

“But we are here”: Life Writing, Disability, and the Importance of Representation

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Introduction

While questions of identity and the genre of life writing have been important to the Irish literary scene for decades,⁶⁸ in recent years there has been a notable boom in life writing, often in essay form. Like most other literary genres, during the twentieth century, autobiographical writing was male dominated. In contrast, today it is women who are at the forefront of publishing memoirs, autofiction, collections of personal essays and other forms of life writing in Ireland. Examples of this trend include Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* (2018), Sinéad Gleeson’s *Constellations* (2019), Úna-Minh Kavanagh’s *Anseo* (2019), *Nanny, Ma and me* (2021) by Jade Jordan, co-authored with her mother and grandmother and, last but not least, the subject of this article, *Unsettled* (2021) by Rosaleen McDonagh. If, as Nicholas Allen claims, “to tell the story of the self is to write the narrative of Ireland,”⁶⁹ then female authors especially have every reason to write their own stories. Indeed, earlier autobiographies contributed to the normalisation of a certain image of Ireland, one that was mainly able-bodied, white, and patriarchal, leaving little space for other identities and lived realities within the cultural landscape of the island. Thus, it is noteworthy that several of the autobiographers mentioned above are not only marginalised due to their gender identities, but in fact face double marginalisation, be it because they are women of colour, members of the Traveller community, or disabled. Any analysis of their writing must accordingly be based on an intersectional approach, considering the various ways in which these women fit uneasily into preconceived notions of Ireland and its inhabitants. By

writing their own life stories, they help to portray Ireland as the multi-faceted place that it is, rather than the white Catholic monolith that some may still want to believe it to be.

This article will first provide a brief overview of the meaning of life writing in an Irish context. It will then address one exemplary text, namely, as mentioned above, Rosaleen McDonagh’s *Unsettled*, paying particular attention to the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and disability in the work. Through this focus, the article will attempt to draw conclusions on what can be learned from this autobiographical work about the importance of representation and the construction of identity in Irish life writing.

Writing the Self into the Narrative of the Nation

Life writing in its many forms has a long tradition within Ireland’s cultural landscape. Before the Republic gained independence, autobiography specifically was perceived as a vital tool in the nationalist struggle, one that could enable the creation of an Irish national identity that was separate from Great Britain. Later, autobiography began to be an important tool for the portrayal of “hidden Irelands,”⁷⁰ meaning voices that did not fit into the newly established state’s vision of itself. Indeed, “[a]utobiography’s potential not only to represent but to be representative,”⁷¹ as Claire Lynch calls it, makes it an ideal instrument for challenging accepted notions of Irish national identity. In both classical autobiography and other forms of autobiographical writing, such as personal essays, authors can explore their own sense of self and negotiate it with their surroundings. Indeed, Lynch argues that while

⁶⁸ Throughout this article, the term “life writing” will be used as an umbrella term for various forms of autobiographical writing. “Autobiographical” is used as an adjective describing all forms of life writing. Whenever quotes used include the term “autobiography,” it may be assumed that they were chosen because the points made, in these specific cases, can also apply to a wider selection of life writing.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Allen, “Autobiography and the Irish Literary Revival,” in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 152.

⁷⁰ John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Paperback reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 15.

⁷¹ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Oxford and Vienna: Lang, 2009), 9–10.

“identity is by its very nature ephemeral,”⁷² it tends to “manifest in physical form such as [...] personal writing.”⁷³ Therefore, it is through the telling of life stories that the overall image of Ireland may be augmented. Indeed, today national identity is no longer the focus of most autobiographical works; yet, for many authors, life writing is still a powerful tool when it comes to negotiating their own relationship to the country and their circumstances. Accordingly, by facilitating the production of autobiographical texts by a wide variety of writers, a more open, fluid, and therefore truthful image of Ireland may be created.

George O’Brien notes that oftentimes “[t]he autobiographical impetus derives from an interrupted experience of belonging.”⁷⁴ This inter- or disrupted sense of belonging can affect any and all marginalised groups and in turn makes the tool of autobiographical writing all the more powerful for these groups. Not only is it important for members of minority groups to see themselves reflected on the screen, in writing, and ultimately in the widely projected image of the nation, but representation is also vital when it comes to allowing for variety in the traditionally very narrow definition of Irish national identity. Liam Harte emphasises “[t]he working-class socialist, the Gaelic-speaking islander, the Traveller, the economic migrant, the non-white Irish citizen, the Northern Irish Protestant, the person with a disability, the survivor of childhood abuse, the LGBTQ person,”⁷⁵ when he speaks of the groups of people whose stories, if they are allowed to be told, can “contest hegemonic representation and contribute to a more complex, ambivalent narrative of ‘nationness.’”⁷⁶ In this sense, life writing can be seen as a form of activism by which the self as the other is written into the narrative of the nation. Indeed, as Briona Nic Dhiarmada mentions, “[life writing] has brought forth the voices of many individuals whose

gender and class usually leave them outside literary discourse, voices which assert their cultural difference and their subjectivity while insisting upon their common humanity.”⁷⁷

Alongside class, gender, and ethnicity, disability is another category that needs to be considered when discussing the issue of identity creation and representation in life writing. Indeed, the dehumanisation many people with disabilities have faced, and to an extent still face in Ireland, makes life writing, with its focus on identity and the human experience, a poignant choice for disabled writers. Ireland’s history of institutional abuse has led to a strong tradition of what Moira J. Maguire has called “abuse survival memoirs.”⁷⁸ These works often overlap with autobiographical texts written by disabled authors, as disability was one of the leading factors of institutionalisation. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grubgeld summarises, “[p]ost-independence Ireland has come to be understood as an era in which the forces of church and state colluded to control the body and sequester those bodies that could not or did not conform.”⁷⁹ Instead of providing support and care at home, the state placed disabled children in hospitals or care homes, which many of those institutionalised would not leave until adulthood.⁸⁰ This practice was still common in the 1980s, with conditions in these institutions described by Grubgeld as “barbaric even by the standard of the times.”⁸¹ Those forced to live in hospitals or care homes regularly faced “severe corporal punishments for physical differences such as being unable to lift one’s arms, tie shoes, control the bowels or urinary function, curtail involuntary tremors, or speak in a socially normative voice.”⁸² Neither were they given sufficient schooling, and, if they ever left institutional life, they did so traumatised and unprepared for life outside the institution.

The practice of removing children with disabili-

⁷² Lynch, *Irish Autobiography*, 2.

⁷³ Lynch, *Irish Autobiography*, 2.

⁷⁴ George O’Brien, “Memoirs of Irish Rural Life,” in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 200.

⁷⁵ Liam Harte, “Introduction: Autobiography Theory and Criticism in Ireland,” in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 12.

⁷⁶ Harte, “Introduction,” 12.

⁷⁷ Briona Nic Dhiarmada, “Irish-Language Autobiography,” in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 228.

⁷⁸ Moira J. Maguire, “The Irish Abuse Survival Memoir,” in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 348.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing in Post-Independence Ireland* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 17.

⁸⁰ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 48–49.

⁸¹ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 47.

⁸² Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 49.

ties from their homes disproportionately affected the poor, leading Maguire to argue that “[w]hat happened to them and to countless others happened in large part because a hyper-moralistic and intolerant society had difficulty coping with parents and children from working-class backgrounds who did not fit the middle-class ideal of ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’ family life.”⁸³ If a family’s lifestyle did not comply with these ideals for any other reason, be it that there were unmarried or single parents, suspected promiscuity or homosexuality or, and this will be discussed in more detail in the next section, the family were Travellers, the risk of a child being taken away was even greater. In a majority of abuse survival memoirs, the fear of renewed institutionalisation is shown to remain a constant part of the life of survivors, especially those who face financial insecurities.⁸⁴ Accordingly, being aware of the history of both abuse survival memoirs and disability life writing in Ireland is vital, since, as Grubgeld notes “trying to understand Ireland without trying to understand the experiences of disabled people in Ireland produces a limited comprehension of a complex and diverse culture.”⁸⁵ Indeed, listening to or reading the life stories of those living with disabilities may help an understanding of the social issues still at stake within the country. Thus, the rest of this article will be devoted to the analysis of Rosaleen McDonagh’s collection of autobiographical essays *Unsettled*.

Unsettled

Unsettled is a collection of autobiographical essays by Rosaleen McDonagh, an Irish Traveller feminist, playwright and academic with cerebral palsy. Although in the introduction to her volume, McDonagh claims that “these pieces embody a diverse experience of what it is to be Irish,”⁸⁶ she rarely references Ireland or Irishness in the body of the text. Arguably, this is because to her, being Irish means being a Traveller. What she instead grapples with throughout the text

are the intersections of discrimination she faces as a Traveller woman with an impairment. It is these intersections which make her story a diverse experience of Irishness, one that functions as an important step towards a more inclusive narrative of Ireland. As McDonagh writes,

Reading [...] seemed to be reserved for settled people, for able-bodied people. [...] However, trying to find myself in these synthesised, curated versions of women’s lives was often futile. When you can’t see yourself on those pages, you write your own stories.⁸⁷

Thus, McDonagh provides vital representation for not only the Traveller community, but also for people with disabilities and institutional abuse survivors in Ireland, and she does so without ever presuming to speak for anyone but herself and without attempting to make her own story more palatable for outsiders.

A central part of McDonagh’s story is “what it is to be Irish and to have an impairment.”⁸⁸ Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that McDonagh’s autobiographical work may be classified as a recent instalment of an abuse survival memoir, as described above. Removed from her family at age four to live in what she refers to as a “residential special school,”⁸⁹ McDonagh came to experience the prejudice, inhumanity, and violence so innate to Ireland’s institutional systems. Maguire explains how “church and state in an independent Ireland that purported to cherish its children [...] allowed the most vulnerable of its citizens [...] to be subjected to a level of violence that by contemporary standards would be regarded as not only immoral but criminal.”⁹⁰ In the chapter “Clamped”—a wordplay that references inhibiting (involuntary) movement in a wheelchair, as well as being something that can be done to a caravan, hindering the Travellers’ traditional way of life—McDonagh mentions the two different kinds of abuse from authority figures she has experienced: “Disabled bodies didn’t have the exotic fetish association that

⁸³ Maguire, “The Irish Abuse Survival Memoir,” 351.

⁸⁴ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 48.

⁸⁵ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 17.

⁸⁶ Rosaleen McDonagh, *Unsettled* (Dublin: Skein Press, 2021), xv.

⁸⁷ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 71.

⁸⁸ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, xi.

⁸⁹ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 1.

⁹⁰ Maguire, “The Irish Abuse Survival Memoir,” 349.

Traveller bodies did. The beatings were for my disabled body, and the sexual stuff was for my Traveller body.”⁹¹ As becomes apparent, even in a medical facility, there is no safety from discrimination. Not only are disabled women routinely put on birth control without their knowledge or consent, McDonagh is also scheduled for a hysterectomy she neither needs nor wants. In her essay, she connects this decision with her dating a Traveller man at that time: “The care workers in the residential centre believed pregnancy was imminent and that this man could be taking advantage of me. Racism is never subtle.”⁹² These connections between her disability and her ethnicity in her experience of institutional abuse are important to note, as they show the intersections of racism and ableism that led to the state’s failure to protect a young Rosaleen McDonagh from harm.

In addition to the horrific abuse suffered, to McDonagh, her isolation from family and community stands out as one of the most traumatising elements of living with an impairment and thus being institutionalised: “This life of mine exposed me to mainstream and settled culture. Being away from my family and my community, the force of that assimilation, broke me.”⁹³ Indeed, as Grubgeld notes, oftentimes “objections to a parent’s way of life [...] led to a disabled child’s removal.”⁹⁴ Of course, the Traveller way of life was and unfortunately still is perceived by mainstream Irish culture as such an objectionable lifestyle, which meant that McDonagh’s family was kept from visiting her:

The arrangement with the nursing home was that my family would stay away. [...] the guards would be called if my family were in the vicinity. Signing the form, crying, as I didn’t know when or if I’d ever see my family again. The word traitor kept running around in my head.⁹⁵

The state’s attitude towards Travellers and towards people with disabilities led not only to McDonagh’s temporary removal from her community, but also to repeated attempts at having her adopted into a settled family, instead of trying to help accommodate life with an impairment in her native setting.

As a result of her separation from the Traveller community, McDonagh frequently discusses “the cultural differences” between herself and her family that emerged through her experience with disability and institutional life:⁹⁶ “The convention of the time was that you would do what your mother or father had done – marry and raise a family. A person who didn’t live their lives in this pattern was considered odd, not a real Traveller.”⁹⁷ As her cerebral palsy progressed, it was deemed McDonagh could no longer live in a caravan, and she was removed from her family. In close contact with settled people, she was not only exposed to violence but also a completely different way of life, a settled one. Living in a house, albeit an institution, and with settled people, isolated McDonagh from her family and forcibly estranged her from her community. Furthermore, once she reached adulthood it became clear to McDonagh that her disability would make living up to the expectations towards Traveller women—birthing children and taking care of the home—near impossible. Thus, she expresses feelings of inadequacy:

The pain of knowing that fundamental aspects of life were closed off to me was often overwhelming. Knowing that if I was a man, it wouldn’t matter what impairment I had. There still would be a possibility. [...] It was excruciating, that strange sense of what it is to be considered a failed woman.⁹⁸

Elsewhere, McDonagh has discussed that institutional life, due to a lack of sex education, lingering trauma and, in many cases, physical intervention such as forced hysterectomies, hindered her and other institu-

⁹¹ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 23.

⁹² McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 17.

⁹³ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, xi.

⁹⁴ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 48.

⁹⁵ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 38.

⁹⁶ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 2–3.

⁹⁷ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 36.

⁹⁸ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 46.

tionalised women from making decisions about their reproductive plans.⁹⁹ At the same time, her family's acknowledgement of her need "to mix with settled people and make a life" means that McDonagh gets to take advantage of certain freedoms not available to her sisters.¹⁰⁰ One of them is her education, which she repeatedly emphasises as her own way to freedom and independence.

In her university days, McDonagh builds a friendship with Mary Elizabeth, another woman with cerebral palsy born into a Traveller family. However, unlike McDonagh, Mary Elizabeth was adopted and raised by a settled family. This apparently saved her from a lot of the abuse McDonagh herself went through in institutional care, but it also estranged her from an integral part of her own identity: "You're lucky your family accepted what came out of your mother's womb. They love and support who and what you are. When you look at photos, you know who you belong to. Not everybody has that,"¹⁰¹ Mary Elizabeth tells McDonagh. Her isolation from the community goes so far that when Traveller ethnicity is officially recognised, she cannot celebrate with McDonagh and her Traveller friends, but insists on a private celebration in which she finally tries to come to terms with her identity. In telling this story in her own narrative, McDonagh acknowledges that the same circumstances can lead to very different outcomes but that being separated from your community will usually have devastating effects on your own sense of self. Indeed, a forced separation may leave an individual feeling perpetually unsettled.

When speaking of autobiographical writing produced by authors with disabilities, Grubgeld notes that "Marketing material such as cover art, the back-cover biography, and advertisements also affects the presentation of identity in the text itself."¹⁰² Accordingly, a brief note on the paratext of *Unsettled* has to be made, starting with the title. "Unsettled" is a multi-faceted pun, referencing the status of the Traveller commu-

nity as opposed to the settled community, but also referring to McDonagh's in-between status as someone forcefully integrated into a settled environment, yet maintaining strong family ties. The word can, of course, also mean disturbed, as well as not resolved, both of which can again be connected to the Traveller community and McDonagh in specific, as she mentions in the introduction to her text that "[t]here was no triumphant moment of overcoming the violence inflicted on me."¹⁰³ Both the past trauma of abuse and the ongoing trauma of discrimination linger, leaving the person affected unsettled. The back cover quotes, supplied by influential Irish authors such as, amongst others, Anne Enright and Emilie Pine, emphasise the quality and honesty of the writing itself and express hopes that the book will lead into a more positive future. While the selection of quotes is, of course, meant to entice readers and the quality of the essays is deserving of praise, care must be taken not to make an example out of McDonagh. Indeed, the emphasis throughout the quotes on the book being about identity, and more specifically, McDonagh's unique story, lends itself to seeing her as an exception, as someone able to overcome all obstacles and become a writer—something the author herself explicitly wants to avoid. Furthermore, although *Unsettled* is an important piece of literary activism, it is only the beginning of what is needed in order to improve the lived realities of Travellers and people with disabilities in Ireland.

Throughout *Unsettled*, we can witness McDonagh working through past traumas and at the same time trying to negotiate her identity as a proud Traveller woman, a person with a disability, a highly educated woman, and a survivor of institutionalised abuse in the face of Ireland's prejudice against all of these identities. It is important to note that "autobiography can yet act as a vital form of self-creation,"¹⁰⁴ as Grubgeld claims. Indeed, especially for an author with a disability, taking control of your own narrative is of

⁹⁹ Rosaleen McDonagh, "Rosaleen McDonagh: 'Traveller women who don't have children are pitied:'

Cerebral palsy meant two mighty and brutal forces of patriarchy had a tight grip upon my body," *The Irish Times*, published 17 April 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/rosaleen-mcdonagh-traveller-women-who-don-t-have-children-are-pitied-1.4526284>.

¹⁰⁰ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 35.

¹⁰¹ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, 94.

¹⁰² Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 9.

¹⁰³ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, xv.

¹⁰⁴ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 7.

crucial importance. While life writing in general is often about the establishment of an independent self, those living with disabilities frequently face difficult situations “involv[ing the granting of] intimate access to the body in need of assistance, and all such arrangements require ongoing negotiations regarding privacy and autonomy.”¹⁰⁵ Grubgeld indicates that in this context,

history [...] urges the abandonment of yet another generic formulation, the tale of ‘overcoming’ one’s own body. The conflict in [disability] life writings does not lie between one’s ambitions and one’s body; the conflict lies instead between one’s ambitions for independence, however the term is imagined, and socially imposed restrictions.¹⁰⁶

Unsettled, in fact, is one example of an autobiographical text that challenges the tale of overcoming and negotiates the conflicting realities of needing assistance and wanting to live independently. An example of this can be found in the acknowledgments of the collection: due to her physical impairment, McDonagh can only put her life story down on paper with the help of someone else: “Enormous gratitude goes to Olivia Smith, who has sat with me and typed for the last two years. Her job is much more than a typist. Her patience, diligence and ambition to ensure she understands every word I say is empowering.”¹⁰⁷ While life writing is always a vulnerable process, involving deep self-reflection and openness, for McDonagh the assistance needed in producing her autobiographical work heightens this aspect. Yet, by acknowledging her limits and being able to ask for the support needed, she is able to tell her story, perhaps more unfiltered than the generations of disabled autobiographers before her, successfully negotiating the line between dependence and finding your own, independent voice.

Conclusion

Readers may be tempted to see Rosaleen McDonagh as absolutely settled into her role as writer, teacher, and advocate and feeling absolved of any duty of their own. If McDonagh succeeded against all odds, then maybe the situation of Travellers, of disabled people, of Travellers with disabilities in Ireland is not so bad after all. This notion, however, belies the lived experience of these communities, and of the author herself. According to paveepoint.ie, the website of the Traveller and Roma Centre Pavee Point, 11% of deaths within the Traveller community are due to suicide.¹⁰⁸ The prejudice Travellers face in Ireland plays a significant role in this devastating number of suicides, as does the fact that it is near impossible to pursue a traditional Traveller way of life in Ireland today. There are few campsites available to Travellers, and many of the sites they are parked in do not have a stable supply of water, electricity or WIFI. Thus, especially Travellers with disabilities are forced to forego their traditional lifestyle in favour of forced assimilation into a settled culture—one in which it may still be difficult to find all the provisions necessary to live independently with a disability. Furthermore, to focus solely on the success of Dr Rosaleen, as McDonagh is affectionately known in her community, would be to minimise the various traumatic experiences she describes in her essays and the systemic issues underlying the abuse she has suffered. While it is important to read works like *Unsettled*, they should merely be reminders of the work still to be done until the lives behind these examples of life writing can unproblematically fit into the narrative of the nation. As Rosaleen McDonagh writes: “This book is not the Traveller story. It’s just one of many to come. [...] Page after page, the details will hopefully motivate other Travellers to document aspects of their lives. We may not be formally recognised in Irish history, but we are here.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, v–vi.

¹⁰⁸ Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, “Mental Health and Suicide in the Traveller Community,” *Pavee Point*, published 2013, <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Travellers-Mental-Health-and-Suicide.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ McDonagh, *Unsettled*, xiii–xiv.

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