

Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) has ominous presence and is a work of genius

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Anna Burns' *Milkman* reveals deeply ingrained strains of colonialism in an unknown location in 1970s Northern Ireland. The protagonist's sister's ex-boyfriend is "killed in a car bomb at work because he'd been the wrong religion in the wrong place and that was another thing that happened" (Burns 47). The reader is given insight into some of the historical oppressions through the eyes of an unnamed eighteen-year-old female.

At the time the novel is set, the British Army and other security outfits imposed rule to stabilize extremely volatile sectarian violence known as "The Troubles" (Clark 2022). As the subject of involuntary negative inference, the protagonist reveals to the reader that anyone can be marked down as the wrong religion or as having a wrong thought process. "Longest friend" had warned, "You are not inferable. You cannot be deduced – and they don't like that" (Burns 241).

The protagonist reveals that she knows she will always be suspect in the world in which she lives. Having been poisoned by "tablets girl," an act of seemingly undeterred random sectarian violence to which the protagonist falls victim, she says: "Why should I explain and beg excuse from them when it's they who have invented this history and who even now are as bad dogs, watching and waiting to take over?" (241). They are all Milkmen to the protagonist. The "real Milkman," who is said to love no one and, having been mistaken for "the Milkman," is killed.

The novel tells the reader that it is they who are this oppressive force – this remnant of colonial oppression – that no one can be innocent. They are the State actors. They are those who do the State's bidding – as an odious character, the Milkman is a paramilitary political element marking colonialism and effectively the protagonist's monitor. A mental tax on the protagonist and an emotional liability requiring her to say one thing but think another, she becomes savvy in the ways she informs herself privately. She tells us she reads as she walks (Clark 2022).

Self-imposed silence is a means of survival for the protagonist. Privately, she lets the reader in. She gossips; she tries to confine herself to domestic spaces, portrayed in the novel as the location of women's work (Wall 2023).

The protagonist practices her "guerrilla intelligence" by knowing to stay silent (69). It is in the home sphere that they communicate, often obliquely and through whispers, side glances, and innuendo. Her freedom of mobility and open speech is hijacked, as it takes a backseat to imagined animosities in this encompassing sectarian civil war environment, where gossip and belief get to determine which side you are on, in an "atmosphere of pathological silence" and "socio-political (self) control and surveillance" (Morales-Ladrón 265).

Works Cited

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