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## **Abstract:**

My article explores representations of Irish identity, history, and trauma in the Irish writer Nicola Pierce's contemporary children's novel, *Spirit of the Titanic* (2011). I examine the representation of Irish society and culture around the time of the construction of the Titanic, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of marginalised individuals and groups. My article analyses the representation of history and the portrayal of trauma and affective ties, and concludes that *Spirit of the Titanic* provides an example of how contemporary Irish women writers offer alternative historical narratives to new readerships, through genres such as children's literature.

**Key words:** Irish literature, children's literature, Nicola Pierce, Titanic, historical novel, trauma, haunting.

## **Title:**

### **Haunting the Text: Nicola Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* and Irish Historical Children's Fiction**

#### **Introduction: Representing Irishness**

This article explores representations of Irish identity and trauma in the Irish writer Nicola Pierce's contemporary children's novel *Spirit of the Titanic* (2011)<sup>1</sup>. The monumental and catastrophic sinking of the Titanic forms the focal point for Pierce's narrative and its investigation of gender, class and Irishness. The article analyses *Spirit of the Titanic* and examines the politics of portraying disaster and trauma from the point of view of the marginalised or silenced.<sup>2</sup> In examining *Spirit of the Titanic*, my discussion involves a particular emphasis on ideas such as the portrayal and meanings of trauma, gender, postcolonial haunting, Irishness, and belonging, and the ways in which such topics are treated

in children's literature. Nicola Pierce's novel is an example of the imaginative and diverse ways in which contemporary Irish women writers engage with issues of history, gender and storytelling, in order to uncover previously marginalised voices and perspectives and highlight continuing problems around invisibility and powerlessness, by offering alternative narratives of hope<sup>3</sup>. Thereby *Spirit of the Titanic* contributes in important ways to contemporary Irish women's writing and children's historical fiction, by signalling interesting directions and preoccupations in these areas.

This article throws light on the endeavours in *Spirit of the Titanic* to represent history and its challenges to dominant narratives of historical and cultural significance. In the article I argue that *Spirit of the Titanic* presents a postcolonial reimagining of the conventional narrative of the sinking of the Titanic, and at the same time illustrates to child readers how such revisionary retellings may affect commonly held perceptions about, and representations of, historical events<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, I explore the way this novel engages with the project of reimagining trauma from a specifically Irish point of view, choosing the Titanic disaster as its focal point, rather than the more conventional topics such as the Great Famine or religious conflict, and the implications of this shift. The article also discusses *Spirit of the Titanic's* use of the ghost or spirit motif, examining its textual strategies of spectrality, and explores the novel's use of family and identity motifs as ways of evoking affect. Through its reading of Pierce's compelling children's novel, the article thus examines some of the pertinent questions raised and ideas explored in Irish women's writing today.

### Trauma and Historical Children's Fiction

An important dimension in writing about disaster and trauma in *Spirit of the Titanic's* Irish contexts is the presentation and representation of history. The novel focuses on the portrayal of Irish society and culture around the time of the construction of the Titanic, with a

particular emphasis on the portrayal of women and children and other marginalised individuals and groups within the text. Through this focus, the text re-presents the narrative of the Titanic, from the moment of its building process, to its launch and the sinking, and also provides a more nuanced insight into the many people affected by this disaster, directly and indirectly. The historical period that *Spirit of the Titanic* depicts is itself a problematic one. However, as Susan Cahill argues, the period between 1890 and 1922 also provides a particularly fertile ground for the representation and problematisation of Irishness. This is a historical period, she argues, “in which ideas surrounding national identity are being articulated and contested, allow[ing] them to undertake a close examination and questioning of the historical discourses that support notions of what ‘Irishness’ means” (Cahill 41).

The critic Nikki Gamble has pinpointed the question which is central to this revisionary process. Commenting on the significance of what she calls “alternative histories”, and their representation in children’s literature and the enquiries that they engender, Gamble states: “Alternative histories engage with the past by posing the questions: What if things had turned out differently? How would the world have been different?” (192) *Spirit of the Titanic* engages with this question of “what if” through the narrator and main character Samuel. Samuel’s narrative viewpoint is constructed as a prism through which the experience of the marginalised and silenced is articulated. His working life, and his unhappy and strained relationship with his mother, are harsh realities which reflect Pierce’s determination to accurately represent what Cahill, in her discussion of Irish children’s literature and its representation of history, terms “the lived realities of children” (45). By focusing on the experiences of children and families, the *Spirit of the Titanic* tests what Cahill elsewhere refers to as “the relationship between public and private histories” (45), and scrutinises the relative value systems and hierarchies of significance associated with these categories.

Addressing the issue of historical accuracy in her novel, Pierce states in her “Author’s Notes”<sup>5</sup> that her novel is fictional but “based on true events”, and that the historical figure of Samuel Joseph Scott existed. She explains that he was the first fatality during the construction of the Titanic, which also claimed the lives of seven other workers, and was buried “in an unmarked grave in Belfast City Cemetery” (Pierce “Author’s Notes”).<sup>6</sup> This attention to accuracy lends an important note of authority to Pierce’s narrative. The significance of this is underlined in Nikki Gamble’s analysis. In her discussion of historical children’s fiction, Gamble argues that it; “is dependent on temporal setting and thus requires a special commitment and research from the author” (186). Certainly, Pierce’s own observations on the importance of this research would seem to bear this out. Reflecting on the complexity of the research and contradictory nature of the information she found, she has said in an interview: “I did my research, confused myself by reading debates/conflicts about most of the information available, and then went with my guts (Maeve).” Pierce’s ability to examine and portray historical realities, while at the same time adding imaginative and creative dimensions to those realities, reflects the diverse directions that contemporary Irish women writers are forging in historical fiction, including in children’s literature.

The building and subsequent sinking of the Titanic are historical events closely associated with Ireland. Discussing the building of the ship, the historian John Welshman supports this view. He states that:

As historian Stephanie Barczewski has shown, the Titanic was closely associated with Ireland. Not only was it built in Belfast, but it called at Queenstown on the morning of 11 April 1912 to collect passengers, many of them Irish migrants (Welshman 291). The importance of the shipyard where the Titanic was built to the local working community in Belfast is evident in Pierce’s story. These historical and cultural-specific details are explored in *Spirit of the Titanic*, through the portrayals of working practices in the shipyard

and life onboard the ship prior to its sinking. However, this significance has not always been readily apparent in popular representations of the Titanic disaster<sup>7</sup>. Nor is the Titanic perhaps what one would first think of when discussing trauma in relation to Irish history and experience. Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* is set in the period between 1910 and 1912, before the 1916 Rising, an event which has been described as a "sensitive, indeed divisive, event in Irish history" (Coghlan and O'Sullivan 4). Therefore, the novel's focus on the Titanic, in close relation to the fate of one boy who worked on its construction, suggests that Irish writing to some extent is moving away from its earlier preoccupation with religious conflict, instead exploring other, less obvious, manifestations of historical experience and trauma<sup>8</sup> (Hughes 167). Now, the Titanic continues to attract attention from scholars and the general public alike – for example advertised guided tours, visitor attractions, for example<sup>9</sup>. The interest in the Titanic was heightened around the time of the recent centenary of the disaster, and this was reflected in children's literature. Specifically mentioning Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* as an example of this, Gamble reports that: "In 2011/12 several novels set at the time of the sinking of the *Titanic* were released to coincide with the centenary commemoration" (186).

As we have seen, historiographies have been written about the Titanic<sup>10</sup>, and oral histories presenting individuals' recollections from the period around the building of the Titanic have also emerged.<sup>11</sup> Through the characters in the novel, the reader perceives how the Titanic dream, the "Ship of Dreams" (Pierce 192), was driven by optimism and the fantasy of the "New World" - to "leave Ireland behind and begin at last, the real journey, the real voyage, across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World of America" (Pierce 33). As the dark counter-representation to the dream or vision, Pierce's novel alludes to the ancient Greek myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun and whose wax wings melted, as an ominous reminder of what lies ahead for the Titanic (Pierce 205). What Pierce's novel

achieves is to make the story of the Titanic and its sinking come alive for children of the twenty-first century, but without sensationalising it. Thus, *Spirit of the Titanic* demonstrates how Irish women's writing and children's literature engage with history in complex and questioning ways.

The story of *Spirit of the Titanic* centres on the first-person narrator, fifteen-year-old Samuel, a Belfast boy who is employed in the shipyard on the building project of the Titanic. Explaining Samuel's role in building the ship, and commenting on his perspective and how it is positioned within the narrative, Pierce says in an interview that:

this fifteen year old just seemed the perfect way into the story, a child's point of view, from someone who [...] performed one of the most dangerous jobs, as catch-boy, a junior member of the rivet squad, in Harland & Wolff (Maeve).

Therefore, it seems even more shocking when, during the opening pages, the reader learns that Samuel tragically falls to his death in April 1910 during the building work, and never sees the ship completed. However, his spirit, or ghost, returns to the ship as it embarks on its ill-fated journey in 1912. Through Samuel's narration, the novel gradually builds up the details of his background and family life, which adds complexity and depth to his storytelling. The main function of Samuel's character, therefore, is to observe and bear witness to the unfolding tragic events. These include the preventable deaths of the many third-class passengers whose lives were not deemed significant enough by the authorities in charge of the ship to make adequate arrangements for their rescue. Commenting on the thematic priorities in historical children's fiction, Gamble suggests that: "Historical fiction concentrates on public events and private consciousness" (186). Certainly we see in Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* the reimagining of public events through portrayals of private consciousness.

Through Samuel's testimony, the reader is able to appreciate the extent of the appalling class inequalities which marred conditions aboard the ship, and their consequences, as the boy tries to save a young family travelling third-class. We also follow Samuel's thoughts regarding his parents, particularly his troubled relationship with his mother and empathise with his yearning to reconcile with her. Although the reader is well aware of Samuel's liminal presence as a spirit, and therefore will not read the text as an unproblematic or straightforward realist narrative, a tension remains between the realist detail of the narrative recollection and Samuel's spirit haunting the ship and attempting to communicate across the dimensions. As the narrative draws towards its conclusion, there is a sense of dreadful inevitability, and because of our common knowledge of how the virgin voyage of the Titanic ended, Samuel's spirit enables insight into the thoughts of the different passengers on board. The novel ends with Samuel's moving reconciliation with the spirits that have haunted him throughout – his own mother and father.

*Spirit of the Titanic* examines notions of history and "legacy" in relation to dominant patriarchal narratives and what is excluded from those narratives. The book critiques these issues, and the pressures brought to bear on the individual by patriarchal history. The novel depicts a solitary moment taken by the Titanic captain during the unfolding disaster. Having sought temporary refuge in his quarters, Captain Smith despairs quietly to himself over events, but seems chiefly preoccupied with his own role and how history will remember him as an individual: "In less than two hours I will only be known as the captain of the biggest sinking ship in the world. This is to be my legacy" (Pierce 150-1). This portrayal draws attention to his selfishness, but more importantly to the tendency of conventional historical narratives to focus on the actions of exceptional individuals, usually male, and their heroic deeds. By enabling the stories of the passengers to be heard, *Spirit of the Titanic* presents a counter-narrative to this conventional historical focus. Pierce's historical children's fiction



can thus be seen in light of recent decades' development within Irish children's literature and Irish writing more broadly (Coghlan 93). Furthermore, her captivating portrayal helps to make historical experience compelling and to problematise its portrayal in more conventional text sources.

One of the ways in which Pierce achieves this in *The Spirit of the Titanic* is through the depiction of children and young people at work, as part of a broader critique of contemporary social conditions and Irish working class lives<sup>12</sup>. As Samuel states, commenting on his experience of a hard and physically demanding working life: "At fifteen years of age I was one of the youngest of this army of employers" (Pierce 7). The word 'army' draws attention to general conceptions of labour and uniformity in the working-class employment force, but also foregrounds prevailing constructions of masculinity and the qualities associated with it. Of course, the very event that precipitates Samuel's narration – his death – is caused by the hazardous working condition he is forced to endure at such a young age. The price paid in human lives for the building of the "Ship of Dreams" is only too apparent in Samuel's untimely death, caused by unsafe working conditions and dangerous practices. Pierce extends this critique, in her portrayal of the realities of working on the ship. The working crew's lives are far removed from the glamorous portrayal of carefree leisure; instead, they live in spartan conditions: "Most of these men slept in small dormitories in third class, well away from the sensitivities of the richer passengers" (Pierce 35). The work is gruelling and non-stop, as the image suggests, of the engines constantly kept going by "the stokers and greasers, who worked in shifts and were permanently covered in soot" (Pierce 35).

Furthermore, the text's criticism of social conditions is illustrated through the contrasting responses of the passengers on board, and their respective class status, wealth, social status, and conditions on board the boat. This is for example demonstrated in the

ability of the American female passengers to buy luxury goods on board, whereas one of the characters Samuel follows, the young Irish working-class mother Isabel, is unable to afford purchasing any goods (Pierce 30-1). Class and gender differentiations are represented in Pierce's portrayal of women, particularly through the figures of Samuel's abject mother and the counter-representation to his mother's quiet despair, the spirited Isabel. Thereby, the text adds nuance to its portrayal working-class mothers and maternal figures who are defined by their class and families, and whose options for self-determination are limited.

The problems of class inequality and tensions related to gender difference are brought to the fore during the panic-stricken moments of the Titanic disaster. These result in differential treatment for passengers, directly affecting their survival chances adversely, and including children, as a steward explains: "It's just that rules are rules: first class go first, then second and then third" (Pierce 152). Similarly, the non-English speaking crew employed on board are exploited and isolated from other staff: "there was nobody to advise them or even just look out for them" (Pierce 171). *Spirit of the Titanic* is critical of such lack of compassion towards the most vulnerable, when it springs from an absolute belief in the authority of rank, money and class positions. Such portrayals promote and engender a social critique of conventional patriarchal society and its class structures. They reflect the willingness in contemporary Irish women's writing and children's literature, in their differing ways, to engage critically with social and cultural questions (Coghlan 98).

Individual male characters in the novel are utilised to exemplify and problematise constructions of masculinity, and to illustrate the trappings of class privilege and patriarchal power. One such character is the captain of the Titanic, Captain Smith, also reportedly called the "Millionaires' Captain" (Pierce 47). He is seen to personify the negative qualities associated with misuses of power and privilege and the corruption of values that it brings, problems that are pertinent to the Irish experience. The novel describes how he: "was a great

favourite with the toffs. They treated him like he was some sort of royalty” (Pierce 47). In contrast, the engineer, Mr Andrews, is depicted as someone who treats all passengers and individuals the same, regardless of their social class or standing (Pierce 50-1). Through such contrasts, *Spirit of the Titanic* articulates a criticism of the class-ridden society of the time, and the impact these problems had on Irish experience. Pierce pays attention to the power of language in these passages, as she uses Samuel’s liminal position as a spirit to dip in and out of other characters’ consciousness, thereby revealing their thoughts and hypocrisies (Pierce 51). At the same time, the failings of language and communication, and the consequences of these, are highlighted, in the example of the malfunctioning telegram machine (Pierce 62). Meanings of “history” and “history-making” are contested. When Samuel’s workmate Charlie, another teen-age boy, states the prophetic words during the construction of the ship: “We’re making history, boys, imagine that.” (Pierce 8), the reader naturally reads the phrase in full knowledge of the disastrous series of events that led to the sinking of the Titanic. This is, of course, very different from the heroic sense of historical recognition which the character Charlie refers to. Sadly, although these boys are part of the history-making, their effort has not been extensively described or explored, and has not been widely acknowledged as part of the Titanic’s history. Thereby, *Spirit of the Titanic* draws attention to problems around gender, history and marginalisation, through its nuanced representation of differentiations.

The various manifestations and forms of trauma and conflict specific to Irish experience are referred and alluded to throughout *Spirit of the Titanic*. For example, in the novel, the working-class couple Jim and Isabel are emigrating to America with their young family to escape the violence and conflict they experience, due to their different religious beliefs (Pierce 38-9), and to pursue opportunities and a new life in America. The novel thus suggests that the Titanic project is part of a broader Irish history of emigration and diaspora, examined and discussed by scholars in recent years, and portrayed in recent children’s

literature.<sup>13</sup> But whereas Samuel's recollection of his uncle's rather prejudiced view of Catholics – “They're just 'different', that's all [...] you can always spot them coming” (Pierce 40) – his own stance shows an evolving sense of tolerance and openness towards difference. Reflecting on his uncle's comments, Samuel states: “I certainly hadn't suspected anything different about Jim” (Pierce 40). It emerges that Jim, although a Catholic, was able to adapt to living in a Protestant neighbourhood in Belfast, by concealing his identity and beliefs, and “masquerading” as a Protestant, for the sake of his family and Isabel, his wife, who were all Protestants (Pierce 41). Jim's concealment of his true faith and identity is indicative of the continued tensions and difficulties, pointing to the attraction of the prospect of emigration. The high price that the couple have had to pay for their love is further indicated by Isabel's recollection that “it was made clear that we were no longer welcome in our own parents' houses [...] they've never even met the children” (Pierce 42). Through this indirect critique, *Spirit of the Titanic* problematises the relationship between Catholics and Protestants, and explores the personal conflicts resulting from continued tensions. Thus, the novel reflects critically on contemporary social and cultural conditions and tensions, making these dimensions part of the fabric of the narrative, and thereby building a context and adding to its depth and complexity. In *Spirit of the Titanic* Pierce uses her protagonist as a prism for the exploration of what Cahill calls “concern for the child's place, or lack thereof” (42) in conventional Irish narratives of history and nationhood.

### Ghosts and Affective Ties

The topics of identity and affect are closely connected to the representation of disaster and trauma in *Spirit of the Titanic*. This part of my discussion will examine the strategies used to represent these facets in the novel. Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* is focused around Samuel, a first-person narrator and protagonist whose form throughout the novel is that of a ghost or

spirit relating events around him. This ingenious narrative strategy allows his character to access all areas and have insight into dimensions and experiences which would otherwise most likely have been off-limits or non-accessible to a more conventional first-person narrator. Through these textual mechanisms, the novel introduces complex topics and ideas such as death and mortality, subjectivity and voice, reality and haunting, affect and the family. Pierce's use of Samuel's spirit draws on a long-standing tradition in Irish writing of employing the ghost motif (Denman 62). The motif of haunting furthermore resonates with the historical position of Ireland. Although the figure of Samuel is not Gothic or troubling in an uncanny sense, the notion of a ghostly presence is a significant feature in Irish writing. The feature is linked to its complex historical realities, according to the critic Matthew Schultz. In his analysis, he suggests that: "Irish writers have long been obsessed with, and haunted by, Ireland's troubled history, and have regularly turned to Gothic evocations of ghosts and vampires as a means of negotiating Ireland's uncanny historical repetitions."<sup>14</sup> The spectral motif alludes to an element of the gothic uncanny, but complicates the association of the gothic with fear through the creation of a "friendly ghost" in Samuel. Samuel's character serves as a catalyst which, as Piesse has it: "re-encompass[es] the relationship between landscape, family, history, and nation"(92). The critic Michael F. O'Riley widens this enquiry, arguing that haunting is a facet of the troubled relationship of the colonial to the marginalised and silenced: "The haunting of the colonial frequently turns on what is undoubtedly a well-intended desire to relate to the Other, the silenced, and the hidden" (1). The idea of "the hidden" has different dimensions in *Spirit of the Titanic*, relating to characters and ideas, as well as to literary language. Through Samuel's ghostly inhabiting and roaming of the Titanic, the novel is able to explore the multi-faceted dynamics between these different dimensions of the spectral.

Through the narrative voice of Samuel's spirit, Pierce's text engenders the idea of 'haunting' as a means of articulating and representing disaster, trauma, and affect. The reader inevitably approaches the Titanic narrative with a sense of foreboding because we assume that we already know how this narrative will unfold and how it ends. The presence of the ghostly narrator contributes to underlining the blurring of boundaries in the novel between past and present, fantasy and reality, fiction and history. This blurring helps to unlock the unspoken or unmediated dimensions of past experience which relate to postcolonial representations of identity (individual and collective) and trauma. As Clare Bradbury states, commenting on the role of children's fiction in mediating issues such as trauma and disaster: "authors and illustrators will continue to produce fiction which gives shape to children's imagined anxieties and desires, and which in doing so discloses their own fears and hopes for the future" (23)<sup>15</sup>. Thus, in *Spirit of the Titanic*, Samuel's spirit presence as on the ship enables him to witness the unfolding disaster, and to bear testimony through his narration. The spirit presence of Samuel and the idea of haunting pervades the novel, as a conversation between two characters in the novel reflects. Suggesting a preoccupation with spirits and haunting, when asked by one character "'You mean you think the ship is...haunted'?" (Pierce 67), another replies "'I'm sure plenty died in the making of her. Or maybe it's the spirit of *Titanic* itself'" (67). This passage, which also contains the novel's title, draws attention to the idea of haunting and mortality, highlighting the motif of the spectral.

Language itself at times appears haunted by the unheard or silenced voices belonging to the victims on the Titanic trying to make themselves heard and to tell their stories. Evidently, these sequences are not "realistic"; however their representations are an important part of extending the historical novel into an imaginative retelling for child readers. The novel underlines this aspect: "it wasn't a dream [...] It sounded like frantic whispering,

blurred, hushed words that I couldn't make out" (Pierce 73). When Samuel dies, his fall is precipitated by an experience he has, in which he is himself being haunted by spectres. He fleetingly sees and hears what the reader later knows to be the spirits of the people who are subsequently to sail away on the Titanic to their graves (Pierce 15). Samuel perceives their unheard voices: "I heard a whole lot of other calls for help" (Pierce 15) and senses their presence: "Hundreds and hundreds of them – ghosts, phantoms, ghouls" (Pierce 16).<sup>16</sup> This episode in the novel finally makes sense to the reader when, after falling to his death, Samuel himself becomes a ghost, haunting the Titanic as he joins the ship on its maiden and final voyage (Pierce 17). Samuel thus achieves a wish to sail onboard the ship which neither he himself nor his fellow labouring co-workers would have ever been able to attain. Other textual motifs in *Spirit of the Titanic* associated with the idea of haunting are sinking and drowning. These motifs are also suggestive of powerlessness and the obliteration of self. The death of Samuel's father by drowning during a fishing trip, "in a flimsy rowing boat that must have completely collapsed under the battering of waves and angry winds" (Pierce 7), poignantly illustrates the significance of the motif. This personal disaster is repeated and magnified in the sinking of the Titanic, and the deaths of the thousands of people who drowned, thus adding resonance and complexity to the rendering of trauma.

The representation of affective ties, and other ethical dimensions in human relationships such as compassion<sup>17</sup>, plays a central role in portraying trauma in *Spirit of the Titanic*. O'Riley argues that the idea of haunting may be central to postcolonial writing because of its ability to encompass and at the same time problematise affect. He states that: "Haunting is pervasive in postcolonial thought precisely because of its affective dimension, a dimension that creates a sense of the imminently important, present and disruptive" (O'Riley 1). These portrayals of affect in the novel gesture at a rejection of absence and silence, and the prospect of change. As conditions become progressively worse onboard the stricken ship,

the increasing sense of panic and mayhem which variously grips members of the Titanic crew and its passengers as the ship begins to sink (Pierce 133), contributes to engendering selfishness and loss of ethical perspective in many of the individual characters described. In contrast to this, the text insists on the importance of affective ties in countering trauma, through acts of compassion and kindness, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant. This ethical focus, and the text's emphasis on the importance of affective ties, is extended in the exploration of animal imagery through the narrator Samuel. He recalls an episode from his childhood, when he observed a spider and a wasp cooperating to free the former from the latter's web (Pierce 135-6), rather than the stronger creature overpowering and destroying the weaker one. The animals' cooperation illustrates how, rather than one animal killing the other in a ruthless act of dominance, the two creatures cooperate to the benefit and continued well-being of both (Pierce 136). This alternative imagery used to depict the relationship between self and world serves as a counter-discursive image to the politics of domination and submission employed by colonialism and patriarchal culture. Similarly, in another passage we see a spider floating on the rapidly rising water, struggling to rescue itself from the flooding ship. The small creature is lifted to safety by the ship baker (however temporary this shelter turns out to be in the final resort), and he keeps the spider with him in a small metal box. Such kindness shown by humans towards other beings (Pierce 134) provides a stark reminder of the reality the sinking of the Titanic. Of course, the image of the drowning spider starkly mirrors the fate of the many third-class passengers on the stricken ship who weren't rescued because there weren't enough life boats, and because their lives weren't considered a priority. This critique of the callousness of profit-makers forms a poignant contrast to the book's message of solidarity.

The preoccupation with family ties in *Spirit of the Titanic* is an important strategy for exploring the complexities of affect and compassion. This focus also provides an opportunity



to examine the gender political dimensions of portraying family. Having previously at times perhaps “romanticized” the idea of family (Piesse 88), contemporary Irish children’s literature, as can be seen in Pierce’s novel, is exploring the parameters of representing “the family”, by examining complexities and differences within family units, and promoting a redefinition and reimagining of what “family” means. In pursuing these preoccupations, Pierce’s novel echoes developments in other Irish children’s fiction. Exploring such trends, Piesse states: “As the old millennium came to an end and the new one began, family continued to be a focus for Irish writers” (89). Although *Spirit of the Titanic* is a historical novel, the significance of this continued focus on family in contemporary Irish writing is evident in the novel. Through its individualised portrayals, Pierce’s novel depicts the effect of poverty, isolation, religious and national politics, and emotional deprivation on families, who are haunted by these issues and their legacy. Coghlan’s observation underlines the importance of this aspect, emphasising that: “Irish children’s writers are generally realistic in showing the poverty and oppression that existed both in colonial and postcolonial times” (97). *Spirit of the Titanic* portrays poverty, lack of opportunity, and personal trauma such as that caused by depression and loss of hope, by scrutinising how these conditions affect individual characters. As the narrator, Samuel is an important focus for these explorations. Pierce has commented on the character of Samuel and his feeling of powerlessness, how he: “is taken up with his sense of isolation, and then hopelessness” (Maeve). Samuel’s quest in the novel is about freeing himself from this feeling of hopelessness, and moving towards the identification of kindred spirits.

The novel’s main strategy for exploring these issues of marginalisation and invisibility is through Samuel’s position as first-person narrator. His spectral position emphasises the sense of him being set apart from others (Pierce 21). In his narration, Samuel’s thoughts often revolve around his feelings of loss and abjection, and his loneliness:

“What I did miss [...] was feeling that I mattered to someone” (Pierce 19). The loss of his parents contributes to this sense of dereliction and powerlessness. Pierce has elaborated on the aspect of powerlessness in Samuel’s character in an interview. She comments that: “He does appear powerless until he is helped in his cause, by baby Sarah who can neither walk nor talk. All that is required is Isobel's trust, which ensures the family's safety” (Maeve). That moment of connection marks an important change for Samuel. The bond of recognition between the spectral Samuel and baby Sarah helps to bridge the gap between the dimensions and the characters. A bond of sorts is created, which Samuel honours at the end when he guides the family to their rescue. His determination to help Jim and Isobel and their children is clearly driven by his own affective needs to reconnect with his parents, but also reflects his attempt to assume authority and have a positive impact on the world in any way he can.

*Spirit of the Titanic* is specifically concerned with examining issues around women, children, and powerlessness. A prominent example is the portrayal of Samuel’s own family. The text depicts his mother’s bouts of depression and her grief over her husband’s death which leads to her rejection of Samuel. The references in the novel to Samuel’s mother’s “bad” moods (Pierce 24) are indicative of depression, and the book reflects this ailment as being a response to surroundings and loss of hope of improving their prospects. Samuel’s recollections of his mother’s grief at her husband’s death underlines this sense of hopelessness in his mother: “It reminded me of the low, brief sound that escaped my mother’s lips when we heard that Da was gone [...] I had no idea that it meant what it did – that she was destroyed forevermore” (Pierce 85). His mother’s inarticulate outburst of sorrow is indicative of the larger-scale breakdown of communication that has occurred in Samuel’s family (Pierce 158-9). In *Spirit of the Titanic* the contrast to Samuel’s maternal deprivation, and his feeling unloved and alone (Pierce 161), is his idealisation of his dead father. This portrayal contributes to a complex and realistic representation of family life

which has not been romanticised nor exaggerated. The text thus explores the complicated relationship between mother and son, Samuel's sense of obligation towards his mother in the wake of the father's death, and his taking on the role of male breadwinner which ultimately leads to his death at the Belfast shipyard where the Titanic was built. Thereby, we see how, in Irish children's literature: "The concept of family dynamics drives the exploration of society, time and space" (Piesse 92). Through the figure of Samuel and his family, and Isabel and her family who are among the third-class passengers, *Spirit of the Titanic* creates a perspective which, in Cahill's words, has a particular "appeal to family" (44), but which also interrogates the meanings of family. The novel gestures at the formation of "alternative" family units, created out of compassion, like the arbitrarily connected unit which is thrown together randomly by the disaster. A woman with three children, terrified at the prospect of the imminent sinking of the Titanic and death, approaches an officer on the Titanic, asking him for advice. He demonstrates his compassion by offering her to stay with her and her children to face what lies ahead – giving her what he would give his own family in such circumstances (Pierce 215). Through this episode, the novel offers a poignant example of a family unit, based not on blood ties, but on emotional identification<sup>18</sup>.

The message of hope which *Spirit of the Titanic* articulates at the end underlines the search for belonging running through the book. At the end of the novel, Samuel is reunited with his parents' spirits, and the spirits of the people who lost their lives when the Titanic went down, allowing the narrative to draw to a close on a note of resolution. Throughout the novel, Samuel is haunted by the memory of his father, a kind-hearted and family-oriented man, compassionate towards women, children, and animals. His character defies conventional constructions of masculinity, as illustrated in Samuel's recollection of how his father saved a little bird and brought it back to its mother's nest (Pierce 141-3); a passage which further underlines the novel's underlying thematic thread about the importance of

compassion and the motif of rescue. There are other examples of fathers putting their children before themselves in bravery of rescue, although these are bittersweet: “There was no time for a farewell and the boy never got to thank his father” (147). By indirectly effecting Jim’s rescue at the end (Pierce 228), Samuel succeeds in reversing a pattern of abjection, grief and separation. Although clearly a fantasy ending, the reversal of abjection is a very important point for the book to make, according to Pierce. Commenting on *Spirit of the Titanic’s* closing pages, Pierce states that she: “didn't want to end the book with the deaths” and “was determined to find an ending that would include hope and fulfillment [sic] - for Samuel, especially” (Maeve). As the spirit of Samuel is reunited with his dead family members at the novel’s close, the life boat that carries them away also takes the spirits of the dead passengers floating in the icy water. This fantasy ending brings an emotional denouement to the high tempo and difficult scenes of the final pages of the novel.

#### Conclusion: Retelling the Titanic

As we have seen, *Spirit of the Titanic* illustrates the diverse ways in which contemporary Irish women writers engage with issues of history, gender, power and storytelling, in order to uncover previously marginalised perspectives. The novel furthermore highlights continuing problems around invisibility and hopelessness, by offering alternative narratives and voices. *Spirit of the Titanic* reflects what Cahill refers to as a strong “focus on the lived realities of children within this historical moment” (45). In an interview Pierce has commented on the problematic of writing about history, and the relative ambiguity of truth and accuracy. She says that: “The thing about the Titanic is that it's very hard to arrive at the ‘truth’. Well, I suppose that's a fair comment about writing history in general” (Maeve). Having chosen the shocking and disastrous sinking of the Titanic as the focal point for her narrative and its investigation of gender, class and Irishness, Pierce has added further

significant dimensions to that story by exploring the meanings of the Titanic to the Irish. The text achieves this, through its detailed and realistic portrayal of the extremely tough and demanding working conditions in the ship yard, during the building of the Titanic, and through its critique of child labour and the appalling lack of safety precautions. These aspects ensure that her writing of the disaster doesn't come across as exploitative or maudlin, but offers a credible social critique.

Striving to mediate historical trauma in a way which accurately reflects the poignancy of that reality to twenty-first century child readers is an important feature of *Spirit of the Titanic*. This openness around depicting trauma is significant, as Clare Bradford points out in her discussion of children's literature and portrayals of 9/11. In her discussion, she emphasises: "The impossibility in the twenty-first century of maintaining the fiction of childhood as a garden of delight" (Bradford 20). *Spirit of the Titanic* reimagines trauma from a specifically Irish point of view, but choosing the Titanic disaster, rather than the more conventional topics such as the Great Famine or religious conflict.<sup>19</sup> As such, the novel contributes in important ways to Irish women's writing and children's historical fiction. Pierce's use of the Titanic motif reflects more general tendencies, described by Coghlan who states: "As Irish identity changes and is imbricated with new forms of 'colonization' in society and in literature, Irish children's literature has to move forward" (101). *Spirit of the Titanic* is an example of children's literature successfully drawing on and employing tropes and ideas of haunting and retrieving alternative and marginalised historical groups and narratives.

We have seen how, in *Spirit of the Titanic*, Pierce uses trauma and affect to focus the story around specific historical moments, measuring and documenting their impact on individuals and collectives, and articulating marginalised perspectives. One of the important and interesting aspects about *Spirit of the Titanic* is that this traumatic event enables a focus

on Irish experience at a crucial point in history. Pierce presents an example of Irish women writers engaging with these issues, and of contemporary postcolonial children's literature reflecting wider efforts at historical revisioning. As Bradford argues, commenting on children's literature and traumatic historical events: "children's text do not merely reflect what happens in national and global contexts, but advocate ways of being in the world" (20). *Spirit of the Titanic* achieves both of these things. Through its emphasis on affective ties and the importance of compassion and equality, the text instils a compelling message into its readers. Thus, we have seen that Nicola Pierce's *Spirit of the Titanic* provides a fascinating, complex, and multifaceted example of how Irish women writers in the contemporary period have reimagined history and Irish identity, by offering alternative narratives and discourses to new readerships, through genres such as children's literature. *Spirit of the Titanic* is testament to the powerful literature being produced by Irish women writers today.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Nicola Pierce was born in Tallaght in south Dublin (O'Brien Press).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of trauma in relation to textual representation and the Titanic has been discussed by Peter Middleton and Tim Woods (2004). The importance of treating the topic of disaster, including the sinking of the Titanic, in children's literature has been examined by Pauline Davey Zeece (1998).

<sup>3</sup> The significance of hope to the narrative is also highlighted in ilovepercyjackson's review (2012).

<sup>4</sup> For other examples of children's literature treating the topic of the sinking of the Titanic, see Womack (2004) p. 85. See also the CLCD (Children's Literature Comprehensive Database).

<sup>5</sup> The "Author's Notes" are unnumbered and located at the end of *Spirit of the Titanic*.

<sup>6</sup> In July 2011, Samuel Scott's grave was given a headstone at a special ceremony held as a tribute, which Nicola Pierce also attended (Burns).

<sup>7</sup> For instance the 1997 film *Titanic*, as discussed by critics in Bergfelder and Street Eds. (2004).

<sup>8</sup> This development has been noted by the Irish crime fiction author Declan Hughes (2011) in relation to Irish crime fiction.

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<sup>9</sup> For example the projects at The Titanic Experience <http://www.titanicexperiencecobh.ie/>; and Titanic 100 Cobh 2012 <http://www.titanic100.ie/>

<sup>10</sup> Notably Rasor (2001).

<sup>11</sup> For example Barratt (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Womack also notes that the narrative of the Titanic has been employed by some writers to critique the concepts of gender and class prevalent at that time. See discussion in Womack p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> A recent special issue of *Irish Studies Review* (2013) demonstrates the growing research area of Irish migration and diaspora and argues for the importance of drawing attention to it. My chapter on Kirsty Murray's children's book series also discusses the portrayal of Irish migration and diaspora (Beyer 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Schultz, citing Siobhán Kilfeather, "Terrific Register: The Gothicization of Atrocity in Irish Romanticism." *boundary 2* 31.1 (2004) p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Bradford's article specifically addresses American children's literature and the 9/11 terrorist attacks; however, her discussions regarding the problems of mediating trauma also seem apt in this context.

<sup>16</sup> This echoes John Wilson Foster's discussion of the Titanic, premonitions, and the supernatural, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Kerry Mallan's discussion (2013) provides further insight into the functions of empathy in children's literature.

<sup>18</sup> I also discuss the idea of 'family' based on emotional identification rather than biological ties in children's literature, in Beyer (2014) p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> See my acknowledgement of Hughes (2011) and his point regarding this in endnote 8.

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