Building the Structure

A House of Fiction

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Number 5.
By Glenn Patterson.
Hamish Hamilton, 308pp. £12.99

Glenn Patterson set himself high standards. His first novel, *Burning Your Own* (1988), which established his enduring "Belfast" theme, was such a convincing version of the friendship-across-the-divide scenario that it won the Rooney Prize. He followed this with *Fat Lad* (1992), a more original story about his native city that gained a place on the GPA shortlist. These two novels are always rightly at the centre of any conversation about the contemporary fiction of the Troubles.

That Patterson's subsequent novels have not been similarly acclaimed is testament to the high order of his own precedent. *Black Night at Big Thunder Mountain* (1995) deserves more attention than thus far granted for its instantaneous cultural response to Euro Disney. *The International* (1999), though it will surely in time be seen as one of the most poignant retrospective stories about the Northern Ireland of the late sixties, seemed to appear all too quietly on the bookshelves.

Number 5 has one of the most interesting formal structures of recent Irish fiction. The area of life this structure is designed to discursively support is such a crucial nexus of the public and the private that readers will agree that it should have been devised before. No. 5 is a "*Modern intermediate terrace house*" in Belfast: "*Just recently erected. Pleasantly situated in healthy rural surroundings, yet ideally convenient to shops and all four main churches*". With a similar estate agent's page at the opening of each of six sections, Patterson describes the fortunes of occupant life at No. 5 from the 1950s to the present and reflects changes in the socio-economic life of Belfast over these decades through minute changes to the relevant property descriptions.

The Falloons, the first occupants, are unoriginal creations: their story centres on how the domestic boredom of the wife-narrator, accentuated by an afflictive boilermaker husband, develops towards possible infidelity. Nevertheless, the house-as-home idea is nicely established at this early point, and Patterson is excellent on the compulsion of décor: "So many things and so many still to buy".

In the 1970s ("modern labour-saving home") come the McGoverns, twenty-five years married and survivors of yearly "Old Year's Night" parties at another house on the estate. In the 1980s ("Fitted Venetian blinds") comes the "chink kid" narrator, Tan. Since his family is already intimidated by racists, his story offers some of the novel's more resonant commentary on the Troubles. The Eliots who arrive in the early 1990s ("pedestal sink") are a purely comical family whose born-again tendencies are a satirical reflection on the bigotry that has led to the murder of a neighbour.

Patterson's curious couple Mel and Toni of the late 1990s ("fitted light-oak units") are even more bizarrely comical. As they make a living from "balaclava-grams", property prices rise and much of the terrace around No. 5 goes up for sale. By the end, Patterson has combined a circular and linear movement. Through one final withdrawn property advertisement ("Original 1950s front door"), he sums up a lifetime around No. 5 through Ivy, a resident of the terrace from the beginning: "When houses are as close together as ours it's an effort a lot of the time not to look …".

The problem, however, is that while Patterson tries to integrate and reintegrate the lives lived in and around No. 5 (the Falloons's daughter shows up at the end), he moves his people in and out so quickly that they, and their house, are insufficiently humanized and are therefore instantly forgettable. Though this is still a comparatively intelligent and observant novel, it is missing Patterson's usually comprehensive humaneness, and its interest lies principally in its clever structure at the expense of its characters and situations. Patterson has already shown that he is capable of better.

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