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Psychiatry in Literature

'The state spoils them'

Owen P. O'Sullivan 

Edna O'Brien's *In the Forest* (2002) describes the life of Michen O'Kane and a triple homicide in the west of Ireland. Eight years on from the tragedy, O'Brien's novel is a fictionalised account of the deaths of Imelda Riney (28), her son Liam (3) and Father Joseph Walsh (37) at the hands of Brendan O'Donnell in 1994. In 1997, following an adverse anti-psychotic reaction, O'Donnell died aged 23 in the Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum.

In the novel, Michen O'Kane experiences early loss, institutionalisation, abuse, imprisonment, worsening mental health and a deepening alienation from his rural community. His nomadic lifestyle and erratic behaviour are met with varying acts of compassion and anger. Some criticise the police for not doing enough; others do not report him for fear of reprisals. After abducting the young mother and her son, driven by an infatuation with her, O'Kane's mental state, and O'Brien's stream-of-consciousness style, belie failed opportunities for intervention:

'Furious now he snatches the letter back and shouts, "Giveusthephone giveusthephone giveusthephone." He bellows his orders into it – "Reported on sick parade ... metal in Vomitus. Released from medical centre. Reunited with family at front gates. Energy level terrific. Chlorophyll feed. C and D not necessary. Proceeding north west as per coda. Over. Over." He is looking at them but not seeing them, arguing furiously with a host of voices, his answers clotted, indeterminate.'

He goes on the run and is eventually apprehended:

'The state spoils them ... little creep, little coward.'
 "'He has been laughing now seventeen minutes," the superintendent says holding up his watch. "I make it eighteen sir."
 "'Eighteen minutes of animal laughter." "Bizarre." The laughter went on unabated and there was something terrible, something eerie in it, as if it would never end [...]'
 '[...] he has gone back into himself, into a hulking frozenness.'
 '[...] hooves and horns and all [...] everyone willing to help you [...] St Michael's, St Joseph's, St Bridget's, St Patrick's, St Finian's, St Teresa's, St Anne's, Spike Island, Clonmel, Rugby, Featherstone, Wolverhampton [...]'

His periods in prison and hospital are fraught with challenging behaviour and his sister visits him:

"Why did I kill them people?" he asks vacantly.'
 "'Keep back now miss ... keep a distance ... this could be dangerous" and that was the loneliest moment of all, to see him gone into himself, dead to the world around him.'

The author encapsulates how tragedy can weigh so heavily on a small nation:

'[...] the judge [...] hoped in his heart that the case would not drag on as it had done, it had opened wounds that were too deep, too shocking, too hurtful, it had been a human haemorrhaging and the country was depleted from it.'

O'Kane lingers in his doctor's mind, who recalls him asking in a poignant island of lucidity:

'[...] for his brain to be taken out and washed and then buried thousands of feet in some bog where neither man nor machine could dislodge it [...] during those endless hours when they tried to pick out the pieces of his life, the milestones large and small that culminated in the abyss.'

The release of *In the Forest* caused controversy in Ireland. Fintan O'Toole, for *The Irish Times*, said its author had 'broken an unspoken rule and crossed the boundary into private grief' and that the novel was a 'moral mistake'. Unsurprisingly, the same newspaper extensively covered the tragedy. It is interesting to consider why – or how – a literary novel is distinct from the inevitable wall-to-wall press coverage at the time of such a tragedy and any subsequent trials, and who delineates and marshals such boundaries. Perhaps Edna O'Brien's stature as a novelist was a factor and maybe with that came certain implicit responsibilities felt to have been transgressed by rendering a rural tragedy in a close-knit community suddenly international.

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