POST-AGREEMENT BORDER INFRINGEMENTS AND LISTICLE FRAMING IN MICHELLE GALLEN'S *BIG GIRL, SMALL TOWN*

Jessica Bundschuh

Establishing an Episodic Frame

Michelle Gallen's debut novel, *Big Girl, Small Town* (2020), belongs to a growing body of novels with neurodiverse protagonists – like Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) or Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* (2018) – who discover paths for navigating stagnant localities and model these escape routes for readers. To structure this potentially tricky interaction with Majella O'Neill, a twenty-seven-year-old autistic protagonist burdened by a sensory over-responsivity, Gallen's novel mediates the encounter through a structural frame.

What makes this example of post-Agreement literature so remarkable is how adeptly Gallen materializes the hyper-sensitivities of her protagonist in the very form of her novel itself. Prior to the first vignette – situated in the hypothetical Northern Irish border town of Aghybogey approximately six years after the Good Friday Agreement – readers may pause over a listicle-key that frames the entire narrative: "The full list of things Majella wasn't keen on extended to ninety-seven items, with subcategories for each item" (Gallen 1). This act of framing has great import for what is ahead. As Irish poet Vona Groarke explains in her book-length essay *Four Sides Full* (2016), a "frame concentrates the eye; it homes in and accentuates", and, as a result, it prevents a subject from being "overwhelmed by too much detail" (47). This applies equally to the protagonist and the reader of *Big Girl, Small Town*, such that instead of meditating on "the totality of human suffering", a frame provides the taxonomic structure to isolate "one take, one experience" (Groarke 47). Thus, Gallen's reader would find it helpful to pause at the transitional threshold of this opening listicle-key, following Groarke's lead – "[p]repare yourself, there will be a crossing. So draw breath" (12) – and, thereby, acknowledge it as a concentrated site of empowerment:

> A frame is a practical thing (for protection) […]
> A frame is magic (it transforms)
> A frame makes itself clear. […]
> A frame defines. A frame encloses.
> A frame completes.
> A frame declares that what's inside
> is worthy of a frame. (Groarke 12)

In *Big Girl, Small Town*, Gallen enlists the grounding device of the listicle, above all, as a coping strategy for a protagonist to better meet challenges she faces on a daily basis. With great precision, Gallen's schema of time and date-stamped episodic vignettes demarcates, values, and protects Majella, as Groarke describes above. The temporal compression of one week in November of 2004, the same week in

which the Bloody Sunday Inquiry concludes, is also of significance. Herein, Gallen's episodic structure replicates geographic and psychic borders in Northern Ireland, but on a small scale: "*2.22 p.m. Item 40.6: The political situation: Commemorations, marches and flag waving*" (53). Readers co-inhabit within this ordered and compressed space as a means to interact with a neurodiverse protagonist otherwise difficult to reach. That is, for Majella, visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory stimulations trigger in her a response of sensory defensiveness. Thus, Gallen's gift of a frame enables Majella to more nimbly navigate her spatial, social, and linguistic interactions within the novel. Readers, too, may experience in bite-size bits the exposures and vulnerabilities of being immersed in a community in which Majella finds few sites of safety.

On a larger scale, Gallen's neurodiverse narrator prompts a profound re-evaluation of the act of bordering. Indeed, through the techniques of listing, repetition, ordering, and fragmentation, the novel focuses on assets innate to autistic language, namely, "the startling creativity inherent in the list form and its potential to upend or destabilize the categories it purportedly inscribes"; in this way, Gallen challenges "notions of autistic discretion as inorganic, robotic, or computer-like" (Rodas 26) and this provocation transfers to other forms of discretion, as well. That is, *Big Girl, Small Town* questions the stereotypes shaping various manifestations of borders (or the lack thereof), both in the microcosm and the macrocosm. For instance, in the claustrophobic setting of Post-Agreement Aghybogey, a disabling and *negative* liminality threatens the forward-looking growth of a locale where the loosening of its borders has not, correspondingly, expanded its population's mindset. Here, an emergence of *positive* liminality becomes thwarted (at least for the time being), undermining the chance to set aside long-standing and divisive ideologies, like the sectarian violence inflicted upon Majella's own family.

This argument proposes reading Gallen's listicle frame as a permeable and double-edged border in which narrator and reader may dwell in a site of shared contact situated porously both inside and outside of the narrative action. Of significance here is the fact that the listicle allows readers to approach a potentially marginalized subject *relationally* and without judgment. Thus, a repositioning of identity as relational and network-driven not only deflects the hierarchies and tribalisms that diminish a hypothetical border town, it also deliberately undermines the mechanical pigeon-holing of subjects (and localities): dividing those some may perceive as 'impaired' and 'challenged' from those some may perceive, by contrast, as 'able-bodied' and 'healthy'. With delicious irony, Gallen carries out this provocation to 'boxed-in' thinking via a grid-like structure. Ensconced within this frame, Majella becomes a keen interpreter of a post-Agreement border experience for those readers willing to join her in a detailed taxonomy of her discomforts and occasional pleasures.

Hiding in Plain Sight

The front cover blurbs on the paperback first edition of *Big Girl, Small Town* in the UK and Europe immediately alert readers to its kinship with Troubles fiction: "*Milkman* meets *Derry Girls*. A cracking read", as does the fact that the actress, Nicola Coughlan, who plays Clare on the Netflix series *Derry Girls*, reads the audio book version. Gallen, herself, also contributes to this genre designation with an epigraph selection from Anna Burns's *Milkman* (which appears in italics in the original):

> *What if we accept these points of light, their translucence, their brightness; what if we let ourselves enjoy this, stop fearing it, get used to it; what if we come to believe in it, to expect it, to be impressed upon by it; what if we take hope and forgo our ancient heritage and instead, and infused, begin to entrain with it, with ourselves then to radiate it; what if we do that, get educated up to that, and then, just like that, the light goes off or is snatched away?* (90)

Burns's penetrating representation of an unnamed subject who endures the Northern Ireland conflict establishes an apt historical context for Gallen's post-Good Friday Agreement border narrative. Here, in the form of a hypothetical question, Burns makes an appeal for a transparent and open acceptance of those brave enough to radiate light from the inside out, despite the community-endorsed surveillance in effect. This appeal applies equally to the "beyond-the-pales" (Burns 91), or marginalized figures, lighting up a gossipy Aghybogey. That is, in relation to our neurodiverse protagonist, Burns's call for acceptance becomes doubly pronounced. The inclusion of this *Milkman* epigraph, enclosing the listicle frame, enables Gallen to appeal *directly* to readers in petitioning for patience for the idiosyncratic, the irregular and the extraordinary; further, Gallen asks readers to avoid an automatic privileging of the comfortable and conforming position, since the implications of such a preference are vast: "*the light goes off or is snatched away?*" (Burns 90; emphasis added). This final question mark is important because the decision to set aside judgement remains before the reader, who now has a chance to enter the listicle frame more thoughtfully and sympathetically.

In a personal interview in Berlin in February 2022, Gallen disclosed an additional personal and political context for her selection of this *Milkman* epigraph, namely, the death of twenty-nine-year-old Northern Irish journalist Lyra McKee on 18 April 2019. Thus, this passage from Burns becomes a literary stand-in for McKee herself, since it had been Gallen's initial wish to dedicate *Big Girl, Small Town* to McKee, a close friend who had been sending her own manuscript to publishers at the same time as Gallen. McKee's aspirations, tragically, were disrupted by a stray bullet from the New IRA that killed her during a riot she was observing on the eve of the annual Easter Rising commemorative parades in Derry. And McKee's murder – like that of Majella's grandmother – remained initially unsolved, until four individuals were attested under the Terrorism Act in September 2021.

In an interview for *The Irish Independent*, Gallen likewise establishes this direct connection between McKee and *Milkman*: "'[Lyra] was one of your bright shiny lights', [Gallen] says, quoting Anna Burns" (Armstrong). Interestingly, not only had McKee and Burns shared the same editor at Faber and Faber, but they had both attended (decades apart) the same North Belfast high school. Most importantly, Gallen's invocation of Burns's Troubles novel at the opening of her tale set in 2004 suggests an eerie synchronicity, wherein an innocent bystander in 2019 (yet again) could be killed by sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. That is, this state of nervous agitation that characterizes a great deal of Post-Agreement literature reveals an anxiety that brutality could erupt at any time anew, striking down individuals like McKee – named by *The Irish Times* as one of the rising young Irish writers to watch in 2019 – who might represent the bright future of Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement. Still, despite the continued vulnerability of fictional and nonfictional subjects alike, both Burns and Gallen ultimately appeal to hope, and this sentiment was even felt in the weeks following McKee's death when "[t]he graffiti in Creggan was replaced with community paintings based on lines from Lyra's work" (McKay).

To tell the story of Majella, a subject wholly different from Lyra McKee, Gallen opts for narrative distance. That is, as opposed to the first-person address in *Milkman*, Gallen's novel employs third person. Thus, the facilitator of access to Majella, arranging the interactions within the boundaries of a listicle grid – "Tuesday. *6.49 p.m. Item 20.1: The security forces: The Brits*" (62) – never leaves readers alone with the protagonist. In this way, readers remain cognizant at all times of the larger temporal and social context in which Majella's minutiae resides. Still, Gallen takes care to not make Majella into a cipher, akin to an autistic riddle to unpack or a case study to simplify and diagnose. As Gallen explains in a *Kirkus* interview,

> I kept being asked this question, *What's wrong with Majella?* I knew she was kind of unusual. […] I decided to read up a bit more on the female presentation of autism, and when I started even the most basic reading of it, I was like, *Oh my God. OK*. I realized that I created a portrait of an autistic woman. […] *What's wrong with Majella?* There's nothing wrong with Majella. She's an undiagnosed autistic woman. And she's fascinating. (Beer)

With the novel's inception in mind, we might approach Majella in relation to autism-centred literature, which Julia Miele Rodas argues in *Autistic Disturbances* (2018) reveals a set of "descriptors of autistic expressive practice" (4). A number of these qualities (selectively collected below) would likely be treated dismissively in their presentation in the individual subject: "*abrupt, adept, circular, creative, eccentric, fragmented, hermetic, hiding, inflexible, listing, literalness, mimicry, narrational gaps, nonsocial, oddness, private, puns, repetition, rigid, self-sufficient, stereotyped, systemizing, and wittiness*" (4). In contrast, these same qualities would likely be prized in a literary context. Thus, although it is difficult to develop a theoretical approach to autistic practice without pointing out and naming in a manner that might objectify Majella's refreshing ability to act as a perceptive guide to her own border

experience, this investigation intends to recognize Majella's strengths as broadly as possible, just as Gallen herself has done.

In contrast to Majella's ironic distancing from the events at hand, the media within Gallen's temporal frame persists in its alarmist coverage carried over from the Troubles, and those characters surrounding Majella are also reeled in: "Majella's ma first sucked up the misery on BBC Northern Ireland before switching to UTV for a slightly different angle and camera footage" and "[t]hings only got worse after peace broke out". On top of this, Majella's personal tragedy has become part of the news coverage: "*the death early last week of eighty-five-year-old Mrs Margaret O'Neill is being treated as murder*" (7-8). As one might anticipate, the death of Majella's grandmother, "the first notorious death in the town since the Ceasefire was declared in 1994" (192), leaves Majella feeling vulnerable and exposed "in a town in which there was nowhere to hide, so people", Majella explains, "hide stuff in plain sight" (14). The irony here is that while Majella might be viewed as private and hermetic by those around her, readers recognize that she, unlike most of the residents of Aghybogey, actually hides nothing.

The mystery of *Big Girl, Small Town* is not *who* killed Majella's grandmother. Indeed, Gallen does not privilege a conventional build up before exposing the guilty party; rather, towards the end of the novel, two characters casually mention in passing, and without any sense of closure, certitude, or motive, that the potential murderer, Jimmy Nine Pints, has been arrested. Interestingly, it is the sheer magnitude of Majella's minutiae-driven listicle of preferences and dislikes that buries information likely to garner more space and pause in a conventional mystery. It is here – in a closed and splintered community – that Majella can neither escape her six-year, six-nights-a-week interface with Jimmy Nine Pints, nor avoid his obnoxious joke that concludes every interaction:

> Majella snapped the till shut, which was the trigger for Jimmy's joke.
> Jimmy shifted his weight, then leaned in closer to the counter. – D'ye want a bit of my sausage? […] Majella waited for the usual five seconds before replying with the line Marty'd given her six years ago.
> – I'll batter yer sausage if you're not careful, now. (19-20)

This tired joke is performatively acted out multiple times over the course of the novel until Jimmy Nine Pints is finally lifted by the police on suspicion of murder; in each occasion, it acts as stinging reminder of Majella's precarity in a landscape of sublimated violence. Yet it shows us, too, that Majella's seemingly rote response has become the *real* punchline for which everyone waits: "Then Marty joined in with the laughter for boysadear [oh my goodness] it was some joke now" (20), and Majella herself is definitively not the butt of this joke.

Challenging a Pathological Reading of Structure

Powerfully, Majella becomes an interlocutor who offers readers an unfamiliar vantage point from which to view a post-Agreement Northern Ireland; in effect, she grants readers a heightened sensitivity to forced change. As a subject with sensory over-responsivity, Majella constructs her day-to-day existence with *minimal* sensory stimulation. For instance, on multiple occasions over the course of the novel, Majella checks her phone, pleased – rather than disheartened – by the static affirmation of "[n]o new messages" (308). Outside of her compulsory interactions at work, Majella prefers isolation, since it is "people who switched on lights, made noise, sweated and fought, wept and shouted" (2). For many years, her interactions have remained narrow and predictable. But the death of Majella's grandmother, one of the few persons she cherished, presents an opportunity, if an uncomfortable one, for a new perspective.

Aside from limiting her interactions with others, Majella also controls her sensory 'diet' as much as possible, from avoiding the tactile experience of rough or "clunky" textures, like the way jewellery "cut[s] into her flesh" (46), or the "way the carpet scratched her knees", to restricting her gustatory pleasure to the same meal each night: "Majella had reached the bottom of the pack, where the chips and fish were mushed together. This was her favourite bit, with salt and vinegar in each mouthful." (32) As this description makes clear, Majella savours selective sensory pleasures on her own terms; after all, the opening listicle-key of what Majella likes includes "[e]ating", Smithwick's Irish Ale, and sex (2).

Majella's self-protection focuses, in particular, on her spatial physicality, like the "too-tight envelope of her overalls" (247) and the nest-like enclosure of her bedroom: "Majella locked her bedroom door, plugged in the fan heater, and then climbed into bed to eat" (30). Fittingly, Majella's biggest expenditure in the novel is a "double duck down duvet" (104), a new duvet cover, and a down pillow. Encased in feathers, Majella fabricates a literal nest where she gathers the "duvet up into a cave around herself before going still so she could feel the feathers settling back down" (106). Ultimately, working the nightshift and isolating herself to a darkened and locked bedroom during daylight hours relegates Majella, both literally and metaphorically, to the shadows and margins. Thus, despite the benefits inherent to this coping strategy, Majella's preference for containment ensures that she remain in a perpetual state of waiting, like Northern Ireland itself in the immediate years following the Good Friday Agreement.

It is important to note, however, that Majella's reliance on routine is not a pejorative state of second-best; it is her preferred temporality. And it is what enables her to act as a figure of stability for those around her, like her mother, mostly drunk on the couch, or her co-worker, Marty, who relies on her skill of perfecting golden chips in the fryer: "Marty wasn't as particular about the chips being done evenly, which bugged her" (13). Above all, what Majella appreciates most about temporality is her gift for precisely engineering and then measuring moments of synchronicity: "The

kettle switch flicked up and the toaster popped at the same time, sending a surge of pleasure through Majella." (6) Thus, while subjects with autism may "have difficulty grasping abstract concepts, like envisioning the future, such as where they see themselves in 5 years' time" (Favis), the upside is their ability to relish in the present.

As Majella's temporal precision and nesting behaviour suggest, Gallen chooses to duplicate the novel's listicle structure in its subject matter. This is warranted by the fact that the list as a trope is rich in its applicability, longevity, and variety. While readers today may primarily encounter the listicle as a contemporary phenomenon ideal for digital content divided into nuggets easy to digest, Umberto Eco contends that the "list is the origin of culture", making "infinity comprehensible" through its drive for order, and its calculated embrace of an anarchy it tames. From Homer, to Joyce's *Ulysses*, a list – akin to one guiding curators in an exhibit at the Louvre – has, Eco argues, "an irresistible magic" as a "mark of a highly advanced, cultivated society" willing to "question essential definitions" (Beyer and Gorris). It is worth noting that the term 'listicle', a portmanteau derived from 'list' and 'article', is rooted in the German word *Leiste*, meaning strip, edge, or border.

The overarching effect of Gallen's listicle – like in any collection, from Homer's ships to the Louvre's Italian sculptures – is that each item nestled in a subcategory of the list ultimately foregrounds the borders of the larger structure of which it is part, as already discussed in terms of Gallen's third-person narration. In analogous fashion, the list also reinforces liminal interconnections *across* borders and categories. Indeed, the novel's title, *Big Girl, Small Town*, places a great deal of weight on the solitary comma that connects the protagonist *to* her locality. Additionally, the title signals the snugness of this cramped relationship, carrying symbolic resonances beyond the literalness of Majella's heft, or the number of residents in Aghybogey. This "inclination toward verbal ordering and listing is associated with what is typically identified as systemizing or, within the traditional pathologizing framework, as 'hyper-systemizing'" (Rodas 13-14). That is, the craving for order and structure that has defined autism since its inception, has "also set the tone for a broader cultural dismissal, casting autism's recursive idiosyncratic activities, interests, and gestures in negative terms" (Rodas 14).

When we recast such ordering as relational, however, we may appreciate the way in which it broadly serves a valuable function, in addition to being reciprocal. Accordingly, Gallen, in line with her title, establishes Majella's materiality in direct relation to the immediate and enclosed setting of her bedroom:

> Majella stretched herself underneath her lumpy wee duvet and yawned, her feet straining against the bottom board of the bed. She had a notion that one of these days she'd push too hard and pop the foot board off. Majella'd spent years getting bigger while her room and everything in it stayed the same size. It felt like a bum deal. (47)

Majella, here, acknowledges the mismatch between setting and self and, thereby, prepares for the possibility of future transformation, if and when she feels ready.

Herein, we may recall Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), viewed by many critics as embodying traits of childhood autism, and Alice's frequent shapeshifting in relation to food ("Eat me"): "She ate a bit, and said anxiously to herself, 'Which way? Which way?,' holding her hand on top of her head to feel which way it was growing." (Carroll 23) Thus, Alice comes to measure herself against her relatively static surroundings, like that of the White Rabbit's house unable to accommodate Alice's expanded size. Majella, too, sees herself ironically as a giant Alice: "She opened the fridge and grabbed a tiny bottle of yogurt. It felt comedically small in her hand as she shook it." (Gallen 49) Here and elsewhere, Gallen's framing device – operating mutually on the levels of plot and discourse or form – honours Majella's personal need for structure with good humour, and in the absence of any pathologizing judgement. Gallen's rubric also signals that the list as an organizing trope is more flexible and transformative than it initially appears, just like our neurodiverse protagonist.

Becoming a Drawbridge

While Homi Bhabha's 'third space' and 'hybridity', introduced in *The Location of Culture* (1994), celebrate liminality as expansive and spatially fluid, Birte Heidemann contends, in *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature: Lost in a Liminal Space?* (2016), that the geopolitical framework of Post-Agreement Northern Ireland constitutes "an unfinished colonialism" that devolves into a "conflict of contested identities" (18). Hence, instead of a *positive* liminality, which sets aside divisive sectarian ideologies, a *negative* liminality persists and threatens beneficial change. This "potentially disabling" (106) offshoot of truth and reconciliation results in

> a space occupied by contesting orthodoxies that leave the two camps in a collective indeterminate state that cannot be transformed into, or transcended by, a liminal space of iteration or re-identification. Northern Ireland's negative liminality, in this sense, can also be described as […] a "claustrophobic reality". (Heidemann 40)

The "contesting orthodoxies" of which Heidemann speaks are readily apparent in the confined fictional space of Aghybogey where repetitive habits abound. On the small scale, we witness this in the predictable script of Majella's dialect-driven chip shop interactions, which begins with "What canna get chew?" (12) or "What d'ye want?" (81), and ends with "Salt an vinegar on yer chips?" (16). On a larger scale, the very naming of the chippy, "A Salt n Battered! Food Worth Fighting For!", reinforces the long-standing ideology of discordant opposition in Northern Ireland. For instance, Majella's chippy competes with the "Prod rivals on the other side of the bridge", "The Cod Father – A Family Business", where Majella has never been, nor has she ever "knowingly tasted a Proddie chip" (74-75), even though this Protestant takeaway slyly undermines division in its named reference to *The Godfather*, an allusion to the most ostentatious Catholic family of them all. This communal preference for tribalism nourishes a disabling framework carried over from the past, such that the Good Friday Agreement ushers in neither resolution, nor closure for the residents of

Aghybogey. Gallen savvily echoes this social fragmentation in the novel's vignette form of repeated and proximal openings and closings.

In such a fractious locality, Majella goes unnoticed as a sly 'bridge-like' subject who may usher in change slowly and gingerly at the margins. It begins with Majella's mediation on bridges in the form of Agnes Ferguson, a resident of Aghybogey whose house was bombed on April Fool's Day years prior, but who returned to "build bridges" (55). Agnes regards Majella as a project in need of 'bridging'. Once Marty clarifies to Majella that Agnes is not speaking of "literal bridges", Majella muses that establishing "bridges across community divisions" is "a much more difficult engineering project, one complicated by the fact that although most people could see the need for rebuilding the literal bridges, no one had an eye for invisible bridges" (55-56). Interestingly, it is Majella, a literalist, who becomes the advocate here for metaphorical or "invisible" bridges: "Majella herself did wonder why no one had considered drawbridges in the whole scheme of things, which could serve as bridges when the need arose." (56) Unfortunately, Majella "suspected that [this suggestion about drawbridges] was a rare thought", so she "didn't share it with anyone" (56).

In fearing dismissal, Majella keeps her insights about bridges to herself. This is a shame because the idea of a drawbridge is a wonderfully apt metaphor for tapping into Aghybogey's long history, and into its bright Post-Agreement future, potentially feasible through a more nuanced vision of change. A drawbridge, after all, is a variable structure in operation only when it serves those in charge of its transformation; that is, it is a *tentative* bridge, which would likely suit an autistic subject like Majella: she may invite interactions when she wishes and may, likewise, retract from exchanges whenever she prefers. This recalibrated version of 'communal bridging' is active and engaging, rather than empty and unchanging. For instance, in a vignette on her birthday (a liminal rite-of-passage), Majella stands in "view of the castle ruins" at "the halfway point" on the bridge she recalls from history class had been refashioned into stone, since the early wooden bridges had been "repeatedly burnt down during battles" (40). At this exact spot, with "one foot on the Prod side, one foot on the Taig side, *an ironic symbol of a town divided*, giving a monologue on the Troubles" (41), Majella had seen numerous international TV crews leverage Aghybogey into the prototypical stereotype of an estranged post-conflict community. However, what sets Majella's equally literal and metaphorical position apart, standing at the *same* high-point of the bridge as the reporters amid the low-simmering antagonisms on either side, is Majella's ability to remain a part of her community, while also regarding it askew. Within the context of the novel, then, Majella's role is doubled: she is an actualized liminal subject whose literary potential extends to the metaphorically liminal objects of drawbridges and invisible bridges. Further, while Majella may be misunderstood by the townspeople and her mother, unrecognized for the strengths she embodies (except by her dead grandmother and her absent, potentially dead father), readers have the privilege of witnessing, via the listicle frame, her wit and perception.

Naming the Foxy O'Neills

The real mystery of *Big Girl, Small Town* is not so far really from that of a generic whodunit. In this world where punned monikers abound (e.g., Jimmy Nine Pints, Cabbage McAteer, or Red Onions), the mystery is "hiding in plain sight" (14), in the act of naming itself, like that of *Milkman*. Thus, Majella's late recollection on her first and last name becomes the turning point of the novel. In response to a year seven assignment "to find out why they were called what they were called", Majella asks her father to share her (and his) origin story. It is worth noting that this information can only be accessed *as* a memory, since Majella's father disappeared fifteen years prior to the action of the novel; in the parlance of the time, 'disappearance' was a euphemism for having been murdered, in this case, shortly after the death of Majella's Uncle Bobby, who died for the 'Cause' while building a bomb. Majella's father proudly tells her, "we're known as the Foxy O'Neills". In surprise,

> Majella blinked. She'd heard her Uncle Bobby being called Bobby the Fox. She hadn't known why.
> – Why are we the Foxy O'Neills?
> – We can't be sure. Some say it's because red hair runs in the family. Some say it's because we're so smart. Some say it's coz we're hard to catch.
> Majella nodded. Bobby'd been a red head. And she knew the O'Neills had brains to burn. She'd heard bits and pieces about her family's history of smuggling, the way they'd dodged the law on both sides of the border. (277-78)

Majella realizes that her kinship with the liminal foxes "loping into the shadows at the side of the house" and dining on "a piece of fish" from her supper is no mere accident (83). While such an affinity might seem fruitful, it is important to keep in mind the tragic fates of Majella's father, uncle, and grandmother, the three dead O'Neills who bear the surname that may die out with Majella. Similarly, the fate of the foxes Majella's father also fed is not a happy one:

> She remembered the week before her da'd disappeared, the week the foxes were found dead around the estate. Poisoned, her da'd said – foxes were too fly to be trapped. He'd been disturbed by the dead foxes. (90)

Without a doubt, these estate-encroaching foxes represent a violent and unsustainable state of *negative* liminality. Still, Majella concedes that her father left too early "to see the fox population recover in the years after" (90). Hence, even in this tragic instance, there is a potential path out of a stagnant past. It begins with the willingness to assume an anterior position, which is buried in her given name, the first word of the narrative, called repeatedly by her mother " – Majella? […] – Ma-jell-ah?" (3). That is, Majella's alignment with her father even extends to his middle name, drawn from the Italian Saint Gerard *Majella.* Interestingly, Saint Majella is believed to have had the ability to bilocate, namely, to be in *two* places at the same time.

By the end of the novel, Majella is finally brave enough to follow the saintly namesake of herself and her father by bilocating, in a matter of speaking, to the residence of a famous oil baron in Texas. That is, Majella sustains her protective nest through her daily habit of viewing *Dallas* reruns on DVD, a show she watched live with her

father in the 1980s on UK Gold (listed as one of the few liked items in her listicle-key). However, up until the novel's final paragraph, when "something had shifted inside her" (309), she had only "listened to" the "lessons" contained therein, without having truly "learned from" their instructions. Once Majella allows herself to inhabit the space of "J. R. Ewing smiling at her from under his Stetson" (309), she decides to sell the land she inherits from her grandmother, which the family has "clung to for generations" (309). In her willingness to give up the strip of border land, she gains a sudden sense of freedom *in* it, without necessarily engaging in a blind endorsement of the capitalist villain J.R. Ewing.

Just prior to her pivotal decision, Majella remembers the childhood experience of "criss-crossing the border, passing the barricades and skirting around the craters" (291) on bikes with a friend in whose car "they'd [later] go up the border and sit in the darkness of the bombed-out roads"; this same car was "blown up by the army at the border crossing in Pettigo" (292), recalling an intersected town that jointly occupies County Donegal and County Fermanagh, and is also the subject of Paul Muldoon's famous poem, "The Boundary Commission", where "the butcher and baker [are] in different states" (80). Majella's profound memory here foretells the novel's 2004 Post-Agreement border zone, currently engaged in a process of unsteady transformation. Instead of being blown up, the cars in Majella's present speedily zip across the Irish border in close proximity to the property Majella inherits; unfortunately, this accelerated motion has yet to yield any economic or psychic benefit to those who reside in this border frontier.

Majella's willingness to depart from her safe cocoon (and exit the listicle) may, ultimately, allow her to find a piece of literal common ground with those who eat "Proddie chips" across the (draw)bridge. The result might be a less caustic form of liminality, allowing Majella to understand, like Saint Majella, how to exist simultaneously on *both sides* of the border, when one feels ready to do so. Granted, this might result in a taxonomy that may veer into an *imperfect* demarcation. That is, in the single instance Gallen reveals not just the time or the day of the week, but also the full date of a particular vignette, it appears imbedded in the receipt Majella receives from a banking ATM: "DATE: 21/11/04" (99). In our personal interview, Gallen explained that this literary ATM receipt is a near replica of a receipt she had been keeping for many years because of the oddity of the capital B in "Banking" appearing mid-sentence: "*Thank you for Banking with us*," which likewise "upset Majella, as it always had" (99). In a novel fixated on establishing, maintaining, and drawing attention to temporal and typographic precision (and a discomfort resulting from accidental imprecision), one might hypothesize that such a 'mistake' is deliberate. Based on an earlier time stamp, readers know it is a Wednesday, but 21 November 2004 falls on a *Sunday*. Thus, in this moment, the listicle form subtly and temporarily breaks down for those willing to pause and engage in its details. Herein, this factual 'error' suggests a buried flexibility, even in a structure that appears static and fixed on its surface. Ultimately, Gallen formally constructs in *Big Girl, Small Town* a literary text wherein

readers, in tandem with Majella, learn how to co-inhabit sites of relationality, becoming aligned with the agile and shadowy fox, hiding below a Stetson. As a result, the novel makes an important contribution to post-Brexit meditations on the Irish border, cutting across geographic, temporal, ableist, and political differences to propose a path towards a dynamic and *positive* liminality.

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