
‘I’ve Been Here Before’: Women Helping Women in Irish Abortion Narratives

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Abstract

In 2018, Ireland’s Eighth Amendment was repealed following a national referendum, and in January 2019, abortion became legal in the Republic of Ireland up to twelve weeks of gestation. Historically, Irish institutions have attempted to eliminate abortion through forced pregnancies in Catholic “mother-and-baby homes” and censorship laws designed to suppress information about reproductive health. However, abortion narratives in Irish literature reflect the realities of abortion in Ireland, including the networks of women who have helped people terminate pregnancies. For example, in Maeve Binchy’s Eighth Amendment-era short story “Shepherd’s Bush,” an Irish woman is assisted by friends and acquaintances who provide her with lodging, medical appointments, and camaraderie in London. Several works published in 2017, amidst the campaign to repeal the Eighth, depict young protagonists who share their abortion narratives and become activists. Many Irish people still rely on groups such as Women Help Women and Women on Web to safely access abortion medication, and the sharing of information and experiences remains relevant and necessary as Ireland transitions into an era of reproductive rights.

For much of its modern history, Ireland operated largely on the principle of magical thinking: if abortion was banned, it would not exist. Or, as Ailbhe Smyth, who served as convener of the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, notes, ‘The plainest fact of women’s biology, that a marriage certificate is not a precondition of pregnancy, was simply denied’ (A. Smyth, ‘A Sadistic Farce’ 21). The reality, of course, was that countless women—married and unmarried, of

varying ages and backgrounds—sought and obtained abortions, many of them illegally performed in Ireland. After abortion was legalized in Britain in 1967, thousands of women travelled every year—typically to London, Liverpool, or Manchester—to terminate pregnancies. However, while an estimated 8,000–10,000 women travelled to Britain for abortions annually during the 1980s and 1990s, few spoke about their experiences, even after abortion travel was decriminalized in Ireland in 1992. The pervasive cultural stigma surrounding abortion in Ireland, a result of the historically intertwined Catholic church and Irish state, effectively silenced all aspects of reproductive health. Ailbhe Smyth was instrumental in organizing the efforts to legalize abortion in the Republic of Ireland by national referendum in 2018. As she explained during the previous year, abortion rights followed marriage equality into the realm of public narrative: ‘We now have a real social movement . . . where we challenge the society as a whole *not* to listen to our stories of abortion, because the stories have been kept so desperately secret, held so closely’ (A. Smyth, ‘The Obvious Explanations’ 139). Despite the strenuous attempts of the church and state to suppress abortion narratives and to withhold access to, and information about, reproductive health, there is a rich body of literary work in Ireland that depicts the long history of women helping women in need of abortion services.

The legal history of abortion in Ireland is intertwined with British law, and one landmark piece of legislation was the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which subjected citizens seeking, performing, or aiding in abortions to ‘penal servitude for life’ (United Kingdom). When the independent Republic of Ireland framed its constitution in 1937, it adopted the language of this legislation, which was considered consistent with the values of the predominantly Catholic state, and the threat of life imprisonment remained effective in Ireland until 2013, at which point it was reduced to 14 years (Republic of Ireland, Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013). In 1979, the legalization of contraceptives mobilized anti-abortion groups—most visibly, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children—to push for a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion. Although abortion was already punishable by life imprisonment, Catholic groups wanted the Irish constitution to reflect a zero-tolerance policy. The Eighth Amendment, which codified the “equal right to life” of a woman and a fetus she is carrying, limited legal abortions to cases in which the

woman's life was at risk, although women facing life-threatening pregnancies were routinely denied abortions. The amendment, which effectively conferred upon a fetus rights greater than those of the person carrying it, was approved by the Irish legislature and, in a 1983 national referendum, by 66 percent of voters ("Referendum on the Eighth Amendment"). In 1992, Irish voters approved two constitutional amendments, one decreeing that the state cannot limit the right of women to travel outside the country for abortions, the other that the state cannot limit the availability of or access to information about abortion services that are provided legally outside the country. Voters rejected a third proposed amendment, which would have removed suicidal intent of a pregnant person as legal grounds for an abortion. While these amendments indicated a significant shift in public opinion, they did little to remove the considerable obstacles largely instigated by Catholic groups, and while the availability of medication abortion in the early 2000s offered an alternative, thousands of women continued to travel to Britain annually to terminate their pregnancies. In 2018, 66 percent of Irish voters supported the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, thereby legalizing abortion up to 12 weeks in the Republic.

From its earliest years, the free state that would become the Republic of Ireland attempted to preserve Catholic ideals and 'moral purity.' Roughly a decade before the Irish Constitution of 1937 decreed that 'by her life within the home' women would support the nascent state by tending the home fires and producing the next generation of Irish nationalists, the Committee on Evil Literature sought to censor published works that its members regarded as a threat to the values of the Irish populace. This short-lived body evolved into the Censorship of Publications Board, which under the aegis of the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 banned roughly 10,000 texts between 1929 and 1969 (Hutton and Walsh 644). One clause of this legislative act cited publications that 'advocate the . . . procurement of abortion or miscarriage or any method, treatment, or appliance to be used for the purpose of such prevention or such procurement' (Republic of Ireland, Censorship of Publications Act, 1929). The second iteration of this legislation specifically outlawed any reference to abortion in printed texts, including works of fiction, memoirs, and medical texts. During the 1940s and 1950s, a period that marked the pinnacle of censorship in Ireland, the Board banned medical texts that mentioned abortion, even if only to define the term.

Although official censorship declined dramatically after the 1950s, information about abortion was effectively withheld, and as recently as 1992, ‘books such as *Our Bodies Ourselves* and even the British telephone directories were removed from the shelves of Irish public libraries’ because they contained information about reproductive health and services (A. Smyth, ‘A Sadistic Farce’ 16). In 2017, anti-abortion activists in Dublin burned the books of Marian Keyes, who has written and spoken in support of legalized abortion. As official censorship efforts became futile, in part because globalism and technology created greater access to information about reproductive health, the cultural movement to suppress this information and, more broadly, to stigmatize abortion continued.

In spite of the legal and societal campaigns to suppress abortion narratives, they do exist in Irish literature, and they often reveal the sophisticated networks that existed to help women circumvent the law and access abortions. Maeve Binchy, one of the most popular and prolific Irish literary figures, introduced abortion storylines in two of her works published contemporaneously with the Eighth Amendment. The 1982 novel *Light a Penny Candle* depicts an illegal abortion that is obtained with the help of a woman whose guesthouse is frequented by women availing themselves of the services of a local abortion provider. The abortion takes place outside of London, and the pregnant character is British, but the abortion plotline tests the Catholic beliefs of one of the novel’s two protagonists. Aisling O’Connor and Elizabeth White form their lifelong bond when Elizabeth is sent from London during the Blitz to live with family friends the O’Connors in Kilgarret, Ireland. Elizabeth returns to London after the war, and the young women maintain a correspondence and support one another through love and loss, eventually reuniting when Aisling leaves Ireland. When Elizabeth becomes pregnant unexpectedly, she decides immediately that she wants an abortion. Her partner, Johnny, is fond of her but is not interested in commitment, and she fears that he would perceive the pregnancy as an attempt to manipulate him into marriage.

Binchy’s portrayal of an illegal abortion in late-1940s London is matter-of-fact, and although Elizabeth must fabricate a story to explain to her father why she will be out of town for three days, the process is smoothly facilitated by women. Elizabeth easily finds the name of a provider—a female practitioner who performs abortions in her

home—as well as the contact information for overnight lodging in the rural guesthouse, which is described as ‘very cheerful’ (Binchy, *Light a Penny Candle* 259). Maureen, the owner, tells Elizabeth and Aisling, who has traveled from Ireland to be with Elizabeth, that she doesn’t want to know their names or the reason for their visit. She knows the reason, of course, and confides, ‘I’ve been to her three times.’ She notes of the room that, ‘it’s got a wash-hand basin, and there’s lots of towels and a rubber sheet,’ and assures Elizabeth and Aisling that the few other guests on the premises are travelers who keep to themselves (260). Maureen clearly oversees her business to provide comfort and safety for abortion seekers. When she senses Elizabeth’s anxiety, she assures her, ‘Mrs. Norris is really nice. ... Anyway this kind of thing’s been happening to women since the beginning of time. Nature organized life in a very funny way, it seems to me’ (260–61).

Later in the novel, Elizabeth occasionally thinks about the age her child would be and how her life might have been different, but the abortion is neither traumatizing nor life-altering, and Elizabeth does not regret it. Binchy portrays abortion as a decision about reproductive health that should be made by the pregnant person, and she humanizes Catholic devotion, particularly through Aisling’s decision to support her friend regardless of her own beliefs. In the course of the novel, readers also learn that Aisling’s devout mother, worried that she might be pregnant with her seventh child, has ‘very hot baths and a glass of gin’ every night for four nights. She considers confessing this as a sin but decides that, ‘it was just something women did to get their bodies back to normal when they were a bit overstrained’ (Binchy, *Light a Penny Candle* 49). In the parallel stories of the friends, it is Aisling’s life that is marked by trauma. Given that divorce is illegal in Ireland, she is trapped in her marriage to a neglectful, abusive, alcoholic husband. Her only option is to seek an annulment, which would be possible because the marriage was never consummated. To avoid upsetting both her own family and that of her husband, she eventually leaves Ireland and starts a new life in London. Although she is comforted by the women in the Irish hospital who treat her injuries and know that she did not trip and fall, there is nothing they can do to help her out of her marriage; however, the women who help Elizabeth access a safe abortion successfully circumvent the British legal system.

A stage adaptation of the novel, its world premiere, opened in Cork in 2019, shortly after abortion became effectively legal on January 1. In an interview with the *Irish Examiner*, Clelia Murphy, who was cast in the role of Aisling’s mother, noted that Binchy, ‘tackles very serious subjects with a light touch,’ and that the story is about ‘women supporting women,’ a cause ‘more relevant today than it ever was’ (qtd. in Sheridan). Although *Light a Penny Candle* is not an abortion-centric work, a domestic production of a play that features one—adapted for the stage nearly forty years after the novel’s publication—reflected the cultural shift surrounding the Repeal movement that Ailbhe Smyth alluded to in 2017.

In 1983, Binchy’s short-story collection *London Transports* introduced another abortion narrative, ‘Shepherd’s Bush.’ Unlike *Light a Penny Candle*, the story has a contemporary setting in which abortion is legal in Britain. However, travelling for abortion services was still illegal in Ireland, and, as Fiona de Londras explains, Irish law-enforcement agents questioned women in airports and on ferries ‘if they looked young and kind of pregnant-y’ (qtd. in Potts). The story’s Irish protagonist, May, travels from Dublin to London by plane and concocts a story in which she is the victim of a crime so as to keep the crime of her travel a secret from authorities, and from her married lover. Binchy’s depiction of abortion is similar in the two works. Both Elizabeth and May give careful thought to their decision, both are treated in safe environments, and neither is portrayed as regretful or guilty. Readers know more about May’s procedure, which involves a consultation with a general practitioner who refers her to a specialist. Unlike the sprawling novel, ‘Shepherd’s Bush’ is focused on the abortion storyline, and the narrative takes readers inside the clinic. Elizabeth and May each confide in only one person, and each expects her Irish friend to judge her harshly for choosing to terminate the pregnancy. However, both Aisling and May’s friend Celia, with whom she stays in London, support their friends without the expected judgment or lectures. Still, the specter of Catholicism is central to ‘Shepherd’s Bush,’ embodied by the clinic’s Irish nurse and Andy, May’s married lover. When May asks the nurse if patients use the facility for other services, she answers, ‘Oh, certainly they do, you couldn’t work here otherwise. It would be like a death factory, wouldn’t it?’ (Binchy, ‘Shepherd’s Bush’ 24). May interprets the remark as

judgment and withholds the observation that, unlike the nurse, she doesn’t make her living in a facility that performs abortions.

Beyond the fact that it is illegal for May to have an abortion even if she travels to a country where abortion is legal, she must face all the logistical challenges of travelling. Unlike many in her situation, she has the means to purchase a plane ticket and to pay the £194 fee for the procedure, though she worked for nearly a year to save the money required for the trip. Moreover, her travel is fraught with complications, beginning with her stating the reason for her visit. She recalls a ‘cynical article in a magazine which said that girls coming to London for abortions provided a significant part of the city’s tourist revenue’ (Binchy, ‘Shepherd’s Bush’ 2) and declares ‘Business’ as the reason for her trip. In contrast to the many women who have travelled alone, unfamiliar with their surroundings, May stays with her Irish friend Celia, who has made an appointment with her own physician. Even without the obstacles of struggling to finance the trip and find a practitioner or clinic, May is worried that her medical situation will adversely affect Celia. She asks, ‘Will it embarrass you, all this? I mean, do you feel it will change your relationship with him [Celia’s physician]?’ (7). Celia assures May that her physician is professional and that he will not judge either of them, but Binchy alludes to the fear that many abortion seekers experience when they must justify their decision. Both the general practitioner and the surgeon are professional and compassionate, but the former says that he must ask why May is unable to continue the pregnancy, pointing out that she is young and healthy. She explains that her parents would be devastated by an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, that she would be unable to care for the child, and that the pregnancy would break up her partner’s marriage and family of six. Her reasoning, of course, shows that her decision has nothing to do with her ability to give birth but, rather, with the quality of life of a child she would have at this time and under these circumstances. When she explains that she will not tell her partner about the pregnancy, the doctor gives an ambiguous sigh before referring her for the procedure. May’s experience with British medical providers is positive overall, but Binchy pointedly critiques the system in early 1980s London as one in which women must defend themselves and the decisions they make about their own health. Notably, however, the surgeon’s office assistant, who has used the facility before, assures May

after her consultation, ‘They have super food’ (15). For May, who chides herself for even thinking the word ‘abort,’ the openness with which women in London discuss abortion is surprising, reassuring, and helpful.

In addition to Celia, who provides emotional support, lodging, and access to healthcare, which involves leading her physician to believe that May lives with her, May is guided by Helen, a young Australian woman with whom she shares a recovery room. Helen, too, has a married lover, and had an abortion a year earlier at the same facility. She calms May by explaining the examination, the sedative, and the recovery, all the while assuring her, ‘It’s going to be fine, love. Look, I know, I’ve been here before. Some of my friends have had it done four or five times’ (Binchy, ‘Shepherd’s Bush’ 19). Helen is casual about the procedure, pointing out that she will return to work the next day, and her partner visits her in the recovery room that evening. The atmosphere is festive, and the three of them drink wine and tell stories. However, Helen criticizes May for not telling Andy about the pregnancy. She insists that May should tell him, not because he has a right to know but because he should pay for the abortion and understand what May went through. The story concludes with the suggestion that Andy will never know about the abortion—a parallel to *Light a Penny Candle*—and in addition to carrying this secret, May concocts a lie about her trip in which the high-end clothing she went to London to purchase was stolen, a story that is also fabricated for suspicious authorities she might encounter when leaving and returning to Dublin. She decides not to tell her partner about the abortion because he ‘might be against that kind of thing. He was very moral in his own way, was Andy’ (26). Binchy ends the story with this wry observation of the married father of four who has had a sexual relationship with May, his employee, for three years, much of it carried out in an apartment he keeps in the hotel where they both work. In portraying both illegal and legal abortion, Binchy focuses on the woman’s decision and the women with whom she shares her experience. Although in both cases the decision to abort is prompted almost entirely by the circumstances of a relationship with an unavailable man, both Elizabeth and May make their decisions independently—for themselves and others. Elizabeth believes that Johnny would reject her and his child, and May believes that having a baby would adversely affect not only her but also her child, her parents, Andy, Andy’s wife, and his children.

In 1985, when an estimated 8,000 women were travelling to Britain each year for abortions, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children filed suit against the Dublin Well Woman Centre and Open Door Counselling, the only two clinics in Ireland that provided information about abortion travel, as well as several student unions across Ireland. After these clinics were closed by court order, the group appealed to the Censorship of Publications Board to remove all references to abortion from magazines and other printed material. Many British magazine publishers began to self-censor to avoid being banned in Ireland, and *Cosmopolitan*, which had once been a valuable source of information, was eventually sold in Ireland with blank spaces where clinic ads should have been. Given that providing information about abortion within Irish borders was a crime under the Eighth Amendment and would remain so until 1992, many women relied on covert word of mouth and graffiti in bathroom stalls. However, a critical resource at this time was the Irish Women’s Abortion Support Group (IWASG). Established in 1981, the collective of Irish women living in London offered support for Irish abortion seekers through the Women’s Reproductive Rights Information Centre. Volunteers shared their time, money, and emotional support, sometimes negotiating fees with providers and sometimes paying from their own pockets. They helped frightened women navigate London and the anti-Irish harassment they might encounter there. They stayed with patients as they recovered, and watched their children as needed, often opening their own homes to travellers. As a piece written by the group in 1988 explained, ‘Many of us in the group do not tell our families about our involvement in IWASG. It is a well-guarded secret, something we often share with the women coming over, many of whom cannot tell family or friends why they are coming here’ (IWASG 53). A code word made its way around Ireland, and women seeking abortions (who might have been overheard by telephone operators) were told to contact ‘Imelda.’

In 1992, the silence surrounding abortion in Ireland was broken by one of the most galvanizing forces in the Irish abortion debate: the tragic ‘X case,’ a widely publicized legal case surrounding a 14-year-old who was impregnated by a family acquaintance following years of sexual abuse. When her family attempted to procure an abortion in Britain in February 1992, they were prevented from doing so by legal injunction

authorized by the Eighth Amendment. The battle that ensued disregarded the teen’s indication that she planned to commit suicide. When the case was heard by the Irish Supreme Court later that month, ‘Miss X’ was granted permission to travel, and reportedly miscarried in a British hospital. The case sparked nationwide protests and the three aforementioned proposed constitutional amendments. Though the decriminalization of abortion travel and the dissemination of information about abortion services indicated a significant shift in public opinion on abortion, it did little to change the situations of women who continued to face considerable obstacles to obtaining legal abortion services. As Lisa Smyth argues, travelling outside the country to terminate a pregnancy, ‘can be understood as a refusal of citizenship, a form of punishment for those nationals who breach the honour code’ (L. Smyth 178). This view was widely expressed by protesters. At a rally in Dublin in 1992, Sinéad O’Connor, whose song ‘My Special Child’ was written about the singer’s abortion, said, ‘If you’re going to admit that a girl who had been raped should be allowed to leave the country for having an abortion, then why not come right out and admit she should be allowed to have it here? To send her away to another country is an Irish solution to an Irish problem’ (NowThis). That same year, ‘220 women of all ages and backgrounds, with variously assorted children,’ showed solidarity and support for abortion rights by sailing from Dublin to Wales on what they called ‘The Sister Ship’ (A. Smyth, ‘A Sadistic Farce’ 22).

Edna O’Brien’s 1997 novel *Down by the River* offered a fictionalized account of the ‘X case’ and laid bare the antiquated and cruel laws governing women’s reproductive health. The mixed reviews of the novel, many of which criticized its portrayal of the Catholic anti-abortion movement, demonstrated the widespread resistance to candid critique of Ireland’s outworn stance on reproductive rights. The novel’s 14-year-old protagonist, Mary MacNamara, is repeatedly raped not by a family friend but by her father. After her mother dies, Mary is subjected to more violent assaults, one of which results in pregnancy. Her father is enraged by this news and tries to kill the fetus with a splintered broomstick. His permission is needed for Mary to travel or receive legal counsel, and aside from an observant teacher and a few others who suspect the truth (but do nothing), nearly everyone around Mary sympathizes with her father and encourages her to return home to care for him. Following several attempts to abort

the fetus herself and to take her own life, she is assisted by a woman in her rural town who takes her to Britain for an abortion. After being reported to Irish authorities, Mary is returned to Ireland before her appointment and sent to live with a distant relative, a stranger who has been instructed to prevent her from escaping. Mary is later housed with a sympathetic Dublin family, and the novel’s perspective shifts from Mary’s to those of the lawyers and judges who will hear her case. O’Brien offers an ambiguous denouement in which Mary miscarries and attempts to begin a new life in Dublin following her father’s death.

O’Brien’s rendering of the infamous legal case changes the facts in several conspicuous ways. As in the actual case, Mary becomes a catalyst for public outcry from both supporters and opponents of abortion rights. However, unlike the teenager at the center of the case, Mary has no family to comfort her and travel with her. Because her rapist is also her only legal guardian, she must find another way to get to Britain. She is unable to tell anyone that she is carrying her father’s child, but after her neighbour Betty finds Mary following a suicide attempt, she eventually figures out Mary’s secret and risks the legal repercussions of aiding the procurement of an abortion. Initially, Betty has a sense of foreboding, ‘wishing a passing car would come and take the girl away and maybe, maybe dimly half-guessing the fatalities to come’ (O’Brien, *Down by the River* 110). Like others in Mary’s life who can see that she is in crisis, Betty initially considers Mary her father’s responsibility and tries to return Mary to him. She invites Mary to stay in her home and takes her to a trusted physician for a pregnancy test, but when Mary asks her to take her to London, Betty says, ‘It’s going against God, it’s going against everything I believe in’ (126). Betty also reflects on her own miscarriages and the shame of telling her husband that another wanted pregnancy had failed. She agrees to take Mary to Britain and violates several Irish laws by taking a teenager over whom she has no legal guardianship out of the country when abortion travel was still illegal. She also puts her own beliefs aside to help Mary through the process, going so far as to decide for Mary to receive general rather than local anesthesia. Betty and Mary stay at a guesthouse operated by a man who ‘knew why they had come’ (140). He asks them no questions and instead distracts and entertains them by performing in costume as Billie Holiday. During this festive occasion, on the evening before Mary’s appointment, she and Betty receive a call

telling them that they are wanted by the police. This setback is the first of many in Mary’s ordeal of being passed around, first to the anti-abortion activists who guard her day and night, and later to the well-meaning family who take her in while she awaits her day in court. O’Brien’s novel focuses on the legal battle that inspired her fictionalized account, but her version also calls attention to women like Betty who made it possible for Irish women to circumvent the Eighth Amendment.

O’Brien also introduces a character at the clinic, a fellow Irish patient named Mona, with whom Mary forms an immediate bond. Mona assures Mary that she will experience no pain and that the procedure will be safe and effective. In the novel’s conclusion, Mary has moved to Dublin to start a new life. She had kept Mona’s contact information and realized that her only friend at the end of her ordeal was another young Irish woman who shared the experience of having to leave the country to terminate a pregnancy. Many reviewers contended that O’Brien’s characters on both sides of the abortion debate were little more than caricatures and stereotypes, and Thomas H. Jackson of *America* dismissed the novel as another chapter in O’Brien’s ‘quarrel with Ireland’ (37). O’Brien is frequently regarded by literary critics as an expatriate who, in the tradition of Joyce and Beckett, abandoned Ireland and used it as literary fodder. Her novels *The Country Girls* and *The Lonely Girl* were famously banned by the Censorship of Publications Board in 1960 and 1962, respectively, for their portrayal of female sexuality. In a 2013 interview, she stated, ‘What was said about *Down by the River* and which incensed me was that I didn’t know Ireland. Well, A) I do know Ireland, and B) this was based on an actual case. All countries perhaps, but I know Ireland more than I know America, like to stamp out or repress things that they don’t want heard or said, so they didn’t want this book written, but I wanted to write it, and I’m glad I wrote it’ (O’Brien, ‘Irish Writers in America’).

In the years that followed the X case and the publication of *Down by the River*, several critical developments in reproductive justice and healthcare affected how Irish women sought abortions. One was the availability of medication abortion online, and another was the growing level of activism that would eventually lead to the repeal of the Eighth Amendment. In 2013, Teresa O’Brien and Helena Walsh founded Speaking of IMELDA, an activist group that takes its name from the IWASG code word and uses

the slogan, ‘Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortion.’ The group is known for its performance-based activism and red outfits, which honor IWASG members, who often wore red skirts or dresses to identify themselves to travelers. In 2015, Ann Rossiter, a member of both IWASG and Speaking of IMELDA, reported that IWASG had ‘passed the baton’ to the Abortion Support Network, which ‘very ably provides not only finance, but the whole gamut of services once offered by IWASG’ (146). As medication abortion became an option for pregnant people in Ireland, support networks became more global and more visible. Groups such as Women Help Women and Women on Web have been invaluable resources for women in Ireland. Although mifepristone and misoprostol were subject to search and seizure by customs officials, and more than 1,200 units of abortion medication were seized by Irish Customs in 2009 alone (O’Connell), women whose medication was safely delivered were able to self-administer abortions, often without having to pay, as in many cases fees were waived and covered by the organizations for clients in need. Another notable form of activism was the 2016 Twitter travelogue by @TwoWomenTravel, in which an Irish woman and her travel companion documented their journey to Manchester as a means of protesting Irish abortion law. The series of twenty-three tweets depicted both the grueling nature of the trip (being sent to a second clinic, waiting anxiously after their return flight was delayed) and the grim details of undergoing a medical procedure far from home (bloodstained hotel sheets, industrial waiting-room furniture). Throughout the trip, the women tagged Taoiseach Enda Kenny in tweets such as the following: ‘Not the first or the last bleeding women about to face a long trek [sic] home @EndaKennyTD #twowomentravel’ (Mulraney). As Jaime Leigh Gray notes, ‘Digital media affords Two Women the ability to assert bodily autonomy while exposing the regulation and surveillance practices enacted against their bodies by concrete and abstract forms of power’ (100).

In the run-up to the 2018 referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment, some writers were using platforms beyond their literary works to argue for reproductive justice in Ireland. Sally Rooney, one of the most critically acclaimed authors in contemporary Irish fiction, wrote an opinion piece for the *London Review of Books* that was published the day before the referendum. Framed by a reference to the Eighth Amendment, which was passed eight years before Rooney was born, the piece urged readers to

vote to repeal it. Rooney pointed to the visceral and misleading images used by anti-abortion groups, posters depicting ‘gigantic, robust babies, as if the referendum concerned the health of six-month-old infants. But the subtext is clear: no matter what’s going on in a woman’s life, it’s always a good time to have a baby’ (Rooney). Citing both the ‘X case’ and the case of Savita Halappanavar, a woman who died in a Galway hospital after being denied a medically necessary abortion of an unviable fetus in 2012, Rooney noted that the majority of Irish citizens agreed that abortion services should be available in cases of rape, incest, and unviable pregnancies. She argued that there is deep hypocrisy in the willingness to allow women to travel to Britain for a medical procedure that was criminalized within the country’s borders and pointed out that, ‘a foetus conceived by rape is no different from a foetus conceived by consensual sex. To make an exception for women who can be classed as victims is to display fear and anxiety of the woman who is not one, but who would simply exercise her right no longer to be pregnant’ (Rooney). A year earlier, Marian Keyes, bestselling author of 16 novels, told delegates attending the World Congress on Women’s Mental Health in Dublin that the lack of resources and information for abortion seekers in Ireland, ‘makes the process one of fear and toxic shame,’ adding, ‘We need to stop exporting our shame’ (qtd. in McTeirnan).

Though some of Keyes’s early novels were published by Poolbeg, an Irish publisher, her novels featuring abortion storylines, *Angels* (2002) and *The Break* (2017), were published by American and British companies. The Censorship of Publications Board was largely inactive after the 1960s, and most banned books were either removed from the list or expired after a 12-year term. However, the threat of censorship lingered, and many titles remained on the official list of ‘banned’ texts as recently as 2016, the same year that the Board added its first title in 18 years, *The Raped Little Runaway* by Jean Martin (Brennan). Unlike Maeve Binchy and Edna O’Brien, Keyes has resided in Ireland for most of her publishing career, which made her the target of book-burning protests in Dublin in 2017. The Irish media also largely distanced itself from the topic of abortion. Although there were some efforts to give voice to the stories of women forced to travel for abortions, including a series published by the *Irish Times* in 2012, many writers resorted to what novelist Claire Hennessy refers to as the ‘sneaky-abortion-novel movement,’ in which books ‘are not quite about abortion, bodily autonomy and

reproductive rights, and don’t immediately identify themselves as “issue” books, but somehow sneak them in’ (Hennessy, ‘Sneaky Abortion Novels?’). Neither *Angels* nor *The Break* has a central abortion plotline, but the latter develops an abortion storyline to reflect the activism that would result in the legalization of abortion a year after the novel’s publication.

The Break focuses on the career and marriage of 44-year-old Amy O’Connell, who has two daughters and a niece, Sofie, whom she has taken in as an unofficially adopted daughter. When Sofie, who is 17 and unexpectedly pregnant, decides she wants an abortion, Amy orders pills online, well aware of the danger of interception and possible prosecution. She eventually receives a letter from Irish Customs informing her that the pills have been confiscated and her information forwarded to legal authorities. As Sofie’s pregnancy approaches the cutoff point, Amy plans to accompany her to London for a supervised medication abortion. This requires booking airline travel, arranging lodging, and including a third traveler who can accompany Sofie while Amy is attending to an urgent professional obligation. The return flight is difficult for Sofie, who feels unwell, and her experience illustrates the hardship of having a medical procedure in a foreign country and travelling while recovering. Although no legal action is taken against Amy, the family is thrust into the spotlight when Amy’s oldest daughter, Neeve, a social-media influencer who accompanied Amy and Sofie to London, uses her vlog to protest the Eighth Amendment. She posts a cellphone video of an obscured Sofie riding on a luggage cart in the Dublin airport, too weak to walk, and explains to viewers that her ‘friend’ is, ‘young, has no money, and emotionally wasn’t ready to be a mother. I went to the UK with her’ (Keyes 629). Links to the usual beauty products are replaced with links to the websites of Aer Lingus, the Marie Stopes site (now known as MSI Reproductive Choices), and taxi services in London. Neeve’s voiceover implores viewers to consider that, ‘[o]ur abortion rate is the same as everywhere else in the developed world. Can we please stop pretending it doesn’t happen?’ (630). Amy immediately fears for her daughter’s safety, but Neeve tells her, ‘I can’t not do this. I have strongly held views, I have a platform. ... I’ll lose subscribers. I might gain new ones. But that’s not why I’m doing this’ (630). After the video goes viral, Neeve receives death threats and must go into

hiding until the threats subside. Many viewers assume that she is the person who had an abortion, and others threaten her simply for her position on reproductive rights.

Although Amy clearly would support Sofie’s decision to have an abortion regardless of the circumstances, Sofie is fearful that she will be forced to carry the pregnancy to term. She has dreams of attending university, and although she is in a committed relationship, neither she nor her partner is ready to care for a child. As she points out, she can barely care for herself. She suffers from clinical depression and an eating disorder and has been abandoned by both of her biological parents. She and her partner used contraception, which failed, and Plan B, which also failed, so the abortion is a last resort. Amy makes sure that Sofie fully understands her options and the implications of her decision, and she discusses the matter with Sofie’s estranged parents. The roles of Amy and Neeve reflect both the longstanding willingness of relatives and friends to accompany an abortion seeker to Britain and the increasing use of social media to break Ireland’s silence on abortion. In addition to showing the difficulties faced by women forced to travel, Neeve’s video publicly challenges the Irish narrative that abortion simply does not exist in the lives of its citizens. *The Break*, like Keyes’s other novels, is frequently light and humorous, even as it addresses serious subject matter. The novel’s style helps Keyes show that abortion is a fact of life and a healthcare issue that can be discussed alongside more mundane topics.

One of the strategies that has been employed by anti-abortion groups in Ireland (and elsewhere) is to deceive abortion seekers with so-called crisis pregnancy centers, and Claire Hennessy’s 2017 novel *Like Other Girls* puts this practice at its narrative center. Unlike Elizabeth, May, Mary, and Sofie, Lauren Carroll, a 16-year-old student at an all-female Catholic school in Dublin, has no one to turn to when she decides to terminate her unplanned pregnancy. Unlike Sofie, she does not have a supportive partner or a parental figure like Amy to help her. She fears that her parents would force her to carry the pregnancy to term, and her first proactive step is to visit a clinic in Dublin, which she quickly realizes is a crisis pregnancy center designed to dissuade her and run out the clock. She then considers ordering pills online but is aware that they might be seized by Customs. One of the major obstacles for Lauren is the financial barrier, and, seeing no remaining option but to travel, she asks her uncle to loan her

three hundred Euro ‘for gigs,’ which he agrees to give her as an early Christmas present. She also needs money for the flight to Liverpool, which she books secretly with her mother’s credit card. For as stressful as this situation is for Lauren, it is important to note that many abortion seekers do not have relatives from whom they could request, borrow, or steal enough money to cover the expenses of an abortion. Lauren skips school to travel to Liverpool alone, where she undergoes a supervised medication abortion.

Without access to the internet, Lauren almost certainly would have been forced to carry her pregnancy to term, and without a guide to offer her emotional, financial, or logistical support, she must be her own advocate. Hennessy’s Young Adult novel specifically targets young readers and serves as a resource for readers with limited reliable information. For example, Lauren directly addresses the reader following the abortion: ‘I discover that apparently most people don’t ask follow-up questions about the not having sex for two weeks after an abortion (and also to remember that you can get pregnant quite soon after, so to Be Careful)’ (*Like Other Girls* 180). In addition to helping readers navigate the process of accessing abortion care, the novel develops a protagonist who, like Neeve in *The Break*, becomes an activist. Following her trip to Liverpool, Lauren contacts a reporter at the *Irish Times* to share her experience at the crisis pregnancy center. The ensuing article, which keeps Lauren’s identity private, is widely read and discussed, including in Lauren’s home and school, and Hennessy underscores the political power of young people, many of whom would be eligible to vote to repeal the Eighth Amendment. Despite its having been published the year prior to the referendum amidst soaring support for abortion rights, when Hennessy was invited to speak on Irish television about the novel (published in Britain by Hot Key Books), she was told that she could not mention abortion, even though the pregnancy and abortion is the novel’s primary storyline. In 2018, Hennessy said, ‘We still believe that it is kinder to force women to continue pregnancies than it is to have a world in which every child is wanted’ (Hennessy, ‘I Wrote a Novel’). Four days later, 87.6 percent of voters ages 18–24 voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment (Raidió Teilifís Éireann).

Another important voice in Irish abortion narratives is that of playwright Eva O'Connor, whose plays *My Name Is Saoirse* (2014) and *Maz and Bricks* (2017) brought the abortion debate to the Irish stage. *Maz and Bricks*, which had an off-Broadway run in 2020 and has been performed throughout Ireland and in Edinburgh and Washington, DC, contributes in several significant ways to Irish literature addressing abortion. For one, it documents the grassroots movement that led to the legalization of abortion in 2018. Maz is travelling to a Repeal the Eighth protest in Dublin when she meets Bricks on the tram. When he sees the young woman making a sign, Bricks refers to the event as a ‘death march’ and insists that as the father of a young girl, he cannot imagine supporting reproductive rights. In the ensuing hours, during which their paths cross again and they get to know one another, Bricks begins to see the polarizing debate in a more nuanced way. Only after Maz tells him the story of Eimear Colgan, a 19-year-old woman who died after being denied a medically necessary abortion, does Bricks consider abortion from the perspective of the woman. When he cites his seven-year-old daughter, Yas, whose *Frozen* backpack serves as an emotionally charged signifier before she appears later in the play, as the reason he opposes the right to an abortion, O'Connor exposes the fallacy of the inability to distinguish a fetus of less than 12 weeks' development from a known child. Bricks is unable or unwilling to imagine Yas as a person impregnated against her will or dying of an ectopic pregnancy, scenarios that change his view on legal abortion in the course of a day. Within the framework of the contemporary debate, O'Connor shows that many men, even those of younger generations with more progressive voting tendencies, were unaware of the quiet struggles and deaths of women in Ireland and beyond. The grassroots groups that campaigned for the repeal of the Eighth, most notably Together for Yes, appealed to undecided and reluctant voters who might not have realized or been willing to consider that people they know, possibly members of their own families, had traveled for abortions. The slogan ‘Who Needs Your Yes?’ focused steadily on changing the narrative around abortion rights and emphasizing that safe, legal, and domestically available abortions were a compassionate response to the dire situations of women who were forced to travel, if indeed they were fortunate enough to have the resources to do so.

Maz eventually reveals to Bricks that she had an abortion after she was raped and impregnated at age sixteen by her mother’s boyfriend. When Maz confided in her mother, her mother blamed her, told her she was ‘asking for it,’ and forbade her to seek an abortion. Maz tells Bricks, ‘I did have an abortion. And I had to travel in secret to get it done, and for months afterwards I didn’t tell a soul, until I thought I was gonna explode if I held it in any longer. So now I just tell people. Fuck it, I tell anyone who will listen’ (O’Connor, *Maz and Bricks* 7). She explains that her activism includes using the space of public transit to design her protest placard and to speak openly about her own abortion. Had she not caught Bricks’s attention with her sign, he would not have reconsidered his beliefs about abortion rights, including that protesting abortion bans is an ‘American’ thing to do.

An important element of Maz’s story is that the person who helped her travel for an abortion was her former babysitter Lucinda, a ‘hippy’ who helped Maz ‘in unspeakable ways’ (O’Connor, *Maz and Bricks* 16). This observation alludes at once to the unspeakable trauma of the rape, the fact that her mother refused to hear the truth, the secrecy of the abortion, and the silence that Maz is finally able to break. As she explains to Bricks, ‘[M]y mam tried to stop me going to England. And I fought her and fought her, and all this time I had this thing growing in me. That reminded me of him. Every second. I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat. A neighbour, this woman who used to babysit me, she gave me money and helped me get to England’ (36). When she sees Lucinda at the Repeal protest, now pregnant herself with a wanted pregnancy, Maz marvels at the visual impact of a pregnant woman marching to repeal the Eighth Amendment and tells Bricks that she hasn’t spoken to her mother in three years. Lucinda is a surrogate mother to Maz through whom O’Connor confronts the long-exploited fallacy that a person cannot be both a parent and a supporter of reproductive rights. As Maz reflects after seeing her at the protest, ‘I owe her my life, my debt to her is a size and shape I can never repay’ (16). Here, she adapts the familiar line, ‘I owe her my life,’ which is typically reserved for biological mothers, to thank the woman who helped her escape forced motherhood. Like Maz, O’Connor has publicly spoken about her own abortion, noting in a 2020 interview, ‘By the time we had the vote there was this powerful openness that had come about in Ireland. It was hard won, but I think it’s here to stay’ (O’Connor, ‘Culture and COVID’).



Kelli Maloy, “‘I’ve Been Here Before’: Women Helping Women in Irish Abortion Narratives,’ *New Area Studies* 4:2 (2024).

Following the 2018 referendum, the abortion clause was removed from the Censorship of Publications Act. While this legislative act was more symbolic than practical, it marked the end of one means by which abortion narratives have been suppressed and silenced in Ireland. As these narratives continue to be shared in Irish discourse and creative work, it is likely that more will be learned about the ways in which abortion seekers have been assisted by quiet supporters of reproductive justice. Naturally, adequate access to abortion services did not simply materialize as a result of the referendum, and anti-abortion groups are actively appealing the referendum and challenging access to abortion services. Many Irish people still rely on the services of groups such as Women Help Women and Women on Web to safely access medication abortion, and groups such as the Abortion Support Network and the Abortion Rights Campaign continue their tireless efforts to ensure that abortion services are available to all who seek them. This brief overview of abortion narratives in Irish literature acknowledges not only the ways in which women have supported women materially in accessing abortions but also the ways in which Irish women have spoken what was once ‘unspeakable’ and written what was once ‘unreadable’—whether censored, censured, or simply denied.



Kelli Maloy, “‘I’ve Been Here Before’: Women Helping Women in Irish Abortion Narratives,” *New Area Studies* 4:2 (2024).

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