

Carregal, José. *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction*. University College Dublin Press, 2021. 218 pages.

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Ambitious in its scope, José Carregal's *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction* is the first comprehensive study devoted to gay and lesbian-themed fiction published in Ireland since the 1970s. While there have been publications in the growing field of Irish Queer Studies, such as the contributions of prominent scholars like Anne Mulhall, Michael G. Cronin, Eibhear Walshe or Fintan Walsh, *Queer Whispers* is the first book-length study that covers the wide range of topics explored in the last four decades.

The volume makes a magnificent effort of unearthing an extensive selection of literary texts—specifically, twenty-four novels and eleven short stories—whose authors “challenged the public language of homophobia and heterosexism” (1), thus giving voice to the experiences of gays and lesbians “against a background of non-recognition and silence” (2).

Silence is indeed one of the overriding themes in the book, which shows a deep interest in the mechanisms that have shaped the public perception and recognition of homosexuals in Ireland. Invoking the thinkers Michel Foucault and Robin Patric Clair, the author conceptualises silence as parallel to language in the task of “creat[ing] and recreat[ing] our social realities” (Clair, in Carregal 2), manifesting itself in “the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name” (Foucault, in Carregal 2). Thus, while the dominant public discourse in Ireland would traditionally be conflated with Catholic values of “prudery and chastity” as well as with an “idealisation of the nuclear family, [and] enforced Victorian values on domesticity, social respectability, the body, and sexuality” (3), silence was imposed on individuals whose sole existence challenged these principles, delegitimising their experiences and “relegat[ing them] to secrecy” (3). Carregal argues that this long-lasting silencing process resulted in a lack of a proper language to be found in public discourse to articulate the experiences, identities and desires of queer people. In spite of that, the works and authors covered

in *Queer Whispers* subverted this imposition and produce an invaluable account of the struggles of gay and lesbian people that “articulate[s] a new language of resilience and recognition” (2).

To understand how subversive and valuable those works are, Carregal pays special attention to the social contexts in which they were produced, dedicating part of the introduction to the history of gay and lesbian life in Ireland from the 1970s to the 2010s. The author explores the social attitudes towards homosexuality, starting from the “silence and stigma” (4) that preceded the creation of the Irish State and prevailed up until the 1970s, when the staunch Catholicism that predominated in the public discourse began to be slowly challenged by the “advancement of a language of feminism and sexual rights” (4). Strongly inspired by Judith Butler’s ideas on vulnerability and resistance, Carregal goes on to address the combative history of LGBTI+ activism in Ireland, as well as the contradictions and prevalent silences within a general shift towards acceptance and recognition in the 1990s. Given that *Queer Whispers* spans four decades of published novels and short stories, Carregal’s volume manages to trace the evolution of the social attitudes and public discourse around homosexuals since the times in which a “conservative, censorious Catholic ideology” (161) reigned to the liberalisation of Irish society since gay decriminalisation in 1993, after which gay and lesbian voices began to be finally recognised. The author acknowledges the importance of reconstructing the history of the cultural contributions of authors that “articulat[ed] a new language to understand gay and lesbian experiences” (161), thus challenging and resisting “cultural invisibility and heteronormativity” (162) in a time when the words to name homosexual desire did not even exist.

One could argue that the ambition to reconstruct gay and lesbian history as well as the overarching focus on silence and language are the common threads that unite the otherwise very diverse novels and short stories that Carregal’s volume analyses. The book comprises eight chapters that deal with very varied topics, in an attempt to “valorise the richness and diversity of the writings of gay and lesbian lives in Ireland” (13). Chapter 1 explores four novels that depict the isolation and vulnerability of lesbians in the 1980s and 1990s, namely Maura Richards’s *Interlude* (1982), Linda Cullen’s *The Kiss* (1990), Edna O’Brien’s *The High Road* (1988), and Pádraig Standún’s *A Woman’s Love*

(1994). The author examines how these novels “promote a language of lesbian love” (33) in a time “when lesbianism remained largely invisible in Irish society” (33), and when the social constraints prevent the characters from living their lesbianism freely.

In contrast to such a depiction of lesbianism, which did not provide models of resistance, Chapter 2 addresses Mary Dorcey’s lesbian-themed narrative from the perspective of its feminist politics, arguing that characters undergo a “personal transformation” once they “unlearn the patriarchal stereotypes about women” (35) and engage in “the joys and rebelliousness of lesbianism” (36). Thus, in an Ireland where “there was no public language from which to reclaim the equality of same-sex love” (34), these characters, Carregal posits, provide a very necessary positive representation of lesbianism that “politically empower[s]” (36) and “reverse[s] damaging stereotypes of lesbians” (36).

Chapter 3 engages with a completely different topic, namely the subculture of ‘cruising’, and presents four short stories—Keith Ridgway’s “Graffiti” (1994), Eamon Sommer’s “Natái Bocht” (1994), Michéal O’Conghaile’s “At the Station” (2012), and Joseph O’Connor’s “The Hills are Alive” (1992)—that “defy the public language of cruising as morally degrading” (60), exposing the complexities of this “subterranean sexual world” (51).

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the Irish gay coming-out novel, examining the ways in which the five novels analysed—Desmond Hogan’s *The Ikon Maker* (1976), Damien McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004), Tom Lennon’s *When Love Comes to Town* (1993), and Jarlath Gregory’s *Snapshots* (2001) *G.A.A.Y.: One Hundred Ways to Love a Beautiful Loser* (2005)—explore “how the dominant language of masculinity increases the vulnerability and damages the emotional development of the young gay protagonists” (80), and attest to the “changing sexual morality in Ireland and Northern Ireland, from the 1970s to the early 2000s” and the “evolving story of LGBTI+ social liberation” (81).

Chapter 5 addresses the cultural narratives of AIDS in Irish fiction, including the persistent demonisation of HIV-positive people in two short stories and three novels, namely Michéal O’Conghaile’s “Lost in Connemara” (2012), Keith Ridgway’s “Andy Warhol” (2018), Anne

Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), Desmond Hogan's *A Farewell to Prague* (1995), and Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999).

Chapter 6 is devoted to Emma Donoghue's contemporary-set lesbian novels—*Stir-fry* (1995), *Hood* (1995), and *Landing* (2007)—, focusing on “the notions of silence and (in)visibility surrounding lesbian life” (102) as well as “the tensions between the feminist and liberal ideologies within a lesbian subculture” (117) that they dramatise.

Chapter 7 also concentrates on more contemporary times, specifically Celtic Tiger Ireland (1990s–2008) and its representation of gay men, which, as Carregal explains, “promoted notions of personal fulfilment and social progress that were clearly connected with the lifestyle principles of liberal capitalism” (15). To do so, the author selects a number of works—Tom Lennon's *Crazy Love* (1999), Belinda McKeon's *Tender* (2015), Colm Tóibín's “The Pearl Fishers” (2010), Ridgway's *The Long Falling* (1998), “Angelo” (2001) and “The Parts” (2003), and Frank McGuinness's “Chocolate and Oranges” (2018)—that challenge the Celtic Tiger's “celebratory, modern icon of gay life” (118), which equated gay men with a new, prosperous and modern Ireland while obscuring widening class differences and silencing the ongoing marginalisation and stigmatisation of LGBTI+ people in the post-Catholic era.

Finally, Chapter 8 is devoted to four historical novels that, unlike the previous gay and lesbian-themed works, which focused on present-day experiences, choose to “offer a revision of the past that epitomises the growing recognition and valorisation of gay and lesbian experiences in contemporary Ireland” (160). Those novels are Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), Emma Donoghue's *Life Mask* (2004), Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End* (2016), and John Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2017). The author explains how these narratives, set in the past, serve to “provide meaningful commentaries on the contemporary moment” (142). In addition, invoking Colm Tóibín's words, the author argues that these novels allow for a cultural revision that “constructs a sense of history” which uncovers the “thin faint line that connects [homosexuals] with those of earlier generations” (Tóibín, in Carregal, 160).

All in all, Carregal's analysis manages to produce a “sense of history” in an indispensable volume which traces the diverse works of gay and lesbian fiction authors that bravely challenged the censorious sexual

norms of Catholic culture and later navigated the contradictions of a more liberal Ireland. Despite dealing with extremely diverse accounts of the same social phenomenon, Carregal manages to deliver an innovative, cohesive and comprehensive study of the articulation of gay and lesbian experiences in Irish fiction in the last four decades thanks to the author's in-depth exploration of silence and the language of resistance in the stories and novels analysed. Moreover, the author's well-informed critical endeavour not only helps in piecing together various fragmented and subversive accounts of gay and lesbian experience in Ireland, but also pushes a door open for further discussion and work on the construction of a queer story of Ireland that is long overdue.

Acknowledgements

This publication is part of the research funded by the Project INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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