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## Tana French: An Interview with Brian Cliff

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Photo by GABY GERSTER/LAIF<https://www.vjbooks.com/Tana-French-s/966.htm>

## Tana French: An Interview with Brian Cliff

Brian Cliff is a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin, where he was a Lecturer and Assistant Professor from 2007 to 2019. His publications include the Edgar Award-nominated *Guilt Rules All: Irish Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction* (Syracuse UP, 2020), coedited with Elizabeth Mannion; *Irish Crime Fiction* (Palgrave, 2018); *Synge and Edwardian Ireland* (Oxford UP, 2012), coedited with Nicholas Grene; and a reprint of Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (Harper Perennial, 2011), coedited with Emilie Pine. His most recent article, "At Home in Irish Crime Fiction," appeared in *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2021), a special issue devoted to domestic noir. He co-organized "Irish Crime Fiction: A Festival" in November 2013 and is currently working on a monograph about community and contemporary Irish writing. Brian first encountered Tana French's work in 2011, and by the next semester he was already teaching *Faithful Place* to both undergraduates and MPhil students. He first published on her work in 2018.

**CIIS:** Can you tell us more about how French's background in theater may affect her writing?

**Cliff:** I'm wary of speculating on this, at least in any 1:1 way. Broadly speaking, however, one of the real hallmarks of her work is the immersive sense of voice, which may reflect all that theatre work, where the monologue is such a staple of training, audition, and rehearsal. Even if I have doubts about the plot of a particular French novel, her ability to shape and convey the protagonist's voice is always enough to keep me going.

**CIIS:** French has quipped, "Blame it on Stephen King" when asked how her youthful reading led her to crime fiction. Can you speak about her status now as both an Irish writer and an international literary star?

**Cliff:** It's an interesting question, because she does not really participate in the crime writing economy of social media, book festivals, and public interviews. (To circle back to your question about theatre: for someone trained in theatre, as a writer she does not go out of her way to be on stage.) Irish literature is already a community that circulates quite a lot through festivals and conferences and public events, but crime writing has an almost uniquely intimate relationship between the authors and the audience, not least around the numerous annual conventions and festivals, so French's restraint stands out even more because of the genre in which she tends to work. Without taking anything away from successful crime writers who *do* participate in that economy, I think this relative public silence helps ensure – more than is often the case – that her standing reflects just the work, because that's about all that she puts out there.

On another level, she's also cited Donna Tartt's work as influential, in a very interesting essay in the collection *Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels*, edited by John Connolly, Declan Burke, and Ellen Clair Lamb (Atria, 2012). There, French writes about Tartt's work in a way that illuminates French's own means and methods:

It wasn't marketed as a mystery novel at all: it was presented as literary fiction, but I think it would be ridiculous to claim that it isn't both. The book itself is one of the best arguments I've ever seen against that tired, lazy distinction. It's unquestionably literary fiction. It dives deep into enormous themes: the wild human urge toward losing the self, throwing away one's own limitations by dissolving into something limitless; how that urge can turn savagely distorted and destructive when it's trapped by a hyperrational, hyper-individualistic society that doesn't give it room to take its course; the unstoppable march of action and consequence, the immense and unforeseeable chain of events that one small choice can set in motion. The characters drive the plot, rather than the other way around. ... it refuses to go along with the convention that says the real mystery is whodunit. For this book, the true mystery is deeper, buried inside the hidden places of the human mind: why the murder happened; what consequences it has for everyone it touches. ... I aim to write mysteries that take genre conventions as springboards, not as laws, and never as limitations on quality or scope; books where the real murder mystery isn't whodunit, but whydunit and what it means.

This seems to me to capture, as nicely as anything anyone's written, the animating spirit of French's novels, particularly the way they interweave the central case with the protagonist's own background, with their past traumas and veiled uncertainties.

**CIIS:** *The Witch Elm* came out in the United States in the fall of 2018, the same time as the midterm elections and the scandal of Brett Kavanaugh's nomination and accusation for sexual assault. Interviewers asked French if she was "psychic," as sexual assault and secrecy undergird this novel. How do you think that power dynamics of gender and class propel that novel?

**Cliff:** Clearly, some novels – I’d add Lisa Lutz’s *The Swallows* to the list, just to mention one – land at the right time and in the right way to resonate with readers in specific and often powerful ways. That’s a slightly mysterious process, but one that is so central to the ways in which readers take one novel to their hearts rather than another. At the same time, I’m wary of correlation / causation here, as far as the author’s intent and process go, because the generative process for novels is so much less linear, so much slower than the news. Crime fiction as a genre does often feature writers able to produce a novel or more a year, but – just as she does not really participate in the festival economy – French does not publish nearly as often as some of her peers, which means that her writing process is often still more distant from the moment in which the published novel appears. Also, the “psychic” line underrates the extent to which many, many women have long been intimately and experientially aware of the dynamics around that nomination. To refer to her as “psychic” seems to me to imply “who could have seen this coming?”, to which the answer is, clearly: many, many women, and the people who’ve listened to them.

**CHHS:** You have discussed at length the issue of the narrator in French’s work. How does the question of the reliability of the narrator shift in *The Witch Elm* when we have a speaker with a head injury?

**Cliff:** Given the recurring unreliable narrators across French’s work, I’m not entirely sure that injury does materially shift the reader’s relationship to the narrator, other than in the sense that this is an unusually overt, up-front explanation. That explanation may blind the reader – for a time – to the extent of the narrator’s unreliability, masking his prevarication as recovery. For so many of the protagonists before this novel – Rob (*In the Woods*), Cassie (*The Likeness*), Frank (*Faithful Place*), Scorcher (*Broken Harbour*), the more varied personae of *The Secret Place*, Antoinette (*The Trespasser*) – their memories are uncertain, shifting, and unreliable. That unreliability is inseparable from the narrators’ inability to trust their own memories. What happens in *The Witch Elm* is in part a physical embodiment of that, through his head injury and the attendant blank spots in his memory.

**CHHS:** You have written about the tension between character and plot as drivers in the crime genre. Though French has called some genre discussion a “tired, lazy distinction,” as you point out, she does play with genre distinctions. How does *The Searcher* layer yet another genre, the Western, on the Irish context?

**Cliff:** I think that sense of play you note is in part a way of working with the richness of genre without being bound by its distinctions and divisions. One strand of crime fiction’s history, particularly in its hard-boiled and noir forms in the U.S., is the extent to which it picks up where the Western left off, perhaps most famously in Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest* (1929). In particular, that strand of crime writing seems to have inherited the Western’s sense that justice is not equally available to everyone, hence the need for an outsider – the proverbial stranger in town – to right wrongs that the official system cannot or will not. Clearly, that vision of justice doesn’t belong solely to Westerns or crime novels, nor to any of their subgenres, but French is very deft at adapting these impulses and genre elements – including traces of the Western, as

well as larger elements of Gothic and crime writing – to her own narrative ends. In *The Searcher*, perhaps the real departure from French's other novels is not so much which genres she adapts, and how, but rather her use of a protagonist who is wholly an outsider. That's a notable difference from her other protagonists, all of whom have some sort of intimate (if conflicted) connection to their narrative's setting.

**CIIS:** I have to ask about the Heaney-esque moment of the revealed body in the bog in *The Searcher*. What were your thoughts reading that incredible scene?

**Cliff:** This is a hard one to answer, because that imagery – iconography, even – has become so inseparable from Heaney's verse. At this point, I'm not quite sure how much of the weight of that scene derives from *The Searcher* itself, and how much from the memory or traces of Heaney. That's, of course, just me speaking as a reader on my own, and not any kind of prescriptive assessment of the passage.

**CIIS:** Can you speak more about a tension that you have mentioned around criticism when Irish writers are *not* discussing nationalism?

**Cliff:** As a field of study, Irish Studies has many strengths. Conspicuous in its absence from that list, though, is the ability to engage in a sustained, consistent way with Irish writing that cannot readily be construed as somehow *about* national identity, whether overtly or allegorically so. The reasons for that would require a much longer discussion, but somewhere up front on the list should be the enduring influence of the Irish Literary Revival's role in defining the central concerns of Irish literary criticism. The Revival's emphasis on authenticity, for example, or its fondness for some narrower articulations of what properly constitutes Irish writing, can be seen behind the lingering scholarly invisibility of Irish writing that is not somehow *about* Ireland. It's important to note, though, that this limitation doesn't really extend to Irish readers: the bestselling Irish novels – in Hodges Figgis, or the Gutter Bookshop, or Alan Hanna's, or Dubray's, or Books Upstairs, or the weekly newspaper lists – show a much more flexible range of tastes and inclinations.

**CIIS:** Can you share some insights about the supernatural elements in French's novels?

**Cliff:** With the exception of *The Secret Place*, where something like magic is involved, the supernatural qualities in French's novels tend to be less overtly foregrounded and more part of the narrative texture. I'm thinking here of the way that Frank describes the sensation of a sudden undertow in *Faithful Place*, or the repeated descriptions there of the street – Faithful Place itself – as having a kind of agency. *In the Woods* flirts with something like the supernatural, particularly early in the novel, but the present-tense mystery occupies the foreground. *Broken Harbour* also takes up the language of haunting, but in many ways that language seems used there more as a marker of trauma and psychological collapse. That collapse, in turn, is figured through highly Gothic writing, which is – as it has long been – very well suited to capture the overwhelming, fracturing quality of these experiences, largely evading the kind of rational

explanation Scorchner would like to find (much as he misread what was really happening in *Faithful Place*, where he is an important but secondary character). These elements are, for me, among the most interesting aspects of French's fiction, while adaptations of Gothic and supernatural modes to crime and other genres are generally a vital strand of contemporary Irish literature. Just a short list of the most recent examples would include Andrea Carter (*Murder at Greysbridge*), John Connolly (his Charlie Parker series and his recent anthology *Shadow Voices: 300 Years of Irish Genre Fiction: A History in Stories*), Stuart Neville (*The Twelve*, a.k.a. *The Ghosts of Belfast*), Sue Rainsford (*Follow Me to Ground*), and William Ryan (*A House of Ghosts* and *The Winter Guest*).

**CIIS:** What did you think of the television version of French's work?

**Cliff:** I enjoyed the series, particularly the way it managed to integrate both *In the Woods* and *The Likeness*. Where most crime series tend to have a central protagonist and a cast of recurring characters, while French's Dublin Murder Squad books all exist in the same fictionalized Dublin, each book has a different protagonist, which poses some practical challenges for film/TV adaptation, not least for preserving a narrative arc across a season. This first filming of her work, though, took an interesting approach in trying to weave these two novels – with their distinct plots – into a single series. That's surely not an easy balancing act, but I thought the show did it quite well.

**CIIS:** Where do you think future scholarship on French's fiction should focus its attention?

**Cliff:** Her novels are rich and will reward all sorts of lines of inquiry. That said, it would be good to see the scholarship start to expand the focus beyond French alone. There are a lot of caveats to this, but my sense is that – very broadly speaking – Irish Studies articles on French tend to be *only* about her work, often addressing one or two of her novels at a time, and rarely to any significant degree about French in tandem with other crime or supernatural writers (Irish or not). Conversely, I'd suggest, most crime fiction scholarly articles on French do more to connect her writing to writers from varying countries, but with little sense of other Irish writers. Those two emphases leave a big gap that's waiting to be addressed in more substantial ways. Engaging more fully with French's peers and contemporaries, particularly among Irish genre writers, would do a lot to enrich our understanding of her individual work and of Irish crime fiction's wider development.