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Abstract

The Secret Place (2014) exposes a persistent Western cultural impulse to contain the emotions of teenage girls when they demonstrate control over their lives. In the Irish context, the dismissal of teenage girls is resonant of a containment culture in which controlling women's bodies and minds has been essential to upholding heteropatriarchal ideals. Resistance to the novel's unresolved supernatural elements by readers and critics and the lack of sustained academic scholarship also point to an unsettling complacency with the neoliberal impulse to contain female emotion and lived experience in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Keywords: containment, neoliberal, Irish literature, girlhood, Gothic, gender, Ireland, mystery fiction, education

Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad series has developed what some have called a "cult following" (Grady). The series, comprised of the first six of French's eight novels, makes up a "daisy chain" of detective protagonists—each novel is narrated by a supporting character from a previous novel (Grady). Though the popularity of French's series has generated much discussion in public media outlets and has earned French numerous literary awards, academic scholarship on French's novels is still developing. A dominant strand of this nascent critical work considers the novels with careful attention to their sociohistorical context: the recessionary landscape of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. For example, scholars such as Molly Slavin and Emily Johansen have discussed the characteristically post-Celtic Tiger crash setting of the fourth novel in the Dublin Murder Squad series, *Broken Harbour* (2012). Set in a home in one of Ireland's ghost estates—unfinished housing developments on which construction was abruptly abandoned when the housing bubble burst in 2008—the novel follows Scorcher Kennedy who is assigned to solve a case in which Patrick Spain and his two children are found murdered in his home and his wife is

sent to intensive care for her injuries. Though Kennedy and his rookie partner Richie initially hypothesize that an immense amount of stress after being laid off from his job drove Pat Spain to murder his wife and children, the case soon presents the detectives with too many mysterious gaps and details for this straightforward assessment to hold water. Both Slavin and Johansen frame the novel as French's commentary on the uncanny and haunting reminders of Ireland's descent into capitalist greed and consumerism. On the whole, French's novels have invited critical analysis about her gothic presencing of Ireland's traumatic past.

Though the body of scholarship on French's work continues to grow, discussion of the fifth novel in the series, *The Secret Place* (2014), remains suspiciously scant. The novel is set at St. Kilda's, an elite all-girls boarding school on the outskirts of Dublin. When a teenage boy, Chris Harper, from the neighboring boys' school is found murdered on the grounds of Kilda's, Murder Squad detective Antoinette Conway is assigned to crack the case. However, a year on, the case has gone cold. The mystery is reopened when a St. Kilda's student, Holly Mackey (daughter of detective Frank Mackey, the protagonist of the series' third book, *Faithful Place*), brings detective Stephen Moran a picture she found on the school bulletin board of Chris Harper emblazoned with the words "I know who killed him." Alternating between Moran's first-person accounts over the course of a single day of investigation at St. Kilda's and extended third-person flashbacks from Holly and her three best friends in the year leading up to Chris' murder, the novel explores the power of adolescent female friendship and the lengths to which some will go in order to preserve these meaningful bonds.

The Secret Place was initially met with mixed reviews. In a *New York Daily News* review shortly after the book was published, Sherryl Connelly writes, "There's an ethereal quality to Tana French's seductive new mystery ... *The Secret Place* may be French's best novel yet."

Yet, in her review of French's series for *The New Yorker*, Laura Miller dubs *The Secret Place* French's "least successful novel." She attributes this to the "confusing" narrative style. Miller writes, "The novel's emotional center is diffused, and it loses the tense, marvelous effect of French's other books" (Miller). Referring to a series of supernatural occurrences prompted by Holly and her friends, Miller continues, "The girls' witchy exploits are a thin pop-culture borrowing, and teenagers are so protean to begin with that their identity crises lack the power to unnerve" (Miller). Negative reviewers of the novel largely cite two reasons for their disappointment: French's use of supernatural elements juxtaposed with her realist style, and a general distaste for the writer's characterization of the eight teenage girl suspects, two warring factions of four-person cliques, all of whom are potential witnesses or suspects in Chris Harper's murder.

Informal reviewers of the novel, many of whom note their enjoyment of French's previous books in the series, are notably harsher than Miller in their assessments of *The Secret Place* on literary social sites like *Goodreads.* Sean Barr writes, "I understand that the author has managed to capture the essence of stereotypical teenagers but they're just not worth reading about. I would much prefer to read a murder investigation in a grown up [*sic*] world not one of gossiping children. Sarah Page offers:

> All of French's novels have some aspect of a supernatural mystery and I generally like that – it doesn't all have to be stark realism, but again, like *In the Woods*, this novel touches on some supernatural happenings with the teenage girls that are never explained or resolved. I also just didn't care for all the teenage drama. The language (lots of dated slang and teenspeak) didn't fit with the genre either. The parts from the teen's POV read too much like a YA novel.

While short-form reviews and posts on open-forum websites may be considered by some scholars less-than-authoritative sources to support a critical study of *The Secret Place,* I find that these venues provide essential material to help contextualize my reading of this understudied novel. As Nora Caplan-Bricker suggests, "French occupies a rare place in the publishing landscape, straddling the categories of mass-market pleasure-read and critical darling." When considering how French's novels blur traditional boundaries between literary and genre-fiction, it seems necessary to draw in contextual material—reactions, reviews, and responses—from academic readers as well as those outside academe. Ultimately, the critiques from professional and popular reviewers point to the same perceived "flaws." The reception of *The Secret Place,* then, reveals a certain resistance to literary texts that break genre constraints.

I propose that the two dominant strands of critique of *The Secret Place*—the novel's unresolved supernatural elements and French's perceived failure to characterize teenage girls believably—can be viewed as evidence of more than subjective reader preferences. I contend that these critiques are symptomatic of a pervasive and persistent Western cultural impulse to contain the emotions of teenage girls when they demonstrate power and control over their lives and experiences. In the Irish context in particular, the dismissal of teenage girls is resonant of a containment culture in which controlling women's bodies and minds is essential to holding up heterosexual and patriarchal ideals. Further, the resistance to unresolved supernatural elements in French's novel, ultimately an objection from the readers to French's blending of realist and gothic genres, echoes another aspect of containment culture. These critiques of the novel, and its lack of sustained academic scholarship, point to the risks of minimizing the power of teenage

girls in Ireland and beyond, and an unsettling—and even horrifying—complacency with the neoliberal impulse to contain female emotion and lived experience in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.[1]

The containment of women's bodies has long been a facet of Irish culture and society. James M. Smith's influential study *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007) and the scholarship that this work has inspired deconstructs the State- and Catholic Church-sanctioned abuse of women and children in Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and mother and baby homes from the nineteenth century until 1996 when the last Magdalen laundry was officially closed.[2] Smith writes, "In a society where even the faintest whiff of scandal threatened the respectability of the normative Irish family, the Magdalen asylum existed as a place to contain and/or punish the threatening embodiment of instability" (xvii). Activists, artists,

[1] The Celtic Tiger refers to a period of rapid economic growth in Ireland which occurred from 1993 to 2007. Despite being one of the poorest countries in the European Union at the beginning of the 1990s, due to a number of factors including direct foreign investments and an increased labor force, during the Celtic Tiger years Ireland's economy grew at record-breaking rates. I use the term "neoliberal" following sociologist Stephen J. Ball's definition in his discussion of the neoliberal shift in Irish education. He writes, "I will consider neoliberalism mainly with a lower-case *n* rather than a capital *N*. That is, rather than the economy and economic policy, I will discuss interpersonal relations, identity and subjectivity, how we value ourselves and value others, how we think about what we do, and why we do it" (1047).

[2] Mary Raftery's documentary series, *States of Fear*, which aired on the Irish television channel RTE between April and May of 1999, exposed numerous reports of physical and emotional abuse of Irish children carried out in state run Industrial and Reformatory schools between the 1930s and 1970s. Research by Irish historian Catherine Corless into the Saint Mary's Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Co. Galway revealed that between the years 1925 and 1961, 796 babies and children had died and were buried in a mass grave. Research and activism have inspired a series of governmental commissions which have published various reports. The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report) was published on May 20, 2009. The Commission was established in 2000 with the purpose of investigating the abuse of children in state-run institutions from 1936 to the time of investigation. The Report of the Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (The Murphy Report) was released on March 28, 2009. The Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation was established to report on Irish Church and State handling of allegations or complaints of child sexual abuse made against clergy of the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin in the years 1975-2004. The findings published in both reports revealed widespread abuse of children, women, and intellectually disabled individuals in church- and state-run institutions during the periods investigated (Swain and Sköld). *Ireland and The Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* (2021), edited by Claire McGettrick, Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke, James M. Smith and Mari Steed documents the experiences of individuals in Irish state-run institutions as well as the campaign for justice headed by Justice for Magdalenes Research. Literary scholars have also contributed to the discussion of the abuse women and children in Irish institutions. See: Backus, Margot Gayle and Joseph Valente. *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable*. Indiana UP, 2021.

and scholars have made connections between the legacy of Ireland's institutional containment of women's bodies and the country's asylum process known as Direct Provision. Vukašin Nedeljkvic, who was housed in a Direct Provision center in Ireland from April 2007 to November 2009, notes, "In historical terms, the scheme continues Ireland's shameful tradition of confinement, whether through borstals, laundries, prisons, mother and baby homes, or lunatic asylums" (289). Ronit Lentin also links the Irish state's treatment of individuals seeking asylum with the country's "breathtaking history of incarceration" (24). Lentin contends, "The high rates of incarceration produced habits of collusion, evasion and adaptation" in Irish culture (25). The enduring nexus of institutional containment of women, immigrants, people of color, and others in marginalized communities, points to modern Ireland's deeply embedded containment culture.

The Secret Place reveals how Ireland's containment culture seeps into aspects of Irish life which, to most, may seem to be at a comfortable remove from the state's egregious treatment of women, immigrants, people of color, and queer individuals. However, Descriptions of St. Kilda's and the actions of the school's headmistress, McKenna, echo Ireland's containment culture and underscore a cultural impulse to contain as well as surveil teenage girls and their emotions. The eponymous Secret Place, where Holly Mackey finds the card that initially reopens the investigation into Chris Harper's murder, is a bulletin board set up outside of the art room where, as Holly tells Detective Moran, "If you've got a secret, like if you hate your parents or you like a guy or whatever, you can put it on a card and stick it up there" (9). When asked by Detectives Conway and Moran about the Secret Place, McKenna explains: "The students pin cards on it, using images and captions to convey their messages anonymously—many of the cards are very creative. It gives the students a place to express emotions that they don't feel comfortable expressing elsewhere" (60). While the school official frames the Secret Place as a creative outlet

meant for students' healthy expression and the anonymous airing of grievances, it becomes clear that the message board is a tool through which the school attempts to maintain its prestigious image. The Secret Place, McKenna admits, was installed after a group of students created a website on which anonymous messages could be posted. McKenna explains, "We have one student whose father took his own life a few years ago. The site was brought to our attention by her mother. Someone had posted a photo of the girl in question, with the caption 'If my daughter was this ugly I'd kill myself too.'" (60). In McKenna's eyes, "girls need a safety valve" and the Secret Place is meant to fulfill that purpose (60).

Though the initial motivation for the Secret Place may have been a protective measure against the more menacing potential of teenage girls to harm each other with their words, McKenna's immediate response to the news of Chris' murder suggests that the bulletin board serves another purpose: to mediate student emotions and maintain the school's good reputation. Before Moran meets McKenna, Conway briefs him by recalling her and her partner's (Costello) initial meeting with the headmistress at the beginning of the investigation a year earlier:

> McKenna. She's a cow. First thing she asked me and Costello, when we got on the scene? Could we stop the media naming the school. Do you believe that? Fuck the dead kid, fuck gathering info to catch whoever did it: all she cared about was that this made her school look bad. (57)

McKenna's desire to keep St. Kilda's "marketable" sits in line with what sociologist Stephen J. Ball sees as a neoliberal shift in Irish educational policy. Ball suggests that the Irish education system's use of neoliberal technologies such as privatization and management "shift the meaning of education from a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity" (1049). In order to continue to attract students from wealthy families, St. Kilda's must maintain an image of a

school that the most successful and poised students attend. Early in the novel, Conway notes the danger in this ethos: "Kid's lying out here, bashed to death, and she's telling me their whole world's made of frappuccinos and cello lessons and no one here ever has bad thoughts…If the headmistress says everything's perfect, and no one's allowed to say it's not . . . That's not good" (40).

Chris Harper's murder shakes the foundation of the manicured grounds and pristine reputation of St. Kilda's. When, after the murder, a handful of Kilda's students begin seeing Chris's ghost in different parts of the campus, McKenna and school officials write these accounts off as teenage hysteria. McKenna tells Conway and Moran:

> We could, of course, have forbidden any mention of Christopher Harper. And the 'ghost' would have reappeared every few days, possibly for months. Instead, we arranged group counseling sessions for all the girls, with emphasis on grief management techniques. And we set up a photograph of Christopher Harper on a small table outside the assembly hall, where students could say a prayer or leave a flower or card. Where they could express their grief in an appropriate, controlled fashion. (60)

McKenna's language echoes the "neoliberal technologies" in recent Irish education reform such as an emphasis on management and privatization (Ball 1049). The quick dismissal of the students' experiences in response to this trauma and the attempts to *control* rather than *validate* students' responses to the disturbing event reflect the schools' embeddedness in Ireland's containment culture.

French's focus on Irish teenage girls in *The Secret Place* exemplifies recent critical discussions on Irish girlhood and teenagers. Susan Cahill has considered the precarious cultural position of the Irish teenage girl in the post-Celtic Tiger recessionary period. She finds, "In many

despairing critiques of Ireland's economic boom and its failures, young women and girls are made to carry the burden of the excesses of the Tiger, encouraged to consume yet simultaneously pilloried for their excessive consumption" ("A Girl" 54). Cahill's research on Cork-born, nineteenth-century writer LT Meade, whose stories featured and were marketed to Irish girls, has been critically neglected and remains largely absent in Irish literary culture. Cahill argues "This invisibility is symptomatic of a more general representative elision of girlhood in Irish culture" ("Where are the Irish Girls" 21). In giving teenage girl characters the spotlight in *The Secret Place*, French actively writes against this elision. Further, while recent cultural texts that feature teenagers such Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), Louise O'Neill's young adult novels including *Only Every Yours* (2014) and *Asking For It* (2015), and Lisa McGee's popular television show, *Derry Girls* (2018-2022) inscribe dynamic female Irish teenagers into the cultural imaginary, Cahill notes that more often than not, these teenage girl protagonists are often "punished" or framed through traumatic events. In her reading of McBride's novel in particular, Cahill suggests "The particularities of the recessionary climate render girls visible in intense and immersive ways, and a novel like McBride's forces us to confront and inhabit the embodied experience of the teenage girl and makes explicit the problematics of representation attendant to these experiences. In other words, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* alerts us to the ways in which Irish literature refuses to see or hear the teenage girl" ("A Girl" 161). I argue that *The Secret Place* does the same.

In her brief discussion of the novel, Shirley Peterson suggests that French characterizes the teenage protagonists as naïve and unaware of the insularity of the St. Kilda's "bubble," and in turn, ignorant of the real world (French 312). Peterson suggests, "Their remoteness from the economic crisis of the outside world fosters their solipsistic narcissism and homesickness. The

class divide between the privileged students and the working-class detectives … contributes to their detachment" (116). While the class division between the detectives and the St. Kilda's students is indeed a theme in the novel, Peterson's assessment of the teenagers runs the risk of dismissing these characters' complexity.

Though reviewers of the novel as well as its adult characters question the awareness of the teenage main characters, French repeatedly frames her teenage protagonists as astute observers of the school's motivations to contain and control them. In one scene in which Conway and Moran interview Holly as a potential witness to the murder, Holly exclaims:

> Everyone thinks girls blab everything, yap yap yap, like idiots. That's total crap. Girls keep secrets. Guys are the ones who can't keep their mouths shut. There's a lot of girls blabbing on the Secret Place. Yeah, and if it wasn't there, they wouldn't blab. That's what it's for: to get us spilling our guts. (136)

These mechanisms of surveillance initiated by the school to contain girls' emotions and manage the school's reputation are seen as exactly that by St. Kilda's students. In her appearance in French's third novel, *Faithful Place* (2010), Holly serves as a key witness in solving the murder at the center of the narrative and consequently, in *The Secret Place* French characterizes her as particularly knowing and aware of the ways of the adult world outside of St. Kilda's grounds. When her friends express concern over their upcoming exams, Holly exclaims:

> That's what the Junior Cert's for … To make us so scared that we'll behave. That's why it's this year, right when everyone starts going out and doing stuff. All that blahblah about how if you don't get all As you'll be working in Burger King for the rest of your life? The idea is, we'll be so petrified we won't do anything like have boyfriends or go to

> discos or for example get out at night, in case it distracts us and oh noooo! Whopper with fries please! (392)

Holly's interpretation of the school's emphasis on exams signals her awareness of the neoliberal forces that undergird the school's structure and ideology. In contrast to Celtic Tiger critiques of Irish teenage girls, *The Secret Place* fits more closely in line with recent recession-era characterizations of young Irish women, which "see a shift from the Tiger shaming and blaming of the girl as too closely tied to the commodity to a more feminist critique of the commodification of girlhood" (Cahill, "A Girl" 155).

While some of French's teenage characters are more aware of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland's pressing issues than others, these characters are far from naïve. French counters a narrative of cultural dismissal of Irish teenagers and instead frames the girls as powerfully cunning. Conway, once a teenage girl herself, reminds Moran, "Girls are smart: if they want to start trouble, they'll find ways that adults can't spot" (69). One of the ways that Holly and her three best friends—Julia, Becca, and Selena—"start trouble" serves as the inciting action of the novel: They begin to sneak out of St. Kilda's at night to spend time in a hidden glade on the school's vast grounds, another secret place to which the novel's title alludes. Conway's description of the layout of the school recalls Ireland's architecture of containment:

> The other wing, that's the boarders. Locked down tight as a nun's gee at night; the girls don't have keys. Bars on the ground-floor windows. Door at the back there, but it's alarmed at night. Connecting door to the school on the ground floor, and that's where it gets interesting. The school windows don't have bars. And they're not alarmed. (37)

Importantly, unlike the thousands of individuals that the Catholic Church and Irish State has contained in its institutions, St. Kilda's structures of containment are ultimately a shoddy façade.

Holly and her friends can, with a bit of coordination, escape into the dark of the night. When they do sneak out for the first time, the glade is "waiting" for them (155). French writes, "They're spun out of themselves, spun to silver dust flying, they're nothing but a rising arm or a curve of cheek in and out of ragged white bars of light. They dance till they collapse" (156). For Holly and her friends, the glade is a liberatory space free of the cultural structures and forces meant to contain young women: "This has nothing to do with what anyone else in all the world would approve or forbid. This is all their own." (156)

The glade is outside of the physical structure of St. Kilda's, yet, notably, it is still on the school's grounds. Though accessing the glade offers Holly and her friends the highly desirable space to connect with each other and be themselves outside of the closely monitored school, they still must function within these institutional bounds. The novel's themes of interiority and exteriority, private and public, invoke on the one hand a desire for the preservation of innocence on the girls' part; on the other hand, however, these themes invoke economic conversations about the privatization of public goods and services tantamount to neoliberal market forces in which children of the Celtic Tiger, coming of age in an Ireland marked with austerity measures must function.[3]

Entering the glade catalyzes a mysterious new ability in the girls that allows them to manipulate energies of the things around them with their minds. The power is startling to the

[3] After a massive downturn of the Celtic Tiger economy in Ireland in 2008, the country introduced "A programme of fiscal consolidation to address the fiscal crisis of the state and it coincided with a series of reforms to reorganize and recapitalize the banking sector" (Roche, Prothero, O'Connell). Contributors to debates around Irish austerity measures in texts such as *Austerity & Recovery in Ireland: Europe's Poster Child and The Great Recession* (2016) edited by William K. Roche, Philip J. O'Connell, and Andrea Prothero, and *Debating Austerity in Ireland* (2017) edited by Emma Heffernan, John McHale, and Niamh Moore-Cherry suggest "the costs of austerity for the Irish people were widespread and felt across all aspects of Irish life. These included both increased unemployment and emigration, as well as increased mental health problems for those who stayed. Culture, took a big hit, both in terms of funding cuts to the arts and in the numbers attending cultural events. There was also considerable deprivation and consistent poverty, with, for example, a quarter of the population lacking two or more necessities in 2012" (Roche, Prothero, O'Connell).

girls at first ("They don't have ways to talk about this"), however, eventually they begin to practice harnessing their new powers in the glade (185):

> Selena brings her little battery-powered reading light, Holly has a torch, Julia brings a lighter. The night is thick with clouds and cold; they have to grope their way down the paths to the grove, wincing each time a branch twangs or a clump of leaves crunches. Even when they come out into the clearing they're nothing but outlines, distorted and unreadable. They sit cross-legged in a circle on the grass and pass the lights around. It works. Uncertainly at first: just small tentative flickers, half a second long, vanishing when they startle. As they get better the flickers strengthen and leap, snatching their faces out of the dark like gold masks—a little wondering sound, between a laugh and a gasp, from someone—and then dropping them again. Gradually they stop being flickers at all; rays of light arrow up into the high cypresses, circle and flitter among the branches like fireflies. Becca would swear she sees their trails scribbled across the clouds. (187)

Though Holly and her friends can use their powers throughout St. Kilda's, the glade serves as the supernatural locus. Using their powers morphs the girls from "distorted, unreadable" "outlines" into more solid figures, lit up by the strength of their magical "rays of light." The glade, though mysterious and dark, is where French allows readers to see the girls as agential figures, manipulating and controlling the world around them.

By coupling the novel's setting in a hundreds-of-years-old "ancestral home" with a series of unexplained supernatural forces, French evokes characteristics associated with gothic fiction as she does in her other novels (French 35). Emily Johansen frames French's *Broken Harbor* (2012) as an example of a "neoliberal gothic" novel, a framework I find fitting through which to

consider *The Secret Place* as well. Reading *Broken Harbor* alongside Gillian Flynn's acclaimed crime-thriller *Gone Girl* (2012), Johansen writes:

> The iterations of the gothic novel that emerge under neoliberal rationalities, what I'm calling the neoliberal gothic, suggest that everyday life under neoliberalism might itself properly be understood as gothic, that the extremes and exaggerations associated with the gothic are not the exception but the rule. Thus it is not the typically gothic tropes in these novels … that seem most grotesque, but the way the demands of neoliberal entrepreneurial subject-formation cannot help but create either monsters or a sense of entropic decline, despite a rhetoric of continuous evolutionary improvement. (31)

French's teenage characters exhibit the haunting experience of Celtic Tiger children coming-of-age in a recessionary Ireland. For teenage girls of this generation, this experience is marked by competition and fear. When the girls ask Selena why she thinks they should begin sneaking out at night:

> She hears all the voices from when she was little, soothing, strengthening: *Don't be scared, not of monsters, not of witches, not of big dogs. And now, snapping loud from every direction: Be scared, you have to be scared, ordering like this is your one absolute duty. Be scared you're fat, be scared your boobs are too big and be scared they're too small. Be scared to walk on your own, specially anywhere quiet enough that you can hear yourself think. Be scared of wearing the wrong stuff, saying the wrong thing, having a stupid laugh, being uncool. Be scared of guys not fancying you; be scared of guys, they're animals, rabid, can't stop themselves. Be scared of girls, they're all vicious, they'll cut you down before you can cut them. Be scared of strangers. Be scared you won't do well enough in your exams, be scared of getting in trouble. Be scared terrified*

> *petrified that everything you are is every kind of wrong. Good girl.* (French 147, original emphasis)

For French's teenagers, simply existing is a gothic experience. As Johansen contends, "The neoliberal gothic gives voice to the growing sense that even if one does everything that one is supposed to do, the system is set up to make one fail or, at the least, to feel like a failure" (33). The main characters of the novel exhibit a desperation for freedom from competition and the desire for affective bonds fostered through care rather than capital. Their escapes to the glade, and the harnessing of their supernatural powers, offer Holly and her friends a space to push against the neoliberal containment culture that structures their lives and futures as adults in Ireland.

The gothic elements that shape the novel are directly linked to the teenage characters' power and agency. It is no surprise, then, that these two elements serve as the basis for critique from many of French's longtime readers. Ultimately, French symbolizes Harper's murder as an act of feminine solidarity gone wrong, placing the mystery of *The Secret Place* in line with what Johansen sees as the threat in *Gone Girl* and *Broken Harbor*: "Despite their deployment of tropes familiar from the Victorian gothic, the real threat … is more insidiously menacing and banal: the threat lies in the values and norms of neoliberalism. The very aspirations that are supposed to guide success for our characters are what turn them into monsters or destroy them" (41). Shortly before it is revealed that Holly's friend Becca murdered Chris, moved to kill by what she sees as his intrusion into the foursome's deep bond, "[Becca] spots a dropped scrap of paper on the carpet, launches it spinning like a moth around the light fixture to remind herself: she has power too" (French 432).

When Conway and Moran solve the case, Rebecca must spend the night in a "child detention school" (490), another nod by French to Ireland's history of institutional containment. Before Becca is taken to the facility by the social worker, McKenna reiterates the school's attempts to contain and manage the school's reputation, noting, "Every student and staff member in this school will be under the strictest instructions not to make any of today's events public knowledge. On or off the internet" (491). However, when Becca continues to process her situation aloud, the social worker explains, "'I can't *force* her to be quiet,' … 'I can't *gag* her. That's not my job' (492). The ending of French's novel offers a sad resolution, in which Holly, Selena, and Julia must resist their supernatural powers in order to conform to their lives as "normal" teenagers. Holly even realizes that "Someday she'll believe—one hundred percent believe, take for granted—that it was all their imagination" (499). In acting on her power in an extreme way—by killing Chris—Becca defies Irish containment culture in hopes of preserving her affective bonds. Becca's power, however, manifests in violence and prompts further containment within another Irish institution. *The Secret Place* makes a case for readers to take teenage girls seriously. French crafts smart, dynamic, and powerful girls navigating a world in which they are viewed as commodities to be managed rather than complex human beings. Like her characters who transgress the bounds of Ireland's neoliberal containment culture, French's writing cannot be classified by rigid literary genre conventions. Readers' recurring resistance to French's teenage girl characters signals an internalized complacency with containment culture. Perhaps, then, the most unsettling element of *The Secret Place* is neither teenage "witches" nor the horror of blended literary genres, but the persistent impulse to see a teenage girl as any kind of monster other than a whole human being (French 237).

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