# Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*: Expressing truths in the silence between the words

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Abstract

According to Stanley Kubrick, "[i]f it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed". This is true for award-winning Irish short story writer Claire Keegan (1968) whose sparse and effective prose has hit the core of audiences struggling to process the lingering impact of national trauma. Keegan confronts it all head-on, highlighting social issues that loom large in evocative narratives where thoughts, situations and scenarios spill over into the space between the words. What is left unsaid says it all. The silence that reigns in a space of 'NON-sayability' in Keegan's stories is anything but opaque. In *Small Things Like These* she navigates treacherous territories in a dark Christmas tale about the widespread and notorious Magdalene Laundry apparatus that keeps weighing heavily on our collective conscience. How can we remain passive in the face of wrongdoings and how does Keegan unlock the past and urge us to scrutinise history?

**Keywords:** Claire Keegan; Ireland; abuse; silence; unspoken truths.



## Introduction: a note on style

How do we express the unsayable, giving quiet voice – one that is powerful and becomes a resounding statement of an unbearable truth – to that which was once unspeakable, hushed up, and preferably relegated to the corners of historical and collective oblivion? A dilemma, in her short stories that speak louder than words Keegan delivers a message that says it all and yet not; at least not at first sight. Rather than going into excessive detail, she hints at a space between lines and sentences where we are urged to reflect further and probe deeper. In that liminal space of suggested transitions, what the reader "thought was true is actually true".[1] And overall,

Keegan's written thought steps out and away from the page as we run with our imagination and expand on a narrative that opens for wider debate.

In her carefully crafted literature Keegan ventures into murky territories and reveals truths that are recalled and brought back to our attention; the past leaving a long shadow and colliding with the present. She explores this larger truth with a vengeance. Yet the power of her writing resides in her sparse and economic use of precise words that describe, highlight and pinpoint. Killing any potential darlings, Keegan harnesses the power of brevity.[2] Neither too prescriptive nor overbearing, she never becomes over-explicit, nor does she resort to over explanations. Instead, she gives credibility to a reader who is left to consider the larger impact of her words. Intelligent and succinct, her journalistic, hardboiled style that tends towards a Joycean stream of consciousness is one where we are invited into the bigger picture, allowed to add to the sentences and use our own informed judgment, connecting the dots and reaching our own conclusions.

Known for "stories and novels that can be small and tight yet packed with light, as well as ominous darkness",[3] Keegan has an uncanny ability to strike at the core and take us by quiet storm. As we are ultimately taken on a journey into our own mind, we learn about larger issues affecting Ireland socially, culturally and in terms of how it relates to the outside world. Keegan boldly lays bare truths that we must strive not to repeat. In *Small Things Like These*, "the shortest book to have been longlisted for the Booker in its entire history",[4] historical injustices are surreptitiously called into attention, yet the subtlety of the writing lies in punch lines that we did not always see coming. Keegan says it all in no time at all and prefers to use her imagination rather than rely heavily on research. "Language", she says,

is older and richer than we are and when you go in there and let go and listen, it's possible to discover something way beyond and richer than your conscious self. It seems to me that when we fail, it's because our imagination fails us. I believe this to be true of both life and literature.[5]

This statement fit for a writer whose books have been translated into more than 30 languages and whose imagination goes a long way. In Keegan's case, less is better, but in that brevity, she speaks volumes.

*Small Things Like These* (2020)

Set in 1985 in an Ireland of damp wintry darkness and institutional rigidity, while Keegan's book sheds light on a trauma lasting until the closing down of the last Irish Magdalene laundry in 1996, in parallel the story is also a cross between a dark yet tentatively hopeful tale about the power of one, a "powerful historical fiction novel",[6] and "a short atmospheric book that explores moral dilemma amidst complacency of the majority, and what it means to hold on to your values".[7] This

complete narrative of a mere 110 pages where the story is framed within a specific period has a timeless quality to it. Keegan explains that:

… it could not have been set after the Ferns Report was published, as the Catholic Church had by that time lost much of its power and was collapsing. I didn't want to set it in a time before motor vehicles because that would suggest it was something of the distant past, not a society of my own generation's making. If it was set in another time, it might not have allowed me to question and criticise the society we ourselves created, our current misogynies and fear, the cowardices and silences and perversities and survival tactics of my own generation.[8]

*Small Things Like These* shocks and hits a nerve with audiences by disclosing the inner workings of the Irish Magdalene Asylums in a bold move that makes the novella a sharp commentary on Catholic abuse of young women often undergoing unplanned pregnancy and forcibly removed and made to work within convent walls in places near and afar. Some of these adolescents presumably orphans, their status was later revealed to be largely a cover-up for girls cruelly snatched from their families; a topic evocatively dealt with in Jim Loach's *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010). The coldly effective Magdalene Laundries apparatus stretching as far as Oceania and the Pacific Rim, Melbourne's Abbotsford Convent had much to account for and the truth of the Good Shepherd Laundries and its interconnected Magdalene Penitents in New Zealand "started to filter through the choking silence and catapulted into the present … as [the girls] moved past their silent shame and started to talk about their first hand experiences, at the hands of cruel 'caretakers.'"[9]

Quiet witness: Melbourne's Abbotsford Convent. Photo by Jytte Holmqvist, July 2024.

A book “dedicated to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland’s mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries”[10] and that is “not so much about the nature of evil as the circumstances that allow it”,[11] centres on coal and timber merchant Bill Furlong as a middle-aged lead character who reflects on his life trajectory and takes stock of ups and downs, highs, and lows. A soul searcher, he quietly breaks down in the face of injustices that clash with his moral convictions. Venturing away from the safety and predictability of his own domestic space, Furlong’s chance encounter mid-way through the book reveals larger issues and raises ethical questions within him that force him to wake up to a crude parallel reality largely ignored or hushed up by the surrounding community. As has been noted, “[m]ore than Furlong’s quiet heroism, [the book] explores the silent, self-interested complicity of a whole community, which makes it possible for such cruelty to persist”.[12] In *Small Things Like These*, small things are anything but small and the damning impact of an omnipresent institution on subjects dragged into the dark underbelly of the Catholic Church is reflected in the quiet aftermath of man versus institution where his actions compensate for the unsayable that calls for our urgent attention. All along, Keegan says little but alludes all the more; Ireland itself not issuing a formal apology until 2013 when Taoiseach Enda Kelly acknowledged the more than 30,000 Irish women and girls incarcerated and forced into Catholic labour, many of whom went into labour and lost babies killed or otherwise stashed away in staggering numbers. A dark yet ultimately tentatively hopeful story set in a cold and wet winter where batches of black December crows hover and that seems to pay homage to Ted Hughes, *Small Things Like These* slowly but effectively transports the reader to a different time and place. The initially matter of fact account of the mundane creates a narrative lull that contrasts starkly with the sudden introduction into the scene of a dishevelled girl held hostage by the Good Shepherd nuns in a castigating Catholic system; “locked in a convent coal shed, leaking milk and mourning the loss of her baby.”[13] Having driven up to the “convent … on the hill … at the far side of the river” in the dark of the night to deliver coal, Furlong had intended to make this his last chore before Christmas – a season that “brought out the best and the worst in people”. With the Angelus bell long since rung [14] he is made aware of the girl’s existence by sheer happenstance, but his discovery upends everything. A wakeup call that triggers him to take a snap decision, the ensuing turn of events will have a lasting impact on his wife and five daughters waiting at home. The ending of the book leaves room for interpretation and invites new spectres into an already dark episode in Irish history; one where the truth sayer becomes himself a new victim. Furlong hurriedly rescues the girl but in so doing he engages in an act of self-destruction and this, explains Keegan, “is the account of his breaking down”.[15] The destruction of the self happens at the level of disintegration of Furlong’s identity as he now takes on a new role and persona. It is likewise an erosion of his well-organised family setup. His decisive act will irrevocably expose his family to the scorn and ostracization by neighbours whose sullenness

becomes a way to shy away from the unbearable, their inability to see means they close their eyes to reality:

The worst was yet to come, he knew. Already he could feel a world of trouble waiting for him behind the next door, but the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been – which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life. Whatever suffering he was now to meet was a long way from what the girl at his side had already endured, and might yet surpass. Climbing the street towards his own front door with the barefooted girl and the box of shoes, his fear more than outweighed every other feeling but in his foolish heart he not only hoped but legitimately believed that they would manage.[16]

Through his controversial yet heroic move, Furlong finds his own truth and lays bare crimes perpetrated at the doorstep of a close-knit community who relate to one another not through matters of the heart and soul but through short utterances that reflect a concern with seemingly petty diurnal duties that become a whole communal way of life. An unsung hero, Furlong is:

an embodiment of the silence surrounding the treatment of young, out of wedlock mothers in Ireland during most part of the twentieth century. Keegan uses this character as the narrator of a fragment of his life in which he rebels against the Catholic Church, the perpetrator of the abuse in the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, therefore, breaking the cycle of silence.[17]

Furlong as a vehicle through whom we explore a dark chapter in Irish history is, in Keegan's view as she analyses her characters as authentic individuals who step away from the page and represent the real, more of a servant than a squire. As she sees it, her role as a writer is, predominantly, to listen and try to follow what is there, "discover it and put it down as evenly as possible without exaggeration and to not ask the central character to bear any of my preoccupations".[18] Keegan's sombre tale becomes a study in accountability and the conviction of one man to drastically change the outcome of his own story – and that of his community. With that she indirectly and without being prescriptive urges us to stay informed, question authorities and the status quo while we revisit history, become aware, pledge not to forget and for history not to repeat.

Final reflections and words for the road

Viscerally uncomfortable, *Small Things Like These* penetrates deep and, as Colm Tóibín notes, moves into our nervous system.[19] We explore that which cannot be explained but that is very much felt. As we, too, trudge through mist and fog and across Irish moors, we irrevocably enter a moral dilemma and question the powers at be. Facing an Irish past that leaves long shadows we begin to query and examine a larger history that concern us existentially. The book allows that history to come alive and "Keegan makes her moments real – and then she makes them matter."[20] Expressing the largely

inexpressible, she delves straight into the danger zone – and yet she does so with quiet grace. What for Jon Fosse becomes a way to express the unsayable through brief dialogues and pauses is in Keegan's literature an astute ability to call the past back into the present through a cautious dance between words and the silences that linger in the space between. And what is not said outright is always remarkably present if we learn to listen as we read; listen to the voice within that expresses that which may not always be present on paper.

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