

## About a Girl

A Reader's Guide  
to Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*

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DAVID COLLARD

**B** editions

For Laura, and Frank and Edwin

Page numbers following quotations from *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* refer to the Galley Beggar Press and Faber & Faber editions.

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## Introduction

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Every now and again you read a book by an unknown author and you know immediately that you are in the company of greatness. That is a rare and precious feeling.

This comes from Gabriel Josipovici's introduction to Agota Kristof's *The Illiterate* and he's referring to her novel *The Notebook*. Eimear McBride's own enthusiasm for Kristof prompted me to begin this book with the quote from Josopovici because my feelings on first reading *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* were similar to his on first reading Kristof. I knew after a dozen pages that I was in the company of a great writer. That doesn't happen very often and is indeed a rare and precious feeling.

What strikes the receptive reader of Eimear McBride's debut novel as great? What is it that commands such lavish praise and critical acclaim? In a word, style. The author has created a new form of prose which employs a deceptively simple lexicon in fragmentary vernacular syncopations to represent thought at the point before it becomes articulate speech. That is an extraordinary achievement in itself, but having forged a prose style capable of doing this she then does much more, placing the anonymous narrator within a series of vividly realised scenes set at different points in her childhood and adolescence, many of which are intensely sad or harrowing, or both. Her prose combines the beautiful, the outrageous, the distressing, the farcical and the heartbreaking in courageously original, uncompromisingly experimental form. Her lexical intensity has no equivalent in contemporary writing.

Reading *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* restored my faith in the power of great writing, and proved to me and many other

readers that it was still possible, in the 21st century, for an author to produce a great novel that built on the achievements of Joyce and Beckett and the other modernists. Even as I type this I realise that the phrase ‘great writing’ appears both condescendingly patrician and elitist, suggesting an established literary citadel populated (mostly) by dead white men and defended by critical gatekeepers such as myself, into which a few latecomers may grudgingly be admitted. I don’t see things like that but there are those who do and whose views I respect. Nevertheless, I want to restore to any debate surrounding Eimear McBride’s novel the long-unfashionable notion of greatness. Not that this amounts to a swooning abdication of the critic’s role in these matters, far from it. I want to be among those no doubt reactionary commentators who claim that *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is great not simply because it is by any worthwhile measure superior to almost all contemporary fiction in its aesthetic ambitions and technical achievement, but because it also represents something new and important in the development of the novel: the repurposing of modernism by (and for) a female sensibility. Eimear McBride has proved that the modernist tradition, all but abandoned by the end of the 1930s, still has a long way to go in the hands of writers who did not, in the past, have much impact on the tradition.

All novelists, in the end, write about themselves. So, in a minor way, do critics and reviewers. Some novels have a particular purchase on the reader’s imagination and admiration because they speak directly to his or her own experience. This was true in my case. I was raised in a strenuously fundamentalist evangelical Christian household, one in which books and other cultural consolations were forbidden, being too much part of ‘the world’. Whatever wasn’t forbidden was compulsory – meetings, prayer, Bible study, evangelising, more prayer, more meetings. Thousands of hours a year were spent preaching and being preached at, on the street and in an unheated, uncarpeted hall with bright strip lighting. My formative years passed slowly in

a state of boredom and fear, caught between being swallowed whole and spat out. I was eventually, fortunately, spat out.

When I read *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* I was especially struck by the well-meaning and ridiculous evangelical Christians, members of ‘the ministry missionary fellowship’ who arrive with prayers and songs as her brother lies dying in a downstairs room the girl has arranged for him. These ‘holy joes’ were immediately recognisable to me because they were the kind of people that surrounded me as a child. When they are present the girl whispers urgently to her brother: ‘I’m here as well as fecking eejits. Don’t forget that I am here.’ I yelled when I read that, and may even have punched the air, because this unprepossessing series of words appeared to me a perfect expression of the redemptive power of love and the triumph of profane intelligence over polite conviction. Something cracked inside me that had been waiting to break since I was an adolescent oppressed by the religious conviction of those around me. I knew I’d found a writer who would remain part of my life, and would be there for me when the fecking eejits closed in.

The girl’s alternating states of yearning and abjection, with their religious origin, were also excruciatingly familiar and rendered with an authenticity that was immediately convincing. I recovered something of my own past when reading this novel – not only in the particular detail but in the general texture. Here was a book that, my own personal identification and admiration aside, worked with equal power on two levels: as an ambitious attempt to represent human consciousness and as a virtuoso display of what can be done with the English language. The fact that my own peculiar background gave me a personal purchase on the subject, or on an aspect of the subject, was of interest to nobody else. But it gave me an immediate way in.

The early episode in which the brother and his sister make a humble and propitiatory meal of tomato soup and white bread for their mother after she has beaten the brother savagely made me cry, and for a long time. I was, for a while, inconsolable

because the episode unlocked something in my own past that I'd long forgotten, or suppressed, or which may not even have happened. I'm not saying that novels should merely be some kind of homeopathic treatment, simply that I experienced an immediate and profound understanding of the author's priorities, her methods, her literary values. For the first time in very many years a book found a space in my heart as well as in my mind, and (I realised with another jolt) my mind and my heart badly needed what the book offered. So I wanted to spend my time thinking and writing about the book, and finding out more about its author and her long struggle for recognition.

I happened to write the first review of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* to appear in print and later got to know the author, who has co-operated with characteristic patience and generosity to make this modest monograph the first full-length introduction to her work. I'm a literary journalist who is expected to have, is sometimes *paid* to have, what's called 'an informed opinion' based on my knowledge and experience or my *taste*. I tend to have strong opinions about stuff, or no opinions at all, and am fierce in my affections and loathings. Nothing in my writing life to date has thrilled me more or given me more satisfaction than bringing *A Girl* to the attention of readers.

## I *About a girl*

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I'll begin by stating the blindingly obvious, which needs stating nevertheless: Eimear McBride is a novelist and *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is a novel, a work of fiction. The author is not the girl in the title any more than Gustave Flaubert was Emma Bovary (and I know he said he was, but let's not quibble). In one important respect, however, the novel *is* prompted by a particular fact in her life. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is dedicated to the author's brother Donagh McBride, who died young from brain cancer in 1999, and his death was a source of emotional and intellectual malaise that would in time find its expression in a great novel.

The girl's violently transgressive sexual encounters and the elective self-harm which is her desperate way of taking control of her life are the novel's central concerns, but I'd argue that a subject of equal importance is the bleak terrain of pain and loss. Few other novels have depicted in such intimate, unflinching and heartbreaking detail the process of dying, the passage into death, and the emotional effect it has on those left behind to mourn. Few if any other novels are so driven by rage and grief, and fewer still express those raw emotions through such exquisitely judged language.

This will make *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* appear unremittingly serious. It *is* a harsh and harrowing book, but McBride is also a sensationally gifted comic writer. The pitch-black pitch-perfect lament of 'I sometimes wish your father hadn't died' is part Beckett and part *Father Ted* in its dry-eyed heartlessness; the grandfather's wake and the girl's thoughts as she speculates over the contents of the dead man's pockets are both farcically hilarious episodes:

So Granda. I don't talk to the dead. So now. That's strange to see him here. Dead. I could give him a kick if I liked. But it's not worth the hassle now. I could undo his flies for shame. I know he wouldn't have wanted me to. Or kiss. Poke him. Squeeze out an eye. I'd lift it but. Maybe. No. Better not touch. I haven't seen him that to this. He's looking so unrumpled now. Just not that angry. (p.101)

That 'unrumpled' is marvellous. She next fumbles in the pockets of his suit and finds a sweet, a toffee chew, which she unwraps and eats (and what film-maker wouldn't want to shoot that moment?). The passage culminates with the hauntingly simple sentence 'Last night he didn't know he'd be dead', begging the question – *does he know he's dead now?*

If the book is ultimately tragic and offers the reader little or nothing at all in the way of consolation, there are at least some fierce laughs to be had along the way. As to that lack of consolation, of uplift and moral improvement – who says novels have to be palliative?

I

Eimear McBride was born in Liverpool to Northern Irish parents, John and Gerardine, on 6 October 1976. She was one of four children and the only girl. In 1979 the family moved from England to the small town of Tubbercurry, County Sligo, in the Republic of Ireland, where John McBride was employed as a psychiatric nurse.

Her father died of pancreatic cancer when she was eight years old, on 11 September 1985. McBride's younger brother, Fergal, was just two years old and her elder brothers, Donagh and Cillian, were 15 and 16 respectively.

She has fond memories of her father reading to her, and particularly Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child*. The title characters are a pair of clockwork toy mice, joined by the hands, who begin their life in a toy shop, are bought, briefly cherished, then abandoned and later chased by a malignant rat as

they embark on a search to become 'self-winding'. The interdependency and literal attachment of the mouse and his child has a structural link to the girl and her brother in McBride's novel, although it wouldn't do to overstate the other intriguing similarities. But childhood stories settle into adult memory and, however obliquely, inform their creative development. (Many English writers, including Graham Greene, Christopher Isherwood and Evelyn Waugh, have claimed that their first influence was Beatrix Potter.) I read *The Mouse and His Child* for the first time only after hearing from the author that it was a childhood favourite. The mouse and his child are evicted from the comfort of their home and spend the rest of the story in the open air, exiled from comfort, constantly vulnerable and prey to assaults from wild creatures.

McBride sees her father's death as a turning point in her intellectual and emotional development, and the origins of her atheism. There's a piercing sentence that appears in the earliest drafts of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* and was retained: 'Our empty spaces where fathers should be.' This refers not only to the father in the novel, who walks out on his wife and their two children, but surely also to a pervasive sense of loss and estrangement that suggests the God-shaped gap in the lives of all who lose their faith.

McBride's mother Gerardine was left to raise four children alone and in 1991 she moved the family to the larger market town of Castlebar in County Mayo, around 30 miles south-west of Tubbercurry. Eimear at 14 must surely have found the transition difficult – although episodes in the novel are drawn from the school she left behind, Banada Abbey, where she had been unhappy. Eimear's brother Fergal recalls the early days in the new town:

I wouldn't be surprised if Eimear felt a bit of an outsider in Castlebar. She would have started at Davitt College halfway through the 2nd year (what would be called year 10 in Britain), so she would