
Heather Ingman. *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 200p.

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Feminist revisionist projects abound in literary criticism today, each claiming to offer the other side of the story, to assist us to see with fresh eyes. At its most fundamental level, this is also Heather Ingman's task in her recent publication, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*. The value of this text, however, lies in Ingman's insightful re-evaluation not only of the landscape of fiction in Ireland, but of women's place in the nation. Ingman persuasively weaves together her analysis of women's writing throughout the century with a deft reading of women's involvement in the nation's political history in order to "find a place" for women within the "narrative of the Irish nation" (1). More than this, the author considers how women, in spite of, or indeed because of their marginalization within Irish culture, have assisted in the progress of peace movements in the modern nation. In this respect, Ingman's text is appropriate for a wide readership, including scholars of women's writing, Irish literature, contemporary fiction, psychoanalytic and feminist theory, and peace and conflict studies.

Ingman's account forges new connections between nationalism and feminism, and directly draws on Julia Kristeva's work in, especially, *Nations without Nationalism* (1993). She sets out to make clear the appropriateness of Kristeva's theories on nationhood and individuality to an analysis of Irish women and their writing over the past century. In this way, Ingman seeks to show how Irish women writers reconcile gender and national identity and attempt to heal through creativity. Importantly, the author places emphasis on reading the primary texts in their own right, not in comparison to or as a subsidiary of a patriarchal literary tradition. Nevertheless, Ingman makes clear that the marginalization of women and their writing has provided them with a valuable place from which to observe and write about conflict in Ireland, and from which they might begin to suggest ways of forging peace in a nation perpetually split by binaries. Throughout the text, the author makes explicit the ways in which her work builds on recent historical and literary analyses of Irish women and their writing, as well as interpretations of the work of Kristeva, thereby positioning her study, like the nation it discusses, as a piece in a chain of development. Ingman entwines historical data and literary analysis to demonstrate the ways in which re-reading marginalized and silenced Irish women's literature and history enables the emergence of a different story than that of the dominant discourse. Indeed, Ingman devotes much space to a considered understanding of the importance of women's political parties and their placement within the wider political structure, the impact

of such issues as the illegality of abortion on the lives of young women, and the difficulty of reconciling religious and political beliefs with the fact of one's gender. Specific examples of contemporary and historical events in Ireland underscore these points. The study moves toward the realisation that "Irish women writers across the binaries (North/South, Catholic/Protestant, nationalist/unionist) are concerned with similar themes" (181), and to an understanding that this singularity of vision works to provide unity in a divisive nation and culture.

Ingman's movement through seven chapters takes up several ways in which the notions of gender and nation are not always reconcilable for Irish women. The first chapter, "Irish Women in the Twentieth Century," lays out previous work in the field, identifies the gap in the current scholarship and demonstrates how placing emphasis on a female rather than a male history in Ireland creates a very different picture of the nation. "Reaching Out to the Other in the Nation" shows how recognition of the Other in Irish women's writing might enable the breaking down of boundaries and begin moving towards unity, and suggests, through Kristevan theory, how women's pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother means that their understanding of the Other differs from a male perspective. Emphasis on the figure of the mother continues in the chapters on "Reclaiming the Mother in the Mother-Daughter Story" and "The Feminine and the Sacred," which examine the importance of the feminine symbolisation Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary, explain the impossibility of women fulfilling this idealised identity, and make clear the ways in which political structures reinforce religious belief and oppress Irish women. Ingman builds on her previous publication, *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (1998) to show how an examination of women's history reveals the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in women's lives. "Dialog from the Margins" and "Translating Between Cultures: A Kristevan Reading of the Theme of the Foreigner" consider the value of woman's role as Other, and demonstrates how Kristeva's notions of exile and dissidence can provide an important counter to violence and conflict in the dominant discourse.

The final chapter, "Northern Ireland," takes up the central arguments of each of the previous chapters and applies them to the fiction of women in Northern Ireland in order to show how this writing differs from that of the Republic and how these women have interpreted and have sought to counter violence in their nation. Although Ingman argues here that her analysis of women's writing across the north/south divide reveals a singularity of purpose, the structural devices of the text work against such a conclusion. By separating the work of women living in the Republic of Ireland from that of women living in Northern Ireland, and moreover, failing to give equal attention to each group, the final chapter takes on the impres-

sion of an afterthought, and could be seen to reinscribe, rather than overcome, difference in Ireland.

Ingman's study does, however, provide an important analysis of the difficulty of reconciling national and gender identity for women in Ireland in the twentieth century. Such an approach might also work for an understanding of women's literature in other fraught nations. The fact that Ingman is a published novelist as well as critic may account for the fact that she falls into the trap of attributing too much to the "redemptive powers" of literature, such as when she concludes that women's writing in Ireland can be seen to form a "therapeutic space where female protest is registered against violence done in the name of politics" (183). Nevertheless, Ingman offers a shrewd account of women's writing in Ireland, and one that invites the reader to wonder where, in light of the recent peace processes in Northern Ireland, such literature will turn next. ✱