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# Reanimating the Nation: Patrick McCabe, Neil Jordan, and the Bog Gothic

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# Reanimating the Nation: Patrick McCabe, Neil Jordan, and the Bog Gothic

*Ellen Scheible*

In a rare moment of academic vacationing, I traveled to Princeton University in February 2011 for the opening of the “Cracked Looking Glass” exhibit, an extensive collection of Irish prose ranging from the nineteenth century to today. As part of the symposium for the exhibit, a number of contemporary Irish writers and Irish Studies critics were invited to attend a series of lectures and dinners celebrating the massive private donation that sponsored this rich collection. Those of us who contributed to the catalogue that accompanied the exhibit were asked

to provide brief essays on either specific authors or specialized topics that could inform and loosely contextualize the history and significance of the collection. I provided the entry entitled “The Bog Gothic” and focused on a few contemporary Irish writers and filmmakers, particularly Patrick McCabe and Neil Jordan, who aestheticize the Irish cultural experience through a contemporary gothic lens.

Over the course of the weekend I had the opportunity to meet Patrick McCabe, and the encounter led me to reflect on the overlap of my scholarship and my pedagogy. McCabe yoked together the educator and the writer in me, making manifest one of the many reasons I remain invigorated by contemporary Irish Studies: a split or bifurcated identity can be a cultural and political survival tool rather than an alienating force.

When I first introduced myself to Patrick McCabe, I was unable to stop myself from telling him how much my students love his novels. He looked me in the eye and said, “Why do you think

that’s the case?” Feeling surprised and slightly worried, I spat out, far too quickly and embarrassingly articulately for casual conversation: “Your novels personify the bifurcation of Irish cultural identity in a way that allows the students to identify with your characters on a personal level while maintaining in their minds a larger national and political critique. You have somehow captured the multi-tasking generation’s attention by legitimizing their constant oscillation between various forms of information and representation, both public and private.”

The last evening of the colloquium culminated in the final series of readings from writers who were featured in the Irish prose exhibit. McCabe was one of these writers and he was waiting until the last possible minute to select his reading for the evening because he needed time to decide what excerpt would have the strongest effect based on his perception of the audience. Unsure of what effect he was going for, I assumed we would be barraged by either comedic violence or overt sexual

deviancy. Instead, he read a scene from a recent novel where a female character slyly visits a barbershop and suggestively converses with the barber. It was a discreetly provocative passage with foggy sexual undertones that were reinforced by the mundane, everyday personalities of the characters. I was seated to the side of the podium and what unfolded was strangely surprising, not only because the prose that was almost entirely dialogue toggled carefully between two characters who embodied strong stereotypes of their opposing genders, but also because McCabe physically acted out the parts behind the podium as he read! Most of the audience did not see this, but from the angle of my seat, I watched as he raised his leg at the knee and he shifted his weight to extend one hip out sideways, placing a hand on that same hip, each time his voice rose to emphasize a female octave. I then watched as he relaxed his posture, placed both feet on the floor, and stood back, one hand in his pocket, when he dropped his voice to read the male character’s parts. Although this was subtle, it was a tremendously informative. It helped me articulate what it is about McCabe’s work that eliminates some of the distance between reader and audience while simultaneously presenting absurd, over-the-top, sometimes even supernatural scenarios. His writing, even text that consists only of dialogue, uses language to express and often privilege physical experience, not by describing physical acts, but by emphasizing the body even when the prose is abstract or vague or about everyday small talk like the weather. One of his many talents is his ability to equally represent the body and the mind in his work, but not by collapsing them. Instead, he preserves their separation while unifying the dualism through narrative. Somehow, McCabe’s novels personify competing oppositional forces and use the body to unify them, while defending, sometimes to the point of hostility, their necessary separation.

Gothic fiction is a visceral genre. From the late eighteenth-century work of Ann Radcliffe to Bram Stoker's 1897 masterpiece, *Dracula*, McCabe's novels participate in an historical chain of narrative that is saturated with the dangers and pleasures of physical experience. Since I began teaching gothic fiction, I have found that the human body trumps all other symbols as the most consistent doppelganger for the prominent structures within the common gothic narrative: the aristocratic but decaying house that parallels the interiority of a character's mental decline, the refined but diseased familial bloodline that surfaces in a sickly or incestuous body, or even the dividing religious interpretations of transubstantiation that become personified in the vampire's physical existence. In McCabe's case, the mind/body dualism is a metaphor for the inherent paradox underlying national identity: a unified nation depends on the erasure of personal identity, while individualism resists conformity, thereby evading the forward motion of cultural and national modernity. When McCabe performed his narrative in an instinctual and spontaneous way, I realized that this paradox translates as a physical experience. My students might connect to his texts because they understand what it means to physically experience many things at once, be they technological, visual, or verbal forms of stimulation. Some of these things represent modern progression and others emphasize individual thinking or perception, but they are coexisting forces that characterize both McCabe's fiction and my students' contemporary disintegrated mode of perception.

Although he does not employ the term "bog gothic" directly in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Joe Cleary identifies authors such as Patrick McCabe and filmmakers such as Neil Jordan as producing fiction where "the old naturalism has ... acquired the high voltage of new technical innovations, some new Viagra



Photo by Matt Cashore/University of Notre Dame

of hectic experiment or extravagance, to resuscitate it into some new life or half-life." Cleary's gothic painting of experimental 'resuscitation' for a modern culture is one of many critical approaches to contemporary Irish writing that has birthed, in the fashion of Dr. Frankenstein, the critical attention paid to the gothic fiction of late twentieth-century Ireland. Technical innovation brings with it the 'high voltage' of experimentation and sews together the monstrous invention of a reanimated gothic identity. Just as Dr. Frankenstein gives birth to an undead being in a skewed creation narrative that imagines the disastrous effects of scientific power, Patrick McCabe, in *Breakfast on Pluto*, invents Patrick "Pussy" Braden, a transgendered character who is born just

south of the border between Northern Ireland and the republic.

*Breakfast on Pluto* is not McCabe's most popular novel, but it is the text that most explicitly engages partition as a central force in its otherwise overly personal, first-person adaptation of a transgendered *bildungsroman*. McCabe has written numerous texts that confront the dualistic components of Irish identity, but in *Breakfast on Pluto* McCabe joins, on the landscape of the transgendered body, the interiority of the self with the physical otherness that disallows that self from locating its point of origin. Pussy imagines the sexual interaction that led to her conception but cannot ever uncover the reality of her birth. Just as Pussy will never be traditionally male or

female, partitioned Ireland must accept the coexistence of two nations on one geographical location. In Pussy's imagined memoir, the parish priest, Father Bernard, Pussy's unidentified biological father, rapes his young, extremely naïve, female housekeeper who consequently gives birth to Pussy and thus creates the unconfirmed story that comprises the majority of the novel:

A first, she really was one hundred per cent certain that it was a joke [...] Which made her go: 'oh now, Father!' and 'Eek!' and 'Oops! That hurt!' until all of a sudden she cried: 'Ow! I'm being split in two!' and there was so much squirty stuff all down her she thought that maybe Father Ben was playing more games—squidgies with the Fairy Liquid washing-up bottle that she'd often seen the kiddies doing. It was only when he fell back across the room with a Hallowe'en mask on him that she really became confused, thinking to herself: 'But it's not Hallowe'en!' How long it was before she realized that it was in fact her Employer's actual face she was looking at—and not a whey-coloured Egyptian mummy-type papier mache affair—is impossible to say but she eventually did, realizing too that the Fairy Liquid—it wasn't Fairy Liquid at all! And that thing—that glaring red thing with its malevolent eye—what was that?

The housekeeper's pronouncement that she is 'being split in two' becomes the metaphor for Pussy's struggle throughout the narrative. Pussy is not conceived from a unifying sexual act and, thus, enters the world with a literal 'split' identity; her transgender status is presupposed and thus inevitable. The housekeeper's difficulty in distinguishing the reality of her experience from the superficial illusions of game-playing and 'Halloween' further underscore the body's detachment from the mind's conceptions. Pussy's origins are multifaceted before she even emerges from

the womb; partition in Ireland might be an unavoidable natural creation, but it is birthed from the ideologically hybridized relationship between sexual repression and religious power.

Neil Jordan has adapted into film Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto*, but Jordan is best known for *The Crying Game*, a 1992 film. Similar to McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*, Jordan's film also tells the story of a transgendered character, "Dil," whose life is threatened after her boyfriend, Jody, is killed by the IRA in Northern Ireland and one of the IRA members responsible for his death guiltily seeks her out in an act of penance. Fergus, or 'Jimmy' as he renames himself when he gets to England, tries to protect Dil but ends up falling in love with her and consequently trapping himself in an almost fatal confrontation with his former IRA compatriots. Dil and Fergus both survive, but their relationship remains sexually ambiguous. Similar to McCabe's novels, Jordan's films combine violence, disorientation, and humor to underscore both the anxiety and trauma that produce what literary critic Enda Duffy has called the "viral discourse" of the Bog Gothic. Duffy identifies mimeticism as one of the defining features of Bog Gothic fiction, where the strangeness of the texts develops a rhythm mirroring material reality. Although contemporary Irish criticism may never resolve either the discordant analyses of modernity in Ireland or the Irish literary interpretation of the Bog Gothic genre, Irish prose continues to transform and reanimate an undead, gothic tradition capable of articulating the simultaneity of the Irish condition.

There are two specific scenes in *The Crying Game* that emphasize the dualistic tension illustrated compellingly in McCabe's novels and further emphasized in Jordan's films. The first scene occurs in the first half of the film, when we see Fergus conversing with his prisoner, Jody, before Jody is killed while trying to escape. The 'scorpion and the

frog' fable that comprises this scene emphasizes the dual but separate connection between natural instinct and social desire; Jody tries to convince Fergus that both good and evil are natural behaviors and some are just better at controlling their impulses. This theme is then physically enacted in a separate scene where Fergus must hold Jody's penis, so that the shackled and hooded Jody can urinate. Like McCabe, Jordan unifies the film's separated identities through a basic physical need. The second scene takes place much later in the film and, though short in length, expresses Jordan's concern with identity that cannot exist as a partitioned whole, but rather must move from one extreme to the other. The main female character in *The Crying Game*, Jude, who passes for a traditional Irish woman who supports the IRA in the first half of the film, has been transformed to a gun-carrying, violent terrorist by the second half. However, her split identity is a forced illusion, not an organic separation, and Jordan emphasizes its unrealistic existence by reflecting multiple images of Jude in a prism-like mirror; nationalist-terrorist Jude is herself inescapably split. And, of course, she does not survive the end of the film. In both McCabe's novel and Jordan's film, the characters who do survive are transgendered men who live as women. Seeing Patrick McCabe perform the bifurcated self in his reading at Princeton helped me understand more clearly the resonance that the Bog Gothic and the notion of split identities (national and sexual) has for my students at Bridgewater State.



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