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Crime on the Periphery: Tana French's Criminal Geography

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Abstract

This article will analyze how Tana French conceptualizes spatiality, focusing on her use of liminal spaces, edgelands and peripheries, as the settings for her crime scenes. Instead of more traditional Irish literary urban-rural binaries, French exploits the interface of both places, reflecting a contemporary post-industrial, post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. In particular, in *In the Woods* (2007) the untamed woodland behind the housing estate in Knocknaree becomes an interfacial zone between the rural and urban, past and present. In *The Likeness* (2009), Whitethorn House sits at the edge of the village geographically, politically, and historically. In French's first two novels peripheral spaces offer a mysterious point of departure, allowing her to delve deeper into the multiple layers of meaning evoked by marginal spaces.

Keywords: edgelands, peripheral spaces, criminal geography, Irish Studies, urban fringe, crime fiction, *The Likeness*, *Into the Woods*

In Tana French's crime novels, edgelands and peripheral spaces feature regularly as crime scene locations. These liminal, shadowy spaces hide secrets which her detectives have to uncover. Leaving the streets of the city, their move to the edgelands of the commuter belt disrupts notions of the Irish pastoral idyll. In her debut novel, *In the Woods* from 2007, the untamed woodland behind the housing estate in Knocknaree becomes an interfacial zone between the rural and urban, past and present. Located on the outskirts of a small outlier village, commuting distance from Dublin City Centre, this edgeland is soon to be bulldozed and developed. The topography of the woodland hides hidden histories, from the archaeological dig to what happened to Adam "Rob" Ryan 20 years ago, and now the murder of Katy Devlin in present day (2007) Ireland. The landscape is about to be submerged into the urban development, and with it many of its secret spaces will be demolished. In *The Likeness* (2009), this trend towards the edgelands continues. The town where the group live, Glenskehy, is a satellite village of the capital city Dublin. Whitethorn House sits at the edge of the village geographically, politically, and historically. Furthermore, the abandoned

cottage where the body of Lexie Madison is found is at the edge of this village at the interface of rural and urban Ireland.

Avoiding the dichotomous trope of urban/rural, French's geographical choices move beyond the "prevailing myth[s] already embedded in an Irish cultural inheritance," challenging this "strict urban-rural polarity" (Patten 265). Rather than depending on the urban-rural binary, or merely exchanging geographical archetypes, French looks to the interface between both places. The topography of her locations exemplifies Patten's "complexity of the Irish domestic landscape" (265) as French explores the criminal geography of the untamed edgelands on the periphery, the liminal space between the two traditional loci.

This article will discuss the edgelands and peripheries of Tana French's work and how these spaces move the crime from the city streets to the outlying places between urban and rural. Analysing how spatiality is conceptualised focusing on those liminal spaces this article will discuss how these locales on the edge and outside the regulated cityscape become sites of danger, crime and secrets, challenging traditional notions of pastoral rural Irish landscape.

Importance of Place

According to Stewart King, "place is arguably the most important feature in crime fiction" (211). The location of the crime plays a significant factor in the narrative as it "not only calls forth the crime; it also determines the sort of detective who investigates the crime, the criminal who commits it and the victim who suffers from it (211). In much crime fiction the city takes centre stage, yet in *In the Woods* and *The Likeness* Tana French moves crime to that interfacial location between the urban and rural. This in-between space is neither the city nor the pastoral, removing the ability to ascribe clear meaning to the location. If, as King has

suggested, place “gives the crime and the investigation meaning,” offering elements that “provide some understanding of the society and the culture,” then what do these spaces reveal from their peripheral locations? (212). For those involved in, and impacted by the crime, the location too can offer clues to the investigation. PD James suggests that setting is “integral to the whole novel” and “should be perceived through the mind of one of the characters, not merely described by the authorial voice, so that place and character interact” (James 111). However, when the location is liminal, it offers few answers. French uses the imperceptible nature of these edgeland locations to build mystery and ambiguity.

What Are Edgelands?

Marion Shoard defines “edgelands” as landscape between the urban and rural but “quite different from either” (Shoard). These spaces offer an interface between the organised structure of the urban topography and the wildness of the rural landscape. Sitting on the edge of both, these sites of possibility are a non-space:

Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland. All these heterogenous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. This peculiar landscape is only the latest version of an interfacial rim that has always separated settlements from the countryside. (Shoard)

These spaces challenge the social order with their “unruly,” “fragmented,” and “chaotic” nature. They become border zones that are neither ordered by planning or in “harmony” with nature. Edgelands are “raw and rough” and as a result they are “often sombre and menacing”

(Shoard), similar to the urban gothic in the crime fiction of Peter Ackroyd or Iain Sinclair. Their ambiguity makes them the ideal location for crime and illegality, contributing to the mystery in French's *oeuvre*. Laura Marcus describes how they open up the:

“hidden spaces within the city, and/or uncovering patterns which are both spatial and temporal, palimpsestic layerings of past events; often violent crimes which, leaving their mark on both place and history, are at one and the same time repetitions and repressions. (248)

These edgelands are also subject to a gothic, dark layering of past events. Knocknaree Woods and Whitethorn House both have a history of violent crime and secrets hidden in their past. The marks of these crimes haunt the locales, remaining as mysteries still waiting to be solved, tainting the present, and adding to the menacing nature of these ambiguous zones. French's locations are marked with memory and trauma, which adds to the materiality of the place and how it is perceived. Tim Cresswell explains that memory and landscape are intertwined: “The very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental processes and is instead inscribed in the landscape – as public memory” (120). Both the locations, Knocknaree Woods, and Whitethorn House, are layered with memory, ambiguity, and ominous possibility, situated within the edgelands at the border of the rural.

Ireland and the Rural

In Oona Frawley's book *Irish Pastoral*, she suggests that the pastoral, the notion of the rural idyll, holds a specific place in Irish society especially “in the face of a changing or threatened social structure, place and nature can be conceived of as a steady and unaltered realm beyond the reaches of the fluctuating culture” (270). Place, nature, and Irish rurality suggest an inalterability in response to change and progress:

The idea of Irish Rurality thus persists, and seems to contribute to the nation's ability to absorb change The pace of change in modern-day Ireland seems to have forced a continued reliance on the idea of the rural nation. (Frawley 137)

The pastoral space has played an integral part in Irish cultural identity. As Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin explain, this was predominantly associated with the West, and the “myth of the west [...] conjured up by the Literary Revival and commodified for popular consumption” which was later debunked in favour of the urban “industrialisation and consumer culture” during the Celtic Tiger (10). Writing at the end of the Celtic Tiger era and start of the collapse, French looks away from this binary in favour of new topography of unexplored spaces.

Her settings, especially in *In The Woods*, and *The Likeness*, suggest that the borders between urban and rural are sites of danger and mystery. They are unknowable spaces that challenge traditional notions of Irish rurality, as the borders between the city and the pastoral, good and evil, truth and lies become ambiguous. While, as Brian Cliff has pointed out, the history, population, and geographical size of Ireland means that Irish crime fiction cannot rely on the anonymity of the city especially “in a landscape as intimate and compact as Ireland's, where can a mass serial killer hide the bodies. The scale of the stage, in other words, matters a great deal for the content and structure that are available to Irish crime fiction” (Cliff 11). French relies on these interfacial locations that border the rural to offer spaces of uncertainty. Not fully encompassed by planning regulations or development, these spaces are often abandoned and untamed, allowing ambiguous possibility and what Cliff calls the “fundamental uncertainty” so integral to Irish Crime Fiction (174).

The gothic overtones in French's locations highlight the sense of unease that was building towards the end of the Celtic Tiger when *In the Woods* and *The Likeness* were

published in 2007 and 2008 respectively¹. As Frawley explains “in literature [...] nature and landscape become signifiers, lenses through which it is possible to examine cultural and historical developments” (1). These edgelands and dark pastoral spaces evoke the ghost estates that haunted the landscapes during the final roars of the Celtic Tiger, and still remain to this day.² French moves away from what Patten calls the “the tension between rural and urban” and the notion that urban environment was in opposition to the “idyllic” authenticity of rural Ireland:

[W]here differentiations between small town and farmstead, or between inner-city affluence and peripheral working-class suburb, were in fact more accurate markers of Ireland’s variegated social profile. (Patten 275)

Instead of focusing on the urban/rural dichotomy and locating the crime in the urban or rural, French chooses the edgelands, the interface where the two spaces meet, to access the liminal spaces of the Irish landscape. Moving away from binary notions of rural and urban, French avoids the Yeatsian juxtaposition of idyllic and dangerous. Unlike Yeats, for instance in “The Stolen Child,” French moves away from what Mulligan calls “a radical alternative geography of the nation” (170), instead complicating the simplistic urban/rural binary by focusing on the spaces in-between and investigating their dark environmental possibilities. We are not lured into a “pastoral panacea” of “of emerald-tinted simplicity” nor does French present the dangerous “otherworldness” of Yeats’s “Stolen Child” (Mulligan 171–73). French moves the debate to the “dark-uncanny” of the interfacial spaces because, as Morton asserts in *Dark Ecology*, “Place now has nothing to do with good old reliable constancy” (10), but instead these two spaces converge in the edgelands, in what Morton describes as “a

¹ See Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, “The House and the Hallucination in Tana French’s New Irish Gothic” in *Domestic Noir*, 2018, pp. 221-238, for a great analysis of the new gothic overtones in French’s work.

² See Anthony Haughey, “A Landscape of Crisis: Photographing Post-Celtic Tiger Ghost Estates.” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 40, 2017, pp. 53–71, for more details and images from his Settlement exhibition about Irish Ghost Estates.

deviation” or a “fold, a twist” so that “the edge is not absolute” (58). French’s landscape is cognisant of this “dark ecology” and provides a representation of Morton’s “weird” potential of these peripheral spaces. Rosemary Erickson Johnsen notes that “one of the striking features” of French’s Ireland, is “the relative lack of historical awareness – on social and individual levels” and this is also true of her criminal geography, which moves beyond conventional or historical notions of the Irish terrain.

In the Woods

Tana French’s first novel, *In the Woods*, was published in 2007 and establishes her location conventions. The prologue opens during a perfect summer in Knocknaree, a small settlement on the edge of Dublin, twenty years previously. This “orderly little maze of houses” was planned by the government in the hope of creating a “a buzzing marvel of suburban vitality, a plan—perfect solution to overcrowding and poverty and every urban ill” (French, *In the Woods* 3). The location of this new development stands in stark contrast to the rural landscape that surrounds the semi-detached houses, according to the narrator Adam “Rob” Ryan. In 1997, the “few handfuls of cloned semi-detacheds” “look startled and gauche on their hillside” (French, *In the Woods* 3). At the time a range of complementary infrastructure was planned, but has “failed to materialise” leaving the high-density development out of place with the surrounding topography. The lack of development is shrouded in mystery around ‘shady deals’ and corrupt politicians” (French, *In the Woods* 4) .

The housing estate is neither urban nor rural but seems to be an urban outlier in the pastoral, an edgeland of sorts because of the chaotic planning development. Beside the houses “Farmers still pasture cows across the road, and night flicks on only a sparse constellation of lights on the neighbouring hillsides; behind the estate, where the someday plans show the shopping centre and the neat little park, spreads a square mile and who knows

how many centuries of wood” (French, *In The Woods* 3). The development is chaotically designed beside an ancient woodland which refuses to give up its secrets to the archaeologists, the detectives, or to Adam “Rob” Ryan. Rob describes it as a “magical place, centuries old, with a mysterious ruined tower buried deep within” (French, *In the Woods* 4). It lures him in, but refuses to be categorised and tamed by development or detection. Its interfacial nature creates this ambiguity. It is all “flicker and murmur and illusion” and the folklore that surrounds it adds to the mystery of this edgeland. Filled with a “conspiracy of a million tiny noises—rustles, flurries, nameless truncated shrieks; its emptiness teems with secret life, scurrying just beyond the corner of your eye” (French, *In the Woods* 3). The woods masquerade as the rural idyll yet hide a violent and fatal history that contests notions of the lyric Irish pastoral, as children disappear and are murdered within its confines. Yet its proximity to the development, and planned infrastructural expansion, complicates this space, encircled within this urban/rural venn diagram. This space cannot be separated from either, twisted as it is within both realms. As Morton points out, “attempts to straighten things are violent; they never work perfectly because they are ‘doomed’” (57).

For Rob the woods hold a special significance. On Tuesday, August 14, 1984, Detective Rob Ryan, then the 12-year-old Adam Robert Ryan, and his two friends, Germaine (“Jamie”) Elinor Rowan and Peter Joseph Savage went into the woods. The alarm was raised when the children did not return at their appointed time. That night only Rob was found “in a densely wooded area near the centre of the wood, standing with his back and palms pressed against a large oak tree. His fingernails were digging into the trunk so deeply that they had broken off in the bark” (French, *In the Woods* 10). Rob’s clothes were torn and his shoes soaked with blood, but he only had minor injuries. However, he made “no voluntary movements for almost thirty-six hours and did not speak for a further two weeks” (French, *In the Woods* 11). Rob remembers nothing about what happened, and his two friends are never

found. The secrets remain hidden and only add to the mysterious atmosphere of this locale.

This sense remains when Rob returns years later after the murder of Katy Devlin:

Knocknaree wood was the real thing, and it was more intricate and more secretive than I had remembered. It had its own order, its own fierce battles and alliances. I was an intruder here, now, and I had a deep prickling sense that my presence had instantly been marked and that the wood was watching me, with an equivocal collective gaze, not yet accepting or rejecting; reserving judgment. (French, *In the Woods* 272)

The wood is alive, watching and marking Rob, and “has its own order.” To cross the boundary from the man-made development of Knockanree to the woods is to enter another world: “The five-foot wall between the estate and the wood was the border between the two worlds” (French, *In the Woods* 3). By personifying the woods and bringing them to life, French alludes to the Irish supernatural tradition, and what Sarah D. Fogle calls the “atavistic evil portents” of Irish folklore, like the pooka (Fogle 23). It nods to Yeats, yet the urban development that borders the woods complicates and modernizes the space.

French’s layering of the location with historical and folkloric significance can also be seen in the contemporary murder. Twelve-year-old Katy Devlin’s body is found on a “Bronze Age ceremonial stone [...] a flat, massive block [...] seven feet long by three wide by three high, chipped from a single boulder” (French, *In the Woods* 25). Devlin’s “small body has been carefully laid out on top” of the altar in the middle of the archaeological dig where “animal and perhaps even human sacrifices may have occurred” (Fogle 23–24). The archaeologists are there as the precursor to government plans to bulldoze the woods and make way for a new motorway. This “raw and rough” edgeland must be sanitised (Shoard). As Marion Shoard points out these locations are not “people-friendly” but “sombre and menacing, flaunting their participation in activities we do not wholly understand.”

Knockanree woods does not want to be sterilised, and this development is not cognisant of the archaeological, cultural or social significance of this space. In an interview, French explained that the “priceless Irish heritage being destroyed to make way for a motorway, when the two could perfectly well coexist” was a theme she based in truth:

if it weren't for deeply dodgy deals involving politicians and developers...those, unfortunately, happen every day of the week. Knocknaree isn't based on any specific place; it's based on dozens of crucial parts of Ireland's heritage, many of them now buried under tons of concrete, many more in imminent danger, and all for no good reason. (*Interview: July 11, 2008 / Bookreporter.Com*)

The development of the new roadway, just like the housing estate before it, fails to acknowledge the significance of the space in its own right or the archaeological importance of the artefacts and ruins on site. Shoard feels that sites like this should be celebrated and not developed into family-friendly woodlands, nor should they be “castrate[d] by turning it into something more ‘desirable’, as if the interface has nothing to offer as a landscape in its own right” (Shoard). For Shoard these spaces are so important because they are unmanaged and unkempt, and as a result, unknown.

For this very reason Knockanree offers French the ideal location for her mystery. Rachel Shaffer explains that woodlands are sites of concealment: “Whether the secrets are physical or psychological, woods offer the ideal metaphor for mysteries of all kinds” (93). The story is filled with ambiguities: “uncertainty,” “unlikely,” “not considered reliable,” or “absence of conclusive identification” (French, *In the Woods* 6). And while the mystery of Katy Devlin's death is solved, the woods fail to reveal the truth about what happened to Jamie Rowan and Peter Savage. Once the dust has settled after the trial, Rob returns to the site to see the woods one final time as the “huge grimy bulldozers tossing aside great clumps of earth and nosing with slow, obscene delicacy at the excavated remnants of walls” (French,

In the Woods 440). It is not until the site is nearly gone, along with its history and secrets, that he appreciates it fully: “It hadn’t really occurred to me, until I saw them cutting it down, that it had been beautiful” (French, *In the Woods* 441).

The Likeness

Tana French’s follow-up novel, *The Likeness*, follows Rob’s partner Detective Cassie Maddox in an undercover case. “Detective Maddox arrives at a crime scene to discover that the victim is her doppelganger, and agrees to infiltrate the victim’s life undercover” (Richardson). The victim, a PhD student, was living with “a close-knit and eccentric group of friends who inhabit a crumbling countryside mansion” (Richardson). Often compared to Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*, the story involves a group of postgraduate students who have moved from the capital to a large Anglo-Irish mansion, Whitethorn House, on the edge of the village of Glenskehy, just outside Dublin. Set towards the end of the Celtic Tiger, as property prices were pushing people outside of the main cities to commutable towns and cities, the novel portrays Glenskehy trying to adapt to new living patterns. Right on the edge of the village sits Whitethorn House, which historically would have been the home of the colonial settlers. The historical tension is now renewed as locals hope the house will be sold in order to make way for a hotel or luxury apartments. However, Daniel March, who has inherited the house, has other ideas:

This investment would reinvigorate the local economy, but the picturesque house that holds the promise of economic independence for Daniel and his friends would have to be sacrificed. This conflict reflects tensions between settler colonizers, previously embodied by the upper-class British aristocracy and now by the college students, and the local Irish population. (Kurowicka)

These tensions are revealed through graffiti and the vandalism of the property by the locals. Similar to *In the Woods*, the rampant and uneven development of the Celtic Tiger, particularly in rural Ireland, is prominent here. Glenskehy has been experiencing a downturn in population and fortunes, and the locals see the promise of a hotel and apartments as essential to reversing the trend. Local resident John Naylor explains to Detective Sam O’Neill what a hotel could mean to the village:

Tourists coming through, new businesses coming in to look after them, people moving in to work for the new businesses. Young people staying on, instead of clearing out to Dublin as soon as they’re able. New houses being built, and decent roads. A school of our own again, instead of sending the children up to Rathowen. Work for teachers, for a doctor, for estate agents maybe-educated people. Not all at once, like, it would’ve taken years, but once the ball starts rolling... That was all we needed: just that one push. That one chance. We’d have had Glenskehy coming back to life. (*French, The Likeness 416–17*)

Edward “Ned” Hanrahan, Daniel’s cousin, is hoping to break up the close-knit friend group living in the property and develop the land into profit. He tells Lexie Madison, i.e., undercover Detective Cassie Maddox, that “ideally, I’ll go for a golf club or a spa hotel, something like that. That’s where the serious long-term profit is, specially if I can get a helipad put in. Otherwise, we’re talking major luxury apartments”(French, *The Likeness 469*).

Sitting on the outskirts of the village, the house exerts an ambiguous presence similar to Knocknaree woods. It is a site of promise, but filled with historical significance and folklore of changelings and murder. It acts as an interfacial space that connects past and present, but only seems to be a symbol for the future fortunes of the village. Now as a crumbling mansion, Daniel and co want to remove themselves from the capitalist system, preventing the residents of the village from benefiting from any economic potential. The

group plan to completely live outside of the system, comparing working for wages to enslavement, and as Anna Kurowicka explains, this “indicates a strong political critique of the capitalist system and its limitations, while ignoring histories of racism that make a life of leisure and comfort possible.” Their privilege allows them to ignore the history of the big house, whereas for the villagers Whitethorn House acts as a visual reminder of the colonial past, a “symbolic geography” according to Mulligan:

Whitethorn House and all the detritus within it stand as symbol of this seemingly inescapable past and these intense social strictures as well as the intergenerational prejudices that linger in historical memory, impacting cultural attitudes toward not only the estate, but its inhabitants and their privilege but also reviled place in the community as a link to the oppressive landed Ascendancy and as homeowners in the midst of the post-Celtic Tiger real estate recession. (208)

Whitethorn House is a remnant of the “Big House,” a reminder of the colonial past standing in the way of capitalist development in rural Ireland, “defiant [...] exposed on every side; besieged” (French, *The Likeness* 197). It is no surprise in the end that this peripheral locale, like Knocknaree Woods, is “razed” to the ground, this time left “to rubble and smoking ash” (French, *The Likeness* 651).

Like the famine cottage, where the body of Lexie Madison is found, it is filled with secrets never to be revealed. From both their peripheral locations on the outskirts of Glenskehy, these dwellings contain an ambiguous history, haunted by their colonial past. The cottage, deserted since the famine, is less obvious than the big house as Cassie Maddox points out: “Famine cottages are all over the countryside, we barely even see them anymore” (French, *The Likeness* 63). The reminders of death linger, and there is a ghostly quality to the geography that surrounds the dwelling. It “rises” up in front of Cassie and she can sense the deathly presence of Lexie inside the walls of the property:

I was so close to her dying, I could have leaned down across ten days and touched her hair-but it didn't. The cottage had a century and a half of its own stillness stored up, she had taken only an eyeblink; it had already absorbed her and closed over the place where she had been [...] "Whatever it is you want," I said softly, into the dark cottage, "I'm here." There was a tiny shift in the air around me, subtler than a breath; secretive; pleased. (French, *The Likeness* 209–11)

Both of these peripheral spaces represent the opposite ends of Ireland's colonial history, and at the conclusion both are unliveable spaces haunted by murder. Sitting on the border between rural and urban, past and present, they haunt the surrounding geography.

Conclusion

Rather than locate her crime fiction in urban cityscapes, French offers the edgelands, those unruly spaces on the interface between urban and rural, neither civilised nor uncivilised, as locations where the social order is disrupted. She maps a criminal geography across Ireland in the peripheral spaces. These locales often have a history of crime and unsolved mysteries attached, while also being haunted by historical significance. These spaces also "have their story" (Shoard) and French's locales "inhabit uncertainty to an especially acute degree" (Cliff 97). Retaining their mystery and refusing to be controlled, these peripheral spaces act as a "story of our age" refusing to conform the sterile development (Shoard).

In both *In the Woods*, and *The Likeness*, French's criminal spaces are interfacial zones, located on the edge and outside the social order. This geographical, historical, and criminal liminality allows for a layered ambiguity in French's settings. Each of the elements of the space contribute to the mystery, meaning that French can move fluidly between the genre of crime and mystery. As she told Stephaine Merritt in *The Observer*: "The thing that attracts me isn't the murder, it's the element of mystery [...] That idea of what could be

mysterious and start people asking questions” (Merritt) In French’s first two novels the peripheral space offers that mysterious point of departure, allowing her to delve deeper into the multiple meanings attributed to these marginal spaces. French “peer[s] beneath its surface representations to offer an interpretation of space that lays bare its deeper mysteries” (Heise 223).

Rather than rely on the tropes of the Golden Age of detective fiction which depend on controllable space in the “deceptively peaceful milieu of isolated rural communities” (Sandberg 337), or on the revival binary of pastoral vs. otherworldness, French uses the border between urban and rural, the “rurban fringe” (Coleman 418), to investigate the grey liminal spaces of the Irish landscape, because “the edge is not absolute” (Morton 58). Through her engagement with these edgelands and peripheral spaces she helps to defy “nostalgic views of an imagined utopian past” by revealing the layered histories of Irish locations, illuminating their “double movements” and rethinking Irish landscape in new ways (Sullivan 3).

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