

BEATA PIĄTEK¹

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2022.36.1.03

Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1048-6991>

Ireland's "broken" homes in the novels of Tana French

Abstract. This paper argues that Tana French effectively uses the figure of house and home in order to comment critically on the state of the nation in her Irish crime novels. The analysis focuses on three selected novels: *The Likeness* (2008), *Broken Harbor* (2012) and *The Searcher* (2020). It demonstrates that in *The Likeness*, French uses the historical and literary tradition of the Big House to comment on the economic and class tensions during the period of the economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger.² In *Broken Harbor*, she employs the gothic mode of writing in her portrayal of the consequences of the credit crunch. And finally, in *The Searcher*, she debunks the myth of rural Ireland as a pastoral retreat and safe haven. The paper applies Susan Fraiman's notions of "shelter writing" and "alternative homemakers" (2017) in order to show how French uses domestic space and domestic rituals in order to problematize gender stereotypes and undermine conservative expectations about the nuclear family.

Keywords: Irish crime fiction, Tana French, house and home, Celtic Tiger, domestic rituals, shelter writing.

This paper aims at analysing the role of home in the portrayal of modern Ireland in the work of Tana French, a contemporary Irish writer, who has achieved popular success and is gaining increasing critical acclaim as the author of police procedurals set in and around Dublin.³ French's first novel, *In the Woods* (2007), received the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best first novel, the Macavity Award, the Barry Award and the Anthony Award, all in 2008. Her fourth novel, *Broken Harbor* (2012), was awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for mystery thriller and the Irish Book Award in the category of crime fiction.

1 Address for correspondence: Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, al. Mickiewicza 9, 31-120 Kraków, Poland. E-mail: beata.piatek@uj.edu.pl

2 Celtic Tiger is a term applied both to the economy of the Republic of Ireland during the period of its unprecedented growth between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s and to the country itself. It alludes to the exceptionally high rate of growth, matching only that of East Asian nations.

3 Tana French has published eight novels so far. All have sold millions of copies and been translated into many languages (including Polish), but the critical acclaim is a relatively new development. In 2014 the oldest American academic journal devoted to the study of detective fiction, *Clues*, honoured her with a special issue. *Critical Inquiries into Irish Studies*, a journal published by Seton Hall University in the US, is planning a volume devoted to the critical analysis of French's work for autumn 2022.

Critics and reviewers who have registered a veritable boom of Irish crime fiction observe that it coincided with the economic growth which took place in the final decades of the last century (O’Toole 2011; Clark 2013; Gregorek 2014; Schaffer 2014; Mannion 2016). Fintan O’Toole explains this phenomenon by pointing out that the economic prosperity of the 1990s brought about a crisis of moral authority in Ireland. The investigations and subsequent reports into sex scandals in the church, child abuse in religious schools, the abuse of women and children in the Magdalene laundries, all in full view of politicians, seriously undermined moral, religious and political authority in the country (2011). Thus, according to O’Toole, “boom-time Ireland reproduced social conditions that created crime fiction as a mass genre” (2011: 359). What is more, the critic goes on to claim that crime fiction is “the nearest thing we have to a realist literature adequate to capturing the nature of contemporary society” (2011: 360). The opinion that Irish crime fiction in the 21st century offers a particularly accurate portrayal of the lives and anxieties of the Irish has been endorsed by several other critics (Clark 2013; Mannion 2016; Peterson 2016). The preoccupation with the economic realities of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath in the novels of Tana French has already been discussed to some extent (Casey 2014; Gregorek 2014; Reddy 2014; Peterson 2016). Maureen Reddy very persuasively demonstrates that French actually writes rather pessimistic state-of-the-nation novels (2014).

The present paper offers a detailed analysis of three novels selected from different stages in French’s writing career: *The Likeness* (2008), *Broken Harbor* (2012) and *The Searcher* (2020) in order to demonstrate the centrality of the figures of house and home in her fiction. While houses and domestic space are highly prominent in all her novels, I have selected the above three titles to illustrate how throughout her writing so far the author has effectively used the figure of a house to comment on the state of affairs in the home of Ireland. In *The Likeness*, French uses the motif of the Big House to reach to Irish history and link the past with the present. In *Broken Harbor*, a ghost housing estate allows the author to comment on the economic and social cost of the housing crisis. In *The Searcher*, French resorts to antipastoral mode to debunk the myth of rural Ireland as a safe home. These three novels also illustrate the generic evolution of French’s writing: from a typical police procedural to a psychological thriller with elements of murder mystery.⁴

4 In the police procedurals (from her debut, *In the Woods* to *The Trespasser* (2016)) Tana French uses an interesting narrative technique in order to create a relationship between the readers and her detective and offers a double perspective on the action of the novels, i.e. in each novel the investigation is conducted by a pair of officers from the Dublin Murder Squad. We see the action from the perspective of one officer, but in the next novel the other officer (the sidekick) will conduct the investigation, often reflecting on the previous case and his or her colleague. In this way the readers learn to notice that the first-person narrators may be unreliable. Additionally, she always makes her detectives vul-

Reaching to the past – Big House in *The Likeness*

Tana French's third novel was written at the height of Ireland's economic boom and is set in the first years of the 21st century. Its characters, in the words of one critic, "seem to embody the central problem of Celtic Tiger Ireland – the past cannot simply be rejected in favour of a blank slate of modernity" (Casey 2014: 94). The dominant themes of the novel are class tensions and anxieties over home ownership and financial independence persisting at that time.

Cassie Maddox, who had left the Dublin Murder Squad after traumatic experiences in her previous case, is persuaded to take part in an undercover operation when the body of her lookalike is found in an abandoned cottage in a village a few miles from Dublin. Cassie assumes the victim's identity. As Lexie, she pretends to have miraculously survived the stabbing and returns home, to a slightly dilapidated country house, which she shares with four other graduate students of English literature. Cassie's task is to discover who murdered Lexie and why. In order to do that she must persuade all the inhabitants of Whitethorn House (Daniel, Abby, Justin and Ralph) that she is Lexie, albeit with impaired memory following the trauma and drug induced coma.

Whitethorn House is a historical Big House, i.e. a country house on a large estate belonging to the "Protestant Ascendancy" and as such deeply rooted in the history of the struggle of the Catholic tenants for land rights in the 19th century, the trauma of the Great Potato Famine, and reprisals against the Protestant landlords in the years following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.⁵ As Otto Rauchbauer states in his introductory sketch in *The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*, "For more than two centuries, the Big House has been a setting, a subject matter, a symbol, a motif [and] a theme in Irish fiction" (1992: 17). In setting the action of her novel in a Big House, Tana French not only draws on this literary tradition, but she uses it to mark a clear link between the past and the present. What is more, the house is more of a character than a setting, as it seems to be endowed with a power to enchant people and is an object of love so powerful that its inhabitants are prepared to murder one of their alternative family when she threatens the future of the house and their commune. French explains this seemingly uncanny power of the house in economic terms: inheriting Whitethorn House has provided Daniel March with economic freedom and enabled him to offer the same to a carefully selected group of friends. Once he made a legal donation of the house in equal parts to

nerable and constructs them so that their past experiences are somehow reflected in the case they are investigating.

5 In the Polish edition of the novel, which was translated as *Lustrzane odbicie* and published by Albatros, the picture on the cover shows a dilapidated wooden cottage resembling a Polish "szataś" of the kind you see in the Tatra Mountains, or a ramshackle house from a Western movie. It is an unfortunate choice as it sends a completely wrong paratextual message to the reader.

all the members of the group, they became liberated from financial anxieties and tied into becoming an alternative family. Jean Gregorek points to the similarities between the attitudes and internal dynamics of Daniel's group and the Bloomsbury group. She observes that like Virginia Woolf and her friends, Daniel March and his friends cherish the newly gained economic freedom, which allows them to lead authentic, intellectual lives and to contest the materialistic and consumerist values of their generation (2014). Unlike the artists and intellectuals of the early 20th century, the inhabitants of Whitethorn House reject modernity. They insist on restricting the use of modern technological devices to a minimum. With no screens in the house, they type their essays on an old-fashioned typewriter and spend their evenings reading and listening to vinyl gramophone records. There is an economic and class paradox involved here. The young people may show contempt for their peers, whom they see as enslaved by their employers, and to Ralph's businessman father, only because through Daniel's inheritance they have come into possession of valuable real estate. Thus they become members of the privileged class, and historically their financial comfort derives from a great deal of suffering and exploitation of the dispossessed. Troubled Irish history is first evoked by the fact that Lexie's body is found in an abandoned famine cottage, and as if that was too subtle a hint, French makes a detour into a historical sub-plot of illicit romance between a village girl and a young man from the Big House. Cassie finds documents which at first lead her to believe that it is a typical story of seduction, illegitimate child and suicide, only to frustrate her and the reader's expectations when she discovers that the young woman a hundred years ago was more of a victim of the bigotry of her community than of the cruel landlord.

Nevertheless, the local community in the contemporary plot bring up the memory of the girl's suicide in order to blame it on the current inhabitants of the house. The animosity between Glenskeyhy village and Whitethorn House bears an uncanny resemblance to the historical conflict between the tenants and the landowners. Like the landowners of the past, the students are portrayed as members of a superior social class who can afford to pursue the life of leisure. Whereas the inhabitants of the village, who seem to have been bypassed by the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger, rely on benefits and see the students' refusal to sell the house and develop the estate into a hotel and golf course as an act of selfishly cruel arrogance. The students' insistence on preserving the house and the grounds in its entirety rules out what the villagers see to be the only chance for employment in the area. From the point of view of the village, the Big House today stands for the same degree of aloof arrogance and disregard for their needs as it did a hundred years before. Thus, it comes as no surprise that at the end of the novel Whitethorn House is burnt down, like so many Big Houses in the past and in Irish fiction, and like in many Big-House novels "the fate of the family is tied up with

the house” (Norris 2004: 114), so the group break up and are forced to face the material reality which they had been trying to avoid.

The relationship between Cassie Maddox and Whitethorn House is carefully constructed by the author and used as a pretext for reflections on the state of Irish society. Early on in the novel, Cassie offers a historical explanation for the housing boom of the Celtic Tiger:

The country’s passion for property is built into the blood, a current as huge and primal as desire. Centuries of being turned out on the roadside at a landlord’s whim, helpless, teach your bones that everything in life hangs on owning your home. (French 2008: 53)

However, she remains unaffected by this “passion for property”; she lives in a rented bedsit and refuses to enter the property market as she considers the new houses to be overpriced and of low quality. Therefore, she will have no difficulty in identifying with Daniel’s anticapitalist rant later in the plot. In this context, the emotional attachment which Cassie develops for Whitethorn House is highly significant. Like the narrator of du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, she falls in love with the house at first sight, she is smitten by its architecture and setting, by the fact that the building seems to be part of the landscape: “it looked like it had grown there” (French 2008: 127). Gradually, as she feels more secure in her role as a member of the group, she becomes enchanted by the house as a mental construct. She taps into all the emotions and hopes that her housemates have invested in this space. Like the other members of the group, she derives comfort and strength from the routine of domestic rituals which they have developed. The communal cooking and eating, as well as working on renovation and interior decoration during the weekends contribute to the growth of a family atmosphere which Cassie (orphaned in childhood) finds hard to resist. She sees the students as a family, “the comforting kind that go on for years ...” (ibid.: 188).

There are extensive sections in the novel which could fit into the critical category of “shelter writing”, which Susan Fraiman defines as “a post-traumatic mode of realism” where “hyperinvestment in homemaking [functions] as compensation for domestic deprivation or difficulty” (2017: 20). Fraiman identifies this mode of writing in the narratives of social outcasts or castaways, people for whom domestic endeavours become urgent and precious, a form of self-expression and a means of survival (2017). All the inhabitants of Whitethorn House (including Cassie and the deceased Lexie) fit into Fraiman’s description; the emotional investments which they make in the house are made all the more believable by their troubled family histories. When at some point the undercover operation becomes too risky and Cassie’s superiors want to pull her out of the house, she insists on staying on, fantasizing about all the domestic pleasures she would have to forsake. Towards the end of the novel we see Cassie seduced by Daniel’s charm and the fantasy of the ideal home which he created in Whitethorn House, only

to discover that the “comforting” family was only a delusion, with the group trapped by the financial arrangement into a relationship whose dynamic was ridden with secrets and power games. The action develops very fast from the night when Cassie/Lexie kisses Daniel. The kiss confirms his suspicions about her identity, and what could have been a love affair becomes a power struggle between two antagonists. Cassie discovers that Lexie was pregnant and planned to sell her share of the house to start a new life, a decision which the group saw as betrayal, even though, as Cassie discovers, they did not share Daniel’s obsession with the house, especially after Lexie’s stabbing in a group fight. In the end Cassie is shown to admit to herself that she fell for Daniel’s charisma and for the old-fashioned way of life in Whitethorn House, which obfuscated her better judgement of the whole situation.

Jean Gregorek draws a controversial conclusion about the message of *The Likeness* when she says that “the frame of Cassie’s [...] rehabilitation clearly implies that a working-through and rejection of the past – and with it, the anachronistic values of Whitethorn House – is a necessary part of the process of healing and moving ahead” (2014: 162). Conversely, if we take into account the relationship between Whitethorn House and Glenskeyhy village, the novel maintains that the working through of the historical traumas is as necessary as acknowledging that the old class divisions were replicated in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, where the old “land question” was merely replaced by access to qualifications and jobs. Although in the end it turns out that Lexie was not murdered by a man from the village, the relations between the village and the inhabitants of the Big House remain tense till the end. Tana French seems to indicate that the economic and class barriers of the past still exist in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger and that the Big House remains a symbol of privilege in the twenty-first century.

Critical account of the present – housing crisis in *Broken Harbor*

The publication of *Broken Harbor* in 2012 with its focus on the economic and psychological consequences of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger is a logical step in Tana French’s artistic progression. In *The Likeness* her characters expressed serious doubts about the future of those who were investing in overpriced, shoddy houses. In *Broken Harbor* we witness the detective, Michael Kennedy, reconstructing the history of one family who had made that very mistake. Although the novel still displays some elements of a police procedural, French clearly moves in the direction of the psychological thriller. Kennedy cannot identify obvious villains. There are no criminals who could be convicted for the murder of the Spain family, and there is no relief of justice for the readers. Instead, or maybe rather, therefore, French accuses the system: the government, the bankers and the developers. They emerge as the only agents which may be held responsible for the violent crime committed in the housing estate of Brianstown. The location of the

fictional crime fits the description of the estates which were most susceptible to the effects of the banking crisis according to a government report published in 2013: “the areas most affected [by the crash] were in the commuter belt that experienced the most rapid development towards the end of the boom. Most of these areas are about one to one and a half hours’ commute from the capital where the bulk of ‘ghost estates’ are located” (O’Brien 2013 online).

Kennedy is investigating the murder of an entire family, inhabitants of the abandoned housing estate: two children have been smothered in their sleep, the father, Patrick Spain, died from stab wounds, and the mother, Jenny, has been taken to hospital with life threatening injuries. As Kennedy’s investigation progresses, he discovers that the Spains are victims of the economic crisis and that the failed investment in the house lies at the centre of their tragedy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the “ghost estate” and the dream home, which turns into a horror trap, is the main focus of the narration. Maureen Reddy observes that Pat and Jenny Spain are “Irish everypeople” (2014: 88), they are a typical nuclear family with jobs in the new economy of the Celtic Tiger and ambitions to move up socially, which they try to realize through investment in real estate. They fall for the developer’s pompous slogans, like the one on the signboard at the entrance to the estate: “Welcome to Ocean View, Brianstown. A new revelation in premier living. Luxury houses now viewing” (French 2012: 12-13), only to find after a few months that the developers have abandoned the estate without completing the building work, with no roads, no street lighting, no shops or any other facilities. In consequence, they have ended up in “the village of the damned” (French 2012: 13), with a house whose value has plummeted so that it cannot be sold, and a huge mortgage which they cannot pay off because Pat has been made redundant and Jenny is a stay-at-home mum. Kennedy talks to the family, friends and neighbours of the Spains, and finally, after he gains access to Pat’s computer search history, he reconstructs the story of the psychological and emotional strain of the couple fighting with financial difficulties. He discovers that the Spains were too embarrassed to reveal the extent of their financial problems to their family or friends, and too ashamed to ask for help. They fell into a chasm of social isolation exacerbated by the conditions on the “ghost estate” where they lived. As Pat developed a psychotic obsession with a mysterious animal, which he believed to be hiding in the attic, Jenny focused on protecting their children from the knowledge of their financial ruin and of their father’s deteriorating mental health. In the end, Jenny also suffers a nervous break-down. When the children start talking about the animal, she discovers that she has failed to protect them from the knowledge. She decides to murder her family rather than have them face the humiliation of their insanity.

Tana French draws on the literary tradition of the gothic in order to create an anti-narrative of domesticity in which the “trophy house” turns into a curse which drives the Spains to ruin and insanity, to eventually become the house of horror and the scene of

a bloodbath. As Brian McHale observes: “nothing is more domestic, more normal than a middle-class house, so nothing is more disruptive than other-worldly agents penetrating and ‘taking over’ a house” (1987: 77). To the Spains the house is haunted: Pat believes that his house is infested by a wild animal, but Jennifer (rightly) suspects that the house is visited by an intruder while they are out. Both Spains are possessed by the house. When they lose control and break down, they act their anxiety out in the house. In both cases their actions are marked by excess, which is one of the most effective narrative strategies of the gothic (Becker 1999). Pat and Jennifer perform an excessive or distorted form of the rituals assigned to the genders in a conservative nuclear family. Pat becomes a preposterous protective father. He is so obsessed with keeping his family safe that, in his attempts to catch the imaginary animal, he sets traps, installs baby monitors and eventually breaks holes in the walls, thus making life in the house unbearable for his wife and children. Jenny, in turn, tries to compensate for their dire straits by overinvesting in housekeeping. She keeps on frantically cleaning and arranging the ornaments, she produces meals they can ill afford, and in the end she tries to “arrange” the children so that they “make Daddy happy” (French 2012: 321). Her frenzied instructions on how the children should act when their father comes home produce a truly gothic effect, which “foregrounds the hidden horrors of a unifying, universalising image of Woman” (Becker 1999: 6). By showing the evolution of a perfect suburban housewife into a gothic monster, the author also subscribes to “the shattering of apparently sacrosanct notions of the benign and nurturing femininity” (Fogarty 2000: 64) in Irish fiction.

Freud’s remarks on *das Unheimliche*, another trope characteristic of the gothic, resonate with the psychological situation created in the novel. According to Freud: “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and long-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression [...] something which ought to have remained hidden but which has come to light” (1953-74: 241). Indeed, the excesses of the Spains and their eventual mental break-downs result not only from the insidious trauma of constant stress, but from their insistent repressing of their financial predicament. While they are both prepared to go to great lengths to conceal their plight from family and friends, they do not admit even to themselves that they have lost control of their situation. Maureen Reddy claims that “Jenny’s secrecy suggests that she thinks troubles are not fully real unless they are publicly known, an attitude which links her to [...] the central role of repression in Irish cultural memory” (2014: 89).

Finally, the estate of Brianstown and the house of the Spains display gothic features, albeit with a 21st-century twist, i.e. there is a sharp contrast between their appearances and reality, or between what had been promised in the developer’s brochures and what became of the house. Instead of the “self-contained haven with all the premier facilities of cutting-edge luxe living on your doorstep” (French 2012: 64), the Spains end up in a

“ghost estate,” with no facilities, no public transport and abandoned construction sites. Even the police officer, Kennedy, finds it disturbing: “Ocean View looked worse every time. [...] I half expected feral dogs to slink up around the car when I stopped, last survivors to come staggering and moaning out of skeleton houses” (ibid.: 317).

The unfinished houses provide shelter to the stalker, Jenny’s former boyfriend, who begins to spy on the family out of genuine concern, but unwittingly contributes to Jenny’s nervous break-down. The fact that the glass wall of the “kitchen-cum-dining room-cum-playroom, running the whole back wall of the house” (French 2012: 20), which was meant to offer luxury views of the sea to the inhabitants of the house, exposes them to prying eyes and makes them vulnerable to the intruder, is a gothic transformation. In a similar twist, the baby monitors, which Pat had placed around the house to catch the sounds of the animal which he is convinced lives in the attic, cross-circuit with the baby monitor in the house of the neighbours, and all the embarrassing details of the Spains’ spiral of insanity become available to the spiteful Gogans. The fact that the Gogans do not try to help, or even feel sorry for the Spains, is symptomatic of the lack of community spirit on the estate – that “traditional Irish society [is] communitarian and caring” (Fogarty 2000: 64) is yet another myth shattered by the realities of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath.

In her very insightful analysis of *The Likeness* and *Broken Harbor*, Jean Gregorek criticizes Tana French for her preoccupation with “anxieties of the troubled middle class”, which she condenses “into a quarantine-able threat with a recognizable human face” (2014: 72). According to the critic: “The generic demands of the procedural call for the identification and removal of an individual offender and not an analysis of a complex system. The impact of the criminogenic structures of postmodern finance capitalism may be registered, but these structures themselves remain beyond scrutiny” (ibid.: 72). However, I believe that such reading of these two novels fails to take into account the relentless attack on the capitalist mechanisms behind the housing bubble and the economic crash of 2008, which French clearly blames for the human tragedies she describes. The reader is left with a strong sense that the order in the home of Ireland is distorted so badly that a highly commendable desire for a house of your own, which so many of us share, may lead individuals to take drastic actions.

***The Searcher* – “the skull beneath the skin of the countryside”⁶**

Tana French’s latest novel to date is a departure from her previous work, since it is the first to be set outside Dublin or its immediate suburbs, and the first with an American

6 Macfarlane, Robert. “The eeriness of the English countryside.” *The Guardian*, 10 Apr. 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane.

principal character. It is also unusual in that it uses third-person narration (only one other of her novels, *The Secret Place*, is not narrated by the voice of the detective). It is not a typical police procedural as the main protagonist, Cal Hooper, has retired from Chicago PD and bought a ramshackle cottage in the West of Ireland to recover from the break-up of his marriage and the stress of working in an increasingly violent and racist environment. He is, therefore, deprived of the privilege of his badge and free from the constraints of working for law enforcement. The novel is stylised as a western: the central plot pattern is that of a stranger who comes to a small town. The title alludes to *The Searchers*, a classic western from 1956, directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne in the role of a Civil War veteran who tries to find his abducted niece.

Cal Hooper is approached by a teenager, Trey Reddy, who persuades him to use his skills and experience to find out what happened to Brendan, Trey's 19-year-old brother, who went missing six months before. The Reddys are a dysfunctional family. Sheila, Brendan's mother, cannot cope with providing for her four younger children, so she prefers to assume that her son has left for Dublin or London. Trey cannot persuade the indolent local police force, the Garda, that this cannot be the case simply because Brendan would not abandon them like their father before. Cal starts making inquiries, pretending that he needs Brendan to help him rewire electricity in his cottage, only to discover that various hitherto friendly neighbours become hostile and clearly mind his nosy questions. By the time Cal finds Brendan's body and solves the case, he discovers that his initial assumptions about the rural idyll of Ardnakelty, and Ireland in general, were completely wrong. He suspected that Brendan got into trouble with gangsters from Dublin who were selling drugs in the area, but it comes to him as a shock when he discovers that Brendan's killing, and a whole campaign of violence which was supposed to warn him and Trey off the investigation, was orchestrated by his friendly neighbour, Mart Lavin and his cronies, who are sheep farmers in daytime but turn into cruel vigilantes at night.

Rural Ireland in *The Searcher* is a lawless country; like the American frontier in the westerns, Ardnakelty is too far from the centre of power for the police or other state institutions to operate there. Mart Lavin sees the modern world as particularly dangerous to young men:

'When I was a young lad, we knew what we could want and how to get it, and we knew we'd have something to show for it at the end of the day. A crop, or a flock, or a house, or a family. There is great strength in that. Now there's too many things you're told to want, there's no way to get them all, and once you're done trying, what have you got to show for it at the end? [...] The women do be grand anyway; they're adaptable. But the young men don't know what to be doing with themselves at all. [...] they are hanging themselves, or they are getting drunk and driving into ditches, or they are overdosing on the aul' heroin,

or they are packing their bags. I don't want to see this place a wasteland, every farm looking the way yours did before you came along: falling to wrack and ruin, waiting for some Yank to take a fancy to it and make it into his hobby'. (French 2020: 358)

He takes it upon himself to protect the local community from the Dublin gangsters. When Brendan tried to open a lab and produce synthetic drugs for them, Mart and his cronies decided to beat him up, but the boy hit his head on a metal gas cylinder and died on the spot.

Like a classic western, this novel is about a moral code and justice. Mart's sense of morality and justice is perverse; his form of protecting the community cannot be justified. However, he is not a stereotypical cold blooded patriarch. He puts on the act of being a garrulous country bumpkin, but he offers Cal short lectures on EU farming regulations, and on the benefits of Irish antibiotics-free bacon, as well as gay rights and gay marriage (which he voted for). He is a homemaker who cooks elaborate exotic dishes, distinguishing between the taste of Italian and Spanish olive oil, which comes as a surprise to Cal, given Mart's penchant for pink meringue cookies.

Tana French undermines gender stereotypes: Trey Reddy, whom Cal first encounters as a wild, almost feral teenager, with a shaven head, wearing a dirty track suit, turns out to be a girl, who, nevertheless, shows a talent for carpentry and shooting. Her mother is far from nurturing and caring. At some point, under pressure from Mart, she subjects her daughter to a ferociously brutal beating. As if to redress the balance in the community, French also introduces the figure of a middle-aged widow, Helen, who is surprisingly reasonable, honest and in control of her life. But the chief homemaker in the village is Cal. He treats the tasks of renovating the house as therapy first for himself, then, when he senses that he is dealing with a troubled child, for Trey. The detailed descriptions of their harmonious cooperation in the restoration of the wooden desk evoke a healing ritual, in which the slow process of polishing wood has the effect of soothing the troubled mind.

Susan Fraiman, in her book entitled: *Extreme Domesticity*, proposes to "claim domesticity while wrenching it away from such things as compulsory heterosexuality, selfless maternity, class snobbery, racial purity, the wanton display of stuff, and the illusion of a safely barricaded life" (2017: 4). For that purpose she focuses on "alternative homemakers" whom she defines as "outsiders of normative domesticity" (ibid.: 5). Although houses and alternative homemakers feature prominently in *The Searcher*, like in all French's other novels, what is of interest for this paper is the focus on the rural countryside as home and French's antipastoral mode of writing about rural Ireland.

Tana French engages in a debate with the myth of rural Ireland as a "site of idyllic pastoral retreat" (O'Connor 2017: 91), which, according to Maureen O'Connor, had been perpetuated by the British since the 18th century (2017). What is more, since the 1950s,

“when Ireland stepped up development of its critically important tourist industry, eager to welcome visitors, especially those with well-lined pockets, tourist board promotional material constructed an idyllic Ireland filled with pastel-coloured villages and friendly natives” (Schofield 2013: 1176)⁷.

By focalising the narration through the eyes of an outsider from a big American city, Tana French can lead her readers through various stages of his encounter with the Irish countryside. He admits complete ignorance about the country: “The West of Ireland looked beautiful on the internet ...” (French 2020: 2), but he falls in love with the beauty of the landscape and surrounding nature:

The sky, dappled in subtle gradations of grey, goes on forever; so do the fields, coded in shades of green by their different uses, divided up by sprawling hedges, dry stone walls and the odd narrow back road. Away to the north, a line of low mountains rolls along the horizon. Cal’s eyes are still getting used to looking this far, after all those years of city blocks. Landscape is one of the few things he knows of where the reality doesn’t let you down. (ibid.: 2)

Any seasoned reader of Tana French novels will guess that Cal must be wrong to believe that just because he has moved to a small and beautiful place he can assume that it is safe and peaceful. The author complicates the notions of retreat and haven, employing a truly anti-pastoral mode of writing, thus offering a corrective to the myth of rural Ireland as an idyll. The descriptions of beautiful landscapes and bucolic scenes, like “Mart’s dog trotting beside the sheep as they plod peacefully towards their pen” (ibid.: 4), are accompanied by Cal’s careful observations of nature: “the rooks have got hold of something. [...] Whatever the thing is, it’s on the small side and still moving. [...] The thing on the lawn twists wildly, shaking the long grass. A big daddy rook jumps closer, aims one neat ferocious stab of his beak, and the thing goes still” (ibid.: 1). When Cal tries to win the rooks over by offering scraps, the birds “yell” and “laugh” (ibid.: 1) at him. As Glenn Harper comments, the birds are anthropomorphized “as a microcosm of the local natives and yet are also ruthless in the totally natural manner of the animal kingdom” (2020 online). The parallels between the violence and cruelty which Cal

7 Interestingly enough, this image of Ireland on the big screen was first promoted in another John Ford film with John Wayne. *The Quiet Man*, released in 1952, was a very loose adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Wayne in the role of the Returned Yank (an emigrant returning from America). The film was shot in Ireland and “stimulated cultural and ‘roots’ tourism” (Schofield 2013: 1191). It also popularised the figure of the Returned Yank, which has since then served in popular culture to explore (among others) the tensions between rural and urban life, since his urban, materialistic American ways allow his Irish compatriots to define themselves in contrast as “authentically rural, communal and old-fashioned” (Schofield 2013: 1183).

observes in nature and in the community of Ardnakelty will only intensify as the story progresses. At night Cal hears the sounds of the owl and the fox hunting, but these are soon accompanied by the sounds of “the engines revving” (ibid.: 4) at 3 a.m., which turn out to be those of the gangsters from Dublin racing their Hummers in the fields. Then more sinister events take place: farmers have their sheep killed and horribly mutilated, and then Cal is given a warning by the locals to stop asking questions about Brendan’s disappearance, which he ignores until Trey’s mother is forced to beat her daughter to a pulp, and when this does not help, Cal is attacked by masked men with hurling sticks. If you pay close attention and count all the mentions of violent attacks on strangers trying to stop badger baiting, the instances of bullying at school, domestic violence, suicide, fights among teenagers, extortion and vigilantism, then the excess of brutality in this small community reaches preposterous proportions.

Since these events are either hinted at, or recounted in a dark-humorous tone, their implications do not strike the reader immediately, especially that French does not exploit violence for the sake of violence or for melodramatic effects. In her plot she offers an explanation which is at the same time an accusation of the indolence of the state and its institutions. The West of Ireland is shown as a lawless place, where rural poverty threatens the lives of children, where schools, social services and Garda have failed the local population, and the beauty of the landscape cannot disguise this brutal reality. When Cal discovers the grip that the Dublin gangsters have on the local youth he reflects on how the landscape has misled him into an idealised perception of the place:

The morning has turned lavishly beautiful. The autumn sun gives the greens of the fields an impossible, mythic radiance and transforms the back roads into light-muddled paths where a goblin with a riddle, or a pretty maiden with a basket, could be waiting around every gorse-and-bramble bend. Cal is in no mood to appreciate any of it. He feels like this specific beauty is central to the illusion that lulled him into stupidity, [...] If all this had happened in some suburban clot of tract homes and ruler-measured lawns, he would have kept his wits about him. (ibid.: 320)

In *The Searcher*, French reaches beyond the confines of the urban and suburban environment, only to leave the reader with equally dark conclusions about the social reality of Ireland as she did in the previous novels. What is new and original here is the ecocritically informed diagnosis which Maureen Corrigan succinctly presented in her review of *The Searcher* in the *Washington Post*: “By the novel’s end any place – even the grimeiest, meanest streets of hard-boiled crime fiction – seem preferable to the sinister and silent watchfulness of the lush Irish countryside” (2020 online). In her venturing out of the metropolitan centre to the countryside, French constructs characters who focus on homemaking and domesticity even in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Conclusions

Although Tana French is widely acclaimed as the author of popular page turners, she has managed to construct a very elaborate critique of the state-of-the-nation within the criminal plots of her novels. She has done so by domesticating crime, that is by consistently presenting the danger and threat as coming from within the family or the close community and by linking its causes to unresolved class tensions, and the failings of the state and public services, in other words, by insisting that the problems of Irish society always originate at home. Thus she proves to be a highly perceptive observer of, and commentator on, the social and economic anxieties of modern Ireland. In view of the above, it is hard to overestimate the role of the house and of the domestic rituals of homemaking in the novels of Tana French. Houses are desired, fought over, defended and lost, while homemakers may be obsessed, desperate and violent.

In *The Likeness*, nostalgia for the past evoked through the beauty of Whitethorn House is undermined by the proximity of the ruins of a famine cottage. The novel's protagonists express serious doubts about the economic viability of the housing market, which establishes a direct link with the plot of *Broken Harbor*. In both novels the houses are endowed with agency and exert uncanny powers over their inhabitants in keeping with the gothic convention. Of the three novels discussed here, only *The Searcher* depicts the house as a shelter; a place where homemaking offers comfort and solace to the troubled protagonist. Indeed, the house is a much needed safe haven in view of the threat of violence looming in the pristine countryside outside. That violence is attributed to the underlying economic crisis which drives young men away from the land or into criminal activity. While in *The Likeness* and *Broken Harbor*, the author alludes to the Big House novel and the gothic novel respectively, in *The Searcher* she draws on the popular motif of migration. In all three novels the house and home lie at the centre of the plots. Tana French builds suspense by frustrating her readers' expectations of conventional domesticity, while offering them the unexpected satisfaction of dialogue with Irish literary and cultural tradition.

References

- Becker, S. 1999. *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Clark, D. 2013. Mean streets, new lives: the representations of non-Irish immigrants in recent Irish crime fiction. In: P. Villar-Argaiz (ed.), *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, 255-267. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Corrigan, M. 2020. Tana French's *The Searcher* nods to John Ford's famous Western with a story of a loner on the hunt for a lost teen. *Washington Post* 5 October, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/tana-frenchs-the-searcher-nods-to->

- john-fords-famous-western-with-the-story-of-a-loner-on-the-hunt-for-a-lost-teen/2020/10/05/17de293a-06a4-11eb-a166-dc429b380d10_story.html.
- Fogarty, A. 2000. Uncanny families: neo-gothic motifs and the theme of social change in contemporary Irish women's fiction. *Irish University Review* 30(1): 59-81.
- Fraiman, S. 2017. *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- French, T. 2020. *The Searcher*. London/New York: Viking.
- French, T. 2012. *Broken Harbor*. London/New York: Penguin Group.
- French, T. 2008. *The Likeness*. London/New York: Viking.
- Freud, S. 1953-74 [1917-19]. The uncanny. In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey*, vol. XVII, 219-53. London: Hogarth Press.
- Gregorek, J. 2014. Fables of foreclosure: Tana French's police procedurals of recessionary Ireland. In: J. H. Kim (ed.), *Class and Culture in Crime Fiction: Essays on Works in English since 1970s*, 149-74. Jefferson NC: McFarland.
- Harper, G. 2020. Closeness and cruelty: on Tana French's *The Searcher*. *Los Angeles Review of Books* 29th November, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/closeness-and-cruelty-on-tana-frenchs-the-searcher/>.
- Macfarlane, R. 2015. The eeriness of the English countryside. *The Guardian* 10 April, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane.
- Mannion, E. 2016. Introduction. A path to the emerald noir: The rise of the Irish detective novel. In: E. Mannion (ed.), *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, 1-16. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McHale, B. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Norris, C. 2004. The Big House: space, place and identity in Irish fiction. *New Hibernia Review* 8(1): 107-121.
- O'Brien, C. 2013. Commuter belt regions worst hit by downturn, survey finds. *Irish Times* 5 January, online.
- O'Connor, M. 2017. Green fields and blue roads: the melancholy of the girl walker in Irish women's fiction. *Critical Survey* 29(1): 90-104.
- O'Toole, F. 2011. Afterword: From Chandler and "Playboy" to the contemporary crime wave. In: D. Burke (ed.), *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century*, 358-361. Dublin: Liberties Press.
- Peterson, S. 2016. Voicing the unspeakable: Tana French's Dublin murder squad. In E. Mannion (ed.), *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, 107-120. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peterson, S. 2014. Murder in the ghost estate: Crimes of the Celtic Tiger in Tana French's *Broken Harbor*. *Clues* 32(1): 71-80.

- Rauchbauer, O. 1992. The Big House and Irish history: an introductory sketch. In: O. Rauchbauer (ed.), *The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*, 1-17. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- Reddy, M. T. 2014. Authority and Irish cultural memory in *Faithful Place* and *Broken Harbor*. *Clues* 32(1): 81-93.
- Schaffer, R. 2014. Introduction. Tana French and Irish crime fiction. *Clues* 32(1): 9-12.
- Schofield, A. 2013. The Returned Yank as site of memory in Irish popular culture. *Journal of American Studies* 47(4): 1175-95.

* * *

Beata Piątek is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her main research interests are memory and trauma in contemporary British, Irish and American fiction, the influence of film on fiction, and ecocriticism.