

# Understanding Anne Enright

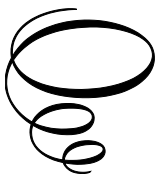


# Understanding Anne Enright

By

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**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-5028-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-5028-5

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## PREFACE

Contemporary Irish novelist Anne Enright shot to international recognition after being awarded the Man Booker Prize for her 2007 novel *The Gathering*, which was then shortlisted as Irish Book of the Decade (2010). Enright was previously well known for her novels, short stories, TV scripts and non-fiction; her short fiction was anthologised, her novels were widely and sympathetically reviewed, and critics generally recognised her as an innovative writer and an original stylist. Yet it was the reception of *The Gathering* that drew international attention to a feminine voice that epitomises the current concerns of Irish and western literature and culture. Along with writers such as Edna O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Colm Tóibín, John Banville, Roddy Doyle and Sebastian Barry, she was acknowledged as an important representative of twenty-first-century Irish fiction and more generally of fiction in English. Her position in Irish literature was consolidated in January 2015, when she became the inaugural Fiction Laureate of Ireland.

In addition to being critically acclaimed, Enright's fiction is extremely enjoyable and engaging. She writes a multi-faceted, challenging and uncomfortable mix of literary prose, chick lit, historical fiction and family saga that is characterised by elemental, visceral intensities, existential undertones, dry humour, and formal inventiveness. It is a prose that renews itself with each book, ventriloquising the concerns of contemporary women even as it dramatizes the lives of women in history. It is also a prose that stays close to the body, rendering the materiality of women's experiences in lush and keenly observed detail and in a language that showcases the author's love of words. Enright's writing has been described as postmodern, post-feminist, post-nationalist, and even deconstructive as it participates in the shifting priorities, the cosmopolitanism and increasing self-reflexivity of Irish culture. In addition to fiction, Enright also writes "Diary" entries for the *London Review of Books*, gives public lectures and readings, and interviews well. In these she reaches out to a wider audience while covering related themes with similar gusto.

Despite Enright's popularity, there are still surprisingly few studies devoted to her work. The only full volume analysing her work to date is an illuminating 2011 collection of essays edited by Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill. *Understanding Anne Enright* thus offers a much-needed introduction

to her novels and stories, addressing both scholars and a wider readership. It analyses developments in Enright's writing, comparing the evolution of themes and forms from one book to another, contextualising her fiction, and interrogating the impact of widely circulated descriptives of contemporary society such as postmodernism, post-feminism and post-nationalism on the writing and reading of her work. Primarily, this book proposes to show how Enright's novels and stories can be read vis-a-vis such labels that have entered daily language, but that can be misleading when the cultural and literary context is not properly understood. As Enright is remarkably articulate about both her own work and current social and cultural events in Ireland, her interviews and essays are referred to throughout as a source of insight into her creative processes. Constant thematic preoccupations such as maternity and the corporeality of women's experiences are traced and discussed in correlation to Enright's shifting relation to language and stylistic experiment. Such a reading will show how Enright's fiction participates in the latest thematic and formal trends not only of Irish or British, but of western, literature.

This monograph has emerged out of my research for multiple, smaller, related projects, but I am particularly grateful to Professor Merritt Moseley, Emeritus, of the University of North Carolina at Asheville, for his generous encouragement and invaluable feedback throughout its writing. I am further indebted, beyond words, to my colleagues and friends Alexandra Mitrea, Ovidiu Matiu, Anca Ignat, Anca-Luminița Iancu and Corina Selejan at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, who have made my teaching load lighter so I could devote more time to my research, and have been cheering me on through the long years of this book's genesis.

A few paragraphs in Chapters One and Six were previously included, in a somewhat different form, in an article titled "Postnationalism, Postfeminism and Other 'Posts' in Anne Enright's Fiction," published in *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 3 (2018). They are reprinted here by kind permission of Johns Hopkins University Press. The research project that resulted in the writing of that article was carried out at Trinity College Dublin, thanks to funding from Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, for which I am grateful.

Moreover, a few fragments in Chapters Two and Three were originally part of a comparative analysis of *What Are You Like?* and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, Enright's historical novels, which was included in a volume titled *Narrative Strategies in the Reconstruction of History*, edited by Ana Raquel Fernandes (2018). They are incorporated here in revised form by kind permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.



*Understanding Anne Enright* is dedicated, as ever, to M & M: my rocks and my pillars.



## CHAPTER ONE

### CONTEXTS: AN OVERVIEW OF ANNE ENRIGHT'S LIFE AND WORK

Anne Enright was born in 1962 to civil servant parents and raised in Dublin's suburbs, where she also went to school. In 1979, she went to Victoria, Canada, to complete her secondary school education at Pearson College, a scholarship-only institution which promotes academic excellence and world peace. She then returned to Dublin to earn a BA in English Literature and Philosophy from its prestigious Trinity College, and continued her studies at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England, where she pursued an MA in creative writing under Malcolm Bradbury and Angela Carter. In Dublin once more, she worked with the Irish Radio and Television broadcaster (RTÉ) as a writer and producer of the late-night programme *Nighthawks*, while also writing short stories. Enright's literary debut was represented by the inclusion of four of her short stories in Faber's anthology titled *First Fictions: Introduction No. 10*, in 1989. After winning the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature for her first collection, *The Portable Virgin* (1991), she decided to give up her job with RTÉ and write full time. Six novels followed at more or less regular intervals: *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), *What Are You Like?* (2000), *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), *The Gathering* (2007), *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011), and *The Green Road* (2015). A new novel has come out earlier in 2020. These alternated with short fiction (her second collection, *Taking Pictures*, 2008, reissued for the United States of America along with a selection of the *Portable Virgin* stories and a few uncollected others as *Yesterday's Weather*, of the same year) and non-fiction (*Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, 2004), as well as introductions, interviews, lectures and an assortment of contributions to the *London Review of Books* and other periodicals. She currently lives in Bray, near Dublin, with her husband, actor Martin Murphy, and their two children, and teaches creative writing at University College Dublin.

Summarised like this, Enright's biography is of little interest. Indeed, the novelist herself has explained in interviews that she does not come from a large, alcoholic or adventurous family and she has had a long and happy marriage. With the exception of *Making Babies*, her writing is not autobiographical. The true interest of a writer's biography resides with her formation as an artist, and Enright has spoken repeatedly about the writers she admires and has learned from. She has openly acknowledged her debt to, and fondness of borrowing ("pilfer[ing] freely," she says) from, James Joyce. Favourite Joyce words such as "dappled" or "anglepoise" frequently feature in her writing, and the influence of *Dubliners* is evident not only in her short fiction but in *The Gathering* as well. As she puts it, Joyce "did not throw a shadow, he cast a great light" in Irish literature (Schwall 2008, 20). His formal innovation and unflinching observation of the trivial, she feels, sanctions her own experimentalism, and she has drawn on his representations of turn-of-the-century Dublin society in order to create the *couleur locale* of her own historical fiction. Her appreciation extends to the entire Irish tradition of drama, prose and poetry writing, from Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats to Samuel Beckett, Frank O'Connor, Seán Ó Faoláin, Seamus Heaney, Sínead Morrissey, Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon, as she admits in interviews and essays alike. Yet her tastes are not limited to Irish writing; she frankly acknowledges her admiration of the great American storytellers, such as Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy, the South American Gabriel García Márquez, and the Austrian poet Reiner Maria Rilke. Enright is further indebted to Angela Carter, who was one of the towering figures of the UEA creative writing programme when she was a student there. In various novels, Enright's indebtedness to other writers is evident, and sometimes stated explicitly. Thus, for instance, *The Green Road* pays homage to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the poetry of Emily Lawless; the influence of classical and Judeo-Christian mythology is obvious in *The Gathering*, as is that of García Márquez and *Alice in Wonderland* in *The Wig My Father Wore*. Often these influences materialise as images and phrases that she lifts from her sources, without preserving the original context and usually without acknowledging the source.

But her fiction has not been shaped only by literature. Like all truly great contemporary writers, Enright has absorbed much from her education and early career in radio and television. As a student of philosophy, she loved Sigmund Freud's writings and tried to read them in German (Schwall 2008, 21), finding him "a wonderful writer and stylist" in addition to the source of "a great way to think about things" (Bracken and Cahill 2011, 30). Although she roguishly dismisses many of the more recent thinkers in the

curriculum, claiming that she never read them or that her interest in them was only sporadic, she clearly internalised many of their ideas, most notably a typically postmodern scepticism of 'grand narratives' such as philosophy, history, science or religion. Moreover, her early fascination with the theatre and her work with the National Irish Radio and Television left an indelible mark on her writing. Her narrative strategies often include techniques from the televisual medium, such as fast cutting, rewinds, fast forwards and close-ups. Her vocabulary, too, incorporates not only the terminology of the mass media, but also traces of television series such as *Sex and the City* and her own *Nighthawks*.

In addition to being widely read and open to various influences, Enright is a fantastic storyteller. The main force driving her fiction is character. Her short stories are brief epiphanies that illuminate the inner lives of contemporary Dubliners, while her novels are more elaborate portrayals of Irish women in historical context. Predictably, several of her works have been advertised, reductively, as chick lit and romances, but they have seldom been read as such. Enright's books were from the first well received: as one critic has remarked, she "quickly established a reputation for a playful, innovative, postmodern, even postfeminist style of writing and in her use of parody and pastiche she was perceived as following in the satirical tradition of Jonathan Swift and Flann O'Brien" (Ingman 2013, 233). The British Council's Literature page dedicated to Enright lists no fewer than seventeen literary awards between her debut in 1991 and 2016, including the Man Booker Prize for *The Gathering* (2007) and the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction for *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011). More accolades have followed since, such as the inaugural Laureateship for Irish Fiction (2015-2018) and the Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Contribution to Irish Literature (2018).

The wide recognition Enright has enjoyed is a tribute to her linguistic acumen and innovative storytelling as much as her brave tackling of uncomfortable social and cultural issues. These features were evident as early as the 1990s in the postmodern quality of her experimentalism. Her first three novels are fragmented and iconoclastic, staging converging narratives told by various characters in styles that borrow freely from surrealism, magical realism and the historical novel, but also from the clipped professional lingo of contemporary life. Her early short fiction is similarly fragmented and hybrid. Enright's language in all these works has something of Joyce's arresting quality and inventiveness and the rhythms of twentieth-century Irish poetry. Starting with *Making Babies* and *The Gathering*, a new realism enters her fiction, one that stems, on the one hand, from "sincerity," and, on the other, "a more generous impulse" to accommodate

the reader, as Enright confesses (Bracken and Cahill 2011, 17-18). Her latest novel, *The Green Road*, although told from the perspectives of its five protagonists, follows a more ample and coherent narrative thread and is stylistically more elegant than anything Enright has written to date.

As she takes her place in twenty-first-century literature in English, Enright describes her more recent use of postmodern experiment as “an attempt to be more honest and not less” (Bracken and Cahill 2011, 18). According to Heather Ingman, the defining attitude of Enright’s fiction is that she “regards her work as at odds with much of Irish mimetic realism” (2013, 233). Repeatedly, in interviews, Enright explains her method as a double move, at once towards a more discriminating sense of the real and away from the brooding naturalism of the Irish novelistic tradition (Schwall 2008, 21-22), or “rain and cows,” as she puts it elsewhere (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 64). In a *Bookforum* interview she aptly contends: “I don’t really write realism. I suppose it’s hyperrealism, as things become a little bit heightened” (2008). In another conversation of the same year she explains the visceral intensities of her style: “It is vital to be sensitive through the senses. ... [O]ne of the five senses must be in each of your sentences or people won’t know what you are on about” (Schwall 2008, 18). Enright’s lucid and astute assessments make her a very enjoyable conversationalist and a respected public speaker on the issues of Irish literature and culture. They also reveal the extent to which her work is embedded in the current literary context and responds to its tendencies, particularly to the confessional individualism of early twenty-first-century fiction, which, as Dominic Head shows, foregrounds both our shared humanity and the fragility of the social framework (2008, 36).

Enright’s coming of age as a writer coincided with the liberal stage in Ireland’s evolution that was inaugurated by the election of Mary Robinson to the Irish Presidency in 1990. This liberalisation was the result of a process that had started in the 1970s and that “particularly affected women’s experience, greatly diminishing the patriarchal character of the state by legal and social reform” (Coughlan 2004, 175). As Patricia Coughlan explains, the patriarchal climate had been sustained by Ireland’s ruralist ideology and its authoritarian Catholicism, which restricted women’s rights and established “coercive arrangements of gender roles and relations.” This system, she shows, “began to unravel from the 1970s on with accelerating rapidity and with marked effects both on women’s experience and on Irish self-understanding more generally” (175). The aspects that were contested during the last decades of the century concerned social and moral norms, legislation and public policies, but also Ireland’s cultural self-representations. Thus, it emerged that “[d]espite a self-image

stressing close communal bonding, warmth, and moral probity, Irish society had been secretive, narrowly patriarchal, and obsessed with the concealment and repression of emotional and sexual life" (Coughlan 2004, 176). Society did not change overnight, and many of the earlier limitations on women's lives were replaced with others:

in the neoliberal era where economic relations supplant social ones and individualism is the dominant model of selfhood, the drive towards style, affluence, success, and a guise of self-sufficiency places new obligations—including, ironically, the obligation to achieve pleasure—upon increasingly isolated subjects. (Coughlan 2004, 178)

Nonetheless, women derived a new sense of empowerment from these changes and from Mary Robinson's election and that is evident in the increasing number of women writers emerging since.

Gerry Smyth has further associated Ireland's liberalisation with the rise of the novel to pre-eminence in Irish culture: by the end of the twentieth century, Smyth shows, the novel was replacing poetry as "the pre-eminent Irish cultural form. ... Understood ... [as] a particular way of engaging with the world, Irish culture is in fact in the process of becoming a novel-driven discourse" (1997, 6). This cultural liberalism and the newly acquired prestige of the novel have enabled Enright to be outspoken about issues that had formerly been taboo, such as women's desire, homosexuality, child abuse and depression. Ireland's economic boom in the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in what has been known as the Celtic Tiger economy, is a similarly important backdrop against which to read Enright, as not only does she set several of her books during and after it, but it also enabled the country, through its Arts Council, to encourage and export literary productions to an unprecedented extent.

Enright's main thematic concerns cover contemporary aspects of women's lives, from unreasonable expectations regarding motherhood, women's overexposure to conventional opinion, and the proliferation of irrelevant and often erroneous or misleading information via the internet, to the mindless and ultimately unfulfilling consumerism brought about by economic growth. Often Enright reflects critically on the contemporary situation by showing women's condition in history, whether her protagonist is the Irishwoman Eliza Lynch in nineteenth-century Paraguay (in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*) or women in twentieth- or twenty-first-century Ireland (in *The Portable Virgin*, *The Gathering*, *The Forgotten Waltz*, *The Green Road*). Enright's retrospective treatments of women have restitutive value: rather than lament the absence of women from historical records and their silencing in fiction, her works reinsert woman as agent at various

historical moments. The novelist achieves this in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, where lavish descriptions of luxury items and banquets constitute a critical commentary not only on the conspicuous consumption of the Celtic Tiger economy but also on the marginalisation and vilification of women in history. An earlier novel, *What Are You Like?*, in which a pregnant woman is reduced to an aberrant body by a brain tumour in the 1960s, forces its readers to confront the truth that women are more than human incubators. Here and elsewhere, Enright decries the fact that too often in the Irish novel the mother is dead or otherwise deprived of agency. To this stereotype, she opposes Ada Merriman, the grandmother in *The Gathering*, a woman who, in the 1920s, must have done “something—to bring so much death into the world” (Enright 2007c, 223). Although her granddaughter, Veronica Hegarty, imagines her to have been a prostitute in her youth and the unsuspecting enabler of her grandson’s sexual abuse at the hands of her landlord, Ada’s treatment as an agent in the novel is sympathetic, intended not to lay blame but ascribe responsibility.

Enright’s insistence on representing women as active participants not only in their own lives but also in history is meant to challenge the earlier national narrative in Ireland, which idealised women as chaste and passive mothers. Critic Laura Sydora explains the implications of the idealisation of motherhood in the 1937 Constitution, a document that remained the standard for nationalist representations of women to the end of the century:

In the 1937 Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht Na hÉireann*, motherhood as a state-imposed ideology not only ties women to a singular restrictive political and social identity, but also imprisons them within their bodies. The oblivious idealization of the female as an asexual, devoted, and pious mother greatly limits the political and social identity of women, as the conflation of “woman” with “mother” aligns femaleness with the maternal, thereby denying women an individual subjectivity apart from the conventions of maternal femininity. Furthermore, the sexual identity available to women as traditional mothers is an identity that renders the female body a merely passive site for reproduction and negates any potential for sexual desire. Forced to accept the sole identity available, motherhood becomes a political tool, costing women their bodies and their sexuality... (2015, 243)

Sydora’s grim view of the political implications of the idealisation of motherhood is shared by many Irish feminists and women writers. Enright’s fictional project is to challenge such representations of womanhood that have at once idealised and disempowered women, particularly the myths of the Celtic Rose and Mother Ireland. The themes of chastity and victimisation are replaced in her work by frank treatments of the physicality



of maternity, the connection between desire and consumption, and, more generally, the embodied nature of experience.

A very sensuous prose results from this foregrounding of the body with its needs and desires. In Enright's writing the senses are the primary means of knowing the world and representations of perception engender what Hedwig Schwall has called "muscular metaphors" (2008, 16). The reader experiences simultaneously the impression of reading unmediated life-narratives and the awareness of the defamiliarizing effect of rendering life in words. This is Enright's way of calling attention to received opinions and stereotypes that falsify reality, silencing individuals and rendering them invisible, while fiction refreshes the eye and encourages critical thinking. A table conversation in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* illustrates Enright's method very well. The topic is the mothers of various nations and Eliza, a mother herself, makes light of cultural stereotypes: French mothers, she quips, "write novels, or burn novels in their drawing room grate, ... [they] are distinguished lovers, or know how to mend a clock that has not ticked since 1693. A Spanish mother is an object of terror, an Italian's mother an object of piety absolute" (Enright 2002, 146). English mothers, on the other hand, are either inexistent or paragons of domesticity:

"The English have no mothers. They grow like cabbages in a garden: they are entirely self-generated. Or if they have such a thing as a mother, it is always a matter of furniture. [...] an Englishman's mother... mob-cap, a little needle-work, and a Queen Anne writing table of oak inlaid with yew." (146)

When asked about Irish mothers, her flippancy is only apparent: "'Oh we eat them,' said Eliza. 'You should see it. We start at the toes and leave nothing out'" (146). This is a revealing instance of what Enright calls "mak[ing] the metaphor radical" (Schwall 2008, 22). Taking place during a genocidal war in nineteenth-century Paraguay, this dinner is one of Eliza's last efforts to preserve a sense of normality. Outside her home, food is scarce but dismembered and decomposing human bodies are plentiful and become the sustenance of dogs, which in turn are roasted by starving soldiers. Eliza Lynch is the unofficial consort of Paraguay's dictator, Francisco Solano López, and her dinner parties include army generals and surgeons. However, "[t]hrough all the meal, not one word had been uttered about the war or their current situation," we read in the next paragraph (Enright 2002, 147). Echoes of the violence and gruesomeness of the war, nonetheless, underlie the dialogue, just as "the dull splashes of shot landing in faraway mud" are audible "when you remembered to listen out for them" (147).

The conversation turns to mothers and the cultural particularities of various European nations precisely because the war is unmentionable. Against the background of violence and starvation, the image of the mother becomes intensely tangible and Swiftian, condensing the nourishing role of mothers and mother earth, sheltering homes and the domestic practicalities of furniture and clocks, generational conflict, the penury and destitution of minor, dominated cultures such as Ireland and Paraguay, and the consumption-corruption binary that runs like a red thread through the novel. What results is the conceit of the “edible woman,” a feminist trope of embodiment and consumerism that was coined by Margaret Atwood in her iconic 1969 novel of that title. That Dr Stewart, the Scottish army surgeon who has seen his fair share of dismembered and decaying bodies, starts hallucinating about nibbling “along the legs of some poor woman ... his poor rotten aunt, or the clean bones of his long-dead mother” (Enright 2002, 147) testifies to how compellingly the female body summons up these associations.

Despite this evocative quality of her style, Enright’s prose is never prurient or voyeuristic. On the contrary, her narrators often admonish the reader: “We made love properly for the first time, myself and Seán, early one evening .... and the details of what corner we found and what we did; how we managed it, and who put what where, are nobody’s business but our own,” writes Gina in *The Forgotten Waltz* (Enright 2011b, 58). The narrator of *The Gathering*, too, curbs her reader’s curiosity: “there is something so banal about things that happen *behind closed doors*, these terrible transgressions that are just sex after all” (Enright 2007c, 140, italics in the original). Even when the details are given, they tend to be so anatomical as to make the description very uninteresting. *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* begins factually: “Francisco Solano López put his penis inside Eliza Lynch on a lovely spring day in Paris, in 1854” (Enright 2002, 1). The rest of the chapter is mostly a lush depiction of Eliza’s room, with its spectacular canopied bed, and an elliptical account of her exploits until the age of nineteen, when she met López. The opening chapter of *The Pleasure* is typical of Enright’s method: her evocation of corporeality always serves to ground her characters, to connect them to their time and place. But her foregrounding of the female body, particularly the pregnant body, is also both an invitation to interpretation and a critique of the western cultural voyeurism that is always ready to objectify, label and defile everything it lingers on.

While Enright’s treatment of women insists that the private is always political, her works are far from being thesis or problem novels. Instead, they propose a compelling plotline and charismatic, while flawed,

protagonists, whose psychological depths are gauged in humorous, often first-person, prose. It has been remarked that an Irish family is at the centre of almost all of Enright's novels and indeed the author admits in an interview that she "put[s] people into that shape, or use[s] that shape to write about deeper truths" such as "separation and connection, disconnection and love" (Clark 2015). Enright's families tend to be of the nuclear kind, with anything between two and twelve children growing up with their mother and father and often with an extended family in the background. Although alcoholism, domestic violence and adultery are never far out of sight, in keeping with Irish Catholic tradition, divorce is seldom an option. The families always coagulate around a woman, typically a mother figure, forging relationships that illustrate these "deeper truths." The matriarch is rendered from the perspectives of the children, and while she stands for a stable moral code, she is by no means enshrined in righteousness. On the contrary, Enright uses the relationship between mothers and daughters to illustrate changing mores in Irish society and reveal the limitations of both past and present systems of values.

Cultural identity, an inevitable leitmotif running through Enright's work, intersects with the condition of women at various points, perhaps most notably on matters of migration and motherhood. Enright's background in theatre, television, radio, and her contributions to the literary press and even photography, like her education abroad in Canada and England, have been instrumental in her sophisticated understanding of the challenges posed to Ireland's emergent cultural and national identity by the postmodern condition, cosmopolitanism, the Celtic Tiger economic boom and its aftermath. Against the backdrop of a very strong Catholic tradition, these challenges resulted in a crisis of identity, both personal and national, which seems to be currently subsiding. Both the negative stereotypes and admirable progress of Irish identity form the context against which Enright's strongly individualised, yet representative, characters are shown to vacillate between the Catholic tradition and secularisation, the memory of poverty and the consumer economy, repression and extroversion, marginalisation and mainstreaming.

Several interpretive frames have been applied to Enright's works. As Margaret Mills Harper puts it in a review of Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill's 2011 critical collection, "Enright seems to read everything, treats serious theoretical, social, and aesthetic issues in her fiction, and shares herself generously in interviews and journalistic pieces. In other words, she is a critic's dream" (2013, 438). Most notably, Enright's work lends itself to psychoanalytical approaches. Her deeply intimate themes, often tackled in confessional, first-person prose, invite Freudian and post-Freudian

readings. From Grace's fixation with her father's wig in the first novel and the uncanny twins of the second, to Veronica's protracted work of mourning in *The Gathering*, and from the gutting of houses that evokes the menstrual discharge of the uterine lining to the various kinds of trauma, both personal and communal, the psychoanalyst comes across a plethora of apposite tropes in her novels. The short stories, too, are replete with psychopathology, from anorexia nervosa to paedophilia and from nervous breakdowns of various gravity to postpartum depression. Like Enright's treatment of the embodied nature of experience and the more or less dysfunctional family relations that organise the plots, these figurations of psychological distress speak to the anxieties of our times. Therefore, in the volume edited by Bracken and Cahill alone, at least six out of the ten essays address psychoanalytical tropes as diverse as dreams, doubles, the uncanny, the matrixial, the spectral and mourning, and cite theoreticians such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Bracha Ettinger. Outside of that volume, Sarah Gardam, Liam Harte, Hedwig Schwall and Margaret Mills Harper are only a few of the critics who have approached Enrightian fiction from a psychoanalytical perspective. There seems to be a consensus that at least up to *The Forgotten Waltz* such readings of Enright's work can be very profitable.

Another frequent critical approach is postcolonial theory, which had broad currency around the turn of the millennium and in the hands of feminists such as Caitriona Moloney, Helen Thompson, Linden Peach, Gerardine Meaney and others, it did much-needed recuperative work (see Moloney and Thompson 2003, xv). However, as Jennifer Jeffers points out, the insights yielded by some critical readings have "aroused suspicions that the method has become a ruse for airing political grievances" (2008, 5). To many Irish writers, postcolonialism seemed to be nothing more than "starry-eyed lit crit from the USA," as Edna Longley puts it (qtd. in Moloney and Thompson 2003, 10). In other words, while postcolonial theories diversified the angles from which Irish society could be approached, the adoption of extraneous terminologies and ideologizing critical discourse could obscure some of the very issues that Irish studies had to contend with. In her introduction to the first part of *Irish Women Speak Out: Voices from the Field* (2003), Moloney confirms that many of the writers she interviewed, Enright among them, did not share her opinion that more dialogue was needed between feminist and postcolonial approaches in Irish studies and some even preferred not to be known as specifically "Irish" writers (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 11, 9).

More germane, post-nationalism as an interpretive frame has been variously understood as that which came after the project of post-

Independence nationalism had run its course or, more simplistically, as a reaction against it. Indeed, it seems more useful to think of Ireland's post-nationalism in the terms set forth by Eve Patten quoting Declan Kiberd's influential 1996 book, *Inventing Ireland*: "With a confidence bolstered by the 1990 election to the Irish presidency of a female reformist lawyer, Mary Robinson, the Irish began to face up to their position as modern Europeans who had 'not so much solved as shelved the problem of creating a liberal nationalism'" (2006, 259). When asked about the importance of Irishness to her work, Enright confirms Kiberd's suspicion, replying that this is no longer a central concern for the writers of her generation (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 61). "I don't write about Ireland so much as from Ireland," she says elsewhere (Popkey 2011).

Her resistance to interpretive grids such as postcolonial and post-nationalist studies notwithstanding, Enright continues to revisit the usual sites of Irishness, particularly the historical past, collective memory, Catholicism, and the rhetoric of national pride. She does so with an inquisitive scepticism that is very much of her time. While there is a wide range of notions of and attitudes towards national identity in contemporary fiction, a few common features stand out: the acidity of its critique; the need to engage with the burgeoning cosmopolitanism of Irish society; the breakdown of the very idea of a coherent national narrative; and the awareness that history is indispensable to self-understanding, whether national or individual. As a result of this revaluation of the centrality of nation to identity, the Irish fiction emerging at the turn of the century is urban, pluralistic, 'hip', refusing to acknowledge its debt to Joyce, Yeats and Synge (Jeffers 2008, 2-3). Enright shares many of these features, although she neither denies her cultural heritage nor shies away from current Irish realities.

The multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism brought about by Ireland's gradual transition to a neo-liberal economy in the second half of the twentieth century have changed society in very significant ways, some of which are yet to be examined. Brian Cliff discerns a move that leaves behind nationalism in favour of a reconfiguration of what he calls "non-national forms of community." The consequences are substantial: the sidelining of social issues, which is paralleled in fiction by the abandoning of the realist tradition, comes at a social cost, estranging certain categories of audience from a culture they feel no longer represents them. Yet what is gained, this sense of "dissonance and plurality as possibilities" (Cliff 2006, 121), is part of a cosmopolitanism that Dominic Head hopes will prove remedial, "unit[ing] novelists, readers and critics in the twenty-first century" (2008, 151). Like feminist scholars such as Jennifer Jeffers, Claire

Conolly or Patricia Coughlan, Cliff points out the extent to which this displacement of nationalism and the resulting diversification of Irish literature are the work of women writers. These innovations are owed to women's tendency, on the one hand, to keep "communication open with the world beyond the island of Ireland, and ... [draw] strength from women's movements abroad" (Coughlan 2004, 181), and, on the other, to modify the way in which identity is defined in terms of "the basic level of sexual and gender identity in contrast to or in alliance with political, social, religious, or cultural norms" (Jeffers 2008, 1). Once again, Enright's fiction illustrates these trends in illuminating detail: her sensitivity to transnational shifts in women's priorities shows in her treatment of desire and agency, while her critical understanding of cosmopolitanism and of Ireland's participation in the globalised world is evidenced by her focus on urban, often polyglot, well-travelled and socially-aware characters, both male and female.

In conjunction with these interpretive frames, many labels have been applied to Enright's writing by publishers, reviewers and critics. Thus, her books were celebrated as "post-Freudian and post-feminist and, of course (three cheers!), post-nationalist" by fellow novelist Colm Tóibín as early as 1999 (xxxiii). Enright reacts with wry humour to such descriptions that tend to simplify the thematic concerns of recent fiction, and is equally sceptical towards national and regional attributes: "But you know, I am a woman, sometimes, for weeks at a time, and I am only Irish of a Tuesday," she quips in "An Interview" with Bracken and Cahill (2011, 14). Both the description and the reply are pertinent: his praise of Enright's fiction aside, Tóibín is ironic towards the current tendency to annex the prefix "post" to any qualifier that denotes a critical or cultural paradigm. Enright, too, opposes this trend and differentiates the importance she assigns to various dimensions of identity: gender, class, culture, nationality. Her reply uncovers the extent to which fashionable terms such as "post-feminism" and "post-nationalism" obscure literature's participation in historical realities in countries like Ireland, which never had a strong feminist tradition and should therefore not be too quick to leave feminism behind, and whose nationalism remains an open wound in need of examination.

Critics have nonetheless found it helpful to categorise Enright's work along these lines. In an early literary dictionary entry, Moloney summarises: "Most critics agree that her work is postmodern and deconstructionist while utilizing a cinematic style suggestive of both the celluloid quality and pace of contemporary life. The term 'magic realism' is often employed to describe her work" (2003, 88). More recently, Bracken and Cahill proclaim in their Introduction: "Enright's work is decidedly postmodern" (2011, 9). And Ellen McWilliams sums up: "Enright

destabilises [Irish cultural archetypes] fully by employing postmodern fictional strategies, but at the same time she retains a feminist commitment to recovering missing histories and contesting misappropriations of Irish femininity, an impulse in keeping with other [Irish] authors" (2013, 190).

Although a graduate of English and clearly familiar with the critical lingo, Enright is adamant to avoid such labels, both as accounts of her work, and in her own appraisal of current literary and cultural phenomena. In an early interview with Moloney, she explains:

I've never had any problems with the term [feminist]. Neither have I found it to my advantage to go around saying that I am a feminist particularly. There's no point in getting involved in linguistic, ideologist arguments about the term "feminism." But I do stick my outspoken neck out at every opportunity. ... I do take a line on things. The current line is, I can't be Irish all day; it's too much of an effort. I can't be a woman all day; the work of it is too strenuous. ... As a writer, I don't want to use language that has become ideological because that's a deadener for a writer of fiction. So, I like to keep my politics fluid so that it won't hem in the work. (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 63)

Several of the points that Enright makes in this conversation remain valid throughout her career so far: she does "stick [her] outspoken neck out at every opportunity," particularly on behalf of women and women writers. In an article about Ireland's new writers by Justine Jordan, one of Enright's interventions celebrates the new "confidence in female voices ... a hugely important thing," commenting that, "[t]raditionally, Irish writing has been about breaking silences. The biggest silence has continued to be about the real lives of women" (qtd. in Jordan 2015). Enright's own fiction has gleefully contributed to making women's testimonies heard. In the process, she has also demythologised the iconic long-suffering Irish womanhood in favour of representations of women endowed with agency: "Female suffering was highly valued in the Catholic Ireland of my youth, but I was never all that keen. I did not see what was in it for me," she states in a recent essay (Enright 2015b). Nevertheless, her work is not programmatically or dogmatically feminist, although it intersects with feminism at many crucial points. In fact, as McWilliams concludes in her investigation of Enright's relation to the Irish literary and cultural tradition, "to worry about whether Enright is 'feminist' or 'postfeminist' is to expend undue anxiety, as she and her work refuse any such easy categorization" (2013, 193).

Enright's language is as fluid as her politics, and as free of deadening ideologies: her wariness of "ideological language" remains one of the most recognisable features of her style. Her linguistic inventiveness

and tendency to draw on sources as diverse as popular culture and psychoanalytical scholarship for the rich evocativeness of her style have been described as postmodern. Yet in the same interview with Moloney she also rejected the term postmodernism as inadequate, preferring instead more descriptive terms, such as hyperrealism (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 64), which suggests a heightened form of realism. And when her interlocutor asked her about the “problematization and fragmentation of history—particularly women recovering a lost history—[which] seems part of the post-modern paradigm,” Enright countered with one of the metaphors in *The Wig My Father Wore*: “Well, it’s all buried under the wallpaper” (64).



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EARLY NOVELS: *THE WIG MY FATHER WORE* (1995) AND *WHAT ARE YOU LIKE?* (2000)

By the time Anne Enright published her first novel, *The Wig My Father Wore*, in 1995, she was already an awarded author of short fiction and a full-time writer. She had recently resigned her position with the National Irish Radio and Television but retained enough of the experience to serve as a plentiful resource of tropes, themes and narrative techniques. The story of a young television producer's efforts to understand desire in the age of rampant consumerism and media hype, *The Wig* draws on Enright's past as a director and producer of the popular television series *Nighthawks*, describing a world of ambitious young professionals and deploying televisual conventions such as schedules, credits, camera angles, rewinds, fast cutting and editing. To these, Enright adds the postmodernist repertoire of "pastiche, parody, magic realism, incongruous juxtapositions, fractured narrative, fragmented history, and an anarchic humour that relies on puns, word play and inversion," as enumerated by Heather Ingman (2013, 234). Tracing Ireland's televisual history as remembered by the unreliable protagonist, Grace, *The Wig* matches the unreality of reality shows with the surrealistic story of a suicidal angel from Canada moving in with Grace and making her pregnant. The narrative chronicles Grace's progress from cynicism to innocence, in a postmodern reworking of foundational Irish myths such as the Immaculate Conception or Mother Ireland. As Ingman goes on, *The Wig* is a novel that "cuts across gender binaries, challenges notions of fixed personal and national identities, and blurs the borders between fantasy and reality, sanity and insanity" (234).

As this outline suggests, *The Wig* is an odd debut novel that is best read within the context of postmodern experimentation in which it was written. When it first appeared, the novel was shortlisted for the *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Irish Literature Prize, but it was greeted by reviewers, perhaps somewhat cautiously, with "words like 'clever', 'unsettling', 'unpredictable' and 'immensely sophisticated'" (Ingman 2013, 234). Since

then, readers have been more enthusiastic in their praise, commending the “stunningly uncompromising precision” of Enright’s evocation of feelings, or the novel’s “celestial blue, televisual glow of wit and linguistic sedition,” as the blurb of the Vintage edition shows. Enright’s gift for comedy has been unanimously lauded. This is Enright’s most openly experimental novel, drawing on Angela Carter, Gabriel García Márquez and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* stories and interspersing the protagonist’s matter-of-fact narration with the RTÉ Guide, the credits of the show she produces, the angel’s list of questions for her, and the bits of newspapers and private correspondence she discovers under the wallpaper as she guts her sitting room. Grace’s own voice clashes with these more formal texts: she is direct, colloquial, irreverent, and gleefully inventive with language. This multitude of voices and styles not only reflects the information overload and the constant noise that characterise contemporary life—wherever she goes, there is a tv set running in the background, sometimes muted, often merely turned down—but it offers a view of early 1990s Ireland “as a kaleidoscope of fragments” (Coughlan 2004, 182).

This is a postmodern view of an Ireland that is itself on its way to becoming postmodern. During the pre-Tiger years, while its national consolidation had been shelved rather than completed, Ireland embarked on a process of liberalisation under President Mary Robinson. Enright uses several means of representing the changes that Irish, and particularly Dublin, society is going through. This is a cosmopolitan society, in which people watch the BBC as well as Irish television and may take holidays in Crete or Brittany, or fall in love in England. Grace’s situation as a young professional woman living alone would have been unthinkable to her mother, and the generation gap is implied by her mother’s constant nagging about her daughter’s lifestyle and her inability to settle down. Grace’s co-workers, on the other hand, are all single or involved in dysfunctional relationships. Ironically, they are also involved in encouraging further perfunctory relationships through the reality show they produce, a dating programme called *LoveQuiz*, whose future is forever uncertain, although it seems to have a faithful and diverse audience that includes Grace’s mother. Sexual mores are clearly changing in Ireland, as are gender roles, although the novel is far from being an unambiguous celebration of these changes.

Like in a story by García Márquez, as *The Wig* opens, an angel called Stephen rings at Grace’s door “with an ordinary face on him and asked for a cup of tea, as was his right” (Enright 1995, 1). The first paragraph effectively obliterates the border between the real and the surreal, the human and the supernatural. Stephen then explains that he used to be a bridge builder in Canada, married with children. He committed suicide one

winter's night in 1934, and has since been "setting despair to rights, growing [his] wings" (1). Neither his realness nor his story is ever in doubt. Grace records her response tersely: "I said I was glad that this was the way it turned out, that I thought everyone was too hard on suicides" (1). Her unsurprised acceptance suggests that the angel's apparition on her doorstep is triggered by a privately acknowledged sense of emptiness in her busy life: "By that time I needed anything I could get, apart from money, sex and power which were easy but hurt a lot" (1). The "money, sex and power" are supplied by her professional success, which nonetheless she describes as a perpetual power squabble with very low stakes. There is more than a hint here that she is despondent and possibly considering suicide, and that Stephen is a materialisation of her fear of death. The angel, who wants to discuss her fertility and promptly moves in with her, will provide a counterweight, she hopes as she falls in love with him. He begins by whitewashing the walls of Grace's house and continues by erasing the visible signs left on her body by her experiences, so that she becomes increasingly youthful as a result of their relationship. As Enright has put it in an interview, this is a "*bildungsroman*, in reverse" (Moloney and Thompson 2003, 59), that is, a story of the progress from experience back to innocence.

While Grace's body makes the journey back to youthful smoothness and unblemished whiteness, Stephen's body becomes increasingly more solid and real, losing its angelic glow and gaining substance: "his body settled on his bones; ... pores opened and age crept in" (Enright 1995, 186). In other words, his body evolves from angelic ideal to human imperfection, while hers acquires purity in preparation for maternity. There is a good dose of irony in these transformations, but they are also a revealing instance of Enright's ongoing project of showing experience to be embodied, even as she defamiliarizes it by using striking visual tropes. Thus, when the "surprisingly naked" Stephen touches Grace's breast, her body responds with an intensity that evokes all the joys and sorrows of life and transcends the personal: "I was just about to let slip the dogs in my gut, the bells and horns, the clamour and carnage, the Victoria Cross, the mourning, the ticker tape parade in my head" (127-28). Falling in love is a personal victory that requires sacrifices, and the price is inscribed on her body as one of her nipples disappears under Stephen's touch. To Grace's mind, the nipple is associated with "the bizarre egress my mother happily called the 'expressing' of milk," and not with any function that has so far been relevant to her (128). Instead, she reacts with more vehemence when Stephen attempts to erase her navel, the residue of the umbilical cord that connected her to her mother, and whose absence is connected with being an angel. Surprised by desire, Stephen is suddenly naked, or, Adam-like, his nakedness

suddenly becomes apparent to them. But although Grace cannot renounce her postlapsarian condition symbolised by her navel, she warns Stephen about the consequences of lovemaking, which in his case are comparable to his suicide in Canada, a potentially annihilating drive that she resists. Thus, it is the “sinner” Grace that seems more mindful of the “wages of sin” than the angelic Stephen. This metaphoric charting of incompatibilities is Enright’s ironic revisiting of the cliché according to which women are more fallible than men.

As their bodies evolve in opposite directions it becomes clear that Grace and Stephen are cast as doubles in order to explode some of the binaries that organise western society. Patricia Coughlan places Enright’s critique of the conventional polarisation of genders within its Irish context when she writes:

Stephen plays spirit to Grace’s flesh. This use of the angel/spirit versus human/body homology to formulate a position about gender is not new. In Patrick Kavanagh’s poem “Raglan Road,” the loved woman is “clay” to the poet’s angel who will “lose his wings” through wooing her: *The Wig My Father Wore* mentions the sung version, a popular Dublin pub- and party-piece (71). The mutual attachment of Grace and Stephen, as full human subjects—by contrast with Kavanagh’s frustrated misogynist idealisation—de-rails the traditional sexist arrangement whereby women were assigned the (human) body and men the (angelic) spirit or mind. This is because Grace the TV professional, acid satirist of Irish manners, and reflective thinker about morality and meaning, most decidedly inhabits mind as well as (bawdily) body. (Coughlan 2004, 184)

Coughlan further points out that the novel’s title, too, is an irreverent gesture towards another song, “The Sash My Father Wore,” “signature anthem of populist unionism” (Coughlan 2004, 197). Such allusions, and particularly the quotation of Kavanagh’s poem and its popular sung version, are a common method of endowing incidents with meaning in Enright’s fiction. As Coughlan points out, in this instance Enright uses this method in order to deconstruct the conventional association of women with the body and materiality and of men with the mind or spirit. Rather than ascribe stable identities, the novelist shows identity to be fluid and in constant process of being made, combining corporeality and spirituality in novel ways.

As Coughlan goes on, “[g]radually each approaches the other’s condition, Stephen taking on more and more physicality, Grace gaining in sheer emotional simplicity and moral optimism, till eventually they make love and Grace conceives a child” (2004, 184-85). This progress, from spiritual existence to materiality in Stephen’s case, and from experience to innocence in Grace’s, culminates in another allusion, this time to Irish

Catholicism. As she becomes ever more youthful and even on occasion childish, Grace wonders if she might be a virgin again (Enright 1995, 137). Their lovemaking thus recreates the scene of the Immaculate Conception in which the virgin “full of grace” conceives in the presence of the angel. The conceit is corroborated when the next morning she notices that Stephen looks at her “in the way you might look at a woman who is pregnant” (180).

The polarisation of gender roles is further challenged as it is Stephen who is unemployed and domestic, a skewed literalisation of the “angel in the house” cliché, while Grace is a professional and the breadwinner in the couple. Her employment in television associates Grace with culture and artifice, whereas Stephen, although a creature of the spirit, has a relation of sympathy with the natural world that enables him to make “the onions sprout through their net bags” and turn “potatoes green just by looking at them” (Enright 1995, 38). At the end of the novel, ethereal once more, Stephen disappears into the televisual system, while the pregnant Grace temporarily gives up her job, though not her professional ambitions, in order to reconnect with the materiality of her body and the new life she is about to bring into the world. The novel thus does not end in marriage; rather, Grace finds happiness and a full sense of self in the prospect of becoming a single mother, rather than by settling into the conventional role of wife.

Enright’s method of questioning simplifying categories encompasses her treatment of genre as well as gender. Although Grace falls in love with Stephen and in due course becomes pregnant by him, at no point does their story turn into a sensational romance. On the contrary, the surreal events in Grace’s private life are normalised by her unquestioning acceptance, while it is the comparatively more banal *LoveQuiz* that is shown to be unrealistic, contrived and in constant need of editing. The novel is thus very busy concealing its fictionality even as it keeps reminding us that all representations are artificial and all records are falsifiable, particularly if they draw on that most unreliable of sources, human memory. Grace’s account, although disarmingly honest, is untrustworthy to the extent that her recollections are imperfect or coloured by emotion. She tells her co-workers, for instance, that her family acquired their first television set in 1967, just in time to watch the moon landing, only to learn, from her colleagues and from a TV Guide found by Stephen “by means Angelic” (Enright 1995, 31), that the moon landing and the programmes she remembers were broadcast in July 1969. Her faulty memory thus attempts to rewrite not only personal but communal history, in a move that exposes the constructedness of all narratives.

In her memory, on the evening when he brought home the set, her father “had something strange on his head,” “an aerial of sorts, a decoder, or an audience response” (Enright 1995, 28). Grace was five at the time and “nearing the age of reason” (27). No one was allowed to touch or mention the wig, so that it became a somewhat threatening symbol of all the things that must remain unspoken in the family, and, as the silence extended to neighbours and co-workers, in Irish culture. In time, the father’s wig acquired a quasi-mythical status: “The wig slept on top of him with one eye open, watching us. . . . The wig was his way of showing his anger, of being polite” (29); and later, “I thought his wig was a talisman against other, less interesting lies” (57). Not only does it encapsulate all that is known but cannot be uttered, it also becomes a performative statement that displaces certain kinds of utterances and actions. Grace ascribes to it all kinds of effects: “For years my father’s wig felt like an answer. I could say ‘I am the way I am because my father wears a wig’” (26). When their mother develops a benign tumour, Grace and her siblings hear the neighbours whisper that “it put out hairs” and draw their own conclusions: “what had put the hairy thing in her tummy . . . was not my father at all, but the thing on his head” (150). The wig thus seems capable of engendering not only the growth that makes their mother ill, but an alternative reality in which even the neighbours collude. However, after the aging father has two consecutive strokes, his wife tames the wig through the pedestrian actions of laundering and brushing it. She then displays pre-wig family pictures, thus bringing the wig’s dominion to a quiet but dignified end. The wig however continues to be a palpable presence in the family and at one point Grace even imagines that it has “started to grow, or just stopped growing” (159).

Grace’s story has three strands that are followed in loosely alternating scenes: her work, her relationship with her parents, and her relationship with the angel Stephen. Grace provides no summary to connect the fragments and only minimal context, inviting the reader to supply the missing connections. These strands are subtly and variously interwoven, as for instance when her father’s fake hair is thought to be part of the television set. This childish misunderstanding is more intuitive than it might appear, as both the wig and television are associated throughout the novel with appearances and concealment. An early exchange between father and daughter that takes place when the former watches the *LoveQuiz*, “just to be polite,” gives us a hint as to how to read these two symbols: “He said he preferred programmes that weren’t so ‘set up’. I tried to tell him that all programmes are ‘set up’ but his wig shouted me down” (Enright 1995, 30). Grace finds that she cannot explain the difference between what is real and what is “set up” in the presence of the wig. Like the show, the wig is a