We Won’t Make It Out Alive

We Won’t Make It Out Alive: Patrick McCabe and the Horrors of the Irish Mundane

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2333-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2333-3

Στην μητέρα μου και στην γιαγία μου.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was first introduced to Patrick McCabe's novels while studying at Trinity College Dublin, and that discovery was among the highlights of my time there. Not that I am assuming he will ever come across these very modest pages, but I want to thank Mr. McCabe for bringing so much joy to me and to so many others through his work.

There are a few wonderful teachers that have influenced my life in profound ways. Virginia Kilgannon, I know I told you my first book would be called *Katieology*, so I hope this isn't too disappointing. You have inspired me so deeply, from your classroom demeanour and refusal to accept anything but the best from your students, to your personal character and your kind heart. You are the kind of teacher I hope to be. I would also like to thank Amy Noll, the late Dan Kristoff, and Chad Wyman for teaching me about music and friendship, and for supporting me during the hardest time of my life. Drs. Robert Sulcer and Irene Fizer of Hofstra University fostered my love of literature and close reading, and I am grateful to both of them for mentoring me.

I would also like to thank my former colleagues at Five Towns College. Within the four walls of our liberal arts office, there was an environment of kindness and intellectual community which I wouldn't have survived without. Dr. Richard Kelley is the greatest boss and mentor one could wish to have— in addition to his formidable intellect on so many subjects, his sense of humour and sarcasm banded all of us together. Professors Navid Ghani, Larry Brittain, Anna Kaplan, and Jane Better, thank you for your friendship, advice, and conversation on all matters great and small. And Professor Jennifer Shea, my cubicle neighbour and friend, I am so glad I met you.

I would also like to thank the following friends for their support: Aamira Welthy and Joyce Pryor, the other members of the book club turned "brilliant minds" discussion group- I admire your enthusiasm and ambition in everything that you do; thanks for listening and supporting my ideas. Karin Romans looked at some earlier sections of this book and I am grateful for her feedback and friendship, from the rugby pitch to the

marathon course. Elizabeth Kuzma and Christine Costa, I feel so lucky that we were thrown together by fate and the Hicksville School District. We have been through so much together and I look forward to many more years of walks, talks, and sickening amounts of frozen yogurt. My brother and almost twin, Chris Brooks, thank you for your friendship, advice, and willingness to eat Greek pastries with me regardless of the time, day or night. And to my husband and best friend, Joe, I couldn't begin to list all of the ways you have made my life better just for being in it. Thanks for your friendship, companionship, and for helping me keep all of this academic stuff in perspective.

Before the orchestra strikes up the music and/or I get yanked offstage, I would just like to add, thanks for reading.

INTRODUCTION

> "The classic Irish Gothic novel…is characterized by a combination of narrative complexity, emotional hysteria and the incursion of supernatural systems on a hopelessly flawed and corrupt 'real' world. In the gothic vision, any hope of social change in the present is belied by the persistence of the sins of the past. The message is that we are all victims of history, only most have not recognized it yet."
> —Gerry Smyth[1]

Drunk, abusive fathers; a tyrannical church who doesn't help the poor, the suffering, or the masses of society, and where priests abuse children and go unpunished; the horror of a small island ripped apart by political violence and opposite allegiances; parents who cannot feed or clothe their children due to extreme poverty. These "themes," if you will, are common threads of both Irish literature and representative of the darker aspects of Irish history. From Jonathan Swift's satirical pamphlets and poetry to contemporary writers like Frank McCourt and Edna O'Brien, there has always been something inherently gothic about the Irish experience due to the combination of colonial rule and religious constraints. Interestingly enough, Patrick McCabe, whose work is rife with stories pertaining to these topics and tomes, and who himself coined the term "bog gothic," is largely left out of this discussion.

According to Fred Botting, "in Gothic fiction certain stock features provide the principal embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties. Tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits predominate...Spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines, and bandits populate Gothic landscapes as suggestive figures of imagined and realistic threats."[2] Contemporary Ireland would serve as a more than suitable stage to set these kinds of actions. Although the Republic won independence from colonial rule in 1922, the certain matter as to what happened to the north part of the island is still not a closed case.

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[1] Brian McIllroy, "Irish Horror: Neil Jordan and the Anglo-Irish Gothic" *Horror International,*eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 1.
[2] Fred Botting, *The Gothic* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 2.

The violent and brutal Troubles resulted in the deaths of many innocent of anything other than trying to live their lives undisturbed. Between 1968 and 1994, 3,500 people were killed and 35,000 were injured as a result of the conflict.[3] The 1998 Belfast Peace Agreement largely put an end to this senseless violence. However, recent attacks from 2008 onward clearly demonstrate that there is a tiny minority who are still angry enough to perpetuate this pointless aggression. As Pat McCabe states in the "prelude" to *Breakfast on Pluto,* "1922; a geographical border drawn by a drunken man, every bit as tremulous and deceptive as the one which borders life and death."[4] With Northern Ireland populated with both Protestant unionists wanting to remain a part of Great Britain while the Catholic republicans wish to join the "Free State", a consensus may be generations away. It is for this reason that I find the use of the title "postcolonial literature" uncomfortable to use when discussing McCabe and Irish literature in general.

Andrew Smith and William Hughes note,

> These writers (postcolonial) have used the Gothic in their writings in order to examine how images of otherness have been made to correspond to particular notions of terror (in terms of either political uprisings or anxieties about race, for example). In this way their work acknowledges this link between the Gothic and the colonial, and this acknowledgement is generated out of a postcolonial reassessment of such a link.[5]

Although I disagree with the postcolonial label, I believe that Smith and Hughes make a valid point about the link between the Gothic and the colonial, and the ability to make this connection with the benefit of hindsight. I would argue that McCabe's work has grown more politically explicit since the 1998 Peace Agreement, and perhaps this is due to the vantage point that the worst is over.

Besides the political allegiances and practicalities involved, there exists gothic elements of the Irish condition on a much more daily and immediate level. Poverty, rampant alcoholism, depression, domestic violence, and child abuse are not merely Fordian inventions—to add steam to a John Wayne storyline—but are concrete social problems that the Irish are only beginning to explore after decades of masking the realities of

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[3] Landon Hancock, "Northern Ireland: Troubles Brewing" CAIN Web Service, (1998, 1 Feb 2010), http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/landon.htm.

[4] Patrick McCabe, *Breakfast on Pluto* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), x.

[5] Andrew Smith and William Hughes, *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 4.

these crimes. The truly absurd thing about these social problems is that they were very much common knowledge—so common that society was able to ignore them for another generation or two. Taking a survey of Irish fiction, especially those coming-of-age stories, one will see that an alcoholic abusive father, a depressed mother, a paedophile priest have all become stock characters that barely cause one to bat an eye. They exist—why?—to represent the adversity that the protagonist must overcome. What Patrick McCabe has done is to throw these elements of the Irish mundane into stark relief through the employment of a neo-Gothic style—we are shocked into seeing how truly unnatural these social problems are, instead of being anesthetized by their constant presence in Irish stories.

Perhaps due to these various factors, Irish writers are still utilizing neo-Gothic motifs in their fiction. Kim McMullen observes: "...the damaged psyches and emotional struggles of individual Irish men and women gesture towards residual social pathologies, borne by the economic, cultural, and social isolation, emotional austerity, and sexual repression that attended Ireland's emergence as an independent nation...[6] John McGahern's book, *Amongst Women*, which describes the trials of a widowed father and his daughters in 1970s Northern Ireland depicts a haunting desolate landscape, a "big house", and nightly religious rituals that antagonize the daughters rather than bring comfort. Despite this, Michael Moran's daughters return home to comfort their dying father, who cannot come to terms with the discrepancy between the IRA of his youth and the "gangsters" of the 1970s. Although the novel feels dark and, at times, oppressive in its depiction of rural life and a patriarch who longs for the order and clarity of the past, it is ultimately a life affirming tale. Eamon Maher notes,

> McGahern's approach to the novel in *The Dark*… and *The Pornographer*... charts a changing Ireland- one that moves from bleak provincialism to an acknowledgement of the role of love and memory as purifying forces- and a return to the traditional rural countryside after having tasted, and ultimately rejected, life in London and Dublin.[7]

McGahern's characters, as Maher recognizes, are eventually able to overcome the Gothicism of their surroundings and situations, as there

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[6] Kim McMullen, "New Ireland/Hidden Ireland: Reading Recent Irish Fiction" *The Kenyon Review* vol.26, no.2 (Spring 2004) 127-128.

[7] Eamon Maher, "The Irish Novel in Crisis? The Example of John McGahern" *Irish University Review* vol.35, no.1 (Spring-Summer 2005), 67.

exists a reaffirmation of traditional values in their eventual return to that established way of life.

Roddy Doyle's novels, while his popular Barrytown Trilogy deals with urban Irish life with a lighter touch despite dealing with serious issues such as unemployment and teenage pregnancy, two of his novels (*The Woman Who Walks into Doors* and its follow up, *Paula Spencer)* are unflinching explorations of domestic violence, crime, and alcoholism. Ultimately, though, Paula embarks upon a new life as a single (and sober) woman, trying to salvage her relationships with her children and find a place for herself within a multicultural 21st-century Dublin. It is, like McGahern's work, ultimately an uplifting and life-affirming tale.

Edna O'Brien's novels, many dealing with small-town Irish life and lyrical in style, have long enjoyed tumultuous reputations. Her first novel, *The Country Girls*, published in 1960, was banned and all of the copies sold in Limerick were burned in a church-sponsored bonfire.[8] But it is her novel *In the Forest* that shares a striking number of similarities with the works of Patrick McCabe. The narrative follows a young boy's brutal home life, the way in which he slips through the cracks despite the fact that all eyes are on him, becoming a social casualty, and eventually stalks and brutally murders a young mother and her child. The narrative is very similar to that of McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. This commonality is worth mentioning since the journey of the character Michen O'Kane is based on the real life story of Brendan O'Donnell, who brutally murdered the young Imelda Riney, her three-year-old son, and Father Joe Walsh, in County Clare in 1994. The murder trial that followed was the longest in Irish history. O'Kane (and O'Donnell) share very similar childhoods to those of McCabe's characters. But while the publication of O'Brien's novel was met with much success in America, the Irish reception to the novel was met with protests and anger. This outrage (supposedly) had to do with sensitivity for the victims and the idea of making money off of such a terrible incident, not the fact that this communal neglect allowed the young murderer get to the point that he did. However, some such as Ronan Bennet, feel that that there were other reasons behind the uproar, and that there should be an ongoing public dialogue about such issues:

> O'Brien has been accused of exploiting tragedy for profit, of intruding into private grief, of writing about an Ireland she no longer knows or understands.

[8] Edna O'Brien, "Causing a Commotion," Guardian.co.uk (19 April 2008, 5 June 2009)
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview2.

> The intemperateness of the language and the contortion and inconsistency of the charges against her lead you to suspect there are other motives at work. Her enduring success and continuing international acclaim, perhaps? The treatment of republicans in her journalism and fiction? Daring to write about Ireland while not living there? Literary Ireland can be a very petty place indeed; O'Brien can safely ignore it. But what we can be glad she has not ignored is the other Ireland, the Ireland that made Brendan O'Donnell/Michen O'Kane. At his trial, O'Kane's barrister addresses the jury: "The young man did not deserve to stand there alone, because the country itself was on trial, it had failed him." Which is why the writing of *In the Forest* was not just a worthwhile enterprise, but a necessary and successful one.[9]

Some of O'Brien's detractors provide similar examples of how she could (or should) have adjusted her fiction to make it more appropriate:

> There are plenty of precedents for writers being inspired by actual murders or novels which explore the impulse behind killing. In *The Butcher Boy*, Patrick McCabe wrote of someone not unlike O'Donnell, but without basing his character on a recognisable young man. John Banville drew on real murders in his *Book of Evidence* without causing offence. Pat Barker was inspired by the Yorkshire Ripper murders to write *Blow Your House Down*, but did so by distancing the events of her novel from the actual happenings. Is it wrong to expect an artist to be more sensitive than others?[10]

I strongly disagree with Ms. Neylon and the rest of O'Brien's critics. It is not the responsibility of a novelist to be "more sensitive", and, if anything, it takes more courage to directly approach such horrifying material, rather than make the reader or society at large feel safer or less disgusted by disguising the details which might condemn them. Countless books now considered to be included in the "canon" of great literature have been banned for being deemed too graphic or inappropriate by misguided minds hoping to censor. I think it is telling that libraries across the world celebrate "banned books day" and that many such novels, like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, are now seen as benchmarks of genius and innovation. It is the job of the artist to push boundaries and approach that which may be taboo, and through their art, both open and add to the discussion surrounding

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[9] Ronan Bennet, "The Country Girl's Home Truths," Guardian.co.uk (4 May 2002, 4 June 2009) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/may/04/fiction.reviews1

[10] Tina Neylon, "Making a Killing out of Murder?" Scotsman.co.uk (24 April 2002, 4 June 2009) http://living.scotsman.com/books/Making-a-killing-out-of.2321015.jp.

said topics. McCabe's novels have more in common with the tragic honesty and brutality of O'Brien's text as opposed to the more grounded-in-reality sagas of John McGahern, Roddy Doyle, and their contemporaries.

John Banville states,

> McCabe has used stuff the rest of us didn't bother with and made a peculiar kind of rough poetry out of it. He catches that particularly kind of bizarre, insane world of Irish country life in the 50s and 60s. People like [Sean] O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor wrote about it in lyrical mode, [John McGahern] wrote about it in tragic mode, but McCabe writes about it in a kind of antic black comedy that is absolutely unique.[11]

In doing research for this book, I was surprised to see that the majority of McCabe's novels have been more or less critically ignored (*The Butcher Boy* and *The Dead School* seem to be popular exceptions to this rule.). Although he is acclaimed as an intelligent and successful writer in many book reviews, and has been shortlisted twice for the Booker prize, McCabe doesn't enjoy as high public profile in Ireland or abroad than many of his contemporaries. Whenever I have been asked by my Irish cohort or my Irish relatives about the contents of this book, the reaction to the name Patrick McCabe was always a blank stare, until I mentioned that he wrote *The Butcher Boy*, which invariably produced some recognition (as they were all familiar with the film version). Why is this? Why have many of these poignant, funny, illuminating and socially relevant novels not received more attention from the critical institution and the public?

I would argue that, first of all, most of McCabe's novels don't deal with the successes of the Irish experience—those who encounter the alcoholic father, the paedophile priest, or lonely orphanage and emerge unscathed, and become stronger from the experience. McCabe deals with the botched operations—those who are pummelled by the suppressed gothic currents that exist in Ireland and are mentally unable to emerge as productive human beings. When you consider what McCabe's characters are up against from the time of their earliest memories—terrorism, child abuse, extreme poverty, and stultifying provincial ignorance—it isn't surprising that they become adults plagued by mental illness, hallucinations, and severe impairments in judgement.

They don't reflect on the tragic elements of their surroundings because they don't recognize that these things affect them—there is no reflection

[11] John, O'Mahony "King of Bog Gothic," Guardian.co.uk (30 August 2003, 2 June 2009) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/aug/30/fiction.patrickmccabe.

or self-awareness or personal growth. Instead, McCabe's characters retreat into their imaginations and the hallucinations and madness that this spawns.

That being said, these terrible childhoods provide the framework for much more fantastical stories. For example, the fact that *Breakfast on Pluto*'s Patrick "Pussy" Braden, whose very existence is the result of a priest raping a young girl and grows up with an abusive foster mother, is easily lost among the fact that he becomes a transvestite prostitute who becomes involved with an IRA arms dealer and witnesses many atrocities. Never mind the breezy pop culture–inflected narrative. What is common among most of McCabe's novels is that these terrible childhoods are overshadowed by the excessive nature of later events.

To return to my earlier question, why are these books largely ignored? It's possible that many are put off by the extent of the violence in some of the novels. But on a deeper level, perhaps these all-present neo-Gothic mundanities coupled with the extreme and exaggerated violent acts prevent readers from indulging in some real escapism, or perhaps they are a little too close for comfort. While Edna O'Brien's novel sparked outrage because it shed light on some very unpalatable truths, perhaps this is why many are so quick to brush aside McCabe's characters—his "botched operations"—looking beneath the veneer of transvestitism or of one-eyed fat men who think they're Al Pacino lurks a piercing (and important) criticism of contemporary Irish society.

This brings up another important question: Why does McCabe use such unexpected comedic/absurdist elements in his fiction? Although cross-dressing is not the usual manifestation, Irish wit and humor has been used throughout history to try and offset some of the horrors of the native land:

> [T]he importance placed upon the art of conversation is signified by a specific word, craic, which is used to describe the atmosphere to a social setting—some respondents—believed it had to do with Irish history and traditions such as storytelling. The same study also noted that this tradition had roots in Ireland's colonial history.[12]

[12] Eileen M. Trauth, *The Culture of an Information Economy: Influences and Impacts in the Republic of Ireland* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 148-149.

I'd argue that this "craic", what you would call trading puns at the pub or gift of Irish gab, serves the same purpose in these stories. McCabe's characters become, in effect, craic-babies, who latch onto this humor or wit or in some cases outward sense of joviality and social propriety as a coping mechanism.

As Kim McMullen states, "perhaps it is only in this brave new world, self-confident and autonomous after centuries of colonial and postcolonial struggle, that Irish writers like...McCabe are at last free to critically interrogate the hidden wounds of the nation's past and to think about moving on."[13]

I certainly agree with Ms. McMullen to a certain extent—and I think the fact that the novel, which deals most explicitly with the Troubles (*Breakfast on Pluto),* was published after the 1998 Peace Agreement illustrates this point. Again, however, I would disagree with her categorization. One can't truly call Ireland an autonomous country since most of Ulster is still a part of the United Kingdom, and the power sharing process (at time of publishing) is still rocky and fraught with political anxiety. Yet, I do think that this current time of political uncertainty about how to proceed makes McCabe's work even more important when uncovering these wounds, both political and communal. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who did a groundbreaking anthropological study of madness in rural Ireland in the 1970s stated in her book *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics:* "to romanticise, ignore or whitewash the darker side of life of the people we study contributes to the perpetuation of social ills."[14]

I would also like to note that in doing the research for this text, I was surprised to see the lack of academic writing about this area of study. Although some of these social issues have been tackled in the above mentioned text by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and several other anthropological studies, very little exists on these aspects of Irish culture within the literature of Ireland. Although some writers have addressed aspects of these issues in the work of a particular author (as I do here), it is still a hugely underexplored area of study. I hope that with this text, a larger and continued dialogue will follow.

In this book I will be exploring a number of issues that revolve around McCabe's narrators' mental instability and the society that shaped them. In chapter one, I will begin by exploring the unreliability of McCabe's

[13] McMullen, 147.
[14] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 74.

narrators and the issues surrounding why they cannot or will not see themselves and the world around them more clearly.

Chapter two will deal with the ideas that these characters are social casualties—they have fallen by the wayside, their demises often the subject of town gossip. I will also be discussing McCabe's focus on these botched operations as characters, as opposed to those who are able to overcome adversity and emerge relatively unscathed. I will look at why specifically the interest here is on those who are unable to overcome the horrors of their surroundings. Chapter three will focus on the common thread within all of these narratives— profoundly disturbing childhoods. Here I will focus on the issues I have coined the Irish mundane and the reasons why McCabe has chosen to lay these foundations for his protagonists. Chapter four will discuss how the Celtic Tiger thrust Ireland into the late 20th century and how McCabe's characters dealt with the guilt and nostalgia that came part and parcel with prosperity and cultural homogenization, as well as how a modernised European sensibility clashes with the traditional Irish pub and craic scene. Chapter five will deal with the characters' search for the homes they never had, both familial and communal.

A BIT OF CRAIC AND SELF-DELUSION: UNRELIABLE NARRATORS

Leah Richards Fisher argues that insanity has always played a role in Irish liture from its inception to modern times:

> There are many episodes in Irish Literature that to a modern reader, might suggest psychological imbalance. Once admired traits such as battle rage, obsessiveness and the willingness to die, violently, young and even in the defense of a lost cause, are icons of a very different age, one without such concepts as manic, obsessive-compulsive, and Freudian… [1](386)

Patrick McCabe continues to utilize this longstanding tradition within a modern setting, as I will be discussing in this chapter. As mentioned in the introduction, most of McCabe's narrators are "unreliable" in a variety of ways. Many of these protagonists have committed violent crimes, have been institutionalized, and/or have been tormented by grotesque hallucinations. These characters also lack self-awareness—their descriptions of themselves are undoubtedly more generous than what someone else would bestow (i.e., Joey being a cool Al Pacino-American-type of tough guy, when in reality he is an obese man with one eye who lives in a caravan at the edge of town with a blowup doll as his only friend). Additionally, these characters are often unable to fully process the events taking place around them (due to their horrific nature), and are then unable to see how these events have shaped them. They are lacking, or have a very limited sense of self-awareness due to the self-preservation mechanisms that disable them from seeing their bleak realities for what they are. These cultural blinders lead to their mental dysfunction and allow them to exist in the gothic Ireland that I will be discussing in a later chapter.

Many of Patrick McCabe's stories are narrated by those who are institutionalized—Francie Brady is in a mental institution, Joey Talon is in jail, and Patrick "Pussy" Braden is also institutionalized, writing his

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[1] Leah Richards Fischer, "'No Nation Wanted It so Much': Mythic Insanity in the Development of a Modern Irish Literature," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*. v.18/19 (1998/1999): 386.

memoirs at the behest of his beloved Dr. Terrence. Linden Peach notes that this recalls a fascination with institution-inspired creativity, "which can be traced back to the eighteenth century, in the writing, visual art and sculpture that came out of psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and asylums."[2]

McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* walks a fine line between sensational and sober—McCabe said he gleaned Patrick's voice from reading many women's magazines.[3] Many of the chapters are extremely short; some as brief as two paragraphs, further contributing to this magazine feel, as do the sensational chapter titles like "Ladies and Gentlemen—Mr. Dummy Teat!" and "I Was a High Class Escort Girl."

Patrick "Pussy" Braden does demonstrate that he is capable of narrating in a more straightforward manner. Earlier chapters that describe socializing with his friends Charlie and Irwin are relatively unadorned with his feathery outbursts and kitschy ornamentations. Pussy also reveals himself to be a rather intelligent and self-aware character, especially when compared to McCabe's other protagonists. For instance, he is the only one who recognizes the burgeoning political troubles for what they are and then flees Ireland, even if only temporarily:

> [N]ow that we were a bit older and had started noticing these things… every time you picked up a paper, someone else had been shot or maimed for life. Of no consequence to me, of course, for, as I said to Charlie, I really wouldn't be hanging around for very much longer.[4]

On some level Patrick can also recognize that the horrific incidents he has lived through have significantly affected his life:

> I suppose that I have to admit…after all I had been through…I really must have been in more of a state than I thought I was (Can you imagine climbing up the highest ladder in the world and having the ladder taken away?)[5]

Pussy becomes progressively girly and flippant with his narrative as the subject matter grows more upsetting—a coping mechanism the narrator uses to distance himself from the violence that occurs around him.

We see perhaps the origins of these manifestations when, as a child, Pussy writes grotesquely glib stories about his birth—the parish priest

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[2] Linden Peach, *The Contemporary Irish Novel: Critical Readings* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 180.
[3] O'Mahony, 8.
[4] Patrick McCabe, *Breakfast on Pluto* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2008), 20.
[5] McCabe, 192.

rapes his fifteen-year-old mother and then sends her away to London—and titles these stories with shocking compositions such as "Father Stalk Sticks It In" and "Father Bernard Rides Again."[6] He must frame these stories in an abrasive, sarcastic manner simply to acknowledge that such events took place—further evidence that McCabe's use of humor to deal with upsetting subject matter creates a unique narrative voice, void of heightened personal and emotional stakes. It pushes the truth further away, or makes it seem like the truth doesn't hurt or affect the author. As discussed in the introduction, this craic-ey attitude has defined roots in the Irish psyche, and probably originated as a coping mechanism for dealing with 400-plus years of foreign occupation. For Pussy, it places some distance between himself and the violence and horrific nature of his birth. We glean information about this through the description of Braden's mother's drab cleaning outfit: "All of which served the purpose for which it was intended of saying to the little penises of all those whose duty it was to bend the knee and wear black serge: 'No mickies today! Off with you and say your prayers for no tiddler stands for girls like these.'"[7]

This is also seen when Braden gets involved with an IRA weapons supplier, Eamon Faircroft, or Mr. Dummy Teat, a nickname born out of their sexual antics. In retelling the story of their relationship, Braden takes on a breathless, feathery tone, embodying the persona he has created for his darling Dums.

This is epitomized in Pussy's recounting of Faircroft's ultimate demise: "I often think of him, blown up like that, his poor little mickey in slo-mo coming back to earth, like a flower pink and bruised, an emblem sent by all the dead men who'd crossed over."[8] This depiction of the dead IRA weapons supplier as being reduced to nothing more than a reincarnated pink bruised flower is a way of emasculating and downplaying the IRA's abilities.

In the two-paged chapter where Pussy first brings up the bombing he witnessed in London, the narrative voice takes on an exaggerated cockney accent: "BANG! Now wot the bleedin' 'ell was that? Oh, for cryin' aht lahd! Look at that! Poor geezer's got blood runnin' all down side of 'is face! It's a diabolical liberty, that is! 'Frowing bombs into restaurants! Wot do they 'ope to gain by that-ai?"[9]

Pussy uses the heavily accented and slang oriented voice of a cockney "lad" as a sort of protective shield to approach the memories of the bombing.

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[6] McCabe, 10.
[7] McCabe, 24.
[8] McCabe, 33.
[9] McCabe, 86-87.

It serves to distance Pussy from the event in the sense that we are, for a moment, artificially removed from our narrator's mind (and, by extension, the trauma, anger, sadness, etc that is connected to the event). In addition, there is, if not a slightly comic affect, a certain desensitization that occurs with all of the exaggerated slang that is used in the above passage.

After some time has passed, Pussy is finally able to tell the story in his own voice, and the defense mechanism has shifted from Eastenders bloke back to glammed up transvestite. The chapter is called "Ooh Bomber" and begins as an especially frothy tale:

> …it seemed as if every squaddie in the country had decided to do some shaky-bootie in London town tonight...who knew—perhaps she might meet sergeant rock or Captain Yum Yum By-My-Girl-Forever! And if the risk was not worth that, then life...it simply was not worth the living.[10]

And when the bomb goes off, the dramatic tone remains constant:

> As the strobe lights swept across her, Barry White was smooching: *'You're the First, the Last, My Everything!'* and tingl-tingly went Puss down in the groin, the short-haired squaddie whispering in her ear: 'You fancy a drink or summat?' Puss coughing a little to summon up the courage to whisper, squeaky-voiced: 'Oh, yes!' and look into his eyes when one part of his brain went to the left, the other part to the right and the brains which were inside to the floor pouring like scrambled egg—or so it seemed to Puss. The squaddie was definitely dead—I mean, there was blood all over his face, and he was lying on the floor. It was as if it never at any time occurred to Pussy to move. Standing there as if still waltzing with an invisible soldier, where she had been, she compliantly remained.[11]

The juxtaposition of hilarity and horror is paramount here. A drag queen and a British soldier slow dance to Barry White, and just as the drag queen feels a "tingly" in his pants, we are brought back to the violent reality of the IRA in the 1970s, as the drag queen's dancing partner's brains explode. As a result, Pussy is physically paralyzed. Though he has undergone dramatic lengths to cloak reality (leaving Ireland, blocking it out of his mind, even a physical transformation), it has broken through the layers of fantasy. The image of stillness that is invoked by "waltzing with an invisible soldier" is comparatively serious and haunting—a neo-Gothic specter in this moment of unavoidable reality.

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[10] McCabe, 140.
[11] McCabe, 141.

Pussy's horrific reality is also interspersed with imagined dialogues, fantasies, and the like. When the police get the idea that he was involved with the London bombing, in response, he concocts a brief little story called "It's Bombing Night and I Haven't Got a Thing to Wear."

> Paddy Pussy, of course, being the undisputed leader of the unit, was well-occupied too, slipping into one of his many luxurious evening gowns—this particular one bias-cut, in pink satin crepe—and posing literally for hours in front of the mirror, trying to establish once and for all just how good he looked on this momentous occasion, the first time he had actually bombed a restaurant in the city of London. Up until now, it had mostly been assorted public buildings, and tube stations of course. 'Oh, figs!,' she exclaimed, casting her fifteenth and final gown to the floor. 'Let someone else do it tonight! I can't find a thing to wear!' 'No! No, please, the other members of the unit pleaded with their adored leader. 'We beg you to do it, Puss!' [12]

The ludicrous idea of the IRA begging a drag queen to get dressed and ready for a bombing like it's a night out on the town highlights the lunacy of bombing public places in the quest for a united Ireland.

Similar to Pussy, Joey Tallon, the protagonist of McCabe's *Call Me the Breeze*, is urged to write his memoirs at the suggestion of a kindly prison governor. These records are subsequently organized by Joey's cellmate, Bonehead. Joey's story follows a similar format to that utilized in *Breakfast on Pluto*; his written memoirs are interspersed with additional memories that Joey forms after the fact, as well as fantasies and alternate versions of real events. After all, living in a film/fantasy is better than Sprucefield in the seventies. There is a distinctive need for a Hollywood ending when no end to the violence in the north is in sight.

That Joey Tallon is an extremely unreliable narrator becomes quickly apparent. Another discrepancy between Joey's personal brand of reality and actual events occurs in his description of himself. Although he is very conscious and ashamed of being overweight and his love of pies, he otherwise paints a picture of himself as cool, calm, and in control:

> A fantastic bright orange palm-print shirt. Hawaiian. I shoved it on and stood in front of the mirror. '*Are you looking at me?*' I said. '*Huh? Huh?*' I slipped on the shades and the combat jacket…I'd fold my arms and vary the voice. Different emphases each time. Are you looking at *me*? You, are *you*

[12] McCabe, 146.

> looking at me… I was beginning to feel really comfortable now saying stuff like that.[13]

Joey's constant quoting from American movies and adaption of American slang demonstrate his desire to be "hip." However, the "enigmatic smirk" he practices in the mirror is a far cry from the man nicknamed Barbapapa, after a "big kid's cartoon jelly man who was on the telly… 'a cuddlyblob of pink ectoplasm'" by the men in the local pub, Austie's.[14] To the people of Sprucefield, Joey Tallon is a large man with a Mohawk, a long grizzly beard, and a big patch over his missing eye who lives in a caravan on the outskirts of town. This outer picture, though, does seem to portray a man perhaps more likely to end up in jail rather than on the film screen. It is interesting to note that Joey is so wrapped up with his internal view of himself, the reader does not learn of his losing an eye in a bomb explosion until it is mentioned chapters later by another character. Again, this knowledge of the grotesque coming from an outside source demonstrates Joey's dedication to keeping an upbeat, if inventive, internal narrative.

Joey's initial writing style (pre-Mountjoy Prison) uses a decidedly American structure and vocabulary. This style has been cultivated by Joey's affinity for Hollywood films, especially *Taxi Driver*: "I attempted the Keith Carradine smile. There was a name for it. 'The enigmatic smirk' they called it. I tried it again. It didn't look bad. All told, I reckoned I could do it pretty good."[15] Joey would rather be De Niro or Pacino—somebody tough who is in control and isn't scared of anything. He adapts this tone as an attempt at sanity, as it were, in a town where the head of the provisional IRA frequents the very pub he works at and wears one of those enigmatic smirks. Joey practices his American schtick in front of the mirror and also around town: "I like the way you say that. I like the way you talk. Half American, like. Half Yankee. Hmm."[16] Brian Cliff notes that "McCabe's protagonists often cling to traces of popular culture as shibboleths, as both a marker of lost community and a means of regaining or revising community."[17] Since Joey comes to fear hanging out in Austie's pub due to the other clientele yet has no other place to go, this

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[13] Patrick McCabe, *Call me the Breeze* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2003), 91.
[14] McCabe, 40.
[15] McCabe, 40.
[16] McCabe, 51.
[17] Brian Cliff, "Community, the Desire to Belong, and Contemporary Irish Literature," *The Irish Review*, no.34 (2006: 114-129, 20 June 2009) 124.

attempt to demarcate some kind of culture for himself demonstrates both his inventiveness and his desperation.

Joey's narratives passages are spliced with crumpled papers coated with Joey's acid-fuelled ramblings:

> Charlie the Gardener could have been good if things had worked out the karma if that had been meant to be we can all be good you know that Jacy if you follow the path of Siddartha if you drink from the fountain of love for love is the drug love is all as she who is The Only One is I'm Not in Love but I am you see you see I am I love love love love you Jacy The Jacy love is all is everything.[18]

This was written soon after Joey survives a bomb attack at a police checkpoint. Much like how Patrick Pussy Braden's narrative becomes increasingly girly when he is thrust into violent situations he can't ignore or process as his true self, Joey's writing becomes garbled and stream-of-consciousness. Although drugs play a role in this lack of mental clarity, it also seems that Joey becomes paralyzed to the point where he cannot think straight in the presence of the senseless violence (and when encountering the local IRA men at the pub).

Joey's desire to be removed from the provincial violence of Sprucefield manifests itself in a love of all things foreign and can be seen in his musical choices (Santana), his reading selections (Dylan, Hesse, Castaneda), and his desire to take a road trip across America with the object of his affection-from-afar, Jacy. However, these longings become a desperate attempt to get away from the claustrophobic reality of Sprucefield. Joey imagines that Jacy herself is a Californian with a breezy, upbeat point of view who is very respectful of local culture and customs:

> But when you thought about it, it was obvious she wasn't going to come to a little town in Ireland, then turn around and start making herself out to be something special. Going around thinking: *Why the fuck should I do the things you do? I'm from California!* Which only made her even more special, possessing that king of insight.[19]

Jacy, in reality, is from County Wicklow, and the idea that she is from California, and therefore, special, is a figment of Joey's imagination. For most of the narrative, it appears to be another example of Joey's

[18] McCabe, 32.
[19] McCabe, 39.

obliviousness to the real world, however, toward the end of the novel, it becomes clear that this was a willful suspension of belief:

> …Now *there's* a fucking joke! *Another* illusion, just like Jacy! Surprised to hear that, are you, Bone? You thought I didn't know she'd never lived in California? Sure I did. All along. I just happened to think that if you believed-*enough!*- that somehow that would make it happen! How about that for a fucking illusion?[20]

Joey also appears to be an unreliable narrator when we learn that Mona, his father's mistress, who he appears to be having a relationship with, is dead, and the character he often cries to and makes love to in his caravan is no more than a blow-up doll:

> I know what you be at in here…pulling at yourself and talking in women's voices…I seen! I seen you putting a wig on her…Calling out her name! Mona! Mona…I seen her about the town, years ago, same black hair and all…Riding the dead! Riding the dead—that's your game and don't tell me any different! For these eyes don't lie—dressing her up and talking to her! Lying there raving without a stitch on you, full to the gills with drink![21]

This vulgar notion of Joey "riding the dead" is only made viler by the idea that it is his father's dead mistress he is imagining. Clearly, this indicates mental instability on Joey's behalf, instability that is echoed throughout the novel in the form of his imaginary conversations with Mona where he tries to climb into her womb to be born again as her child. This situation also results in a kind of duality of emotion for the reader—it is simultaneously grotesque and pathetic that this grown man has no one to talk to or confide in besides an inflatable pit of plastic in the vague shape of a woman.

Perhaps the grandest delusion that Joey suffers from is his eventual kidnapping of Jacy. Throughout the beginning of the novel, it is unclear what he is planning. Joey speaks of a "karma cave"—a shack in the Tyreelin Mountains, which he prepares for a visit from Jacy. It does not become clear until later, however, that this event is a kidnapping and what lands Joey in Mountjoy Prison in the first place.

Though they are of unsound mind, Joey and Pussy are McCabe's most self-aware protagonists to date. Both manage to pull themselves up from

[20] McCabe, 333.
[21] McCabe, 88-89.

self-delusion bordering on (or crossing over into) insanity to reach relative levels of peace and clarity. It is significant that these two characters are the first to be created by McCabe after the 1998 Peace Agreement. It is only in a world where this agreement has been reached that McCabe's characters can ever hope to overcome their fragmented mental state and live some semblance of a normal life, now that the systematic terror is over.

Francie Brady of McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* is yet another main character whose writing is prompted by institutionalization—in his case, however, as a psychiatrist at the mental institution in which he is interred. Francie establishes himself as an unreliable narrator immediately due to his less-than-finite grip on time: "When I was a young lad twenty or thirty or forty years ago…"[22] This lack of chronological reference suggests that to Francie, time is more often guided by important actions than the Roman calendar. As a result, Francie is an observant but extremely childlike narrator. Even though we can surmise that this story has been recorded at least a few decades after the end of Francie's childhood, his narrative voice is very childlike in vernacular, sentence structure, and content.

His preoccupation with comic books and John Wayne movies have slight echoes of Joey Tallon and Malachy Dugeon (of McCabe's *The Dead School*)—Francie integrates a John Wayne accent into his speech at inappropriate times and often characterizes himself as Mr. Algernon Carruthers or other comic book characters: "for Francie…the process of self-creation is pursued through *imitation* and draws on the models provided by film, television, and comics."[23] Francie's mother, who Donna Potts compares with "the weeping and distraught woman featured in the traditional Irish *aisling*," is unable to provide guidance or support due to her own mental illness.[24] After Francie's mother is taken to the "garage" and a gaggle of gossipy women stood around, Francie weaves this memory with:

> A few more women came in and stood whispering by the fire. I could see Mrs. Connolly pulling the zipper of her housecoat up and down going terrible terrible but I didn't care. *Take 'em to Missouri!* Said John Wayne and *hee-*

[22] Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (London: Picador, 1992), 1.
[23] John Scaggs, "Who is Francie Pig? Self-Identity and Narrative Reliability in *The Butcher Boy*, *Irish University Review*, Vol.30, no.1, (Spring-Summer 2000), 51.
[24] Donna Potts, "From Tír na nÓg to Tír na Muck: Patrick McCabe's 'The Butcher Boy,'" *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua.* v3 no.3 (Autumn, 1999): 85.

> *yah!* He rode off in a thunder of hooves. They hung around for a while talking about this and that, stuff they thought da might like to hear…[25]

Francie cushions himself in this protective layer of fiction and repetitive habits of speech and thought, similar to what we have seen with McCabe's other protagonists:

> One of them comes up to me one day when I was hacking at the ice on the big puddle behind the kitchens and says what's going on here or what do you be at with this ice? I'm thinking what I'm going to do with the million billion trillion dollars I'm going to win, I says.[26]

Here, despite everything—committing murder, surviving the deaths of his parents, enduring abuse by a priest—Francie is very much a "botched operation," living in this asylum and having the same inane conversations he used to have before any of these traumatic events happened. He remains a perpetual child so he doesn't have to face the reality of his sufferings or take responsibility for his actions. There is a surreal duality in his character: The childlike frame of reference and comic book vision coupled with the stereotypical elderly vice of repeating conversations and reliving the past makes for a chilling juxtaposition. This mirrors where Francie ends up—alone in a mental institution, reliving the past through the eyes of a child.

Francie also demonstrates his ability to be extremely manipulative:

> The women whispered there they go the poor orphans. I had a mind to turn round and shout hey fuckface I'm no orphan but then I remembered I was studying hard to get the *Francie Brady Not a Bad Bastard Any More Diploma* at the end of the year so I clammed up and gave her a sad, ashamed look instead.[27]

He has the intelligence to know what his audience is looking for but lacks the emotional maturity (or role model) to learn or grow as a human being.

As a means of survival, Francie employs suspension of disbelief. When his mother is committed to a mental asylum, he says she's in the garage "Getting a tune up." He only refers to the mental institution once specifically: "I knew then ma was never in any garage but I knew all along anyway, I knew it was a madhouse I just didn't want Nugent or anyone to

[25] McCabe, 9.
[26] McCabe, 230.
[27] McCabe, 79.