

# The New York Review of Books

## A Woman's Performance

**Clair Wills**  
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### *Actress*

by Anne Enright  
Norton, 264 pp., \$26.95

### *No Authority: Writings from the Laureateship*

by Anne Enright  
University College Dublin Press, 109 pp., \$25.00

Fifty years from now, future historians attempting to understand the Me Too movement will pore over the legal documents from the Weinstein case; call up video of Christine Blasey Ford's statements at the Kavanaugh hearing; ponder pictures of women in pussy hats and of tennis balls stuck to the feet of walkers; analyze the press coverage of high-profile cases of rape, assault, and sexual exploitation in the film and theater industries, as well as publishing, academia, government, and many other professions; and sift through the mass of online evidence around it all—the hundreds of low-profile stories of men abusing their positions of power over women, and sometimes over other men, that never get as far as the courts or the newspapers. Faced with this mountain of sources, they may well choose to relegate the evidence of contemporary Me Too novels and stories to a footnote. After all, it's only fiction.

What can fiction contribute to any social reckoning that may emerge from this moment? It is a live question. Discussing her recent novella *This Is Pleasure*, about a powerful New



Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos

*The Trinity College Ball, Dublin, 2003*

York editor who is accused of multiple sexualized power games with his subordinates, Mary Gaitskill explained that the fictional mode was central to her treatment of the subject:

It was the only way that I could imagine addressing it. The essay form is best for making an argument that is more or less rational, and my feelings on the subject are too complicated and contradictory for that.

She was arguing in favor of the kinds of insight that can emerge from fiction, with its tension between inner monologue and exterior drama, which can help us understand the complex dynamics of social situations and the hidden frailties or cruelties of other people. Storytelling can put flesh onto the bald statements about fact, motive, and intention that are the materials of a court of law. The narrative of Gaitskill's novella is split between two voices: Quin, the guy whose history of overly intimate encounters with young staffers has caught up with him; and Margot, his old friend and colleague, who defends him despite her feelings of anger. Both of them are what we might once have called "rounded" characters; both of them unpack Quin's queasy history and both are compromised by failures of empathy and understanding, as rounded characters are. Margot, for example, who once fended off Quin's grab at her crotch, simply can't understand why his young female accusers didn't just say No.

It's an absorbing piece of fiction, and it has been praised for its "admirable interest in complication," as compared to "simple" victim stories. But it doesn't manage to save us from the tyranny of individual testimony as a means of addressing the issues. The question of the truth (Was it really abuse? Where do you draw the line between bad behavior and harassment? Were the women who accuse him now complicit then?) depends on the adjudication of different points of view. And in the end, we are not so far from the processes of law, which entail witnesses, testimony, and the weighing of contradictory interpretations of evidence to arrive at a judgment. What is missing—what cannot be accounted for in fiction that depends so heavily on the idea of "perspective"—is an account of the systemic nature of exploitation.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. There are plenty of other places where the politics and structures of sexual power get taken apart and analyzed and protested against. Nonetheless, it is striking that the systems and institutions of violence have long been the stuff of Irish fiction. The modern Irish novel seems dedicated to insisting on the ways in which sexual violation in Ireland is not, or not only, done by one individual to another, but carries the force of an entire culture. From the violent punishment of the schoolboy Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to the grim horror of daily (and nightly) abuse by the narrator's father in John McGahern's 1965 novel *The Dark*, twentieth-century

Irish novels repeatedly tell the same tale: the young are at risk from the brutality of their elders, who are in league with the institutions of power.

Perhaps the most startling—and startlingly overlooked—example of this scenario is the sexual assault on the young female narrator by a young priest in Edna O’Brien’s 1970 novel *A Pagan Place*. Two pages later it is followed by another assault, this time by her father. The devastating twist in the final pages is that the narrator reveals she is telling her story from inside the walls of a convent, having taken the veil. She has chosen to punish her parents by burying herself inside the heart of the institution that has harmed her, and the novel is her defense of that choice.

This sacrificial logic has been harnessed to great effect by contemporary female Irish novelists. In Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), the narrator is distraught over her brother’s illness, but it is the combination of her mother’s rigid religiosity and her rape by her uncle that destroys her, and leads to her self-sacrifice by drowning. The spareness of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2018) works as well as it does partly because behind her fairly simple story lies the attenuated echo of the Irish abuse plot, in which the main character’s masochism—she asks to be hit during sex, for example, including by people who don’t want to hit her—has been determined by her abusive father and brother.

Anne Enright’s novel *The Gathering*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2007, tied the narrative of familial abuse quite explicitly to the institutional structures of church and state. The narrator acts as the family’s detective who, in the days following her brother’s suicide, seeks the source of his harm. Uncovering his abuse by their grandmother’s friend and possibly lover takes her back to the early 1920s, when her grandparents met at the dawn of the new Irish state. What she learns is that surrounding the guilty perpetrator lay complicit institutions and a network of individuals who turned a blind eye. Culpability has seeped into the deepest corners of Irish life and its most intimate familial spaces.

Enright’s new novel, *Actress*, is plotted in a similar way to *The Gathering*, set in the present but insistently looking back. Norah, a woman in middle age—married, children on the cusp of adulthood, a suburban house in the comfortable town of Bray, just south of Dublin—decides to investigate the story of her mother’s life. Katherine O’Dell, an actress once famous in Hollywood and on the Irish stage, is now some thirty years dead. We learn in the first chapters of the novel that as her star began to fade—as she aged, and as she was increasingly overlooked for parts and condescended to by men with influence but far less talent than herself—Katherine became unstable, eventually shooting and wounding a well-known Dublin theater producer in the foot.

It is a request for an interview from a Ph.D. student, Holly Devane (who is not into men in a “hetero-normative way,” she explains), that sets Norah off on her search. Holly wants to

write a biography of O'Dell so that she might, "for once, be well served." But after a series of questions about her mother's "sexual style," Norah suspects that Holly's purpose in writing about Katherine O'Dell has more to do with her own "refusal of the hetero-normative" than interest in Katherine O'Dell. "Why don't you write it yourself?" asks her husband. Norah is a novelist, and Enright signals early on that this is in part a novel about who has the right to tell a story about the intimate past—about who gets to take authority over it, and for it. In an extraordinarily artful fusion of third-person narration and first-person recollection, Norah uncovers her mother's history—including a sexual assault in the 1950s—and intersperses it with her own sexual history from the 1970s to the present.

Over the last few years Enright has expressed her concern with questions of female authority and authorship in a series of trenchant lectures given during her tenure as the inaugural laureate for Irish fiction. An initiative funded by the Irish Arts Council to promote public engagement with fiction and (through educational programs) to encourage a new generation of Irish writers, the laureateship offered Enright a public platform that, she explains in the introduction to *No Authority*, a collection of her lectures, she "accepted with some seriousness, not realising that the thoughts I was trying to articulate on a personal level would be part of a general chorus about women's voices in the world."

Her lecture "Antigone in Galway" begins with the Tuam Mother and Baby Home scandal—in which the bodies of babies and small children born to women in the home were discovered in 2014 buried in something resembling a sewer system—as a departure point for thinking about how "paternalistic" authority still structures perspectives on the treatment of women in Ireland. (It also points readers back to *The Gathering*, and the realization that it is a retelling of Antigone.) There is an essay on *The New Yorker's* Maeve Brennan, and a rightly unforgiving piece on the wildly uneven playing field for women writers and artists pitching to publishers, trying to get their work on stage, hoping to be reviewed. She cites grim sets of statistics but, throughout, the mood of these essays is lifted by the evidence, everywhere, that women are no longer putting up with it.

One of the pleasures of reading *Actress* lies in the accuracy of Enright's evocation of Irish culture over the last seven decades. In a disclaimer at the front of the book, Enright assures the reader that its central characters are fictional and "based on no person living or dead." That is apart from Mac (Anew McMaster), Katherine O'Dell's first employer, who was in fact a famous figure in the world of touring "fit-up" or traveling theater—made legendary by Harold Pinter, who got his first acting job working for Mac, performing Shakespeare in small-town Ireland in the early 1950s, and later wrote a short biography of him and the world he inhabited. It is hard to read of *My Dark Rosaleen*, a "major international feature film" shot in the west of Ireland in 1973, and not think of David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1970): "Very few big shoots happened in Ireland in those days, and the glamour of it was off the scale. The Bishop of Elphin came to bless the camera, he

couldn't be stopped." Short of money in the 1970s, Katherine does a TV ad for butter that immediately conjures—for any Irish reader over the age of forty—the famously kitsch Kerrygold TV fishing family. It's a deft way of establishing her household-name status in the novel. And there is a devastating, horribly credible portrait of a middle-aged, sexually predatory lecturer in 1970s Dublin, for whom the available models are sadly numerous:

The man sweated through skin so thick and white, he looked pretty much dead to me. He was only forty-eight. Unbelievably. I had to look it up, to check. Niall Duggan drank and sobered up and drank again, he molested his students and snarled at his students, he shafted his colleagues and gave jobs to his friends, many of whom were mediocre. When I was twenty-one, I thought he was already finished, but he lived on—he kept spreading all that around—for another thirty years.

As for Katherine herself—born in London in 1928 to Irish actors, a teenager in training in wartime Ireland, onstage in postwar London, catapulted to fame in 1950s New York City and Hollywood, and reduced to acting in experimental plays abroad and singing Irish songs on the telly in the 1970s—she is a composite of characters partly because that's what was required of actors apprenticed to the studio system in the 1950s. The studio marries her off to a fellow actor who happens to be gay, and insists she dye her hair red to perfect the colleen look. She is a little bit Maureen O'Hara ("whole paragraphs were penned about bog and field, when journalists looked into my mother's eyes"), a little bit Rita Hayworth (hair dyed, hairline lifted, generally manhandled and mistreated), and a little bit Edna O'Brien, or a version of O'Brien that appears in her 1970s fiction:

She was a Bohemian. For Katherine O'Dell, sex was just one aspect of the great problem she sometimes called Love, and other times Art. It came and went. Celibacy was as difficult as unemployment, and a lover nearly as good as a role: both were a kind of performance, she was, by them, "possessed." By being in love. By not being in love. Forsaking love.

Innocence "is a great protection," says Katherine of her ignorance of the casting-couch sex that was going on just behind the door of the London theater producer's office where she worked as a receptionist in the early 1950s. Her breathless mixture of naiveté and passion is one of the things that distinguishes her from her daughter.

*Actress* charts a history of what Holly Devane might call sexual styles through the decades, including the many different ways in which blind eyes have been turned to rape, assault, and harassment. The plot turns on a discovery Norah makes about her mother's past that I am not going to reveal here. But it is in Norah's first-person history of Dublin in the 1970s that the fraught experience of sexual exploitation (and the difference between exploitation and bad sex) really becomes clear.

Take the problem of drunk and inarticulate young men at parties, or the hazards of being a young woman around them. (“Because that also happened in the late summer of 1973. You got waylaid. You went out to do your hair and ended up in a rummaging heap, stuck to the wall.”) Enright manages to be both excoriating and mildly disdainful about the sexual politics of the 1970s because Norah has moved beyond it. We look through Norah’s eyes. Now loved and steadied in a marriage of equals, she has long ago pulled herself out from under the perverse sense of importance with which the older men of her acquaintance liked to cloak themselves, simultaneously paternalistic and predatory:



*Frédéric Reglain/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images*

*Anne Enright, Saint-Malo, France, May 1996*

Everything was a reference.... It was all both base and weirdly ennobled and even their lechery was overstyled. Silent O’Boyle talked to my right breast on the wonders of Baudelaire, before switching—in case it felt excluded perhaps—to the left, for a teasing aperçu about the young Rimbaud. Then Duggan himself asking me, “Would you ever get up on that character from Faulkner? What about Salinger? You would. You’d shag that miserable streak of ennui and the course of American letters, don’t argue with me now, would be permanently changed.”

They are desperate, of course. The desperation of these men shines through their thick white skin even more visibly than the sweat. And many of them, despite their more or less creepy behavior, are harmless. Norah’s first job out of college is on a newspaper, and because she is a young woman it involves spending time in the hotel bars frequented by politicians in order to “flirt with old men, which I did, and find out things, which I really did not”:

Flirting in Buswells was not the worst way to spend your Thursday evening and it did not make me feel especially soiled. I avoided sleeping with most of them, though there were nights I stumbled out of there, dusting myself down. It was a game we played; some old fucker ordered up champagne and you said, “Get away out of that,” then you drank it anyway, and left....

I can’t properly describe how fond I was of these men, the ones in the Oval who looked after me and the ones in Buswells who did me so little harm. I liked their sad and guarded eyes, the way they turned me into that gallant object, the Girl About Town.

Enright is interested in agency (so closely allied with action and acting) and how to distinguish, in the mess of encounters with actual men, between choice and determination. “Determination” is one of those words that looks in two directions at once. It is associated with individual will—to be determined to do something. And also with the opposite—with the weight of history or fate that determines our behavior. How far back does our sexual behavior get determined, Enright asks, and by what? And although Norah doesn’t use the word “agency,” she does talk about passivity and the experience of living in a culture that tends to speak in the passive voice:

“Beset” is a good word for a man who “went and got himself shot,” as Dublin likes to phrase these things—the way you could get yourself robbed or, especially, raped. We lived in the passive tense in those more difficult—certainly more tactful—times. Embarrassment was everywhere. You could also “get yourself” murdered or “find yourself” in dire straits. Many of my mother’s actorly friends sometimes “found” themselves, for example, behind with the rent.

Norah can move through this world with a measure of ease. The rich mixture of tones in her voice (arch, hurt, humorous, biting) is a resource she has developed to survive in that climate, and it is one of the novel’s gifts to the reader. It’s the voice of a sharp-eyed young woman who simply has to get on with it. But she can’t entirely escape this culture’s pervasive nastiness. Norah ends up having unwilling sex, and more than once, with an older man who pressures her into it. Her detailed account of this is the best description I’ve read of how power messes with intention—how women get caught up, their actions twisted, their sadnesses taken advantage of.

The first time with Duggan is a mistake, a kind of error of judgment. She is lonely and unsettled by his practiced mixture of praise and taunting. Enright’s physical description of this man offers a kind of vicarious revenge to all women who have been caught in that situation:

Whatever impulse I had to contain him, or even shut him up, went away as soon as we hit bare skin. Duggan was big in the belly, and his arms were thin by comparison, also very white and hairy. You don’t see them any more, or not so much, these men pregnant with porter, and they were powerful looking men, in their day. Even so, his erection seemed at odds with the rest of him. I was, as I recall, surprised all that still worked, he seemed so old (he was, I calculate it now, fifty one).

The second time is different. The pressure is palpable. “Exactly three quarters of the way through my own second drink, I decided that the only way to get out of this situation was to go through with it.” She drinks “to escape the wretched drinking,” and finds herself—I choose the passive voice deliberately—back again at his flat where her “protestations... continued to fail.” In a gruesomely realistic touch, she ends up helping him with her



underwear: “I was helping him in order to make it less awkward, or even painful for me.” And it is not painful, but that does not make it less of a violation:

It did not feel like he was fucking *me*, he was just trying to find and catch his own pleasure....

I think I said it clearly. The “no,” I mean. Not the way they say it in the movies, in a voice muddled by desire. But I also did it the way an Irish girl says it, with a wretched squirm in the word. Sweetly, I said it. Then, I stopped saying anything and I thought, *This is happening*.

Afterward Norah is beset (it’s the passive mode again) by “spikes of self-hatred that impaled me, it seemed, from the inside.” She is furious with herself for her stupidity. It doesn’t occur to her to consider that “what had happened there was wrong,” but she knows it wasn’t right either. And so she refuses to think about it. But some time later, faced with the smugness of her—what shall we call him?—her aggressor, she is able to recognize the “slick horror” of his intent. Enright’s account of Norah “putting the right motives back in the right bodies” is beautifully done because it is so simple:

This is what he wanted and knew, this is what I wanted. This is what I did not want. This is what I did not know. Also, the difference between what happens in your head and what happens in the room. The big difference.

The clarity of this shift in direction is striking. Norah is able to disentangle his intentions from hers, but only in retrospect. It is one of the moments when the novel stands squarely with *Me Too* and with those women who can only clearly understand what has happened to them—in the room—at some considerable distance from when it happened.

There is an inevitability to Katherine’s downward spiral toward crisis and breakdown—and not only because it is foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel. “Ours was indeed a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women,” says the narrator of one of Edna O’Brien’s stories from the 1970s, and it is as though Katherine inhabits just such a fatalist plot. Every role she is offered, in life or on the stage, turns on violation, loss, and surrender. Although she tries to fight her way out of it (she is “determined”; she keeps on auditioning for roles; she even writes a script that upends the sacrificial story, about an eighteenth-century brothel-keeper who murders a series of clients, but nobody will stage it), she remains beset.

By contrast, Norah is able to be, as she puts it, “restored...to my own proper desiring.” Here Enright takes a real risk. Norah knows what a happy marriage is, and she knows good sex. She thinks a lot about it—sex with her husband. (“The only constant is this



pivot, the crux where we join, me around you inside me.”) She celebrates a kind of sex that is

very real. It’s not a performance, I mean. There are no masks, no costumes or cruelty. No one gets hurt or pretends to be hurt.

Well, maybe a bit.

Or I am wrong, and it is all cruelty—it is such a serious thing for two bodies to do. There may be, at the heart of it, some mutual destruction. There is certainly a kind of undoing, that leaves us remade.

It is her openness to the possibility of being destroyed by love, of being “unbearably named by the person you love,” that gives her resilience in the face of sexual power games. She is protected by being loved and by loving—her husband and her children, but also and perhaps above all her mother.

You can see the risk, especially when the celebration of “me around you inside me” is juxtaposed with Norah’s suspicion of the nonheteronormative scholar Holly Devane. There is a knowing humor to Enright’s celebration of marital sex that rescues it from preaching. Still, she comes dangerously close to suggesting that there are happy-healthy-sex people who get to have proper relationships, and there is the grim patriarchal past we can leave behind now that we have enough money to live in nice family houses in Bray. (She slightly hams it up, with a few too many references to the click of the garden gate, to make sure we get the point.)

But she is not, I believe, suggesting a hierarchy of sexual happiness. Instead, the good sex and happy home life are bold responses to the anti-coming-of-age plot familiar from Irish fiction, in which the young are sacrificed to the brutal needs and greeds of the older generation, and from which there is no escape. It is a commonplace that the model for this youth-denying plot derives from Joyce’s *Portrait*, with its twin monolithic forces of church and state. But at least Stephen gets away to France. For the heroines of these stories, a truer model might be the fatalism of Thomas Hardy. There is no way out for them, and no possibility of change. *Actress* is a novel that thinks about action and change, as well as determinism. “It’s funny how you change,” says Norah at one point, and what she means is that it’s funny how you change your mind about things, and how you can learn to think differently.

Norah gets fucked over by her parents’ generation, literally, but she is not sacrificed. She refuses to give them the authority to determine her fate. Enright skirts close to the cliché that writing our own story in our own voice sets us free. But in doing so she reminds us that there is some small truth in the cliché. In the end she puts her faith in fiction not

because fiction clothes motives and actions in subtle and complex contradictions, but because it also does something like the opposite, allowing us to trace action back to its actors, to put motives back in the right bodies, to track determination in both directions.

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