

The Child Sex Scandal in Ireland — A Remote Past?

Aleksandra Sadowska

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Aleksandra.Sadowska@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable by Joseph Valente and Margot Gayle Backus uses the concept of the 'enigmatic signifier' to scrutinize the portrayals of children's traumatic first sexual experiences in modern Irish literature. It is a daring and unapologetic book that investigates both the private and collective reactions to pedophilia and argues for literature's superiority over the press in dealing with traumatic experiences.

Der Kindesmissbrauchsskandal in Irland — eine ferne Vergangenheit?

German Abstract:

The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable von Joseph Valente und Margot Gayle Backus macht sich die Idee des 'rätselhaften Signifikanten' zu nutzen, um die Darstellung traumatischer erster sexueller Erfahrungen in der modernen irischen Literatur zu untersuchen. Es ist ein mutiges und unverblümtes Buch, das sowohl private als auch kollektive Reaktionen auf Pädophilie untersucht und für die Überlegenheit der Literatur gegenüber den Medien bei der Verarbeitung traumatischer Erfahrungen plädiert.

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International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Valente, Joseph and Margot Gayle Backus. *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature. Writing the Unspeakable*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020. 300 pages, 28 USD. ISBN 978-0-253-05318-3.

From the very first pages of their book, *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable*, Joseph Valente and Margot Gayle Backus, renowned professors and experts investigating the topic of sexuality in Irish literature, do not shy away from touching on controversial issues and raising challenging questions. They ask, for instance, “why are the lives of so many children as precarious as ever?” (p. xv). In their book, the authors make clear that media attention, public outcry, and political discussions about so-called child sex scandals “only reaffirm rather than challenge a society’s complacent belief in its collective commitment to children and their welfare” (p. xvi), without taking effective precautions to ensure children’s well-being. *Writing the Unspeakable* scrutinizes the portrayals of children’s traumatic first sexual experiences in modern Irish literature and argues for literature’s superiority over the press in dealing with traumatic experiences. The study makes use of psychoanalytic tools, most importantly ‘the enigmatic signifier’ — a concept developed by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche — which the authors define as a “psychic blind spot incurred in a child’s traumatic encounter with adult sexuality” (p. 3). In other words, the concept describes a child’s inability to recognize and, as a result, discard or integrate what s/he has seen or been subjected to.

In the foreword, Fintan O’Toole, an acclaimed journalist for *The Irish Times*, emphasizes the book’s significance for ongoing debates in the Republic of Ireland and sides with the authors in their quest “not merely to interpret the cruelty, exploitation, and trauma” but to “change the society that colludes in them” (p. xvi). The preface and introduction position the scandals within a broader socio-political context by providing a brief but well-researched historical overview of the most infamous cases concerning pedophilia and the press’s misuse of the scandals for political and religious purposes. In their book, Valente and Backus juxtapose what they regard

as self-serving media coverage of this subject with “the crucial function” of literary works “to perform in confronting, interrogating, and dissecting the psychosocial complexities of Ireland’s child sex scandal culture” (p. 31).

The first five chapters of *Writing the Unspeakable* analyze different portrayals of sexuality, social approach to this matter, and the usage of the ‘enigmatic signifier’ in five contemporary works by James Joyce, Kate O’Brien, Edna O’Brien, Keith Ridgway, and Tana French. The authors also do not limit their investigation to the fictional characters but extend their analysis to consider what effects depicted sexuality has on the readers. In the first chapter of the book, the authors further elucidate Laplanche’s approach and proceed to investigate James Joyce’s works. They inspect the initiation of a child into sex, politics, and the Catholic Church’s doctrine, which are firmly interrelated in Joyce’s works. In the second chapter, the authors investigate society’s approach towards atypical sexual activities in Irish communities, as depicted in O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices*. Valente and Backus also engage in a dialogue with other critics who debate the book’s possible queerness. The authors use psychoanalysis to detect homosexual elements and deeper desires driving the main characters’ actions. Chapter three engages in a discussion about the eroticization of girls in the Irish countryside as presented in Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girl*. In this chapter, the authors argue that the “normalized predatory accumulation deflects and obscures the more dissident or queer aspects of Caithleen’s sexual disposition, long overlooked in the readings of this bildungsroman” (p. xx). Chapter four closely inspects the use of Case X, an infamous case of a child who was not permitted to terminate her pregnancy resulting from her rape, in Keith Ridgway’s novel *The Long Falling*. For Valente and Backus “Girl X is [...] the public enigmatic signifier of scandal’s cultural and sociopolitical economy” (p. 135). Chapter Five examines the “psychopathology in everyday Irish life” (p. xx) in Tana French’s *In the Woods*. The authors utilize the term ‘selective forgetting’ coined by Ernest Renan and analyze how revived memories can disrupt the status quo. Basing their analysis on the behavior of a psychopath depicted in the novel, the authors also argue that society’s self-preservation techniques can be used against it.

The sixth chapter is undoubtedly the high point of the book. The authors argue that the criticism of Edna O’Brien’s *The Gathering*, which is largely based on the theoretical framework of trauma studies developed by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, is replicating the same theses and missing several interpretations. Valente and Backus’ use of

psychoanalytic theory and thorough close reading complements earlier readings of the novel and presents a new and unique perspective. They reflect on the implications posed by the unexplored chronology of the novel, the dynamics between characters, and explore the “conscripted of traumatic sexuality” (p. 224). In the closing subsection of the chapter, the authors reflect upon ‘reproductive futurism,’ a term coined by queer studies scholar Lee Edelman, as depicted in O’Brien’s novel. According to the authors, an element that points to a happy ending does not foreshadow a positive resolution, on the contrary, it closes one circle of abuse and opens another one. In the epilogue, Valente and Backus juxtapose the representation of the mentally ill and underage victims of sexual abuse in O’Brien’s book and media. They argue that abused children get more attention than mentally ill people because their suffering happens at home, not in isolated institutions, and because the community cannot distance itself from their tragedies. As a result, the authors draw the reader’s attention to Michael Rothberg’s concepts of ‘competitive memory’ and ‘multimodal memory’ that point to the expression of ‘collective memory’ seen as, respectively, “a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers” and as “a subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (Michael Rothberg: *Multidirectional Memory*. Stanford, CA. 2009, p. 3). By doing so, the authors, instead of ending the book, open a new discussion and point to the complex patterns that are still to be explored in Irish history, culture, and literature.

The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable is not a neutral book — and it should not be such. However, readers might find the use of sarcasm in a few places rather disturbing. An example of this is a mocking remark about the Irish Catholic Church; Valente and Backus write “[the Church] eventually accumulated more than enough rope to hang themselves in the eyes of an appalled, if unconsciously complicit, Irish public” (p. 21). Moreover, despite the overall strong arguments presented in the book, a few instances of close reading where the authors argue that isolated words conjure up sexual associations prove too convoluted and fail to convince the reader of their adequacy. The authors exemplify a mastery in operating within a psychoanalytical framework, and the analysis of source materials through this framework is well done and easy to follow. However, the theoretical parts at the beginning of each chapter, which are based amongst others on the works of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Jean Laplanche may be quite challenging for a reader not well-versed in psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, those few shortcomings do not substantially affect the reception

or limit the significance of this book. *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable* is a daring and unapologetic book. Moreover, it is also a much-needed addition to the research corpus. Despite the fact that the topic is of vital importance to both Irish literature and culture, the portrayal of pedophilia in Irish novels has not been scrutinized so thoroughly before. Therefore, this book is a must-read for all scholars working within the area of Irish studies.