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DARK PASSAGES

Dark Passages: Seeking peace for himself and his victims

In Stuart Neville's 'The Ghosts of Belfast,' a former IRA killer tries to quiet the restless spirits of the people he killed by hunting those who gave him his orders.

By Sarah Weinman

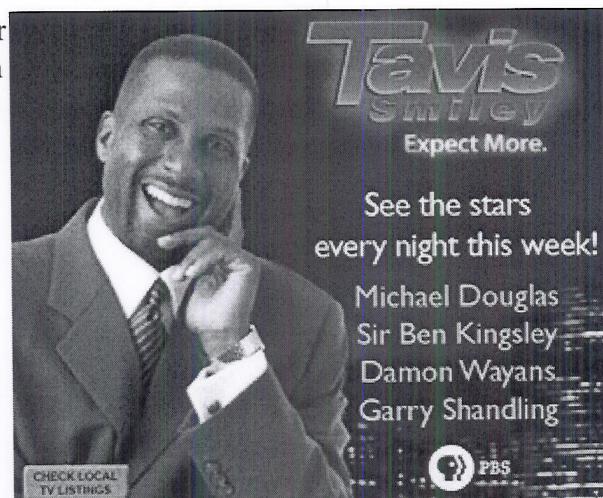
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A few years ago, while abroad for a summer semester in England, I flew over to Ireland for a short vacation over the Bank Holiday weekend. I spent much of the time in Dublin but before getting there, I had a day's layover in Belfast. And though one only needs 24 hours or so to see the entire city (including the excellent mystery bookshop No Alibis), it haunts me still.

At that point, The Troubles -- the three-decade-long strife between the Roman Catholic Nationalists and the Protestant Unionists -- were supposed to be a memory thanks to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. But away from downtown and closer to the projects, the Republic's orange colors shone with equal ferocity to the Loyalists' emerald green, and as a group of straggling young boys played soccer in the fields, the ghosts of those who died for and against causes they may not have understood seemed to loiter about the area. Peace in our time? Perhaps, but I left with the feeling history hadn't set down its definitive answer.

Six years later, the ground beneath the feet of peace began to shift, coinciding with the mini-boom in Irish crime fiction. Much of it, however, has been set in the Republic -- such as Benjamin Black's 1950s-era Dublin or Ken Bruen's doomed Galway -- while the North has been the mainstay of Colin Bateman's satirical work. The Troubles led to plenty of spilled ink during their heyday and wane (including Eoin McNamee's "Resurrection Man," published near the end, in 1995) but little afterward. Now, however, a new voice has laid claim to such a task, climbing through the muck and sifting through the blood to produce a crime novel that counts among the best brought out this calendar year.

Gerry Fegan, the protagonist of Stuart Neville's **"The Ghosts of Belfast"** (Soho Press: 328 pp., \$25), more than qualifies for his perpetual state of torment. At the apex of The Troubles, he followed the IRA's orders and killed whomever he was told to kill. "He had always thought of killing as work. Just a job to be done with no care or feeling behind it. He hadn't considered himself a craftsman, more a skilled laborer. Not like those assassins who made it art. . . . He supposed he had a talent for it, just as [others] had a talent for inflicting pain. And that talent had earned him respect."



But with peace in Northern Ireland's time, and a few years removed from a lengthy prison stint, Fegan's tune has shifted from melodic repetition to harmonic discord. Now he tries to chase away his specific demons with the swig of a shot of whiskey: "Look up and they'll be gone," he thought. No. They were still there, still staring. Twelve of them if he counted the baby in its mother's arms." With the howls and wails of so many sounding loudly in Fegan's head, no wonder he searches for any way to appease them -- even if the task, as set out by the very ghosts who haunt him, involve hunting down those who consigned The Twelve to their deaths, the very men to whom Fegan swore his oath and loyalty.

There are so many ways this premise could have derailed: the apparitions might have come off as hokey or melodramatic, Fegan's brutal ways unmoored from proper motivation. But Neville plays the narrative with absolute seriousness, presenting Fegan's internal struggle in matter-of-fact terms and his multiple hauntings with anguish instead of melodrama. From the first paragraph of "The Ghosts of Belfast," we are inside Fegan's skin, downing alcohol to dull the pain and to quell the voices even as he knows such endeavors will not succeed.

Neville also gives Fegan a very enticing carrot of redemption: the possible love of Marie, the mother of a little girl, tied to Fegan's victims as well as to his own personal architect of violence. She knows exactly what Fegan was and is, and she sees his unspoken apologies writ large upon his face: "Listen, I've known men like you all my life. My uncles, my father, my brothers. I know the other side, too, the cops and the Loyalists. I've talked to them all in my job. Everyone has their piece of guilt to carry. You're not that special." As their relationship takes hold, and Fegan realizes he does, in fact, have a heart, the inevitable emotional gut-wrench works that much harder once he learns that violence, love and redemption prove an impossible triangle.

"The Ghosts of Belfast" would have been a superior effort had it been just about Fegan's struggle to assert his inner goodness in the face of larger evil, but its narrative power draws further strength from Neville's acute understanding of Northern Ireland's true state and how, in just a few short years, "the North had become the poor relation, the bastard child no one had the heart to send away." Take the viewpoint of one Edward Hargreaves, the Minister of State for Northern Ireland (and mixed up deep in Fegan's vengeful quest):

"It never ceased to amaze [him] that people would vote for criminals in full knowledge of their nature. He doubted there was a more cynical electorate in the world. The average Northern Irish pleb could read between the lines of a speech better than any professional political analyst, disbelieving every treacherous word. Yet still they voted as predictably, election after election. He wondered why they didn't just have a sectarian headcount every four years and be done with it."

The flip side of cynicism, of course, is idealism, and the hint of it is what lies at the crux of "The Ghosts of Belfast." Here Neville describes a North-South divide in which the South is the clear winner. But I can't help thinking that with the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, with the "country's new vision of itself" through the influx of money shown to be a lie, that there's far more narrative fields to plow in this volatile space.

Sarah Weinman blogs about crime and mystery fiction at www.sarahweinman.com. Dark Passages appears monthly at www.latimes.com/books.

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