Magic from a Protestant childhood

JESS LOWE

Jan Carson's latest novel draws on her early life in Northern Ireland. She talks to **Sarah Meyrick**

JAN CARSON's latest novel, *The Raptures*, is set in the fictional Northern Irish village of Ballylack, in the summer of 1993. Our heroine is 11-year-old Hannah, who attends a particularly Evangelical church, and, as a result, lives a highly restricted life. She is not allowed to celebrate Hallowe'en, or learn about dinosaurs; nor is she allowed to go to birthday parties or the cinema, because the devil is always after a foothold. (Her father says: "Cinema starts with sin.")

One of the few things that Hannah is allowed to watch on TV is the news, and, since we're in the middle of the Troubles, violence is so common as to be almost mundane: "There's never a night when nobody dies."

For all that, it's summer, and Hannah is looking forward to the holidays — until, that is, her classmates start to succumb to a mystery illness. Hannah, it appears, is the only child to stay well. Events taker a darker turn when the other children begin dying — only to appear to Hannah, one by one, from beyond the grave. In a story that is, by turns, tragic and comic, we witness the gradual unravelling of the community.

This is Carson's third novel (*Malcolm Orange Disappears* came out in 2014, followed by *The Fire Starters*, in 2019). It is hard to categorise her work, but, she says, "There's definitely a magical realist undertone to everything I do — and this one in particular," she says. Part of the inspiration came from the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. "I mean, what would happen if all of the children in a village are taken away to another place, and one is left behind? So, there's a kind of fable there."

What is it about this form of fiction that appeals to her? "I'm completely self-taught," she says. "I have no degree in creative writing, or anything like that. I guess, when I started to write, I just wrote the kinds of stories I wanted to read, and they tended to be this way."

It was the poet Sinéad Morrissey who gave her a copy of Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* and suggested that this was her genre. "At that point, I began to do some research into magical realism, and to understand the associations with colonialism and post-colonialism, which is particularly relevant in Northern Ireland. I'm always a bit shocked that a lot of the writing that comes out of the North [of Ireland] is very realist. There is not the kind of playfulness or the uncanny or anything speculative at all. . .

"But I would say, for me, the main reason that I write magical realism is because the Bible was my primary storyteller text, and I think the Bible is a magical realist text. I don't mean that in a disrespectful way. But it's a narrative that's grounded in the real world, where strange things happen, but it constantly brings you back to the real present. So, that's how I learned to tell stories: being exposed to years and years of Presbyterianism."

Looking at Northern Irish literature, she says: "I think, if you go back, beyond the period of the Troubles, there is a real grounding in a kind of mythology and folklore and a playfulness.

But something happened when the conflict began. People mistakenly got this notion that serious times deserve a very serious degree of storytelling technique, which is nonsense. . . I don't think that you need to be realistic to talk very seriously about things."

ALAMY

The Revd Ian Paisley at the head of an Orange Day Parade in the 1980s, in Ballymoney, 20 miles from where Jan Carson grew up

YOUNGER Northern Irish writers appear to be enjoying a moment. As well as Carson, Louise Kennedy, Lucy Caldwell, and Anna Burns have all come to prominence in recent years.

"These writers have always been there," she says, "and they've been writing away, but there was a moment around the Brexit legislation and questions around the [Northern Ireland] Protocol when the likes of *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* suddenly came calling for us to talk. And, lo and behold, there were loads of [us], and all very eloquent. So, that spotlight is probably one of the only things that has been positive about Brexit." She is now a dual passport-holder — but not without misgivings. "I'm the first person in my family to have an Irish passport ever, I think. My grandfather was an Orangeman, my dad was Clerk of Sessions in the Presbyterian Church, and we were brought up very British."

In the brand of Presbyterianism in which she grew up, politics was viewed as "a dirty thing to get involved in", a stance reflected in *The Raptures*. "They didn't vote, but, if they had, it would have been Unionist. The last five years has taken me on quite a journey." This is to do partly with Brexit, and partly with the outworkings of the collapse of the Stormont government.

"It's also parallel with my journey as a writer, because the Irish writing community has been so incredibly welcoming and inclusive, whereas with the UK writing community, it hasn't always been as easy," she says. "At this point, I probably identify as Irish. I'm not ashamed of my British roots, and I still have my British passport, but I've much more ease and comfort with an Irish identity than a British one."

Winning the EU Prize for Literature Ireland in 2019 for *The Firestarters* is part of the story. "That was a very gracious statement, I thought, because the Irish judging panel nominated my novel, which is about Loyalist identity in Ireland, as representative of Irish culture. I feel a real responsibility to be an EU laureate, and that's much, much easier on an Irish passport."

OF THE latest book, she says: "There's not very much of *The Raptures* that isn't my own story. . . Much of Hannah's world is the world that I grew up in.

"Growing up, I read a lot of Irish literature, but I didn't really ever come across another Evangelical Protestant narrative. There was a lot of the exploration of the Catholic faith in Ireland, but it just always felt odd that I couldn't pick up a book and go, 'That's the world I'm familiar with.'

"I wanted to write something so that the enormous amount of people in Northern Ireland that grew up under [the Revd Ian] Paisley, under Evangelical Protestant churches, have something that represented them. I also wanted to interrogate it."

As a result, *The Raptures* took about eight years to write, "because the early incarnations of it were just really angry, and I didn't want to write a book that became confrontational."

She took inspiration from Naomi Alderman's *Disobedience* (about leaving an Orthodox Jewish community) and Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* (about the systematic rape of women in a remote Mennonite community in Bolivia), "because I think they're careful books that go through religion, picking out what is beautiful and worthy of celebration, and what needs to be interrogated". She wanted, she says, to write the kind of a book that was honest, but also respectful.

> I'm a big believer in maintaining relationships with people you don't see eye to eye with

"It's a world I'm not so much part of now, but my entire extended family still is, and a lot of my friends are. I'm a big believer in trying to maintain conversation and relationship with people that you don't always see eye to eye with."

Ms Carson's narrative is whip-smart, and full of humour. "There is nothing in there that's not true," she says. Ballymena — home to Ian Paisley as well as the Carson family — is often called the buckle of Northern Ireland's Bible Belt. When she was growing up, in a town of 3000, there were seven different Protestant denominations.

She refers to a BBC documentary about Paisley which was broadcast to mark the recent 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. "There

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