Abstract

This chapter examines the portrayal of Ireland’s mother-and-baby homes in the generally well-received film *Philomena* and the account on which the film is based, the British journalist Martin Sixsmith’s portrayal of Philomena Lee’s life and search for her son, who had been given up to an American couple for adoption under coercive circumstances. Enforced adoptions have long been a part of Irish life that was silenced within official discourse, just as the women themselves were silenced under a blanket of shame and denial within a form of patriarchal nationalism. Cultural representations such as film and trauma biography will of course tend towards certain structures of storytelling that reveal in dramatic form the deep emotional wounds inflicted on the survivors, yet are often challenged by an official discourse as shallow and untrustworthy. This controversy draws attention to other conflicts and paradoxes that can operate when there are attempts to give a voice to the silenced or marginalized, yet such efforts have begun a process of forcing a re-evaluation of Ireland’s narratives of nationhood through the twentieth century.

In her inaugural address on December 3, 1990, Ireland’s first female president, Mary Robinson, called for an open and pluralistic definition of national identity:

I want Áras an Uachtaráin to be a place where people can tell diverse stories – in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen. I want this Presidency to promote the telling of stories – stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience
and of social justice. As a woman, I want women who have felt themselves outside history to be written back into history [...].

Robinson’s call for new stories has been interpreted as a call for the reimagining of Ireland’s foundational narratives, which until then had largely excluded stories about institutional mistreatment of women, children and other marginalized groups. Such stories began to appear in various Irish media during Robinson’s time as president and included the uncovering of abusive conditions in Church-run institutions for women – the so-called Magdalen laundries and mother-and-baby homes. The new openness advocated by Robinson was complicated, however, by the emergence of the Celtic Tiger, that is, the economic boom that Ireland experienced from about 1995 to the recession in 2008. Accounts of institutional abuse committed in the country’s recent past were unwelcome additions to the narratives by which a modern, economically prosperous Ireland was defining itself. In addition, historical accounts were limited by a lack of access to the Catholic Church’s records about the establishments that it once managed.

3 James M. Smith identifies three stories that caused a redefinition of the national narrative in the 1990s: the Kilkenny incest case in 1993, the 1994 television drama Family about domestic abuse and the 1996 television drama Dear Daughter about the abusive conditions in the country’s industrial schools in the 1950s and 1960s. James M. Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 87–8.
4 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment, 167.
5 Niall O’Sullivan, ‘Philomena Lee Seeks Release of 60,000 Adoption Records’, The Irish Post (24 January 2014, xvi). See, for example, the Ryan Report on the Goldenbridge Industrial School in Dublin, where ‘the Sisters of Mercy retained almost no records of complaints or allegations against the School, or even any reports of internal inspections or reviews’. Office of Minister for Children & Youth Affairs, Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009 Implementation Plan (Dublin:
The official silence that has surrounded Ireland’s institutions for women means that contemporary public knowledge about institutional abuse has been informed mainly by the media and by contemporary cultural representations. Such representations include drama, biography, documentaries, art installations, poetry and film. Several works have dealt with the story of the Magdalen laundries in depth; fewer have explored Ireland’s mother-and-baby homes. In 2009 international attention was drawn to the adoption policies of the homes through British journalist and former political advisor Martin Sixsmith’s biography *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee: A Mother, Her Son, and a Fifty-Year Search*, first published in the UK and later reissued as *Philomena*. Sixsmith’s biography became the basis for British director Stephen Frears’s film *Philomena* (2013), which was co-produced in the UK and the USA. Both works tell the real-life story of Philomena Lee, who in 1952 entered the mother-and-baby home at Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, Tipperary, where she gave birth to a son. According to biography and film, Lee remained in the convent for four years while working for her keep. During this stay, she was coerced by the congregation running the home into giving up her son Anthony for adoption by an American couple. Both representations tell the story of Lee’s search for Anthony fifty years later, but unlike the film the biography also deals with Anthony’s life in the USA and his search for his mother.

Cultural representations have the potential to change prevailing discourses by bringing silenced or neglected topics to the public’s attention. Specifically, cultural representations of the mother-and-baby homes and

Department of Health and Children, 2009), 8. See also the McAleese Report, which states that ‘there are some gaps in the data available regarding entries to the Magdalen Laundries’, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* (Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, July 2014), xii.


7 Martin Sixsmith. *Philomena* (London: Pan, 2013). Henceforth in this essay, the biography will be referred to by its shorter title.


Magdalen laundries can provide a voice to the women who suffered under and disappeared within the systems. In this way, the representations can inspire women who once resided in the institutions to make the transition from ‘passive victim to active survivor’ and they can relocate the problem from ‘the individual psyche to the social and political institutions that imposed a rigid national morality’ on the population. \(^\text{10}\) In addition, stories told from a temporal and geographical distance create positions from which to break the silence that has long surrounded the institutions. On the other hand, representations can also confirm the dominant discourse by sensationalizing, exploiting and eroticizing victims’ traumatic memories, and by scapegoating easily identifiable groups as culpable while ignoring the complicity of other social and political agents. \(^\text{11}\) In a similar manner, storytelling from a temporal and geographical distance risks simplifying or otherwise misrepresenting the past. Sixsmith’s and Frears’s respective stories demonstrate both tendencies.

Contested Discourses

The migration of Lee’s story from private memory to biography and film has resulted in distinct accounts that both challenge and confirm previous discourses on the mother-and-baby homes. The establishment of the first mother-and-baby homes in 1922 rested on a national narrative in which Irishwomen were defined strictly in domestic terms, as mothers and wives. \(^\text{12}\) The idealization of motherhood resulted in the criminalization of sexual relations outside marriage. To uphold a national image of Irish female purity, the state and the Church collaborated to restrict and render invisible

\(^{10}\) Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, xvii.

\(^{11}\) Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, xvii.

women who disobeyed or otherwise departed from social conventions.\textsuperscript{13} As a solution to the perceived problem of placing unmarried mothers in county workhouses for the poor, the state founded and subsidized separate homes for unmarried mothers.\textsuperscript{14} These mother-and-baby homes were mainly operated by Catholic Sisterhoods and were reserved for first-time mothers, so-called first offenders.\textsuperscript{15} Women who entered the homes could be detained for up to three years, during which time they were expected to perform unpaid domestic duties and care for their children after birth.\textsuperscript{16} By the 1970s, the homes were falling into disuse. In 2014, the media reported on a mass grave containing the remains of almost 800 infants on the grounds of a former mother-and-baby home in Tuam, Galway.\textsuperscript{17}

Previous discourses concerning the mother-and-baby homes have been challenged by the media and by various human rights groups, as well as by cultural representations.\textsuperscript{18} Three topics related specifically to adoptions

\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{13} Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 3.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 18, 52. Although the majority of homes were run by Catholic congregations, a Protestant home was set up in Dublin in 1921. The home closed in 1971. Patsy McGarry, ‘This Time, the Issue of Mother and Baby Homes Must Be Addressed’, The Irish Times (7 June 2014).
\item\textsuperscript{15} According to the Carrigan report, Smith writes, the mother-and-baby homes’ primary purpose was to separate unmarried mothers from ‘the decent poor and sick’ in the workhouses, on the one hand, and supposedly more ‘hardened prostitutes’ in the Magdalen laundries, on the other. Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment, 18. ‘Repeat offenders’, that is, mothers of more than one illegitimate child, were typically sent to Magdalen laundries rather than to mother-and-baby homes. Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment, 48.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 52.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Alison O’Reilly, ‘A Mass Grave of 800 Babies’, The Irish Mail on Sunday (25 May 2014). Similar graves were found on the grounds of other mother-and-baby homes in 2014. The same year, the Irish and international media reported that illegal vaccine trials were performed on children from the homes in the 1960s and 1970s, Report of the Inter-Departmental Group on Mother and Baby Homes, (Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, July 2014), 17.
\item\textsuperscript{18} For other cultural representations of the mother-and-baby homes, see, for example, June Goulding’s The Light in the Window (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1998).
\end{enumerate}
have come under scrutiny in the 2000s. The first deals with the adoption procedures in the homes. In 1939, a report by the Department of Local Government and Public Health suggested that children fared better if they were placed in foster homes than if they remained in the mother-and-baby homes.²⁹ By the 1930s, children were regularly boarded out, or transferred to the country’s industrial schools.²⁰ The Irish Adoption Act was established in 1952 and allowed children from the homes to be formally adopted. The Act required that the natural mother give her written consent to the adoption of a child under one year of age.²¹ In the 2000s, adoption rights groups have argued that women in the homes were systematically forced into giving their consent to adoptions. These groups have demanded the investigation of forced adoptions and births illegally recorded as belonging to someone other than the natural mother.²² Since the 1950s, allegations have also been made that the congregations which ran the homes were selling Irish children to adoptive parents abroad.²³ In 2013, the nuns who ran Sean Ross Abbey denied the claim that donations given from adoptive parents were de facto payments for children.²⁴

The second topic of contention concerns access to adoption records and other archival material relating to the homes. Unlike the Magdalen laundries, the mother-and-baby homes were officially sanctioned and financed by the state, and detailed records were kept of the women and children who resided there. Over the years, such records were collected by the various congregations that ran the homes, or reported by local state representatives, and when available reveal systematic mistreatment of the

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²⁹ Report of the Inter-Departmental Group on Mother and Baby Homes, 8.
²⁰ Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 52–3.
²¹ Report of the Inter-Departmental Group, 15–16. As a result, many children were kept in the homes until they had reached their first birthday.
²² Report of the Inter-Departmental Group, 15–16.
residents. Current Irish legislation restricts access to adoption records held by the Registrar General, that is, the central civil repository for records relating to births, deaths and marriages, under the pretext of safeguarding the adopted children’s right to privacy. According to the civil-rights group Adoption Rights Alliance, more than 60,000 files relating to adoptions of children from mother-and-baby homes are held by Ireland’s Health Services, private adoption agencies and representatives of the Catholic Church. After the discovery of the mass grave in Tuam, demands have been made that the Church makes its archival documents on the homes available to the general public. Representatives of the religious congregations that ran the mother-and-baby homes have denied withholding records about the homes.

The third topic under discussion is the extent to which previous Irish governments were aware of the conditions in the mother-and-baby homes and whether the state and the Church should take joint responsibility for what took place there. In the last two decades, the Catholic Church has experienced an unprecedented backlash in Ireland, partly due to exposed cases of paedophilia among the clergy and partly due to attempts by the Church to conceal such cases. Signs of deliberate disassociation between the state and the Church include Commissions assigned by the government to look into the conditions in institutions that were once managed by Catholic congregations. The discovery of the mass grave in Tuam in 2014 led the Irish government to establish a Commission of investigation into the mother-and-baby homes. Amnesty International, however, has urged the investigation to proceed with ‘greater integrity’ than

26 Report of the Inter-Departmental Group, 16.
27 O’Sullivan, ‘Philomena Lee Seeks Release of 60,000 Adoption Records’.
28 Conall Ó Fátharta, ‘Nuns Have No Details of Buried Children’, Irish Examiner (7 June 2014).
29 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 106.
previous Commissions initiated by the government.\textsuperscript{31} Early in the 2000s, a Commission was established to determine the state’s involvement in the Magdalen laundries. The result was published in the so-called MacAleese Report, which concludes that the state had only minor responsibility for sending women to the laundries.\textsuperscript{32} Together with earlier reports on abuse in the country’s Industrial and Reformatory Schools, the McAleese report was condemned by the United Nation’s Committee Against Torture for lacking ‘many elements of a prompt, independent and thorough investigation’ and for failing to ‘ensure prosecutions of persons responsible’ \textsuperscript{33} In addition, the Commission behind the report was criticized for relying too heavily on undisputed claims from local and religious institutions, and for dismissing first-hand evidence in the form of survivor testimony from women.\textsuperscript{34} Survivor testimony tends to pose particular challenges to historians. Their ambivalent attitude towards witness accounts stems from a common suspicion of memory as unreliable, or false, and a view of first-hand accounts as too subjective, or personal, in contrast to empirically and archive-based historiography.\textsuperscript{35} The first-hand evidence made available to the Commission behind the McAleese Report was dismissed precisely as ‘stories’ in the report’s Executive Summary and their influence on the

\textsuperscript{31} Amnesty International, ‘Ireland: “Mother and baby homes” investigation must be robust and comprehensive’, amnesty.org (19 June 2014).

\textsuperscript{32} Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries.


\textsuperscript{34} According to Simon McGarr, ‘only one member of the 10-strong committee, Martin McAleese, ever met with any women who worked in the Magdalene institutions […] It is unfortunate that the report’s authors chose not to include anything more of the women’s evidence when they had 800 pages of survivor testimony which they simply left out.’ McGarr, ‘The McAleese Report Leaves Questions Unanswered.’

The report was minimal. The lack of available archival records about the mother-and-baby homes support the notion that there is no history of the homes, any more than there is of the Magdalen laundries. The absence of historical records, however, simultaneously opens up for alternative stories about the homes, which can tell ‘a history Irish society prefers not to acknowledge’.

According to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, stories are important because they serve as reminders that it is ‘always possible to tell in another way’. Like cultural representations of the Magdalen laundries, stories about the mother-and-baby homes can ‘ensure that traces and archives of the past are preserved’ and maintain the ‘relationship between the present and the past’. Personal accounts about institutional abuse in the past can become part of the national heritage and help ‘to keep alive the memory of Irish women and their children who were marginalized, dismissed, and forgotten by an oppressive and exclusionary narrative of national identity’. In this respect, the stories about Philomena Lee serve an empowering function and encourage further action. By writing ‘women who have felt themselves outside history [...] back into history’ the biography and the film appear to answer Mary Robinson’s call back in 1990 for stories of ‘conscience or social justice’.

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36 Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts.
37 Smith argues that no history of the institutions ‘can exist until the religious congregations afford scholars [full] access to their archival records’. Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, xvi–ii.
38 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 89. Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy, 63.
39 Ricoeur quoted in Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 90.
40 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 90.
41 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 90–1.
Empowering Stories

In the early 2000s, the topic of Ireland’s mother-and-baby homes migrated in two respects. It moved from the media to biography and film. It also moved geographically from Ireland to being addressed internationally in and through two British-produced cultural representations. By telling their respective stories about Philomena Lee and her son, the creators of the biography and the film entered into and engendered critical discussions about the mother-and-baby homes nationally and internationally. In the prologue to the biography, Sixsmith describes how he was first told about Lee at a New Year’s party in London. He eventually agreed to help Lee look for her son Anthony and to write a story about the search.\(^{42}\) During the search, Sixsmith discovered that Anthony’s adopted name was Michael Anthony Hess and that he had been adopted by an American couple. Furthermore, he found that Hess had worked as chief legal counsel to the Republican National Committee in the 1980s and early 1990s, and that he had died of complications from AIDS in 1995.\(^{43}\) Spanning from 1952 to about 2009, the biography describes Lee’s early life in the mother-and-baby home, but her story takes up only about one fourth of the biography. The rest of the narrative deals with Hess’s life in the USA. In contrast, the film Philomena focuses primarily on the evolving dynamics between Sixsmith and Lee in their joint search for her son. In the film, Sixsmith is the leading character together with Lee and a great deal is made of the socio-economic differences between the Oxford-educated journalist and the working-class Irishwoman.

Although Sixsmith plays a less prominent role in the biography than in the film, in both representations his presence authenticates and authorizes the respective stories. Of the biography’s four parts, three end with a short chapter, each titled ‘London Present Day’, where Sixsmith reflects on the material evidence he gathered while looking for Lee’s son. Sixsmith’s use

\(^{42}\) Sixsmith, Philomena, 1–2.

\(^{43}\) Sixsmith, Philomena, 116, 305–6, 433.
of the first-person narrative perspective separates the short chapters from the rest of the biography, which is told by an omniscient narrator who accounts for the central characters’ thoughts and actions, and who fictionalizes many events of the past. Unlike the rest of the book, the short chapters make explicit Sixsmith’s role as storyteller and detective/researcher. As an outsider he is able to make connections between historical events that are not visible to the people involved. References to ‘photographs and documents: letters and diaries, interviews, old hotel bills, postcards and scribbled notes in fading handwriting; the poignant fragments of an unravelling mystery that has been with me since that first meeting in the New Year of 2004’ emphasize the plethora of material on which Sixsmith’s biography depends. Embedded among photographs and documents, Lee’s witness account is only one of many sources available to Sixsmith, thereby deflating any criticism against the truthfulness of survivor testimony.

The film Philomena claims to be merely ‘inspired by a true story’, yet as fiction it can still challenge and contradict prevailing discourses about the mother-and-baby homes. Fiction, according to Ricoeur ‘gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep’. In the film, the character Sixsmith is the person who sees and weeps. As such, he functions as a stand-in for the viewer. The film lacks an authoritative narrator equivalent to the biography’s first-person chapters and roughly equal screen time is given to both Lee and Sixsmith, suggesting that their perspectives are equally important. Early in the film, however, it becomes clear that of the two characters, Sixsmith is the primary focalizer. It is through his investigation into the injustices performed against Lee that viewers learn the full extent of her tragedy. He is the one who has to learn the truth about the past. The identification of Sixsmith as focalizer is further supported by his personal transformation. Used to writing about Russian history and current political events, the jaded journalist initially dismisses Lee’s

44 Sixsmith, Philomena, 91.
45 Ricoeur quoted in Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, 91.
story as a ‘sob story’ for ‘vulnerable, weak-minded, ignorant people’, but his cynicism and class-prejudice eventually turn into moral indignation on Lee’s behalf. She undergoes no similar transformation in the film, but remains a static character.

By authorizing Lee’s account, the film and the biography position themselves in a discourse on the adoption procedures in the mother-and-baby homes. The biography criticizes the adoption process from three perspectives. Initially, it focuses on the moment Lee is coerced into signing away the rights to her child in critical terms: ‘The proceedings had an air of inevitability about them, an ineluctable process that was grinding towards its dreadful conclusion. Philomena fell silent – she had spent a lifetime doing what the nuns told her to do and a lifetime of submission is not easy to overcome.’

The omniscient narrator’s use of adjectives, such as ‘ineluctable’ and the evaluative ‘dreadful’, stresses the injustice of the procedures. The story is also told from the perspective of the American couple who adopted Lee’s son, which highlights the abuse of power to which Lee was subjected. Readers are informed that the Hess family had strong connections with the Archbishop of Dublin, who facilitated the adoption.

A third perspective on the adoption procedures is offered by interspersed chapters about Joe Coram, a middle-ranking official in the Department of External Affairs. He was assigned to put a stop to unregulated adoptions of Irish children to foreign nationals in the 1950s. The inclusion of Coram’s perspective lifts Lee’s story to a national level where ‘she and her young son were the prizes in a battle between Church and state.’ In the process Coram becomes the biography’s unsung hero, even blackmailing the Archbishop to ensure the passing of the Adoption Act of 1952.

In the biography, the emotional impact of the separation between mother and child is made visible mainly through descriptions of the son’s life in the USA. Hess’s desire to succeed academically and professionally
is depicted as an effect of his excessive fear of abandonment. Unlike the biography, the film does not portray Hess’s life other than through blurry home videos. Instead it centres on present-day Lee’s suffering from depression and guilt. The pain caused by the adoption is underscored by flashback scenes to the home, which show the close relationship between Lee and her son, and the traumatic separation that ensued. Later in the film, Lee returns to the home together with Sixsmith and looks out of the same window and barred door from which she saw her son being taken away thirty years earlier. By establishing a visual link between the past and the present, the film stresses the longevity of the trauma from which Lee suffers.

In the film, the first visit to the Abbey sparks Sixsmith’s professional interest in Lee’s story. Moreover, it allows the film to take a stand regarding the monetary donations to the Church from adoptive parents. In the former home, Sixsmith notices a signed photograph of Jane Russell on the wall. When he asks one of the residing nuns about the photograph, she ignores the question. A local publican in town later tells Sixsmith that Russell ‘bought a baby from Derry in 1952’ and that Americans ‘were the only ones who could afford them’. The revelation triggers Sixsmith’s journalistic interest and offers a clue about where to look for Lee’s son. Moreover, the nun’s evasive answer now seems like an admission of guilt. That the Catholic congregations which ran the mother-and-baby homes sold children for profit is similarly argued in the biography. In a chapter devoted to Coram’s work, the Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, criticizes the Church for making a profit from the mother-and-baby homes. Basing his criticism on information provided by Coram, readers are encouraged to sympathize with Aiken’s viewpoint. In this respect the biography indirectly supports critics who accuse the Church of organizing adoptions for profit.

52 In the film, Sean Ross Abbey is never mentioned by name. Instead, the place where Lee was once a resident is referred to by the town’s name, Roscrea.
As well as condemning the monetary donations, film and biography disapprove of the Church for withholding adoption records, siding instead with adoption rights groups, who struggle to ensure mothers’ and children’s access to said records. In the biography, Sixsmith traces the adoption records from Sean Ross Abbey to a centralized office at a convent in Cork, run by the Sacred Heart Adoption Society.56 Readers are informed that access to the document is restricted.57 That Sixsmith is at all able to locate Lee’s son is attributed to photographs of the churchyard at Sean Ross Abbey. While perusing the photographs, Sixsmith discovers the gravestone of a Michael A. Hess, who was born on the same day as Lee’s son.58 Through inquiries in the USA he finds out that Hess repeatedly visited Sean Ross Abbey in search of his mother and wished to be buried there. The emotional cruelty of the nuns’ silence is brought home in the biography by accounts of Hess’s despair at not knowing whether his mother chose to abandon him, or was forced to give him up for adoption.

Events are told differently in the film and the biography. In both representations, however, the nuns are described as withholding important facts from mother and son. Neither is told of their respective visits to the Abbey or of each other’s search. In the film’s portrayal of Lee and Sixsmith’s first visit to the former home, the nuns claim that all their records have been lost ‘in the fire’.59 Later, Sixsmith finds out that no such fire ever happened. Instead, he is told that the nuns burnt all the records regarding the adoptions. The moral injustice of the nuns’ behaviour is emphasized through an accusatory speech that Sixsmith makes towards the end of the film, when he and Lee make a return visit to the Abbey. At this point, Sixsmith has become emotionally invested in Lee’s story and is especially incensed by the silence of Sister Hildegarde, the only nun who remains from the time when Lee was a resident. When he confronts the elderly nun and is told that his behaviour is disgusting, Sixsmith replies,

56 Sixsmith, Philomena, 442.
57 Sixsmith, Philomena, 443.
58 Sixsmith, Philomena, 445.
59 Frears, Philomena.
‘I tell you what’s disgusting, it’s lying to a dying man. You could have given him a few precious moments with his mother before he passed away but you chose not to.’\textsuperscript{60} Sister Hildegarde, however, expresses no regret. The scene ends with Lee entering the room and telling the nun that she is forgiven. Refusing to be defined solely as a victim, she reminds Sixsmith that ‘it happened to me. Not to you.’\textsuperscript{61} Her forgiveness of Sister Hildegarde provides Lee with an agency of which Sixsmith’s speech paradoxically threatens to deprive her. At the same time, Sixsmith’s status as outsider allows for viewer identification by giving voice to the moral outrage that the story is clearly meant to produce.

The question of responsibility is similarly addressed in Sixsmith’s biography. The chapters dealing with Joe Coram’s attempt to stop the stream of foreign adoptions highlight the new Irish state’s reliance on support from the Catholic Church. According to the biography, the head of government, Eamon de Valera, had ‘fallen under the [Archbishop of Dublin’s] spell’ and ‘in return the [Catholic] hierarchy had supported de Valera through thick and thin.’\textsuperscript{62} Earlier, the omniscient narrator argues that the illegal adoptions were a solution that suited everyone, as ‘every child sent to America is a donation more for the Church and a problem less for the state,’ which ‘was ill equipped to deal with the nation’s illegitimate children.’\textsuperscript{63} Co-operation between the state and the Church suggests underlying patriarchal structures in Irish society, which allowed for the incarceration of unmarried mothers and their children. That these structures existed also on family and community levels is never addressed in the biography, but is visible on a plot level. When Lee becomes pregnant, she is abandoned by her father. After her stay at Sean Ross Abbey, Lee moves to the UK. When she returns to Ireland a few years later, she is harassed by Irish customs officers, who feel justified in singling her out because she is a woman travelling alone and they suspect she has been in

\textsuperscript{60} Frears, \textit{Philomena}.
\textsuperscript{61} Frears, \textit{Philomena}.
\textsuperscript{63} Sixsmith, \textit{Philomena}, 30.
the UK to have an illegal abortion. Unlike the biography, Frears’s film does not offer any examples of the Irish state’s complicity in the adoptions at the Abbey and similar mother-and-baby homes. Instead, all blame is assigned to the Church. Brought up in a convent school, Lee explains to Sixsmith that no one ever taught her how children were made. The film’s only voice-over belongs to Lee, when introducing the flashback scenes of her time in the Abbey. She informs both Sixsmith and the viewers that ‘my father just left me with the nuns. He was so ashamed.’ This statement suggests the patriarchal structures determining Irish society, as well as the Church’s complicity in upholding them.

Bringing the victim’s perspective into the realm of discourse about the mother-and-baby homes can lead to social transformation and the empowerment of victims by speaking on their behalf. As the example from the film shows, however, speaking out on other people’s behalf also means running the risk of inscribing those others into ‘hegemonic structures’ and of producing ‘docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves to [...] authoritative experts’ (260). When Sixsmith takes it upon himself to tell Lee’s story and act as her mouthpiece, he risks reestablishing her as a passive victim. Telling stories with a sexual content similarly means running the risk of sensationalizing the main characters and exploiting their experiences. Finally, and to use James M. Smith’s words, ‘compartamentalizing responsibility for the past’ by blaming only the religious congregations means ignoring the larger social structures that abused two groups of women: the nuns, as well as the incarcerated women in the Magdalen laundries and the mother-and-baby homes.

64 Sixsmith, *Philomena*, 435.
65 Frears, *Philomena*.
67 Alcoff, ‘Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?’, 260.
68 Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 93, 150.
Disempowering Stories

That the story about a working-class Irishwoman’s personal experiences is told by a middle-class Englishman with ties to the British government is not problematized in either representation. To highlight Sixsmith’s nationality is to undermine his authorizing presence in the two representations, but, at the same time, his presence risks reducing Lee to a passive victim. Although Sixsmith and the film-makers are careful to avoid any mention of the two countries’ historical ties, the main characters’ unequal socio-economic positions and the portrayal of an Irish past characterized by sexual abuse and Catholic hypocrisy nevertheless bring to mind highly prejudiced descriptions of the Irish once common in the British press.69

The sexual dimension of Philomena’s experiences results in similarly questionable narratives. According to Carolyn G. Heilbrun, women’s lives have had a particularly vulnerable relation to the culture’s notion of plausibility.70 ‘Biographies of women, if they have been written at all, she argues, ‘have been written under the constraints of acceptable discussion’.71 Today, acceptable discussions include stories about women who have been victims of sexual abuse. Such stories risk being sensationalized or exploited for shock value, which can obscure their social criticism.72 In the biography, readers are told that Sister Hildegarde demanded that women admitted into the home must explain how they became pregnant: ‘She listened to the farmer’s daughter whose father had always slept in the same bed with her, and to the schoolgirl who had been raped by three cousins at a wedding.’73 Sixsmith’s inclusion of the nun’s demand underscores the sexual politics of Irish society in the 1950s. At the same time, the account serves a titillating function by associating the image of nuns with illicit sexual practices.

71 Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life, 30.
72 Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, xvii.
73 Sixsmith, Philomena, 14.
Women are not the only group whose sexual experiences are sensationalized in the biography. In his account of Hess’s life in the USA, Sixsmith juxtaposes Hess’s republican affiliations and his homosexual and sadomasochistic sexual practices. When Sixsmith lets Hess express ambivalence towards sadomasochistic sexual acts, he simultaneously highlights the adoption’s emotional effects: ‘There’s a side to me that I can’t control. It’s bad and wrong and it’s self-destructive. I know it will spoil everything in my life [...] but it’s always there and it’s always beckoning, always whispering: “You are unworthy of this happiness, therefore you must destroy it.”’

According to the biography, Hess’s sadomasochistic preferences threatened to destroy the relationship with his long-time partner, Mark. By establishing a link between Hess’s sexual preferences and a trauma resulting from the adoption, however, Sixsmith not only explains but pathologizes Hess’s desire for sadomasochistic sex.

As noted by, among others, film critic Peter Bradshaw, the story of Philomena Lee packs a ‘sledgehammer emotional punch’, which links it to what is sometimes called ‘misery literature’. In the 2000s, bestseller lists began to include examples of misery literature, that is, stories in which the author tells of his or her triumph over a personal trauma. Some critics have explained the genre’s popularity by reference to its appeal to readers’ prurience and voyeuristic desires, while others point to its ability to generate moral outrage and titillation. Such emotional appeals are not limited to the film and the biography about Lee. The headline to an article by Sixsmith in *The Daily Mail* seems aimed at affecting readers emotionally as well as morally: ‘How I Helped Philomena Track Down her Son Sold by Cruel Nuns: It’s the Film about a Toddler Torn from his Mother that is Reducing Grown Men to Tears…but the Real Story Will Haunt You

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Forever’. The headline’s reliance on clichés and common prejudices is clearly meant to evoke moral outrage and strong emotional reactions from readers. In contrast, Frears’s film at first appears to poke fun at misery literature’s conventions and stereotypical plotlines, as in the following dialogue between the character Sixsmith and his editor:

[Editor:] Who are the goodies? Who are the baddies?
[Sixsmith:] Well, it’s about a little old Irish lady, a retired nurse, who is searching for her long lost son who was taken – snatched from her at birth – by evil nuns.
[Editor:] So how does it end? And it’s got to be really happy or really sad.
[Sixsmith:] Either he’s chairman of IBM or a hobo, it doesn’t matter. The years melted away as a 50-year silence was broken by two simple words, “Hello, Mum.” I could write it now.
[Editor:] I didn’t know you were so cynical.

The dialogue functions as a meta-narrative moment in the film, at the same time as it highlights Sixsmith’s cynicism. When the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that the film follows the suggested outline almost to the letter. In other words, the film’s meta-narrative moments do not so much ask viewers to be wary of misery literature’s stereotypical narrative strategies as ask viewers to accept the film’s storyline as genuine, as the film traces Sixsmith’s diminishing cynicism and gradual emotional investment in Lee’s search.

Misery literature’s strategies include a tendency to define its main characters in strict Manichean terms, as either victims or perpetrators. The clearest sign of what Smith calls ‘compartamentalizing responsibility for the past’ is the two stories’ portrayals of the nuns at Sean Ross Abbey. In both accounts, most of the nuns come across as cruel and hypocritical. By

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77 Martin Sixsmith, ‘How I Helped Philomena Track Down Her Son Sold by Cruel Nuns: It’s the Film about a Toddler Torn from His Mother That Is Reducing Grown Men to Tears ... but the Real Story Will Haunt You Forever’, *The Daily Mail* (9 November 2013).
78 Frears, *Philomena*.
79 O’Neill, ‘Misery Lit ... Read On’.
80 Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 103.
blaming the nuns, any critical dialogue between the present and the past is effectively cut off in film and biography. In an increasingly secular and international Irish society, as suggested by Smith, nuns who once ran the institutions for women have come to symbolize a past effectively separated from contemporary Irish society, yet these nuns, too, can be understood as victims of a traditionally patriarchal and exploitative church-state hegemony with implications in the present.\(^81\)

What the present implications of any existing state-Church hegemony are is not made clear in the two representations of Ireland’s mother-and-baby homes discussed in this essay. According to Patsy McGarry, ‘even the story of Philomena Lee […] did not stir the national conscience to action’ regarding the homes. One reason might be the biography and the film’s sensationalizing of Lee’s story. Another reason could be that the Irish state is still not ready to accept culpability for its part in the thousands of adoptions that took place in the homes. An additional reason yet might be related to the public’s confusion between Magdalen laundries and mother-and-baby homes. In his biography, Sixsmith makes no distinction between the institutions. When explaining the difficulty of gaining access to adoption records, he refers to ‘the Church’s […] belief in the unabsolvable guilt of the Magdalenes [sic]’.\(^82\) The film, too, refers to ‘Magdalen girls’ rather than mother-and-baby home residents. Recent compensation schemes aimed at women who once resided in the Magdalen laundries may inadvertently suggest to people both in and outside Ireland that the history of the mother-and-baby homes has already been investigated. Unlike women who resided in Magdalen laundries, however, women who stayed in mother-and-baby homes are not entitled to any compensation from the state.\(^83\)

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\(^{81}\) Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 108.

\(^{82}\) Sixsmith, *Philomena*, 91.

Conclusion

Cultural representations of the mother-and-baby homes promise to fulfil former President Robinson’s wish for new Irish stories. The film and the biography about Philomena Lee and her son are taking a stand in debates about the homes and their adoption practices. In the process, they are reimagining Ireland’s foundational narratives. In both representations, Sixsmith’s presence authorizes and authenticates Lee’s story, while the geographical and temporal distances established in the two stories serve an emancipatory function. Both stories portray Lee more as an active survivor than a passive victim. Less successful are the stories in relocating the trauma associated with the homes from the individual psyche to the larger social and political sphere. This is due mainly to the sensationalist nature of the stories and the tendency to demonize the nuns in the religious congregations that ran the Abbey where Lee gave birth, rather than exploring in depth the underlying patriarchal structures that allowed the homes to come into existence in the first place. It is significant, perhaps, that neither account deals with the father of Lee’s baby. The 2014 Commission assigned to look into the conditions and high-infant mortality rates in the mother-and-baby homes might provide new insights into the homes’ adoption practices, which could lead to changes in how the state and Church deal with parents’ and children’s access to adoption records. In the meantime, the stories of Lee are added to cultural representations that seek to replace or enrich Ireland’s national narrative.