

QUEER WHISPERS: GAY AND LESBIAN VOICES OF IRISH FICTION

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In recent years, Ireland has experienced a notable transformation. Having decriminalised homosexuality less than thirty years ago, in 1993, it appears that the country, in the last few decades, has moved from being a strongly homophobic nation to being the first country to pass same-sex marriage legislation through a public referendum in 2015. Within this current context of progressive change, *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction*, authored by José Carregal, becomes a crucial work. This volume looks at the representation of gay and lesbian lives in Irish literature in the last four decades, from the 1970s up to the present, thus constituting the first exhaustive study of gay and lesbian Irish fiction within this time frame. In his thorough analysis of more than thirty different works—including both novels and short stories—written by twenty-one different authors, Carregal illustrates how Irish writers have been challenging the heteronormative and homophobic ideals of a Catholic society in the past and the ongoing discrimination that has persisted in more recent years.

The book opens with a foreword written by well-known Irish author Mary Dorcey. Here, Dorcey recalls growing up in the Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s, which she describes as “a period of profound social conservatism; silence, repression, guilt and fear” (2021: xi). She speaks of how, on discovering in adolescence that she was attracted to her own sex, she turned to literature and to those writers who bravely wrote about same-sex love. This brief foreword closes with Dorcey’s praise of the

work of the authors analysed in the volume as well as of Carregal's successful effort in gathering all these different voices together.

In the introduction, Carregal provides an overview of gay and lesbian activism in Ireland between the 1970s and the 2010s and sets out some of the aims and hopes of this volume: "to valorise the richness and diversity of the writings and writers of gay and lesbian lives in Ireland" (2021: 13) and to "lay the foundations for future expanded work on the ever-evolving story of queer Ireland" (16). Furthermore, this chapter emphasises how Ireland's 'cultures of silence' have impacted Irish gay and lesbian lives, as well as how "the languages of Irish Catholicism and national identity by no means facilitated the recognition and dignification of gay sexuality and lesbianism in twentieth century Ireland" (3). It is precisely language and silence that become the dominant focus for the analyses that follow in the coming chapters, in connection with diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Chapter 1 focuses on four novels that deal with the secrecy and silence that surrounded lesbian identity and the confinement of lesbian relationships to the private sphere at the time of writing. In exploring Maura Richards's *Interlude* (1982), Linda Cullen's *The Kiss* (1990), Edna O'Brien's *The High Road* (1988) and Pádraig Standún's *A Woman's Love* (1994), Carregal offers an analysis of how these works address vulnerability and isolation in 1980s and 1990s lesbian lives, a period during which lesbianism was characterised by its invisibility.

The second chapter of the volume is centered on some of the works by "[t]he first high profile Irish woman to be publicly and proudly a lesbian, Mary Dorcey" (Carregal 2021: 34). Examining three short stories from her collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989) and her novel *Biography of Desire* (1997), Carregal looks at how Dorcey's characters both identify and embrace their lesbian identities. Here, Dorcey's fiction appears in contrast to those works explored in the previous chapter, as the protagonists of these stories seem to accept their same-sex attraction and are able to find a place for themselves within the feminist and lesbian community, thus transcending victimisation and vulnerability. Relying on theories such as Raewyn Connell's notion of the 'patriarchal dividend' (1995) and on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), Carregal's exploration of Dorcey's texts concludes that the author "promotes a deeper understanding of lesbian lives and relationships" (48).

Chapter 3 looks at the depiction of cruising in four short stories: Micheál Ó Conghaile's "At the Station" (2012), Eamon Somers's "Nataí Bocht" (1994), Keith Ridgway's "Graffiti" (1994), and Joseph O'Connor's "The Hills Are Alive" (1992). These short stories provide an understanding of the reality of cruising, and through this chapter Carregal offers an analysis that illustrates how these four

works “defy a public language of cruising as morally degrading and an expression of sexual degeneracy” (2021: 60).

The fourth chapter deals with the following novels: Desmond Hogan’s *The Ikon Maker* (2013), Damian McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004), Tom Lennon’s *When Love Comes to Town* (1993), and Jarlath Gregory’s *Snapshots* (2001) and *G.A.A.Y.: One Hundred Ways to Love a Beautiful Loser* (2005). Drawing on Michael G. Cronin’s (2012) commentary on the Bildungsroman, Carregal looks into how these works examine cultural and personal crises, generational gaps, and the protagonists’ urgency to defy “the toxic languages of heterosexual masculinity” (2021: 62). His analysis illustrates how the novels, in their depiction of Ireland and Northern Ireland’s changing sexual morality from the seventies until the early 2000s, encourage a language of resilience, as the main characters depart from conventional concepts of masculinity and develop their own truths and relationships outside the expectations of their families and society.

Chapter 5 centers on both novels and short stories that address the issue of AIDS within the Irish gay male community. Carregal takes into account those cultural narratives of AIDS that associated the virus to gay sex and helped to reinforce Catholic sexual morality and Cormac O’Brien’s (2020) literary tropes of ‘punishment paradox’ and ‘positively Irish’ —that he identified in his study of HIV and AIDS in Irish theatre— to explore five texts: Micheál Ó Conghaile’s “Lost in Connemara” (2012), Keith Ridgway’s “Andy Warhol” (2018), Anne Enright’s *The Green Road* (2015), Desmond Hogan’s *A Farewell to Prague* (1995) and Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999). Even though these short stories and novels are set in the eighties and nineties, Carregal’s work evidences how they are still relevant today as the HIV/AIDS stigma remains and how they encourage an understanding of those conditions, both personal and social, that affect those who are HIV-positive.

The sixth chapter looks at three works by author Emma Donoghue: *Stir-fry* (1994), *Hood* (1995), and *Landing* (2007). Carregal focuses his analysis on how the novels address the female body and sexuality, the conflict between liberal and feminist ideologies in lesbian subculture, the disenfranchised grief confronted by lesbian widows, sheer exclusions that exist within the lesbian community, and the complex position of non-heterosexual teachers in Ireland; thus succeeding in his attempt to emphasise how Donoghue’s contemporary-set novels break many of the social silences that conditioned lesbian experience in 1990s and 2000s Ireland.

In Chapter 7, a total of seven different works set during the Celtic Tiger years are analysed: Tom Lennon’s *Crazy Love* (1999), Belinda McKeon’s *Tender* (2015), Colm Tóibín’s “The Pearl Fishers” (2010), Keith Ridgway’s *The Long Falling* (1998), “Angelo” (2001) and *The Parts* (2003), and Frank McGuinness’s “Chocolate and Oranges” (2018). As these texts approach different themes such

as gay fatherhood, the church scandals, rent boy prostitution, domestic violence and the invisibility of illegal workers and poor immigrants—to mention a few—Carregal effectively explores how these gay narratives “transcend social silences and articulate a cultural critique of the modern icon of gay life” (2021: 141) as they provide alternative stories than those promoted by Celtic Tiger discourses that built a division between Ireland’s modern present and its conservative past.

The eighth and closing chapter focuses on four historical novels that in their examination of past repressions around same-sex attraction offer a significant commentary on the current situation for homosexuals: Emma Donoghue’s *Life Mask* (2004), Sebastian Barry’s *Days Without End* (2016), Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), and John Boyne’s *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* (2017). Relying on Norman W. Jonas’s (2007) study of gay and lesbian historical fiction in Anglo-American writing, Carregal explores how these authors re-examine the genre’s traditional themes of ‘identification’, ‘transformation’, and ‘chosen community’, and he skillfully depicts how these four works “open up a space for the recovery and revaluation of queer histories, traditions and identities, subverting the historical silencing of homosexual lives” (2021: 161).

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To conclude, *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction* constitutes a well-researched volume that becomes relevant not only within the field of Irish Studies, but also within other disciplines that it touches upon, such as cultural studies, literature, history, and LGBTQ+ studies. Carregal has carefully brought together a wide range of works by many different Irish authors—both queer and straight—that through the past decades have given a voice to lesbian and gay lives in Ireland, addressing a variety of social issues. Focusing on the themes that these fiction texts engage with, such as lesbian (in)visibility, coming-out, Ireland’s changing sexual morality, HIV/AIDS stigma, lesbian/gay subcultures, and same-sex parenthood—among others—Carregal offers an all-encompassing analysis of those short stories and novels that since the seventies have contributed to exposing the silencing and repression of gays and lesbians in Ireland. Indeed, this is the first work to fully engage with lesbian and gay voices in Irish literature, providing an analysis of literary texts covering four key decades regarding social, cultural and legal transformations that have become essential for raising awareness of these issues. Furthermore, in its exploration of the limitations enforced by this silence, the volume strengthens the recognition of this community and their struggles, past and present. In short, thanks to Carregal’s elaborate weaving together of these stories and their consequent study, *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction* is a definitive must-read for any researchers and readers that are interested in Ireland’s LGBTQ+ literature and how this is significantly breaking with social silences by providing a place for dissenting voices to be articulated.

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