

Anne Enright: 'I've never been good with authority'

Appointed the first laureate for Irish fiction, the novelist was at first unsure what to make of the role. Trump's election showed why women need a seat at the table

'Men still organise their hierarchies of value in a way that excludes women' ... Trump in the Oval Office in January 2017. Photograph: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Donald Trump's victory in November 2016 was preceded, in my home life, by the death of my father in early June. I lost a wonderful man from my life while the world gained a terrible one, and for many months I found it hard to look up to anyone who claimed to be in charge of anything, especially if they were male.

My father was a quiet man, gentle and smart, and an astute observer of his children. He could fix sleeplessness and toothache, he took temperatures, checked for appendicitis. There was no bombast or posturing. I am trying to find something negative to say about the man – he smoked non-stop and absented himself sometimes in deafness, but he was, by the world's standards as well as by my own, a very good person; extremely slow to anger, a punner and puzzler, a lover of languages, with great independence of mind. Donal Enright was from County Clare: he never seemed to break any rules, and he never once did what he was told.

Five months later, my thoughts were full of Trump, who seemed to be the opposite of my father in all the important ways. And though the man was nothing to me, I was not the only person on the planet to take his election personally. Trump made the problem for women clear. Trump was the problem. The question was, who had put the problem itself in charge of the United States?

His voters polled strongly for "authoritarianism", we are told – they seek strong men and hold the weak in disdain. They also like to follow the rules, valuing obedience and respect for authority "no matter what".

It became quickly apparent that "No matter what" could be the man's motto, but it would be a mistake to call Trump an authority in the usual sense. It is hard to remember what it was like back in 2016 – we know with such clarity, now, how a revered role can turn into something self-serving and empty. The first months of Trump's tenure were astonishing. The confusion came from the deep need people had for a proper president, someone they could look up to and admire.

As authorities go, Trump is pretty much a child. He dumbs the world down. His personal dysfunction is a cartoon of the crowd's disaffection. He acts it all out for them up there on the rally podium; his racism is their racism, his misogyny sparks pleasure. This is an exclusionary identity, spattering the world with blame; empty, grandiose and profoundly hurtful to those on the outside.

The death of my father had already left me feeling exposed to misogynies, hidden and overt. After he died, I felt the world's unfairness. Perhaps, when he was alive I had

recourse to a figure who was, in my head, more important than any other man. Some childlike part of me needed this and mourned it. I needed to be told I was valued – and in order for those words to have weight, I needed them to come from on high.

If I was a child while my father still lived, in November I fell into an astonished and rancorous middle age. When Trump was elected, I felt, in some primal and raging part of myself, that the advances made by women in the last decades were worth nothing because, deep down, nothing had changed. Men still organise their hierarchies of value in a way that excludes women – at least they do if we let them. They will smile and say that they are not doing this, even as it is happening. It seemed to be some kind of default, and one that men themselves cannot see or discuss properly. I wondered if the exclusion of women was not axiomatic to the sense of male importance. Some unsayable truth had been lurking under the illusion of change, and now it was out in the open. Misogyny, I thought, now ruled the world.

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My tolerance for the misogynists I know, in all their unhappiness, evaporated. [The #MeToo movement](#) helped: it was as if some magnetic bond between women and men's badness had suddenly stopped working. And though it was good to stand free of that, the debate about sex and sexual predation left other questions unanswered. Because, when I thought about it, I knew many good men and very few bad ones. Was this male goodness also illusory? What, I wondered, came between these individual, well intentioned men and the wider enactment of equality?

Once you saw the pictures of Trump's first cabinet, every other group photograph became gendered in a similar way: open the paper to see a bunch of powerful and important Irish men, followed by another bunch of Irish men, some of them people you know. And because these men were not willing to talk about how good or bad it felt to be in that photograph, it was up to the viewer to consider the connection between the sense of their shared masculinity and institutional power.

I also wondered why it was that for a woman, being in the company of one or two men can be a good way to pass the time, and being in a room with 10 men hard to enjoy. I am not talking about rugby teams here, although these can be terrifying to women, especially after dark. I am talking about the 10 men who run your company, the 10 men on the county council or at the editorial meeting, the undifferentiated, often besuited maleness that struggles to include women, for reasons they really do not want to articulate.

Even in the business of writing books, where unfairness is hard to identify, I found a reluctance among men to read or review books by women, and it was hard not to see an aversion to the feminine there. The game of literary reputation is also a game about authority. Who writes the important story? Who says it is important? Both these questions are questions about being in charge. When I was appointed [laureate for Irish fiction in 2015](#), I did not know how to consider my elevation. I thought how Ireland likes to give women symbolic power – we love a female president, for example – while the real stuff remains in male hands. I was not sure whether to be a symbol (keep smiling!) or a grenade. Then, a year later, came Trump.

I have never been good with authority. If I had a more compliant personality I would have lived a less useful life, I think. Creativity is inherently playful and sometimes anti-authoritarian, though I was getting tired, in middle age, of all that. I started to ask myself who I was trying to annoy – isn't this just the same as trying to please them? What was important about being important, after all? My own anger was also worth considering. Why did misogyny feel so personal and hurt so terribly? Was it just the disappointment – that things had not improved, when we thought they had improved? Were all men hypocrites? After my father died, these questions had no answer. There was no big man who was above it all – above the business of gender or misogyny, above the grubby business of competition and importance. There was no one who could keep things fair.

And I missed that. I mourned the loss, not just of my father, but also of some ideal man, the right-thinking judge, the ultimate authority. In order to compass my hurt, I had to acknowledge my need for a superior goodness in the world. I also had to question why, even though I was a woman and a feminist, my idea of authority – in some lovely, daughterly way – tilted male. Or it skewed male in some outraged way, as happened when Trump walked on to the world stage. Perhaps these contradictory feelings were both aspects of the same childlike need: please, let there be someone in charge.

The danger with something that is not real – as my idealised sense of my father's authority is not quite real – is that it can turn very simply into its opposite. The rise of Trump was a terrific reminder that there is enough childishness in the world already. It was time to grow up. It was also time to be the figure I needed in my life, to work on a horizontal axis, collapse hierarchies, look at things straight. It was time to judge things, not as I wanted them to be, but as they were. It was time I stopped looking upwards, for the big man who wasn't there,

• *Anne Enright's No Authority: Writings from the Laureateship is published by UCD.*