

Catholicism's indelible mark on the page

With the recent deaths of John McGahern and Muriel Spark, does fiction inspired or underpinned by the Catholic faith have a future? Leafing through the pages, from novels to plays, it looks like it's still very much alive

It would be sad in any circumstances for two of the greatest writers of English prose to have died within a month. But the recent losses of John McGahern (1934-2006) and Muriel Spark (1918-2006) also mark another passing: the end of the line for two classic kinds of "Catholic writer".

Spark was the last of the four major novelists with religious allegiance to Rome – Anthony Burgess by birth; Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Spark by conversion – who dominated British literary fiction in the twentieth century. They belonged to a now quite improbable era of fiction in which Catholic faith was worn like a badge: on old Penguin paperbacks of works by Greene, Waugh and Spark, the date of their entry into the Church is listed in the author details, given the weight that a Booker Prize shortlisting or Hollywood adaptation might have now.

McGahern represents a less happy tradition of Catholic fiction; those Irish writers – typified by James Joyce, Brian Moore and Julia O’Faolain – whose work was shaped by opposition to the educational and political power of the official state religion. Born in County Leitrim and steered towards the priesthood, he rebelled to the extent that his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), was seized by Irish Customs as indecent and banned. The scandal led to McGahern losing his teaching job at a Catholic college.

It's impossible to imagine either Spark's or McGahern's careers being precisely replicated now. If, say, Martin Amis or Zadie Smith were to become Catholics, the conversion would certainly be newsworthy (my guess is that it would even make the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*) but the fact would not be printed on their next dustjacket and there would be little chance of their becoming part of a movement at the heart of British fiction.

Equally, a young teacher who published his or her first novel in Ireland would surely have to include almost unimaginable levels of sexual depravity and theological heterodoxy in order to put their pay-packet in danger. And, anyway, it's likely that a contemporary Irish writer of 31 (McGahern's age when he wrote *The Dark*) would see politicians and terrorists rather than priests as their largest and most urgent subject. So the bigger question is

This distinction always appealed to Greene, who liked to define himself as an outsider, but is largely nonsensical. It seems to me that whether a writer writes and dies as a believer (Spark) or as an atheist (McGahern), an author who has been for any serious length of time a Catholic carries an almost inescapable tribal and psychological imprint, in the same way that Philip Roth is fundamentally a Jewish novelist despite being a declared atheist.

If Roth had been raised as a Methodist in England or even an Episcopalian in America, it's unimaginable that he could have written *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Counterlife* or *The Plot Against America*, all of which are informed by experiences of taboo and prejudice that are specifically Jewish.



Rachel Cusk



Graham Greene



Hilary Mantel

whether the deaths of Spark and McGahern have read the last rites for the genre of the "Catholic novel". The two most likely evangelists for the genre among living novelists are David Lodge (born 1935) and Piers Paul Read (born 1941).

However, Lodge has described himself in recent interviews as at best an "agnostic Catholic" and Read, although his Catholic faith remains enviably strong, seems to be having doubts about the novelistic half of the equation. The majority of his latest publications have been non-fiction and the most recent novel, *Alice in Exile* (2001), was less directly concerned with the Church than almost all of his previous fiction.

But, before burying the form, we should establish what we mean by Catholic fiction. Graham Greene, who many observers regard as the pope of Catholic prose, liked to use the formula, which he had borrowed from the French writer François Mauriac (1885-1970), that he was "not a Catholic novelist but a novelist who happened to be a Catholic".

A version of this question – would this book have existed in anything like the same form if the author had been Jewish or Baptist? – seems to me the single sensible qualifying test for the Catholic novel, the only one capable of accommodating the Joyce/McGahern strain, in which the books are a rejection of the faith, and the Greene/Spark tradition, in which the fiction represents acceptance, or at least acknowledgement. This broad-church definition also succeeds in accommodating, among the present generation, Lodge, whose novels frequently question doctrine, and Read, with his fiction of affirmation.

My entry qualifications falter most obviously in the case of J.R.R. Tolkien. Although some have argued that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are drenched in Catholic ideas, it seems to me that they could have been written equally well (by which I mean equally badly) by a Scientologist or indeed a Venusian.

With authors who were converts, the la-

elling is also more complicated. These writers frequently find in Catholicism a confirmation of ideas or instincts which they already had. For example, Waugh warmed to the religion's sense of certainty and hierarchy, values which he saw vanishing from society and politics, while Greene welcomed the idea of a rigid definition of sins against which he could test himself. Spark seems to have been enthralled throughout her life by ideas of free will and predestination – her novels consistently expose the author as puppet-master, jerking the characters' strings – and so responded to Catholicism's deep engagement with fatalism.

Even so, it will be noted that every writer so far cited in this essay is either dead or into pensionable age. The same is true of the numerous American novelists who, though the level of their affiliation to the faith greatly varies, can be claimed as Catholic writers under the formula outlined above: Paul Theroux, Dominick Dunne, the spy writer Charles McCarry. This weighting towards an ageing generation does tend to suggest that the Catholic novelist as a recognisable cultural figure is disappearing.

Certainly, it's unlikely that a major mainstream author in the twenty-first century will write novels which deal as directly with the fabric and sacraments of Catholicism as Greene's *The Heart of The Matter* (1948) or *The End of the Affair* (1951). Nor is there much chance of an equivalent in future American fiction of J.F. Powers (1917-1999), whose books, including *Morte D'Urban* (1962) and *Wheat That Springeth Green* (1988), were almost exclusively concerned with the lives of Catholic clergy in the United States.

The decline of such books is largely because the power of the Catholic novel in the mid-twentieth century was encouraged by the Church's social status in Britain (where conversion became fashionable) and its cultural strength in America. Logically, the equivalent literary form of the next hundred years would be the Islamic or Christian fundamentalist book.

Yet the Catholic novel is still being written, though in a more oblique form. Authors such as Hilary Mantel (*Fludd, Beyond Black*), Rachel Cusk (*Saving Agnes, In the Fold*), Andrew O'Hagan (*Our Fathers*), Patrick McCabe (*The Butcher Boy, Breakfast on Pluto*) and Jonathan Tulloch (*The Lottery, Give Us This Day*) produce work which consistently reflects, thematically and structurally, their experience, for good or ill, of Catholicism.

And, if the arena is widened from the novel to screenwriting, Catholic-influenced storytelling is very recognisable in the scripts of Jimmy McGovern, Alan Bleasdale and Julian Fellowes.

A novelist who happened to be a Catholic, claimed Graham Greene. But, for him and most others, once the Catholicism has happened, the novels are still indelibly marked by it.

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