Poor Little Rich Kids: Privilege, Murder and Melancholia in Kevin Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock* and Tana French's *The Secret Place*

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Introduction

The South of Dublin, as Liam Lanigan states in his article on Dublin suburbia, is often portrayed in contemporary Irish literature as a 'severed space', a space 'detached from the rest of the country'.[1] This is particularly true for the exclusive boarding schools set in this area, as depicted in Kevin Power's debut novel *Bad Day in Blackrock*, published in 2008,[2] and Tana French's *The Secret Place* from 2014.[3] *Bad Day in Blackrock* is a fictional account of an actual murder case, the so-called 'Club Anabel case', in which 18-year-old Brian Murphy was kicked to death by three young men in front of the Club Anabel in the centre of Dublin in 2000. Many of the young men involved in the case attended exclusive private schools.[4] The novel, written from the perspective of the victim's brother, recapitulates the events that led to the fatal attack, delving into the background of both the victim, Conor Harris, as well as the three perpetrators, Richard Culhane, Barry Fox and Stephen O'Brien. Like Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock*, Tana French's *The Secret Place* centres on the murder of a young man, 16-year-old Chris Harper, who attended an exclusive South Dublin private school and is found dead on the grounds of St. Kilda's, an equally exclusive girls' boarding school. The murder case here, however, is purely fictitious. *The Secret Place* is the fifth novel in French's bestselling Dublin Murder Squad series, which can be classified as 'Emerald Noir' – a genre which according to David Clark is 'fast becoming synonymous with social criticism' and which is 'an invaluable prism through which the complicated milieu of post-Tiger Ireland can be gauged'.[5] French's

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[1] Liam Lanigan, 'A Severed Space: The Suburbs of South Dublin in Contemporary Irish Fiction', *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture*, eds. Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 97.

[2] Kevin Power, *Bad Day in Blackrock* (London: Pocket Books, 2010). First published in Ireland by The Lilliput Press, 2008, *Bad Day in Blackrock* won the Rooney Prize for Irish Fiction in 2009. A film adaptation, directed by Lenny Abrahamson, premiered under the title *What Richard Did* in 2012. Yet, despite its critical and economic success, *Bad Day in Blackrock* has so far received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

[3] Tana French, *The Secret Place* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014). While French's oeuvre has overall attracted much scholarly attention, *The Secret Place* has sparked considerably less interest than other novels of the series. Mollie Kervick remarks that the discussion of the novel, particularly in contrast to French's other novels, 'remains […] scant' (Kervick, Mollie. 'Gothic Girlhood and Resistance: Confronting Ireland's Neoliberal Containment Culture in Tana French's *The Secret Place*', *Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies* 4.1 (2022): 2. https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciiis/vol4/iss1/3/. Accessed 14 March 2024.).

[4] Anon. '30 seconds of madness that led to Brian Murphy's death', *Irish Independent*, 28 February 2004. www.independent.ie/irish-news/30-seconds-of-madness-that-led-to-brian-murphys-death/26018702.html. Accessed 17 March 2024.

[5] David Clark, '*Emerald Noir*? Contemporary Irish Crime Fiction', *East Meets West: Proceedings from the 13th International Region and Nation Literature Association Conference*, eds. Reiko Aiura, J.U. Jacobs and J. Derrick McClure (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 155.

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novels are renowned for their acute portrayals of contemporary Ireland and can even be described as state-of-the-nation-novels.[6]

This paper explores the representation of Irish youth attending the elite boarding schools in the two novels, arguing that both novels provide a critical portrayal of the generation that has come of age during the economic boom, that is, of the young men and women attending exclusive boarding schools, privileged, wealthy children of a new 'ruling class'. At first sight, exclusive boarding schools appear to be unusual settings for novels published around the time of the financial crisis of 2008 and in its aftermath, in a country shook by the sudden end of the Celtic Tiger[7] and, from 2010 onwards, impacted by austerity measures under the reign of the European Troika.[8] Moreover, the choice of setting seems at odds with the literary trends of the period: as Malcolm Sen notes that 'Irish literature, written in the shadow of the Celtic Tiger's demise, [...] provides a sustained reflection on the precarity of individual life in the face of national and planetary challenges'.[9] In the same vein, in their study on post-Celtic Tiger women writers, Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan argue that a clear focus lies 'on the material realities of precarious forms of living in twenty-first-century Ireland'.[10] A case in point is the highly successful Irish author Sally Rooney, whose novels not only tell of the complicated love lives of the millennial generation in Ireland but also, according to María Amor Barros-Del Río, portray the 'precariousness of her characters' lives',[11] as they are struggling to pay rent like Connell in *Normal People* (2018)[12] or are barely able to afford groceries like Frances in *Conversations with Friends* (2017).[13]

Kevin Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock* and Tana French's *The Secret Place* thus differ from the dominant literary representations of the post-Celtic Tiger period: both portray a highly affluent and privileged group of young people who do not have to contend with the material realities of minimum wage jobs or the threat of homelessness. If the South of Dublin is a space detached from the rest of the country, one can observe that the young people in the two novels seem to be just as detached from the economic developments unfolding around them. And yet, the two novels align with post-Celtic Tiger literature in two significant ways: first, through their focus on troubled teenage and young adult characters and second,

[6] Beata Piątek, 'Ireland's "Broken" Homes in the Novels of Tana French', *Crossroads: A Journal of English Studies* 36 (2022): 38. https://doi.org/10.15290/cR.2022.36.1.03.; Maureen Reddy, 'Authority and Irish Cultural Memory in *Faithful Place* and *Broken Harbor*', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 32.1 (2014): 81, https://doi.org.10.3172/CLU.32.1.81.

[7] The period of the Celtic Tiger refers to a time of unprecedented economic growth in Ireland, lasting for roughly eighteen years from the early 1990s until 2008, the year of the financial crisis.

[8] While Power's novel was published in 2008 and is, strictly speaking, not post-Celtic Tiger literature, this article follows Adam Kelly's classification of Power as a postcrash writer in his article 'Ireland's Real Economy: Postcrash Fictions of the Celtic Tiger', *The New Irish Studies*, ed. Paige Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 195–210.

[9] Malcolm Sen, 'Risk and Refuge: Contemplating Precarity in Contemporary Irish Fiction', *Irish University Review* 49.1 (2019): 14, https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2019.0376.

[10] Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing II: Reflections on the Post-Celtic Tiger Era', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28.2 (2017): 97, https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2017.1315547.

[11] María Amor Barros-Del Río, 'Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: The Millennial Novel of Formation in Recessionary Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 30.2 (2022): 177, https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2022.2080036.

[12] Sally Rooney, *Normal People* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018).

[13] Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

through the feeling of melancholia expressed in both novels. In her article on 'Post-Millennial Irish Fiction', Susan Cahill speaks of a 'strong teenage presence' in recessionary and pre-recessionary Irish literature[14] and claims that 'depictions of troubled and vulnerable youth' loom large.[15] The liminal character of the teenager seems to be particularly well suited to articulating the anxieties of the time, representing a country stuck in a 'liminal place',[16] unsure of where it was headed. Both French's and Power's novels have teenage characters as their focal points, and yet, both novels portray not only a troubled but also a *troubling* youth. *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place* paint a bleak picture of the generation coming of age during the years of the economic boom, particularly of the privileged young men and women attending elite boarding schools. The setting of the expensive boarding schools is shown as a place where material privilege, toxic masculinity and an elite status, which seems almost reminiscent of the old colonial elites in Ireland, intersect and ultimately culminate in murder. Both novels thus offer a cultural critique of stark social divisions and growing materialism, of the toxic atmosphere fostered in the boarding schools, the sense of entitlement of the students and the repolarisation of traditional gender roles.

At the same time, *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place* express a feeling of melancholia prevalent in Ireland at the end of and during the immediate aftermath of the Celtic Tiger. While both novels revolve around a violent death and many of the characters go through a process of mourning, they are pervaded not only by a feeling of grief and mourning, but also by a sense of melancholia. In his seminal essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', Sigmund Freud draws a clear distinction between the two: 'melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contrast to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious'.[17] In the context of recessionary Ireland, Molly Slavin argues that melancholia can be 'understood as public, shared, but unnamed, unconscious, unspecified grief at the loss of what was perceived to be [...] a glorious neoliberal future'.[18] The object-loss withdrawn from consciousness is the 'imagined loss of futurity'[19], while the feeling of grief centres on high hopes for the future which did not materialise. Slavin's analysis focuses on the representation of ghost estates in post-Celtic Tiger literature, which she reads as signifiers for this melancholic feeling pervading recessionary Ireland and Irish fiction. A similar argument is made by Maebh Long who detects a feeling of melancholic longing in *City of Bohane* (2013) by Kevin Barry,[20] another influential novelist of the post-Celtic Tiger period.[21] In *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place*, the premature deaths of the two young men become intertwined with the unconscious loss of an imagined future, a loss ushered in by the financial crisis and the end of the Celtic Tiger boom. This melancholy tone

[14] Susan Cahill, 'Post-Millennial Irish Fiction', *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction*, ed. Liam Harte (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2022), 613, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198754893.013.41.
[15] Cahill, 614.
[16] Barros-Del Río, 176.
[17] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *On Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia'*, eds. Thierry Bokanowski, Leticia Fiorini and Sergio Lewkowicz (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.
[18] Molly Slavin, 'Ghost stories, Ghost estates: Melancholia in Irish Recession Literature', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 5.1 (2017), 2–3, https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.16.
[19] Slavin, 1.
[20] Kevin Barry, *City of Bohane* (London: Vintage, 2013).
[21] Maebh Long, 'Black Bile in Bohane: Kevin Barry and Melancholia', *Textual Practice* 31.1 (2017): 81–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2015.1105864.

is amplified in *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place* by drawing on conventions from the genre of the Big House novel.

Elite Boarding Schools, Relentless Materialism and Toxic Masculinity: Excesses of the Celtic Tiger in *Bad Day in Blackrock*

Although *Bad Day in Blackrock* centres on a murder case, it is neither a crime nor a true crime novel: as John Boyne comments in his review for the *Irish Times*, Power's novel is 'not so much a whodunit as a *whydunit*'.[22] This assessment is shared by Lanigan, who remarks that 'the novel interrogates the cultural conditions [...] that made such an act of violence explicable and meditates upon the collective crisis of identity the incident precipitates'.[23] In this regard, I argue that that the young men, as portrayed by Power in the novel, epitomise concerns about a larger culture of irresponsibility of a privileged 'ruling class' prevalent in Ireland during the last years of the economic boom. The designation of a particular group of people as the 'ruling class' appears particularly striking in the context of Ireland, a country which, as Aline Courtois remarks, is often 'believed to have no upper class' and where the 'national narrative' is that 'of a meritocratic society with no fixed class structure'.[24] Interestingly, the narrator, himself part of the sphere of South Dublin, is aware that the establishment of this well-connected 'ruling class' is a recent phenomenon in the context of Ireland's political history.[25] He explains:

> For generations, our ruling class had been made up of landed Protestants, a genteel pseudo-aristocracy [...]. Their passing left a vacuum, a period of hesitancy and stagnation. Then, in the late 1990s, [...] [s]uddenly – overnight, as it were – there was a new ruling class, a vast Catholic bourgeoisie.[26]

Yet, the novel conveys the impression that the newly established Catholic bourgeoisie has more in common with the old ruling class, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, than might be expected. In her sociological study on Irish elite schools, Courtois observes that 'as typical in post-colonial contexts, background, status and British aristocratic culture and manners still operated as mechanisms of distinction'[27] in Ireland, where 'a section of the new […] elite adopted the cultural repertoire of the former Anglo-Irish ruling class, […] shown by their taste for castles, horses, […] boarding schools'.[28] The exclusive world of elite boarding schools, such as that of Brookfield College portrayed in the novel, seems reminiscent of English elite public

[22] John Boyne, 'A Story that Breaks the Rules', *The Irish Times*, 11 October 2008. www.irishtimes.com/news/a-story-that-breaks-the-rules-1.894830. Accessed 17 March 2024. Emphasis mine.
[23] Lanigan, 100.
[24] Aline Courtois, *Elite Schooling and Social Inequality: Privilege and Power in Ireland's Elite Private Schools* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.
[25] While Lanigan points out that the narrator's 'narrative dehistoricises the emergence over the course of the twentieth century of this "vast Catholic bourgeoisie"' (103), to many people in Ireland, the economic boom did seem to be coming out of nowhere. For instance, Slavin describes that 'Ireland's economy suddenly, seemingly miraculously took off' (3).
[26] Power, 34.
[27] Courtois, 37.
[28] Courtois, 5.

schools, e.g. Harrow or Eton. While coming more and more under scrutiny these days, English 'public schools remain extraordinarily powerful channels of elite formation'.[29]

Similarly, the young men portrayed in *Bad Day in Blackrock* can be seen as embodying the new Irish elite: the narrator himself points out that the case is not only 'deeply bound with […] a private school philosophy' but also with 'a ruling-class worldview'.[30] Kathleen Costello-Sullivan notes that the novel 'mine[s] the underlying, long-standing currents of privilege that continue to frame much of Irish society today'.[31] The young men, according to the novel, were first and foremost 'the sons of the men who ran the country'.[32] Interspersed in the novel are terms like 'nobility' and 'hereditary monarchy',[33] pointing to the enormous privilege these boys grew up with. As the narrator comments, their families 'were people who knew people […]. They knew people at the *The Irish Times* and the *Evening Herald* […]. They knew barristers and accountants and TDs. They knew people who played golf with the Minister of Justice'.[34] In the context of exclusive Irish boarding schools, Courtois points out that they can be seen as 'repositories for vast amounts of social capital, which can be mobilized by their members'.[35] The mobilisation of networks and social capital in the novel becomes apparent at the criminal trial, when the narrator reveals that the judge is 'a Brookfield boy',[36] too. The novel here shows the close connections within the Irish upper class and highlights how – exclusively male – networks of power are brought about and fostered through the exclusive boarding schools.

The boarding school background of the three killers, Richard Culhane, Stephen O'Brien and Barry Fox, and the victim, Conor Harris, is established early on in the novel, when the narrator states:

> Three people killed Conor Harris outside Harry's Niteclub on the last night of summer, 2004. Two of them were Brookfield boys. The other had gone to Brookfield College and then transferred to Merrion Academy. These things matter. These things make a difference.[37]

In the exclusive world of South Dublin, the exact name of the private school one attends – even though, as the narrator himself admits, Merrion Academy and Brookfield yearly swap the first and second place in the ranking of Ireland's best private school for boys[38] – works as a mechanism for social distinction. The narrator, who at the end of the novel reveals himself to be Conor's older brother, is well aware of this fact, being a part of the privileged South Dublin microcosm himself. Throughout the novel, he shares his 'insider perspective' with the reader, revealing insights into the 'severed space' of South Dublin and Brookfield. It becomes

[29] Aaron Reeves, Sam Friedman, Charles Rahal and Magne Flemmen, 'The Decline and Persistence of the Old Boy: Private Schools and Elite Recruitment 1897 to 2016', *American Sociological Review* 82.6 (2017): 1139–1166, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417735742.
[30] Power, 200.
[31] Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, '"I still consider myself a lucky person": Unreliability, Intersectional Privilege, and Irish Society in *The Wych Elm* and *Bad Day in Blackrock*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, forthcoming: 2.
[32] Power, 115.
[33] Power, 191–192, 101.
[34] Power, 53.
[35] Courtois, 149.
[36] Power, 200.
[37] Power, 25.
[38] Power, 25.

apparent that these schools are not only very expensive and thus extremely exclusive, but that they also, as Lanigan remarks, 'foster a sense of confidence and prestige in successive generations of South Dublin students'.[39]

In fact, *Bad Day in Blackrock* conveys the impression that the young men attending these schools are to a large degree influenced by the sense of prestige and entitlement instilled by their exclusive schools. Even after realising that their actions have led to the death of Conor Harris, they seem to believe everything can be 'sorted out'. The narrator mentions that Stephen O'Brien 'admitted […] he had assumed that he would never be arrested. "Things like that don't fucking happen," he said. What he meant was *Things like that don't happen to people like me*'.[40] The boys' sense of entitlement becomes most apparent when they learn that they have actually killed Conor. Instead of calling the police or informing a lawyer, the three turn to their Brookfield rugby coach, Pat Kilroy. The narrator seems to be aware that this reaction might appear strange. He comments:

> Other people have wondered, though – people, it hardly needs to be said, who did not receive a private education, […] who never played for the Senior Cup team. To understand why the boys went first to Pat Kilroy, you have to understand the centrality and significance in their lives of rugby […]. Most of the important emotions they experienced on a daily basis had to do with rugby […] and Pat Kilroy had been the man who took them through it.[41]

It seems as if to the three young men, Conor's death was reminiscent of a rugby match they are about to lose rather than a real crime, and they turn to their coach in order to get instructions. And Pat Kilroy, their trusted rugby coach, assures them: 'Don't panic now, lads. It's all in hand'.[42]

The culture – or maybe the cult – of rugby seems to permeate the young men's whole world. Not only is the murder of Conor framed in rugby terms, the fatal kicks against his head are described as 'rugby kicks: great semicircular sweeps from the hip, with the foot angled up to lift the ball, the arms extended to keep balance',[43] but even at Conor's funeral, the priest refers to 'what a loss Conor's death meant for the game of rugby' before a relative reads a poem by A.E. Housman, titled 'To an Athlete, Dying Young'.[44] The popularity of rugby, a sport which originates in the English public-school context and was long seen as 'a vehicle [...] to instil appropriate moral values' into the pupils,[45] once again aligns the young men in *Bad Day in Blackrock* with the former colonial ruling class in Ireland. Moreover, in her analysis of the culture of exclusive Irish boarding schools, Courtois notes that '[r]ugby […] channels a strong vision of masculinity and the "negation of violence" it requires makes it an elite sport par excellence'.[46] Rugby thus functions in a double way in the novel: it indicates the boys' elite

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[39] Lanigan, 99.
[40] Power, 175. Emphasis in the original.
[41] Power, 141.
[42] Power, 142.
[43] Power, 18.
[44] Power, 101.
[45] Rémy Hassanin and Richard Light, 'The Influence of Cultural Context on Rugby Coaches' Beliefs about Coaching', *Sports Coaching Review* 3.2 (2014): 132–144, https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2015.1013751.
[46] Courtois, 167.

status and at the same time points to the strong emphasis on stereotypical masculinity existing in their circle.

The culture displayed here so prominently – a culture of privilege, entitlement and an obsession with sports that are perceived as traditionally *masculine* – seems to go hand in hand with a tendency towards toxic masculinity fostered in the environment of the exclusive boarding school. Toxic masculinity as defined by Esther de Dauw and Daniel J. Connell manifests itself in 'the ways that the extreme rejection of femininity through the performance of hypermasculinity creates behavioral patterns and ideological beliefs that become toxic to men, and, on a structural level, to their environments'.[47] The boys in *Bad Day in Blackrock* perform a kind of hypermasculinity, particularly in the context of rugby, and are unable to allow themselves to feel emotions – which are framed as feminine – in any other context than that of sports. Even the traumatic event of losing a parent to cancer at the age of twelve does not lead to emotional vulnerability or an expression of feelings such as grief or sadness. Instead, the narrator recalls that the boy in question, Barry, 'made a joke of his mother's death. It was what you did, in a boys' school'.[48] The toxic masculinity fostered in the school context ultimately becomes not only toxic to the boys on an emotional level but even leads to the death of one of them.

In the context of twenty-first-century Ireland, Debbie Ging notes an increasing polarisation of the supposed male – female binary, driven by an 'increasingly commercial media-scape in Ireland [which] has enabled deeply conservative images and ideologies of gender to proliferate'.[49] The stereotypical masculinity performed by the young men in *Bad Day in Blackrock* can thus be seen as representative of a more general development in Ireland at the time. Moreover, portrayals of violent young men have gained traction in the Irish literary landscape. A case in point is Rob Doyle's novel *Here Are the Young Men* (2014),[50] set in 2003, which portrays a generation of young Irish men who exhibit a feeling of being lost, hidden behind a façade of hypermasculine performance. Like Power's novel, Doyle's narrative features murder as one of the 'young men' kills two homeless men, displaying, as Claire Lynch puts it, a 'reckless disregard for the lives of others'.[51] Hypermasculine performance and violence, seemingly coming out of nowhere and without any real motive, seems to be a concern when it comes to young Irish men in post-millennial fiction.

Similar to the young men in Doyle's novel, unable to verbalise their feelings, the young men in *Bad Day in Blackrock* express themselves through physical violence – a violence that 'is always an unspoken possibility' on their nights out.[52] Violence even becomes a form of intimacy between the boys. When reporting in detail on how the fight between Conor and

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[47] Esther de Dauw and Daniel J. Connell, 'Introduction: "The Subaltern and the Hegemonic"', *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*, eds. Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 5.
[48] Power, 72.
[49] Debbie Ging, 'All-Consuming Images: New Gender Formations in Post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland', *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques, Resources*, eds. Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin and Peadar Kirby. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 69.
[50] Rob Doyle, *Here Are the Young Men* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[51] Claire Lynch, '"Everything not saved will be lost": Videogames, Violence, and Memory in Contemporary Irish Fiction', *Irish University Review* 47.1 (2017): 138. www.jstor.org/stable/45129206. Accessed 29 September 2024.
[52] Power, 15.

the others unfolded, the narrator states that to Richard Culhane, one of the three perpetrators, Conor's fall felt like 'a kind of consummation. He remembered the intimacy of the fighting, the need to be close to another human body, like lovemaking but with the opposite intention'.[53] Instead of allowing any form of emotional intimacy, the only way to feel close to another boy is to physically attack him. In the context of the film adaptation of *Bad Day in Blackrock* by Lenny Abrahamson, *What Richard Did* (2012), Deirdre Molumby remarks that the movie shows the 'incapacity of Irish young people to communicate their feelings effectively'.[54] Ultimately, Conor Harris' murder can also be traced back to the boys' inability to talk about their feelings. The only – although somewhat murky and even in the eyes of the narrator 'glibly improbable and mercilessly childish' – motive for the murder seems to be that Richard was jealous that his girlfriend was wearing a sweatshirt given to her as a gift by Conor Harris, her ex-boyfriend.[55]

While the cultural conditions of entitlement, elitism and toxic masculinity present in the exclusive Brookfield College seem to contribute to a large degree to the murder at the centre of the novel, they are inextricably linked in the novel to the question of generation. As Lanigan observes, the young men display 'the brash confidence of an emergent generation […] produced by the Celtic Tiger'.[56] The young men portrayed in *Bad Day in Blackrock* have all grown up during the economic boom, as part of the newly established ruling class, the 'new bourgeoisie',[57] of the time, enjoying not simply material security but excessive wealth. In her article on intersectional privilege and Irish society in *The Wych Elm* and *Bad Day in Blackrock*, Costello-Sullivan notes that 'materialism […] is foregrounded relentlessly' in the novel[58] – there are abundant references to expensive brand clothing, holidays and internships in the United States and, in the case of Richard Culhane, a newly built swimming pool in his garden.[59] However, the Celtic Tiger did not only entail material riches, but also, as Shirley Peterson remarks, 'increased violent crime and antisocial behavior [were] accompanying economic prosperity in urban Ireland'.[60] The murder of Brian Murphy, on which the novel is based, was also framed in this context in the media at the time – *The Irish Times* called the murder a crime committed by 'the cubs of the Celtic Tiger'.[61] Comments like these directly link the murder case to the generation growing up during the years of the boom, which was not only associated with economic growth but also growing materialism, greed[62] and violence.

[53] Power, 225.
[54] Deirdre Molumby, '*Out of Here* and *What Richard Did:* Listlessness & Inarticulacy in the Young Irish Population', *Estudios Irlandeses* 10 (2015): 219.
[55] Power, 157. This incident with the sweater also points to the objectification of women which the characters practise throughout the novel – the female characters, first and foremost Richard's girlfriend Laura Haines, appear more as status symbols than individuals. For a more detailed analysis of the representation of misogyny in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, see Costello-Sullivan, 22–23.
[56] Lanigan, 102.
[57] Kelly, 205.
[58] Costello-Sullivan, 21.
[59] Power, 22.
[60] Shirley Peterson, 'Homeward Bound: Trauma, Homesickness, and Rough Beasts in O'Brien's *In the Forest* and McCabe's *Winterwood*', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 13.4 (2009): 57.
[61] Kathy Sheridan, 'Nightclub killing that convulsed and divided the middle classes', *The Irish Times*, 16 March 2004. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/nightclub-killing-that-convulsed-and-divided-the-middle-classes-1.1135594. Accessed 17 March 2024.
[62] Declan Burke ed., *Down These Mean Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2013), 1.

Moreover, the novel sheds a very critical light on the issue of economic inequality, foregrounding how the boom, which did not entail positive change for all social groups equally, exacerbated social division. As Derek Gladwin comments, the 'economic and cultural inequalities [in Ireland] […] only increased in the face of such economic success'.[63] In the same vein, Lisa Fitzpatrick observes that '[t]he economic boom disproportionately benefited the wealthier classes in Irish society, while [others] […] remained economically marginal in precarious employment'.[64] The sphere of South Dublin and Brookfield College portrayed in *Bad Day in Blackrock* is, however, detached from these social groups who did not profit from the economic boom or those in precarious employment. Courtois points out that the world of exclusive boarding schools 'constitute[s] […] a world apart' as the schools 'isolate their students both physically and symbolically on islands of privilege, where students are sheltered from the realities affecting others'.[65] This is exemplified in the novel through Laura Haines, Richard Culhane's girlfriend, and her friends, who maintain that 'people who had less money than they did, or who had not been able to go to private school' are to be looked down upon, '[t]hey called them "povvos" or "knackers" or "chavs" or "skobes"'.[66] Never does any of the characters question their own disregard for less wealthy people, and the boundaries between the 'ruling class' and those less economically fortunate thus remain absolute.[67]

Overall, *Bad Day in Blackrock* paints a bleak picture, a 'ruthless portrayal'[68] of the generation of privileged young men growing up during the Celtic Tiger years. The narrator himself speaks of 'the cannibalistic nature of my generation'[69] and portrays them, including himself, as a group of materialistic, entitled rich kids who would kick someone to death because they gave a present to their ex-girlfriend. Part of the cultural conditions mentioned by Lanigan thus seem to be not only caused by the culture of the exclusive boarding school but also refer to the wider context of values and norms present in a small yet influential elite group during the last years of the Celtic Tiger. In her discussion of *What Richard Did*, Ging points out that the film provides an 'allegorical framing of the financial crisis not just as economic or local but also as moral and universal'.[70] While the financial crisis was nowhere in sight in 2004, the novel seems to suggest that a moral bankruptcy preceded the economic bankruptcy that was to follow.

Mean Girls, Misogyny and Murder: Tana French's *The Secret Place*

Like Brookfield College in Kevin Power's novel, St Kilda's, the exclusive all-girls school in *The Secret Place*, seems to constitute a world apart. Even though the novel is, in contrast to *Bad Day in Blackrock*, set shortly after the financial crisis – Mollie Kervick observes that the

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[63] Derek Gladwin, *Contentious Terrains: Boglands in the Irish Postcolonial Gothic* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), 177.

[64] Lisa Fitzpatrick, '"I Suppose I Feel Disappeared Meself": Shamed and Silenced Characters in Deirdre Kinahan's *Bogboy*', '*I Love Craft. I Love the Word': The Theatre of Deirdre Kinahan*, eds. Lisa Fitzpatrick and Mária Kurdi (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 141–142.

[65] Courtois, 92.

[66] Power, 84.

[67] Costello-Sullivan observes that Richard Culhane's mother forms an emotional bond with her Nigerian housemaid – yet it is a bond she is deeply ashamed of, see 20.

[68] Costello-Sullivan, 20.

[69] Power, 16.

[70] Debbie Ging, 'Review: *What Richard Did*', *Estudios Irlandeses* 8 (2013): 210.

sociohistorical context of the novel is 'the recessionary landscape of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland'[71] –, the girls attending the school seem at first sight to be unaffected by the economic developments around them. Once again, the stark social divisions in Ireland at the time are mirrored in the novel, just like in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, in which according to Adam Kelly, 'the realities of class are paramount'.[72] This becomes even more visible in *The Secret Place* as one of the two narrative voices in the novel is that of a young police detective, Stephen Moran, who has a working-class background. While the narrator of *Bad Day in Blackrock* is firmly anchored within the wealthy community of South Dublin and shares the privileged background of the young men he talks about, Stephen Moran feels like an outsider. The disparity between his economic background and that of his detective partner Antoinette Conway[73] and the girls attending the school, is striking. Like the young men at Brookfield College, the young women at St. Kilda's are privileged, or, in the words of Detective Conway: '[e]veryone's got perfect teeth, no one ever gets up the duff, and all the shiny little pedigree bitches go to college'.[74] On the other hand, Detective Moran, upon entering the school in a 'leafy suburb' of Dublin,[75] is half expecting 'a groundskeeper to burst out of the trees and chase us off the grounds'.[76] While their class background would normally prevent Moran and Conway from entering the exclusive sphere of the private school, through their status as members of the police force, they are able to investigate not only the murder of Chris Harper but also the social milieu of St. Kilda's.

St. Kilda's is, like the 'severed space' of Blackrock in Power's novel, secluded and isolated. Peterson observes that St. Kilda's is not only spatially removed from the rest of the city but that its 'remoteness from the [...] outside world fosters their [the girls'] solipsistic narcissism'.[77] Like the boys in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, the girls' lives mainly take place in the microcosm of their exclusive boarding school and their wealthy families' homes. Moreover, the girls attending St. Kilda's seem to be protected by the same networks of privilege and wealth as the young men at Brookfield College – Detective Conway recalls how after the first interviews, the boss of the murder squad called her into his office to caution her to go easier on the girls, as some of their fathers knew the superintendent.[78] Likewise, the boundary between the privileged world of exclusive boarding schools and the world inhabited by less wealthy people is as impermeable in *The Secret Place* as in *Bad Day in Blackrock*. Conway remarks that to the students of St. Kilda's and the neighbouring boys' school Colm's, their '[s]chools [...] are the whole civilised world. Outside, it's wilderness. Teenage mutant skanger smackheads selling your kidneys on the black market.'[79] And while there is no culture of toxic masculinity in St. Kilda's, the atmosphere at the school can in many ways be described as equally vicious. The headmistress tells the detectives that some of the girls have set up a

[71] Kervick, 1.
[72] Kelly, 204.
[73] The obvious intertextual reference here is to the protagonist Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). In fact, Conway shares many characteristics with the protagonist of Rhys' novel such as her experience of discrimination and of growing up without a father.
[74] French, 31.
[75] French, 7.
[76] French, 36.
[77] Shirley Peterson, 'Voicing the Unspeakable: Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad', *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, ed. Elizabeth Mannion (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115.
[78] French, 162.
[79] French, 317.

website in order to spread malicious rumours about each other, writing for instance of a girl whose father had committed suicide: 'If my daughter was this ugly, I'd kill myself too'.[80] The culture of the exclusive boarding school therefore seems to mirror the cultural conditions present at Brookfield in *Bad Day in Blackrock*.

The girls who attend the school share their materially privileged position as well as their consumer-capitalist, materialistic orientation with the young men in *Bad Day in Blackrock.* This becomes apparent in their fascination with a nearby shopping centre, called 'the Court'. In a passage told from the perspective of one of the pupils, she comments: 'The Court pulls like a towering magnet and everyone comes. Anything could happen here, […] your life could lift right off the ground and shimmer into something brand-new'.[81] The mall in *The Secret Place* signifies the promises of consumer capitalism. It is a place where the girls can buy anything and be anyone, and to many of them, it hence seems like an escape from their highly regulated life at the school. The Court is described as 'the magic place, the shimmering place to make you forget all about sour teachers, rows of dorm beds'.[82] One can easily draw a parallel here between the girls' enthusiasm for the shopping centre and Ireland during the economic boom, when everything seemed possible, and a supposedly 'brand-new' national identity developed.

However, the Court is not only a dream place for the girls but also, as Peterson observes, a 'sexual marketplace'.[83] At the mall, the girls feel permanently subjected to the gaze of others. One of them remarks, 'the Court is where you bring your bewildering new curves and walk and self so people can tell you what you're worth and you can't risk the answer being *Nothing zero nothing*'.[84] The Court is thus not a liberating place, offering endless possibilities for consumption, but a place where the girls are objectified and become not consumers but products with a certain value that is determined by other people's perception of them. Like *Bad Day in Blackrock*, the novel draws attention to the repolarisation of gender norms, yet in contrast to Power's novel, where the narrator is feeding into the objectification of women, *The Secret Place* draws attention to how much the neoliberal system influences the lives of young women who feel pressured to conform to it and to accept their objectification. This is in line with an observation by Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, who point out that in post-millennial Ireland, 'women became increasingly disempowered and subsumed under the ethos of materialist consumption'.[85] Thus, instead of enjoying their privileged lifestyle, as the young men in Power's novel do, and displaying an attitude of 'brash confidence', Kervick argues that 'French's teenage characters exhibit the haunting experience of Celtic Tiger children coming of age'.[86] The girls feel that their main prerogative is to live in permanent fear. One of them observes that she hears voices 'snapping loud from every direction: *Be scared, you have to be scared* […]. Be scared terrified petrified that everything

[80] French, 60.
[81] French, 46.
[82] French, 47.
[83] Peterson, 'Voicing the Unspeakable', 115.
[84] French, 48.
[85] Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I: Reflections on the Post-Celtic Tiger Era', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28.2 (2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2017.1275382. See also Barros-Del Río, 177.
[86] Kervick, 14.

you are is kind of wrong'.[87] As Fionnuala Dillane notes, 'French emphasises the endemic and unquestioned social structures that produce such gender-specific fears'.[88] *The Secret Place* here clearly addresses the impact of societal pressures on the young women coming of age in a society fundamentally transformed by the economic boom.

In many ways, *The Secret Place* can be read as a counter narrative to *Bad Day in Blackrock* – it draws attention to the objectification of women and shows the harm caused by the misogyny and toxic masculinity displayed by the young men. This becomes particularly obvious with regard to the sexual assault one of the girls is subjected to. The perpetrator of the assault, a boy from Colm's, displays the same misogynist attitude as the boys in *Bad Day in Blackrock*. The novel portrays how this assault impacts all of the girls in the group, they feel 'a mix of roaring rage and a shame that stains every cell, this crawling understanding that now their bodies belong to other people's eyes and hands, not to them'.[89] Ultimately, the murder of Chris Harper can also be traced back to the culture of toxic masculinity fostered in the environment of the boarding school. While it is not the actual toxic masculinity Harper displayed, the motive for the murder is that one of the girls suspected that he had forced one of her friends to have sex with him. In a misguided attempt to protect her friend from the supposedly cruel rapist, she sets a trap for Chris and kills him. Her assumption that Chris is just like the others points to the pervading nature of toxic masculinity as performed both by the Colm boys in *The Secret Place* as well as by the boys attending Brookfield in *Bad Day in Blackrock*.

And yet, the girls' close friendship, which could be read as an effective counteraction to the toxic masculinity and the constant objectification they are subjected to, is also ultimately presented as flawed. Barros-Del Río, again in the context of Sally Rooney's novels, stresses the importance of interdependence which 'stands out as the only means to counterbalance the damaging effects of individuation and gendered commodification'.[90] Yet, in *The Secret Place*, the interdependence of the girls, combined with their isolation in the secluded boarding school, cannot be seen as an effective counterstrategy. As Peterson asserts, the girls' 'yearning for certitude sought through an Amazonian sisterhood founded on rejection of men, ultimately leads to group hysteria that results in ritualistic murder'.[91] *The Secret Place* overall shows a more ambivalent picture of the generation coming of age in twenty-first-century Ireland. While the novel provides a sharp critique of the privileged environment of the boarding school context and draws attention to the girls' materialism, just like *Bad Day in Blackrock*, it also shows how the young women suffer in an environment that objectifies them and in which they are not unlikely to fall victim to male violence. *The Secret Place* expresses a concern for the 'troubled and vulnerable youth' that Cahill considers to be so central in post-millennial Irish fiction, but at the same time troubles the reader through its portrayal of vicious girls and a teenage murderess. But still, the novel, like *Bad Day in Blackrock*, goes beyond a mere critical portrayal of the poor little rich kids attending exclusive boarding schools, as the following subchapter will outline.

[87] French, 149.
[88] Fionnuala Dillane, 'Breaking Memory Modes: Anne Enright's and Tana French's Silent Interruptions', *Irish University Review* 47.1 (2017): 147, https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0262.
[89] French, 115.
[90] Barros-Del Río, 187.
[91] Peterson, 'Voicing the Unspeakable', 116.

Melancholia and the Big House Novel Tradition in *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place*

In his article on postcrash Irish fiction, Kelly identifies *Bad Day in Blackrock* as a contemporary Big House novel. He asserts that 'like big house novels before it, *Bad Day in Blackrock* aims to evoke the structure of feeling that attends to the falling away of one reality […] and its replacement by something still undefined'.[92] If novels like Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) chronicle the 'crumbling of the Anglo-Irish as an aristocratic class',[93] *Bad Day in Blackrock* chronicles the fall of the wealthy 'ruling class' of Celtic Tiger Ireland, which, as has been shown, resembles the old colonial ruling class in many ways. This fall is embodied by Richard Culhane, one of the three perpetrators. The novel begins and ends with a description of Richard's family, the Culhanes, on the fictional island of 'Inishfall', their 'fallen island'[94] in a house that 'has become the final refuge of a fallen family'.[95] The recurrent motif of the fall seems to mirror the metaphorical 'fall' of Ireland from a newly wealthy and prosperous country to a country shaken by the financial crisis. As other Big House novels before it, such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), which conveys the message that 'glory days have ended',[96] the novel speaks of the end of an era and an insecurity about the future.

The narrator of Power's novel clearly mourns the death of his brother, feeling heavy with grief,[97] yet it seems that Conor is not the only one dead and buried in the novel. A clear parallel is drawn between the death of Conor and the end of the Celtic Tiger boom:

> We know it will end, of course, our golden age, our belle époque […] There are people, I know, who are waiting for the end, who are ready with their elegies and funeral rites. But they're already too late. This world – rich south Dublin at the turn of the twenty-first century – is already over. It ended on the night of 31 August 2004.[98]

While the novel shows the excess and blatant materialism of the boom years and portrays the immoral, toxic and misogynist culture of a so-called ruling class, *Bad Day in Blackrock* is an elegy rather than a triumphant account of their downfall. The novel, published in the year of the financial crisis, 2008, can be seen as a swan song to the short period of prosperity in Irish history, as the narrator seems to be mourning not only his brother but a whole way of life, which he believes has died as well – a lifestyle that he remembers with a certain fondness, despite all its drawbacks.

The novel not only expresses grief about the loss of Conor and the end of the Celtic Tiger period, but also a feeling of melancholia about a lost, bright future. In this context, it is again the character of Richard Culhane that takes centre stage. Richard is portrayed throughout the novel as the embodiment of the boom period, the successful golden child

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[92] Kelly, 206.
[93] Claire Norris, 'The Big House: Space, Place, and Identity in Irish Fiction', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 8.1 (2004): 114.
[94] Power, 230.
[95] Power, 11.
[96] Norris, 114.
[97] Power, 226.
[98] Power, 35.

with a newly built pool in the garden of his parents' house.[99] Kelly goes so far as to suggest that Richard seems reminiscent of Jay Gatsby – and not just because of his swimming pool. And yet, he points out that '[a]s in Fitzgerald's novel, this [Richard's] pool becomes symbolic of the hubristic belief that wealth insulates one from reality'.[100] Like *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Bad Day in Blackrock* dismantles this arrogant belief: after the trial and his short stay in prison, Richard has, though physically unharmed and still protected by his parents' wealth, lost the 'brash confidence'[101] that was so defining for him and his circle of friends before the murder, and with it, he has lost his whole identity. The narrator remarks, '[i]n a sense, of course, it *was* Richard who had died. We just didn't know it yet'.[102] Despite being aware of Richard's actions, he expresses no feeling of glee over the fall from grace of one of his brother's murderers. While acknowledging the gravity of Richard's actions, he can only articulate a feeling of grief: when he recalls that 'Richard Culhane's future was immaculate',[103] he seems to mourn not only Richard's individual future but also a collective imagined future, voicing what Slavin calls the 'unspecified grief at the loss of what was perceived to be […] a glorious neoliberal future' in Ireland.[104]

The Secret Place conveys a similar 'sense of an ending' and a feeling of insecurity about the future. Moreover, the novel's setting clearly alludes to the classic setting of the Big House novel. At the beginning of the novel, Stephen Moran, the working-class detective, finds himself admiring the beautiful schoolhouse, which he describes as:

> Someone's ancestral home, once, someone's mansion with grooms holding dancing carriage horses, with tiny-waisted ladies drifting arm in arm across the grass. Two hundred years old, more? […] Perfect, it was perfect, everything balanced, every inch.[105]

St. Kilda's, in other words, is reminiscent of a Big House, a place that almost certainly belonged to the Protestant Ascendancy, transformed here into an exclusive home for the children of the new 'ruling class', the Catholic Ascendancy. Moran, the working-class outsider, admits, 'maybe I should have hated it'.[106] Whereas his colleague, Antoinette Conway, openly states that she regrets she cannot 'petrol-bomb it to fuck',[107] alluding to the burning of Big Houses during the Irish War of Independence,[108] Moran admires the beauty of St. Kilda's for a long time before he realises that he has fallen for a beautiful illusion. In line with the conventions of the genre, Moran and Conway can be read as outsiders 'who infiltrate [...] the Big House with a view to taking it over',[109] as it seems likely that the exclusive boarding school's reputation will not survive the revelation that one of their own students has murdered Chris Harper. The end of the novel evokes the topos of the final fall of the Big House. When Moran

[99] Power, 22.
[100] Kelly, 206.
[101] Lanigan, 102.
[102] Power, 104.
[103] Power, 38.
[104] Slavin, 2–3.
[105] French, 34–35.
[106] French, 35.
[107] French, 35.
[108] On the burning of Irish Big Houses, see for example Terence Dooley, *Burning the Big House: The Story of the Irish Country House in a Time of War and Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).
[109] Heather Ingman, 'Anglo-Ireland: The Big House Novel in Transition', *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940–1980*, ed. Eve Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 256.

and Conway are about to leave the school, Moran hears 'the faint slow toll of a great clock striking midnight somewhere […]. For one last second, the place we'd come to that morning materialised out of the dark for me: beautiful; whorled and spired of mother-of-pearl and mist; unreachable'.[110] The clock striking midnight seems to imply that the time of the transformed Big House of St. Kilda's, has come to an end – the time of the new 'ruling class' has run out.

While Moran is, in contrast to the narrator of *Bad Day in Blackrock*, an outsider and thus expresses no grief over the fall of the Big House, the novel still expresses a feeling of grief and melancholia – and this is linked to the character of Chris Harper. Chris Harper resembles the golden child of *Bad Day in Blackrock*, Richard Culhane, in many ways: he is handsome, a good rugby player, 'the whole school fancied him'.[111] As the son of a successful banker – who 'always had the best stuff […]. He wanted it, he had it'[112] –, Chris also embodies the privilege, materialist orientation and 'brash confidence' that was characteristic of Richard. On the other hand, Chris also represents the growing self-centredness of the Celtic Tiger generation that could be observed in Power's novel alongside the objectification of women – the detectives discover that Chris had a secret phone which he used to flirt with girls but also to pressure them into sending him revealing pictures.[113] While Chris is portrayed as a slightly more ambiguous character than the boys in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, he, like them, represents the privileged, wealthy, irresponsible Irish 'ruling class' of the early twenty-first century. And like Richard Culhane, he, too, embodies their fall.

Chris Harper's early death, like that of Conor Harris in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, can also be read as emblematic of the end of the Celtic Tiger. He epitomises both the economic boom in Ireland and – through his premature death – what Rachel Schaffer has called 'the negative outcomes of the Celtic Tiger's premature demise'.[114] In this context, it is important to consider that in *The Secret Place*, Chris' ghost is allegedly haunting the school grounds. Slavin points out that '[m]elancholia […] is often linked to the presence of ghosts and hauntings'.[115] Chris' ghost is thus linked not only to a feeling of grief over his premature death but also to a feeling of melancholia over a lost future. Selena describes that Chris' ghost is 'always doing something. It's like he's trying to get all the things done that he'll never have a chance to do'.[116] As Molly Ferguson remarks, ghosts do not haunt the Irish at all times, but tend to appear in 'moments of collective unease over a crisis in national identity'.[117] The ghost of Chris Harper does indeed appear in a time of crisis – the crisis of the post-Celtic Tiger years in Ireland, characterised by the austerity politics and a general feeling of what Gladwin describes as a 'Celtic Tiger hangover'.[118] Read against this backdrop, the ghost of Chris Harper not only

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[110] French, 517–518.
[111] French, 95.
[112] French, 131.
[113] French, 276–277.
[114] Rachel Schaffer, 'Introduction: Tana French and Irish Crime Fiction', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 32.1 (2014): 11.
[115] Slavin, 5.
[116] French, 135.
[117] Molly E. Ferguson, *The Ghost in the Irish Psyche: Ghost Stories in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2010), 1. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/ghost-irish-psyche-stories-contemporary/docview/757244005/se-2. Accessed 17 March 2024.
[118] Gladwin, 210.

represents a departed soul, motivated by the unfinished business of his unresolved murder, but also seems to represent a general feeling of melancholia, similar to the one expressed in *Bad Day in Blackrock.*

Conclusion

Tana French and Kevin Power, two writers of the post-Celtic Tiger period, provide acute portrayals of Irish society in a time of profound transformation. *Bad Day in Blackrock* and *The Secret Place* paint a bleak picture of Irish youth, of materialist, privileged teenagers, of mean girls and violent boys, immoral rich kids – of the cubs of the Celtic Tiger. And yet, they both go beyond a mere social critique of the spoiled children of the *nouveau riche*, expressing a feeling of melancholia over a lost, bright, imagined future. Despite their focus on the severed spaces of exclusive boarding schools in South Dublin, the novels shed light on the state of postcrash Ireland in general, a country, like the teenage characters at the centre of both novels, in a liminal state, unsure of where it was headed. A description of an abandoned building site, called 'the Field', next to the glamorous shopping centre in *The Secret Place* appears as particularly emblematic in this context:

> [The Field i]s where another wing of the Court was supposed to be built […] but then the recession happened. Instead there's a wire-fenced expanse of tall raggedy weeds, with raw patches of hard earth still showing through like scars where the bulldozers had started work.[119]

While the shopping centre epitomises the capitalist culture of Ireland during the economic boom, 'the Field' next to it represents its downside, the recession and austerity politics after the financial crisis. The depiction of this place speaks not only of the deep transformation of the country during the Celtic Tiger years – the earth is still bearing 'scars' from the bulldozers – but also illustrates an observation by Marie Mianowski, who in the context of post-Celtic Tiger literature remarks that 'the representations of place and landscape are also symptomatic of a difficulty to imagine the future'.[120] Instead, the melancholic feeling of a lost future pervades the desolate landscapes of recessionary Ireland such as the Field.

It is noteworthy that in this time of crisis, both authors draw on conventions of the well-established Irish genre of the Big House novel. The Big House novel, from its beginnings with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* in 1800,[121] has throughout Irish literary history appealed to writers chronicling the end of an era – Claire Norris observes that '[t]he motif of the deteriorating Big House and its society recurs throughout Irish fiction'.[122] Like the crumbling castle in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806)[123] or the burning estate at the end of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929)[124] convey the sense of an ending and the fall of the established 'ruling class', so does the fallen house of the Culhanes and the exclusive school of St. Kilda's, where the clock strikes midnight, epitomise the end of the

[119] French, 71.
[120] Marie Mianowski. *Post-Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Irish Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 7.
[121] Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, ed. George Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[122] Norris, 115.
[123] Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*, ed. Claire Connolly (London: Pickering & Catto, 2000).
[124] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Cape, 1969).

boom period. The genre of the Big House novel seems to be particularly well suited to both chronicle a society undergoing deep transformation as well as express a feeling of grief and melancholia – while at the same time acknowledging that maybe this golden age, this *belle époque* was never so magnificent to begin with.

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