move away from the narrative of inexorable catastrophe that typified my debut.

One of *Hot Stew*'s main characters, Precious, a Soho-based sex-worker, 'has a huge amount of faith in the power of human communication; of two people looking each other in the eye and speaking their minds, generously, politely, but clearly.' She feels that if she is able to speak to her billionaire landlady, Agatha Howard, one on one, they will be able to come to an understanding. Agatha, meanwhile, is dealing with her own separate conflict, with three elder sisters she has never met. In the closing chapters, a meeting between them seems possible. Lorenzo, who has lived in Soho for his whole life, is good at making friends. He prides himself on his friendship with people of all ages, and all backgrounds. He has spent his life trying to find the points of contact between himself and people who are, on the surface, very different from him. During the course of the novel, this facility is stretched to breaking point.

Each character in *Hot Stew* has their own personal reckoning – a moment at which they realise something about themselves or their situation; a moment at which they make a choice; a point of alteration. And, in each case, there is a possibility of reconciliation, whether or not the possibility is realised.

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Yassine Belkacemi





'It would be easier for everyone if they left of their own volition.'

'Clearly, but Roster tells me the ratio of rent to custom is too good, even with the increases we're enacting. The level of footfall, the Soho address, the circumstances of their lease. These things are all too advantageous to expect a voluntary departure. But if we raise the rent enough – as much as we're allowed to – and make life inconvenient for them in other respects, when we ask them to leave they won't make as much fuss as they otherwise might. They will just move somewhere new – to a part of London more in keeping with their profession.'

Agatha Howard holds the phone flush against her ear. The voice of her long-time lawyer, Tobias Elton, is an irritation. She has told him her intentions on so many occasions she is almost reciting from a script.

'It does seem like an awful lot of bother,' says the lawyer.

Agatha tries to stifle her irritation. 'It will be difficult work for all of us but the benefits will be substantial. We need to get them out, Tobias.'

Tobias waits on the line. Agatha can tell he's thinking of another question. He finds it difficult to construct thoughts and turn them into sentences, but Agatha doesn't want this to become a protracted conversation.

After years of enlisting his legal services, she knows it's best to keep the conversations frequent and brief.

'We'll talk again tomorrow,' she says curtly. 'Goodbye.' She has spoken with him too many times to bother waiting for a response. She places her phone on the large, walnut desk and slides her hand to the furry head resting between her legs. She takes one of the silken ears and threads it between her fingers, rubbing the soft tip with her thumb. He is a pedigree borzoi: the size and shape of a greyhound, with long white fur and a pointed face.

Fedor opens his eyes. His irises are as black as his pupils, and in the dim light they almost look recessed. He pulls his jaws into a wide, prolonged yawn, revealing thin canines, broad and jagged molars, and a pink, colubrine tongue with short, coarse bristles. Agatha takes hold of Fedor's head with both hands, and when he closes his mouth and settles his jaws together, she draws her palms towards her, along the length of his nose, then back again towards the flopping ears.

The dog fidgets. He sniffs at her lap then begins to whine. He wants up. His hind legs are tensed and he bobs on the spot several times, asking for permission. Agatha pushes her chair back to give the pup room to emerge, and Fedor springs to her lap. He places his bony hips on her knees and his front paws on the tops of her thighs. Spindle claws dig deep. She will have red indentations later.

Agatha's study is on the second floor of her Georgian townhouse, in Mayfair. It is where she spends most of her day and is one of the finest rooms in the house, with an intricate parquet floor, high ceilings framed with Roman cornicing, and three tall sash and case windows along one side. Through the windows she can see the street which is wide, clean, and lined with plane trees and expensive cars.

Her desk is littered with documents. There are tenancy contracts and outlines of planning permissions. There is a letter from one of her sisters. It reads: GIVE US OUR FUCKING MONEY, YOU FUCKING RUSSIAN SLAG. This is on top of a pile of documents she was readying for the forthcoming arbitration. Beneath a newspaper, she finds the photograph the antique dealer showed her earlier in the day. It shows a white handkerchief marred by a small, somewhat faded bloodstain. According to the letter of verification, the handkerchief is French, dates from the 1790s, and the blood came from the foot of the guillotine. During the Great Terror, when notable individuals were decapitated, spectators used to rush forward and collect souvenirs: blood, hair, items of clothing. The morbid mementos are still collected: the more famous the decapitated party, the higher the price.

Extract

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## The Lip

CHARLIE CARROLL

I often think there are two Cornwalls. The first is a representation, not imagined so much as offered. This is the Cornwall you might know from TV shows such as *Poldark* or *Doc Martin*, from authors such as Daphne du Maurier or Rosamunde Pilcher, or, if you're lucky enough, from your own holidays down to our little peninsula. It is a land of pasties and cream teas, of smugglers and pirates, of romance and drama, of pounding north-coast surf and quaint south-coast fishing villages.

The other Cornwall we keep a little hidden. There's a reason for this: it's not so appealing. This is the Cornwall of poverty, for not only is it one of the poorest parts of the UK, it is also the second-poorest region in all northern Europe. It is the Cornwall where the proliferation of second homes and holiday lets have raised house prices way beyond the means of average earners, where younger people are being forced out of the villages their families have lived in for generations because they can no longer afford to remain there. It is not the picture-postcard Cornwall of St Ives or Padstow, but the increasingly angry Cornwall found in areas such as that which the locals call the CRAP: Camborne, Redruth and Pool.

Much has been written about that first Cornwall; less about the second. *The Lip* is my attempt to redress the balance a little. Its themes reflect issues the 21<sup>st</sup> century Cornish deal with day after day and year upon year – issues such as solitude, identity, ownership, mental health, frustration, and the shifting uncertainties of the future.

The protagonist of *The Lip*, a young café-worker called Melody Janie Rowe, grew out of the midst of all this. She straddles both Cornwalls – on the one hand, indebted to the tourists and holidaymakers who keep her family's business afloat; on the other, resentful of their intrusion upon what she sees as her land, and bitter about her reliance upon them. Like many other modern Cornish people, it is a dichotomy she must reckon with every day.

If Melody Janie serves as a (somewhat skewed) representation of the Cornish, her land embodies Cornwall itself, a county recognisable like few others by its geography and topography. We may have our problems down here, but every single Cornish man and woman knows exactly how lucky we are to live where we do. It turns out that, should situations arise where things such as non-essential travel become forbidden, we live in the perfect place, for we are never far from world-class walks across beaches

and coastlines, over moors, through woods or along inland trails. We may get angry about the tourists – we may even curse and call them *emmets* (an old Cornish word for ants) – but when it comes down to it, we're also deeply proud that, in an age of cheap flights to exotic locations, people still choose our land for their holidays.

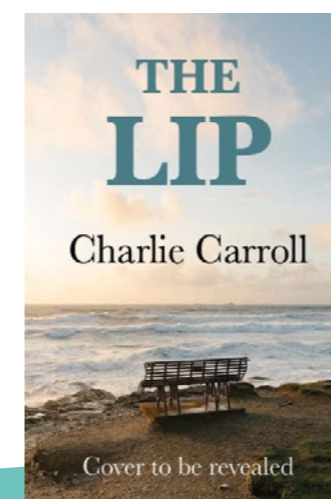
And why wouldn't they? It's a magnificent place, filled with natural diversity. For me, perhaps the most glorious part of all is the north coast: a world of sheer cliffs and hidden coves. This is where *The Lip* is set, where both Melody Janie and her land – a remote and elemental wilderness known as Bones Break – can be found. To the east lies the fishing village of Petherick, to the west the glorious beach of Lantoweth, to the south the ancient Trethewas Woods, and to the north nothing but the Atlantic. It is an area as timeless as any you'll find in this part of the county. Nevertheless, timeless as it is, *unpeopled* as it is, this is still an area which – like Cornwall as a whole – faces an uncertain future. Climate change, extreme weather patterns and heightened erosion are all taking their toll on the northern Cornish coast. With rockfalls and landslides and the washing away of sands growing increasingly common, the face of this part of the county is changing every year.

All of this is what coalesced to form *The Lip*. As a novel deeply rooted in its sense of place, I wanted it to account for much of what is going on within Cornwall today – all the frustration and all the pride, all the destruction and all the beauty – in order to effectively illuminate it. *The Lip* is both the world of Melody Janie and the world of all the different Cornwalls, each of which has much to reckon with.

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Rachael Duncan

Final cover to be revealed.



15

If the cold made an impression on her, she did not show it. Nor the prospect of the drop. The tide was at its lowest. No water awaited her down there, only black sand.

I have often wondered what she thought of in those last moments. I like to believe that if she thought of anything it was of my land, of the overwhelming beauty of it from the lip. And then I hope she thought of nothing at all. Because there is peace in that.

I had no time to shout. I was halfway across the road when I realised. By my next step, she had jumped. I watched her disappear out of sight beneath the lip and, still, I did not shout. I wanted to, I wanted to scream, but something stopped me. I did not know what it was at the time, but I do now. It was already too late. She had left, her action irreversible, and the last thing she needed to hear on the drop was my scream. Then she would have known that I had seen her. Seen *it*. I could not give her that as a final thought. I wanted peace for her.

I did not shout but I did run. Her footprints remained in the grass at the lip and I nestled my own feet into them. I looked.

She lay face down on the black sand.

\* \* \*

This is all I have.

Few ever get to see it as I do now: bathed by the rising sun behind, immaculate in this crisp morning air. There are no silhouettes in these conditions, only long shadows. The clarity is resounding. My land, my *world*, can be seen and absorbed in one long swoop.

There is no better place.

It starts from the coast-path signpost: the pitted wooden needle which pierces the horizon-hanging clouds, rock-steady on the western headland. And then it arcs, a jagged but perfectly curved lip, swinging back from the signpost until it reaches dead-centre and then out and on again with the same slow bend, past the warning sign and towards the eastern headland, where the lip crumbles and the coast-path has no barrier to separate it from the edge. That toppled into the ocean during last winter's storms. The lip forms the boundary of my land outwards but not downwards, where it continues, including the chop of Atlantic below, the sheer cliff-face which rises from it, lonely Gull Rock a few metres out, standing tall and serene. And then behind, behind the lip, behind me, this field of untamed grass which swells towards the road, ends, and then surfaces again on the far side, circling the Cafy and streaming towards the woods.

All of this is Bones Break.

All of this is mine.

I know every inch of it; I know it as intimately as the seagulls. I stand at dead-centre, my feet teetering on the edge of the lip. Below, the thundering tattoo of waves on rock. Wind catches the tips of my hair, lifting them above my ribs: less force than it takes to knock me down: enough to make me right myself with a step to the left, and then another back again. Here on the lip, it is vital to know where my feet are. They must have the same distance from each other as they have from the edge. For this is how she stood, nothing before her but clean and open air, her shoulders back, her bare feet flattening the blades of grass.

This is as close to her as I can get. Time and feeling separate us now, but I will not let distance do the same. I remove my sandals and picture her here. The ocean view, the sharp tang of brine at the back of the throat, the wet grass and wetter earth beneath it.

I breathe it all in, long and deep.



## The Rules of Revelation

LISA McINERNEY

A Corkonian band called Lord Urchin bursts onto the scene and not everyone's happy to sing along when its frontman used to sell drugs to half the county. Its guitarist has come home from Brexit Britain suffering a plethora of awkward questions, like, 'Is gender nonconformity OK for proles?' and 'Is no one going to tell me what the hell happened to my missing mother?'. Elsewhere, a former sex worker is encouraged to tell her story by a journalist with her own agenda, a young mother keeps failing at feminism, and a sixty-eight-year-old revolutionary acquires a long-dead nemesis and a knack for leading German tourists astray. This is *The Rules of Revelation*, polyphonic, set in Ireland's Real Capital, and full of flying feathers because so, so many chickens have come home to roost.

*The Rules of Revelation* was always going to be about music. I said my first three novels would follow the hendiadris 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll', so this had to be the rock 'n' roll novel, featuring all the hits: writing songs on island retreats, doing acid in the park, sharing epiphanic moments and drinking beer in green rooms. This was the vague plan, and all of those moments came through in the story, but it turned out that wasn't what *The Rules of Revelation* was about. That's probably already obvious. It's right there in the title.

I thought it would be the easiest of my Cork novels to write, certainly the funniest and gentlest, because my cast of characters have already dealt with quite enough Themes, thank you: sex, shame, religion (*The Glorious Heresies*), drugs and class inequality (*The Blood Miracles*). I even thought any chickens due home could be portrayed with wry humour, even homely pragmatism such as you might find on an inspirational meme. But novels aren't simple things that go from A to B with light japes in between. I don't want to sound like a mad person and insinuate that novels have an agenda, but they definitely start insisting on form and content at some point along the way. It doesn't feel like I wrote *The Rules of Revelation*, rather that I chiselled it out of some great slab of foolish credulity.

It was definitely shaped by the way I've moved through the world these past five years, and so it's probably the novel I'm closest to. It's not just about making art, it's about trying to make a living out of making art when you're a working-class artist. It's

about how no one in your own community really thinks you're doing the right thing and no one from anywhere else asked for your company in the first place. About battling against your deep-seated suspicion that making art is self-indulgent while trying to find your way around spaces that were never designed for you. I hope that doesn't sound too heavy. It's fun, I promise. I swear. It's fun, but it's not feelgood.

Ireland's a funny country, changing so swiftly and so frequently that we've become kind of numb to reckonings. So it is with the cast of *The Rules of Revelation*. The title is to be taken relatively literally: the past is to be excavated carefully. There are landmines around that stuff! You might, as my character Georgie does, decide to enact secretive revenge and instead find your own failings exposed. You might, like Maureen, have set ideas about your place in your own country, and find that as your country warps and wefts, the battle scars you wear so proudly become irrelevant. You might, like Karine, have built a whole world on a blurred image of yourself that's going to come into focus when you're least ready for it. You might, like Mel, demand answers from a world that won't be interrogated.

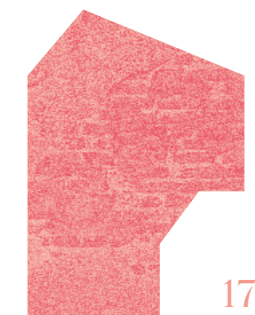
How do you cope if your indignation is ignored? You can spew liberating truth, you can be brave, you can armour up and march off to take on the dragon, but the real challenge is in facing up to the idea that you're not owed the killing blow. You might have to keep making sense out of half-truths, keep making your way through spaces not designed for you. So it is with me, as well. I try to make sense of how my country's moving, what I'm supposed to be saying about Ireland, and class, and gender, and how any of those big Themes pertain to coming of age in the council house.

'Make a song and dance about it,' says my character Ryan Cusack, the heart of all three Cork novels, and my most indefatigable rogue. 'Maybe that's what you're here for.'

He's saying this to his old friend, Mel. Maybe to his old friend me, as well. It is a good parting gift.

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Rosie Gailer



Maureen liked flea markets. She liked curios and tat and had been to this place more than once. She couldn't remember forming an impression of its name at all, but if she had it would have been that she'd thought Mother Jones to be a common nickname, like Lady Muck or Missus Mop.

'What do you know,' she asked a man presiding over an abundance of denim jackets, 'about the woman this place is named for?'

'Mother Jones?' He had the teeth of a fella fed up listening to anti-smoking campaigns and a crown of dusty curls, though both he might have owed to the light. It was the same light you got in pubs with a strong day trade. Light for the impulsive guilty.

'That's the wan.' Maureen pulled at the sleeve of the nearest jacket, which felt too supple to be clean.

'She was a Cork woman,' said the seller. 'Emigrated to America, and fought for worker's rights. There's a plaque up on the wall on John Redmond Street.'

'I never knew about her.'

'She wasn't a friend of yours, then?'

Maureen threw out an injurious glare. The seller looked not even a decade younger than her. 'Saucy so-and-so,' she said.

'Sure I'm only coddling you.'

'Your jackets smell of diesel,' she told him. 'I'm not coddling you.'

She lingered at his stall, rubbing denim between her thumb and first finger and tutting. He had left a black marker on top of a hardback notebook; when he turned his back she slipped the marker up her jacket sleeve. She moved on slowly and cast an eye over lampshades, second-hand books, bottles of coloured glass, porcelain dolls, military coats. She had a coffee at the little cafe and played conspicuously with the black marker, but its owner did not come looking for it. She took her time because she was otherwise at a loss for occupation. Oh, this was not like her. She pinched the handle of her mug. This was not like her one bit. In London she had every right to be down on herself, and she wasn't. She held a grudge but wasn't sunken with it. She should have been down on herself because for all her grudges she trundled on unnoticed. What would the people in London remember of her? That she was the joyless wan who used answer the phones. That she was the wan you couldn't bring to the pubs because she'd turn away the fellas with her acid tongue. And in the end that she was the cracked Irish biddy who lived in the middle bedsit on the middle floor, who thought herself guardian of the building and all its lost souls but who did nothing for anyone but gripe and belittle and rub the wrong way. She rammied the marker into her pocket.

She was continuing on up the road, she decided. Up the hill. She was going to wear the legs off herself.

'Merchant fecking prince,' she said, loudly, halfway up Summerhill North and coincidentally outside the old Chamber of Commerce; a fella with a wispy beard, walking past her from the opposite direction, nodded in camaraderie. Even if he hadn't been flaking down the hill she wouldn't have corrected him. Merchant fecking princes, and Mrs Harris Jones the opposite of a patron saint. She wouldn't think much of Maureen, and she living off sour spoils. Not that they'd let Jimmy in the gate of the Chamber of Commerce, and how many of them could he buy or sell?

The sky was grey but light and high. There was a lackadaisical breeze. She was getting clammy in her jacket, so she took it off and carried it over one arm. There were intermittent breaks in the terraces of townhouses where she could see Cork stretch to the south. It was a pleasantly green city, looked at from that angle. She came to the cross at St Lukes and turned right. The footpaths here were narrow, the views more frequent and more impressive. She climbed past old money's back gates and Lycra-clad girls carrying patterned water bottles. On either side, weeds poked from the top two feet of old stone. She went left and the street rose ahead of her again. The walls got lower and uglier. She turned her back on the view. She crested the hill, reached the Old Youghal Road, turned right, and sat on the first wall low enough.

'Merchant fecking prince!' She rubbed her thighs. 'And content to keep this place in this condition, because it suits him down to the ground.'



## The Making of Mrs Petrakis

MARY KARRAS

Maria Petrakis confesses her sin to the darkness and awaits her ultimate reckoning. She knows it is coming.

This hazy notion of godly retribution was never far from my mind growing up as a child of religious, Greek-Cypriot, parents. My childish interpretations of right and wrong involved reproachful, omniscient, eyes, heavily weighted scales of justice and heavenly lightning bolts. Religion, superstition and my over-active imagination converged to create a thick fog of righteousness and right in the centre of it swirled the threat of the curse. The curses we bring on ourselves, curses cast upon us by others and curses which are really just a reckoning in disguise.

These beliefs intrigued me long after I'd stepped out from behind their childhood shadows. I was keen to explore and analyse them through writing and, unsurprisingly, they spilled out onto the pages of my first book and into the lives of the central characters. Greek-Cypriot matriarch, Maria Petrakis, commits a sin and she spends the next fifty years atoning for it. She opens a bakery in north London selling warm, sticky, *shamali* cakes to hungry locals. She's a kind-hearted, patient, grandmother with a soft-spot for a tormented soul and an ear for a tantalising tale. Will it have been enough, though, she wonders. Will all the good deeds she's carried out have been enough to cancel out the bad one?

Then, there's Elena. Her melancholy, young, daughter-in-law who has been suffering from the blackness since having a baby and nobody knows quite how to help. Elena names her child after her husband's dead sister and is convinced she is being haunted by her spirit. The darker her postnatal days become, the more resolute she grows in her conviction that she's cursed. That somehow, she's brought her sickness upon herself by not praying hard enough, not being worthy enough, and by invoking anguished ghosts.

Her mother, Lenou, believes in curses, too. Things have been going wrong for many years and something or someone is to blame. The most likely candidate is her neighbour, Mrs Pavlou, who is supposedly jealous of her life. Mrs Pavlou is a busy woman. She has three teenage sons to feed and her eldest is preparing to fight in a war for Cyprus. She has no time to indulge Lenou. Why would she curse us? Elena asks her mother. Although rational thinking has no place among the shiny, eye-shaped, amulets.

Elena's sixteen year old sister, Valentina, is also in trouble. She's tarnished herself, ruined her reputation and must now face the consequences of her behaviour. Her mother offers no sympathy, no shoulder to cry on. Her version of religion is absolutist, it's black and white, and there is no room for maternal pity. A transgression like Valentina's needs to be punished and when it comes, she'll deserve her celestial lightning bolt.

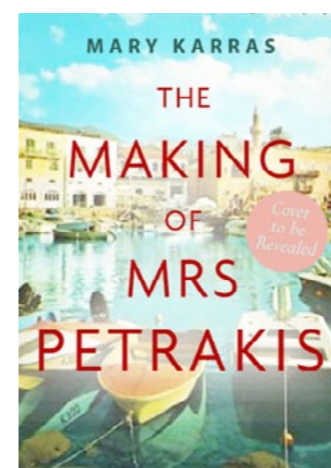
Another question which has long since captivated me. Are we persecuted by the powers that be or are we the masters of our own misfortunes? Running neatly alongside the ideas of wrongdoing and divine retribution, of imposing an order on chaos through religion, is the concept of personal culpability. Are the characters answerable to a deity for the sins they've committed or are they ultimately responsible for their fates? And, moving a step beyond this thinking and looking at wider society, are we just as accountable when it comes to the world we have created and the world we now find ourselves in? Whatever our backgrounds and whether we believe in an omnipotent presence, the universe or nothing at all, at what point do we stand up and take ownership for the things going on around us instead of watching passively from the sidelines?

We reap what we sow. For many reasons, a familiar refrain this year. This childhood inevitability was usually averted by a simple, heartfelt, apology. An exoneration. An absolution. It's what many of my characters are seeking. But, turning away from religion for a moment, what of the earthly reckonings we bring upon ourselves? Is it enough to offer an apology and if so, to whom are we apologising? Or, as some might say, has the time finally come for us to do something more decisive, more definitive, so that we may collectively alter the course of humanity?

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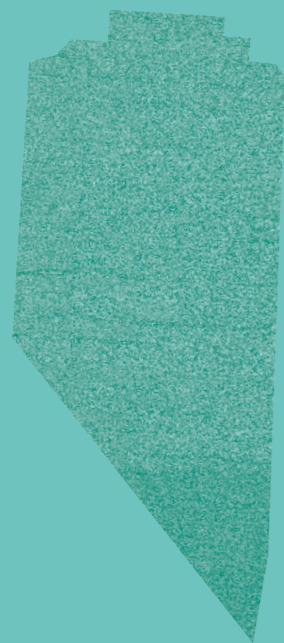


She marches into the kitchen chest first, her large, bent, nose pointed at the ceiling and her grey, curly, hair bouncing furiously around her shoulders like Medusa's. She fills a pan with water so she can make tea. She reaches for the koulouri bread, forgetting what she usually puts in Elena's sandwiches. Lounza, halloumi, olives? *You see*, she spits under her breath. *What you've done?* And as if worrying about her wasn't enough, she's worrying about the soul of the child, as well. She'll go and see Pater Sotiri later, when Elena's in class. She needs to know if it will be ok. She can't bear to think of the babe lost somewhere, in the shadowy spaces of Xanthe's stories about goblins and devils and Purgatory. She smears butter onto the bread and shudders at the thought of it. *Now look what you made me do! There's butter everywhere!*

Elena pads into the kitchen in her night dress, surprised that her mother is sending her to school. Of course she is, she replies. The world doesn't stop because Valentina has problems. Everyone has problems. She wraps the sandwiches in brown paper and ties them for her with string. *Here*, she tells her. *Halloumi. I remembered.*

She knows Elena's upset but she doesn't have time for vulnerability this morning. Not hers and not anyone else's. She can go to school and cry there. Lenou has chores to do. Someone needs to strip the beds and wash the sheets and tonight's dinner won't cook itself. Has Elena ever seen a chicken pluck its own feathers and fry itself in lemon and salt? Then she has to go over to St Peter's church and tell the Pater what has happened and put in a request for prayers to be recited because while there was nothing to look forward to, there was always the possibility of things getting worse. Another important life lesson which Elena would do well to remember. Things can always get worse.

Then, of course, there's the gossip. The malicious tongues, momentarily silenced by news of Valentina's marriage, will now have other things to gloat about. *Oh, I'm sorry about the baby*, Kyria Lenou, they'll say, dragging out their words and making two syllables sound like four. Professing their concern and empathy to her face and then whispering behind her back. She had it coming, she can hear them saying as they shake their heads at the back of the church. Did the stupid girl really expect to live happily ever after everything she'd done? Well, did she?



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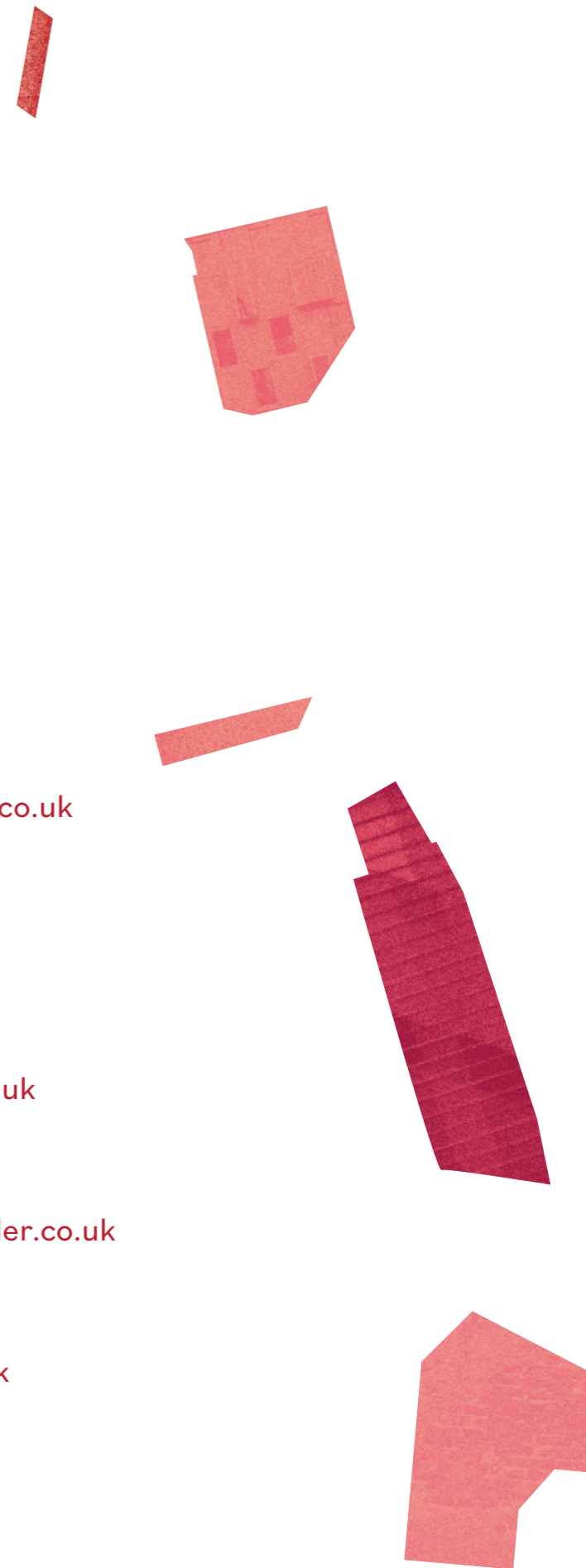
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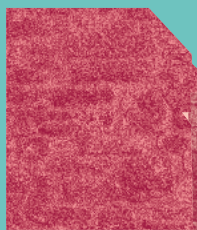
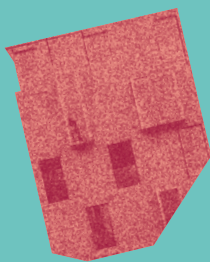
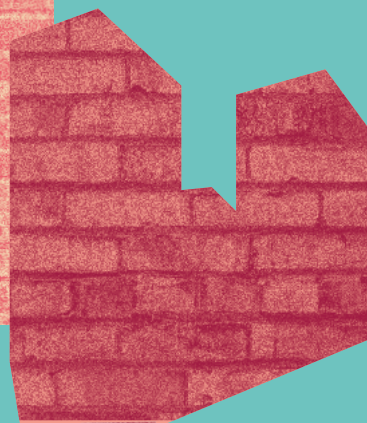
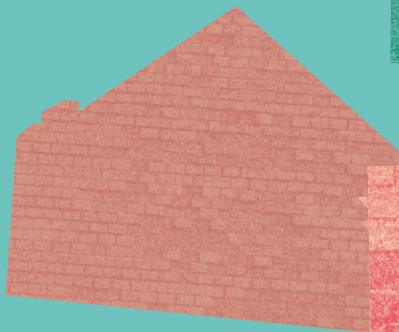
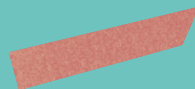
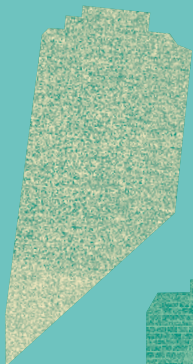
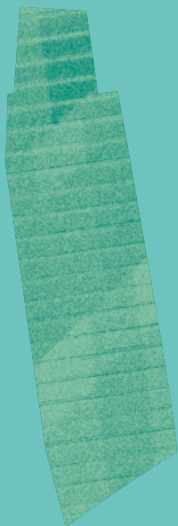
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TWO  
ROADS

JM