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## Chapter 7

### **“Lazy Reading” and “Half-Formed Things”: Indeterminacy and Responses to Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing***

Billy Clark

#### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter considers how ideas developed within relevance theory can be applied in accounting for different kinds of responses to Eimear McBride’s novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*.<sup>1</sup> The discussion here focuses on the opening of the novel, using this to illustrate difficulties posed for readers by the novel as a whole and to consider how different ways of responding to these difficulties can lead to different kinds of responses.

McBride’s novel is a challenging text which raises issues for pragmatic theories as well as for readers, since it is hard to establish what it explicitly and implicitly communicates. Some readers (including, significantly, some critics and judges for literary awards) have responded positively to the novel. Others (including many literary agents and publishers) have done so negatively. Some readers report beginning with a negative reaction and then becoming more positive. This chapter suggests that ideas developed within relevance theory

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for helpful feedback and discussion to Siobhan Chapman, John Mullan, and to audiences at the Poetics and Linguistics Association conference in Cagliari in 2016, the International Pragmatics Association in Belfast in 2017, the Stylistics Circle in London in 2016, and research seminars at Middlesex University and Sheffield Hallam University.

(Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 2015) can help us to understand how texts differ as well as how readers respond differently to specific texts, including McBride's novel.

The chapter begins by outlining some features of the novel, its publishing history, and different kinds of responses. It then considers some of the pragmatic processes involved in interpreting all texts and introduces ideas from relevance theory which will be used in the later discussion. These concern indeterminacies and the pragmatic processes involved in understanding what texts convey explicitly (seen as partly implicit by many pragmatic theories, including relevance theory), what they communicate implicitly (implicatures), varying degrees of "spontaneousness" (as discussed by Furlong, 1996; 2007; 2011), and the open-ended and ongoing nature of interpretations. The chapter considers how each of these are relevant to understanding and characterising varying responses to McBride's novel, relating this discussion to an informal characterisation of reading processes suggested in an interview with McBride by the critic and literary scholar John Mullan.

## ***7.2. A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing***

*A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* is about a girl's experience, starting from before she is born, told in a style which immerses readers in her experience.<sup>2</sup> Here is the opening of the novel:

For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear  
your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did.  
Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion here does not reveal much of the content of the book. For a very useful discussion, including of its writing, editing and reception, see Collard (2016), which the discussion here draws on for several points.

Walking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son. Smell from dettol through her skin. Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some. Her heart going pat. Going dum dum dum. Don't mind me she's going to your room. See the. Jesus. What have they done? Jesus. Bile for. Tidals burn. Ssssh. All over. Mother. She cries. Oh no. Oh no no no.

(McBride, 2013, p.2)

This is a difficult novel in at least two senses: first, it is hard for readers to process the text and understand what exactly is happening at particular points in the story; second, it presents a series of events which are traumatic and disturbing. One of the most salient features of the novel is its “fractured language”. The text consists largely of short sentences and fragments, with little guidance to help readers resolve indeterminacies about propositions expressed. This style has led to comparisons with work by Joyce (who McBride has explicitly referred to as an influence), Faulkner and Beckett, among others (see, for example, Wood 2014).<sup>3</sup>

The book divided readers as soon as it had any. It took nine years to find a publisher, eventually succeeding after McBride approached the independent publisher Galley Beggar Press, based near her home at the time in Norwich. Until then, responses from agents and publishers were negative or lukewarm. As Collard points out, some readers in these organisations made positive comments even when reaching negative decisions. He writes (Collard, 2016, p.21, “What was particularly exasperating was the often positive quality of the negative responses. In one case somebody scrawled across a standard rejection letter *I suppose this is some kind of masterpiece.*” After publication, it still took some time for the

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<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the linguistic similarity to Beckett's prose fiction is greater than to Joyce's, given features such as the large amount of punctuation in the text.

book to receive significant positive responses. A key one came in a review by the writer Anne Enright in *The Guardian* (Enright, 2013). She described the book as “an instant classic”, “hard to read for the best reasons: everything about it is intense and difficult and hard-won” (Enright, 2013). To her, McBride was as a genius. After quoting the opening lines, she said, “If this kind of thing bores or frightens you, then there are many other wonderful books out there for you to enjoy. The adventurous reader, however, will find that they have a real book on their hands, a live one, a book that is not like any other”.

Significantly, judges for important literary prizes responded positively. Collard quotes Caitlin Moran’s description of her response when reading the book for the 2014 Bailey’s Prize, which the book won. After commenting that Moran “muddled her metaphors”, Collard quotes her as saying, “Ten pages in and all the bells start ringing. It explodes into your chest” (Collard, 2016, p. 27). This reported move from a more negative to a more positive attitude echoes one reported by the novelist Elizabeth McCracken, a family friend, who described her reaction when reading a draft manuscript:

I knew she’d been working on a book — she called it her beast — and when she was finished she’d asked me to read it. I took it nervously . . . And for the first page and a half I thought, Oh dear, no, too self-conscious, what a shame. Then about halfway down the second page, my brain figured it out and *the book had me*, and I realised that the prose was the opposite of self-conscious: it just took my self-conscious brain that long to give itself over to the language.

(quoted by Collard, 2016, p. 22)

The book still divides readers. In March 2018, Amazon reviews reflected the range of positive and negative responses, as well as some in-between. The average score was 3 out of

5 stars. Here are three examples (a positive one, a negative one, also mentioned by Collard, and an “in-between”):

[insert Figure 1 here]

All three of these, like many other reviews, mention the difficulties in reading the book.

Some of the positive ones, like the one from “Laurenevie”, suggest that it is worth expending the effort to get to the stage where readers begin to enjoy the it (if they do).

One way of thinking about readers, then, would be to allocate them to one of three groups: those with consistently positive responses; those with consistently negative ones; those (like Moran and McCracken mentioned above) who respond negatively at first and then become more positive. What are the features of the novel which lead to these different responses? Collard makes a number of useful comments on this, pointing out that the difficulties come not from the vocabulary, which is very simple, or the length of sentences, which are generally short, but from opaqueness about what is happening, who is speaking or thinking, and what they are thinking or saying. He discusses the opening passage and presents evidence indicating that McBride’s style is careful and controlled, with attention paid to linguistic and structural details. He also identifies strengths of the book (which he suggests are reasons for positive responses) in the texture and clarity of the presentation of characters and events. He discusses McBride’s own description of her approach as “method writing” (she was trained in Stanislavskian method acting at the Drama Centre in London) and suggests that she has been very successful in creating “real” characters on the page and of representing what the girl in the book is experiencing and helping readers to feel that they are sharing these experiences. He characterises what the prose represents as “[s]tream of pre-conscious” and “an attempt . . . to represent thought at the point immediately *before* it

becomes articulate speech, before it is ordered into rational utterance” (Collard, 2016, pp. 205-206). He says:

Her use of language is unique and her heavily punctuated “ungrammatical” prose may alarm some readers but . . . The eye and mind soon adjust to the rhythmic syncopations of the words on the page and something quite extraordinary happens, something uncanny and practically alchemical. I can only put it like this: *the book begins to read us*. What happens to the anonymous girl is never described *to* the reader but directly experienced *by* the reader.

(Collard, 2016, p. 27)

There is no space for a detailed linguistic analysis here. This would, of course, involve identifying formal features and effects, and offering an account of how the former lead to the latter. Instead, this chapter aims to identify some aspects of the pragmatics of the text (the inferences readers make when reading, and how these vary among individuals) and to suggest how these contribute both to some of its effects and to different kinds of responses. The next section identifies some kinds of inferences which readers (and listeners and viewers) always make, and ways in which interpretations can be seen as indeterminate and open-ended. These ideas are then applied in considering how to account for different kinds of responses to the novel.

### **7.3. Pragmatics and Indeterminacy**

Like many other pragmatic theories which have developed from the ideas of Paul Grice (1975), relevance theory assumes a greater role for pragmatic inference in accounting for

communication than Grice envisaged. This section considers some assumptions made within relevance theory about the scope of pragmatics and the kinds of inferences we make which will be referred to when discussing how to account for reader responses below.

### *7.3.1 Explicatures and implicatures*

Along with other approaches, work in relevance theory has assumed that pragmatic principles guide inferences about directly communicated explicatures as well as about indirectly communicated implicatures (see, for example, Wilson and Sperber, 1981; Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2004). In understanding an utterance of the expression in (1), for example, we need to work out (infer) the referent of *that* and the intended sense of *soft*.

(1) That's soft.

We can demonstrate that these are context-dependent and that pragmatic principles can play a role in making these inferences by imagining different linguistic and other contexts in which they might be uttered.

(2) A: This jumper's made of merino wool. Feel it.

B: Wow! That's soft.

(3) A: We only give an informal warning the first time a student submits coursework after the deadline.

B: Wow! That's soft!



In the exchange in (2), we are likely to infer that speaker B is expressing her opinion that the (wool used to make the) jumper feels soft in that it is smooth and pleasant to touch. In (3), we are likely to infer that B thinks the policy on late coursework submission is not very strict. We can account for this not only by referring to assumptions about the context but also by referring to an account of pragmatic inference which explains what guides interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Relevance theory is in line with other approaches to pragmatics in assuming that there is more to infer in working out what speakers communicate directly than simply disambiguation and reference assignment (including time reference). Other things which need to be inferred include narrowing and broadening of lexical meanings, the recovery of ellipsed material, assumptions about attitudes to propositions conveyed, assumptions about who is entertaining or saying what the utterance represents, and possible metaphorical or ironic interpretations.

As well as inferring explicatures, readers will aim to infer implicatures of the text. The two interact, of course, and a key idea in relevance theory is that inferences about these affect each other in a process of “mutual parallel adjustment”. Relevance theory assumes a large amount of indeterminacy here, both with regard to whether particular acts are intentionally communicative and with regard to what they convey.

For methodological and pedagogical reasons, discussion of these ideas often begins with fairly straightforward exchanges such as (4):

(4) A: Do you fancy going to the pictures tomorrow night?

B: My parents are coming round tomorrow.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilson (2018) takes the existence of inferences about explicit content as one piece of evidence that readers must consider the intentions of authors at least at this level (i.e. as a partial response to claims that authorial intentions are not relevant in literary interpretation and criticism).

Most people will agree that key implicatures here are that B cannot go to the pictures and that this is because her parents are visiting and so she can't go out. Once we have developed an account of relatively straightforward cases like this, we can go on to consider how things change in more complex ones. Recent work in pragmatics assumes considerable complexity even in what seem to be fairly straightforward exchanges.

Sperber and Wilson (2015) discuss the following example:

(5) *Passenger*: What time is the next train to Oxford?

*Railway official*: 12.48.

(Sperber and Wilson, 2015, p. 121)

They suggest that, if the railway official speaks “in a neutral tone of voice and with an impersonal facial expression”, then it would be reasonable to paraphrase this utterance as communicating only that the next train to Oxford leaves at 12.48. However, small changes in the official's behaviour could introduce some indeterminacy:

Add an urgent tone of voice or a warning look, and although his assertion would remain the same, part of the intended import would be rather less determinate: he might be implicating, for instance, that the train is about to leave, that the seats are filling up fast, that the platform is further away than the passenger might have thought, that the passenger's estimated walking speed may not be enough to get her there on time, and so on. In that case, his meaning would be partly precise and partly vague.

(Sperber and Wilson, 2015, p. 121)

They go on to suggest that interpretations are generally more or less determinate rather than simply determinate or not. This relates to the idea, developed within relevance theory, that communication can be stronger or weaker, i.e. that communicative acts can convey a narrower or broader range of possible conclusions with more or less certainty that each is intentionally communicated. For example, speaker B in the exchange in (4) communicates strongly that she cannot go to the pictures the following evening and that this is because of the visit of her parents. At the same time, this utterance also provides evidence for other conclusions, such as that B will need to prepare for the visit, that B's parents care about B, and so on. Each of these is less strongly communicated than the key implicature about not being able to go to the pictures.

Some utterances convey a relatively wide range of relatively weak implicatures and this has been applied in accounting for poetic effects. There are, of course, countless examples to illustrate this in lyric and other poetry, fiction, drama, and other genres. Pilkington (1992; 2000, pp. 102-104) discusses Seamus Heaney's poem *Digging* (which first appeared in Heaney 1966) and in particular the final line "*I'll dig with it*" where "*it*" refers to the pen belonging to the poet in the poem and we have a wide range of possible paths to explore in considering what "*dig*" means in this context.

Another part of the process of reading will involve inferences about different layers of communication in fictional discourse. At one discourse level, characters convey explicatures and implicatures to each other. At another, authors show characters communicating in order to convey other explicatures and implicatures to readers.<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, a larger number of potential levels of communication. One salient feature of McBride's novel is that it is often difficult to know the status of propositions expressed. Readers are not always able to identify who is thinking or speaking the thoughts or utterances they represent. Clearly,

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<sup>5</sup> For an early discussion of this, see Leech and Short (1981, pp. 237-254).

readers struggle to complete a wide range of the inferential tasks involved in arriving at explicatures and implicatures conveyed by McBride's novel.

### 7.3.2 *Open-endedness and spontaneousness*

Pragmatic processes are open-ended in the sense that communicators and addressees can choose to go on to think further about what they or others have said or done. Interpretation processes can extend over time and new potential conclusions can be inferred. When speakers reformulate their utterances, this shows that they have been thinking about inferences others might make based on them. Here is a fictional example from the film *Nanny McPhee* (2005, dir. Kirk Jones):

(6) That was my idea! (*pause*) I mean my fault.

The naughty children in the film have played a series of tricks on guests at a tea party (including putting worms in sandwiches and a toad in the teapot). A cake has just exploded over the person who will soon be their stepmother. In (6), the speaker, Sebastian, corrects his formulation after thinking about how she is likely to react.

Hearers provide evidence of continuing to think about utterances when they change their mind about an interpretation (“actually, maybe he didn't mean it in that way”) or come up with something they wish they had said at the time (termed “*l'esprit de l'escalier*” in French, referring to situations where someone might be halfway down a staircase when thinking of an appropriate response to something which happened upstairs).

Furlong (1996; 2007; 2011) has considered how interpretations can be more or less spontaneous in the sense that addressees can spend more or less time and effort in

considering evidence for interpretations. This began as an exploration of what is involved in “literary” interpretations which often involve relative non-spontaneousness. These tend to involve greater time and effort in considering evidence for and against possible readings than other kinds of interpretative practices. Furlong points out, however, that relative non-spontaneousness in this sense is not necessarily linked with literary interpretation.

Key points suggested by Furlong are that speakers and interpretations vary with regard to how spontaneous they are, that it is always possible to expend further time and effort in thinking about these, and that expending further time and effort is not something which occurs only in literary interpretation. This is clearly relevant to responses to McBride’s novel. Some readers are willing to expend further effort thinking about what the novel might convey. As indicated above, some of this is the author’s responsibility and some goes beyond that. Readers will also vary in the extent to which they explicitly consider what the author might have intended. Some readers, by contrast, decide quite quickly that they are not prepared to put further effort into looking for interpretations.

### 7.3.3 “*Manifestness*”

In their 2015 discussion, Sperber and Wilson focus on the notion of “manifestness” both in considering how their approach is an improvement on Grice’s, particularly with regard to his notion of “speaker’s meaning”, and in considering how interpretations can extend over space and time. They suggest the following definition for “manifestness”: “An assumption is manifest to an individual at a given time to the extent that he is likely to some positive degree to entertain it and accept it as true.” (Sperber and Wilson, 2015, p. 134)

Rather than focusing on assumptions being accessed or not, or aiming to distinguish between those which are “activated” and those which are not, manifestness is seen as a matter

of degree. An assumption can be manifest or not since an individual can either be able to entertain it (and accept it as true) or not. At the same time, it can be more or less manifest, since assumptions can be more or less salient and we can be more or less likely to entertain particular ones. As I type this, I am able to entertain assumptions about the current weather, whether or not I attend to evidence about this, but I am not able to entertain assumptions about the weather in places I have no information about. Some assumptions are highly manifest to me, including ones about the notion of manifestness which I am entertaining as I type. A range of others are manifest to varying degrees. There are some which I can entertain quickly if I see a need to (e.g. about whose offices are next door to mine on each side). There are others which would require more time and effort (e.g. about whose offices are four doors down from me on each side).

As well as avoiding problems with the notion of “knowledge” (discussed more fully in Sperber and Wilson, 1986), this approach differs from Grice’s in not assuming that communication is always about inducing beliefs. The notion of manifestness is used in defining a “cognitive environment” (the set of assumptions which are manifest to an individual at a given time) and communication is seen as being about adjusting the “mutual cognitive environments” of interlocutors, i.e. the sets of assumptions which are mutually manifest at a given time. Sperber and Wilson point out that “a given time” may refer to a shorter or longer period. Building on this, they propose a view of communication as being about making assumptions more or less manifest rather than about causing others to entertain them or not. This relates, of course, to the notion of stronger and weaker communication mentioned above. Some utterances strongly communicate a relatively small number of assumptions fairly strongly. Others communicate a wider range, each of which is communicated more weakly. Sperber and Wilson (2015) show how this idea can help to account for the communication of impressions. They consider two ways of describing what

happens when an individual (“Robert”) opens his window to check the weather and decides to cancel his plans to go for a walk. One possible explanation refers to perception, premises and “practical inference”:

We might be tempted to say that, on the basis of his perceptions, he has formed new beliefs and used them as premises in a practical inference. Which new beliefs? Well, maybe the belief that the sky is grey and the air is quite cold, that it is therefore likely to rain, and that the weather is not right for taking a walk.

(Sperber and Wilson, 2015, p. 136)

They suggest an alternative account:

When Robert opened the window, an array of propositions became manifest or more manifest to him, in the sense characterised above: they became more likely to be attended to, and more likely to be taken as true, than they had been before, and were therefore more likely to influence his decision. He may have been aware of this increase in the manifestness of an array of propositions, and of their general drift, without entertaining all of them, and maybe even without entertaining any of them as a distinct proposition, except for the practical conclusion that he would not go for a walk.

(Sperber and Wilson, 2015, p. 137)

They suggest that the second account is more plausible and that, “[a]rguably, the vast majority of inferences made by humans and other animals” do not involve explicit reasoning but are close to the second account described above.

The notions that assumptions can be communicated more or less strongly and that interpretation can continue over an extended period of time are both clearly relevant to an account of McBride's novel. Readers often have very little evidence for particular assumptions and of course they can continue to explore possible interpretations for extended periods of time. As with other texts, the interpretation process can be more or less intermittent or continuous and the changes in readers' cognitive environments more or less salient (i.e. manifest).

Relevance theory, then, offers a particular way of understanding interpretation processes as open-ended and indeterminate. There is not always a clear distinction between intentionally communicative and non-communicative behaviour and assumptions. There is not always a clear moment at which interpretation processes stop. Interpretations can be more or less extended and more or less spontaneous. It is not always clear when an interpreter has gone beyond what the communicator intended and is deriving conclusions on their own initiative. It is always possible for interpreters to choose to spend further time and effort considering potential interpretations. The adjustment of the manifestness of assumptions can carry on for an indefinite period of time with varying degrees of salience and explicitness. All of these points are relevant to considering how readers respond to *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*.

The rest of this chapter considers how this approach can account for some of the differences between readers who respond positively to McBride's novel and those who do so negatively. A key idea is that this has to do with different ways in which readers respond to the considerable indeterminacy in the novel. Some abandon the book. Others continue and some go on to respond positively to it. A key aspect of positive responses, I will argue, is that such readers continue to read the book while accepting that many inferences they would usually expect to make have not been completed. In other words, key parts of the expected



interpretation processes are only partially complete (“half-formed” is too precise but can be understood as a loose characterisation).

#### 7.4. “Lazy” Readings and Other Responses

In September 2016, the critic and literary scholar John Mullan interviewed Eimear McBride for the Guardian book club (<https://membership.theguardian.com/event/book-club-with-eimear-mcbride-26195584699>). During the discussion, he pointed out that it is possible for readers of the novel to work out who referents are, whose voice is responsible for particular parts, and what exactly is happening at each point in the book. He suggested, and McBride agreed, that evidence is available for readers to work out the answers to these questions if they put in the effort to do so. He said that he sometimes did this himself when reading McBride’s novel but said that, “. . . sometimes I was just lazy”. We might ask what is involved in reading processes of the type which Mullan described (informally and in passing) as “lazy” and what is involved in the kinds of more “analytical” and careful processes he says he sometimes carried out, i.e. ones where readers work harder to identify referents, speakers, thinkers and so on. What is a reader doing sentence by sentence if they go to the effort of establishing referents, establishing who is “saying” each sentence, and so on? We might also ask what exactly the more “lazy” readings involve and how they might differ from this?<sup>6</sup>

This is, of course, related to the question of what readers who give up and/or have negative responses are doing. Are their practices more towards the “lazy” or more towards the more “analytical” end of the spectrum? And to what extent do positive responses tend to be associated with more “lazy” or more “analytical” readings? The suggestion here will be

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<sup>6</sup> In a conversation in May 2018, Mullan told me that his main aim in making his comment was to support McBride’s practice by making clear that there was a sense in which there ‘is a logic’ to what she has written and so to provide evidence against claims that her writing style in this novel is pretentious or unmotivated.

that many of the positive readers (like McCracken, Moran and Collard who report effects using phrases like Collard's "the book begins to read us") do not go to extra effort to assign referents, decide who is speaking or thinking, etc. At the same time, entertaining incomplete representations involves effort and so "lazy" is not really an appropriate term.

Mullan's implied "non-lazy" reading strategy seems to be a fairly non-spontaneous one (in Furlong's sense) and something which is not typical of everyday readers. It is more likely to be carried out by literary scholars and sometimes under the heading of "close reading".<sup>7</sup> More significantly, though, this process might be going against what McBride intended and reduce the likelihood of a positive response. It might even be a way of being a "resisting reader" not in the sense in which this is usually understood (developed from the feminist critical approach of Fetterley, 1978), i.e. by resisting or critically responding to cultural or ideological assumptions in the text, but in the more general sense of treating the text in a way the author did not intend. Evidence for this was also provided in Mullan's interview. He asked about the lack of proper names in the book. McBride answered that this was one of her strategies for reducing "distance" between the girl and readers. Giving characters names would make it easier to represent them as separate from readers and to take a more detached view. Arguably, then, she had in mind a reading process closer to the "lazy" than the more analytical kind.

This chapter is not intended to raise issues about author intentions and their relation to reading practices but to consider different kinds of reading processes and their effects.

Without trying to characterise all of the practices which readers might follow, and taking a

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<sup>7</sup> "Close reading" is, of course, a problematic term which is understood in a variety of ways. It has been much discussed by literary scholars. While literary scholars moved away from close reading practices for some time, there has been increased interest and increased practice describable in this way in recent years. This was the topic of a symposium at Middlesex University in London in 2017 (<https://londonenglish.live/2017/05/09/symposium-on-close-reading-13th-june-2017/>). For a recent discussion of the history of literary criticism which describes the general move towards historical-contextualist work and argues for a move away from this (and 'back' towards approaches which include close textual analysis), see North (2017).

very broad approach for now, we might loosely characterize three ways of interacting with the novel as: trying to understand it but then giving up; “analytical” reading processes, which involve taking the time to search all clues, identify referents, work out who is speaking and thinking, etc.; and “lazy” reading processes which involve continuing with the novel without arriving at conclusions about referents, speakers, thinkers, etc.

The next section considers how the ideas from relevance theory discussed above can help us to understand the nature of the text and different kinds of responses to it, including “lazier” and more analytical ones, and a suggestion about what happens when an initially negative reader becomes more positive.

### **7.5. Accounting for Varying Responses**

How can we develop an account of what different readers do when reading *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* (or any text)? A natural assumption would be that we work through the text identifying at each point what is linguistically encoded by each expression and a range of different ways in which readers might build on linguistically encoded meanings to arrive at fuller interpretations in context. At this point, we can look for patterns which might relate to different kinds of responses.

There are several problems with this approach. First, it assumes an idealised account of linguistic processing, arguably far removed from what readers actually do. It is not an assumption of relevance theory (nor of at least some other theories) that “semantic representations”, understood as stable representations of what is linguistically encoded by an expression, have a real psychological status in online processing, or that they are represented by interpreters. Rather, interpreters move quickly from the prompts supplied by linguistically encoded meanings to interpretative pathways which lead them to develop interpretations in

context. For example, using the convention that items in square brackets represent material which needs to be pragmatically inferred, and simplifying considerably, we might represent the linguistically encoded meaning of the expression *you can* as follows:

(7) a. *Linguistic expression:*

You can.

b. *Semantic representation:*

[someone is representing the proposition that] EITHER [somebody is able to] OR [someone is permitted to] [do something] [at some time or in some circumstances]

Of course, no hearer or reader of an utterance of (7a) would actually represent something like (7b). Rather, they would begin looking for an interpretation of the utterance as soon as (in some cases, earlier than) they hear or read the beginning of it. So they would begin to make assumptions about who is saying or thinking the thought represented right away, and also look for a referent of *you*, and so on. There are, of course, occasions where an interpreter might end up with a thought like (7b) but this would likely be a post-hoc process building on earlier processes involving assigning a referent to *you*, etc.

Furthermore, it is not clear that interpreters represent all of the implicatures of an utterance as fully propositional thoughts. Imagine, for example, that (8) is uttered (with stress on the first syllable *you*) in the exchange below:

(8) A: Who do you think should introduce the keynote speaker at the conference?

B: YOU can.

A is likely to infer that B is saying that B will not object to A introducing the speaker and possibly that B wants A to do it. This could but need not involve a stage of understanding that B is saying that A has B's permission to do this (whose status as explicature or implicature will depend on the particular theoretical approach adopted). Implicatures of B's utterance could include any of the list in (9), as well as others not listed here:

- (9) a. B won't be offended if A introduces the keynote speaker.  
b. B wants A to introduce the speaker.  
c. B has no strong desire to introduce the keynote speaker.  
d. B does not want to introduce the keynote speaker.  
e. B thinks A will do a good job of introducing the keynote speaker.

A is unlikely to access each of these, and may reject some, but B's utterance provides at least weak evidence for each of them. A's actually entertaining any one of them is not a requirement for it to count as an implicature. (9e), for example, might occur to A at some later stage or only when something prompts it, e.g. if somebody else wonders whether B would be good at tasks like this. This, of course, relates to the ideas about manifestness discussed above, with interpretation processes extending over space and time and assumptions becoming manifest to greater or lesser degrees as time passes.

Given these uncertainties, could it still be possible to characterise different kinds of responses among readers and different kinds of texts? Despite the issues just mentioned, this section suggests ways of beginning to do this.<sup>8</sup> It begins by considering inferences readers are likely to make about various kinds of indeterminacies in the novel, including about

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<sup>8</sup> For ways of working with participants to explore inferences, see Clark (1996), Durant (1998). For another way of representing the relative complexity of inferences, see Clark (2009).

explicatures and implicatures, possibilities for developing more or less spontaneous interpretations, and how interpretations can extend and continue to be developed over time. For each of these, it suggests an initial characterization of how a “lazy” reader might respond to these indeterminacies and what a more “analytical” reader might do. Finally, it makes a suggestion about how “lazy” readings differ overall from others and how this relates to varying responses to the novel. The suggestion is that the difference between “lazy” and less lazy readers is that the former carry on reading while not having found ways of resolving many of these indeterminacies. This means that they continue reading with a wide range of possible explicatures and implicatures becoming more or less manifest as they read on and think about the book. This process is far from “lazy” overall since the interpretation as a whole is complex and so are the continuing effects of interpretations at each stage. This interpretative experience is closer to how we respond to the world in general than the experience of reading much prose fiction.

### *7.5.1 Explicit content*

In responding to any text, readers aim to identify what the text explicitly conveys. This is often difficult at the start of a piece of prose fiction where we have not yet been introduced to characters or situations. Here, for example, is the beginning of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, a novel not seen as particularly challenging for twenty-first century readers:

(10) On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. Bridge.

(Dostoevsky, /1994, orig. 1866, p. 2)

When we first begin reading, we do not know when or where these events take place and we know little about the young man. We discover that the place is Petersburg early in the chapter (on the same page of this edition) and we find out more about the young man as the story develops. This amount of uncertainty at first is not unusual and is unlikely to make readers uncomfortable as we are used to finding out more about characters and situations as we read through novels.<sup>9</sup>

Novels vary with regard to how much clarity there is in opening passages, with some clearer than others. As the opening passage (quoted at the start of this chapter) demonstrates, McBride's novel is extremely challenging, with significantly more uncertainty than Dostoevsky's novel. We do not know who *you*, *her*, *me* or *I* refer to. We cannot be sure whether each occurrence of these pronouns refers to the same person. We do not know who is speaking or thinking the utterance or thought represented by each sentence. There are uncertainties about the propositions represented by each sentence (e.g. what will the referent of *you* soon do?) Another difference is that Dostoevsky soon provides ways of helping us to resolve the indeterminacies. McBride, by contrast, provides readers with little help and we develop our understanding of characters much more slowly.

Here is an attempt to represent the linguistically encoded meanings of the expressions in just the first six sentences of the paragraph (without indicating here the parts which need to be pragmatically inferred):

(11) Linguistic semantics of the opening of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, Dostoevsky's narrative technique, with a 3rd person omniscient' narrator sharing the perspective of characters in the novel (mainly, the central character Raskolnikov, but shifting closer to that of other characters in various places) was innovative at the time.

- a. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which says that something is “for” in some sense the referent of *you* at some time or in some circumstances
- b. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which says that the referent of *you* will soon do something at some time or in some circumstances
- c. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which says that the referent of *you* will “give name” in some sense to the referent of *her* at some time or in some circumstances
- d. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which says that the referent of *she* will “wear the say” in some sense of the referent of *you* at some time or in some circumstances
- e. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which indicates that they are asking a question “mammy me?” at some time or in some circumstances
- f. someone is thinking or saying “yes you” and so possibly confirming to the previous person that they will indeed be “giving name” to “her”

While it is, of course, logically possible that a reader might only get this far, it is generally accepted that we always make at least some pragmatic inferences even when we only overhear other people’s conversations accidentally. Even someone who accidentally overheard a reading of this passage would make some further inferences. We might represent a very “shallow” processing of this sequence as follows (with assumptions being made here for illustrative purposes and represented by informal paraphrases):

(12) Possible “shallow” processing of the opening of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:



- a. someone is saying or thinking that something is for someone they're addressing as "you" in some sense
- b. someone is thinking that whoever "you" is or telling whoever "you" is that they will soon do something
- c. someone is thinking or saying that whoever "you" is will "give name" in some sense to somebody being referred to as "her"
- d. someone is thinking or saying that the person who will be given name will "wear the say" of whoever "you" is
- e. someone is asking a question "mammy me?", possibly checking that they've understood that they will be "giving name" to "her"
- f. someone is entertaining the thought or producing an utterance which says that something is being agreed with about the referent of *you* at some time or in some circumstances

While a reader who only overheard a reading of the passage might stop there, a combination of linguistic semantic knowledge" and contextual assumptions is likely to lead them a little further. They are likely to at least consider the possibility that a mother is telling a child ("you") that the child will name somebody ("her").

Readers can be more or less "lazy" at this stage (more realistically, after reading a little further). They might carry on without fleshing things out much more or they might put in more effort, perhaps rereading and thinking about possibilities. An analytical reader who does what Mullan indicates, considering all of the evidence in order to make fairly confident assumptions about who is doing, saying and thinking what, will eventually end up (after considering evidence from later in the novel) with an understanding something like the following:

(13) More “complete” representation of what happens in the first six sentences of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

From inside the womb, the girl in the title is hearing her mother speak to her brother. (We understand from later events that the brother has been diagnosed with a brain tumour and is about to go through an operation for that). The mother is telling the brother that he will be allowed to choose the name of his sister when she is born. (We infer from later in the novel that this might even be intended as a “prize” or “bribe” since naming his sister will be a kind of “reward” for surviving the operation and getting better). The girl will carry what her brother chooses as a name with her throughout her life as an important part of her self-understanding and identity (making here a fairly sophisticated reading of “in the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say”). The boy checks his understanding (implying that he is surprised and excited by this possibility). The mother confirms that he is right.

Mullan is right that we can go through the entire novel and develop our interpretations like this (more or less “completing” them). It is important to note, though, that (as always) this partly depends on moving forwards and backwards through the novel, either just by thinking about connections or by explicitly moving in both directions. For example, readers are often unable to identify referents and resolve other indeterminacies right at the beginning of a novel, typically assuming that things will become clearer as they read on, sometimes reading ahead for clarification, and sometimes going back to reread passages when things have become clearer.

With regard to explicit content, then, we might characterize relatively “lazy” readings as ones where readers do not go far beyond the interpretation characterised in (12) and do not

get close to the representation in (13). Sticking at something like (12) is relatively “lazy” in that the reader does not expend effort in moving forwards and backwards in the text to look for clues and develop their interpretation. Getting closer to (13), however, will mean that less effort is required in understanding later parts of the novel and in deriving implicatures, the topic of the next subsection.

### 7.5.2 *Implicatures*

Difficulties in deriving implicatures are, of course, related to indeterminacies about explicit content. If the opening sentences of the novel do not make clear what is for who (“*you*”) when, what “*you*” will do soon, etc., then we cannot derive implicatures on the basis of propositions this passage expresses. What we can do is to entertain a relatively wide range of relatively weak potential implicatures which are supported to varying degrees by different assumptions about explicit content. This means that the interpretations we entertain have something in common with the examples such as the conclusion of Heaney’s poem *Digging* mentioned above. The situation here is harder, of course, as we have less clear indications about the nature of the explicit content.

A situation like this is common in some kinds of poetry, e.g. lyric poetry where readers do not have enough evidence to assign referents to pronouns such as *I* and *you*. This is also often the case with pop song lyrics (for discussion of the effects of pronouns in pop songs and how listeners can make varying assumptions about them, see Durant, 1984, pp. 202-209). Collard (2016, p. 29) comments on poetic aspects of McBride’s prose, including its rhythm (punctuation plays a key role in this, of course). Indeterminacies in explicit content and the associated communication of a wide range of weak implicatures can also be seen as contributing poetic elements of the book.

So what kinds of implicatures might readers of the book entertain with varying degrees of salience and confidence? Characterising these is much harder than for examples such as Heaney's poem *Digging*. Here are just a few potential implicatures we might derive from an initial reading of the opening passage:

(14) Potential implicatures derivable from a first reading of the opening of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

- a. something must follow from the thought that something is for someone in some sense
- b. something must follow from the thought someone will soon do something
- c. maybe they will be happy to do that thing
- d. maybe they'll be grateful for being able or allowed to do it
- e. maybe they will be naming someone
- f. if they name someone, they will feel important in her life
- g. maybe their mother is saying they can do this
- h. if so, then the addressee might be grateful to their mother

People who read fiction fairly regularly will be used to initial indeterminacies about referents of pronouns etc. but will not be used to having to wait so long for evidence which can help them identify referents. A "lazy" reader will presumably carry on reading while not being clear about the explicit content and so not being able to make confident hypotheses about which possible implicatures they should continue to entertain. A less "lazy" reader will presumably move forwards and backwards a number of times in order to work out what is going on. Readers who do this will have varying practice with regard to how many pages they reread, how far they go before coming back, and so on. Ultimately, they will be able to

come up with clearer interpretations based on more complete representations of explicit content, i.e. with assumptions such as those in (13). When they have done this, they might come up with a different range of implicatures.

(15) Potential implicatures from a fuller interpretation of the opening of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

- a. the boy is excited and happy that he is going to name the girl after she is born
- b. he is grateful to his mother
- c. being allowed to name the girl is a kind of treat
- d. naming her will add to the bond between them which we discover later is very close
- e. being allowed to name the girl is part of a more general set of behaviours in response to the boy's illness and adds to our sense of the mother's desperation and resolve

Implicatures like these are, of course, stronger. Readers can be more confident that the book provides evidence for them. As they continue to derive further implicatures, they will be doing so with a clearer representation of what happens in the book in their mind. At this stage, they might be seen as no longer reading the book McBride wrote but rather working from a representation of what it communicated to them. This is not unusual and readers of all texts will be in this position after they have finished reading a text. I would argue, however, that reading on while still confused about details of what happens in the book, who speaks and thinks what, and so on, is important for readers to experience the book as McBride intended. This thought is behind the suggestion that we might think of "non-lazy" readers as "resistant".

### 7.5.3 *Spontaneousness*

It seems reasonable also to suggest a correlation between “laziness” and spontaneousness, i.e. that “lazy” readers come up with fairly spontaneous interpretations while other readings are less spontaneous. It seems clear that readers who take trouble to assign referents, resolve indeterminacies and work out what is going on in the book are being non-spontaneous. They are following the practice Furlong describes in making greater effort to develop their interpretations. Spontaneous responses are difficult in this case, though, as the indeterminacies in the text are problematic. To some extent, we could argue that the indeterminacies encourage a degree of non-spontaneousness. Clark (2009) suggests that this is a feature of various kinds of literary and other texts, including jokes and witty comments as well as challenging books, films and other kinds of art works. Even a reader aiming to be quite “lazy” (explicitly or not) is bound to go through some processes we would think of as fairly non-spontaneous, e.g. wondering why McBride has chosen this kind of style, wondering about specific formulations, wondering how the book will develop, etc.<sup>10</sup>

As readers continue reading (if they do), non-spontaneous interpretations will develop at the same time as spontaneous responses to individual sections become easier (as we develop our understanding of who the characters are, what they are like, etc.) Reading becomes a bit easier and interpretations become both fuller and stronger in that we have more confidence about conclusions we entertain. As suggested above, at a certain stage, readers will arrive in a situation similar to that they find themselves in when reading other texts. A key feature of the novel is the different route readers take to get there.

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<sup>10</sup> During my own first reading, I guessed wrongly that the style of the book would change significantly as the girl aged, i.e. I assumed that a motivation for the style at the beginning was to help us think like a baby or very young child. Like Collard, I also misunderstood the opening and did not realise that the girl was in the womb at that stage.

#### 7.5.4 *Open-endedness*

As with all texts, it is possible to continue indefinitely to think about the novel and to derive new implicatures and lines of interpretation. This can occur during and after reading.

Individuals vary, of course, with regard to how much time they spend reading novels. At one extreme, a novel can be gone through in one “sitting”. At another, individuals might pause frequently and for long periods of time between moments of reading. Even during reading, individuals vary with regard to how much they move in a linear way more or less from one word to the next, how they move backwards and forwards, how much they reread specific passages, whether they look more or less closely at material on covers, jump to the end of books or sections, move around on individual pages, and so on. Interpretations can be developed during reading, between times spent reading, and after reading, as well as during a period of reading. This applies whether readers are relatively “lazy” or not. Some individuals, of course, “give up” fairly quickly and so will not be continuing to think about the book much or at all when not reading it. Others will find themselves developing interpretations as they do other things and sometimes individuals refer to the process of “finding myself thinking about it” as one way in which evaluations become more positive (for discussion of this process in evaluating literary texts, see Clark, 2014).

Given the discussion of indeterminacies in explicit and implicit content above, there is likely to be interesting variation among readers as they progress through the book.

Implicatures are likely to be harder to derive, weaker and more varied at earlier stages and easier, stronger and less varied at later stages. It may be that readers are less likely to continue interpretation processes at earlier stages and more likely at later stages.

We might also consider here how texts vary with regard to how likely they are to encourage ongoing (and non-spontaneous) interpretations. Clark (2014) suggests that Chekhov's short story *The Lady With The Little Dog*<sup>11</sup> has come to be highly valued partly because it is relatively easy to represent the story as a whole after having read it and partly because doing so can lead to interpretative routes towards significant implicatures. Furlong (1996; 2011) has suggested that texts vary with regard to how successfully they support and reward ongoing interpretations.

One final point to make in this connection is that McBride's novel can be seen as providing readers with an experience which is more like life in general than many other fictional texts. As we go about our daily lives, we notice various things, pay more or less attention to different things (with intentionally communicative behavior attracting more attention, of course) and our "cognitive environments" contain a vast range of more or less manifest assumptions. As time goes by, ongoing changes take place in how manifest various assumptions are and we have many assumptions which are only marginally manifest alongside some which are quite strongly manifest, and everything in between.

When we read a novel or short story, writers have often "packaged" experience so that we assume we are being told what is important and we derive implicatures based on that. As suggested above, readers will eventually reach a place where their experience of this novel is similar to that of others in that they will have developed a representation of the novel as a whole and derive implicatures based on that (this process taking longer for "lazier" than other readers). Along the way, though, we could argue that their experience is more like that of a person dealing with the world in general rather than with a clearly "packaged" version of part of it. This is surely connected to McBride's comment in the interview with Mullan about why

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<sup>11</sup> As Clark (2014: 58) points out, there are no articles in Russian and Chekhov's original title translates as "lady with dog" where *dog* contains a diminutive morpheme.



she did not give the girl or other characters in the novel names, i.e. with the aim that readers would come as close as possible to sharing the girl's experience rather than consider it from a metaphorical "distance" which, she suggested, would occur "as soon as she had a name".

To the extent that it is successful with regard to this aim, then, the novel enables readers to feel immersed in the story and to feel that they are sharing the girl's experiences rather than reading about them from a more distanced or detached perspective. The girl's experiences are traumatic and disturbing and this adds both to negative and to positive responses.

#### *7.5.5 Characterising readers and readings*

The discussion so far has suggested ways in which more or less "lazy" readers differ from each other. We can build on this to suggest (idealized and simplified) accounts of three kinds of responses to the novel evidenced in discussion by reviewers and online discussions. We might label these: "giving up", "careful" and "lazy". The "giving up" reader will come up with a relatively shallow representation like the one represented in (12) above, continue reading and, at a certain point, find the continuing lack of clarity so uncomfortable that, along perhaps with the developing expectation that there will be no significant clarity, they decide not to read any more. The "careful" reader will develop interpretations like the one represented in (13) above for the entire novel. The "lazy" reader will carry on and develop something between the representations in (12) and (13) with details becoming clearer to varying degrees as they read on and as they think about it afterwards. Naturally, any reader who completes the novel will be somewhere between the "careful" and "lazy" readings characterized here, i.e. the extent to which they complete interpretations will vary for different parts of the novel.

To be a “lazy” reader, then, involves giving up on pragmatic processes of resolving indeterminacies about explicit content, entertaining a fairly wide range of weakly evidenced explicatures, and deriving a wide range of weakly evidenced potential implicatures on the basis of these. This process will carry on while reading until eventually things become clearer and readers find themselves in a similar situation to other readers with a representation of the novel overall to derive implicatures from. A more careful reader will bypass the process and get more quickly to a place where things are resolved and the range of implicatures is narrower with stronger implicatures.

In a sense, a careful reader is creating a different novel from the one McBride wrote or translating it into something else and then responding to (i.e. deriving interpretations of) that. We could relate this to earlier and ongoing discussion of ideas about reading and interpretation, including ideas about close reading. One relevant example here is Armstrong’s (1995) of “close” reading practices. She argues that many close reading practices are in fact attempts to create a distance from texts by analyzing them. She also suggests that these practices often assume an opposition between emotion or affect and rationality. We can interpret non-“lazy” readers as, to some extent, carrying out this kind of analytical work and so avoiding the kinds of emotional and experiential effects which McBride was aiming for.

This chapter has argued that “lazy” readers derive a wider range of weaker implicatures than less “lazy” readers and that they experience something closer to what McBride had in mind. A final thought is that this might be relevant to accounting for readers who begin with a fairly negative response and then become more positive. It seems at least plausible that these readers begin with a more careful and non-spontaneous approach, thinking about how the indeterminacies might be resolved and why they are there, and then at a certain point become more “lazy”, continuing without resolution of indeterminacies and experiencing the complex effects which McBride intended. At this stage, they experience something close to

the girl's experience, are less detached, and have more profound, personal and "real-world-like" experiences. This is suggested by the quote from McCracken cited above:

I knew she'd been working on a book — she called it her beast — and when she was finished she'd asked me to read it. I took it nervously . . . And for the first page and a half I thought, Oh dear, no, too self-conscious, what a shame. Then about halfway down the second page, my brain figured it out and *the book had me*, and I realised that the prose was the opposite of self-conscious: it just took my self-conscious brain that long to give itself over to the language.

(quoted by Collard, 2016, p. 22)

## 7.6. Summary

This chapter has suggested ways in which we can apply ideas from relevance theory in developing accounts of how we respond to texts in general and of varying responses to McBride's novel in particular. It argued that ideas about indeterminacy and the open-endedness of interpretation processes help to account for responses to texts and how they change during and after reading. It suggested that we can understand more by thinking about inferential processes involved in recovering explicit content and about who is understood as the thinker or speaker of expressions in the text which this novel makes it hard for readers to carry out. Some readers give up on the book because of this. Some continue reading and some who do find the experience rewarding. The chapter argues that this kind of reading process is complex and far from "lazy". It requires readers either to entertain complex representations of interpretative uncertainties or to continue reading while entertaining very partial representations of what they have read so far. Some readers who do this experience

effects which are arguably similar to ones McBride had in mind when writing the novel (experiencing something similar to what the girl experiences without the detachment that would come from other kinds of readings). Another kind of reading involves making considerable effort to assign referents, identify speakers and thinkers, and so on. The chapter argued that this constitutes what might be thought of as a kind of resistant reading and, to some extent, amounts to a rewriting of the text in ways not intended by the author. Readers who follow the “lazy” approach are more likely to enjoy the book and to experience it as intended by McBride. While more analytical readers may also have positive responses, some negative responses seem to arise from frustration with the novel’s indeterminacies.

The discussion here has aimed to show both that ideas from pragmatics can be useful in understanding responses to literary and other texts and that there is a lot of interesting work to do to find out more. Another line for future research is to consider more fully what is involved in “close reading” practices of various kinds and to consider the pedagogical implications of these ideas.

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Figure 1:

★★★★★ **Raw, Beautiful and Vulnerable**

By [Laurenevie](#) on 27 November 2017

Format: Paperback | [Verified Purchase](#)

McBride has quickly become one of my favourite authors. Her style of writing really is like no other to me, and though her books take a while to get into, they're really worth the initial persistence. This one tells the story of a young girls relationship with her brother, who suffers from a brain tumour. It's told in the same stream of consciousness style that McBride is so brilliant at, and is just as raw, beautiful and vulnerable as *The Lesser Bohemians* was to me. I just adore the way that McBride writes her characters - in this completely open way where no thought is censored. I loved this book.

★★★★★ **i hated almost every minute**

By [Empress](#) on 27 November 2015

Format: Kindle Edition | [Verified Purchase](#)

so so so awful. i hated almost every minute. pretty sure all the awards are a result of the emperor's new clothes syndrome, as if you rewrote it in English you'd find neither the plot nor the characters interesting. as it is though it's written in pathetic fragments which, painful enough the first time, you are forced to reread far too often because (surprise surprise) the meaning is often lost when you dispense with grammar and half the words you need to say something. felt like marking a never ending self indulgent melodramatic and boring essay by an illiterate teenager with delusions of grandeur. thank god it's over and thank god [spoiler] in the end. what a waste of money. stay far far far away.

★★★★☆ **A book with a half-formed plot**

By [Barry Bootle](#) on 14 May 2015

Format: Paperback | [Verified Purchase](#)

I was really looking forward to this one, what with all the lavish praise that's been heaped on it, the awards it's received, and the backstory. The last is probably familiar to most of us by now, but just in case you haven't heard it, here it is; McBride searched in vain for a publisher for years, was rejected again and again (with one publisher stating it was "probably a masterpiece" but that it wouldn't find a large enough readership to make it commercially viable), and was finally taken up by Galley Beggar, a small independent. The general consensus seems to be that the UK publishing scene is overly timid, too driven by financial sensibilities, needs it's head read, etc. Well, all these things are probably true. But is the book a masterpiece? For me, probably not.

That's not to say it doesn't contain some masterful moments. The opening chapter, where the unnamed (and as yet unborn) narrator speaks to her older brother is dazzling. Throughout the novel, the portrayal of the relationship between the two is tremendously affecting, and wonderfully well done. The rest of the plot, though, could lifted straight from Irish literature's central casting. Abusive mother? Check. Damp house? Check? Fire-and-brimstone grandfather? Check. Pervert uncle? Check. Lashings of Catholic guilt? Check. Sodomy? Check. (The last seems de rigueur for any modern literature pertaining to be serious, although to McBride's credit, she doesn't attempt to describe it in any particularly hifalutin way, as others, naming no names, have done). I found it all a bit of a melange of misery-lit clichés, and rather wearing. OK, plot is not the most important thing in literary fiction, but if you are going to have one, make it a good one.

My greatest issue, however, is with the style. Stream of consciousness writing works brilliantly (when done well) when it's of the moment, descriptive of the half-formed thoughts we all have, before they coalesce into cogent speech - the closest writing can get, in fact, to depicting how life really feels. And when McBride does it for scenes which are set in the moment, in real time, it is indeed brilliant. But the format doesn't work for, say, describing the passage of several days in a few lines (describing starting a new school, for example, she says "I be the new gir!" - why?), and it's problematic to sustain it for an entire novel, set over the course of twenty-odd years. It comes across as dislocated and, at times (sorry to say) pretentious.

I'm not disputing that McBride has huge talent, but I fear proclamations of genius may be premature. I for one will reserve judgement until I see what she does next.

Figure 1. Three online reviews on Amazon's page for *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*, downloaded 5 April 2018. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Girl-Half-formed-Thing-Eimear-McBride-ebook/dp/B00JID6Y5K/>

