CHAPTER 5

Writing Childhood: Young Adult and Children's Literature

Patricia Kennon

Since the 1980s, Ireland has undergone a series of social, political, legal, and economic transformations as it moved 'into, as well as away from, the Celtic Tiger phenomenon and, as a consequence, notions of Irish identity and nationality have been in constant flux'.[1] The concept of childhood and the status of children in Irish society have been central to many of these transitions. Indeed, 'the story of contemporary Irish society [. . .] is a narrative with the child as its central trope'.[2] Alongside the Irish government's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989, the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2005, and the 2012 'Children's Referendum' (an Amendment to the Irish Constitution dedicated exclusively to children's rights), there has also been a growing awareness of the importance of children's literature and cultural experiences. For example, The Ark: A Cultural Centre for Children opened in 1995, Baboró (an annual arts festival dedicated to children and families) was launched in 1997, and author Siobhán Parkinson was appointed as the first Laureate na nÓg (Ireland's children's laureate) in 2010.

'Conflated with citizenry in the embryonic Irish republic',[3] childhood has long been utilised in constructions and regimes of Irishness, 'from the infantilization of the colonized subject under imperialism through to the imperatives of a model of heritage tourism that fetishized anti-modernity and was deeply invested in promoting the Irish people as quaintly charming and childlike'.[4] In his 1943 national radio address, Taoiseach Eamon de Valera famously consolidated the association of youth with an idealised Ireland filled with 'the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens'.[5] Seven decades later, Fintan O'Toole noted youth's still-central importance in envisaging Ireland. Proposing that 'the novel of growing up, from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) to John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965) and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960), is the quintessential Irish form',

he emphasised the opportunities that childhood and young characters afford authors regarding 'the most basic plot of all – the move from innocence to experience [. . .] the old reliable to which Irish writers return. But precisely because it is so old, it forces them to continually reshape it'.[6]

Concepts and meanings of childhood are interpolated and mediated within a plethora of adult desires, nostalgia, ambivalence, hopes, anxieties, institutions, educational agendas, and national interests. Simultaneously fluid and regulated, wild and a key site of socialisation and acculturation, childhood is 'a discursive conflict zone upon which cultural, political and economic engagements are waged'.[7] While some Irish writers of adult literature, such as Roddy Doyle, John Banville, and Cecilia Ahern, have been willing to 'cross over' and write for younger readers, children's literature has traditionally tended to be regarded as less 'literary' and less culturally valuable than adult literature. However, 'if we want to understand the way in which a culture envisions itself, we might look no further than the stories adults tell and retell to their children'.[8] Simultaneously constructed and surveilled, yet overlooked by adult agendas and interests, youth literature contains the potential for radical transformations. It therefore provides 'a curious and paradoxical cultural space [. . .] in which writers, illustrators, printers, and publishers have piloted ideas, experimented with voices, formats and media, played with conventions, and contested thinking about cultural norms (including those surrounding childhood) and how societies should be organised'.[9]

A further 'tangle of complexities' is involved when navigating the 'strange, complex, and fascinating place' of Irish children's literature.[10] While a preoccupation with national identity has been a central theme of Irish children's literature, English-language publishing in Ireland for children has been and continues to be a 'transcultural phenomenon'.[11] The Children's Books Ireland awards system (the leading children's literature awards in Ireland) accepts nominations for authors who are Irish citizens as well as those resident in Ireland but who are neither Irish by birth and/or who are not published in Ireland. I have applied this inclusive paradigm and therefore have approached Irish youth literature as including texts published in Ireland or internationally by writers and illustrators born and living on the island of Ireland, literature by children's authors of other nationalities now living in Ireland who are published by Irish publishers, and Irish authors of the diaspora whose work is published either in Ireland or elsewhere. I submit that the adoption of this capacious understanding of Irish youth literature is particularly appropriate and important in light of

the field's transitions over the last four decades and the increasingly diverse nature of twenty-first-century Ireland and Irish society.

An Irish tradition of writing for children by authors such as Jonathan Swift, Maria Edgeworth, L. T. Meade, Padraic Colum, and Meta Mayne Reid has existed for over three centuries. Two prolific twentieth-century Irish authors whose work was effectively synonymous with 'Irish children's literature' were Patricia Lynch and Eilís Dillon. Acclaimed for her rich evocation of place and blending the otherworldly with Irish rural life, Lynch's fiction helped 'establish a new literature for Irish children, rooted in the situations in which they lived'.[12] Mostly set in Ireland's small struggling island communities, Dillon's novels present a 'fascinating particularity of her Irish setting, coupled with the universality of her insights into human nature and society'.[13] Lynch, Dillon, and contemporaneous Irish authors for children such as Joan Lingard were overwhelmingly published by international publishers since English-language publishing for children in Ireland was virtually non-existent until the 1980s. Owing to Ireland's geographical insularity and position between two behemoth publishing industries, Irish children's authors writing in English who wished to aspire beyond their local limited market were obliged to move to and adapt to British and American publishing systems and expectations. This all-too-often resulted in Irish children's writers producing and perpetuating 'stage-Irish' stereotypical scenes involving 'pigs in the kitchen [. . .] clamps of turf and heaps of muck, [. . .] illiteracy, bad whiskey and general "devilment"'.[14]

This previous readerly and authorly reliance on foreign markets 'changed utterly' at the turn of the twenty-first century, which witnessed a remarkable upsurge of indigenous children's publishing. Echoing Ireland's economic expansion and cultural re-invention, Irish institutional and infrastructural conditions evolved to enable the production of Irish children's literature in the Republic of Ireland on a significant scale. While the increase in quantity of publications over this relatively short span of time was impressive, its deeper ideological significance concerned issues of national representation and new opportunities for self-expression which helped to manifest Ireland's 'new-found confidence' during the 1990s.[15] For the first time, 'domestically produced children's literature' was able to explore 'Irishness on its own terms without having to cater for an external audience.'[16] In 1980, the state-funded Arts Council opened up its literature policy to children's Anglophone fiction and the subsequent subsidising of the production of Irish children's literature in English enabled the founding of independent presses such as The Children's Press, O'Brien Press,

Poolbeg, and Wolfhound Press. Less than a decade later, children's books was one of the most successful sectors of overall Irish publishing[17] and this 'Irish publishing revolution' was hailed as signalling 'Ireland's coming of age and maturing self-confidence [. . .] Can anything be more important for so small a country – and one still so young?'.[18]

A new interest in Irish children's literature intensified, supported by professional publications and the setting up of prizes and organisations such as the Children's Literature Association of Ireland in 1987, which produced *Children's Books in Ireland* (later renamed *Inis: The Children's Books Ireland Magazine*). A significant moment for Irish children's publishing occurred in 1996 when Ireland was the focal theme of the Frankfurt Book Fair and several publications for both national and international audiences were produced for this event, including *The Big Guide to Irish Children's Books*, which contained a foreword written by President Mary Robinson. Accompanying the increasing attention paid to youth literature in libraries and schools, the founding of The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature in 2002 marked the formalising of the Irish children's literature scholarly community. Since the late 1990s, children's literature studies in Ireland has been embedded as a core part of Irish teacher education and increasingly incorporated into university English departments, while two MA programmes in children's literature have been established and an increasing number of doctoral and postdoctoral students study this area in Irish institutions.

Two genres have been particularly strong in Irish children's literature since the 1980s: mythology and historical fiction. The dominance of these genres is not surprising given the concern of Irish writing and culture with links between past and present and the opportunities they afford for self-exploration. This focus on Irish history and the associated production and mediation of collective memory becomes further intensified when brought together with childhood and adult desires to harness youth's symbolic power and future-bound potential. In 1997, Cormac MacRaois, estimated that there were at least thirty books dedicated to the retelling of Irish legends and myths for children in Irish bookshops.[19] Lavishly illustrated collections such as Niamh Sharkey's *Irish Legends for the Very Young* (1996) and Malachy Doyle's *Tales from Old Ireland* (2000) re-presented these traditional stories for modern Irish children, the Irish diaspora, and the international tourist market. Prompted by commercial motivations and heritage agendas, these works were 'part of the wider Celticism operating within the capitalist global economy of the modern society they critique'.[20]

A wave of Irish fantasy fiction for children also emerged, including Cormac MacRaois's Giltspur trilogy (1988–91), animal stories such as Tom McCaughrean's *Fox* series (1983–99), Pat O'Shea's *The Hounds of the Morrigan* (1985), and Michael Scott's *Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flame* series (2007–12). English-born author Kate Thompson is regarded as one of the most distinguished Irish writers of the fantastic for young people. Having resided in Ireland since the early 1980s, Thompson's work is immersed in Irish music traditions, the Irish landscape, and Irish traditional storytelling. As I have argued elsewhere, Thompson's 'distinctive mixture of the realistic and the fantastic enables her to elegantly explore the impact of memory, heritage, cultural belonging and hopes for the future'.[21] Irish children's writers, such as Darren Shan, Sarah Rees Brennan, Dave Rudden, Peadar O'Guilin, F. E. Higgins, and Derek Landy, have also been drawn to dark fantasy and horror's opportunities for exploring transgression and challenging notions of childhood innocence. The popularity of horror in Irish youth writing since the turn of the millennium speaks to the Gothic's 'characteristically uncertain and unsettling approach to youth', which reflects 'Ireland's coming of age as an independent state'.[22]

Historical fiction holds special potency for Irish children's literature as it is both 'the area in which Irish children's need for a literature of their own is most acute' and the 'area in which Irish children's authors have been most sure-footed in their writing and in which Irish children have been best served by their writers'.[23] Changes in Irish educational curricula in the 1990s encouraged teachers to seek out historical fiction and the period saw a profusion of Irish-produced historical writing for children predominantly set in the Irish past and concerned with the place and/or absence of the child in these Irish historical landscapes. These included Gerald Whelan's works exploring the Irish struggle for independence in the early twentieth century, Michael Mullen's novels set in pivotal moments across Irish history, Joan O'Neill's *Daisy Chain War* series (1990–2004), set in the Irish 'emergency' during the Second World War, and Sam McBratney's *The Chieftain's Daughter* (1994), based during the Irish transition from paganism to Christianity. Marita Conlon-McKenna's *Children of the Famine* trilogy (1990–6), set during that cataclysmic period in the 1840s, was the major phenomenon of 1990s Irish children's publishing. Marking 'a new approach to the writing of historical fiction' for children, it has been hailed as 'a prime example of how skilfully the specific can be shown – and perceived – to be of universal relevance, enabling a transfer beyond the Irish context'.[24] John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) and its

global critical and commercial success also helped raise the profile of Irish children's historical writing.

In her survey of Irish historical fiction in 1997, Celia Keenan observed that approximately a quarter of contemporary Irish children's books comprised historical narratives, and this genre continues to be a significant force in twenty-first-century Irish writing for young people. Emphasising historical fiction's particular importance in colonial and postcolonial cultures, Keenan concludes that the 'enormous growth in historical fiction for children in Ireland' reflected 'a new confidence in Irish society'.[25] This confidence was demonstrated through Irish children's literature's readiness to recognise and explore Ireland's past and its complex history of conflict, suffering, and violence: 'at a time when official historians and history teachers fought shy of emotional treatments of such contentious topics as the Famine or the Easter Rising, children's literature helped to rehearse the move beyond revisionist nervousness by frank confrontations with the issues raised'.[26] While the realities of conservative library and school markets imposed limitations on Irish writing for young people, Irish children's literature possessed an intriguing potential to explore territory that contemporary Irish adult literature was reluctant to acknowledge. Drawing upon the Irish youth publishing sector's financial and cultural momentum during this period, Irish children's authors could increasingly negotiate the paradoxical nature of this surveilled yet overlooked imaginative space and venture into more radical investigations of Irishness and Irish identity.

For example, Mark O'Sullivan's 1994 novel, *Melody for Nora*, was one of the first Irish novels for children or for adults to address the Irish Civil War. It unsentimentally considers cycles of violence and the impact that this traumatic time had and continues to have on Irish society. In this sense, Irish children's literature became 'pioneering in an Irish cultural context and engages with issues glossed over by "adult" or mainstream texts'.[27] Like *Melody for Nora*, Siobhán Parkinson's *Amelia* (1993) and its sequel, *No Peace for Amelia* (1994), were published during a politically charged period of peace initiatives in Northern Ireland. Focalised through the unconventional perspective of a young Quaker female protagonist and her family's egalitarian, pacifist world view, these novels draw upon debates in Irish society about Irish women's history, class, violence, religion, nationalism, and feminism. Elizabeth O'Hara's *The Hiring Fair* trilogy (1993–6) attends to a similarly neglected history of late-nineteenth-century young Irish working women. Buoyed up by Irish society's expansive mood during the 1980s and 1990s, these writers' works offer an interpretation of Irish

history 'that deflates the triumphantly nationalist, and social and religiously conservative attitudes that publicly predominated in earlier years'.[28]

However, the boom in indigenous Irish children's publishing was not to last. In the mid-1990s seven Irish publishing houses regularly produced books for young people; yet by 2002, only the O'Brien Press consistently continued to publish a substantial children's list. Others had ceased to exist or significantly reduced their output. Paradoxically, two UK publishing conglomerates were simultaneously establishing children's divisions in Ireland in response to the strength of the Irish market and the availability of promising Irish children's authors. Ironically, 'in many ways, Irish children's publishing' had 'become a victim of its own success', with the Arts Council deciding to withdraw funding from Irish children's publishers due to their commercial success.[29] This dramatic reversal has many causes: a 'phase of identity-fatigue' due to the quantity of books produced during these decades; the uneven quality of the literature produced; inconsistent concern for editorial and production standards; British publishers pursuing marketable Irish authors with more lucrative contracts and the opportunity for international sales; a lack of mandatory school-library provision; and 'a culture of kindness in Irish reviewing [which] did not help to raise critical standards'.[30] Inconsistent quality and production standards and the pressures of managing dominant publishing industries in neighbouring countries are not unusual issues in emergent postcolonial children's literature, and an overly constructive reviewing culture has often been critiqued in the children's and young-adult literary communities in many countries. However, the decline of Irish youth publishing seems remarkable in its speed and scale.

Thankfully, though, recent Irish publishing for young people is in a healthier state. For example, the imprint Little Island was successfully launched in 2010 with the aim of fostering new Irish writing for young people and issuing translations of international children's literature. Yet, the significant challenge for Irish publishers to attract and retain promising and established Irish children's writers and illustrators remains. The desire of Irish children's authors to reach wider audiences and attain more financial security and success than the small domestic market can offer is understandable. However, moving to international – predominantly British and North American – publishers overwhelmingly results in a cultural elision of the Irish-specific content of Irish authors who have first been published in Ireland. Upon studying the novels of three representative children's writers – Maeve Friel, Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, and

Eoin Colfer – after they were adopted by British publishers, Celia Keenan concluded that their work underwent a 'qualitative change'.[31] After Colfer (author of the popular *Artemis Fowl* series, which incorporates figures from Irish folklore and begins within an explicitly Irish landscape) joined a British publisher in 2001, 'almost all culturally specific references' in his subsequent fiction were either 'eliminated or rendered parodic' and the local and national 'ceded to the global'.[32] The erasure of Hiberno-Irish and of Irish myth and history give Colfer's books a highly successful globalised feel, but one which no longer engages with the richness of Irish identity politics or literary heritage. The loss of a distinctive sense of place and the pervasion of globalised, anonymous non-places was part of a wider transformation in the early 2000s as the country's economic success was hailed and promoted as a 'showpiece of globalisation'.[33] This pattern of identifiably Irish references being diluted and reconfigured into a more homogeneous, 'universal' style and setting for a more universal reader is common to both the adult and children's publishing world, and it 'is probably an insoluble problem in an overwhelmingly Anglophone country sandwiched between two Anglophone world centres of publishing'.[34]

Irish-language children's authors had and still have few opportunities to be published outside the country. Youth literature in Irish has been predominantly required to act in a language-teaching role and the embedded primary- and secondary-school market as well as the recent growth of *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-language-medium schools) since the 1990s underpins the market for Irish-language youth literature. An evolution of Irish-language children's publishing began in the late 1970s when *An Gúm* – the Irish publications branch of the Department of Education and the main Irish-language publishing house – reviewed its standards in order to produce books that would evoke pleasure and enjoyment as well as support children's Irish-language reading skills. Encouraged by *An Gúm*'s review and a clear policy of direct state intervention, new authors began to produce literature in Irish for children and various independent Irish-language publishers for children emerged at the cusp of the twentieth century, including Cló Mhaigh Eo in 1995, Futa Fata in 1997, and An tSnáthaid Mhór in 2005.

The production of picture books in Ireland has been difficult in light of the constraints imposed by a small market and the costs of creating original artwork. Another factor inhibiting the 'relatively new' publishing of these 'indigenous' texts may be that 'the Irish, though highly literate verbally, do not have a great tradition of visual literacy'.[35] While English-language Irish picture book makers, such as Niamh Sharkey, Chris Haughton,

P. J. Lynch, Oliver Jeffers, and Martin Waddell, have been internationally acclaimed for their visual narratives, twenty-first-century Irish-language publishing for young people has demonstrated a particular capacity for visual storytelling. The first graphic novel for young people published in Ireland, *An Sclabhaí* [*The Slave*] (based on the early life of Saint Patrick) was produced in the Irish language by Cló Mhaigh Eo in 2002, and the subsequent series of graphic-novel retellings of Irish myths and legendary figures has attracted a diverse audience of child native speakers, older additional language learners, and international comics readers. Irish-language publishers have incorporated multimedia and audio CDs into picture books as a result of strong demand from the growing Irish-medium preschool and primary sectors. The creation of co-production imprints such as Walker Éireann has also helped meet the needs of indigenous readers and additional language learners, and navigate the challenges of a small-scale domestic market and minority-language publishing.

A 1988 Irish-language picture book, Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick's *An Chanáil* [*The Canal*], was one of the first Irish works of children's literature to recognise Ireland's increasing multiculturalism. Set along the changing urban and rural environment of the Grand Canal in Dublin, it realistically depicts diverse socio-economic conditions and cultures, including an image of an Indian woman in a sari and her child walking home. During the last three decades, Ireland rapidly moved from a nation formerly renowned for its emigrant outflow to one facing for the first time a multiplicity of incoming groups, including refugees, asylum-seekers, job-seekers, and returning Irish migrants. Although the Irish government pledged its commitment to cultural plurality and a respect for the 'new Irish', this transformation has been complex and uneasy. Irish youth literature has all too often assumed a default norm of whiteness and has been slow to acknowledge and challenge issues of racism and white privilege. As Victoria Flanagan states: 'Whiteness largely functions as an invisible category of identity, as it is by remaining invisible that it instantiates itself as normative.' This is particularly prevalent in postcolonial countries such as Australia and Ireland that now have diverse multicultural populations and Flanagan argues that 'the cultural hegemony of Whiteness [. . .] can only be displaced if the privilege attached to this particular identity is revealed and dismantled'.[36]

Contemporary novels addressing racial diversity include Siobhán Parkinson's *The Love Bean* (2002) and Vincent O'Donnell's *Out of the Flames* (2002), which explicitly examine negative media discourse around multiracial immigration and the relatively new phenomenon of African

asylum-seekers in Ireland. These novels, however, are still presented from a white perspective. John Quinn's *Duck and Swan* (1993) was the first Irish children's novel to feature a black Irish character, and Mark O'Sullivan's *White Lies* (1997) and Patrick Devaney's *Tribal Scars* (2004) are two of the few Irish youth novels to feature an Irish biracial protagonist. Cliona Ó Gallchoir has emphasised the significance of these three novels, as they are 'not primarily concerned with the "Irish" response (sympathetic or otherwise) to "outsiders"; instead, they offer a more profound reflection on the processes of racialization that emerged in the Celtic Tiger period amidst Ireland's increasing racial diversity'.[37] Disappointingly, apart from the Bridges series of four picture books published in 2011 by O'Brien Press with the agenda of promoting multicultural education for Irish readers aged six years onwards, there has been almost no further Irish children's literature that has substantially addressed issues of race, plurality, or migrant communities within contemporary Irish settings.

Irish youth literature has also been reluctant to address other realities, such as abortion, sexuality, teen pregnancy, child abuse, homelessness, and divorce. However, from the late 1980s, fiction arose in which 'the first fictional intimations of the "new" Ireland were to be clearly perceptible' and which challenged traditional notions of what constituted taboo topics in texts for young people.[38] For example, Siobhán Parkinson's *Breaking the Wishbone* (1991) explored homelessness, Marita Conlon-McKenna's *No Goodbye* (1994) addressed divorce and step-families, and Michael Scott's *Judith* trilogy (1991–7) considered class frictions and prejudice around the Irish Traveller community. Tom Lennon's *When Love Comes to Town* (1993) was the first Irish youth novel to involve a gay character. Published by O'Brien Press in the same year that homosexuality was decriminalised in Ireland, the novel originally appeared in the publisher's adult list but now appears on their children's list. The book's publication history and reclassification optimistically suggest 'significant changes in cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in Ireland' and that 'it is now easier for publishers to place what may once have seemed controversial novels onto their children's lists'.[39] Meg Grehan's *The Space Between* (2017), Claire Hennessy's *Like Other Girls* (2018), Sarah Maria Griffin's *Other Words For Smoke* (2019), Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* (2019), and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples* (2019) feature LGBT characters. Since the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015, there has been a welcome increase of Irish novels representing queer characters.

During the last decade, the Irish young adult (YA) market has rapidly become one of the most buoyant fields in Irish youth literature and Irish

literature generally. While Irish novels for teenagers can be traced back to the 1990s – Margrit Cruikshank's *Circling the Triangle* (1991) is regarded as the first Irish novel for adolescents – Ireland's relatively recent YA 'scene' (fostered by consistent new releases and an enthusiastic Irish YA reader and author community) is 'burgeoning, emboldened by political conviction and boosted by inventive retail'.[40] Eason, the leading Irish bookstore, introduced a YA category in 2011 and Dept 51 (a distinctive hybrid area that combines YA literature with forms of popular culture) was established in 2014. Dept 51 began featuring events in 2015 with DeptCon, an annual YA convention featuring a prestigious programme of Irish and international authors such as Juno Dawson, Patrick Ness, and Sarah J. Maas. YA fiction also attracts adult readers. Nielsen Bookscan studies during the last five years have revealed that a significant majority of YA fiction is consumed by readers over the age of 25. The YA Book Club, a Dublin-based reading group of YA fans from across the publishing industry, demonstrates the crossover appeal of YA fiction beyond the teenage demographic. Many critics have identified the allure of YA literature for 'those forced to occupy childhood well into their thirties' due to 'the preoccupation of the form with periods of transition, uncertainty, and identity formation'.[41]

The number and success of Irish YA women writers such as Louise O'Neill, Deirdre Sullivan, Sheena Wilkinson, Sarah Crossan, Sarah Maria Griffin, and Moira Fowley-Doyle is thus particularly significant. Observing how 'teenage girlhood tends to be associated with crisis and trauma, unexpected pregnancies and abuse' in twentieth-century Irish fiction, Susan Cahill commends the recent proliferation of Irish texts for young people that 'share a taking seriously of the teenage girl's consciousness and a celebration of the energies of the bold girl as a force for change'.[42] Contrasting the emphasis on masculine developmental modes in the Irish literary tradition and the way that Irish boyhood 'now constitutes a well-established literary genre of its own' with the constraints, rarity, and obscurity of novels exploring Irish female experience, Jane Elizabeth Dougherty has argued that 'childhood' in an Irish context 'has become a male genre'.[43] Novels such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) powerfully addressed 'the ways in which Irish literature refuses to see or hear the teenage girl'.[44] Instigated by the Kerry Babies and Ann Lovett tragedies that rocked Ireland in 1984, Siobhán Dowd's YA novel, *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006), re-invented the traditional 'problem novel' about teenage pregnancy and created a poetic examination of Irish society's hypocrisy and religious obsession. The elision of Irish girlhood has been increasingly

challenged by recent feminist and women's rights movements around the representation of women in Irish theatre and Irish women's reproductive rights. Topping bestselling lists and winning literary awards, Irish women's YA fiction echoes the increased visibility, publication, and media attention of wider Irish women's writing.

A particular concern of Irish YA women's writing relates to discourses around the adolescent female body as a 'site of contradictory cultural expectations' which occupies 'a space between childhood and womanhood, between innocence and experience, between purity and fertility'.[45] Irish women's YA fiction that addresses the complexities and vulnerabilities of girlhood includes Kim Hood's engagement with mental health issues in *Plain Jane* (2016), Claire Hennessy's treatment of peer pressure and eating disorders in *Nothing Tastes as Good* (2016), Deirdre Sullivan's exploration of a teenage girl's experience of abuse and recovery in *Needlework* (2016), and her compelling collection of feminist retellings of fairy tales, *Tangleweed and Brine* (2017). Winner of the inaugural *The Bookseller* YA Book Prize in 2015, the 2015 *Children's Books Ireland* Eilís Dillon Award for debut literature, and Newcomer of the Year at *The Bord Gáis Energy* Irish Book Awards 2014, Louise O'Neill has been 'the most successful YA breakthrough in Ireland' and her work uncompromisingly traces 'the reduction of the teenage girl to commodity' in Irish society.[46] Spanning a range of genres, O'Neill's three YA novels to date interrogate female embodiment, misogyny, patriarchal power, and adolescent female agency. *Only Ever Yours* (2014) is based in a dystopian world where young women are bred for the pleasure of men, while *The Surface Breaks* (2018) is a feminist retelling of 'The Little Mermaid'. Her best-selling novel, *Asking for It* (2015), was inspired by the real-life 2013 case of 'Slane Girl': a photograph of a teenage girl performing oral sex on a young man at a concert in Slane Castle went viral on social media, resulting in the widespread excoriation of the girl, with no consequences for the young men involved. O'Neill's feminist activism and fiction have instigated important national conversations about issues of slut-shaming, rape culture, toxic masculinity, revenge porn, and the importance of education around consent and the ethical uses of social media in today's Ireland.

As Ireland transitioned into the twenty-first century, Robert Dunbar remarked that 'there are, in truth, many Irelands' in this new millennium and hoped that Irish youth literature would come 'to reflect and respect these pluralities'.[47] While Irish young adult fiction is in its own state of 'childhood', the progressive work of the increasing host of Irish YA authors presents the exciting potential of modern Irish writing for young people to

challenge hegemonic norms, explore diverse perspectives, and re-imagine representations of youth experience.

Notes

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