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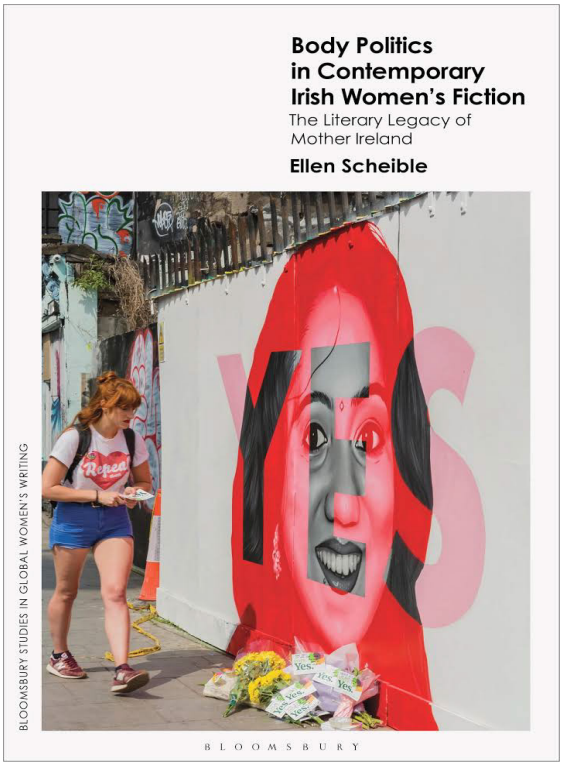
BOOKS

Ellen Scheible, *Body Politics in Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction: The Literary Legacy of Mother Ireland*, Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 177 p.



From the exposure of the Magdalene Laundries in 1993 to the publication of the Ryan Report in 2009, the Catholic Church's authority in the Irish Republic has struggled to resurface amid the unrelenting waves of scandal and controversy. Its waning influence over public opinion marks a profound shift in the island's institutional history and legislative politics. In the wake of the Church's receding power, Ellen Scheible's 2025 book, *Body Politics in Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction: The Literary Legacy of Mother Ireland*, contributes to the ongoing collective "unveiling of Ireland's historical traumas" (4), providing an in-depth examination of the multifarious ways literature has revisited and confronted the atrocities of the past.

Through six chapters extending across multiple generations of Irish writers—such as James Joyce and Sally Rooney—the study surveys a wide-ranging selection of prose writings that challenge the idealized Revivalist image foundational to postcolonial Ireland, traditionally modeled on the sanctified figure of the Virgin Mary. With an intersectional focus on the depictions of the Irish domestic interior and the female body, Scheible argues that modern definitions of Irishness were

inextricably shaped by a female subjectivity entrenched in binary constructions of gender, the patriarchal "internal policing" within the confines of "the family cell" (15), and the regulation of sexuality and reproductive autonomy.

The first chapter aims to highlight how the newly independent yet divided Irish nation was formed within the liminal space between tradition and modernity, through an ideological entanglement of "nation-making and homemaking" (24) embedded in the doctrine of Mariology. Scheible's analysis begins with a reappraisal of James Joyce's well-established innovative and subversive political aesthetics. She draws on Lacanian theoretical framework to show how the feminine in Joyce's texts acts as a signifier of cultural difference that resists and disrupts homogenous and oppressive colonial visions of nationhood and masculinity. Presented by Scheible as destabilizing confrontations with one's unfulfilled bodily desires, the male protagonists' encounters with women-as-mirrors (26) become sites for potential epiphanies, contingent on whether they embrace (Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom) or dismiss (Gabriel) the reflection of their selves in the female Others (Lily, Molly Ivors and Gretta). Within the broader project of nation-building, such narratives of recognition offer an alternative, hybridized version of postcolonial Irish subjectivity that "rejects unity as its founding principle" (37) and reconfigures the Irish home as a space free from the state of paralysis imbued with shame and sexual repression. According to Scheible's reading of Joyce's critique of nationalism, if the Irish domestic interior and discourse of national identity have historically been mapped on the female body, the liberation of women represents a crucial step in fully decolonizing Ireland.

In the second chapter, Scheible expands on the intrinsic relationship between domestic space and Ireland's biopolitics by exploring a set of texts authored exclusively by women: Angela Bourke, Elizabeth Bowen, Pamela Hinkson, and Tana French. What ties them together is their thematic concern with the regressive and repressive paradox that is Mother Ireland—a trope that demands women be both virgins and mothers (42)—as it was grafted onto the Irish domestic interior. This gendered paradox, in turn, reflects the bifurcated identity of the Irish nation. Caught between a folkloric Catholicism and a "colonial modernity" (47), the tension can be traced in two symbolically charged spaces: the Irish cottage and the Big House. Through Angela Bourke's *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (2001), Scheible seeks to emphasize how a childless, working female body not only challenges gender binaries but also renders a woman as an outcast, interpreting Cleary's murder as an attempt to re-assert manliness as the dominant symbolic order within the home. In a parallel example, the metaphorical silence (55) inherent to the Big House—an emotionally-vacuous passivity anchored in colonial masculinity—reveals yet another side of the gendered paradox: the silence requires the suppression of femininity, even as it relies on the feminine-coded domestic space to uphold a masculine power structure. This characteristic "numbness" permits the unmitigated "consumption of war, violence, and human suffering" (55) afforded by the gentry lifestyle at the expense of the Irish peasantry. Thus, argues Scheible, neither the Catholic nor the Anglo-Irish framework can mediate Ireland's transition toward a (re)productive future, for both rely either on the oppression or the absence of women.

Near the end of the second chapter, the book shifts its focus to Ireland's contemporary setting, specifically the post-Celtic Tiger period. In the third chapter, Scheible conceptualizes the female body as "a text" (74) inscribed with the economic anxieties and aftershocks of this era. Framed as a haunting spectre, this period prompts a Gothic reading of the two mystery novels Scheible analyzes: *The Likeness* (2008) by Tana French and *The Wonder* (2016) by Emma Donoghue. Before close reading the texts, Scheible articulates a female subjectivity rooted in Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, which entails a "feminized body (…) formed through bifurcation, separation, and distance" (74). The idea aligns with Scheible's argument that both novels conceive the female body as a "site for loss" (75), revealing and confronting—rather than reinforcing—the "systemic oppression inflicted by systems of power," namely "capitalism and Catholicism" (81). For instance, in *The Likeness*, the murder of an unmarried and pregnant young woman by her roommates within a Big House estate is interpreted as a rebuke of youth's obliviousness to Ireland's traumatic history of sexual abuse and incest amidst economic bliss. As Scheible notes, "modernization (…) without the incorporation of Irish history and memory will only result in the return of the repressed" (77). Similarly, *The Wonder* denounces a hidden, unaddressed economy built on the exploitation of women and children by the Catholic Church, where "the physical wasting away of both characters without successful reproduction demands a reconsideration of the role of the family in Irish economic development" (80).

Along these lines, Scheible identifies two main directions in contemporary Irish female fiction: the reassessment of both the Irish family and of female identity as inherently tied to motherhood. She opens the fourth chapter with a discussion of the Bildungsroman, propounding that the female versions of the genre interrogate "the reproductive expectations put on women in Irish culture" (89) by reimagining the failure of the female body "as one way to undermine the pressures to conform to capitalism as a patriarchal system of oppression" (90). Perusing texts such as *The Likeness* (French) *The Wonder*, and *The Pull of the Stars* (Donoghue), along with Emilie Pine's personal collection of essays *Notes to Self* (2018), Scheible seeks to demonstrate how strategic failure—or Bildung-through-failure—undercuts "the nation-as-woman trope" (101). In these works, reproductive failures or nonreproductive bodies become metaphors that both mirror and subvert the economic failure of the Celtic Tiger capitalism, with loss fostering the emergence of an autonomous female self, independent from biological determinism and familial structures. Whether by rejecting traditional forms of ownership (*The Likeness*), embracing nonbiological caregiving roles (*The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*), or finding empowerment in infertility (*Notes to Self*), Irish women writers, as Scheible observes, call for a redefinition of female sexuality beyond a heteronormative paradigm (104).

Although they discuss different novels, the last two chapters both delve into the topics of masculine privilege and entitlement. The fifth chapter analyzes *The Witch Elm* (2018), another mystery novel by Tana French, which proposes a radical ethics of reparations demanding that "men who benefit from a long history of racial, gendered, and economic privilege [to] sacrifice their own freedom for those who did not benefit from that same system" (108). Scheible's analysis contains a thorough examination of the

novel's symbolic use of character and setting to comment on the historical containment of female bodies, the insidious effects of cultural amnesia, and the pernicious legacy of "ancestral wealth and property ownership" (119). In the sixth chapter, Scheible positions Sally Rooney within the contemporary Irish literary landscape as a successor to James Joyce's politics of desire, where "desire is the central motif for the development and salvation of [a] struggling nation" (139). For both writers, she posits, the heteronormative family unit and the commodification of sexuality within it remain "essential to the formation of Irish national identity" (145). Thus, despite economic progress, only through a raw "expression of intimacy" (151) can Ireland rid itself of the violence cemented deep within the nation (144-145). Accordingly, Rooney attempts to offer alternative portrayals of heterosexual relationships that do not rely on the currency of female violence (144).

A key strength characterizing Ellen Scheible's study lies in her holistic approach, which interweaves critical theory, history, politics, and literature to unpack the complex layers behind the abiding image of Mother Ireland. Given its depth, the book assumes some familiarity with critical theory and Irish history. Nonetheless, the rigorous and compelling work stands as a valuable contribution both to Irish scholarship and feminist literary criticism. Equally significant is its engagement with contemporary debates in migration and transnational studies, as it responds to the urgent need for new, plural, and non-restrictive notions of home, selfhood, and cultural identity.

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