

Teaching Notes on Claire Keegan's novel *Small Things Like These*



This document gathers notes and resources from posts on juliangirdham.com. It is free to **download as a PDF**, but if you find it useful, do buy me a coffee or two to help defray costs.

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/juliangirdham>

For online resources and links (updated occasionally), including my illustrated analysis of the Faber cover, go here:

<https://www.juliangirdham.com/blog/small-things-like-these-resources-and-links>

Turn over for the Contents table.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. This licence requires that **reusers give credit to the creator**. It allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, for **noncommercial purposes only**. If others modify or adapt the material, they must license the modified material under identical terms. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

<i>page</i>	<i>Resource</i>
1	My original review of the book on its release: November 2021. https://www.juliangirdham.com/blog/claire-keegans-small-things-like-these
5	Detailed notes on each of the seven sections of the novel.
17	Using the lens of George Saunders to look at the novel. https://www.juliangirdham.com/blog/george-saunders-amp-claire-keegan
20	Links between this book and Fintan O'Toole's <i>We Don't Know Ourselves: a personal history of Ireland since 1958</i> . https://www.juliangirdham.com/blog/on-claire-keegan-and-fintan-otoole
23	Suggestions for the 4 comparative modes of the Irish Leaving Certificate.

Original review, November 2021.

Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see? (p.100).

This is the crucial question that the protagonist of Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* asks himself near the end of the book, as he comes to terms with a personal revelation, on top of another, and very distressing, discovery. A few pages later he thinks of Mrs Wilson, a well-off Protestant woman who provided for his mother after she became pregnant with him (he was born on April 1, and some said the boy would turn out to be a fool):

Of her daily kindnesses, of how she had corrected and encouraged him, of the small things she had said and done and had refused to do and say and what she must have known, the things which, when added up, amounted to a life.

This book is just about that: the small things which amount to a life (to all our lives), the things about ourselves and others that we cannot, or will not, see.

Claire Keegan's first book was *Antarctica* in 1999, and another collection of short stories, *Walk the Blue Fields*, followed 8 years later. Then came that masterpiece, *Foster*, her long short story which first featured in the *New Yorker* and was published in book form in 2010, and which I have taught several times. We have had to wait 11 years for more. This time we certainly have a novel, though a very short one (110 well-spaced pages). 22 years from first book of fiction to first novel: a rarely travelled journey.

We are in the consciousness of Bill Furlong, a fuel merchant in County Wexford in the grim recessionary mid-1980s (not long after *Foster*, which is set in the countryside rather than a superbly-evoked New Ross - I too grew up in a small South-East community set along a river). Furlong is a provider - of fuel and of kindness. Like Mr Kinsella in *Foster*, he is a deeply sympathetic man, a caring father of five girls, an attentive husband, a hard-working and sensitive employer. Here is another positive portrait in a literature which often portrays fathers negatively (think for a start of Christy Mahon's in *The Playboy of the Western World*). [In Keegan's words](#) about Kinsella in *Foster*:

So many of the fathers in our literature are just awful and neglectful, especially when it comes to fathering a girl and one of the things I probably wanted to do is have a good Irish father in this story. I wanted him also to use his humour and his intelligence and energy with a girl, rather than fostering someone who is male. I don't think Kinsella was good to her because she was a girl. I just thought he was a decent man who enjoyed her company.

Despite his apparent security in life (but if you have something you are vulnerable to losing it), Furlong is beset by restlessness and anxiety (*the strain of being alive*, 53), an inescapable undercurrent which goes back to his own origins. There is a regular cadence: *the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come near the place* (59), *Once more the ordinary part of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home* (61), *A part of him felt divided* (84), *A part of him considered ...* (107), *Was it possible the best bit of him was shining forth, and surfacing?* (108). A charged object in his life is the 500-piece jigsaw of a farm he asks for one boyhood Christmas (the alternative being his daddy), but he is disappointed, getting only a nailbrush, bar of soap, hot water bottle and a copy of *A Christmas Carol* (that story touches this one in many places):

He'd gone outside then, to the cow-house, to hide his disappointment, and cry. Neither Santa nor his father had come. And there was no jigsaw. He thought about the things children said about him in school, the name he was called, and understood this to be the reason. 20

Near the end of the story, decades later, he enters Mrs Stafford's old shop just before Christmas and asks for the same present, but

She said the only jigsaws they kept now were for children, that there was little demand for the more difficult ones anymore, then asked if she might help him find something.

Like a jigsaw, his life is fractured, and never securely whole. He is all too aware of its fragility, both financial and emotional, and how close everyone is to disaster. He is aware both of how fortunately his own life has turned out and of how it might have been different:

Of late, he was inclined to imagine another life, elsewhere, and wondered if this was not something in his blood; might his own father not have been one of those who had upped, suddenly, and taken the boat for England? It seemed both proper and at the same time deeply unfair that so much of life was left to chance.

and

It would be the easiest thing in the world to lose everything, Furlong knew. Although he did not venture far, he got around - and many an unfortunate he'd seen around town and out the country roads. The dole queues were getting longer and there were men out there who couldn't pay their ESB bills, living in houses no warmer than bunkers, sleeping in their overcoats.

The rest of that paragraph lists examples of financial distress, and culminates in this image:

And early one morning, Furlong had seen a young schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat's bowl beyond the priest's house.

Unlike other men, who fall asleep in front of the fire after post-Mass pints, he cannot relax on Sundays, and wants Mondays to come, so that he can *lose himself in the mechanics of the ordinary, working week.*

This is not a land of plenty (imagine the current pandemic hitting Ireland in 1985, and trying to save jobs and businesses). Furlong's lorry will shortly need new tyres, and as a result Eileen's longed-for replacement windows at the front of the house, to be financed by a loan, will have to wait. The barber's son has just had a terminal diagnosis of cancer. Later in *this December of crows* Furlong

Came across a black cat eating from the carcass of a crow, licking her lips. (104)

All that makes the book sound very dark, but it is actually full of warmth, affection and decency, mediated through Furlong's character, as in Foster, where the kindnesses of the Kinsellas are all the more impressive given their own personal tragedy. His family life is warmly evoked, particularly in their pre-Christmas rituals, and his relationship with his wife Eileen is brilliantly done in quick brush-strokes that some other novelists can only envy (Eileen has a sharper edge than her husband).

The other pleasures of this book are manifold. Keegan's prose is somehow simultaneously unshowy and carefully poetic: at times she reminds me of William Trevor in her tender attention to characters which goes straight to their heart. Sentence by sentence her writing is of the highest quality, and she moves through longer ones beautifully (look at the sentence at the top of page 25 starting *Again, he found himself*

thinking back as it re-enacts Furlong's thought processes). Peripheral characters flare vividly: the Mother Superior, Furlong's daughters, Mrs Wilson. New Ross in the 80s is evoked superbly, a presence throughout the novel.

Underneath all is the shame of the [Magdalene laundry scandal](#), to which the narrative eventually turns. By now this has been deeply explored in journalism, but Keegan approaches it slowly and obliquely, eventually folding it in with Furlong's own story: the two strains come together in a moving conclusion. But this is not a novel 'about' that issue - indeed, Claire Keegan would firmly put right anyone who thinks that fiction should address 'issues'. Nevertheless, the dedication at the start of the book alerts us in advance to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries, followed on the next page by the irony of the extract from the 1916 Proclamation, which boasted of the *cherishing of all of the children of the nation equally*, a promise dismally unfulfilled in our history.

At one point Furlong stands in the dark outside the convent and looks down over New Ross:

For a time he stood listening and looking down at the town, at the smoke starting up from the chimneys and the small, diminishing stars in the sky. One of the brightest fell while he was standing there, leaving a streak like a chalk mark on a board for just a second before it vanished. Another seemed to burn out and slowly fade.

I think here of Malcolm in Act IV scene iii of *Macbeth* who says:

*Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.
Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace,
Yet Grace must still look so.*

The brightest was Lucifer/Satan (and thus Macbeth, the favoured thane), but Malcolm, in that scene set in the sunshine of England, which leads to the ending of the tyranny in Scotland, reminds us that there *is* still Grace in the world, and Furlong's most personal discovery is his delayed understanding of (no spoiler) the *act of daily grace* by one particular person in his past.

It was Pascal (or Cicero, or Mark Twain or whoever) who wrote about a letter he had written:

I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter.

It takes a lot of time and skill to write so concisely, and with such lucidity. Eleven years after *Foster*, Claire Keegan has given us a marvel of a story, one that within its 'mere' 110 pages somehow, and apparently effortlessly, carries a huge narrative, intellectual and emotional punch.

Page notes on the 7 sections of the novel (these are designed for teachers rather than pupils).

Pagination is from the Faber and Faber UK paperback edition, 2021.

Dedication:

There is plenty of material online, in books and in film, [on the Magdalene Laundries](#). A basic outline will be helpful in advance of reading the book. We have to wait until Section 4 before seeing the relevance of this dedication.

Proclamation from the Easter 1916 Rising:

- Some will be familiar with Easter 1916 and the [Proclamation](#) from History class. If not, a simple overview will be useful.
- Come back to this later on and discuss ‘cherishing all the children of the nation equally.’
- In both cases, central to Cultural Context.

SECTION 1: PAGES 1 to 3

- Time: implications of October (then November, on the way to Christmas). This will be a journey to a particular point in time. First sentences of later sections - Section 3 - ‘Christmas was coming’; Section 4 - ‘It was a December of crows’. Section 5 - ‘On Christmas week, snow was forecast’. Section 7 - ‘On Christmas Eve, Furlong never felt more like not going in.’
- Page 1: Suggestive images in the first paragraph: winds, bare trees, the dark River Barrow, rain. The people ‘for the most part, unhappily endured the weather’ (1). General Vision and Viewpoint - does not suggest a positive journey for the story.
- 1-2: the sense of the close-knit community (a common theme in many comparative texts).
- 2: First mention of Furlong, a coal and timber merchant who is a provider for the community. But the lorry’s tyres are worn: ‘We could soon be on the rims.’ This concern recurs on page 90 - Mrs Furlong may not get her longed-for windows because of the engine giving out. A continuing idea in the book will be how close life is to the edge.
- 3: 1980s Ireland: the rare ‘novelty’ of the Polish and Russian boatmen with their fur caps and lack of English. A monoculture very far from Ireland 2024, insular not just in the literal sense.
- 3: the section ends with the ‘cold’ again, the men ‘facing back out into’ it: this will be a novel about what is faced up to, or not.

SECTION 2: PAGES 5 TO 14

- 5: Furlong's path 'from nothing', or rather from 'less than nothing, some might say' (the vicious 'some' who gossip): Mother at 16 'falling pregnant' while a domestic for Mrs Wilson, the Protestant widow: this was her 'trouble' in April 1946. Cultural context: the shame and fallen nature of pregnancy, which prefigures the other girl called Sarah later in the novel.
- 5-6: The supportive environment of Mrs Wilson's house, compared to outside, where some expect him to turn out to be a 'fool' (he was born on April 1st). Some financial stability. Her unusual 'small library'. First mention of the significant Ned. Lack of tension over religious beliefs: the prayer books are left aside until Sunday: but this suggests an exception to the religious tension and hyper-awareness in the community. Ignoring the influence of the Roman Catholic is not an option for 97% of the community. On page 12 as an adult Furlong is 'often tense; he could not say why.'
- 7: The 'big house' gives some 'leeway, and protection' for Furlong. Once he came back from school with spit on his coat. He develops 'good, Protestant habits'. Whose attitude is that 'good' and what does it show?
- 8: Mrs Wilson gave a very generous few thousand pounds when Furlong and Eileen married: 'it was one of her own that had fathered him - sure hadn't he been christened William, after the kings'. Literary Genre: the withholding of information, of who was the father. Furlong does not know, and neither for the moment do we. 'Unknown' in the birth certificate: that shame and moral disapproval in 1980s Ireland.
- 8-9: The Furlongs' embeddedness in the community: Kathleen helping in the office, Joan in the choir, both in the secondary school. Sheila, Grace and Loretta are yet to attend - see implications later, and on the next note for page 10.
- 10: Title alert. 'Sometimes Furlong, seeing the girls going through the small things that needed to be done ... felt a deep, private joy that these children were his own.' The difference to the fates of the children in the laundry. Furlong is hyper-conscious that they are the 'lucky ones': he does not take his good fortune for granted. He helps Mick Synnott's 'little chap' as he is pathetically foraging for sticks, and gives him money: Eileen is less sympathetic - the father is a drunk (think of the girl's father in Foster).
- 11: Title alert again as Furlong thinks at night 'going over small things like these'. His agitation, his mind racing, his awareness of life's fragility (12: 'it would be the easiest thing in the world to lose everything, Furlong knew'). He thinks of his girls growing up, and men's predatory eyes on them (see page 50 and Kathleen).
- 12: The stray dogs are 'foraging' for scraps in the bins, the same word used on 10 for Mick Sinnott's young son.
- 12: 'Some part of his mind was often tense: he could not say why' - this formulation 'part of' recurs regularly throughout the novel: Furlong does not feel

whole or complete despite his domestic and professional stability (and see later for the jigsaw motif).

- 12: the [moving statues](#) in Cork and Kerry: credulity in Roman Catholic Ireland in 1985. See the first few minutes of the [1985 'Reeling in the Years'](#). In this section, page 8, also the general belief that Mrs Wilson paid money at Furlong's engagement because the father was 'one of her own' and the thin evidence that he was christened William (a 'Protestant name').
- 12-13: many images of economic hardship in Ireland of the 1980s. 13 - 'Furlong had seen a young schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat's bowl behind the priest's house.' Mick Sinnott's boy has to forage for sticks and this boy is so desperate he drinks out of a cat's bowl. See p.104: the black cat eating the crow.
- 13: current events in 1985 (more explicit references than in *Foster*, where we just have a brief allusion to the Northern hunger strikes). Closures of businesses - Albatros, the shipyard company, Graves & Co. This is not the Ireland of Microsoft, Google and Pfizer. More images of coldness: the auctioneer says business is 'stone cold, that he might as well be trying to sell ice to the Eskimos.' (14).
- 14: So 'the times were raw' but Furlong 'felt all the more determined to carry on.' As a (fuel) provider, his main duty is to 'keep providing for his girls': the vital importance of the school. CK here sets up unobtrusively the later veiled threat by the Mother Superior about the girls' schooling: two of them are currently at St Margaret's, the other three are yet to go to 'the only good school in the town'. What is the attitude behind that word 'good' and whose is it?

SECTION 3: PAGES 15 TO 35

- 15: Christmas was coming: echoes in this book of *A Christmas Carol* (see 20). The nuns are 'talking to some of the more well-off parents.' 16. The modest lights display is an excitement for the community, but Loretta is scared by the 'big, fat Santa' (17), and has to be comforted by her father: again, the sense of fragility that underlines everything, as 'it cut him ... he could not help but wonder if she'd be brave enough or able for what the world had in store.' (his anxiety earlier about his girls and the ways men look at them on 11). On 15, the Virgin Mary was 'met with general approval, kneeling passively' - an image of what is expected of women.
- 19: preparations for the Christmas cake, and 'always they carried mechanically on without pause, to the next job at hand. What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things?' His questioning of the ordinary complacencies of family life, his constantly restless mind and sense of insecurity (from his childhood).
- 20: Showing how little 'his mind was not so much upon the here and now', Furlong 'reluctantly [] found himself remembering back to when he was a boy'

That reluctance is to be taken away from the pleasures of the present, but the construction 'he found himself' shows how deeper forces are at work. He thinks of Christmas presents as a boy: asking for his daddy or else the jigsaw of a farm in 500 pieces but gets neither. Presents included *A Christmas Carol*. See 97: he asks Mrs Stafford for a 500-piece jigsaw of a farm, but she does not have any: 'there was little demand for the more difficult ones anymore.' The things other children said about him in school and 'the name he was called'. He plunges his hands into brutally cold water 'to divert his pain, until he could no longer feel it.' 20-21.

- 21: 'where was his father now?' The missing piece of the jigsaw. But Mrs Wilson's stroke means he will not find out from her.
- 22: he tells Sheila that he did get a jigsaw from Santy, concealing the absences of his childhood from his own children, protecting them.
- 22: Furlong is almost afraid of women and their 'canny intuitions'- his wife (he 'had almost feared Eileen and had envied her mettle, her red-hot instincts'), his daughters. At the bottom of 23, Eileen is folding the laundry, and she does the shirts and blouses first, leaving the more awkward pillowcases to the end: 'Always, she tackled the hardest things first', whereas Furlong is naturally 'reluctant', but at the end of the book he will have to make a decision about tackling a very hard thing.
- 24: the girls are allowed to stay up late, even though the next morning is a school day: his sense of the fragility of such happy moments, and his fear that 'there might never again be another night like this'. And on 25: 'Before long, *he caught a hold of himself* and concluded that nothing ever did happen again; to each was given days and chances which wouldn't come back around.' He has to remind himself that moments can be sweet in the present, and not to think of 'the trouble ahead, which might never come': but as readers we know it will (or there will be no story).
- 25: he sees Joan singing with the choir and thinks 'how she looked like she belonged there, with all the others', an extraordinary thought (of course she does) that comes from his own sense of not belonging as a child.
- 26: Furlong fills the two hot water bottles: his memory of the one Ned had given him at Christmas, warmth and comfort from this significant figure, a provider of warmth as Furlong now is for this community.
- 27: Mrs Wilson's praise makes him feel 'a foot taller, believing, in his heart, that he mattered as much as any other child', suggesting that normally he does not 'believe' this. Society does not regard him as equal to other children.
- 28: Furlong and Eileen read the children's Santa letters to see what they can afford. They 'stretch it out' as much as they can risk.
- 30: 'You know we'll blink a few times and they'll be married and gone.' Time moving, and the fragility of these moments as a family.
- 31: Eileen's perceptiveness ('her instincts') in seeing that something is on her husband's mind - 'You were miles away this night'. Her calmness and strength

compared to his anxieties - exchange on 32. She has been looking after the finances, and saving for the windows (see page 90, and the problem with the lorry).

- 32-3: Furlong's anxious reflectiveness: paragraph beginning 'What was it all for?' Top 33: Coming up to 40, 'Lately, he had begun to wonder what mattered, apart from Eileen and the girls'. CK building to the decision to be taken late in the book. Furlong's concern about purpose in his life, about things being the same (as in the mushroom factory job).
- 33: last paragraph - the 'foolish' need to go over things with Eileen (born on April 1st & the last sentence of the book).
- 33-34: the talk of the community, and the sense of people being at the edge economically. At Wilson's, the livestock has gone, with 'a few dogs around the place' (see 12-13 and the cows who are un milked).
- 34: the barber's son has been given a year to live after a cancer diagnosis, another example of how close disaster is in our fragile lives. At the end of that paragraph, another brief reference to Ned (CK dropping small scarcely-noticeable seeds through the narrative).
- 34: Furlong's self-doubt, imagining he is 'poor company' for his wife. He wonders if she ever imagined 'how her life would be if she had married another?' See his own imagining of an alternative life with the women near the yard on 55.

SECTION 4: PAGES 37 TO 47

- 37 - 'It was a December of crows': the gathering in black batches, their scavenging. Look ahead to the cat on 104 which is eating the carcass of a crow. Immediately after in the next paragraph the black is echoed in the gates of the convent. CK takes 37 pages to get to this most important location in her story. The front is 'kept in order with shaved lawns, ornamental shrubs growing neatly in rows, the tall hedges cut square': the façade of order, the face the nuns present to the world. It is 'like a Christmas card'. Later, in the key confrontation the Mother Superior gives Furlong a hurriedly-written card accompanying the money as a form of bribe.
- 38: first mention of the laundry, which 'had a good reputation' (see 14 - St Margaret's is 'the only good school for girls in the town'. 'Good' as a communal word of approval) but also 'there was other talk' - that the girls were 'of low character ... doing penance by washing stains out of the dirty linen.' The irony of the stains on Ireland's history that the laundry system left. A place of some mystery and gossip: no-one truly knows what goes on.
- 39: the poor state of the girls of 'low character': some think 'the place was no better than a mother-and-baby-home where common, unmarried girls went in to

be hidden away after they had given birth'. Again, the censorious class judgment of that 'common', and a reference to the mother-and-baby homes mentioned in the first dedication.

- 40: Furlong's visit, his discovery of the dozen young women in the chapel. 41: he is asked for help by the girl with the roughly cut hair. He 'felt himself stepping back', the grammar of '*felt himself*' showing his involuntary instincts, and he says cannot help, since he has five girls and a wife. See another 'stepping back' on page 63 (but eventually he will *not* step back). The shocking directness of her response: 'all I want to do is drown meself'. He leaves without commenting.
- 43 - Furlong is disturbed, discomfited. He has noticed the padlock, the broken glass on top of the high wall separating the convent from St Margaret's School (the thin boundary between the lives of his daughters and the young girls/women in the laundry). 44: he asks the young man about where the road will take him. 'Wherever you want to go, son'. A decision is coming, a fork in the road (like Robert Frost's poem '[The Road Not Taken](#)').
- 44: back home in bed, Eileen's dismissal of his concerns, her defence of the nuns ('It was a long speech'). What matters is their own girls. Her hard realism (45), compared to him being 'soft-hearted': 'All thinking does is bring you down', and her insistence that you need to ignore some things 'if you want to get on in life'. She reminds him of his own background, and then apologises (46). But her hardness is relentless: again she points out that none of the girls is theirs, and the privilege of Mrs Wilson's life. And Furlong's life was so close to taking a different road (Robert Frost again). Consider: is Eileen similar to her husband in her consciousness of life's fragility but different in how she handles this?
- 47: Eileen's hardness about Mrs Wilson, pointing out that she was 'one of the few women on this earth who could do as she pleased.' Later, Mrs Kehoe also checks Furlong about his privileges as a man.

SECTION 5: PAGES 49-72

- 49: 'On Christmas week, snow was forecast'. A cold poor world: the yard is closing for 10 days, and people are panicking about their orders (far from the plenitude of Irish society now).
- 50: he checks with Kathleen that none of the men has been 'giving you guff' a euphemism for sexualised comments, which he has already been concerned about on page 11. His daughter is coming to the same time of life as his mother was when she became pregnant.
- 51: Furlong wakes up to deliver early to the convent. Paragraph 51-52 - the dog licking the tin can, the crows are out, tearing of the pizza box (and link to the clergy - reminding Furlong of the pretentious young curate, linking to the Church).

- 53: after leaving the house and his (mostly) sleeping family, at the yard gate he 'felt the strain of being alive ... but he made himself carry on'. Visiting the neighbour for her kettle to thaw the frozen gate padlock, and knocking 'softly, on the door', there is an erotic undertow when he encounters the young woman from the West ('Furlong saw an impression, which was unintended, of her breast, loose, under the cotton' 54), and this prompts '*a part of* his mind turn loose to stray off and imagine what it might be like to live there, in that house, with her as his wife' 55. As if the erotic impulse when he looked at his sleeping wife on 52 has transferred its momentum to this woman. His sense 'that so much of life was left to chance' 55. The road not taken, and Furlong's continuing sense of the fragility and contingent nature of all life. He is missing one crucial part of his own jigsaw - who was his father, did he go to England? The thawing of the frozen lock is like a mental loosening of his own imagination.
- 56+: Furlong's anxiety over the lorry starting (and he is already anxious about its tires) and his anxious checking of the load, the yard, the office in the prefab. Then he locks the door (57) before he knocks on the next door at the coal house (see 58).
- 57+: Furlong goes to the convent (the reflection in the windowpanes makes it feel 'as though he was meeting himself there', which in a sense he will: he will meet the core of himself). The convent is still, 'but why was it not ever peaceful?' 57.
- 58. He wonders 'if he had not turned into a man consigned to doorways, for did he not spend the best part of his life standing outside of one or another, waiting for them to be opened'. He will have to make a choice about a pushing open of a metaphorical door soon.
- 59: A moment of 'escalation' (George Saunders - [see separate post](#), or further down this document). He discovers the cowering girl, freezing, her own excrement around her and '*the ordinary part* of him wished he'd never come near the place' 59 - but there is another part to him. Will it come alive? When he rings the front door bell '*a part of him* wondered what he was doing.' 61. And 'once more *the ordinary part* of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home'. 61. Then her distress over her 14 week-old baby, which is such a sensitive and personal thing for him - top 62, 'You have a child?' is a moment that changes things and pushes him closer to involvement.
- 62: the Mother Superior's smooth semi-plausible pretence of care for the girl, the suggestion she was going to call the Guards out of concern. 63: Furlong's instinctive obeisance to the nun's authority as he 'found himself taking his cap off and following, as he was bid' - again the grammatical construction '*found himself*' indicates a deep-rooted deference to authority, as if he is without agency). Similarly on 64 he '*heard himself say*' to the Mother Superior that he was dirtying the floor.
- 63: When the Mother Superior asks him in for tea, he 'stepped back - as though the step could take him back into the time before this.' [See page 41 where he

also steps back]. But it cannot - he has started down that road now and will not be able to reverse. That 'escalation' (the word from the Latin for 'ladder') cannot be ignored or undone.

- 64: 'The whole place and everything in it was shining, immaculate' and again (see 57) Furlong sees his reflection, this time in the hanging pots, in which he 'glimpsed a version of himself, passing.' Which version of himself will Furlong turn out to be? Which will he choose? Which road will he go down?
- 65: the Mother Superior's sly introduction of the topic of Furlong's home, and his daughters, and her suggestion that there might not be space for them (66); on 65 she calls him by the boyhood name 'Billy', a kind of attempted emasculation of his adult self. The threat is hinted at in the final line of 65: 'And don't you have another two next door.' No question mark - just a full stop. She is not asking a genuine question: it is a statement of knowledge, a tool of power.
- 66: the threat is made explicit: 'It's just that there's so many nowadays. It's no easy task to find a place for everyone' while at the start of the page she alludes to Furlong's past, that 'we see another of yours in the choir now. She doesn't look out of place.' Why would she? On page 25 Furlong was moved by the sight of Joan in the choir and 'how she looked like she belonged there, with all the others.' However, he is not threatened by the catty remark about not having a son, where he is on 'known ground.'
- 67: the girl from the shed returns cleaned up and is 'treated' with tea and cake.
- 69: a turning point, as Furlong pushes back against the power-play of the Mother Superior suggesting a fry for the girl. 'Furlong watched the girl being taken away and soon understood that this woman wanted him gone - but the urge to go was being replaced now by a type of contrariness to stay on, and to hold his ground.' He knows the kind treatment has just been for show, for his benefit. That 'contrariness' is echoed on 71 (see below). He is now 'encouraged by this queer, new power.' 69.
- 70: his exchange with the Mother Superior about the foreign sailors, and her dismissive 'I'd hardly compare Our Lord to those fellows'. She is overplaying her cards.
- 71: the Mother Superior's bribe, which Furlong takes, though 'reluctant'. As he passes the girl he pauses 'contrarily' (see 'contrariness' 69).
- 72: the connection between the girl and his mother, both called Sarah, though the girl has been denied this by being called 'Enda', a male name, in the convent, attempting to erase her identity. She says her people are from beyond Clonegal ([CK has said](#) the girl might be the one from *Foster* - what happened to her after that story?). He leaves her his name, and where to find him: so they exchange names, an intimate connection (the girl in *Foster* does not have a name). When he leaves, 'he heard someone inside, turning the key', an echo of the start of this section and the thawing of the lock to his own yard. As readers, we don't expect that that door is now closed for good.

SECTION 6: page 73 to 87

- 74: ironically, the card accompanying the £50 note shows the Virgin and child being led by Joseph on 'The Flight into Egypt', escaping from Herod. This book will end with another adult leading a child to safety, an escape. A tell-tale sign is that the inscription is in a 'hurried-looking hand', suggesting the Mother Superior has scribbled it in a rush at the last minute to accompany the money, a bribe to silence Furlong.
- 74: As Furlong gets ready for second Mass, he cleans his hands slowly, and scrubs his nails: his need to cleanse himself after the convent visit. Will he be a Pontius Pilate who washes his hands of this problem? He looks in the mirror (yet another reflection), examining himself.
- 75: then 'with a fresh type of reluctance' Furlong gets into his Sunday clothes. He was also 'reluctant' to take the £50 four pages earlier, and these tensions are swirling around inside him, so that Eileen is astonished by his untypically sharp reply about the collection: his displaced anger.
- 76+: the service, a whole community meeting. All the genuflection, a visible sign of the obeisance to the Church. Furlong 'didn't join in so much as listen, distractedly' 77. And when the Communion starts, Furlong 'stayed contrarily' (see versions of this word on 69 and 71).
- 78: what should be a cosy Christmas family scene - but Furlong is restless, and has to be upbraided by Eileen for brushing the floor (another nervous cleaning gesture) while they are icing the cake. For Furlong 'it felt as though the room was closing in' and 'A longing to get away came over him'. 80. He decides to visit Ned. Eileen can see that something is 'ailing' him, but soon he will understand that he has not seen the biggest truth about himself.
- 81: Furlong is relieved to be out; it was 'sweet'. Yet again '*a part of him*' wishes it were Monday and he could 'lose himself' in work. 'Why could he not relax and enjoy [Sundays] like other men who took a pint or two after Mass before falling asleep at the fire with the newspaper, having eaten a plate of dinner?' [What if anything do we expect he will do about the girl?]. The images of the bleak quay at the closed-down shipyard, where the huge gulls '*forage, futilely*', like the boy *foraging* for sticks on 10 and the stray dogs on 12 '*foraging* for scraps in the bins'.
- 82-3. Ned's story about stealing from Mrs Wilson. Later, think back: why does Ned talk so much at this point, referring to i) his contentment with living in a small room at Mrs Wilson's (thus being with his son as he grew up in childhood) and ii) the anecdote about the hay, which he should not feel guilty for (it was an act of kindness), but does: that anecdote is about guilt, shame, regret. Then Furlong asks him if he knows who his father was?
- 84. '*A part of him* felt disinclined to go near the house', and then he finds out that Ned is in a home convalescing from pneumonia and the woman at the door sees the likeness to Ned, and that they are related. The poignancy of Ned's silence over

almost 40 years: observing his son growing up, yet not feeling he can say anything.

- 86: outside in the lorry 'a type of emptiness comes over him' and he thinks about what the woman said about the likeness to Ned. He thinks about Sarah at the convent, and is 'tormented' by his failure to say or do anything, that he had not asked about the baby, his taking the money, his going to Mass 'like a hypocrite'. He lets the thought 'stoke his mind'
- 87. At the same time he is discovering his own father, he failed as a father-figure to an abandoned girl, and is 'tormented'. The energy of this torment will transfer into the final section: it needs to go somewhere in the narrative.

SECTION 7: PAGES 89 TO 110 (the end).

- 89: Furlong's gathering sense of tension and crisis. 'For days, something hard had been gathering on his chest.' On page 108, we heard that he feels 'light and tall' walking with the girl, as if that burden has been lifted.
- 90: the lorry struggles on the hills, and Furlong knows that this means replacing the engine will stop them putting in the new windows Eileen wants for the front of their house. There is a cost for everything, a cost which might impact on your family, a lesson that we will see at its starkest in the closing pages of the book (108 - 'the fact was that he would pay for it'). An economy that also struggles: customers are asking to delay payment, and Furlong leaves gifts of bags of logs 91; the girl whose mother is thankful she doesn't have to buy a stamp for the card. But still he is guilty at not handing on his own gifts to the less well-off, and recognises his own relative 'privilege'.
- 92: Christmas dinners in Kehoe's, paid for by the yard. Mrs Kehoe's correction to Furlong's comment on days off: 'What it is to be a man, and to have days off' on 93, followed by her warning on 94 about the 'run-in' at the convent. He hasn't seen the truth about women, and she worries he can't see the truth about the Church's power. Like Eileen, a 'hugely practical woman': her advice is to keep the enemy close, don't assume the nuns have 'only as much power as we give them.' 94. Again he feels he is being regarded as 'foolish' 95. Furlong listens to Mrs Kehoe's repeated warnings without a meaningful response, suggesting he will not in fact heed her warning. She points out that the Church is 'all the one', a monolithic power-structure, and on 106 Furlong remembers that, after deciding not to go to or trust the priests.
- 96: Furlong walks through the town, his work done for the year. 97: he goes into Mrs Stafford's shop and asks for a 500-piece jigsaw of a farm, but she doesn't have ones for adults. Again, we are moving in towards the completion of the jigsaw of his psyche.
- 98: at Joyce's Furniture, yet another reflection, in the full-length mirror, which prompts him to go to the barber. 99: he looks in the barber's mirror 'searching

for a resemblance to Ned, which he both could and could not see.' He is getting to a point when he can see fully. He starts to think about Ned and imagine his point of view, the 'act of grace' that Furlong should 'believe he had come from finer stock'. Now all the pieces of the jigsaw come together: Ned and Sarah went to mass together, ate together, he was 'down-hearted' at her early death, taught him how to shave and tie his laces: of course. It all makes sense now.

- 99: 'Furlong found himself not joining in the talk' and 101: 'he *found himself* walking back down to the river'. The construction suggests his sub-conscious is animating him.
- 100: A key question: 'Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?' Think of how he had not 'seen' how much work women do, and Mrs Kehoe had to correct him. But more broadly, his failure to see who his father was is mirrored in society's failure truly to see what is happening at the laundry, and nationally in mother and baby homes. We 'knew' but did not want to look or see. My comparison between this book and Fintan O'Toole's *We Don't Know Ourselves: a personal history of Ireland since 1958* is [here](#) and further down.
 - *Fintan O'Toole's central thesis about that same society over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st is encapsulated in the title of his book, We Don't Know Ourselves. So often we have suppressed our knowledge - of truths, just for a start about abortion, about a corrupt Taoiseach, about clerical child abuse. We 'knew' about these things, but chose not to accept that knowledge, unlike Furlong, who at the end of Keegan's book takes responsibility, potentially at great personal cost.*
- And O'Toole also writes near the end of his book -
 - *Maybe Ireland has reached the point of accepting that half-knowledge - the ability to see clearly what is, while also acknowledging what remains dark - is better than the swinging between the pretence of knowing everything and the denial of what you really do know.*
- 100-101+: images of the river, his own Rubicon, as he crosses the bridge: see [my illustrated piece](#) on this bridge in which I analyse the cover art, a selection from Bruegel's 'Hunters in the Snow (Winter)'. The story of the curse on it (three drownings a year); Furlong thinks of the girl who'd asked him to take her to it to drown.
- 103: his journey continues, past the better-off houses; images of other families.
- 104: he closes in on the convent (prison-like images), 'feeling not unlike a nocturnal animal on the prowl and hunting', and then the image of the 'black cat eating from the carcass of a crow, licking her lips'. 105: he collects Sarah, and as they cross the river he sees the 'stout-black river flowing darkly along' and 'a part of him [yet again] envied the Barrow's knowledge of her course, how easily the water followed its incorrigible way, so freely to the open sea'. His journey is now not at all easy or free of cost/consequences. But he *must* make that journey.

- 106: already the cost (108 - 'he would pay for it') of what he has done - people he knows well flinch when they see the girl is not one of his daughters and that she is bare-footed (he is carrying Eileen's Christmas present, a pair of shoes).
 - 107: *A part of him* considered backing off' and taking the less public route, but his determination overrules this, his bravery.
 - 108: As he gets closer to home, 'he *found himself* asking was there any point in being alive without helping one another?' Can you 'face yourself in the mirror?' (reflection). But now, walking with the girl, there is 'fresh, new, unrecognisable joy in his heart'. 'Some part of him ... was going wild'. Extraordinarily, this is even better than his own daughters' births. There is both fear, and excitement.
 - 109: the 'small things' Mrs Wilson had done, 'which, when added up, amounted to a life'. He is doing what Mrs Wilson did, 'saving' a girl, and knows that 'a world of trouble' is waiting for him 'behind the next door'. But he *has* to do this: 'the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been.' That is now the road not taken: inaction.
 - 110: the book ends with another door to go through, his own, and he climbs the street to this challenge and uncertainty. He is afraid, recognises his 'foolishness' but 'legitimately' believes they will 'manage'. What does the reader think? Will they?
-

Using a George Saunders lens

George Saunders is not only a very fine short story writer, he is just about the best analyst around of how stories work. Top tip: sign up to his superb [Story Club](#) on Substack, in which he regularly analyses stories, and engages directly and generously with readers. His book [A Swim in a Pond in the Rain](#) is essential reading for English teachers; in it, he looks at 7 stories by the Russian masters (Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev) with sensitive attention. He knows those stories as only someone who has taught them repeatedly over many years could do.

This post is on how the George Saunders-lens might be applied to Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (and you can hear him directly on Keegan's work in his [discussion with Deborah Treisman](#) of her story 'So Late in the Day'). This book is of course not a short story, but its tightness as a narrative still lends itself to that perspective, I think. For a classroom example with a shorter work, [look at this](#) on Hemingway's short story 'Cat in the Rain'.

The most important idea is 'escalation':

To our accruing list of universal laws of fiction (Be specific! Honor efficiency!), which, by the way, we should continually remind ourselves to distrust, we might add: Always be escalating. That's all a story is, really: a continual system of escalation. A swath of prose earns its place in the story to the extent that it contributes to our sense that the story is (still) escalating.

and

A story (any story, every story) makes its meaning at speed, a small structural pulse at a time. We read a bit of text and a set of expectations arise We could understand a story as simply a series of ... expectation/resolution moments.

Also, in as carefully-written a text as this, we should pay attention to his 'Ruthless Efficiency Principle':

the story form is ruthlessly efficient. Everything in a story should be to purpose. Our working assumption is that nothing exists in a story by chance or merely to serve some documentary function. Every element should be a little poem, freighted with subtle meaning that is in connection with the story's purpose.

This is a perfect description of Keegan's writing in *Small Things Like These*: everything serves a function, it is full of subtle meaning, and is as tightly patterned as a poem. Apparently she went through 41 drafts.

So for *Small Things Like These*, what are those crucial moments of escalation, its 'structural pulses'? These are moments which a teacher might draw out of pupils in class, and which reveal the substructure of the narrative (much in Keegan's writing is below the surface). My page by page notes sometimes point to these, but there is no correct answer: if a pupil can find

one of those pulses, and understand how it moves the story on in a 'non-trivial way', then that is an important element of understanding.

Some moments that might be examined:

- It could be said that there are essentially no important narrative escalations in the first three sections of the book. There are many important things of course, but Claire Keegan keeps us waiting, and waiting. She describes Furlong's life, the way he thinks, the life of New Ross leading up to Christmas and more, and we are aware that at some point there will be an escalation; we are holding our breath; the energy is building. Here is George Saunders:
 - *We might think of a story as a system for the transfer of energy. Energy, hopefully, gets made in the early pages and the trick, in the later pages, is to use that energy.*
- Section 4: it comes. The visit to the convent, which might have turned out to be just another routine delivery. But everything changes when he arrives at the chapel. On page 41 the girl with the roughly-cut hair comes to ask him for help. He '*felt himself stepping back*', ironically, this will be the prompt for, eventually, him stepping forward to confront the situation, and at the end taking Sarah home with the steps they make through New Ross.
- Another escalation: his discussion with Eileen in bed that night, pp 44-47, and her 'cheap blow' about his mother: she has sensed the danger of change in him. There has been a shift in their relationship.
- 50: his concern about the men sexually harassing Kathleen, which she brushes off. Something has certainly changed inside him.
- 53-56: the encounter with the young woman as he asks for a kettle to thaw the yard's lock. His previous self has been discomposed: he imagines another life. He is carrying this energy forward now.
- 59: the return to the convent, and finding the girl in the coal shed, her excrement on the floor. Reluctant though he is, he cannot ignore this.
- 62: a big escalation. He finds out the girl has a baby boy, just 14 weeks old. Now this is personal for Furlong, the parallel with his own (more fortunate) life impossible to avoid.
 - Saunders: *The preferred, most efficient, highest-order form of energy transfer (the premier way for a scene to advance the story in a non-trivial way) is for a beat to cause the next beat, especially if that next beat is felt as essential, i.e., as an escalation: a meaningful alteration in the terms of the story.*
- The following pages show the Mother Superior manipulating and trying to control him, at first successfully. This could be the end of the story. But on p.69 another change: his 'contrariness' means he stays, with a 'queer, new power', and although he accepts the bribe of money he delays his exit to talk to the girl.
- 71. Another step on his journey: he finds out that this girl and his mother are both called Sarah. In class: what do you expect to happen now? (and in retrospect, what is his point of no return? After what moment must he act?).

- In the following pages, there is little action: the family go to Mass, they continue the Christmas preparations. Again, we are waiting: so is he. What is happening inside him?
- 85. His attempted visit to Ned (who is in a convalescent home). A crucial escalation: the woman who points out the family resemblance. 86: his half-hour mulling over this, 'letting it stoke his mind.' In class: what is the connection between this moment and his thoughts about the girl in the last paragraph of Section 6?
- 93+ the conversation with Mrs Kehoe, and another point where the story might come to a halt (the road not taken): her warnings about not tangling with the Church. Look at 95: he politely declines to accept what she is saying. So a 'fundamental change' has happened within him?
 - Saunders: *What is escalation, anyway? How does a story produce the illusion of escalation? (Or, as a writer might ask it: "How can I get this stupid thing to escalate?") One answer: refuse to repeat beats. Once a story has moved forward, through some fundamental change in the character's condition, we don't get to enact that change again.*
- His walk through New Ross: on 99 he has come to terms with Ned as his father, and admires his 'act of daily grace'. So will he also do what a 'father' should?
- Imagine ending the story at this point.
 - Saunders: *Experimentally truncate a good story before the point where its creator actually ended it. Just cut it off and observe your reaction to that imposed ending. The resulting feeling will tell us something about what's missing. Or, conversely, about what the remaining text does supply, once we read it, that completes the transformation from "narrative" to "story."*
- The final pages act out inevitably. Ask in class: at what point did this become inevitable, the only path Furlong could take?
- Saunders: *We might think of structure as simply: an organisational scheme that allows the story to answer a question it has caused its reader to ask.*
- Saunders again on endings. What do we imagine happening on beyond the completion of this novel?
 - *One feature of a beautifully ended story is that we can imagine the lives of the characters continuing on beyond it.*
- And he also gets the final word:
 - *We might imagine a story as a room-sized black box. The writer's goal is to have the reader go into that box in one state of mind and come out in another. What happens in there has to be thrilling and non-trivial. That's it.*

Comparing Fintan O'Toole and Claire Keegan (July 2022)

They are two of the finest books by Irish writers published in 2021.

One is just 110 widely-spaced pages long, a work of fiction by a woman whose output over many years has been spare and careful, concentrating on just a few winter weeks in the life of a small-town fuel merchant.

The other is a big beast, 600 thrillingly-detailed pages by a prolific male journalist and literary critic which stitches together personal and public history, and covers his and the country's life all the way since 1958.

But despite these differences they have a meeting place, intersecting in Ireland of the mid-1980s, specifically in the idea of what we 'knew' or refused to accept we knew. Both are beautifully written books by highly intelligent authors that tell us a lot about what we were, from the perspective of what we are now.

[I have already written](#) about Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, and started that piece with this quotation from late on in the story:

Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?

Keegan's novel tells the story of the psychological journey of Furlong, a good man, as he has to come to terms with a discovery in the local convent, a story which has echoes in his own disturbed upbringing. His heroism, possibly at the expense of his own family, is constructed out of his determination to look at one of the darkest truths of Irish society, not to turn away from what he sees, and to act on what he now knows.

Fintan O'Toole's central thesis about that same society over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st is encapsulated in the title of his book, *We Don't Know Ourselves*. So often we have suppressed our knowledge - of truths, just for a start about abortion, about a corrupt Taoiseach, about clerical child abuse. We 'knew' about these things, but chose not to accept that knowledge, unlike Furlong, who at the end of Keegan's book takes responsibility, potentially at great personal cost.

In Chapter 24 of *We Don't Know Ourselves*, 'Foetal Attractions', O'Toole starts with a personal story: in 1976, an 18 year-old student at UCD, he was asked by a male friend for information about getting the latter's 16 year-old sister an abortion in England:

What was I supposed to do? Get up and storm out in a show of moral outrage? ... Or sit there and squirm and stammer out the quite truthful answer that I knew sweet damn all about any of this stuff? Or try somehow to be of use, to help the girl get this thing done so that after the school holidays, she could just turn up in class like everyone else, study for her Leaving Cert and get on

with her life? It's at moments like this, when you find yourself under pressure to make a choice you are not prepared for, that your hidden instincts reveal themselves.

He passed on information, and heard no more, only knowing that the girl was not pregnant by the time school resumed:

That was the way things were done.

Later in that chapter he turns to the subject that stains our recent history: the Mother and Baby Homes, including the Tuam scandal uncovered by Catherine Corless, and then other notorious events come at us in quick succession in the chapters which follow: GUBU (the subject of a fascinating Irish Times podcast recently), Bishop Eamonn Casey, the abuser Ivan Payne, the Kerry Babies (just a year before *Small Things Like These*, which takes place in New Ross in 1985). Keegan's dedication is

To the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries.

and on the next page she quotes the 1916 Proclamation in its noble and frequently-neglected resolution

To pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.

What follows is a narrative masterpiece, driven by the psychic tensions also explored by Fintan O'Toole, but here compressed into a single-strand story (one which apparently was redrafted 41 times).

As I wrote in my earlier piece, Furlong is beset by restlessness and anxiety (the strain of being alive). A charged object in his life is the jigsaw he asked for one Christmas, and

Like a jigsaw, his life is fractured, and never securely whole. He is all too aware of its fragility, both financial and emotional, and how close everyone is to disaster. He is aware both of how fortunately his own life has turned out and of how it might have been different.

He constantly questions himself:

What was it all for? ... Might things never change or develop into something else, or new? Lately, he had begun to wonder what mattered, apart from Eileen and the girls. He was touching forty but didn't feel himself to be getting anywhere or making any kind of headway and could not but sometimes wonder what the days were for.

At the end of the book the choice he makes is in a sense inevitable: if he does not take it, the days will be for nothing.

Early on, Keegan holds her nerve. It is not until Chapter 4 that the true subject of the book sidles into view, with a brilliant paragraph that starts with a curt, ominous statement:

It was a December of crows.

This is followed by a free-wheeling sentence starting *People had never seen the likes of them* which arrives at the end in the word 'convent', a place now already overshadowed by images of scavenging birds. The next paragraph echoes the description of Tom Buchanan's mansion in *The Great Gatsby*, both places from which power is exercised (it is a *powerful-looking* place, a sly play on that Hiberno-English coinage). The people of the town talk about the place and its attendant business:

Little was known about the training school, but the laundry had a good reputation.

Little may be known, but there is 'talk' and 'reports' and 'claims':

A good half of what was said could not be believed, and indeed Furlong didn't like to believe any of it.

And just there is the story: he does not like to believe any of it, but eventually he has to, for his own integrity. When he leaves the convent after that first time he asks for directions from an old man slashing thistles, who tells him

This road will take you wherever you go, son.

He returns home, and his wife Eileen tries to dampen his curiosity about the place. He asks her What is it you know? but she tells him That such things had nothing to do with them. Like Lady Macbeth, tells her too-soft husband *Consider it not so deeply*. Macbeth is aware of the dangers - *To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself* - but then disastrously suppresses this knowledge to try to save himself; Furlong opens it up to save himself. It might be 'best' not to know himself, but unlike so many people in our history, he is prepared to look at what is hiding in plain sight.

On his walk back to the convent at the end of the book, as Furlong crosses the stout-black river (his Rubicon), and thinks of its certitude, he

envied the Barrow's knowledge of her course, how easily the water followed its incorrigible way, so freely to the open sea.

He feels *his self-preservation and courage battling against each other* and considers taking his charge to the priest's house, but he knows deep down that the priests are complicit, part of the same abusive system of power as the nuns:

Several times, already, his mind had gone on ahead, and had concluded the priests already knew ... They're all the one.

That is Fintan O'Toole's vision too: it was all one, and we knew or we should have known that. Close to the end of the book, after quoting Keats's famous statement about negative capability, he suggests that

Maybe Ireland has reached the point of accepting that half-knowledge - the ability to see clearly what is, while also acknowledging what remains dark - is better than the swinging between the pretence of knowing everything and the denial of what you really do know.

In their examinations of that journey and of how we may have reached that point, from two utterly different angles, these books are essential reading.

Some ideas for the Comparative section of the Leaving Certificate

THEMES

- Responsibility and provision; duty.
- Personal blindness, self-realisation and personal development. And the parallel blindness of Irish society.
- Conscience, integrity, individual self. Moral dilemmas, ethics.
- The fragility of life.
- The influences of and shaping by childhood.
- The power of economics in shaping individual lives.
- Time.
- The influence of the past.
- Religion (morality, marriage): see Cultural Context.
- Furlong's journey ('wherever you want to go, son'). Doorways. Think of Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'.
- Yearning, escape (both Furlong and the girls).
- Beliefs, faith; where personal values clash with religious doctrine.
- Complicity.
- Family; parenting.
- The search for Identity (reflections) - alternative versions of life. The shaping of character. Furlong's mother could have been in the convent.
- [All elements of Cultural Context can open up theme too].

CULTURAL CONTEXT

- Gender - treatment of women (see Mrs Kehoe's remark). The Virgin Mary (p.15) 'kneeling passively'.
- Class attitudes.
- An obsession with transgressive sexuality. The 'fallen' women, the 'shame' of illegitimate birth.
- Treatment of children. Illegitimate children do not 'matter' as much as ones born from a marriage - 'common'.
- The family, and those excluded from that norm.
- And do some women internalise/enable this treatment?
- Roman Catholic Church: a power-structure, hierarchy ('all the one' - Mrs Kehoe). The convent, the priests, the schools (Furlong was spat on and called 'a name'; his daughters have only the one 'good' school to go to). The power-struggle of the (superficially civil) encounter with the Mother Superior. Pre-divorce, contraception, abortion.
- Class attitudes (the Protestant Mrs Wilson).
- 1985: economic problems, closing businesses (Albatros, Graves & Co etc). Even the supposedly secure Furlongs need to be careful. A constrained world. Mick Synnott's foraging son.
- A close-knit community, at times oppressively so (can be censorious). And this can make a family like the Furlongs all the more vulnerable.
- Monoculture in terms of religion, race, language (the rare Polish and Russian foreign visitors). Very insular.
- Conformity.
- The impact of this culture on individual lives. How would lives be different now?
- The moving statues 1985: see [the first 5 minutes](#) of the relevant episode of *Reeling in the Years*.

GENERAL VISION AND VIEWPOINT

- The overall context: recession, emigration, people everywhere struggling.
- The grim oppressive power-structure of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Treatment of children.
- Furlong's decency (like Kinsella in *Foster*).
- But also, the joy of family life (is this threatened for Furlong at the end?).
- The end: is trouble ahead? Do we admire him? Is he 'foolish'?
- The River: the dark undertow, Furlong's journey.
- Reflections (windows, mirrors).
- Fracturing: 'a part of him', the jigsaw. Is he made whole by the end?
- Doors, windows, locks.

LITERARY GENRE (not examined in 2025).

- Understated style; a spare style with moments of greater elaboration.
 - Opening up big issues in the particular.
 - The subtlety of many details (the 'hurried-looking hand' from the Mother Superior on the card containing money, revealing how cynical the 'gift' was - a bribe)
 - The withholding of information, particularly Furlong's father. The scarcely-noticeable seeds Keegan drops every now and then about Ned.
 - Primarily a linear structure, but Furlong's past story is gradually revealed, woven into the present.
 - Use of motifs (doors, windows, mirrors, particular grammatical constructions).
 - Use of imagery, particular symbolism (overlaps with motifs).
 - 'Escalations': key moments which push on the story - see [the post on George Saunders](#).
 - 3rd person narrative which comes out of Furlong's consciousness.
 - Rich use of local detail and atmosphere to evoke New Ross in 1980s.
 - The end: as with *Foster*, there is an after-story for us to imagine.
-

If you found these free teaching notes helpful,
I'd be happy to be bought a coffee or two:

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/juliangirdham>

