



The Day Was the Same Day: Finality and Personhood in Anna Burns' *Milkman*



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BACKGROUND

- This project focuses on Northern Irish author Anna Burns' novel *Milkman*, a Booker and National Book Critics Circle Award Winning Novel focusing on a young woman living during a period of intense violence in Northern Ireland known as "the Troubles."
- The Troubles were a conflict that took place in Northern Ireland which pitted loyalist—mostly Protestant—militants who wanted to stay under English rule against—mostly Catholic—Irish republicans who wanted to unite with Ireland.
- The Troubles are generally agreed to have lasted from the late 1960s to 1998, the conflicts between loyalist and republicans, between Protestants and Catholics, and between Ireland and England have causes that stretch back centuries, and the issues that started the Troubles are still not resolved to this day.
- The novel itself focuses on the experiences this young woman, who goes by "middle sister," has with Milkman, a republican paramilitary leader, who spends the novel stalking her.

MOTIVATION

- This research hopes to use *Milkman* as an example of literature that challenges the normative timeline of the Troubles because, while the Good Friday Agreement ended the conflict in 1998, the tensions were not resolved
- *Milkman* questions the idea of finality of conflict both on the literary level of Middle Sister's relationship with Milkman, and on the historical level of the Troubles.

METHODS

- This research uses close readings of a number of quotes from *Milkman*. This poster will focus on three of those quotes. These three quotes will provide an outline of the style with which *Milkman* accomplishes its dissent against finality.

THE QUOTES

"The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died" (1).

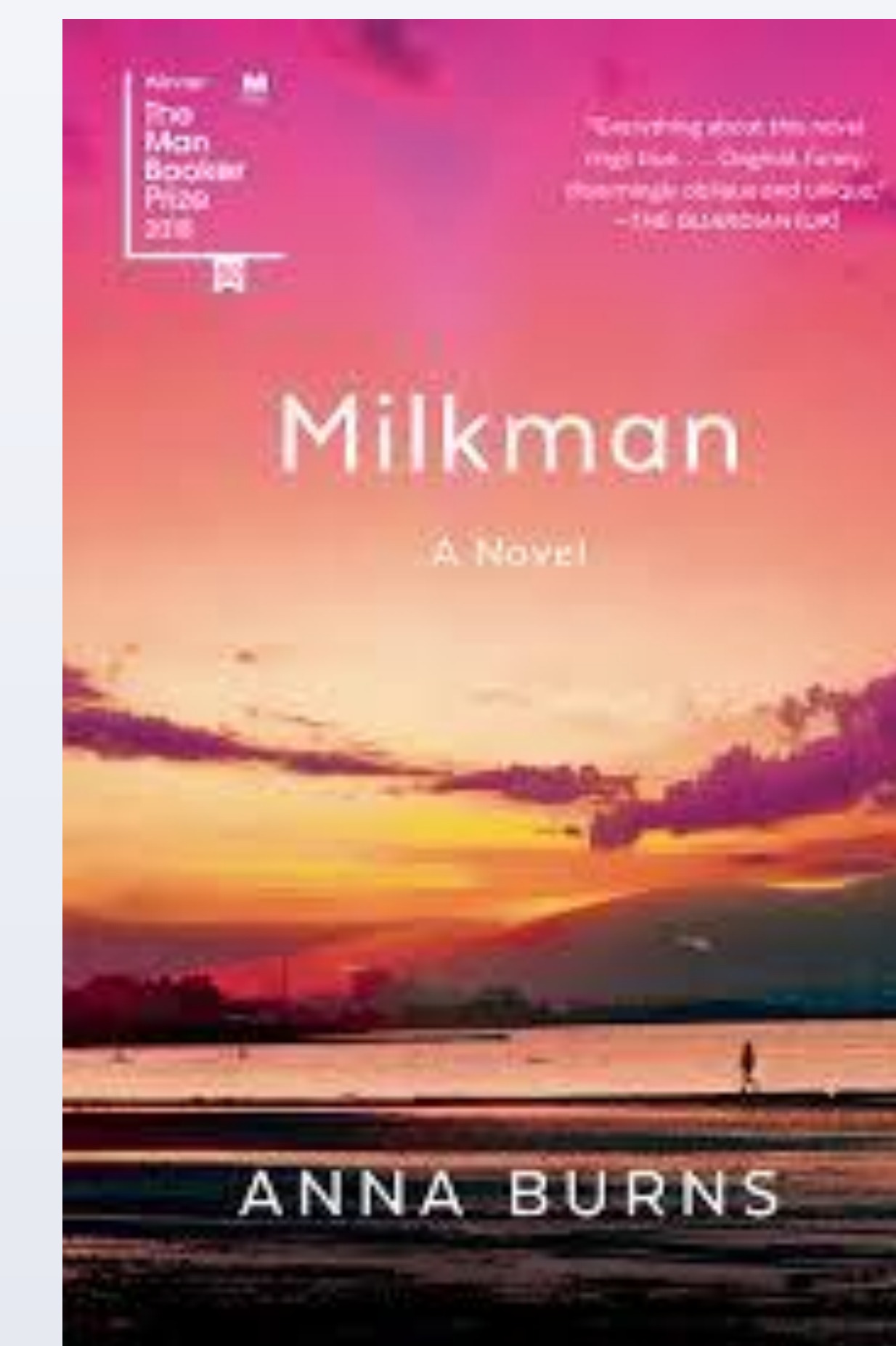
- Note: Middle Sister narrates the novel from the first-person point of view. This first sentence describes the end of the novel, in which Milkman is killed by a state hit squad.
- Somebody McSomebody: A younger man who, like Milkman, aggressively pursues Middle Sister during the book.
- When you shave the sentence down to the bare subject and predicate, it turns into "the day was the day." This form shows how nothing has changed structurally even though Milkman died. Furthermore, as "the day" is both the subject and object of the sentence, making it seem as if the action is done by the environment rather than the people in the environment.
- This grammar form shows how personal life is constantly subjugated under such a conflicted environment.

- Two independent clauses linked by a conjunction.
- First clause written in passive voice, so the focus of sentence is the object of the action, i.e., "He"; thus, state hit squads seems less like an active doer and more of a passive environment.
- Second clause, however, is the first in which a character occupies the subject with an active voice, i.e., the "I."
- The split structure of the sentence makes a comment on the society's gender hierarchy: Milkman, though he comes first, is the object of the sentence and thus given less agency than Middle Sister.
- This is further emphasized by her statement that she "did not care about the shooting of this man." She is trying to maintain independence in the world that she lives in while the world is doing everything to strip that from her.

"He (milkman) had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man" (1).

"And although wee sisters hadn't shown any inordinate interest in our political problems—not any more, that is, than their interest in phonological places of articulation, or Early Kingdom Egyptology, or the finer points of technical singing, or the state of the universe before it was reduced to order, or the Apotheosis of Heracles, or indeed any of their many indices and appendices and marginalia and small notes at backs of books and all the rest of it—there was a time a while back when me and the older sisters came in the door and found wee sisters reading the papers from 'over there'" (148).

- Wee sisters: Middle Sister's three extremely erudite younger sisters.
- In the sentence, the listing of their topics of study are grammatically contained within the em dashes that begin right after "political problems."; thus everything, even things that seem completely unrelated, is made political in this society.
- The wee sisters are too young to see the danger of their studying the newspapers from "over there."
- Their erudition also forms their character around the study of everything *but the self*. Furthermore, they have no individuality, and are always treated as a group
- They are symbolic of the youth of Ireland: they have potential to become well-rounded adults, but they have equal potential to become trapped in this conflicted environment that has caught so many others.



FUTURE WORK

- An analysis paper going into further depth about the topic of finality and the concept of "middleness" in *Milkman*. The paper will focus on the individual's relationship with society and how there is no true ending to personal or national identity production, rather a never-ending process of identity building.

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REFERENCES

- (1) Burns, Anna. *Milkman*. Graywolf Press, 2019.