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AEDEI

"All writing is an act of imaginative empathy": Interview with Catherine Dunne[1]

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Abstract. Catherine Dunne is a Dublin-based writer whose work has been widely acclaimed both in Ireland and internationally. Her literary career represents a significant contribution to contemporary Irish literature, and it is marked by a sustained engagement with themes of identity, female subjectivity, domesticity, and familial and interpersonal relationships. Her narrative strategies often rest on the exploration of silence, secrecy, and emotional resilience, positioning her work within a feminist literary tradition that seeks to revalue domestic space and affective work. This interview comprises part of our public conversation during the XXIII AEDEI Conference and private email correspondence with the writer in the past few months.

Key Words. Ireland, female subjectivity, motherhood, Mother and Baby homes, gang rape, Catherine Dunne.

Resumen. La obra de Catherine Dunne, residente en Dublín, ha sido ampliamente aclamada tanto en Irlanda como a nivel internacional. Su carrera literaria representa una contribución muy significativa a la literatura irlandesa contemporánea y se caracteriza por un compromiso constante con temas como la identidad, la subjetividad femenina, la vida doméstica y las relaciones familiares e interpersonales. Sus estrategias narrativas a menudo se basan en la exploración del silencio, el secretismo y la resiliencia emocional, lo que sitúa su obra dentro de una tradición literaria feminista que busca revalorizar el espacio doméstico y el trabajo afectivo. Esta entrevista incluye parte de nuestra conversación pública durante el XXIII Congreso de AEDEI y la correspondencia privada por correo electrónico que he mantenido con la escritora en los últimos meses.

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Palabras clave. Irlanda, subjetividad femenina, maternidad, Asilos para madres y sus bebés, violación en grupo, Catherine Dunne.

Catherine Dunne is a Dublin-based writer of literary fiction and non-fiction whose novels have been translated into many languages. Her first novel, *In the Beginning*, was published in 1997 to much critical and popular acclaim. *A Name for Himself* followed a year later, and was shortlisted for the Kerry Fiction Prize. Between 2000 and 2012, she published seven further novels: *The Walled Garden* (2000), *Another Kind of Life* (2003), *Something Like Love* (2006), *At a Time Like This* (2007), *Set in Stone* (2009), *Missing Julia* (2010) and *The Things We Know Now* (2012). Her non-fiction book, *An Unconsidered People* (2003), documents the experiences of Irish emigrants in mid-twentieth-century London and it was republished in 2021, with a new Foreword by Prof. Diarmaid Ferriter. Catherine has also written short stories and non-fiction pieces for various publications, among them *Moments, Travelling Light, Banshee Literary Journal* and *Irish Girls about Town*.

She has received considerable recognition, including the Arts Council Bursary for English Literature on two occasions and the Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature in 2018. Her other prizes include the inaugural Rapallo Bper Banca European Prize for Literature (2023) for *A Good Enough Mother* and the 700th Anniversary Giovanni Boccaccio International Award for *The Things We Know Now* (2013). Her shortlistings include Novel of the Year at Listowel (Kerry Prize), Bancarella Booksellers' Award (Italy), Irish Novel of the Year (Irish Book Awards) and International Strega Prize for Fiction (Italy).

Catherine was nominated for the first Laureateship for Irish Fiction and longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award (2018). She was Vice-Chair of the Irish Writers' Centre (2010-2013) and co-founded the Italo-Irish Literature Exchange, which led to an anthology, *Lost Between*/*Tra una vita e l'altra,* published in Ireland and Italy. Together with Enrica Maria Ferrara she has co-curated the Festival of Italian and Irish Literature in Ireland (FIILI) since September 2023, a collaboration between the Istituto Italiano di Cultura and Irish PEN. She served as Chair of Irish PEN/*PEN na hÉireann* from 2023-2025. Dunne's work has been supported by Literature Ireland. In 2024 she was elected to Aosdána, the Irish academy of artists, each of whom must have produced a distinguished body of work of genuine originality.

Part of this interview was held in public during the XXIII Conference of the Spanish Association of Irish Studies (AEDEI) at the University of Huelva in May 2025, where Catherine Dunne was one of the invited writers through the Irish Itinerary programme funded by the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS). Several questions and answers have been added following private email correspondence with the writer in the past few months.

Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides: Catherine, thank you for your time and work on this interview. I would like to start focussing on the notions of use and abuse. As widely known, the process of nation-building in Ireland drew substantially from ideological and cultural devices. The uses of "Irishness" as a term also correlate with the uses, and very often abuses and exclusions, of certain groups and realities. However, the notion of use can also be resisted and reinvented, and literature is a really powerful tool for that. In your case, do you feel your Irish identity shapes your writing in a particular way?

Catherine Dunne: I've lived most of my life in Ireland. I've lived through the grim years of the fifties, the beginnings of transformation in the sixties, the opening out of society in the seventies, the dreadful recession of the eighties, and the incredibly fast pace of societal change

in the last three decades. I believe it's impossible not to be shaped in some way by our culture. We can resist it, or we can buy into it – but we can't be indifferent to it. One way or another, where we grow up – and grow older – has a profound effect on us emotionally, psychologically, intellectually. During my childhood and early teenage years "Irishness" was composed primarily of the unquestioning acceptance of the dominance of the Catholic Church. To be Irish was to be Catholic – even to the extent of believing ourselves to be, in the words of journalist Derek Scally, "The Best Catholics in The World" (2022). Church and State went hand in hand. Every aspect of citizens' lives was ruled by this dogmatic partnership. Irishness was also defined by a fierce resistance to being assumed to be English: my most vivid memories of being abroad as a young teenager are those of insisting on what I was *NOT* – I was emphatically not English. Ireland was also the land of the shamrock, of green fields, of *céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes. We were also the land where the "marriage bar" existed until 1973 – a rule forcing women to retire from Government and many other jobs, as soon as they married. Not my definition of being the land of welcomes. In the South of Ireland, where I grew up, we were also remarkably dedicated to keeping our distance from the struggle for civil rights in the North of Ireland, and to the conflict which followed, lasting three decades. In the South, we were also the land of strictly enforced sexual mores: no contraception; no divorce; no abortion legislation. We were also extraordinarily concerned about "what the neighbours will think" – the mantra that followed many of us, and most certainly followed young women – if we behaved in any way outside the accepted norms. Silence, secrecy, compliance: these were the watchwords of my early life.

As a writer, I have always been drawn to exploring those silences that particularly impact the lives of women. The silence and denial that trapped women and men within failed relationships, before we grasped the nettle of divorce legislation. The silence and secrecy around being gay. The silence and social compliance around Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalen Laundries. And above all, the ways in which shame is used as a method of social control. But I must emphasise that my writing grows out of my fascination with character – how we as human beings respond to the challenges of the time and the world we live in. The issues in themselves are never my inspiration – they are the background colour to the complex tapestry of human emotion and experience.

APV: Let's talk now about the publishing industry, which unfortunately is still informed by a very utilitarian, patriarchal and neoliberal dynamics, not only in Ireland but also internationally. How do you think the publication opportunities and context for Irish women writers have changed since you first started writing?

CD: The publishing landscape has changed radically since my first novel saw the light in 1997. At that time, in Ireland, there were just a few small indigenous publishers: most of the Irish writers being published were being taken up by large houses based in London. In a recent volume, *Look! It's a Woman Writer* (2021), published by Arlen House, and edited by our current Laureate for Irish Fiction, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, women writers over the age of 60 were invited to explore their experiences of writing and being published in Ireland over the last three decades or so. The brief for our essays was very broad indeed – we were not directed to explore any particular issues. But in different ways, each woman revisited the difficulties they'd had in being taken seriously as writers, first of all, and secondly, in securing publishing contracts. Women novelists, if they were published at all, were frequently regarded as the purveyors of light romantic fiction, or "chick lit" – a reductive, dismissive and disrespectful term in itself. The label "lad lit" used to describe light romantic fiction written by men at the time did not endure. Invariably, their work received more serious, respectful attention. Having one's work reviewed thirty/twenty years ago was also problematic – indeed, recent research by Anne

Enright highlighted the fact that books by men were still being taken more seriously than work by women. Her findings revealed that women came a poor second in the traditional book and culture review pages of national newspapers.

Ireland now has several highly regarded publishing houses – New Island, Arlen House, Tramp Press, Doire Press, Lilliput Press, The O'Brien Press, Liffey Press – and others too numerous to mention. Women poets are being published extensively; young debut women novelists are having a moment; women writers excel in writing crime – the landscape is more varied and more vibrant than ever. However, similar to the publishing industry everywhere, editors are eagerly on the lookout for the debut, the next "new thing". It seems there is less room for the older woman writer – despite the fact that, in my view, we get better as we get older: the work we produce is more nuanced. We're more experienced in life and in publishing. We have more interesting things to say. Having had two novels turned down by English language publishers in recent years with the observation that they were "too quiet", with the editors in question also lamenting the fact that I was not "a debut", led me to ask the question: how is it possible for me to be a debut after thirty years as a writer? Publishing is a strange and unforgiving business.

APV: Many of your novels are set in Ireland, but also some of them include a transnational component, with themes, actions and characters that move and connect across different national borders. This is also central in your non-fiction book, *An Unconsidered People*, which deals with the experiences of Irish emigration to Britain and their sense of displacement, among other effects of their exodus. How important are the notions of interconnection, circularity and cultural exchange in your writing?

CD: Living on an island contributes to my sense of the importance of interconnection above all. One of the definitions of the word "insular" is "ignorant" or "uninterested in the cultures outside one's own experience". Ireland was a very closed society until the mid-1960s. Closed, economically depressed, and grieving the reality of emigration – a whole generation was lost in the 1950s. It's no secret that Ireland has always had a problematic relationship with our nearest (much larger) neighbour, and that complexity was also a factor in our turning inwards, rather than outwards. Even those who spent decades in Britain believed themselves to be there only temporarily: they would go home someday soon. America was a distant and more benign destination: but those who left Ireland during those dismal decades were unlikely to return, unlikely to bring with them insights from a very different culture. Our accession to the EU in 1973, after a massive 83% vote in favour of joining, showed the hunger to be part of something bigger, wider, to be more connected to Europe. Apart from the economic opportunities, there was a looking outward to other cultures, a sense of diminishing isolation. On a more individual level, I'm always fascinated by the ways in which meeting other cultures is such an enriching experience. It's one of the many reasons I've chosen to include Spain, Cyprus, Italy and Britain in my work. There are many aspects of these societies that differ widely from my own, but the most profound realisation is that as human beings, we have far more to unite us than divide us.

APV: You have also widely expressed an interest in Greek mythology, which has inspired some of your novels, like *The Years That Followed* and *The Way The Light Falls*. Particularly, in the books you reimagine myths where women are presented as deviating from the traditional roles of femininity and they take unexpected, scandalous courses of action, like that of Clytemnestra and Phaedra, respectively. What fascinates you about these ancient stories and why do you think they continue to be so appealing for contemporary writers and readers?

CD: I find it really interesting to observe the ways in which our response to something we read changes as we grow older. When I was a child, I was obsessed by Greek, Roman and Irish mythology. I loved the extravagance of the gods, their capriciousness, the havoc they wrought in the lives of poor human beings. About fifteen years or so ago, I started to read more "grown-up" versions of Greek mythology in particular, and I was astonished at the depth of the psychological insight I discovered in these ancient tales. How they had changed in the intervening years! Now, these were compelling stories about families, rather than battles for territory. They showed mothers and children, fathers and sons, sibling rivalry, jealousy, love and lust. But curiously, they did not show a woman's point of view, something I had not noticed as a child. I was used to women being overlooked in any sphere beyond the domestic. Nor were women's voices heard – unless they were grieving a lost child or lover, and then they were defined by their grief and the enormity of their loss. But they had no agency. They were passive recipients of the consequences of the acts of others. The tale of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra really gripped my imagination. I had never "heard" her speak. Everything I knew about her came from what the men around her said. In different versions of the myth, she was portrayed as a wicked woman: after all, she murdered in cold blood the man who left her. There are many versions of the myth, of course, but some elements stood out for me.

Child sacrifice is not something I could expect modern readers to buy into, so while writing *The Years That Followed*, I had to map the story of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia onto more identifiable twenty-first century behaviours. I found it distressingly easy to reframe these ancient behaviours into a modern context. Agamemnon seamlessly morphed into Alexandros, a man who felt entitled to control his wife, and to assault her if she didn't behave as he wished. Domestic violence and gender-based violence, then as now, spring from a sense of entitlement. Calista's life with Alexandros, as I imagine Clytemnestra's with Agamemnon, was miserable. She had lived in fear of the man who exercised control over every aspect of her life. As for the sacrifice of Iphigenia on the altar at Aulis: there are many ways to sacrifice the well-being of a child in order to pursue one's own political ambitions. Neglect, abandonment, abuse. These are all familiar stories to us today. They are timeless; they spring from human behaviour – and not just from a particular time and place. In *The Way the Light Falls*, Melina is my version of Phaedra. She is a dutiful, responsible daughter, as so many daughters are brought up to be. I have chosen to place her as an outsider in a different culture from that of her parents. Her sister, Alexia (Ariadne) is rebellious, but Melina leads a life of caution until she is hit by a thunderbolt: she falls in love with her stepson. Entering into Melina's character, I wanted to explore the longing to belong: how close those words are. To examine betrayal, disappointment, loneliness, vulnerability. And the power of sex and love. Both novels have been my attempt to give space to the women's voices that have either been silenced, manipulated, or dismissed, down through the years.

APV: I am also curious about the process you follow for characterisation. Critics have constantly admired the fact that your characters feel real and relatable, and their personal journeys resonate deeply with us readers. I think that one of the strengths of your narrative is your ability to explore complex emotional landscapes with sensitivity and realism, and there is a lot of authenticity there. How do you develop your characters? Do they come to you fully formed or do they evolve as you write?

CD: My characters never cease to surprise me. Their very unpredictability is one of the joys of writing: it has remained a constant source of challenge and delight across more than three decades. Character has always been the beating heart of the novel for me. Plot is a necessary function, but what drives people to do what they do is what fascinates me. I know that some writers hear their stories, some dream them, some see them. Each of my novels has begun with

a clear vision – of a woman, a child, a man – in the midst of a significant personal dilemma. In order to find out what that dilemma is, I need to write their story. In order to imagine their story, I have to create their lives: past, present, and future. I dream up a family for them; friends; the neighbourhood where they grew up; their early schooldays. Often, these details won't appear on the page – but they are part of the essential structure of the character's presence in my imagination. On more than one occasion, I have dealt with the insistent presence of a character that I had never originally envisaged as part of my narrative. In *The Walled Garden*, for example, my intention was to explore a difficult mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of Beth, the daughter of an elderly mother, Alice. However, even though Alice is in a coma from the outset of the novel, she had very different ideas and kept making her presence felt. I had to give in and find a way to tell her story as well as Beth's.

In one way, writers have complete control over their characters, of course we do: they are figments of our imagination, after all. However, sometimes, our subconscious will nudge us in a new direction while we are writing. We can ignore the nudge, or we can follow where it leads. I always follow. Sometimes, I need to reverse as this uninvited character might lead me to a dead end. More often, though, they lead me to a place that is open and luminous and all the richer for its unexpectedness. Once I begin to write, the character will evolve and change. All writing is organic, so characters grow and develop once I begin to tell their stories. Sometimes, I have a clear view of the character's destiny; on these occasions, they more or less do as I tell them. On other occasions – and these are more frequent – the character has other ideas, and their story goes in a completely different direction from the one I originally envisaged. I love that phrase by E.L. Doctorow, that "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

APV: In the particular case of *A Good Enough Mother*, all the female characters are somehow affected by physical, sexual and psychological mistreatment, and through their stories of grief, secrecy and ongoing trauma, you manage to interface two scandals that have shaken the Irish population, but which have resonances in other international contexts. The first one is the forced institutionalisation of women in mother and baby homes (with the subsequent illegal adoption of their babies). What drew you to this theme?

CD: When I embarked on the project of writing a trilogy of novels based on Greek mythology, it became clear to me immediately that motherhood was to be my focus. Novels are not written in ivory towers. Writers live in the world, are affected by it, need to navigate their way through it. Two major events were unfolding in Ireland while I was writing *A Good Enough Mother*, as you have already observed. The first, in 2014, was the discovery by Catherine Corless, a local historian, of the presence of 796 babies' bodies in a septic tank in the grounds of a former Mother and Baby home in Tuam, Co Galway, in the west of the country. The news not only shocked Ireland: it also shocked the rest of the world. It was not one of our finer moments. But strangely, according to Corless, the discovery did not cause the amount of outrage at home that she had expected it to. The stories that began to emerge into the light after Tuam haunted me. I became obsessed with what it must have been like (the writer's eternal question "What If?") to be one of the 56,000 women and children incarcerated between the 1920s and the 1990's in Ireland's Mother and Baby homes – a misnomer if ever there was one. Rather than "homes", these were institutions that were often bleak and brutal.

And so Maeve arrived in my imagination. She was just sixteen. Due to the shame of her unmarried pregnancy, her family hid her away in St Brigid's Mother and Baby home. A fictional institution, fuelled by all of the details that research had revealed. The moment Maeve's baby was born, another young girl entered the dormitory – and my story. Her name

was Joanie. And so the next two of the several women who would obsess me for the following five years were born. I knew what they looked like (of course I did: I created their physical presence), I knew how they felt, I knew their family backgrounds. They moved in with me. They became as real as the people I lived with, worked with. With the character of Eileen, I drew on my extensive research for my non-fiction book, *An Unconsidered People*. Years of going back and forth to Kilburn, interviewing elderly Irish immigrants, meant that my sense of London in the fifties and sixties was already part of my imaginative landscape. And I was able to give Eileen a passion for fabrics and sewing, all of which helped me develop the individual nuances of her voice.

APV: It must have been really hard, and I suppose even painful, to delve into the real stories and events that sparked your literary rendering of part of Ireland's so-called "architecture of containment". I am curious about the process you followed in order to give voice to the women survivors of this system of institutionalisation and illegal trafficking of children. How did you lay the groundwork for your fictional account in the book, and how did you feel about it as you were writing?

CD: As with all my fiction, I begin with reading around the subject. Newspaper archives are a great resource. Works on Irish history. Or Spanish history, or Greek history. Novels written at the time when I'm basing my book. But I've had to develop a system of research that involves a particular discipline. Writers are wonderful at procrastination. The terror of the blank screen can often be so intense that we'll do anything to postpone the writing. When I'm deeply engaged in the research at the start of a new project, I usually have a very clean house. Because any task feels easier than facing the work of pulling a story out of the ether. It becomes a case of "I'll start the writing once I've finished the ironing/cleaning/phonecalls…" Or, "I'll start the writing once I've read all of these fifteen books that look so interesting" – history, novels, poetry of the time. Anything to postpone facing the blank screen. So my method now is to write and research at the same time, once the initial research period of a few months is over. It means that sometimes, I have to rely on my intuition about the situation in which my characters might find themselves. I'll write the scene, then later, I'll check it for historical accuracy. I've been astonished at the number of times my intuition has been on the right track. Documentaries – radio or TV – can also be a wonderful way to see and feel the texture of the time I'm writing about. Also film. Writing for me is a highly visual experience, and I want my reader to see as well as feel the daily lives of my imagined characters.

APV: Since the phenomenon around the Magdalen laundries and Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland began to be publicly unveiled in the 1990s, many of the elements embedded in this system of female disciplination and incarceration as well as the emotional scars it provoked upon former inmates and their families have been tackled in a large body of literary and other artistic manifestations. What makes *A Good Enough Mother* different from previous narratives that deal somehow with Magdalenism?

CD: That's not really for me to judge. All I can say is that my aim was to explore emotional truth; not to sensationalise, but to write in a way that the reader felt, as well as understood, what it might have been like to be one of these individual women whose lives I invent. I hoped by counterpointing the Mother and Baby Home narrative with the more recent attitudes towards sexual assault, that the reader might see how, although many aspects of girls' and women's lives have improved over the years, we still have a long way to go as a society in tackling the misogyny that is still alive and well – not just in Ireland, everywhere.

APV: The second major subject addressed in the novel is the retraumatising of women who have been victims of gang rape. As a writer, how do you feel about this issue, so relevant in the contemporary feminist agenda on a both national and global basis?

CD: The Belfast Rape trial of 2018 traumatised the entire nation. The accused young men at the centre of this trial were all celebrity rubgy players. The trial was a very public event, and I followed all forty-something days of it, with a growing sense of horror and injustice. The North of Ireland is a different jurisdiction, and rape trials there, unlike in the Republic, are held in public. We hold such trials *in camera*. Although the young woman's identity was supposed to be protected, given the size of her community in the North of Ireland, everyone was aware of who she was. The hostile and intrusive nature of the cross-examination of the victim, the humiliation of intimate details being made public, the re-traumatising of the victim brought women, North and South, out onto the streets in protest. Watching the mothers of these accused young men emerge from the court each day, impassive, but clearly suffering, brought that "What If?" quesion to the surface again. What must it have been like for those mothers to love and support their sons in the face of such distressing, ugly evidence? What followed was my exploration of Tess's need to reconcile her unconditional love for her son with her abhorrence of the crime he is accused of committing.

I've heard the process of creative writing described as ventriloquism. It's not: it's much more than that. Rather than simply projecting a voice – which is also part of the process – it's much more like walking around in somebody else's skin, seeing the world through their eyes. Writing is a kind of madness: it can be delightful, or infuriating; frustrating, compulsive, exhilarating. It is a dreamlike occupation that demands we leave our "sound" mind aside while we enter a completely different realm. That, for me, is the realm of imaginative empathy – first cousin to intuition, but more insistent, more committed to finding out what it's like to be somebody else. As always, it's the characters who draw me to the writing process. I never begin with the idea of exploring a theme. It's always the individual's life, their challenges, their emotional landscape that I want to inhabit. Societies change slowly. Sometimes, we resist learning from our mistakes. But I believe, and believe profoundly, that the act of individuals telling their stories has the power to change lives. The courage of those who told difficult personal stories had a significant impact on the passing of two recent referenda in Ireland – that of Equal Marriage and the legislation permitting abortion. I continue to take comfort in the power of story.

APV: The two main plots in the novel put the spotlight on the role that secrecy and silence have had in the articulation of contemporary Irish society, with a particular emphasis on their effects upon women. Why have these two artefacts been so powerful in Irish culture and do you think they can be wholly resignified socially and through literature?

CD: This novel took me about five years to complete. During that time, the characters became my friends and I saw them as individuals. The more time I spent in their company, the more I grew to love them and the more real they became. The more real they became, the more I grew to understand the level of complicity in Irish society. These women's lives had been controlled by shame. The Catholic Church was an oppressive presence, working hand in glove with the Irish State to bring about a particular vision of a moral society. It seems that in post-colonial experience, such as Ireland's, the virtue of the new state rests with its women. If women are deemed not to be virtuous by the standards imposed by the men in power – what was to be done with them? Hide them away, became the answer. Some families resisted, of course, some courageous individuals. But most bowed to the power of Church and State combined and gave their daughters to infamous institutions, such as the Mother and Baby Homes and the Magdalen

Laundries; they themselves were consumed with shame because their daughters had transgressed. Writing is an act of imaginative empathy. The predicaments I created for each character were different, the challenges I gave them were demanding in different ways. Each draft of the novel meant I could stitch in more and more detail about their lives and their attitudes that made these fictional characters differ from each other.

APV: Through the story of Aimée/Amy, another topic that features prominently in the novel is sexual consent, which indeed remains central in current debates about the extent of patriarchal control over women's sexuality, agency and bodily autonomy. You masterfully depict the many levels at which this term operates in cases of gang rape, including its relation with the construction of masculinity, the public exposure of the victim when charges are pressed, and the moral obligations of the perpetrators. As a former teacher yourself, do you think young people are more or less unaware of the boundaries around sexual consent than other generations, and why?

CD: I think the whole area of sexual consent has become far more fraught in recent times. We must remember that I left the formal classroom in the mid-nineties, when the question of consent was navigated privately – if at all – between the people concerned. Then, as now, both female and male victims of sexual violence were unwilling to come forward, as the amount of shame and humiliation attached to such revelations were overwhelming. "Blame the victim" was a very prevalent response to any individual claiming that sexual activity had taken place without their consent. For young women, the questions were "What was she wearing?", "How much did she have to drink?", "What was she doing in that part of town anyway?", "What did she expect if she went back to his apartment?" The distressing thing – among many distressing things about the Belfast Rape Trial – was to see those attitudes still to the fore, despite at least a decade of the issue of consent being a prominent item on the social agenda. I don't think young people are unaware of the boundaries. I think they are more aware than ever that consent is something that needs to be navigated – but I think there is a degree of confusion around how to do that. I hope that the long-term project to inform young people about consent in this country, We~Consent.ie, will clarify the boundaries and empower young women in particular, as they are overwhelmingly the victims of sexual assault and rape. Consent needs personal agency and safety, ability to express one's own likes and dislikes, and the security of knowing one's choices are heard and respected.

Reading some of the experiences on the We~Consent website is a sobering experience. The lack of understanding shown around boundaries – whether deliberate or through misinformation – needs to be tackled comprehensively. That's one part of the problem. The other is the way in which social media depict young women as passive vehicles for sexual activity is horrifying – a mere glimpse into the toxic undergrowth of the "manosphere" is more than enough. That, and the availability of violent pornography – easily accessed by all, including, according to recent research, eleven-year-old boys – is a major social issue. Choking, for example, is presented as a normal part of sexual activity. It's horrifying to contemplate the expectations of young men around sexual consent in the real world when this is their experience in the online world, which has such a grip on young minds. Just look at the recent controversy around Grok. And another piece of this complex jigsaw is the way the law – either in public or *in camera* – treats victims of sexual assault. They are subjected to hostile cross-examination; any counselling notes may be used as evidence against them; and the old, old prejudice of the woman being – at least *partly* – to blame, still, unfortunately is alive and well. We have a long way to go.

APV: The title of the novel alludes to Winnicot's theory of good enough mothering, which involves more than devotion and protection; it escapes perfection and it implies that mothers need to "fail" their children, so that they actually learn. Motherhood, maternal practices and mother-daughter relations have been at the centre of some of your books, but in this one the debates around women who decide to take on that role become more contemporary. Which do you think are the current challenges of motherhood in the twenty-first century?

CD: Bruno Bettelheim and Donald Winnicot both explored these notions in their respective works *A Good Enough Parent* (1987) and *The Child, The Family and The Outside World* (1964). I found both phrases comforting in their acceptance that mothers, in particular, do not need to be "perfect'". There is, of course, no such thing as the "perfect" mother, but society continues to put a lot of pressure on women to be just that – the ideal, the perfect nurturer. I'm still struck by the number of people who feel compelled to give unasked for advice to new mothers, for example. Or who express disapproval if the mother (never the father) has somehow fallen short of the standards of perfection that are reflected in their child's behaviour/ appearance/ food preferences/ sleep habits/ academic prowess – the list is endless. "I blame the mother." All of these expectations tend to undermine what Bettelheim identifies as the most important aspect of parenting: the security each individual feels in their ability to parent. From this, the child develops their own sense of security, and eventually, the ability to separate and become a self-actualising individual. In the years since I became a mother for the first time, I noticed, with growing dismay, the increasing prevalence of what I regard as "performative parenting". With most mothers working outside the home due to a combination of economic necessity and the need for intellectual stimulation, the pressures to keep all those numerous balls in the air is enormous. Any recent research I've read about how domestic roles have evolved over the decades has tended to depress me. It seems that the ultimate responsibility for everything to do with home and children still rests with women. That is not to say that women always do all the domestic and childcare work – although some still do: those with partners who are reluctant to share – but the mental load still belongs to women. They have dozens of lists inside their heads on a daily basis: the supermarket list; the meal preparation list; the homework list; the preparation of clothes and equipment for children's school activities list; the after-school activities list – they're all endless and they all have to be dealt with after a day at work, a commute, caring for other family members… And these are only the practical aspects of everyday motherhood. Then there is the navigation of the whole toxic world of social media and the pressures of keeping young children safe – this is probably the newest and most difficult aspect of modern motherhood and shared parenthood. I'm very glad the smartphone wasn't around in my days as a young mother. Or X. Or TikTok. Or Grok.

APV: One of the elements that struck me most in *A Good Enough Mother* is the strong presence of bonding among women and the crucial role it has in their survival and growth as human beings, as in the case of Maeve and Joanie. I really enjoyed how you interconnect the characters as if you are weaving a kind of web. Women's alliances, solidarity, kindness and above all, empathy, play an important role in the novel, as a kind of counter-discourse and affective turn to resist discrimination and debasement. Did any particular person or story spark this quite feminist stance you demonstrate in the book?

CD: The solidarity, the kindness, and the empathy I explore in the novel all spring from my own life experience, from what I've observed, and from what I've read. When I came across the story of the women in the Changi prisoner of war camp in *Threads of Life* (2019) by Clare Hunter, all of my experiences and observations coalesced in my imagination, and the metaphor

of the patchwork quilt was born. The alliances formed between the women in the novel – the "army" of women in Ireland who had been shunned because they had become pregnant outside of marriage – were important to me to highlight, because these alliances were repositories of strength and resilience. From the outside, young girls who were abandoned by their families because they had "transgressed" could be seen as victims. I wanted to turn that narrative on its head and show that although they had been victimised by society, they found freedom and strength in solidarity. Something like the women of Changi: they may have been prisoners, but they found a kind of freedom and dignity in subverting the system that incarcerated them. In essence, they won.

APV: For my final question, I would like to look ahead to the near future. You have mentioned to me that your stay in Spain last year was very productive, in terms of writing. Where have the Spanish muses and your own hard work been leading you next?

CD: My couple of months in Spain were wonderful. There is always a terrific freedom in removing myself from the daily, the familiar routine of my Dublin life. That's why writers find writing residencies so productive. All the daily tasks fall away – or at least, take on a different shape and feel like something of a novelty because they are undertaken in a new place. To be able to read, to walk, to think, to try all sorts of new stories to see how they fit: this was an incredible privilege. Above all, to be unavailable to others for a period of time felt like a blessing. Being back in Spain was also an unexpectedly emotional experience. I lived in Valencia for a year when I was nineteen. Then I came back for several months, twenty years ago. But for some reason, returning on this occasion, so many decades after my first time, ignited memories of people and places that had long retreated to the back of my mind. Perhaps it has to do with getting older: with that need to reflect on all the experiences that have shaped me. Whatever the reason – or combination of reasons – every moment felt significant, and the need to store up memories felt more intense. In particular, a visit to the *Cortijo del Fraile*, where Lorca found the inspiration for *Bodas de sangre* was deeply moving. It was like returning to the source of my love of Spanish literature. As for my next project, I have nothing fixed as yet. I'm processing a lot of things, reading widely, and allowing thoughts and ideas to filter through to the imagination in their own time. It's a process that can't be rushed. The muse, Spanish or Irish, takes her own sweet time, and that's just as it should be. I'll let you know what's coming next just as soon as I do!

Thank you again to everyone who made my visit possible. In particular to you, Auxi, and the University of Huelva for the invitation, and for your generous hospitality.

APV: Thank you very much, Catherine. It's been a real pleasure to spend time with you, in person and online!

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