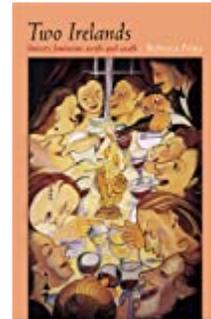




**Rebecca Pelan.** *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005. xxxiv + 203 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3059-3.



**Reviewed by** Maria Doyle (Department of English, University of West Georgia)

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## Real Irish Women Write Fiction

Rebecca Pelan's *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South* explores the concerns of Irish women's fiction in the last decades of the twentieth century. Contextualizing her subject not as the delineation of a literary movement but as the examination of a body of fiction that has offered a relatively cohesive critique of Ireland's traditional "family values," Pelan divides her discussion of texts from the 1970s through the mid-1990s into two primary sections dealing with women's writing in the Republic and in the North. The study concludes by exploring some of the ramifications of changes within feminism itself as they affect our understanding of Irish women's cultural production. Focusing more on historical overview rather than theoretical analysis, the book provides a solid introduction to the work of a wide range of female Irish writers. *Two Irelands* further suggests important questions about how the realism that is the dominant mode of this body of work illuminates Ireland's changing cultural map.

Pelan's first chapter, which examines women's writing in the Republic, provides readers with an overview of novelists, short story writers, journalists, and essayists.

Her inclusion of this wider variety of women's writing demonstrates an admirable desire to expand the definition of the "literary" so that it can reflect more accurately women's writing and women's experience. Exploring female perspectives on mother/daughter relationships, marriage, sexual identity, and religion, to name a few, the chapter introduces readers to an array of texts ripe for analysis. That said, this first chapter is in some ways less satisfying than the rest of the book. The background section here offers a relatively concise history of women's relationship to nationalism in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, a history that highlights important hindrances to women's attainment of equality in these formative years of modern Irish consciousness, not the least of which were constitutional provisions set up to "protect" a woman's position in the home. Such background is necessary to illuminate the tradition contemporary writers are working against, but the chapter employs relatively broad strokes that sometimes generalize in problematic, or at least unclear, ways. In discussing nationalist mythology, for instance, the author claims that dramatist John Millington Synge was complicit in the Revival's desire to "deny 'real' women through the

portrayal of a feminized/idealized Ireland sacrificed in exchange for freedom” (p. 19), an unconvincing assertion, especially given that the unconventional complexity of Synge’s female characters contributed to criticism of his work from nationalists who preferred heroines who embodied that Cathleen ni Houlihan ideal. While footnotes provide some important historical context for the specific period from the 1970s on, more examination of the politics and cultural currents of this era in the body of the text, particularly in relation to the fiction explored, would help to situate Pelan’s subject more effectively.

Pelan’s first chapter concludes with the assertion that “Irish women adopted ... as subversive and counter-hegemonic a tradition in their fiction as once existed in that produced by Irish (colonized) men in response to similar conditions” (p. 51), thus suggesting that the period from the 1970s to the 1990s represented, in essence, a new stage of decolonization in the Republic. Her chapter on Northern Ireland illustrates that this dynamic is more difficult to define in a cultural space where the political, colonial struggle is still in process and where, consequently, women’s desire to assert themselves as women is often viewed as of secondary importance when compared to the need to clarify an unstable national identity. This chapter offers more persuasive context, primarily because the cultural material it explores provides a broader understanding of the period in which the literature *Two Irelands* examines was created. Pelan discusses the tensions between feminism and nationalism in the Northern political climate, such as the cultural anxiety over female nationalist prisoners’ participation in the “dirty protests” of the early 1980s, and reveals similar tensions within a Northern Unionist community where women have been encouraged to occupy a background role. Exploring the work of fiction writers and playwrights, Pelan reveals distinctions in the development of genres in the North, pointing out, for instance, that drama is a more popular choice for Northern women than for their counterparts in the Republic and investigating the status of the thriller as a means of exploring questions

of politics and gender. Ultimately, this chapter provides an interesting and balanced assessment of the literature and history that shaped it.

Pelan’s final chapter, “Surveying the New Minefield,” seeks to contextualize the previous discussion as a refutation of the contemporary claim that “feminism is now dead, or, worse, so ‘fragmented’ that it has become politically impotent” (p. 102). This section explores tensions within feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and literary discourse that have served to marginalize the work of Irish women; for instance, the author critiques the “greatness” debate which she sees as “favor[ing] the abstract, experimental and linguistic” (p. 128) over the concrete and historicized. Pelan highlights quite effectively important cultural questions while situating her own work as a means of asserting the sociological value of literature: as she sees it, Irish women’s articulation of their own various outsider positions merits exploration as a means of documenting real women’s perceptions of their culture and their potential to recast their place within it.

The massive bibliography at the end of the book—the “Works Cited” and “Selected Readings” sections combine for over fifty pages—provides readers with ample resources for further critical and fictional reading. Wide-ranging in its scope, this section of the text includes references on a variety of political and social issues, literary development, and theoretical concerns; few readers will fail to find something of use to their particular interests. One of the most interesting components of *Two Irelands* is Pelan’s concern for the material means of women’s literary production: the book includes a number of sections dealing with the dynamics of women’s publishing, which presses are publishing what and how their relationship to the literary market has developed over the period in question. Exploring this filtering process, the means by which women’s words reach the public, adds important context to the project. Overall, Pelan’s text is a useful resource for those interested in discovering the voices of Irish women writers in an important transitional period.

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