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**How to Cite:** Sherratt-Bado, D M 2018 'Things We'd Rather Forget': Trauma, the Troubles, and Magical Realism in Post-Agreement Northern Irish Women's Short Stories. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 12, pp. 1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.247>

**Published:** 18 September 2018

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**#AGREEMENT20**

# 'Things We'd Rather Forget': Trauma, the Troubles, and Magical Realism in Post-Agreement Northern Irish Women's Short Stories

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The post-Good Friday/Belfast Agreement period has witnessed an efflorescence of magical realist fiction by Northern Irish women authors. Although these texts were published during an ostensibly 'post-conflict' moment, recurrent trauma linked to the Troubles manifests in the form of magical realist narrative elements such as surrealist, fantastic, and phantasmal events and characters. This essay considers the ways in which the magical realist mode is useful to women writers within the context of contemporary Northern Irish culture. The dialectical structure of magical realism makes this mode well-suited to post-Agreement, 'post-conflict' literature, which ricochets back and forth across the 'post-' marker in order to explore how the past impinges upon the present. This study analyses work by Jan Carson, Bernie McGill, and Roisín O'Donnell, authors whose magical realist texts address the 'living ghosts' of the Troubles. Their stories investigate the transgenerational memory of trauma and the 'legacy' of the conflict and consider the ways in which these are transmitted. They examine the impact of this transmission on the family unit – particularly upon younger generations – and contemplate the nature of the society that they will inherit. These writers utilise the magical realist mode as a means to challenge received narratives about Northern Ireland and to engage with the memory of trauma, which has been sublimated by the progressivist discourse of the Agreement.

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The past five years have witnessed an efflorescence of magical realist fiction by women authors from Northern Ireland. This revived magical realist trend is part of a larger movement of new writing by women from the region. Their work has flourished in the post-Agreement period, owing to an increased number of literary platforms for and recent anthologies of literature by Northern women.<sup>1</sup> After the Agreement, women's writing methods have shifted to include increasingly experimentalist forms. The magical realist stories covered here emerged in response to the retraumatizing structures of post-Agreement society. Cillian McGrattan argues that in Northern Ireland, 'the political dimension of trauma' includes 'fundamental democratic and governance problems...having to do with a loss of voice; the perpetration of violence... and the feeling of being betrayed by those in power' (2017: 1). Although these texts were published during an ostensibly 'post-conflict' moment, recurrent trauma linked to the Troubles manifests in the form of magical realist narrative elements such as surrealist, fantastic, and phantasmal events and characters.

The term 'magic realism' originated in the field of art criticism in the 1930s 'to describe a style of painting which depicts fantastic or bizarre images in a precise representationalist manner' (Oxford English Dictionary). The related term 'magical realism', which is in more extended use, denotes 'any artistic or especially literary style in which realistic techniques such as naturalistic detail, narrative, etc., are similarly combined with surreal or dreamlike elements' (Oxford English Dictionary). In her study of this genre, Maggie Ann Bowers remarks that a magical realist fictional setting is one in which 'ghosts, extraordinary happenings, and extrasensory perception are commonplace' (2010: 44). She notes that 'because it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist, magical realism is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode' (Bowers, 2010: 4). Accordingly, I will argue that Northern Irish magical realist fiction challenges received narratives about the supposedly 'post-conflict' region that dominate contemporary culture.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, collections such as *Female Lines: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland* (2017), edited by Linda Anderson and Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado, and *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women from the North of Ireland* (2016), edited by Sinéad Gleeson, seek to redress the historically masculinist bias within the Northern literary canon.

The extraordinary aspects of Northern magical realism contest the normalising narrative of 'Peace' that is promulgated by the post-Agreement dispensation. The magical realist mode also ironises the clichéd Troubles narratives that continue to proliferate within fiction about the North. This study analyses work by Jan Carson, Bernie McGill, and Roisín O'Donnell, authors whose magical realist tales reflect the unsettled sociopolitical conditions in contemporary Northern Ireland, a society that is still working through the deep trauma of the Troubles.

These stories explore the transgenerational memory of trauma and the 'legacy' of the conflict ('legacy' being a keyword from both the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the 1993 Downing Street Declaration) and consider the ways in which these are transmitted. They examine the impact of this transmission on the family unit—particularly upon younger generations—and contemplate the nature of the society that they will inherit. I will posit that Jan Carson, Bernie McGill, and Roisín O'Donnell utilise the magical realist mode as a means to destabilise received narratives and to engage with traumatic memory, which has been sublimated by the discourse of the Agreement. Future-oriented governmental texts such as the Agreement promote a willed sense of closure, which only exacerbates the suppressed cultural trauma of the Troubles. Carson, McGill, and O'Donnell modify and disrupt realistic narrative techniques as part of the process of working through residual trauma related to the Troubles. As McGill comments, 'Magical realism allows us to examine the everyday challenges that we face in life in what feels like a fantastical environment. Like all the best kinds of writing, it requires empathy from the reader' (Personal correspondence, 9 May 2017). Similarly, O'Donnell reflects:

As a response to violence, magical realism works by producing a shock wave and jolting the reader out of his or her complicity. As a society, we have become so immune to shocking images; in the decade of information-overload, realism has lost its sting. But a magical realist story can make you see things from a completely different angle and can therefore provide a more meaningful way of engaging with conflict trauma. (Personal correspondence, 24 May 2017)

For these Northern Irish authors, magical realism provides an effective way to articulate repressed traumatic narratives. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is a 'wound' that 'attempt[s] to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (1996: 3–4). Similarly, Wendy Faris discerns that the magical realist mode 'allows realism to escape from the confines of its mimetic program' in order to examine 'nonverifiable phenomena' (2004: 156, 50). In Northern Irish magical realist fiction, these nonverifiable phenomena are the traces of traumatic experience, which re-emerges in narratives that seek to explicate it. The phrase 'magical realism' suggests a binary opposition between two ideologically charged representational codes: 'magic' and 'realism'. However, these constitutive codes do not operate in a hierarchal framework. Rather, as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris assert, 'magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourage resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women' (1995: 6). Correspondingly, I will consider the ways in which the magical realist mode is useful to women writers within the context of post-Agreement, neocolonial culture in Northern Ireland.

Neocolonialism refers to the exertion of economic, political, or cultural hegemony by one state over another polity. In particular, it often denotes the retention of influence over a polity by a former colonial power. Colin Graham emphasises that Northern Ireland remains 'exceptional within colonialism, as [Britain's] first and/or last colony' and argues for a postcolonial reading of the region (2001: 81). Following Graham, Birte Heidemann remarks that there is a 'discursive uneasiness surrounding Northern Ireland's place' in criticism within the fields of Postcolonial Studies *and* Irish Studies due to its liminal position within the UK and the island of Ireland (2016: 29). Heidemann underscores the need to 'situat[e] Northern Ireland' in critical discourse within the 'framework of an unfinished colonialism' (2016: 18). She observes that 'the [re]annexation of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom' established the state's complicated relationship to Britain from the moment of its inception (2016: 20). The Troubles are a neocolonial trauma, albeit with deep historical roots. The early Troubles of the 1920s emerged with the partition of Ireland and the creation of the Northern Irish state. The more recent Troubles, which began in the late 1960s, were linked to

the violence that became entrenched within that state. The conflict resists narrative fixity due to its repetitive nature and Graham argues that consequently, it 'whittl[es] away quietly and continually at the most basic of critical assumptions' (2001: 51).

Northern Irish magical realist fiction also undermines these assumptions because it disrupts the order of dominant cultural narratives. Heidemann notes that 'the complexity of Northern Ireland's colonial history does not lend itself to an easy articulation of Self and Other' (2016: 21). Competing cultural iconographies frame Northern Irish society as binaristic: Irish/British, Catholic/Protestant, nationalist/unionist, republican/loyalist. Critics of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement contend that the consociational model of Northern Irish government built these binaries into a new political structure which reifies communal division rather than accommodating difference, as it purports to do. The dialectical structure of magical realism holds different representational codes in productive tension, which makes it well-suited to addressing conflicting cultural viewpoints. It also makes this mode applicable to post-Agreement, 'post-conflict' literature, which ricochets back and forth across the 'post-' marker in order to explore how the past impinges upon the present.

Magical realist texts utilise a matter-of-fact narrative style to describe extraordinary events, and the writers covered here use this mode to address retraumatising sociopolitical paradoxes. Contemporary Northern Irish magical realism responds to the manipulation of reality and memory by the post-Agreement dispensation, which arguably reinvented the conflict in an institutionalised form. Mutual opposition between the 'two communities' was encoded in the Agreement via the consociational model of devolved government. This is an extension of the 'rudimentary discourse of "Two Traditions"' within the Downing Street Declaration of 1993, which 'used culture paradoxically and ultimately untenably as both the naturalization and the transcendence of a preordained sectarianism' (Kelly, 2005: 548). In turn, as the current Stormont deadlock demonstrates, this has forestalled any opportunity for resolution at the level of the state.<sup>2</sup> As Graham discerns, the

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<sup>2</sup> The decade of power-sharing between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin collapsed in January 2017, ending a period of ostensible stability from 2007–2017. In February 2018, multi-party talks to restore a devolved government at Stormont reached an impasse after several weeks of intensive negotiations. At the time of writing (August 2018), Northern Ireland remains without a government.

Agreement 'accepts and builds on the irresolvable nature of the identity politics of the North and...it therefore preserves sectarianism within itself' (2017). The institutionalised opposition between 'the two communities' and the persistence of an exclusionary political framework signal a lack of progress—a situation which inflects post-Agreement fiction.

### **Agreeing to Forget**

The Agreement attempts to substantiate a clean break with the past and thus a forgetting. It laments the 'regrettable legacy of suffering' due to the conflict and advocates the need for 'a fresh start' (See 'The Agreement'). However, this declaration of an 'end' to the conflict via its sublimation leads to what Graham calls the 'living ghosts' of the Troubles (2017). He states, '[a]rising from this...fragile peace are those very traces of the repressed, formations which act as conscience of and reminder to the new orthodoxy, cultural texts which inhabit that...no-man's land between those who have simple beliefs and those who do not' (Graham, 2007: 176). Graham argues that the homogenising drive of the Agreement does not account for 'the complex and conflictual lived place' of 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland (2007: 172). He cites Jacques Derrida's theory of the repetitive nature of violence as relevant to contemporary Northern Irish culture. Derrida asks, 'as soon as peace is instituted...does it not indefinitely and inevitably retain within it a trace of the violent nature which it is supposed to break, the nature it is supposed to interrupt, interdict, or repress?' (1999: 89). Graham applies this concept to the post-Agreement North, noting, 'if peace...suppresses but is traced by the very violence it follows and fails to end, then we might expect some more extreme re-manifestations of that violence at the level of the cultural text' (2007: 176). Accordingly, contemporary Northern magical realist fiction uses the interplay of different narrative codes to draw attention to the blurred distinction between experiences of recurrent violence.

Post-Agreement fiction retains the sense of equivocalty found within post-ceasefire writings, as texts from both periods 'occupy indeterminate zones, mediating between redundant pasts and nebulous futures, questioning the rhetoric of "progress" even as they seek adequate modes of resolution' (Gamble, 2009: 362). John Brannigan maintains that 'fiction in Northern Ireland has adhered too closely

to...forms of literary realism, and too often attempts to resolve the irreconcilable differences of the conflict through the consoling perspectives of liberal humanism' (2006: 144). Eve Patten identifies the source of this problem as a reliance on what she terms 'fictional essentialism' (1995: 132). In contrast, post-Agreement magical realist fiction does not attempt to narratologically resolve conflicting cultural discourses. Instead, it operates a dual narrative structure at whose core is a dialectical tension. Post-Agreement magical realism registers homologically the contradictions within Northern Ireland: the vacuum of the present, the excesses of the past. These excesses re-emerge textually, adopting new forms but retaining traces of the old trauma. As Carson explains, they erupt from the unconscious of the writer. Of her own work she notes that there are 'stories you write without thinking and then afterwards you try to work out where it came from and what it meant...It's an odd experience learning things about yourself from your own writing' (Personal correspondence, 4 April 2017). This unconscious mode of writing is evident in contemporary Northern magical realist stories, which explore the uncanny images that arise from the traumatic imagination.

### **Magical Realism and (Northern) Ireland**

Whilst magical realism is a prevalent mode in literatures from postcolonial and neocolonial cultures, it is not often discussed within the context of Irish writing. Magical realist literature appeared later in anglophone regions than it did elsewhere in the world. In postcolonial and neocolonial anglophone areas, magical realism often materialises as an oppositional response to British neoimperialism. Stephen Slemon asserts that magical realist writing is a form of resistance to 'neo-colonial mode[s] of domination' (1995: 412). He argues, 'the established systems of generic classification are complicit with a centralizing impulse in imperial culture. Their incompatibility with the practice of magic[al] realism...makes magic[al] realism a problem case for the understanding of genre' (Slemon, 1995: 408). The generic slipperiness of magical realism makes this an appropriate narrative mode for writing about Northern Ireland, a polity whose status is also problematic to define, as it is often described as 'a place apart' (See Hughes, 1991). It is a place defined in conflicting, binaristic terms: province/statelet, UK/Ireland, neocolonial/'devolved'. Northern Ireland's proximity



to its neoimperialism, Britain, and to the latter's former colony, the Republic of Ireland, has resulted in diverse literary influences upon Northern writing. The origins of Northern magical realist fiction appear to be quite different from those of the South. The magical realist elements within Irish fiction from the Republic are primarily linked to ancient Celtic myth, folklore, or Catholicism, whereas magical realist texts from Northern Ireland are predominantly explorations of psychological phenomena.

Brian Moore was perhaps the earliest Northern Irish author of magical realist fiction and his novels written in this mode are deeply psychological. However, as a diasporan, his texts exhibit significant cross-cultural influences and they are also representative of the North American magical realist movement during the 1960s and 70s (Bowers, 2010: 52).<sup>3</sup> In the late 1980s, Belfast-based authors Glenn Patterson and Robert McLiam Wilson engaged with magical realism in their debut novels. Patterson's *Burning Your Own* (1988) and McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989) employ similar magical realist methods to rework the bildungsroman genre within the context of Troubles violence. In 1999 Derry-born writer Marilyn McLaughlin published her collection *A Dream Woke Me and Other Stories*, which portrays life in the North directly after the signing of the Agreement as a strange dreamscape. In the twenty-first century, short stories by Northern Irish writers Carson, McGill, and O'Donnell exhibit a preoccupation with contemporary 'post-conflict' society and how it can move forward or be worked-through.

Sigmund Freud defines working-through (*Durcharbeitung*) as a process whereby the subject repeats, elaborates, and amplifies interpretations of unconscious content in order to overcome internalised resistances to this content (See Freud, 2011). Freud describes the act of interpretation as a form of 'art,' and magical realist fiction has emerged as a strand of Northern art which interprets suppressed traumatic memory of the Troubles. As Carson points out, there is 'an entire generation of Northern Irish people' who grew up during the conflict and 'are currently journeying through the

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Moore emigrated to Canada in 1948 and lived there until 1959, when he moved to America. He went to New York and then Malibu, California, where he remained until his death in 1999. His magical realist novels are: *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1965); *Fergus* (1970); and *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975).

process of becoming something new' (2016b). An important part of this process is reevaluating the literary legacy of the conflict, which entails questioning received Troubles narratives.

Contemporary fiction from Northern Ireland features a magical realist thread, albeit considerably later than in other 'post-conflict' areas such as Latin America, where it originated as *lo real maravilloso* in the early twentieth century and developed into a mid-century literary boom; or Africa, where it emerged during the period of decolonisation and democratisation in the mid-twentieth century. What is the reason for this belatedness in Northern Irish culture? As Chris Andrews and Matt McGuire observe, 'some of the conflicts' in the aforementioned regions 'have arisen as a consequence of decolonization and the competition for power created by the vacuum of colonial withdrawal' (2016: 2). Although the Agreement and the new devolved legislature were implemented in 1998, Britain maintained its military presence in Northern Ireland until 2007, when Operation Banner finally ended. Moreover, contemporary Northern Ireland remains caught in a politics of suspension due to its dysfunctional devolved government and the recurring threat of direct rule from Westminster. The current incarnation of the Northern Irish Assembly appeared in 1998 and has operated intermittently since then. It was suspended four times between 2000 and 2007, and at the time of writing (August 2018) it has remained suspended since January 2017. Due to the protracted nature of the conflict *and* post-Agreement inertia, there has not been enough time for Northern Irish society to process its 'post-conflict' neocolonial status.

The signing of the Agreement on 10 April 1998 marked this date as the official start of 'peacetime', a new historical period which would bring about a 'new North'. Nevertheless, as Christine St. Peter contends, 'the narrative voices and inscribed values of northern women's fiction still carry a much more doubtful sense of an "after"' (2000: 121). Magical realist fiction provides Northern women writers such as Carson, McGill, and O'Donnell with an inventive method of exploring the duality of a 'post-' condition. In his attempt to 'locate the question of culture,' Homi Bhabha declares that '[o]ur existence today is marked by...living on the borderlines of the "present", for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial

shiftiness of the prefix "post": *postmodernism, postcolonialism*' (1994: 1). He argues that the modifier 'post-' indicates that we live 'beyond the border of our times' (Bhabha, 1994: 6). What of the multiply 'post-' milieu of Northern Ireland? Rather than being proleptic or retrospective, Northern magical realist fiction moves back and forth across the 'post-' marker, thereby indicating that there is no such thing as a clean break with the past. Due to its dual narrative structure, magical realism reveals the 'tensions and gaps of representation' within the post-Agreement, 'post-conflict' Northern Irish context, which is framed within official discourse as a smooth transition (Bowers, 2010: 97). In the texts analysed here, trauma manifests in magical realist elements that exist beyond the borderlines of normative discourse. These authors respond to the current phase of politico-cultural suspension by presenting the 'living ghosts' of the Troubles as figurative projections of an unresolved past.

### **'No Angel'**

Bernie McGill's oeuvre features a mix of contemporary short stories and historical novels. She explains that much of her work focuses on 'suppressed memory,' which manifests in surreality or, more frequently, in phantasmal elements (Personal correspondence, 12 March 2017).<sup>4</sup> Her short story collection *Sleepwalkers* (2013) is her first foray into magical realism. McGill's tale 'No Angel' flashes back to the 1980s and 90s, and the setting shifts between the urban space of Belfast and a family farm in rural Northern Ireland. The opening scene establishes a magical realist perspective via the narrator Annie's matter-of-fact description of an encounter with her father's ghost:

The first time I saw my father after he died I was in the shower, hair plastered with conditioner, when the water stuttered and turned cold. He was at the sink in front of the misted-up mirror with the tap running, his back to me. It was two weeks after his funeral. 'Them tiles would need re-grouting,' he said, and pointed his razor at the salmon pink mould that was growing below the mirror.

I stared at him through the circle I'd wiped in the shower door. 'I didn't know you'd be able to do that,' I said.

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<sup>4</sup> Bernie McGill lists Spike Milligan and Flann O'Brien as magical realist influences on her work.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'any decent tradesman would sort that out for you.'  
The twitch of a smile; thran as before. He looked more or less the same.  
(McGill, 2013: 39)

This story plays with the reader's expectations from the outset. For when Annie comments, 'I didn't know you'd be able to do that,' the reader presumes that she is surprised by her father's reappearance as a ghost. However, it turns out that she is merely referring to his ability to re-grout the bathroom tiling. There is an element of sly humour in this passage; but it is also disturbing because the family home already exhibits a noticeable sense of decay, with its crumbling tilework and mouldy walls. Furthermore, this scene conveys the narrator's view of her father's ghost as distorted and multiply mediated. She can only perceive him as he is reflected in 'the misted-up mirror' and 'through the circle' that she wipes on the shower door. The multiple mediations of the mirror and the circular 'lens' of the shower door metaphorise the distancing effect of trauma—what Caruth describes as 'the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world' (1996: 3). Annie is in mourning for her recently departed father and his ghost begins to trail her movements. She recounts, 'The next time I saw him I was on the train on the way to Belfast...outside, reflected in the glass, it was his face skimming over the fields' (McGill, 2013: 40). She turns and his apparition is sat next to her on the train, seemingly to keep her company.

Later when she is out to dinner with her boyfriend and his parents, her father's spectre reappears and his motive for following her becomes clear. She recalls: '[I] had stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. Daddy legged it out from a bus shelter on the far side of the road, dodged over between breaks in the headlights... "Are you going to marry thawn boy?" he said. Not so much as a "Hullo"' (41). They proceed to have a heated argument:

'He'll never set foot on my farm,' he said.

... 'Not everybody's after your land, Daddy.'

'Have you forgotten what they did to your brother, Annie? The way they left him, lying on the road like a bag of rubbish the binmen had forgotten to lift? What it did to your mother, to see him like that?'

I gritted my teeth. 'It wasn't Thomas did that.'

'Him or his kind. I make no difference between them.' The spit flew out of his mouth. Then he turned on his heel and strode down the street...It had never occurred to me that the dead could be bitter still, could feel loss. (42)

As this scene reveals, another ghost haunts the story – that of Annie's younger brother James, who is the victim of sectarian murder at the age of seventeen. However, it is significant that McGill never reveals which 'community' any of the characters are from, even though they reside in a 'mixed' area. Annie states that James 'wasn't involved in anything – people round here would have known that... All he wanted was to...“get the hell out of this backwater”' (43). James refuses to join the paramilitaries, but he is unable to avoid them and he is beaten to death in a sectarian attack while walking home one night. Annie remarks, 'My brother Jamesie... had never learnt caution the way most people had in our uneasy mixed community' (42). James's death exacerbates his father's sectarian prejudice, which the latter takes with him to the grave. Annie's father's spirit returns to haunt her in an attempt to dissuade her from marrying Thomas, who is from the 'other side'.

The tale does not conclude with a romantic resolution; for the 'love-across-the-divide' between Annie and Thomas eventually fails. As Brannigan observes, the 'romance narrative' is 'a dominant genre in Troubles fiction in which the symbolic union of lovers from across the political and social divisions of Northern Ireland attempts (unsuccessfully in most cases) to transcend those divisions' (2006: 145). Joe Cleary reads this as 'an anxious and contradictory literary mode' in which 'the right of the [Northern Irish] state to exist, at least in its present form, is disputed' (2002: 113). He argues that it is a form of 'national romance,' since the struggle between the 'two communities' as represented by the two lovers is 'about whether Northern Ireland can be the sole determining unit' within which they 'can imagine their future together' (Cleary, 2002: 113). Correspondingly, Annie reflects, 'we didn't last. I think it was Thomas's confidence I fell for—his belief in my ability to love him back, his faith in the world's acceptance of us both. He never questioned his right to be anywhere' (47). Although McGill's story features elements of the conventional Troubles romance narrative, her magical realist approach subverts this framework. The love-across-the-divide at the centre of the tale is in fact Annie's love for her

family across the breach between life and death. The spectralised storyline examines the ways in which the national narrative operates at the level of the family unit, which is shattered by James's death.

It is difficult for Annie to imagine the future because the ghosts from her past continue to resurface. This is due to re-traumatising, self-replicating cycles of violence in the North. She is relieved to escape the tensions at the family farm and to return to her studies at Queen's University Belfast. Annie muses:

The threat in the city never felt personal. A bomb scare on University Road and everybody piled back into bed, lectures cancelled for the morning. The night the explosion went off at the Lisburn Road police station, the whole of our rented house shook. Eight girls on the landing in their pyjamas and then down to the kitchen...listening for the sirens, second-hand drama. Not like a dark car in your own yard at night; not like a shotgun under the bed. (45)

McGill dramatises the actual bombing of the Lisburn Road police station on 16 December 1986, when IRA members held an unidentified man's family hostage and forced him to drive a school bus laden with 800 pounds of explosives to the station (New York Times, 1986). Although the threat in Belfast feels 'less personal' to Annie than that which she experiences at home, she is aware of the litany of bombings that occurred subsequently around the North in a self-perpetuating chain of events. She notes: '[t]he eighties were a nervous time, and things were worse after something big: Loughgall, Enniskillen, Milltown, Ballygawley. Those were the times when people walked about careful, eyes to the ground' (43). Annie names these real-life bombings in chronological order and they become synonymous with the places where they occurred, producing a remapping of Northern Ireland that embeds traumatic, sectarian geographies. McGill explains of the tale:

I can trace elements of it back to...my experiences as a student in the eighties in Belfast; to a time in the nineties when the situation felt particularly brittle here, when every time you switched on the news it was one retaliation shooting after another until it felt like the place was about to implode' (Stich & McGill, 2017).

The flashback structure of her tale mimics that of traumatic memory. As Caruth states, trauma is 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in...repetitive phenomena' (1996: 94).

At the story's close Annie attends a performance at the Grand Opera House in Belfast only to find that the ghosts of her father, mother, and brother are also in the audience. She takes solace in the fact that they are together again and asks her father's ghost not to return, thus bringing an end to the haunting. McGill ironises the subject of the comic opera *The Bartered Bride* via Annie's failed relationship with Thomas. The story's celebratory end, with its happy reunion of ghosts, further disrupts the love-across-the-divide narrative. Due to its fusion of the real and the phantasmal 'No Angel' is not a typical Troubles tale, nor is it a straightforward ghost story. McGill employs magical realism in order to thwart traditional Troubles narrative devices and to reveal their limitations.

### **'Ebenezer's Memories'**

Roisín O'Donnell's body of work features a cross-cultural mix of realistic and magical realist stories that are set across the globe.<sup>5</sup> Born in England to Northern Irish parents, she returned to Derry regularly throughout her upbringing. O'Donnell's tale 'Ebenezer's Memories,' from her 2016 collection *Wild Quiet*, is inspired by these family visits and it merges the actual events of the Troubles with magical realist aspects. She explains that this story is a means of working through her memories of the unrest in Derry: '[m]y theory has long been that magical realism flourishes in regions affected by conflict and trauma; that it arises essentially as a way of narrating the unspeakable' (Personal correspondence, 1 March 2017). The tale consists of a series of flashbacks to Derry in the 1990s, during the narrator Cathy's childhood. Cathy's Northern Irish parents eloped to England in order to avoid potential harassment for a 'mixed marriage' in their hometown. Although she returns to the city frequently to visit her grandparents, Cathy grows up unaware of the specifics of the Troubles. She

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<sup>5</sup> Roisín O'Donnell counts Mia Cuoto, Gabriel García Márquez, and Ben Okri among her magical realist influences.

recounts, 'until that summer of '98, I thought Northern Ireland was just something that happened on the TV...The Troubles were confined to the six o'clock news, after which the weather woman would stand with the left shoulder of her suit blocking out the republic. Northern Ireland had nothing to do with Grandad's house, which we continued to visit each Christmas and almost every summer' (O'Donnell, 2016: 10). As a child, Cathy's knowledge of Northern Ireland is limited to the places she visits with her family on their holidays. The Troubles are not spoken about in their household in England, nor at her grandparents' home in Derry. Although the city was the site of major violent incidents throughout the duration of the Troubles, Cathy's family shield her and her brother from these events. When she grows older, Cathy finally learns about the conflict after it supposedly comes to an end with the signing of the Agreement in 1998.

Cathy remembers one Christmas visit to Derry in the mid-1990s when the children accidentally discover a family secret hidden in the cupboard under the stairs during a game of hide-and-seek. She and her brother Jack are especially fond of their grandfather's storytelling and he sits them down to explain what they have seen:

'Let me tell you,' Grandad whispered, 'there's a monster living in that cupboard...and his name is Ebenezer.'

... 'Ebenezer's hungry. I've to feed him newspapers every day, and other things. What things, Catherine? Scary things, pet. Things we'd rather forget. But do you know what his favourite thing to eat is?'

We shook our heads, and Grandad leaned closer. 'His favourite snack is wee wains from England. So you are not to go playin' in that cupboard again, understand? (2-3)

At first, O'Donnell's tale appears to be a fantastical children's story because it is framed as such through the mesmeric words of Cathy's grandfather. However, its darker, magical realist framework becomes apparent when Cathy encounters the monster Ebenezer. She recalls, 'My hand reached for the cupboard door of its own accord while I watched with the helplessness of nightmares' (6). Cathy feels 'a sudden



dizziness' and her vision becomes altered (6). She states, 'dots of blue danced before my eyes, like the wake of a camera flash. Blue turned to blazing white and then cleared into flickering light-filled images. It was as if the moving pictures were being projected inside my eyelids from an invisible cinema reel. I saw half-remembered faces, and others I had only seen in photographs' (6–7). She experiences a mnemonic transference when she comes into contact with Ebenezer, whose undigested memories emanate from beneath the cupboard door. The force of this transmission leaves Cathy exhausted. She reflects, 'My ears rang, and I kept recalling Grandad's words: "things we'd rather forget." And I gradually began to realise that as well as being a great devourer of newspapers, Ebenezer was a fairly ferocious consumer of unwanted memories too' (8). Nonetheless, when Cathy receives these memories from Ebenezer they are fractured and decontextualised.

The fragmented, magical realist narrative of 'Ebenezer's Memories' counters the flat, unilinear narratives of Northern Ireland broadcast by the news media. Cathy views these unprocessed memories as though they are from 'a cinema reel' or 'photographs,' two documentary modes which have been used historically to package details of the conflict neatly for the consumer. The reportorial format of these modes presents a straightforward realism that asserts the verisimilitude of their accounts. However, when they are taken out of sequence or out of history, they become illegible. Cathy remembers, 'Each winter morning I would watch Grandad... feeding Ebenezer the previous week's *Londonderry Sentinel* or *Derry Journal*' (9). Her grandfather feeds Ebenezer the local news from opposing sectarian viewpoints; for the *Londonderry Sentinel* is unionist-leaning, whilst the *Derry Journal* is nationalist in its political alignment. When Ebenezer transfers bits of the conflicting news reports to Cathy, she states, 'The images and sounds I witnessed were gnarled and broken things, almost impossible to decipher' (8). O'Donnell's magical realist tale enacts an imaginative 'resistance to media narratives of Northern Ireland' that dismantles their reportorial accounts and thus, their authority (Brannigan, 2006: 153).

Ebenezer's hiding place below the stairs resembles a prison, with its brass latch barring the door. It metaphorises the location of the unconscious, where suppressed memories are buried. Cathy realises that Derry is an ideal hiding spot for Ebenezer due to its self-contained nature. She ruminates: 'Stroke City. The City of Bones.

Ebenezer had hidden in every house in this city at one time or another...when the apprentice boys slammed shut those gates, a lot of other things in Derry got slammed shut too' (15). Ebenezer continues to call to Cathy, and on another visit to the cupboard she discovers that her father's death was the result of murder—a fact that her family had kept hidden from the children. She remarks, '[t]hey think my dad stumbled upon "someone up to something" in the docklands that morning. It wasn't a political killing as such; more a chance; a misfortune; an incomplete memory. The details were never uncovered' (20). This revelation emboldens Cathy to visit Ebenezer more frequently and to start asking her family questions about their past.

Towards the end of the tale, Cathy takes pity on the ailing Ebenezer and lifts the latch on the cupboard door. She marvels, 'Poor Ebenezer, it must have been terrible always to be this gassy. One belch and a kneecap shattered. One fart and a petrol bomb exploded across the Foyle. He wanted to leave Grandad's cupboard and breathe his memories back to their owners' (11). The grotesque humour in this passage reflects Cathy's childlike understanding of the ways in which suppressed traumatic memory manifests corporeally. Ebenezer crosses the River Foyle, which splits the city down the middle, and goes unnoticed by the residents. However, once he returns their lost memories the population of Derry experiences a seismic shift. Cathy recounts that '[p]eople paused in their tasks. They looked up, each stunned by a painful recollection long since shed. Some looked over their shoulders, suspecting a supernatural presence, not believing that the human mind could, by itself, conjure such nightmares' (17).

O'Donnell's magical realist narrative portrays 'the supernatural presence' of Ebenezer as a figuration of the living 'nightmare' of the Troubles. She limns Ebenezer as a monstrosity that evolved out of the suppressed memories of the conflict. Furthermore, she implies that the peace process and the Agreement are also implicated in the suppression of traumatic memory. When Cathy describes Ebenezer's journey across Derry, she also lists the chain of events and agents leading up to the current post-Agreement moment. She comments, '[a]s he slid across the Foyle, two men on the river path were talking about the ceasefire. They spoke of Stormont. Decommissioning. Paisley. Adams. Good Friday. They didn't know that the memories that fuelled the conflict were not gone, only buried' (15). This discourse has the effect

of steamrolling memories of the Troubles in the name of 'Progress', and as a result, these memories cannot be processed fully. The fact that Ebenezer skims right by the men while they discuss this sequence of events demonstrates that the present moment is shot through with the horrors of its past. As Cathy notes, 'opting out of the Troubles was never really an option' (20). Similarly, O'Donnell explains of the tale, '[i]t's about how families often have to bury certain memories in order to function on a day-to-day basis, and in order to maintain some sort of equilibrium...Running parallel to the personal story of one individual family is the broader scale narrative of "the Troubles"' (Jeffery & O'Donnell, 2017). The Agreement repackages this narrative of 'the Troubles' in an effort to contain it and relegate it to the past. As Aaron Kelly argues, '[a]lthough the names have changed – from the Troubles to the Peace Process – it is the same rubric of historical enclosure' (2009: 2). Correspondingly, O'Donnell affirms, '[a] fragile peace has existed in the North for the past two decades, but you don't have to scratch far beneath the surface to find old wounds and deep resentment. In my opinion, the conflict has never been really healed, just locked away – like Ebenezer' (Jeffery & O'Donnell, 2017). It is significant that Cathy never sees Ebenezer in the story—as a manifestation of suppressed trauma, he is unknowable. Furthermore, as a monstrous figuration of this trauma, he is unassimilable to post-Agreement Northern society and its normalising narrative of 'Peace'.

### **'Contemporary Uses for a Belfast Box Room'**

Jan Carson is a prolific author of magical realist fiction, with a novel and short story collection in this mode, in addition to numerous stories for literary journals and radio.<sup>6</sup> Her tale 'Contemporary Uses for a Belfast Box Room' from her collection *Children's Children* (2016) is set in the current moment and it does not address the Troubles overtly. However, its portrayal of 'post-conflict' Belfast evokes the city's skeletons in the closet—or in this case, in the box room. The space of the box room echoes the cupboard under the stairs in 'Ebenezer's Memories,' for it also stores disused or unwanted things. The story is divided into three parts whose headings

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Carson cites Aimee Bender, Günter Grass, Brian Moore, and Karen Russell as magical realist influences on her work.

suggest various containment functions for the box room: 'Least-Favourite Child,' 'Storing Poets,' and 'Hobbies.' Carson's characters feed things into the box room as a way to avoid dealing with them directly. Similarly to the cupboard under the stairs in O'Donnell's tale, the box room is also metaphoric of the unconscious. Each mini-narrative within the story depicts a different married couple who believe that the box room in their flat will provide a solution to their problems.

In the first section, a couple grow bored with their firstborn child and debate what to do with it: "[w]hat's the point of it?" they asked, turning the first child backwards and forwards like long division on the living room rug. "It's not particularly bonny. It doesn't speak. It can't even stand up without the assistance of furniture" (Carson, 2016a: 91). They deliberate things that they should have spent their money on instead, namely, 'a boat,' 'en-suite bathrooms and Continental holidays' (92). They call the obstetrician to enquire about returning their firstborn, only to find that 'it was almost impossible to return a child, once opened' (92). Resigned to this fact, '[t]hree weeks after its arrival they gave it a name. Yet, from time to time, rising in the night to fill and empty the child, they could recall neither its given name nor a single significant feature which might set it apart from other more useful household appliances' (92). Here Carson satirises the increasingly homogenised, consumerist landscape of post-Agreement Belfast, which is driven by commodity fetishism. This scenario plays out at the domestic level, as the couple regret that they do not receive a made-to-order child. However, '[w]hen the second child arrived—sky-eyed and abundantly blond, with a keen, Northern wit already peaking—the first child lost its appeal' (91). Dissatisfied with their firstborn's perceived lack of aptitude or likability, 'they moved the first child into the box room and installed the second in the spare bedroom' (93). It is possible to read this segment as allegorising the viewpoint of the current administration towards the city of Belfast before and after the Agreement. The 'least-favourite child' symbolises the Belfast of the past, which they perceive as unattractive, stunted, and culturally 'backwards'. Its unpleasant memory must therefore be hidden away safely, and visitors must only be permitted a cursory glance at it through the dull glass cases of the archive or the museum. In contrast, the second child in the story represents post-Agreement Belfast—the latest model from

a catalogue of 'the postmodern everycity,' which the government showcases proudly for its guests (Kelly, 2005: 109). The new, improved, 'post-conflict' Belfast is framed as a destination for tourists and investors, as the government 'allows entrance for the forces of global capital, which were once held partially at bay by the Troubles' (Graham, 2007: 181). This narrative conveys the phantasmagoric environment of the post-Agreement city, which advertises the illusion of consumer choice and opportunity but which is underwritten by anxiety concerning its outmoded, violent past. The couple ignore their 'Least-Favourite Child' to the point where they forget its name, and Carson's absurdist depiction of their parental negligence allegorises the post-Agreement dispensation's failure to name and take responsibility for the unresolved legacy of the conflict.

The second storyline, 'Storing Poets,' depicts a couple who struggle with the husband's unsuccessful career as an author. He stops calling himself a 'novelist' and a 'writer,' and 'finally could not think of anything to call himself' (Carson, 2016a: 93). He begins to feel threatened by words themselves and wonders whether paper 'could be made to disappear, individual sheets and sentences disintegrating until it was no longer a mountain but rather the ghost of an avalanche, avoided' (94). This subplot parodies the cultural scene in Northern Ireland, which became a marketplace for 'the sprawl of Troubles trash' fiction—whose 'ghost' still haunts writers today (Patten, 1995: 129). The 'avalanche' of bad writing, mainly in the form of sensationalist novels, was an attempt to capitalise on the conflict.<sup>7</sup> For the aspiring writer in Carson's tale, this negative literary legacy leads to an identity crisis:

'Darling,' he said... 'after this weekend I'm going to get a proper job and no longer be a novelist.'

'What about the book?'

... 'There's nothing in it. Nothing worth keeping anyway.'

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<sup>7</sup> Eóin Flannery notes: 'Michael Storey estimates that as many as five hundred novels deal with the cultural geography and the political history of the conflict. While Aaron Kelly suggests that in the region of "four hundred thrillers have been produced over the last thirty-five years in response to the current phase of political upheaval in Northern Ireland."' (See Flannery, E, 2009; cf. Storey, M, 2004 and Kelly, A, 2005: 1).

'But it's enormous,' cried his wife, pointing to the towering stacks of foolscap, like Babel, nestling in all four corners of the dining room. 'We haven't had room for anything else.' (94)

The piles of paper that encroach upon their domestic space metaphorise the glut of bad novels produced about Northern Ireland during the period of the Troubles. When his wife suggests writing poetry, which 'is smaller but still made of words,' he agrees to give it a try: "Throw the novel in the recycling bin," he said with forced bravado, "see if it comes back as a dictionary or something useful. I am a much-diminished man" (95). As Patten argues, the Troubles novel is a medium often 'impoverished by cliché and overkill' (1995: 129). Accordingly, the would-be novelist imagines his inferior manuscript being reprocessed and returning in another form that would actually be 'useful' to the reader.

In need of a new writing spot in which to find inspiration, he locks himself into the box room: 'the space was perfectly adequate for a poet of limited ambition' (95). The husband believes that writing in a restrictive environment will help him to hone his craft. He disappears into the box room, forgoing food and his wife's company. 'On the fifth day,' Carson writes, 'his wife beat the door down...She found him greatly reduced' (95). However, he is also greatly pleased with himself: "[t]he box room helped,' he admitted, flinging his arms as wide as the walls would allow. "There's no room for self-indulgence here" (96). Carson parabolises the creative process and depicts the North as a congested space, both physically and intellectually. Here, it is a small place whose oppressive literary inheritance bears down upon the writer from all sides. 'Storing Poets' is a metanarrative about cultural narrative, and it constitutes an inventive response to the potentially stifling aspects of the literary scene in Northern Ireland. As Cleary maintains, 'cultural narratives about Northern Ireland share much in common with dominant intellectual and academic discourses about that situation' and they have 'helped to sustain a rather similar conception of things on a more popular level' (2003: 108). Carson's magical realist parable undermines misleading narratives about Northern Ireland within contemporary discourse by revealing them to be cultural constructs.

This sense of Northern Ireland's delimited parameters also inflects 'Hobbies,' the final section of Carson's tale. It portrays an older man and his third wife, who are at odds about whether to have children. She would like to start a family, but he is against the idea and decides to take up gardening to avoid spending time with her. When they go flat hunting the estate agent tries to sell them on the merits of a box room, which can be used as 'a great wee space for hobbies,' and the husband jumps at the opportunity:

'Allotments,' he said, with hurtling enthusiasm, 'I've always wanted an allotment but there's a terrible waiting list for the ones down by the embankment. This space would be perfect, don't you think, sweetheart?'

It was a brute lie. All three knew it, but bound by the walls and the thin air staling around them, they would believe any fool thing...

'We'll take it,' he said, and within a week he was ploughing up the carpet, planting carrots and tiny seedling potatoes in perpendicular drills. (Carson, 2016a: 96–97)

He stays hidden away for so long that his sense of identity begins to decompose: 'Upstairs in the box room the walls began to fur. His beard grew out in sympathy. He no longer recognised himself in the bathroom mirror. The plants, sensing his desperation, refused to sprout' (97). He tries a variety of elaborate methods to make the seedlings germinate, but still 'nothing grew' (98). Nothing grows between him and his new wife either due to their mutual estrangement. Still, they try to convince themselves and their friends that they are happy with their 'allotment' in life.

Carson indicates that her characters are 'tottering on the edge...trying to decide whether they want to commit or withdraw' (Robinson & Carson, 2016). This equivocation parallels that of contemporary Northern society, which remains fixed in the current phase of suspension, causing it to question its futurity. Thus the conflict has become internalised, and the story closes with an image of submerged hope. She writes, '[l]ater he would find things buried in the allotment: baby shoes, a teething ring, two dozen nappies still packaged. Holding them to the light he could no longer recall if these sadnesses had been planted or had sprouted unbidden like weeds in

an untended field' (97). As this visualisation suggests, Carson's stories examine the impact of 'post-conflict' space upon successive generations. She states:

I've always been interested in the idea of legacy and inheritance. The phrase 'children's children' is lifted from the Old Testament...this [is] a particularly pertinent theme for contemporary Northern Ireland where, for the last number of decades, (or perhaps even centuries), one generation has inherited the consequences of decisions made by the previous generation. Most of the stories in *Children's Children* are about people wrestling with situations or prevailing structures of belief and behaviour which they've received rather than created. (Robinson and Carson, 2016)

These 'prevailing structures' include 'received' narratives about Northern Ireland which are disseminated via government administrations, the news media, literature, popular culture, and so on. The dual narrative structure of magical realist fiction enables a parallel perspective whereby Carson simultaneously examines 'post-conflict' society at the individual and collective levels. She portrays Northern Ireland as a place that is struggling to grow into itself. She describes her stories as exploring 'the fractured narrative of the place I now call home. I think they're representative of the people who live here in this new, or rather "newish" Northern Ireland' (Carson, 2016b). The segmentarised structure of 'Contemporary Uses for a Belfast Box Room' textualises the 'fractured narrative' of post-Agreement Northern Irish society and the disruptive nature of its traumatic memory.

## Conclusion

Magical realism enables writers to fill in some of the gaps within the Northern Irish literary canon, particularly regarding different understandings of the conflict and its legacy. As Eamonn Hughes observes, contemporary authors are aware of 'the need to locate the Troubles as one strand in a more complex set of stories,' 'realising that there are other [tales] to be told about Northern Ireland' (2001: 88). The magical realist mode problematises dominant narratives about the North such as clichéd fiction, lurid news reports, and the progressivist text of the Agreement. It also questions



what Gary Mitchell terms the 'peace process narrative' (Qtd. in Miles, 2010: 71). Tim Miles describes this metanarrative as 'an ideological construct that presents peace in binary extremes of success or failure' (2010: 71). Magical realist fiction subverts imposed binaristic narratives by complicating the relationship between reality and representation. As O'Donnell observes:

A peculiar paradox I've noticed in my writing is that when my stories are at their 'weirdest' is when they are most true. Perhaps Northern Irish women authors feel that their experiences cannot be adequately represented by the conventional realist mode, and so we have sought out new ways of telling. I've always felt there's something rebellious about magical realism, in its power to disrupt the conventional narrative. (Personal correspondence, 24 May 2017)

In their stories, Carson, McGill, and O'Donnell write against the normalising impulse of the post-Agreement dispensation. For, as Kelly remarks, 'there is a sense in which the Peace Process demands that culture becomes normal – less charged or political – because it supposedly takes place now in a normal society. In other words, it should reconcile itself with what is' (2009: 5). Rather than reconciling itself to an injunctive 'post-conflict' condition, Northern Irish magical realist fiction depicts the structural alterity that this normalising discourse introduces as its obverse. Suppressed traumatic memory re-emerges as the phantasmal, monstrous, fantastical – devices which destabilise post-Agreement teleology.

As critics of contemporary fiction note, the political narrative of the North is 'unresolved' and as a consequence, 'the "post" in post-Agreement...resists both closure and fixity' (Harte and Parker, 2000: 249; Heidemann, 2016: 252). Magical realist texts from Northern Ireland are based on the specific contexts of the Troubles and its aftermath, but their otherwise realistic narrative structures are permeated by intangible elements. As Shane Alcobia-Murphy argues, '[c]ultural responses to the peace process do not tend to obey the imperative to...forget' (2016: 203). The texts studied here are haunted from within; for the language expresses empirically 'impossible' viewpoints, which have been silenced or occluded by the irrepresentability of trauma and by the rationalist rhetoric of the Agreement. Official

post-Agreement discourse systematically suppresses the memory of the violent past in the name of 'Progress.' In response, Carson, McGill, and O'Donnell identify 'the dangers of constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers,' and their magical realist texts portray the 'things we'd rather forget' (Graham, 2007: 180; O'Donnell, 2016: 3). As Carson states:

I have the same collective memories most Northern Irish children ha[d]: ghost-faced soldiers at the border checkpoints; bomb scares in department stores; Land Rovers with their backsides flung open exposing more soldiers, more guns, more grim, young faces; the occasional friend of a friend of a friend, shot or caught up in an explosion. None of this should ever be normal for a child. (2016b)

Nevertheless, these collective experiences became customary for many people and their stories have been transmitted across generations during the Troubles, as well as in the post-Agreement period. Carson reflects, 'I think all Northern Irish writers, whether they're comfortable acknowledging it or not, write against a backdrop of the Troubles. You can't really call this place home and not engage with the situation here in some way' (Henry & Carson, 2016). Accordingly, literary fiction serves as an index of contemporaneous sociopolitical conditions in Northern Ireland. As Stephanie Schwerter contends, '[e]ven after the ceasefire[s] women writers seem[ed] to prefer to engage with the Northern Irish situation in a traditionally realistic way' (2007: 19). The excessive reality of post-Agreement magical realist fiction mirrors the intensity of violent experience, enabling the women authors covered here to work through the traumatic legacy of the conflict.

Magical realism has the capacity to re-imagine the trope of Northern Ireland as 'a place apart' without attempting to resolve its discursive contradictions. By treating the fantastical as if it were a natural occurrence, and by depicting sociopolitical conflict as phantasmal, monstrous, or surreal, these writers blur the boundaries between absence and presence, past and 'post-'. The magical realist mode thereby textualises the diffuse nature of traumatic memory and reorients the reader's habitually linear notions of time, place, and experience. Northern Irish magical realist fiction demonstrates that

violence is uncontainable, and it takes the narrativisation of reality to its extreme in order to represent traumatic events that are in excess of our conventional frame of reference. In doing so, the authors of these texts reactivate the polemical play of difference, traversing binary oppositions within a space of transgression.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Jan Carson, Bernie McGill, and Roisín O'Donnell for corresponding with me about their writing praxes and their views on magical realist fiction. Their responses were characteristically generous, thoughtful, and fascinating, and they have enriched this article significantly.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Sherratt-Bado, D M 2018 'Things We'd Rather Forget': Trauma, the Troubles, and Magical Realism in Post-Agreement Northern Irish Women's Short Stories. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 12, pp. 1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.247>

**Published:** 18 September 2018

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