



RIGHT TO READ

Dani **Green**
with
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Reframing Critique:

Young Adult Fiction and the Politics of Literary Censorship in Ireland

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If you briefly peruse the American Library Association's annual compilation of the "Top Ten Most Frequently Challenged Books," it would not be farfetched for you to assume that censorship is an act that is nearly exclusive to children's and young adult (YA) literature. The complex and close relationship between informational suppression and YA fiction should come as no surprise—authority figures and institutions often want to "protect" children and adolescents from ideas and depictions of realities that they consider harmful. At times, these parental and institutional forces outright question teenagers' competence when it comes to comprehending and thinking through difficult social and literary issues. While YA literature is often susceptible to acts of censorship, is it possible that the very literary traits of this genre might provide us with the critical tools needed to counteract the suppression of information and ideas? To what extent do YA novels articulate ideas and critiques that other genres of literature refuse (or are unable) to discuss?

This issue of *The ALAN Review* is particularly invested in expanding our understanding of YA literature by exploring the stories that can or cannot be told in different contexts, communities, and locations. While an understanding of the acts of censorship that occur in a US context offers us a glimpse into the ten-

sions that arise between ideas, publishers, and target audiences, an examination of censorship in non-US contexts allows us to further understand the historical and cultural foundations that lead to the institutional suppression of knowledge. Additionally, a more global understanding of these issues could push us to understand the ways in which YA fiction thwarts censorship in surprising, unexpected ways. To nuance our understanding of censorship by adopting a more global perspective, I have collaborated with my friend and colleague Dani Green, who offers us an account of contemporary acts of censorship in Ireland and the ways in which Irish YA literature is particularly suited to express ideas that are deemed unspeakable and unprintable.

Dani is a scholar of 19th-century British and Irish literature with an interest in issues of modernity, space, and narrative. As an academic who specializes in both historicist and poststructuralist study, Dani is particularly suited to think through the fraught historical and literary situation of contemporary Ireland and the ways in which YA fiction escapes (and perhaps challenges) the pressures of nationalistic censorship and self-censorship. In the following column, she provides us with a brief overview of the past and present state of censorship in Ireland, focusing particularly on how contemporary Irish writers steer away from offering critiques of Ireland's economic growth during the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. After sharing this historical context, Dani conducts a case study in which she focuses on how Kate Thompson's YA novel *The New Policeman* (2005) blends elements from fantasy and Irish mythology to both communicate and critique

Ireland's economic boom. By taking advantage of elements commonly found in YA texts, she argues that Thompson's *The New Policeman* enables a cultural critique that is often impossible to achieve in other forms of Irish literature. Dani ultimately highlights the potential of YA fiction to turn censorship on its head through its characteristic implementation of genre-bending, formal experimentation, and disruption of the familiar.

Young Adult Fiction and Censorship in the Irish Literary Landscape:

The Case of Thompson's *The New Policeman*
Dani Green

While YA fiction does not conform to any one genre apart from that which accords it an assumed audience, there are several with which it is associated, including historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy. As Smith (2007) points out, "[T]he best YA fiction often defies classification," thus associating young adult fiction with innovations in what he terms "genre bending" (p. 43). If YA fiction is characterized by radical work with genre, arguably a conservative system of potentially limiting codes and conventions, what radical agendas might YA fiction support in terms of content? And how might an interrogation into the politics of YA fiction help us understand the relationship between YA fiction and censorship, which is the focus of this column?

In this installment of "Right to Read," I explore these questions through Thompson's 2005 Irish YA novel, *The New Policeman*, a text that arguably deploys several genres, but especially fantasy. Thompson's novel was published during a period that economists and historians call the "Celtic Tiger," referring to the unprecedented economic boom that Ireland experienced from approximately 1995–2008.¹ Fueled by globalization and technological revolution, the Celtic Tiger saw Ireland transform from one of the poorest western European countries into one with a robust economy with international stakes. Economists rushed to examine and discuss Ireland's newfound prosperity, but its fiction writers remained notoriously silent about the country's changing fortunes. *The New Policeman*, however, was not shy about addressing the present moment.

Set in Kinvara, a small seacoast village in County Galway, Ireland, the novel follows 15-year-old J. J. Liddy in his quest to buy time for his mother in a world that seems to be constantly short of it. The search takes J. J. through a souterrain, or fairy mound, to Tír na n'Óg, the fairy land populated by the legendary Tuatha Dé Danann.² There he discovers a time leak sustained by the belligerent Father Doherty, who J. J.'s great-grandfather had been accused of murdering decades earlier.

While J. J.'s adventure is one of personal discovery as he comes to terms with his musical talents and explores his family history, the plot is couched within an appraisal of present-day Ireland that critiques the pitfalls of technological innovation, the housing boom, and the European Union. Thompson's engagement is quite distinctive, given the notable silence of Irish authors or authors writing about Ireland, and suggests that YA fiction is especially suited to social critique.

In the remainder of this discussion, I explore the ways that YA fiction could address Ireland's contemporary position and offer opposing viewpoints on its economic prosperity. I argue that *The New Policeman* demonstrates how literature for younger audiences is uniquely equipped to deal with some of the controversial topics of the present, particularly in a country like Ireland, which experienced decades of censorship laws influenced by a conservative Catholic culture and a staunch sense of nationalism. I will first briefly explore Ireland's history of censorship and suggest that an unofficial censorship dominates in the present, resulting in a reluctance, unconscious or otherwise, to represent the present, especially in critical terms. I then explore how *The New Policeman* navigates this dilemma through the freedoms that YA fiction and fantasy afford. I suggest that these affordances—a term I borrow from Levine and will define below—enable YA fiction to mobilize cultural critiques in ways that other literatures do not.

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Censorship in Ireland: Past and Present

Ireland was generally wary of offering negative speculation on the economy during the Celtic Tiger, and just two years after *The New Policeman* was published, economist Morgan Kelly was met with skepticism when he predicted that the economy would fail. Indeed, several newspapers declined to publish his prediction that the housing boom could not sustain itself, and the head of Kelly's department at University College Dublin was

even asked to find someone to write "a learned piece" refuting his claims. The negative response to Kelly's prediction seemed to stem from the idea that "a positive outlook on real estate prices" translated into "a love of country and a commitment to Team Ireland" (Lewis, 2011, p. 95). In other words, to

offer an unpleasant view of Ireland's economy was to be unpatriotic, and an unofficial censorship apparatus sprung up in defense of the status quo.

Of course, official censorship has a decades-long history in Ireland, which established several laws early on in its existence. Throughout the first few decades of the 20th century, several groups and organizations campaigned for censorship on moral grounds. These campaigns resulted in the Censorship of Films Act (1923; see <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/act/23/enacted/en/html>) and the Censorship of Publications Act (1929; see <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1929/act/21/enacted/en/html>), which were passed shortly after Ireland earned independence and dominion status in December 1922. Both acts installed a formal apparatus for reviewing and prohibiting films, books, and periodicals on the basis of moral and ethical concerns, mainly having to do with birth control, abortion, and sexuality (Ó Drisceoil, 2005, pp. 146–147). Moreover, this clearly Catholic morality was highly inflected by nationalist concerns. In his important work on the topic, Adams (1968) writes, "[U]ndoubtedly, nationalistic motives were involved—the idea of self-sufficiency, and dismay at the fact that most of the reading matter bought in the new State was written for an English public. . . . And

now that the country was self-governing it was in a position to control that flood [from England] by legislative action on its own account" (pp. 16–17). In other words, passing these bills offered some satisfaction to the Irish as they defined their national ethos over and against England's by way of their Catholic faith.³

While censorship laws have certainly been relaxed and bans undone, the nationalist character that drove them into existence continues to persist in a way. The remains of this nationalism may be seen to linger in the country's reluctance to admit that its economic prosperity would not last. As Maher (2014) suggests, "[D]uring the Celtic Tiger years, the majority of Irish people were undeniably in favor of 'maximum gain within the economy,' believing, mistakenly, that 'a rising tide lifts all boats'" (p. 19). This stubborn belief in the economy's ability to improve and benefit Ireland on all levels and in all areas led "to the silencing of dissenting voices, especially those who expressed reservations in relation to the direction the country was headed. It was viewed as heresy to question the dominant view of the political class that the good times would roll on forever, that Ireland had finally assumed its place at the top table of wealthy nations and would continue to stay there" (p. 20). Maher's observation suggests that an unofficial censorship operated within the context of Ireland's economic boom, with dissenting voices silenced by a louder and more intense optimism for the country's future. With a long history of poverty and economic distress, criticisms of the Celtic Tiger and evidence of a potential economic downturn were not what the country wanted to hear.

Maher's use of the word "heresy" links the unofficial censorship he describes with Ireland's history of religiously inflected official censorship and brings us back to literature. While the country's literary production remained as strong as ever, the content of Irish fiction seemed to reject explicit engagement with Ireland's present moment, and much of the work turned out by the country's most celebrated authors during the years of the Celtic Tiger found their settings in the mid-20th century. For instance, Kiberd (2005) observes that the current generation of writers was reluctant to take up the "rich pickings" that an era of "such a profound social change" had to offer. Instead, "there [was] no major celebration or corrosive criticism of these developments in good novels, plays or

poetry,” and writers seemed to be setting their work in “a period at some remove from the present” (p. 276).

Several years after Kiberd made his observations, Gough (2010) posted a heated complaint about the state of the contemporary Irish novel on his blog, in which he compares Irish novelists to the clergy of a theocratic Ireland. Gough suggests that writers did not just simply ignore present conditions, but produced moralizing, didactic literature. But Gough was not taking “genre fiction” into account; chick lit, YA novels, and crime fiction—the last of which O’Toole remarked did “a good job of depicting Ireland’s ‘globalised culture’”—continued to cultivate present-day representations (as cited in Prospero, 2011). Why is this the case?

The Politics of Genre: YA Fiction, Fantasy, and *The New Policeman*

Kiberd suggests that, more so than literary fiction, children’s and young adult literature exists in a less pressured space, wherein writers are much freer to do the slightly daring, or even say the unspeakable, in a form that tends not to be taken as seriously as other literary genres (Kiberd, personal communication, November 4, 2015).⁴ YA fiction’s lack of legitimacy is a concern for scholars and teachers who study and teach novels that are subjected to “considerable efforts to discount the works as merely genre fiction” (Garcia, 2013, p. xi). But in Kiberd’s conception of it, YA fiction’s status as “merely genre fiction” enables a type of radical politics, in the sense that the challenges it poses to the status quo might go unremarked even as it influences generations of people. For example, Gierzynski and Eddy (2013) find that the Harry Potter series has had a measurable impact on the politics of the “Millennial Generation,” which they characterize as accepting, tolerant, nonviolent, and supportive of equality—in short, liberal (p. 6). While these politics might not be precisely “radical,” they are radical in the sense that they pose a challenge to accepted or traditional social norms. But a radical politics need not simply extend to a book’s content; it can also happen through form. Indeed, what I want to suggest here is that YA fiction’s openness to genre bending, to recall Smith, evinces a type of radical politics that can be useful at times and in places where censorship—official or unofficial—might predominate.

As Levine’s recent contributions to literary theory demonstrate, genres (or forms) have certain affordances, a term she borrows from design theory that “describe[s] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (Levine, 2015, p. 6), and by deploying multiple forms, we give ourselves the best chance of making up for one form’s possible deficiencies (Levine, 2016). I focus here on the affordances the fantasy genre offers *The New Policeman* as an Irish YA novel. Hunt and Lenz (2001) propose that “it is not surprising that fantasy and children’s literature have been associated with each other, because both are essentially democratic forms—democratized by being outside the solipsistic system of high culture” (p. 3). Therefore, while fantasy is not specific to YA and there are many “adult” fantasy novels, fantasy and YA literature amplify one another’s democratic impulses and allow Thompson to produce a text that is both familiar yet defamiliarizing in its representation of Ireland. In other words, Thompson produces a text that invites a kind of double-reading because it juxtaposes reality and fantasy.

This juxtaposition does not mean that reality and fantasy are mutually exclusive, however, and indeed the double-ness of *The New Policeman*’s world(s) is part of its mode of critique. “One thing that can rarely be said of fantasy,” Hunt and Lenz argue, “is that it has nothing to do with reality” (p. 2). Moreover, “[T]he assumption that fantasy is childish because you may not need to know much about this world in order to read about an invented one overlooks the obvious fact that knowledge of this world is necessary to *invent* one. . . . [A]lternative worlds must *necessarily* be related to, and comment on, the real world” (p. 7).

In *The New Policeman*, Thompson does not precisely invent a world because she draws on Irish

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mythology and folklore as source material, but the effects are comparable. As I mentioned earlier, Tír na n'Óg is the mythical land of youth occupied by the Tuatha Dé Danann, and this fantasy world functions in concert with the real world, rendering the relationship between reality and fantasy as symbiotic. This symbiosis allows the differing contexts of each world to defamiliarize and inform one another, ultimately leaving the reader with a renewed sense of the Celtic Tiger deficiencies Thompson wants to highlight.

YA's practice of "genre bending"—its willingness to include and occupy a variety of forms—is a democratic impulse in itself, but it also allows for a process of defamiliarization that permits readers to approach potentially disagreeable topics with a different, more open, frame of mind.

Defamiliarization thus allows Thompson to posit a critique of the Celtic Tiger by presenting a familiar situation in an unfamiliar way, allowing us to see our world from a different perspective by merging it with that of the mythical fairy world. In the case of *The New Policeman*, this is augmented through fantasy, which affords the maintenance of a physical link between real and imagined worlds. Though the fairies closed the sky and sea gates as soon as people learned to fly and build submarines (pp. 269–270), the supposed boundaries between the real and the fantastic remain blurry and, well, leaky. This leakiness is both the novel's major

conflict (time is leaking into the timeless fairy world from the real world) and what enables a critique of what Thompson frames as the real-world conflict produced by the Celtic Tiger: despite time-saving devices and machines, people (literally) do not have enough time to enjoy life, and this has upset the fabric of the world in a material way.

The biggest disruption to this fabric is the leak produced and maintained by Father Doherty, who has lodged J. J.'s great-grandfather's flute into the time skin to destroy the fairy world and its link to Irish culture. Because the priest holds music and mythol-

ogy in tension with modernity and progress in his confrontation with J. J., Thompson makes an explicit value judgment by casting him as the villain and the fiddle-playing J. J. as the young hero, yet the encounter of these characters takes place in a fairy world that places reality at enough of a remove to make the critique less straightforward—without necessarily diminishing its effects.

There are other types of leaks, too, that have nothing to do with the priest and are simply part of the structure of this dual-world model, thus allowing for subtle critique. For instance, Aengus tells J. J. about “the sock leak,” which provides the fairies with useful markers for places where new houses have gone up in the real world, a reference to the housing boom that was part and parcel of the Celtic Tiger. Beginning in 2006, however, “property prices started sliding” and uninhabited housing estates—or “ghost estates”—remain “the most visible scars of Ireland's extraordinary crash” (“Ireland's Crash: After the Race,” 2011). In Thompson's Tír na n'Óg, this process seems to be anticipated by representing its reverse: inhabited houses marked only by lost socks render them ghostly, uncanny, and defamiliarized, especially for J. J. who knows what is meant to occupy the missing space. By maintaining the link between spaces in this way, Thompson implies a criticism of one aspect of the Celtic Tiger (the housing boom) without explicitly denouncing it.

A technique of defamiliarization is interesting to think about in the context of censorship. While Ireland's official censorship is rarely exercised anymore, self-censorship, or “practices of omission,” may arise “from perceived or real sensitivities in politico-social contexts” (Ho, 2008, p. 491). As I discussed earlier, criticism of the Celtic Tiger, even criticism in the form of predictions about potential losses, was perceived as unpatriotic, considering Ireland's unprecedented chance at becoming a global player. As Mundler (2016) notes of Liz Jensen's use of otherworlds in her fiction, “[T]he fact that the gap between imaginary and real is narrow serves to point up the faults of the real, contemporary world by defamiliarizing them” (p. 68). Such a technique makes it possible to temper the sting of critique by making the object of analysis look slightly less real. If it's not real, it can be dismissed, especially when it comes encased in a novel that is seen as mere kids' stuff.

But even if we take Thompson's YA fantasy novel seriously, she sidesteps the issue of patriotism by positing Ireland's traditional culture as the remedy for the Celtic Tiger's shortcomings. Kennon suggests that this move is evidence of a traditionalist agenda that sanctions "a conservative and politically passive status quo" (cited in Markey, 2012, p. 116). What critics have called Thompson's "nostalgic conservatism," according to Markey (2012, p. 115), is most apparent in the novel's paratextual material, which includes a glossary of mythical personas and sheet music for traditional Irish folk songs between each chapter.

The presence of such paratextual materials is not unusual in YA or fantasy novels. Most notably, the latter often includes maps of the alternative worlds to which readers are taken, and even the interactive nature of Thompson's sheet music is anticipated in the translatable pictograms that run along the bottom of *Artemis Fowl's* (Colfer, 2001) pages. It is this interactive nature of sheet music that undermines Kennon's observation that Thompson's novel endorses a passive agenda. Music performance, an activity that requires work beyond just reading, invites the reader to become active. As Matos (2017) argues in his discussion of book covers in the previous "Right to Read" column, paratexts are "interpretive thresholds" that facilitate communication between author, text, and reader and function as invitations to the reader to take an active role. By including such materials, Thompson does one better and invites her readers to *play* the music, moving the action beyond the insular world of reader and text to the world surrounding them. In this way, Thompson envisions her novel as one that has play in the social world outside of the text.

Reconsidering the Political Effects of YA Fiction

Through an examination of *The New Policeman*, I hope to have shown that YA's status as "merely genre fiction" can be figured as one of its greatest assets when it comes to making political statements. YA's practice of "genre bending"—its willingness to include and occupy a variety of forms—is a democratic impulse in itself, but it also allows for a process of defamiliarization that permits readers to approach potentially disagreeable topics with a different, more open, frame of mind. This is especially important for helping us to think through the relationship between censorship and YA. While many of the "Right to

Read" columns have perceptively illustrated instances in which YA novels have been themselves censored, I have focused on how the genre can function more effectively than literary fiction within an atmosphere of unofficial or self-censorship. As the world seems to face another cycle of nationalist propaganda and the growth of authoritarian regimes, it is important to develop strategies for cultivating toleration, acceptance, and political action. With the potential for real political effects that Gierzynski and Eddy noted, YA fiction can provide us with the critical and material tools to escape actual and indirect acts of censorship.

Endnotes

1. See Lewis (2011) for more on the Celtic Tiger and its international contexts.
2. The Tuatha Dé Danann are a supernatural race thought to represent the gods of pre-Christian Ireland. They reside in the Otherworld known as Tír na n'Óg, but myths often feature interactions between the Otherworld and the human world, with residents of each moving between the two. Aengus Óg, the god of love, is J. J.'s primary companion when he is in Tír na n'Óg.
3. Defining Ireland against England was an especially important move in the context of their colonial relationship, a relationship that began as early as the 12th century and that became particularly embittered after England's Protestant Reformation in the 16th century made religious differences between Catholics and Protestants a central part of the conflict. After centuries of uprisings in response to British rule culminated in the Rebellion of 1798, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was created through the 1800 Act of Union. This act replaced over a century of governance through penal laws but did not include Catholic Emancipation. Though 1829's Roman Catholic Relief Act removed most of the restrictions on Catholics, religious and political tensions motivated discussions about Home Rule throughout the 19th century. A little over a century after the Act of Union, though, Ireland finally threw off the yoke of British rule through a guerilla war fought throughout 1919–1921. The Irish War of Independence led to the creation of the Irish Free State and achievement of dominion status in 1922. Of course, Northern Ireland, consisting of six counties, remains part of the United Kingdom, while the remaining 26 counties now function as the Republic of Ireland.
4. In this column, I draw a distinction between genre fiction (of which YA fiction is a part) and literary fiction. Mundler (2016) draws the same distinction in her scholarship on contemporary British writer Liz Jensen, whose works she describes as "literary thrillers." She elaborates: "[A]t first glance, the expression may appear to be a contradiction in

terms, since a thriller, by its nature, tells a story, whereas a literary novel, in the wake of postmodernism, tends to be to some extent self-reflexive and to make commentary on its own textuality A thriller is inclined toward the popular and formulaic, while a literary novel may be elitist and formally audacious.” Moreover, “the very mixing of genres, and the self-consciousness created by this, with the various parts of the text illuminating and undermining each other, is what lends these novels credibility as serious artefacts” (p. 2).

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