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## **Masculinity in Crisis: Depictions of modern male trauma in Ireland**

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### **Title:**

#### **‘Still a Respected Man’: Irish Masculinity in Crisis and Crime Fiction**

#### **Introduction: Irish Masculinities and Crime Fiction**

This chapter explores representations of crime and masculinities in crisis<sup>1</sup> in two contemporary crime fictions by Irish authors Ken Bruen and Neville Thompson. The notion of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ has received much recent critical attention<sup>2</sup>. Commenting on the causes of this sense of crisis, Fidelma Ashe says that it: ‘implies that the old certainties surrounding men’s traditional roles in the family and workplace have been swept away through social change [...] leaving the modern man dazed and confused about his roles and place in society’ (1). Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen offer further reflections on recent debates on masculinity in crisis. They state: ‘critics have come to posit that masculinity is [...] worthy of debate, rather than being read as an innate trait that all men possess’ (3). Drawing on these and other debates surrounding contemporary manifestations and embodiments of gender, this chapter considers how genre fiction, specifically crime writing, presents a site for the problematisation of Irish masculinities. The novels I discuss here frequently reveal male characters, individual or collective, who are angry and lost, and find validation either in victimising others or in groups of males which offer stable roles and subject positions. The criminal milieus within the crime fictions discussed further underline the association of troubled masculinities with the seedy underbelly of contemporary Irish urban existence. These portrayals foreground masculinity’s problematic association with

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is from Stuart Neville’s novel *The Twelve*, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> I also discuss the notion of a ‘crisis in masculinity’ in Beyer 2013, particularly in relation to representations of male sexual violence in crime fiction.

violence, and the values, norms and behaviours associated with it. Those questions turn on evolving conceptions of Irishness and power, and the ways in which these are constructed in popular culture (including genre fiction).

The depictions of Irish masculinities to be discussed here reflect what Ashe calls ‘the new politics of masculinity.’ She argues that this ‘is rooted in the claim that the social, political and economic conditions of late capitalist societies have exerted pressure on men’s traditional roles and identities’ (Ashe 1). The emphasis on the Irish specificity of the issues under discussion is central. In his analysis of contemporary representations of masculinity in popular culture, Baker states that the portrayal of masculinities is intrinsically linked to literary locale, and the ideological and symbolic values invested in that locale, such as American West, and to genre fiction in its cultural- and national specific manifestations, such as Westerns and crime narratives (ix). The crime fictions under investigation present a range of representations of masculinity in crisis and gender-political debates. According to Magennis and Mullen, crisis scenarios expose shifts in identities. They argue that: ‘It is in times of ‘crisis’ and of shift that the gap between ideal and lived concepts of identity becomes particularly amenable for discussion’ (Magennis and Mullen 4). The process echoes Sara Keating’s point about how crime fiction writers: ‘use the crime idiom to interrogate configurations of masculinity and reflect the changing social landscape of late twentieth-century Ireland’ (286). This chapter argues that contemporary genre fiction presents a unique and complex field for the investigation of Irish masculinity and trauma.

In the interrogation of constructions of masculinity and criminality in these crime fictions, I employ a range of critical approaches, including crime fiction criticism and discussions from gender theory and Irish studies. In crime fiction, representations of masculinity as a group category and individual selfhood bring out some of the inherent contradictions of contemporary Irish masculinities, a dimension which is uniquely expressed

in the genre<sup>3</sup>. Lee argues that the mainstream or dominant construction of masculinity can be rendered ‘a point of friction that elucidates the slippages, cracks and contradictions of the center.’ (121)<sup>4</sup> Thus, my chapter also investigates whether polarised victim-aggressor representations in Irish crime fiction may be reflective of unresolved tensions and dynamics within Ireland and the masculine identities formed there. Such dynamics expose the contradictions between the drive for ‘respect’ and male authority and the complexities of evolving and changing masculinities. Crime fiction exposes and problematises the insidious ways in which these dynamics are inscribed and reinforced by popular culture. My chapter places its discussion of Irish masculinities in the context of the emergence and recent popularity of ‘Emerald Noir’ Irish crime fiction (McDermid). These current debates about Irishness and the politics of literary and generic aesthetics form the critical context to my exploration of Irish masculinities in crisis and trauma.

### Masculinity, Trauma and Shame

Ken Bruen’s 2006 novel *Priest* offers a complex portrayal of a recent traumatic chapter in Irish history: the revelation of endemic child abuse within the Catholic church, discussed in the media by commentators such as McDonald. Using the prism of crime fiction to interrogate these recent events and deeply imbedded trauma, Bruen’s narrative facilitates a reading of violent masculinity. The novel also focuses on the implications of loss of respect; the aftermath of authority figures losing the respect in their communities when their criminal activities are uncovered. Set in Galway, the crime narrative in *Priest* revolves around the brutal murder of Father Joyce, a priest who is later revealed to have sexually abused altar

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<sup>3</sup> Lee argues that the mainstream or dominant construction of masculinity can be rendered ‘a point of friction that elucidates the slippages, cracks and contradictions of the center.’ (2010 121). Lee is citing Hearn 1996 206.

<sup>4</sup> Lee is citing Hearn 1996 206.

boys at his church. The murder is investigated by Jack Taylor, a private detective who is also the story's central character. The killer is eventually found; the sister of one of the abused altar boys serving in Father Joyce's church. The boy himself, now a grown man, ends up committing suicide, finding himself unable to recover from the trauma he suffered as a result of the abuse.

*Priest* is a conventionally structured detective story, told in the first person by the detective figure Jack Taylor, and features the elements of criminal activity and violence followed by restorative justice that we would expect from the genre. The novel examines two central manifestations of problematic masculinity, which are magnified through the crime fiction genre, namely trauma and shame, specifically in sexualised transgression. Rabey refers to the 'self-compounding shame which frequently haunts Irish masculinity' (161), a dimension which Bruen's novel also explores. The novel examines these notions through its representation of polarised extremes which are, in part, responses to or expressions of troubled masculinity. The novel's problematisation of criminality and religion adds further dimension to its interrogation of masculinity and the values it represents. In *Priest*, the crimes and transgressions are buried in the past but have present-day repercussions. Although *Priest* portrays an individual murder and its circumstances, the background of collective anguish and anger at the church is omnipresent, giving the novel a sense of urgency and social and cultural relevance.

Jack Taylor is himself a central representation of masculinity in crisis, which in him chiefly manifests itself in anger. The fallibility and flawed nature of the detective character is a very important dimension of this novel. Rather than presenting the detective as an idealised role model of masculinity, Bruen portrays Taylor as a damaged and troubled man, vulnerable but also on edge, haunted by his own past and sense of shame. Reflecting on his past actions, Taylor refers to the mistakes he has made and the people he has hurt, the consequences of

which he must now face. This edginess is evident in his barely concealed aggression and rage. Taylor is informed by verbal and physical aggression in his enactment of masculine behaviour. He reflects: 'Spitting anger has informed most of my life, but the white-hot aggression I felt towards this old woman was new to me and I couldn't rein it in' (297). Taylor's character highlights the problem of addiction and the shoring up of his fragile or exposed sense of self through drinking. Alcohol has allowed him to forget; however, drink is also to blame for some of the past tragedies which haunt Taylor in this novel, including the accidental death of his friend Jeff's 3-year-old daughter for which he holds himself responsible (149, 164). When confronted with problems, his, 'answer is/was [...] rage' (303). His anger is shown to be connected with self-loathing and fear of vulnerability. These deep-rooted problems are caused by alcoholism, but also by his own inability to articulate his rage and self-loathing which is bubbling just beneath a surface veneer of civility.

At the novel's opening, Taylor has just been released from a mental hospital following a breakdown. He gets involved in investigating the brutal murder of Father Joyce, a Catholic priest who sexually abused altar boys. Through this plot line, the novel thus explores the controversial and painful subject of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests, a topic which has haunted Irish debates in recent years since its disclosure. By exploring the construction of criminality and sexual deviancy, *Priest* reflects the significance of trauma in Irish literature and culture. The effects of this upheaval on individual masculinities are illustrated by Taylor and his personal crisis. While recovering from his breakdown, Taylor befriends a black patient who reaches out to him. Tragically, the man later kills himself when threatened with deportation. Through the depiction of their friendship and the sense of marginalisation they share, Bruen poignantly comments on the spurious values and lack of tolerance of 'The new Ireland' (20). His portrayal foregrounds and criticises the construction of group and national identities around whiteness and dominance and the marginalisation of

racial and ethnic difference. *Priest's* portrayal of the black patient, victimised because of the colour of his skin and residential status, reflects an acute awareness of the complex effects of violence and marginalisation, and their continued impact on contemporary Irish society.

The figure of Father Joyce, the murdered Catholic priest, presents the other main problematic masculine identity examined in *Priest*. Bruen's uncompromising interrogation of this figure is especially pertinent because of the authority and privilege conventionally associated with it. Cregan's comments underline these points, as he states that: 'The character of the priest is culturally identifiable in Irish society with power and authority' (170). In his discussion Cregan also observes, 'This power and authority is, however, not simply recognisable as spiritual, but is often associated with social and political issues' (170). This elevated social status allows the perpetrators to continue their abuse of innocent victims, as this phrase from *Priest* reflects: 'The Church had protected abusers before, abused the accused and transferred the culprit to another parish. Reassigned a suspected monster to a new and unsuspecting populace' (Bruen 83). Through the character of Father Joyce, *Priest* illustrates how crime fiction, and genre fiction generally, is capable of delivering an incisive social and cultural critique of male patriarchal privilege and authority<sup>5</sup>.

The murder of Father Joyce foregrounds the paradox inherent in the fact that the murder victim is also a perpetrator and a criminal, highlighting the novel's exploration of contradictions inherent in constructions of masculinity. These contradictions have their roots in colonial power politics, and are further underlined by religious structures. The fact that Father Joyce was found murdered in a church building in the confessional booth (29), underlines the connection between masculinity in crisis and the problematic of dogmatic religion through his role within it. His position is further complicated by Sister Mary Joseph, a nun who protects him by keeping his secret. The book describes Sister Mary Joseph's

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<sup>5</sup> I also discuss this critical dimension of crime fiction in Beyer 2012.

knowledge of Father's Joyce's abuse of the altar boys over an extended period of time, and her decision to say nothing, despite the fact that she had witnessed 'the altar boys crying. In obvious distress' (46), and knew that 'Father Joyce's *little temptations* grew uglier and more obscene' (46). The depiction of the taboo subjects of child sexual abuse reflects an ultimate consequence of predatory male sexuality and exploitation of positions of authority and trust. When Father Joyce's murder is solved, and his now adult abuse victim takes his own life, there is no sense of justice having been done. This is a bleak novel which refuses the easy catharsis of restorative justice, and rejects a reassurance of masculine authority.

Bruen's novel presents a wider critical examination of the construction of masculinity and power in Irish culture and literature. The novel contextualises its portrayal of child abuse with a critique of the church and the society which allowed the abuse to continue. This endeavour includes exposing the continued sense of shame festering away inside the individual and collective. The difficulties of representing and expressing this shame is discussed by Margot Gayle Backus and Joseph Valente who state; 'The inexpressibility of shame [...] is not only a significant psychological and phenomenological problem, but a pathogenic and social and political condition as well.' (49). However, through his use of the crime genre, Bruen articulates this sense of shame and collusion, and also the difficulty of its reconciliation. The emergence of these issues is related to contemporary times of economic and cultural change. Ian Campbell Ross has commented on these changes, stating: 'the Celtic Tiger's material affluence and the disintegration of the stable, conservative Catholic world' (Ross 30-1). The implications of this disintegration are serious, Ross adds, as he describes a contemporary Ireland 'of violent, often drug-related crime, facing up to the past tainted by religious hypocrisy and the long-concealed physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children' (31). Through these textual strategies, Bruen draws our attention to the ways in which crime

fiction incorporates social critique and affects the ways in which we read our culture<sup>6</sup>.

Commenting on the problematic of representing identity, Nash argues: ‘cultural expressions or enactments of identity are often moments of conflict’ (109). Crime fiction texts offer prisms through which to examine how male trauma is configured and reimagined by genre, and to reflect on the implications for national and cultural embodiments of masculinity in Ireland. Magennis and Mullen discuss the ways in which Irish masculinity as a construct has undergone change during post-conflict times (4). They furthermore pinpoint the ways in which Irish masculinities have been perceived to be threatened by femininity and victimhood (ibid). These complex gender identifications are bound up with the sense of shame and guilt which Bruen’s novel examines.

*Priest*’s portrayals of abusive masculine behaviour, shored up by feminine complicity, are disturbing, both when they explicitly depict transgressions and when these are merely hinted at. The descriptions of the long-term effects on the victims echo the anger felt by the Irish people at the horrors of the paedophilic crimes committed by male authority figures in positions of trust. The disintegration of the respect which these authority figures enjoyed in their local communities has profound implications. In portraying Jack Taylor’s quest for truth, *Priest* highlights the difficulties he encounters, in a society still haunted by the continued power and influence of the Church. Through Taylor and his hidden disgrace and troubled past, the novel extends the themes of shame and taboo into an examination of the individual male and detective character. This blurs the boundaries between right and wrong, suggesting a breakdown of values and moral codes. Bruen’s novel presents a complex picture of an Ireland haunted by its collective past and inability to deal with the present. The urgency of these questions is sharpened through his portrayal of troubled masculinities. Those portrayals complicate the issue of respect’ and masculinity which the quotation in my

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<sup>6</sup> I also discuss this political aspect of crime fiction in Beyer 2013.

essay title refers to. 'Respect' as a marker of community status and masculine authority identity has been eroded in *Priest*, through the revelation of shame and taboo. Similarly, Taylor's alcohol problems and his hidden disgrace and guilt, illustrate his identity problems which undermine respect in his character as a representative of law enforcement. These unresolved conflicts are illustrated through individualised character portraits, which enable the reader to understand the ways in which these insidious and destructive issues continue to haunt Irish cultural and literary life.

### Violent Masculinities and Victims

Neville Thompson's 2006 novel *Mama's Boys* explores Irish masculinity through its portrayals of violence, masculinity, and relations between men across the generational divide.<sup>7</sup> Examining this dimension enables us to explore the construction and depiction of differences between and among men, which is crucial to a discussion of the complexity of both masculinity and Irish identities. Differing from Bruen's novel in its array of literary techniques and experimental narrative structure ('A Conversation'), Thompson's *Mama's Boys* departs from the conventional traits of crime fiction. Instead, the novel employs a hybrid narrative form, straddling genres by mixing fragmented postmodernist storytelling style (Burke) and multiple narrative perspectives (both male and female) with a hard-boiled mode. This narrative strategy emphasises multiplicity and polyvocality. It draws attention to literary language and the different modes and registers used by the different characters and their narrative voices. The blurring of boundaries between criminal and victim positions further complicate these positions and expose what Christina Lee calls 'cracks' and

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<sup>7</sup> In my article on the politics of representing male rape, I also explored issues related to the construction of individual and group masculinities (Beyer 2013). These manifestations are central to analysing masculinities in crisis.

contradictions' in identities (121). The absence of a detective figure, the larger cast of characters and shifting narrative viewpoints in Thompson's novel serve to highlight the lack of cohesion or community in times of change.

Set in working-class Dublin, *Mama's Boys* relates the complicated back stories of two young small-time criminals, Dammo and Bebop. The novel portrays Dammo and Bebop growing up and the events leading up to their brutal murders. The two lads are murdered in cold blood at the end of the novel by a gang of criminals led by the enforcers Bomber and Scooby who work for a sinister drug baron called The Chemist. However, the opening pages of the novel reveal this tragic ending, drawing a bleak picture of inevitable repetition of violence, loss and anger. *Mama's Boys* seeks to put a human face on otherwise anonymous-seeming gangland killings, forcing the reader to imagine the lives and backgrounds of those men caught up in crime. This important dimension has been highlighted by Thompson in an interview, where he stated: 'In these times of constant headline grabbing stories of crime and punishment it is easy to forget that behind the headlines are real people with real families and real feelings.' ('A Conversation') *Mama's Boys* contrasts portrayals of traditional working-class men who represent traditional values, with opportunistic younger males looking for hedonistic pleasure and easy money through crime. The novel shows how descriptions of criminals in the media glorify violent criminal masculinity based on film and iconography from popular culture: 'Godfather Irish Style' (Thompson 231) and criminals becoming 'a legend overnight' (237). In Thompson's novel, such media constructions of glorified masculine violence are contrasted with the 'mama's boys', the male victims who are brutalised in the ruthless power struggles.

In *Mama's Boys*, the male 'gang' identity reinforces masculine dominance, but also allows for characters to play individualised roles, enacted within the self-reinforcing and self-monitoring confines of the gang. As Bomber states, 'Being part of the gang was great'

(Thompson 238). The gang is constructed around the upholding and maintaining of male power by brutalising other men and women, using prostitution, addiction, and ritual humiliation as methods of control (249-51). The examination of identity and its construction, individual and collective, is also crucial to the exploration of the crisis within masculinity. This focus emphasises the structures and operations of social and cultural power dynamics, as Cregan argues in his discussion of group identity and masculinity. He states that:

‘Masculinity is a complex system of gender identification and codification caught up in social relations that go beyond the personal associated with the sociology of hierarchical power’ (Cregan 168). Crime fiction typically deals with social hierarchies, and therefore magnifies issues related to violence and masculinity. The grounding of these problematic masculinities in specifically Irish settings and idioms further draws attention to the close link between crime fiction and the local and specific which renders it politically and culturally relevant.

The title of the novel - *Mama's Boys* - alludes to and mocks a feminised masculinity. The phrase ‘mama’s boys’ suggests a loss of masculine toughness associated with a continued closeness to the mother (Merriam-Webster). Such a perceived loss of power is arguably an aspect of a troubled masculinity, as Cormac O’Brien argues. This threatened ‘subjugation’ is aligned with a feminised position, and O’Brien comments on the tensions and cracks which arise in the construction: ‘when it is suddenly threatened with subjugation and negation’ (167). The phrase ‘mama’s boys’ also draws attention to the role and representation of the maternal, as part of the book’s problematisation of gender. Mothers are portrayed as either troubled or inadequate (Bebop’s mother Ann-Marie), or identified with the domestic sphere, waiting on the boys and men in their lives, defined by their gender and reproductive role (Dammo’s mother Mary). This dichotomy reflects Nash’s assertion that both men and women are affected by the ways in which Irishness and gender are constructed: ‘Within most national traditions individuals are assigned certain kinds of sexual and gender roles and

identities' (109). *Mama's Boys* thus portrays the effect on successive generations of Irish working-class women and their sons, of being relatively powerless and having limited options in life, due to their traditional gender role and cultural, social, and religious factors governing and controlling sexuality. These separate spheres for men and women lead the male characters in the book to group together, and to seek affirmation in their identities and relative positions within the group. Thompson's insightful treatment of gender roles illustrates how rigid constructions of masculinity and femininity limit and damage both sexes.

Thompson's examination of masculinity in crisis includes a scrutiny of fatherhood which brings the notion of respect and its connotations into sharp relief in *Mama's Boys*. Absent or inadequate fathers are portrayed as parental figures who let their sons down, by leaving them vulnerable to potential abuse and neglect (Thompson 155). Bebop is groomed by Eric, a resident at a hostel where Bebop lives temporarily with his mother Ann-Marie as a young child. When Eric's abusive past comes to light and he tries to molest the boy, he attempts to justify his actions by blaming Ann-Marie: "'What sort of fella did you think lived in a place like this?'" (170) The motif of abusive father figures using their power in harmful ways is echoed elsewhere in the book, in Bomber's family life for example. Dammo's relationship with his father Kevin is different, and doesn't involve violence. Instead, however, it is characterised by the son's loss of respect for his father. Towards the end of the novel, Dammo has an argument with Kevin and tells his father that working hard all his life has got him nowhere, whereas he, Dammo, is prospering and accumulating wealth through criminal activity (305-6). Dammo then gives Kevin a sum of money to treat his mother and to boost his father's sense of masculine self-esteem (306). This paradoxical reversal of roles suggests a shift in the parameters of the father-son relationship and male authority. 'Traditional tropes of Irish manhood such as marriage, work and family' (Cormac O'Brien

165), are shown to be eroding and changing, evidenced in the dysfunctional families and heterosexual relationships in *Mama's Boys*.

In *Mama's Boys*, male characters use violence to affirm or consolidate their masculinity and gain respect from peers. Critically examining and exposing gender oppression and domestic violence, the novel portrays how the need to affirm masculinity frequently results in male aggression towards and brutality against women. The novel thereby makes domestic crime part of its broader plot, showing the capability of genre fiction to treat pertinent social and gender political issues. Anecdotes told in the novel support this strategy. At one point, Dammo's mother Mary recalls a shocking domestic violence incident she witnessed in a neighbouring couple on her street, the Finnigans (15). A controlling husband first bullies then beats up his wife because her physical beauty and sexual attractiveness threatens his sense of masculine dominance. This harrowing incident maims her face (17), suggesting the devastation caused to her whole being and sense of self. Thompson's incorporation of references to domestic violence and male domination is thus part of his critique of extreme forms of masculinity in the novel. Another example in *Mama's Boys* of male violence against women is shown when the drug baron the Chemist teaches Peggy Andrews, an assertive prostitute, a devastating and humiliating lesson in subservience (251). When she asserts her right to get out of the 'game' and get off drugs, based on her knowledge that she has alternative options and choices in her life such as education and achieving a prominent social status, she too is beaten to a pulp by the Chemist's enforcers, and is finally killed by Bomber (254). This once again demonstrates that male violence against women as a crude way of retaining control and upholding authority, a strategy which the novel condemns. Rather than portraying these instances of extreme male violence against women in a glorified fashion, *Mama's Boys* is clearly critical of the male behaviours it depicts. This suggests that crime fiction, rather than uncritically replicating stereotypical

patterns for the reader's titillation, can expose and question those power inequalities as part of its crime plot.

Examining contrasting positions of masculinity, aggressors and victims, enables us to get a sense of the dichotomies and contradictions which shape masculinity in *Mama's Boys*. The character which most menacingly portrays violent masculinity is Bomber, the enforcer and violent bully who works for the drug baron The Chemist. The two enforcers, Scooby and Bomber, have comical names reminiscent of cartoons (255); however, those light-hearted names are deeply ironic, in the light of their ruthless and brutal behaviour. Bomber is emotionally detached from his actions, calmly acknowledging his 'reputation for being an evil sadistic bastard' (9) and that hurting, maiming and killing people is just 'me doing me job' (10). Whereas the other hitman Scooby, uses a punch bag to practice his blows, Bomber rejects the artifice, asserting instead that the physical and psychological dimension of inflicting pain on a sentient being is what drives him: 'I liked the sound of flesh on bone [...] Hitting humans was different. There was that look. The look that let you know they were scared shitless of you'(185) This knowledge that others fear him gives him a sense of power and reaffirms his sense of masculinity, as he leaves a permanent bodily imprint on his victims (189).

Bomber sees himself as representing a counter-discourse to conventional society and the masculinity it deems normative. To him, when men conform to social expectations they are not rewarded, on the contrary 'they still fuck with you.'(191) *Mama's Boys* portrays how Bomber is made into the man he is by his violent upbringing (195), through physical punishment aiming to produce 'real men' (p195) through its physically and mentally abusive methods of 'hardening up' (195). Having been thus brutalised, Bomber rejects his father's values and symbolic locus (196). His object lesson in brutalisation leaves him in no doubt that he has to be the 'hardest bastard' (195) of all. Bomber's need for violent domination as a

form of affirmation makes him the book's most obvious embodiment of extreme masculinity. In contrast to Bomber's hyper-masculinity, *Mama's Boys* poses the contradictions within the masculine role and its construction. Bebop expresses his frustration with this sense of crisis, emphasising the association of emotion with weakness: 'I hated his fucking New Man shit that let fellas cry' (11). However, as Dammo and Bebop meet their final demise at Bomber's hand, and their bodies are taken out of their water, the ultimate ignominy of victimhood and its denial of subjectivity is reflected in the anonymity surrounding their description (396).

Thompson's *Mama's Boys*, the novel presents a seemingly inevitable closure with the demise and victimisation of Dammo and Bebop evokes the reader's sympathies but reinforces and underlines the prevailing masculine norms and the oppressive pattern of domination and victimisation. This temporary reprieve is poignant when seen within an Irish historical and political context, in which attempts at establishing self-determined identity take on an additional individual and collective importance. In *Mama's Boys*, victimisation has a degree of finality and inevitability about it, the binary pattern of aggressor and victim being not only central, but proving persistent and extremely hard to break down. The association of masculinity with respect through the upholding of traditional working-class values (represented by Dammo's father Kevin) has become irrelevant to the younger generation of men in the novel. Instead, they seek respect by making fast money through, or through violence and bullying. *Mama's Boys* suggests that, until we begin to dismantle extreme masculinity and the binaries responsible for defining victimhood, violence will remain endemic in individual and collective Irish working-class lives.

### Conclusion: Fractures and Contradictions

This chapter has examined the creation of multi-faceted and complex conceptions of masculinity and Irish identity by contemporary Irish crime fictions.<sup>8</sup> Examining Bruen's *Priest* and Thompson's *Mama's Boys*, we have seen how these authors employ the crime fiction genre to interrogate male violence and Irishness. Sara Keating explains how crime fiction writers: 'use the crime idiom to interrogate configurations of masculinity and reflect the changing social landscape of late twentieth-century Ireland' (286). Thus, through the examination of specific thematic content in these texts, we have established the importance of patterns of victimhood and power reinforcement, and the implications of this for our understanding of portrayals of troubled masculinity in Irish crime fiction. In the novels by Bruen and Thompson examined here, Irish masculinity is evidently undergoing a process of change and revision. In assessing Irish masculinities, Magennis and Mullen have identified the current drive in literary and cultural representations to 'explore the plurality of representations of manhood in literature and culture' (1). These critical explorations of the 'cracks and contradictions' within the construction of Irish masculinity have informed my reading of the crime fictions discussed in the chapter. As we have seen, literary representations provide complex examples of constructed gendered identities and change. Ashe explores the notion of 'crisis' within masculinity and its manifestations, noting: 'The key terms that have emerged in popular discourses about the plight of the modern man have been 'crisis', 'loss' and 'change' (1). Those terms have also emerged prominently in the texts discussed here. Furthermore, crime fiction highlights themes of conflict and confrontation, both external and internal, but also linguistically, through its discursive modes and textual strategies.

Bruen's and Thompson's novels challenge prevailing popular conceptions of Irishness and of Irish masculinity in profound and often uncomfortable ways. However, frequently we

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<sup>8</sup> I have earlier acknowledged Lee's use of the terms 'cracks, and contradictions' in her discussion of masculinities in crisis (2010 121).

also see that certain ideas and values are very difficult to shift. The parallel interrogation of masculinity and Irishness is evident in Bruen's protagonist Jack Taylor in *Priest*, who wryly states:

Ireland prided itself on being confident aware modern. Our image abroad was that of hip coolness [...] Imagining we'd moved far from the provincial, closed, parochial society of the bad years, events were occurring to remind us we hadn't moved as far or as fast as we thought (Bruen 320).

The sense of belonging based on a group is shown to be part of the problem. There is a reassurance in the hierarchy within the group, and in adhering to fixed positions of power and privilege. Bruen and Thompson explore what happens when these hierarchies and systems are eroded or challenged, and the implications this has for the individual masculinities defined within them and by them. Those shifts are also indicative of wider cultural and political shifts within Irish culture and society. The crime fictions examined here illustrate the cracks and contradictions exposed (Lee), suggesting that change is illusory and elusive, not concrete, and resisting the neat tie-up of the plot frequently seen in conventional crime fiction.

As this chapter has shown, studying depictions of masculinity in Irish crime fiction affords an opportunity to interrogate constructions of national and gendered identities. We have explored the extent to which representations of masculinity as a group category and individual selfhood foreground underlying inconsistencies of contemporary Irish masculinities. Furthermore, the identification of persistent polarised victim-aggressor representations in these Irish crime fictions has suggested unresolved tensions and cracks which remain. These divisions, between the conventional association of masculinity with 'respect' from peers, power and fear, and the masculine identities evolving within an Irish postcolonial context, demonstrate the precariousness of masculinity as a category. These

issues are magnified in crime fiction, because the genre often depends on particular (often extreme) embodiments and representations of masculine characters and behaviours. The novels by Bruen and Thompson discussed here are critical of extreme forms of masculinity, and of polarized gender positions which divide individuals and collectives into perpetrators and victims. Issues of class and religion exacerbate these problems, as we have seen, engendering a situation whereby Irish masculinity is in crisis and in need of change. Through focusing on violence, we have seen how these fictions expose the fractures and breaking points within masculinity and its construction. These fractures are further exacerbated by the way they are shaped by Irish historical and cultural legacies which have brought to bear particular pressures on Irish masculinity, as these stories explore and explain. This chapter has discussed how Bruen and Thompson demand a reappraisal of Irish history, and an acknowledgement of the traumas and hurt caused by oppressive regimes. These powerful novels use the prism of crime fiction to draw attention to Irish social and cultural problems. Complex issues such as shame, trauma, violence and agency are used in both novels to interrogate constructions of Irish masculinity, and to emphasize the enduring problems confronting it and preventing change. By using contrasting textual techniques and narrative approaches, *Priest* and *Mama's Boys* insist on the reader's critical engagement with the ways in which Irish masculinities are constructed and shaped in the present day and in the future. Both novels are frustrated and energised by the seeming inability of Irish masculinity to move beyond the perpetrator/victim binary which traps individuals in untenable positions. Bruen and Thompson's crime novels demonstrate that these oppressive regimes and polarised identity positions revolving around notions of peer group respect and the subjugation of others must change.

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