



Modern Gods

Nick Laird

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An award-winning author who writes in “a wonderfully original and limber voice” (*The New York Times*) delivers his most accomplished novel to date—the story of two sisters whose lives are dramatically upended.

Alison Donnelly is getting wed again, after a disastrous first marriage. With her two young children, she hopes to pick up the pieces and get her life back together. Her sister Liz, a disillusioned anthropology professor with a chaotic personal life who resides in New York City, has come home to Northern Ireland for the wedding. From there she will go to an island off Papua New Guinea to be the presenter for a BBC show called “The Latest of the Gods,” about a new religious movement led by a cargo cult prophet.

But both sisters’ lives are about to go off script. Alison wakes up the day after her wedding to find herself living in a nightmare, discovering—on the front page of the paper—that her new husband has a past neither of them can escape. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Liz becomes drawn into the world of Belef, the subject of her show, a mysterious, charismatic Melanesian woman whose sway over her followers is creating conflict with local authorities and missionaries.

Both Liz and Alison are looking to be reborn, to be cleansed in some way, and the dramatic journeys that they take form the backbone of this compelling novel about trust, intimacy, complicity, religious belief, and the bonds of family life.

Modern Gods Details

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From Reader Review Modern Gods for online ebook

Hanneke says

A very original novel. Nick Laird shows with devastating clarity how sectarian religious violence evolves along similar lines whether it occurs in Ulster, Northern Ireland, or a small island off the coast of Papua New Guinea. Furthermore, the novel reminds you what an odious influence Western missionaries can have in communities that are led to believe that it is advantageous to adopt the foreign religion purely on the ground of the promises it makes. I would imagine that preachers in places like Papua New Guinea of whatever denomination will have all in common that they are so fanatically single-minded that they will not let the idea enter their mind that they advocate ideas and values which are truly foreign and disadvantageous to the native people, such as the concept of hell. How cruel it is to be introduced to hell, if you had previously no idea of its existence! The same religious single-mindedness applies to the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Island and the parallel is convincingly demonstrated in this novel. The novel is about loss, love, danger, violence and the persistence to look the other way. I really liked this novel. It was an interesting and touching read.

Shawn Mooney says

Abandoned just shy of the 70% mark, with a couple hundred pages left to go. It wasn't awful, but not good enough. At best, this was going to end up being a three-star read for me and life is too short to waste my time on anything that mediocre.

SueLucie says

A novel of two halves. On the one hand we follow a family in crisis. Alison has escaped her first marriage to a drunken, abusive husband and has hitched herself to a seemingly good man who turns out to have the worst sort of past for a family to accommodate in Northern Ireland of the 21st century. Two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, memories are still too raw.

‘A second marriage meant substituting old ceremonies and traditions with different ones, meant trading in the old gods for new, but Alison couldn’t help it; she didn’t believe in it any longer. She’d lost her faith and found the new gods to be false gods.’

On the other hand we journey with Alison’s sister, Liz, to Papua New Guinea to make a TV documentary about a local woman who has established a religious following in the heart of the jungle (a cargo cult, a concept new to me and utterly fascinating). This is in direct competition with a Protestant mission on the same island and here lies the link between the two halves of the novel.

Nick Laird presents a thoughtful and carefully written take on religion (of any denomination), its genesis and how it survives, mostly through the observations of our anthropologist Liz.

‘...how long can you enforce belief based on some future event occurring? How long can Belef promise and not deliver? Here Liz drew a little asterisk, then, at the bottom of the page, its twin, and wrote: Of course, Christians have been waiting for two thousand years for their own cargo! The trick is to keep them on edge -

on red alert - 'one cannot know the hour.'"

'It seemed to Liz that Josh was living out the longings of a mystic who'd pitched up in the desert two thousand years or so ago. He's staked his life - and his wife's, his children's lives, the little time he'd got on this good green earth - on something he could neither see nor hear. He had a hunch, a feeling in his gut, and on that he'd bet the farm.'

Are we to think Belef's followers foolish and susceptible to her charisma? Are they not living hard, impoverished lives, hopeful of better and comforted by the force of her self-belief? Have they turned their backs on the Mission or are they, like Usai, torn between the two and hedging their bets?

There is no need to labour the comparisons between the versions of religion we see here, their competitiveness and their inability to exist side by side with each other. Religions are shown to be basically the same - live according to certain rules and have faith that the reward will be received sometime afterwards. Whether one will ever be able to accommodate the existence of another is a topical question, as it has been throughout history. I'd certainly recommend this book.

With thanks to Harper Collins 4th Estate for the opportunity to read and review this book.

Allan says

Lost my review - in a nutshell though, I didn't buy the main point of the NI thread, knowing the 'nosiness' of locals and the infamy of certain individuals in our society, and while I understood the symbolism of the New Ulster narrative, it held no interest for me. Shame but there you are.

Rebecca says

To some, Nick Laird will only ever be Mr. Zadie Smith. Many probably have no idea that he's an accomplished poet as well as a fiction writer. I've read all six of his books now: three collections of poems and three novels. While his two previous novels were firmly in what could be called the 'lad lit' camp, with *Modern Gods* he's upped his game and is attempting a broader and more literary statement.

The Donnelly family of Ulster is preparing for a wedding. But it's not exactly a time of unadulterated joy. It's Alison's second marriage and she has two small children from her previous relationship with Bill, an alcoholic. Alison's sister Liz is an anthropology professor in New York, and although her professional life has taken off - after the success of her self-help book on Lévi-Strauss, she's been invited to present a documentary on a new cult in Papua New Guinea - her personal life is in tatters after she finds her boyfriend in bed with another man. Meanwhile, their brother, Spencer, is sleeping with a married colleague, and their mum, Judith, is ill with untreatable uterine cancer and hasn't yet told her children.

It's only on the morning after her wedding that Alison - and the rest of the world, via the papers - learns that her groom was involved in Catholic-Protestant violence some years back. At last the mini-profiles that have interrupted the text at various points make sense: these are the victims. As Alison loses faith in the idols of marriage and family, Liz also has reason to question what she holds true as she travels to the fictional island of New Ulster, where she is to interview the cult leader Belef about her new religion, dubbed "The Story". This is a mixture of Christianity and traditional myths and originated, it seems, primarily as a way for Belef

to process her grief over the accidental deaths of her children.

The Irish strand of the novel is much the better one, with the complicated and sometimes funny family dynamic reminding me of Anne Enright's *The Green Road* and Jonathan Tropper's *This Is Where I Leave You*. The Third World interlude struck me as unsubtle – “New Ulster” demands comparison with Northern Ireland, and the name “Belef” is just one letter away from “belief” – and mostly irrelevant. Oddly enough, this is exactly how I felt about Zadie Smith's latest novel, *Swing Time*, in which the visits to Africa feel forced and weak compared to the central story of troubled family and friendship back in London.

Still, I see what Laird is trying to do here: point to the inevitable links between religion and violence, and show how difficult it is to move beyond beliefs that seem to be bred in the bone. And I appreciate how he occasionally turns Liz's anthropologist's eye onto his homeland: “Ulster—a gift-based culture. You received, you returned, you passed it on. The statelet ran on quid pro quo, on tit for tat” and “What fetish gods the Donnellys were! They'd stay in a marriage so as not to waste the cargo of a fondue set.” Though I don't think the novel is entirely successful, it's interesting to see themes of faith, family and violence coming to the fore.

Originally published at Nudge.

Cherise Wolas says

This is a hard novel to rate and so I won't. The writing is very fine. I loved reading about this family, the two sisters, Liz and Alison, trying to reclaim themselves in very different ways, Alison's coming second wedding, the relationships with their parents and brother Spencer. There is a wonderful sharpness to the descriptions and the dialogue. From the start we understand something else is going on, for the book opens in a pub, with people being gunned down, and there are short inserts through the book in which we learn who the victims were. We also learn who Alison's new, mild-mannered new husband is. I found it all fascinating. When Liz goes on assignment to Papua New Guinea to host a BBC 2 presentation of a cargo cult that has sprung up, I was interested, but grew less interested and found myself doing what I rarely do, flip through pages seeing how many to go before I was back in Northern Ireland with the family. Perhaps my interest fell away because the whole setting in PNG, the jungle, the native-born, the cargo cult that seems to have burgeoned, lacked Conradian weight. Still, this is a novel I'm very glad to have read.

?Tara Sheehan? says

This is not a book to read for entertainment, it's one to read for education, for philosophical reasons.

If you have an emotional attachment to Ireland and its history, it's a bloody painful one to get through.

The novel opens violent and bloody so the first impression you're given is one of monsters especially with the Halloween theme placed over the scene and no explanation given for the massacre. Interspersed throughout the story you'll suddenly come across a small story snuck in about one of the people who was part of that massacre then the main story picks up again so faces are put with the bodies from that horrific opening. Eventually an explanation is given late in the book as to who was involved and why.

One of the best lines is when a supporting character is trying to comfort another and tells her “I wish someone would explain Northern Ireland to me,” and the main character replied, “Me too.” That pretty much

sums up the history and turbulence in which this story is set; no one, not even those who live there, can ever fully wrap their hearts and minds around it.

At its heart this is a story about the messiness of families, relationships and trying to navigate a world where boundaries don't exist or move as fluid as water. Thrown in early, the author highlights the generational issue when it comes to dating that it seems increasingly newer generations of people are deciding at an exponential level that the 'norms' of dating mean to have sex with whoever is available regardless of gender and monogamous relationships exist only in history books; that could just be a thing in the States and not the rest of the world. The rules of motherhood were one of his better introspections on human behavior because any parent being honest with themselves would agree they made perfect sense.

At times he used the "f-word" so often I wondered if he had quota or if he was trying to create a drinking game – take a shot every time it appears. Since a good chunk of the story is set in Ireland he did at least use phrase and terminology appropriate for the country and people which is appreciated though I'm sure if Americans read this they'll need to keep google open to understand what he means or we'll be having reviewers claim Laird's homophobic for using the word "fag" because they didn't know that means "cigarette" in the UK. You shake your head but I've seen it.

The reader needs some kind of familiarity with what has happened, and on a smaller level continues to happen, in the North of Ireland to truly appreciate the story. Even small things will lose their humor if they don't understand passages like when he describes his characters leaving County Derry and the context as to why the sign showing they're leaving the area has been defaced. Or how another sign sums up so accurately the convoluted politics of the area and times: "In Texas murder gets you the electric chair. In Magherafelt you get chair of the council."

For me the hardest part to read was when one of the characters tries to justify what he did by saying, "They were killing us for being Protestant, just for existing. We had to strike back." I'm an Irish Catholic who lost family at the hands of Protestants simply because my family is Catholic. Our whole country was being run for hundreds of years by people who wanted to kill us, exterminate us, just for being Catholic; it was a genocide that England has never been punished for. Laws were created and enforced making everything about us illegal even into the late 1900s; so we began to fight back. It's always been hard that for years, even now, they justified what they did and called us terrorists for fighting for our right to exist. All they had to do was let us live and treat us as equals and none of this would have happened.

As an Irish Catholic it was interesting reading the dynamics in an Irish Protestant family because if you didn't know their religious leanings they very well could have been from the other side. Their struggles, their faith, their chaos and confusion with the politics of the area as well as how they feel regarding their own who use violence is exactly the same as us. When one of the characters is being interviewed for his part in killing innocent people just because they were Catholic he sounds so justified, even thrilled, I felt my soul break from the pain then fill with rage; it may be a fictional story but these kind of people and these events really happen and that's where the emotional attachment hits thanks to Laird's descriptive writing. It would have been easy to fall into old genetic patterns and just hold onto that hatred if Laird hadn't shown that just as with Catholics there were Protestants who were truly good people who wanted nothing to do with the violence and maybe we needed to remember we can't continue to judge and punish them for their religious beliefs if we want the same.

I only had two issues overall with the book. One was with the Part 2 of the story where one of the characters goes off to New Ulster to research a cult like group where Christians are painted as invaders destroying indigenous cultures (which they have) and are willing to cause death to spread their faith (something I'm not even going to touch). I didn't really get why the author included this storyline as it didn't seem to have anything to do with the bulk of the book unless it was just because the place she went to was called "New Ulster" like it was some kind of tie in to the Ulster in Ireland. Apparently the author just made that place up as I can't find anywhere in Papua New Guinea called "New Ulster". I guess you could stretch and say it was

like a mirror to the Catholic-Protestant multi-centuries war in Ireland as you have an invading Christian faith bent on wiping out the existing people but whatever it still felt like it was 2 separate books meshed together and imperfectly at that.

The other issue I had was the bias towards Protestants being the innocent victims who were wrongly being murdered by Catholics. Although Laird did paint nearly all but one of his Protestant characters as having some humanity and not being pro-murder towards Catholics there was still never anyone pointing out WHY the violence and issues even existed; it's not like Catholics just woke up one day and decided "Hey we're bored let's set off some bombs or shoot up people!" It's a verifiable truth the history is a convoluted mess but you can't explain anything or tell a story properly without showing both sides.

Faith says

The description of this book reads in part, "Both Liz and Alison are looking to be reborn, to be cleansed in some way, and the dramatic journeys that they take form the backbone of this compelling novel about trust, intimacy, complicity, religious belief, and the bonds of family life." I don't think that the person who wrote that summation actually read the book. Neither Liz nor Alison is "reborn" or "cleansed" here, and no one takes a journey (although they do both need to examine their own contributions to unfortunate events). The book opens with a terrorist attack on an Irish pub, in which several people are killed. The way in which this incident is woven into the story was the most interesting part of the book for me.

The focus of the book is the Donnelly family, including the parents Judith and Kenneth, who both have serious health issues, and their grown children Liz, Alison and Spencer. Liz is an anthropologist living in New York who comes to Ireland for the second wedding of her younger sister Alison. Alison is marrying Stephen, a man with a tragic past, and she really should have listened to him when he tried to tell her about it before the wedding. After the wedding their marriage is severely challenged. Spencer's sole contribution to the book is to have a boring affair with a married woman. His character is given short shrift here and I have no idea why he was included in the book. There is also a dog who Liz smuggles into Ireland and dumps on her parents while she goes to New Guinea. The dog then disappears until the final pages of the book.

Liz has been asked to fill in as host of a BBC documentary on a religious movement in New Ulster near Papua New Guinea. A woman called Belef has started a new religion there, combining local religions with Christianity. She communicates with the dead, including her daughter, in order to obtain the cargo that she sees going exclusively to the white people. Belef is a grieving mother who is part insane and part shrewd. The chapters of the book dealing with the film crew, the Christian missionaries and Belef and her followers were my least favorite.

I found this book disjointed. Both the Belef story and the Irish story (to a lesser extent) deal with the role of religion in people's lives. Both Belef and Judith use religious rituals to deal with death, grief and illness. Religion is also a source of violent conflict in both settings and divides the Protestants and Catholics in Ireland and the Christian missionaries and Belef in New Guinea. However, I thought that the religious linkage didn't completely tie the two parts of the book together. I think that I would have been happier with just the Alison/Stephen storyline.

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher.

Ali says

I really enjoyed this book. I wanted to read more about everyone's story but without feeling like I'd been left hanging. The characters were introspective without being self-deprecating or whiny and the depiction of the cult and Liz's experience in their world felt realistic. I'd read a whole, albeit short, book about either Liz or Alison and where they go from here. The ideas of "modern gods" is touched on appropriately and thoughtfully - is it technology? Comfort? Love? Money? Success?

James Murphy says

Modern Gods is a novel examining religion, death, tribalism, and culture on 2 islands on opposite sides of the earth: Ulster, what we commonly call Northern Ireland, though it does contain 3 counties of the Republic of Ireland, and New Ireland, which Nick Laird calls New Ulster, an island belonging to Papua New Guinea. It's also a novel about 2 sisters, Liz and Alison. Liz is a teaching anthropologist who joins a BBC crew making a documentary about the "world's newest religion," a cargo cult called the Story which has sprung up around a dynamic Melanesian woman named Belef. Alison, the younger sister, works for the family estate agency in Ballyglass and is getting remarried.

It's a novel of many parallels. Laird carefully points to the similarities between 2 cultures we'd normally think aren't alike. He equates the giving of wedding gifts for an Ulster wedding, for instance, with the exchange system of Melanesian peoples, calling them both gift-based cultures. Obviously there are religions in conflict. Not just the Protestants and Catholics in Ulster but Belef's cargo cult the Story is in desperate competition with the missionary Christianity on the island. Just as obviously, Ulster is violent. But so is New Ulster in these times not far removed from the stone age with its peoples intoxicated by the materialistic promise of the modern as well as by the friction caused by 2 contrasting religions rubbing together. If Liz is an anthropologist studying primitive culture in the field, so is a man named David Boyd who interviews Stephen, Alison's new husband, about atrocities committed against Catholics in the past.

Laird connects the 2 islands, the 2 cultures, and all the divergences and correspondences of religion in ways I expected. Certainly one reason I like this novel so much is that it performed exactly as I felt it would in mining the veins of my own thinking and beliefs. I began it eager to follow the path of its ideas to the food for thought I hoped for. It delivered, and Laird laid it out with an elegance I appreciate and admire. He skillfully shifts his narrative almost 180 degrees back and forth between Ulster where the night stars are "exit wounds" and the older skies of New Ulster, "Galactic time, nighttime, deep time, the time of stars, time of the moon." And near the end Liz lies in the dark reflecting how "she had spent her lifetime studying the differences, how one tribe does this, another that--and all the time there was no difference, not really, just tiny variations on a theme of great suffering, great loss."

Ayelet Waldman says

Too much time has passed since Laird's last book, but this was worth the wait!

Bandit says

In literary format the Irish (particularly of the northern variety) tend to come across as a sour dour depressed bunch. At least from what I've read thus far. It isn't utterly unreasonable either, the country and nation divided as they are has had their share of sadness. And while unhappy families certainly make for more interesting reading as Tolstoy once mentioned, it can be an emotionally draining experience. This was such a case. A story that concentrates on two sisters (very different and yet presumably shaped by the same familial events) as they struggle with life's vicissitudes. Both romantically challenged to varied degrees, one goes from one messed up marriage to another, one (unmarried and childless) goes to PNG to do a tv presentation on a cargo cult. Mind you, despite romantic challenges, this is very much not a chicklit or a romcom of any sorts and is way to bleak for either. But the cargo cult aspect is what attracted me to this book. The psychology behind such things is fascinating to me. Albeit cargo cults are a different bag of tricks altogether, usually a product of a primitive society such as the one described here, a syncretic Papua New Guinea variation. With the prerequisite paternalistic perspective, because frankly how can there be any objectivity when perceiving something so profoundly backward to modern ways. And all of this is cleverly juxtaposed with the greatest cult of all...family, the only institution where all logic is abandoned in favor of the blind pursuit of unconditional love shared DNA promises. With that narrative construct the author genuinely delivers the goods of a first class literary novel, one that might not have necessarily sung for me, but was objectively quality material with very strong characterizations. Took a few chapters to get used to his writing cadences, which much like the Irish accents have a music of their own, but it did engage after a while and though I didn't love the players, I enjoyed the play. Thanks Netgalley.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

It didn't take much more than the mention of Papua New Guinea for me to request an eARC of this novel. I did not know nor did I care that Nick Laird is married to Zadie Smith, something I only discovered after reading.

I've always loved novels featuring anthropologists, linguists, or people struggling through similar issues. There is so much ripe for conflict when white people (or people from the developed world) go traipsing through the world to study or convert.

Some of my favorites:

- Mating by Norman Rush
- Euphoria by Lily King
- State of Wonder by Ann Patchett (up until the blue mushrooms)
- The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin (yes aliens, yes anthropology)
- The People in the Trees by Hanya Yanagihara (hated it, loved it, couldn't decide)

So I was hoping for more of that. 25% in, the narrative was still in Ireland, focusing on the siblings in a family and their somewhat dysfunctional adult lives. Interspersed with that were profiles of people who had died in a shooting, which I was confused about at first. I didn't dislike the beginning, but it definitely was not what I expected when I started.

Eventually Liz, the older sister of the family, gets to New Ulster, an island off of PNG, and starts her work. She is more of a journalist and is there very briefly, investigating what might be the newest religion in the world, a female-led cargo cult. I think the author got a lot right about PNG from what I know about it through my own reading; the only thing I'm not sure about is how Liz (and her BBC crew) were able to connect so easily to Belef, the leader of the cargo cult. Anthropologists talk about the importance of trust and understanding the culture and still spending years gaining the kind of access her crew gets in under two weeks, foreign technology and being filmed included. That's a bit of a stretch. Not to mention that Liz, while

trained in anthropology, learns much about what she knows by skimming a few books she's heard about on the long plane rides over.

The novel as a whole draws some interesting parallels. There is a storyline dealing with the aftermath of a shooting that happened during "the troubles" in Northern Ireland, questioning how people move on from that violence and form normal lives. In New Ulster, like most of Papua New Guinea, World War II was the first real connection they had with the outside world. Missionaries have moved in and started to insist the natives act a certain way, but these also seem to be puppets of the government and/or commerce, which is not good!

We really only see the natives through the lens of Liz, which is more fair than the lens of the missionary and his family. I would have liked an entire novel of Liz and Belef and the cargo cult and ghost children, and I'm still mulling over why the author chose to make over half of the novel about this other story.

Thanks to the publisher for providing early access to the title via Edelweiss.

Roger Brunyate says

Does Not Quite Connect

I was prepared to like this a lot. Nick Laird writes superbly. He addresses his native land (and mine), Northern Ireland (Ulster), with faithful objectivity and a less usual perspective: Protestant, rather than the more familiar Catholic. Yet he does not fall into the provincialism of so much Ulster writing; many of the characters have experience in other cities, other continents, and almost half the novel takes place on an island in Papua New Guinea, fittingly called New Ulster.

That split locale was another thing that got me thinking of five stars. It takes courage to open a novel's scope as widely as Laird has done, and I take my hat off to anyone who attempts it. After returning home from New York to attend the wedding of her divorced sister Alison, Liz Donnelly flies to the South Pacific to record a program for the BBC about a cargo cult on this remote (but imaginary) island. Alison goes on honeymoon to Greece with her new husband, Stephen. Both stories are well developed and interesting in themselves, and there is at least one parallel between them, in that both involve religious strife that leads inevitably to violence. But the parallel is a subtle one. While I enjoyed the swift changes of texture between the two stories, and sensed rather than analyzed their kinship, I did expect a closer connection as they both wound up, so that the lessons of one might illuminate the other. But this did not happen. Both stories ended, more or less neatly. But they never came together. And my presumptive five stars dwindled to four, though a high four.

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I have put this aside for a week, meaning to write a lot more, but work has got the better of me. So I shall just end with some examples of Laird's writing.

On the weather in Northern Ireland:

The light of Ulster traveled not by particle or wave but by indirection, hint, and rumor. A kind of light of no-light, emanating from a sun so swathed in clouds it was impossible to tell where it lurked in the sky.

On sectarian division:

If you tried to sit on the fence, you came to realize that you couldn't move, not an inch, for you would topple off and land on one side or the other, covered in bullshit. The north was thesis and antithesis, but no synthesis.

On the slow recovery from stroke:

To see him do such simple things with such tremulous care and hysical trepidation. His eyes expressing fear, his fingers fiddling with a zipper. It was like the element he lived in had changed, had once been air and now was water, and the entire choreography of daily life had to be relearned.

Laird's writing about Papua New Guinea is equally good, with hints of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Peter Matthiesen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, especially in his attitude to missionaries, but still very much his own. However, I can't quote everything!

Barbara says

This is Nick Laird's third novel. As he describes himself, he is referred to as an "Irish poet and a British novelist". That goes with being from Northern Ireland. In this novel, he tells the stories of two sisters, Liz and Alison Donnelly from a small town in Northern Ireland. Liz is an anthropologist, currently living in New York, and on her way to an island off of Papua New Guinea (PNG) named New Ulster (a fictitious place) to film a documentary for BBC4. The subject of interest is a woman named Belef, and her followers are what's known as a "cargo cult". The topic of cargo cults is interesting enough to pull in readers. Alison, mother of two, and divorced from an alcoholic abuser, is about to get remarried.

The Guardian referred to this novel, appropriately, as "a tale of two tribes". Laird tells the story of the tribes of Northern Ireland and PNG, without ever resorting to hyperbole. Protestant religiosity occupies a central role in both tribes. In PNG, a missionary, angry at Belef's growing power over locals, reports her to authorities for a minor infraction. The intervention of the authorities does not end well. In Northern Ireland, the Presbyterian church is at the center of the story. As in New Ulster, the local church, as well as as the history of sectarian violence, hold sway over the family. Laird describes the materialism surrounding the upcoming wedding of Alison, and parallels it with the dreams of the New Ulster inhabitants who wish for appliances, tvs, and more to come from the sky or the sea. The similarities of the tribes are convincing.

It is 19 years after the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. Despite the passage of time, many in the North, have not reconciled the past with the present. This is at the heart of Alison's story. In Liz's trip to New Ulster, we see the continuation of colonialism in the independent state. The American missionaries have brought about some crucial changes, particularly improving the lives of women. In the past widows were killed, and women's lives were not valued. But we see at the same time, they wield tremendous power with local authorities who depend on donations from the missionaries' home church in America. That is why when Belef's church poses a threat to the power of the missionaries and their church, the local authorities are at their beck and call. The BBC documentary process is also indicative of how those of us who live in developed countries view people in developing societies. They are "the other", "the exotic", and we want to keep our distance.

I am a big fan of Laird as a novelist, poet, and human being. This novel does not require readers to know a lot about Northern Ireland or the Troubles to appreciate. In fact, both societies in the book will seem "foreign" to readers, and provide journeys to new places.
