

Annalisa Mastronardi, *James Joyce's Legacies in Contemporary Irish Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 2026), 225 pp., ISBN 9781032899534 Pb

Reviewed by Carmela Esposito

“My nature is feminist. How could you not be a feminist and be alive? The world is full of brilliant, interesting women”  
Ali Smith, 2015

Sally Rooney called *Ulysses* “a book for girls” (16). Anne Enright reiterated that she “spent quite a considerable amount of energy not studying it” (211). Mary Morrissy said to herself: “it’s either me or Joyce” (84), and, when asked about the Irish giant’s influence, Emilie Pine confessed: “I was having fun with it!” (218).

So effervescently alive is the relationship between contemporary Irish women writers and James Joyce, that it is unavoidably intertwined with all the proliferating intricacies, contradictions, and ironies of life itself. Annalisa Mastronardi’s *James Joyce’s Legacies in Contemporary Irish Women Writing* (2026) offers a timely, fierce study on Joyce’s many afterlives in Irish literature through diverse approaches that include gender studies, women studies and reception studies. Mastronardi’s central premise is established with clarity and conviction: Joyce is for everyone, *especially* for women writers. Such premise is supported by an extensive critical and historical foregrounding that allows the monograph to propose a new paradigm of influence in a field long dominated by male-centred reception models. Indeed, gender studies and Joyce studies have a conflicting history. The author behind the liberatory soliloquy of Molly Bloom and the desperate cry for help of Eveline, besides the overflowing transformational force of Anna Livia Plurabelle, has been the target of feminist scholars who regarded Joyce’s use of female archetypes as sexist and degrading, reducing women to mere fabrications of the male gaze. Described as flat, constructed, and even disgusting, Joyce’s provocative portrayals of women characters aligned with his rebellion against the rigidity and bigotry of the end of 19<sup>th</sup>- and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland. Mastronardi’s book delves deeply into the contextual reasons that discard those claims: Joyce himself owes his own writerly success to women (and specifically to women in writing); as Mastronardi states, he “was surrounded and supported by a network of women who served as his primary benefactors, publishers, and confidantes” (3).

Mastronardi responds to scholarly critiques by posing a thought-provoking question: “what, ultimately, is more pornographic: the explicit content of [Joyce’s] texts or the voyeuristic impulse to expose his private correspondence with Nora, as Richard Ellmann famously did?” (5). And, she adds: “[a]s human beings – and thus carriers of inner contradictions – critics do not hold the authority to dictate absolute meaning to readers” (6). Joyce gave voice to those who had none, and notably did so for women. By subverting and modernising mythology he made Penelope unfaithful, unwaiting, and, to steal a title from Mary Morrissy, “unbound”, but most significantly, he made her ‘her own’. In *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom “has the final word – her voice dominates the last forty pages of the novel – uninterrupted” (8).

Mastronardi reframes the notion of Joycean legacy departing from Harold Bloom’s agonistic model of influence, where later authors struggle with their literary precursor: while male writers have often been intimidated by him, it is Irish women writers who maintain the most fruitful connection with Joyce. “Rather than being overshadowed by his presence”, Mastronardi argues, “women writers have embraced his heritage, expanding on his audacity and ambition to give voice to those previously marginalised or ignored” (20).

The result of Annalisa Mastronardi’s doctoral research at Dublin City University, *James Joyce’s Legacies* consists of five chapters: the first two chapters encompass a study of Joyce’s female characters in *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922) as well as the reception of Joyce in Irish women’s writing. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are undeniably the book’s most original contributions, providing detailed analyses of the works of three contemporary Irish women writers through the Joycean lens: Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), Eimer McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), and Emilie Pine’s *Ruth & Pen* (2022). Additionally, the monograph also features an appendix of three enlightening interviews she conducted with the authors Anne Enright, Emilie Pine and Mary Morrissy between January 2020 and December 2022.

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In her reading of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), Mastronardi examines the recurring themes of silence and trauma, demonstrating how Joycean elements are reworked to address the lingering effects of familial and societal repression. After the loss of her brother Liam, 39-year-old Veronica is left to figure out what caused her brother to drown himself as she uncovers uncomfortable secrets. This emphasis on "breaking silences" (104) situates Enright within the broader tradition of Irish writing, while also highlighting the specificity of her feminist take. The subtle references to Joyce are visible, according to Mastronardi, in small details such as the inherently Joycean locations like the Belvedere Hotel sited opposite Belvedere College "which Joyce attended from 1893 to 1898" (107). Hauntings and ghosts constitute a major leitmotif in Joyce's fiction, particularly in "The Dead" (1914), the final and longest short story of *Dubliners*, where the romantic memory of Micheal Furey – the boy who died for the love of Gretta Conroy – lingers on the mind of her husband, Gabriel Conroy, who feels his inability of ever measuring up to his phantom. "Unlike Gretta, whose traumatic memory is stirred by music and guided by Gabriel [...], Veronica remains trapped within the fractures of her memory" (108). The very image of the Irish family is dismantled by Enright, according to Mastronardi, who reflects on how the character of the suicide brother serves as the archetype of the Christian scapegoat: "[t]his archetype aligns Liam with Leopold Bloom, who, as Suzette Henke observes, becomes 'the new Paschal lamb to be sacrificed on the altar of history' in 'Cyclops'" (114). In Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, with its title referring to Liam's funeral, Joyce's influence *gathers* as well: the very fact that the opening story of *Dubliners*, "The Sisters" (1914) (not to mention the last book he wrote) also deal with a wake, seems equally telling.

Similarly, in the chapter on Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* Mastronardi shows how the author transforms Joycean modernism into a vehicle for female subjectivity under conditions of patriarchal constraint. The novel "confronts the devastating impact of sexual abuse on a young woman [...] crafting a voice that is raw, fractured and urgent" (139). This is achieved by reinterpreting the Joycean stream-of-consciousness in ways that offer a compelling account of struggle and interiority. As Mastronardi remarks "[t]he infant voice of the protagonist blurs with those of the adults, creating a tapestry of overlapping consciousnesses – a technique evocative of Joyce's free indirect discourse in the opening pages of *A Portrait*" (141). The result is not merely a "Joycean pastiche" (144), but a radical reconfiguration of his stylistic innovations and circularity.

The last chapter of the monograph – Mastronardi's analysis of Emilie Pine's *Ruth & Pen* – convincingly situates the novel as a contemporary reimagining of *Ulysses*. "Published on the centenary of *Ulysses*" (163), the novel also follows the wanderings of its characters through Dublin over a single day, but instead of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, Pine places two women protagonists centre stage: Ruth, a therapist who is on the verge of giving up on the dream of ever becoming a mother; and Pen, an autistic teenager struggling with her sexuality. "While Pine does not experiment with language in the same way Joyce does, her characters are deeply attuned to its power" (165), Mastronardi points out. Although Pine has admitted to Virginia Woolf being a stronger stylistic influence on *Ruth & Pen*, her concern on embodiment, ethics, and urban experience underscores the adaptability of Joycean tropes in addressing contemporary concerns.

*James Joyce's Legacies in Contemporary Irish Women's Writing* methodologically combines an interpretivist approach that prioritises close reading, and a strong theoretical engagement within an all-Irish cultural and historical framework. Mastronardi succeeds in capturing how women writers have appropriated, expanded, and overall reimagined Joyce's key devices and motifs. Edna O' Brien once stated: "[n]o other writer taught me what Joyce taught me" (75). Among Mastronardi's achievements there is a careful discernment of the reasons behind statements such as that one. Ultimately, with the aim of understanding the tensions underpinning Joycean legacy, the study defiantly affirms the central role of Irish women writers in the ongoing evolution of contemporary literature.