Recall This Book
Episode 159 Glenn Patterson: You can Choose Who You Are (JP, DC)
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John Plotz (JP):

Hello, and welcome to Recall This Book, where we invite scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events.

So our topic today is on one level, a straightforward one, the political situation in Northern Ireland today, 27 years after the Good Friday Agreement putatively ended the Troubles, that hot war that divided Belfast especially and sent its tentacles all over Ireland and the United Kingdom. I'm already choosing my words specially, carefully, not trying to name the sides between whom the war was fought because to say it was between the British Army and Irish Catholics or between Protestants and Catholics with the British Army backup or the Protestant side or to say it was Unionist or Loyalist seems already to be picking a side and getting it wrong, especially coming from an outsider. So from the get-go, today's topic is a very complex one. It's not impervious certainly, but it is very resistant to outside examination. We are super grateful to have a subtle thinker and writer here today to discuss it with us, one who's been living with and writing about the complex situation for decades.

Hello, I'm John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department, and to travel to Northern Ireland today, I'm joined once again by my beloved former Brandeis colleague, David Cunningham, now sociology professor at Wash U St. Louis. David, hey, welcome. Thanks for coming back.

David Cunningham (DC):

Hey, happy to be back. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

JP:

Me too. So David is the author of such massively influential books as There's Something Happening Here, The New Left, The Klan and FBI Counterintelligence, and the award-winning Klansville, USA. The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights Era, KKK. And he's a member of the City of St. Louis Reparations Commission, and he's recently engaged in exploring political signaling in public art and monuments, including, I believe, a forthcoming article on the political and cultural work of murals in Protestant and Catholic communities.

That's a co-authored article, right, David?

DC:
It is, yeah, with one of our graduate students who actually has a degree in public history at Queen's University of Belfast, so it was an interesting triangulation.

JP:
Great. And so if you're a fan of David as I am, you can't be as big a fan as I am, but if you're a fan, you should check out earlier Recall This Book episodes on racialized policing in the US., on January 6th, and on the 2024 presidential election. So David, welcome.

And Glenn, so those of you who have watched or read Say Nothing lately, or maybe you've watched the TV show Derryy Girls, or read Anna Burns' unforgettable novel Milkman, you know how easy it is to bring heat to the discussion of rights and wrongs at Belfast and Derry and their still-divided neighborhoods, and how terribly hard it is to bring light. But for me, one of the most powerful sources of illumination has been the novelist, memoirist, screenplay writer Glenn Patterson, who is the director of the Seamus Haney Center at Queen's University Belfast and I saw a lovely cowboy-themed poetry reading that he maestroed on my first day at Belfast this spring. It was my first introduction to him.

His best-known works (by my count, I think 10 novels) include The International and then also the screenplay for Good Vibrations, which is a great film about Terry Hooley, who ran a non-sectarian record shop, as well as the memoir in Belfast, as well

Glenn Patterson (GP):

I was just going to say to all people who heard your introduction and the bit that you said, anyone who has seen Say Nothing or watched Derry Girls or read Anna Burns' brilliant Milkman, will be severely disappointed to find out that none of those writers are here today. But we all are instead going to talk to Glenn Patterson. So for anybody who is getting really, really, really excited, hi.

If you haven't watched Derry Girls, and if you haven't watched Say Nothing, and if you haven't read Anna Burns' Milkman, please do watch, read all of those because they are brilliant.

JP:

Well, that's great. Thanks, Glenn The end is when we try to induce people to go out, and as their second choice after listening to you, they could do those other things.

I'm glad you gave us that dessert first.

And I just want to say really quickly before we launch into it, the main focus is your marvelous 2006 collection, Lapsed Protestant, and also its sequel, Here's Me Here: the Reflections of a Lapsed Protestant, which brought the collection up to 2014. And the Irish Times called it “quick-witted, level-headed and even-handed.” And I think that's such a great, all three things I think are so true about your writing. And I guess I would like to invite you if you would like to take the bai, I want to offer you a softball question. Could you just describe the books in question in your own words? Like what motivated you to write these pieces?

And looking back, maybe you could say something about your key claims back then and whether they resonate today or how you see them resonating in 2025.

GP:

My first novel came out in 1988.And any people out there who have written novels, especially thinking of their first novel, it can often exhaust you and it can often absolutely drain the well. And I felt like I'd used up so much more than I thought I was going to use in that first novel.

So when invitations came to write things, pieces of journalism, little bits of memoir or anything like that, I just said no because I thought I need everything for the next book. And eventually I got asked to write a piece for a magazine in Sweden.

And again, this would have been in the early 1990s. And if you wrote for a magazine in Sweden, even if it was translated into English, nobody outside of Sweden was going to see that. So I got asked to write a piece about growing up in Belfast.

And my friend and fellow novelist, Robert McLiam Wilson, whose first novel came out in 1989, year after mine. He got asked to do so. He was born Catholic.

I was born Protestant. We were asked to write pieces about growing up in Belfast and in the 70s and 80s. So we did.

And in a way, that sort of unlocked some things. So I called that piece, I think it was called “Love Poetry, The RUC and Me. “The RUC being the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

The police force is the term in Northern Ireland from the 1920s through until the 1990s. So I wrote this piece and it was published in a Swedish magazine. And something seemed to be unlocked by that.

I was less intimidated about writing things that weren't fiction and also just thought, *well, that's just another place to write, to try things out, to put things out that you didn't have to wait a year and a half for.*

The late 1980s here, we were still a number of years away from ceasefires, from peace process and there's so much terrific new writing coming out of this place at the minute that to think of a time when maybe there weren't quite so many new writers coming through, it certainly felt like in the late 1980s when my first novel came out, Robert's first novel came out and my own McNacnamie published around about the same time, Deirdre Madden. So it wasn't that there were no new writers coming through, but perhaps there was just a novelty in us. Maybe there's always a novelty. I'm just not the novelty age anymore. There just seemed to be an awful lot of invitation to comment.

It so happened that Robert and I had been living away from Belfast for a while, had for different reasons, found ourselves back in Belfast in the late 1980s. We were knocking about together. We became friends and I suppose the invitation was just there to comment on all kinds, all manner of things, the political situation, and both of us had grown up.

He'd grown up in a Catholic nationalist Republican area, grown up in a Protestant Unionist loyalist area, and both of us had worked through our past in that background, and at the same time didn't rush to embrace what was considered to be its opposite. In fact, the thing that we repudiated in our work, and in our thinking, and in everything about us, and this wasn't exclusive to us.

This was all the people who we were drawn to as artists, as writers, as fellow citizens, and human beings, were people who just said, there's not just two identities, you know. You can be, you can choose who you are.

Your choices need not be mutually exclusive. And instead of having this idea of identity as the reduction to one, brilliantly in Robert's version of it, *reduction to the one word you'll get killed for*, you just kind of exploded your identity and you say, I'm all of these things.

I'm all of them. And I embrace them and I get to define who I am myself. So that was, I think, probably where we were beginning to write out of in that period, as I say, in the late 1980s.

So whether it was because we were just the newest people that particular year or whether it was because at that particular moment there was something that hadn't been said from a particular generation and we were not the most visible but certainly

JP:

Yeah, that's really, that's super helpful. That really brings me to actually one of the questions that Dave and I were both hoping to get to one of the essays from Here's Me Here, the one called “The C-word,” about community and communities. “ How did a word that has its roots and commonality” you write “end up one of the most vexing in our lexicon? What is the difference between a community worker, a community practitioner and community activist and a community gatekeeper?”

So I feel like that's such a wonderful way of thinking about that kind of upside-down -and logic of community as the ultimate marker of sectarian division.

GP:

Yeah. I mean, it's still a very vexed and vexing word there. See, this is true in all conflicts.One of the things that happens is that words get taken out of your mouth. They get appropriated and you find it very difficult to say something for fear of using a word that marks you out and even useful words. Get taken off you.And so we are kind of always, I always had this thought of, *I wanted to take them back.* I wanted to look at what words were. I mean, I'm a writer, of course, I'm going to do this. But it is one of the things that you do is that you work with words. You have to think about what is the right word. What is the word I need in this situation?

You have to know where the words come from. You have to know the weight of them, the connotations, and so you can also therefore look at words that are being abused or words that can be reclaimed and are they useful? Is there anything that's useful in these words that we can take back?

I would say the kind of motivation for starting to write more nonfiction, journalism (journalism isn't right for what I write because journalists are extremely, have skills and expertise that I just do not have.) I mean, I write sort of current affairs, adjacent pieces maybe is what I would call the things that I would write. But very shortly after I moved back, I sort of left Northern Ireland for a number of years, five or six years where I was not living here at all. Then by degrees, I moved back in the late 1980s and then finally moved back in the early 1990s properly.

Shortly after I moved back, there was a young taxi driver who was Catholic and he was in a relationship with a woman who was Protestant. He was murdered by Loyalist paramilitaries for being Catholic. His partner went on television the night after his murder and denounced the killers and denounced for murdering her boyfriend for his religion.

The next day, her family was put out of the Loyalist area where they lived for having a temerity to question and condemn the killers of the man she loved. And I thought at that time there was somebody who didn't have the cover that writers very often have to write or the invitation to speak. Here was somebody who was just speaking out of that awful circumstance and having the bravery to do that.

And then some of the consequences of that. And I kind of thought it was one of the moments where I thought to myself, if the opportunity is given you, then take it.

JP:

Can I pick up on this point of the those those mixed marriages or those mixed couples? Because you make in your memoir, you talk about moving back and I believe your wife is Catholic, I think, right? And you have this wonderful description of this.

"It often seemed as though the bigots here reserved a special hatred for mixed relationships, perhaps because mixed relationships gave the lie to the idea that there existed two different people, peoples in Northern Ireland."

But then you've got a comma and I love that you end the sentence slightly differently.

"Although you cannot discount the possibility that in a society where housing had become more segregated with every passing year, the internal border is more impenetrable, such relationships simply offered the gunmen some very convenient targets."

That's a wonderful sentence because you put so many different ways of thinking about the interface into play. Yeah.

GP:

I mean, you cannot rule out the thought that it's an easy target. Sometimes the nearest person of another religion who you could kill was all that was required. And so, you know, yes, it's kind of trying to see different ways in which that might be approached. Yeah, I think probably on balance, I come down.

So I just came across Belfast from, before I started to speak to you, I was at Falls, Falls Road Library for the unveiling of a blue plaque, the Ulster Historical Society have these blue plaques commemorating significant

figures in our city. And they were unveiling one today to the poet Padraic Fiacc, born Joseph O'Connor and not that Joseph O'Connor, born in Belfast in 1924 and lived for a while in the United States, but from the 1940s, I think, or early 50s, permanently in Belfast. So I was there and I traveled right across the city. I traveled east to west and west to east.

I passed an awful lot of monuments to paramilitary members. I meant to the IRA, to the UVF, to the UDA, to the INLA. There are lots of memorials to combatants. There are far fewer memorials to people who were not members of paramilitary organizations, who were not members of military organizations whose lives were taken.

If you looked at it one way, this can look like what happened here in the years from 1969 through to about 1994 and carried on in various forms on a lower level after that. It can look like a war and be presented by a war.

We talk about the combatants. It can look like in other ways. It just looks at times like a very, very, very dirty and nasty murder campaign perpetrated very often by people who knew their victims.

I try very hard to imagine my way into the thinking of people, often people of my own age, some people I knew who joined those organizations. But I refuse to accept only their way of looking at it.

Sometimes those murders up close just look really, really nasty and opportunistic.

DC:

I really appreciate all the ways that you make that point, the lexicon that enables this from happening.

I mean, we've talked about language around community, of course, and you just mentioned murals and monuments and memorials, kind of this visual language that we see in these places.

And one of the things I really appreciate about how you talk about all these things are, you know, just maybe initially to go back to the idea of community, you know, the ways in which that draws boundaries, you know, and I think we usually think of those boundaries are it's keeping people who are not, quote unquote, of the community out or at least identifying them. But it also does something I think you say really powerfully about murals is it also enforces within the community.

It signals, you know, by saying that this is the collective will of the community, any deviation from that now becomes suspect and I really appreciate how I feel like in a lot of your writing that point kind of shines through.

And I think it's subtle enough that you don't hear it that much, you know, it's often either celebrated as something within the community or it's seen as contentious to outside.

But what it does to live in a neighborhood where, you know, you have paramilitary figures ostensibly elevating your values or at least defining those values for you.

And to not be outside of that but then be subject to that seems like a really difficult place to be.

JP:

Glenn, I really want to hear what you have to say. But David, could you maybe draw that analogy out for St. Louis at all? Because I feel like we have so many ways of talking about racial, you know, racialized communities in America.

But I never really thought about that point about the monuments, you know, reminding you like, what does it mean to be a good white citizen of St. Louis or a good black citizen of St. Louis, the ways in which that foreclosing of possibilities in the American racial economy gets policed that way too. So that, you know, certain pathways seem valorized and others, you're just not supposed to think about that.

GP:

It's this place, you know, I grew up here. I thought there was no reason on earth why I shouldn't write about growing up here. And I wanted to write from, you know, not a particular viewpoint, but from a particular time that

I, you know, spent living here, but also the people who informed my life. I wanted to draw those things in. So I wasn't writing about the Troubles, I wasn't writing about this place, I also wanted to understand how we compared with the world or how we could understand ourselves better by looking outside and understanding how the ways in which certain things that occurred here, even the idiom, how that had been influenced by things that were happening in the rest of the world. You cannot speak about civil rights movement here in the 1960s without thinking instantly of the United States of America.

You cannot talk about 1968 and student protests here without thinking about things that were going on in Paris in 1968. You can't think about the urban terrorism of the 1970s without looking at Germany and the Red Army Faction there.

Just add this to the bigger picture if it's useful. So that was the way I always thought of the pieces. Thinking about the way, the marking out of territory, it is absolutely the case that yes, you can see when you're crossing a border in Belfast to this day, this very day that I came across the city, I passed so many borders, I passed peace lines, I passed flagged areas. So you see all of that thing. But then once you're inside there, then it is a reminder exactly that certain paramilitary organizations or a certain ethos holds sway.

And that can manifest right this moment in the part of Belfast where I am, in East Belfast. There are people going around, whether they have a paramilitary connection or not, I can't say, but they're acting as vigilante groups and they're approaching people who they deem to be migrants or refugees and asking them to justify their presence in this part of the city. So it can sometimes be overt. I would be really surprised if there was absolutely no paramilitary connection to that, by the way. It can either be really overt or it can just be a permanent visual reminder that there are certain values that you are supposed to, living in this place, espouse.

I always thought when I was growing up here that probably I was in more danger from what was considered to be *my own community* because I was deviating from it than I would be from what was deemed to be the other community, the enemy community it would have been described as. Because when was I going to encounter people from there anyway? So for a long time when I was growing up and trying to find out how to be here, that certainly was my concern, and I'm certain when I started to write then was coming back.

My first novel came out when I was living in England. My parents were very concerned that somehow I stuck my head up above a parapet and that they were anxious about me in the place that I lived or had lived, rather than running the risk of drawing criticism or worse from the nationalist Republican community.

JP:

I really want to come back to those vigilantes you just mentioned, Glenn, because David and I have been texting about that question a lot. But before we get there, can I, David, just connect what Glenn just said to the St. Louis example? Because the point you're making about the cul-de-sacs and the balkanization and the way that interface zones are constructed, so the murals are a very visible way of constructing. This is our side, that's your side. Oh, here's an Israeli flag over here, here's a Palestinian flag over there. But of course, the creation of cul-de-sacs are just the creation, like when I lived in Baltimore, just one-way street systems to keep white and black neighborhoods apart, that's intended to be invisible.

What I heard you saying partly is, *yeah, you're talking about repertoires that Northern Ireland gets from the rest of the world.* But you're also making a point about what goes on in Northern Ireland in a very visible way can actually help us to think about problems that we have all over the world.

GP:

Yeah.

The traffic is too wide; This is before David takes away. The traffic is too wide. We import ideas about spatial segregation from elsewhere, and some of our own security innovations have been studied by people from other territories, and they've taken them back.

DC:

Along those lines, I'm always fascinated. I've now--being in Belfast multiple times, I've had various folks from the US kind of join me for periods of time. I mean, John and I were there together, and I'm not referring to John with this example, but oftentimes people come to Belfast, they have a vague sense of the Troubles. They haven't really thought about the landscape of Belfast, and inevitably the peace lines just seem shocking.

Just this idea that you would place walls between these neighborhoods for security purposes or related purposes of separation.

But you come to a place like St. Louis, as John's saying, there aren't walls, but there are all sorts of things that are designed, and I think, John, you said it really nicely, that to " invisibly" kind of perpetuate the same sort of division to ensure that you're not going to see people from particular neighborhoods or groups in particular areas. And this whole idea of urban development and redevelopment and renewal and all the language we have around that is in effect serving a softer, less visible sense of that same purpose.

And so I always kind of get a kick out of people's surprise when they see peace lines for the first time and then how that kind of unspools when they think about places they do know well, basically having similar functions, but it doesn't look the same.

GP:

The architectural, so just to say, I mean, the architectural security apparatus, or it's not security apparatus, the softening of those peaceful walls, I think is probably one of the most pernicious things that has happened in this city of Belfast in the last 40 years. Walls, the walls were erected, usually where, you know, streets had divided and people had been burned out of one end or chased out of another end. And the walls went up as kind of like temporary barbed wire that then were kind of became concrete or brick and then had more barbed wire put on the top. But there was always the possibility that those would come down.

Once you start building the cul-de-sacs, once you start, once you take as a given that these are separate communities and start to build that in to the to the monastic architecture, to the civic architecture, then you've got a problem because you cannot overcome those divisions as easily. And I think that I absolutely know that that is not just that's not unique to here.

And all those, you know, John, sorry, David, you mentioned there that the one-way streets in the night, you know, those kinds of things that make it difficult for communication and traffic, which are talking of powerful and useful words.

JP:

So, I love that. I mean, I do want to get back to the moment of the riots that have been going on now in 24, 25. But you called out one of my

favorite books, China Mieville's The City and the City. Yeah. That's great. It's so hard to describe the novel because it's like, if you call it a fantasy novel, it makes it sound like it's made up. If you call it a political allegory, it gets away from the weirdness. But the idea of two cities that are just, you know, through the looking-glass to one another, like sharing the same space, but you wear certain colors if you're a member of one city and certain colors if you're a member of the other. And I love that you connected that to Belfast, you know, in terms of thinking about how to name this place and name that thing that's going on.

GP: Yeah, I learned about City and the City from Kieran Carson, my great and sadly now departed friend, wonderful poet, prose writer, musician. And Kieran and I used to meet every so often for a drink in Belfast City Center.

And he told me one night about it. He was a genre fiction fan and he mentioned this novel by China Mieville, who I hadn't heard of at the time, called The City and the City. I thought it had been published like in the 1950s. There's a lot of that kind of sci-fi and things that Kieran read had been. So I was really surprised to find that it had been published the year before he told me about it. But the City and the City functions, the way it functions is that the two, what do they call, Bezel and Olkoma. That's the name of the two cities. Yeah. They occupy exactly the same physical space.

So there are areas in them that are uniquely Bezel, and there are areas that are uniquely Olkoma, and then there are areas that are *hatched*. Is that what they're called? *Crosshatched*, where both cities absolutely exist at the same time.

But the way they function is that you *unsee*. So you just don't see the other city. You are trained not to see the other city happening right in front of you. That, to me, is just that's growing up in Belfast. Because we knew that if you walked into the city down one street, it instantly identified, or worse, leaving the city rather than walking into it.

Leaving the city by one street identified you as one religion or the other. So you could see that you actually had two lots of people who could come into the city center, crosshatch. But then used these different ways, they used the different city completely differently. So lots about that, I just thought, was a really useful way of understanding or looking at the place that I had lived.

So we were always looking for these things that were helpful for understanding, for explaining. Complicating pictures are always a good thing as well. The more complicated it is, the better. We know what simplifying is. That's the language of politicians is to simplify and reduce.

Our task, is it our task? It's one of the things we might do. If we are interested in language is to look for those things that operate counter to that reductive approach. The City and the City, it's a great book.

I thought I would inquire about whether the rights were available, see if I could do a screen adaptation of it.

JP:

Tell me about it. I think that's a brilliant idea, because I don't know why it hasn't happened. Like you said, it has this great police procedural genre feel to it.

GP:

The reason it hasn't happened to me is because I was told the rights had already been taken. I'm probably taken by somebody with a better track record that I had, which is one movie.

JP:

Well, that's really great though. But can I just say- To that unseeing point though, David and I, the first day I was with David in Belfast, we had this experience of being brought around, of what we were given a tour of an area in the Falls Road, past one of the cemeteries. Then we were trying to walk back to the city center and we asked our guide, who was Catholic, for directions.

He literally couldn't think of or name this shortcut that would have saved us a mile because he didn't see that as part of his mental geography, even for us, no. It didn't occur to him that for us would be OK to do that.

GP:

Yeah. My friend Colin Carberry, who I co-wrote most of my screen and stage stuff, I think I probably it's in Lapsed Protestant somewhere, but he went to school in the Lower Falls, or in the compartment art area of Falls Road. His school more or less backed onto the peace line. Yeah. The term he used for what lay over the peace line was Narnia.

JP:
Yeah, that's good.

GP:
Which is such a brilliant term because again, it's drawing on fantasy.

It's also drawing on the work of a not always widely known or appreciated that CS. Lewis grew up here. But it's just a great way of thinking about it. It's as unimaginable as Narnia to go over there. It's through the wardrobe. So yeah, I think that mental map you have where you just don't see it, you don't go there.

And obviously, this is not unique to Northern Ireland.

And for all kinds of reasons, often to do with class, often to do with race, there are all kinds of reasons why people do not think that another part of their city is for them, or they would say, you know, they would advise you against going to it. So yeah, that partial map, that partial reality, I suppose, that we have.

I lived away, I said, for a number of years. I went to Manchester. I lived part of the time I wasn't in Northern Ireland in late 1980s. I was in Manchester. On my first week there, a friend, the boyfriend of a woman that I knew when I'd been at school in Belfast.

He took me for a walk around the city. He walked me everywhere. But it was like we're going down under this canal bank and we're going to walk up. Now we're going to pop up here in another bit of the city. And he had lore with all of the bits of the city. And I thought I couldn't do that in Belfast because I couldn't pop up.

I couldn't pop over. There were bits I just thought I'd be on there. No idea. So when I came back, I sort of set myself the task. This was before the ceasefires, before the peace process. I thought I want as much of this place as I can possibly have.

I don't want to exclude myself, I suppose, was what I thought.

JP:
Maybe that's a way to connect back to the sort of disturbing thing you were saying about the vigilantes that you had seen and also the things we've all read in the newspaper about these essentially xenophobic riots that have gone on, not just in Northern Ireland but in Britain generally over the last year. Northern Ireland but in Britain generally over the last year.

I've read a couple of different accounts of how we understand them in Northern Ireland. I'd love to hear your take. This is like a gross

simplification, but I read a report put out by the Dow Jones Company, which basically said, it's an economic question. Basically, the places that are more economically deprived are more likely to have xenophobic reactions.

It's more likely to be violence because there's a lot more resentment, because there's fewer jobs, people are more anxious about things being taken away. That's one account I've heard.

Then I read an article in the New York Times, which was more like, there's a big tradition in Northern Ireland. It's an available, culturally available repertoire. I think that's what your guy, Charles Tilly, would say, David. There's a cultural repertoire of knowing what to do when you want to blast an outsider. You have a bonfire, you make people feel unwelcome. So I know that's a huge question.

Do you have a take on that?

GP:

I mean, it has been truly disgusting what has happened. And again, I'm going to say that, I mean, the particular just when you mentioned the bonfire there, I think possibly there's a reference there to an effigy on top of a bonfire in County Tyrone. So the 11th of July, just before the big, for anybody who doesn't know about this, just before the biggest day of the Orange Orders celebrations that run kind of across the summer, but the biggest day is the 12th of July. And tens of thousands of people march and bands play. And the 11th night, as it's called the evening before, traditionally bonfires are lit. And in my first novel actually deals with the center of it. It's set in 1969 and it's about some kids building a bonfire. And not kids, some other people in a housing estate, not unlike the one I grew up in.

It was always the case that I can remember that there was some kind of effigy on the top of the bonfire. It was, I think probably when we were kids, when we were growing up, it was the Pope. So that was nothing glorious in saying that, but there was always something on top of bonfires. But they were fairly rudimentary as my memory of them and offensive undoubtedly.

But so in recent times, they have been really, really far, far more specifically sinister election posters of politicians from other parties. The same is true of bonfires in Republican areas at the times of year when bonfires occur there.

But there are far more bonfires in loyalist areas. And so yes, things like that. And then anti-immigrant or migrant or refugee effigies as well have started to appear. And I mean, this was a boat representing the small boats that come across from Northern France to the south of England with figures that are representing refugees and migrants, asylum seekers. And that was on top of the bonfire to be burnt.

And that's truly appalling. So, I mean, it's, I'm not going to say that there's absolutely no mitigating circumstances whatsoever. But this anti-migrant, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee sentiment and violence is widespread in Europe.

Yeah. It's also widespread in the American, in the United States as well. And you've got a government that seems to be acting on some of those impulses and encouraging them. And likewise, we have political parties here, even if they're not in government, who are certainly fueling those beliefs and those actions. So do we have a kind of a repertoire to hand? Do we?

I hate being rhetorical like that. But yes, I mean, undoubtedly, there's a history here of street violence, a recent history here of street violence.

But the kinds of things that we saw last summer in Belfast, the riots here were not unlike the riots that happened in England. In fact, they started the spasm last summer. I grew out of an event in England.

What we do have here is we also have policing. We've got a fairly tooled up police force. I wouldn't wish a fairly tooled up police force on anybody.

By the way, I'm not saying that. I think things can maybe escalate here in ways or fall into other patterns. Maybe that's the thing to say.

But the violence itself was not dissimilar to violence that happened in parts of these islands, including in Dublin. But certainly, the burning of Muslim owned businesses in South Belfast, very close to the Seamus Heaney Center where I work. It's within walking distance and by walking distance, I mean within a minute's walk from there. So all of that, utterly, utterly appalling. I don't even know if I've answered the question there.

JP:

I think the point about policing, you answered it and more because the point about tool that policing is a great American question as well.

That's one David knows really well, like that policing elicits certain kinds of reactions. I hadn't really thought about that part of it.

GP:

Well, you've got all that equipment and I think you're probably, I'm not going to say you're itching to use it, but going right back to the dawn of the troubles, the most recent troubles because of course, there were troubles here in the 1920s as well. In 1969, and I traveled right past the spot today, coming from this plaque, the unveiling of the plaque, the Padraic Fiacc. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, the RUC, at that time had available to them armored cars with machine gun turrets.

It was police force. They had a machine, the machine guns mounted on armored cars. So when the rioting of August 1969 reached a certain pitch, and it was obviously the rioting was pretty, pretty fierce. But nothing that required or would have anticipated the deployment of an armored car with a revolving gun turret. But that's what was sent out. And because that's what was available.

And that revolving gun turret killed a nine-year-old boy called Patrick Rooney, who was sheltering in his family's flat in Divis Tower.

I so appreciate, as John said as well, you bringing the policing element into that last question. You know, where I sit in St. Louis, Ferguson, which is a key site of the Black Lives Matter movement here, the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown, that led to a sustained protest campaign, and also a militarized, most immediately militarized policing response, is right down the road from here. And so the dynamic you're describing, you know, as you noted, is parallel quite directly here in the US.

DC:

And so, you know, I think John and I had a back and forth around, you know, the limits of just thinking about economic deprivation is kind of explaining the whole dynamic. And, you know, we were thinking about how history matters in the repertoire way that John had mentioned.

And then you bringing policing into that equation, I think, really is super helpful for, you know, not creating these either/or kinds of debates about what's driving these things. You know, you mentioned, like, the walk you took today.

A few went to the library in Falls Road. And you mentioned the murals that you see, the kind of monuments, memorials, you know, these memorial plaques that you can see.I'm really curious, because the other striking thing about the visual landscape in Belfast, I mean, certainly there's the political murals that we've been talking about quite a bit.

There's also the kind of street art that I know Belfast has been investing in in a variety of ways is, you know, quite striking. And beautifully so, in many instances.

But the kind of third pole in that is that there also seems to be a really vibrant graffiti culture. You know, there's lots of dense graffiti, especially around city center.

And, you know, one thing that both John and I noted from Lapsed Protestant is that you talk about graffiti a couple of times and at one point you refer to it as the 90s danger sport.

And if I read that right, I was thinking about how people might overwrite political murals, you know, in a critical way. So, you know, scrawl something on top of a mural to contest it in some way.

And that would be, you know, more so than the writing of the mural, which is quite controlled by paramilitaries or others, that sort of act of graffiti.

But I'm curious how you think about graffiti that would typically be thought of as non-political in the sense that we're talking about now. You know, people who are tagging at a large scale. You know, because one thing about that is, it seems like graffiti pieces that are often quite elaborate, but the writers' tag are these kind of radical expressions of individual agency. You know, they're really about promoting themselves.

Their audience oftentimes is other graffiti writers. You know, it's not really about the public thinks about the aesthetics of it or anything like that. And I'm just curious what you think of the dense presence of graffiti and Belfast alongside all the more politically legible things that we've been talking about.

GP:

Yeah. I mean, I think there's so many questions in what you just said there. Probably we could talk, as long as we've just talked up to now on that. I'm bound to say that probably the age I am, I'm not the best commentator on the graffiti and what's happening there, and how that operates in terms of the response to something else that somebody, another graffiti artist has done.

But so that period that you were talking about, kind of for arts, that period that you were talking about when I was writing some of those pieces for Lapsed Protestant, maybe in the 90s and into the early 2000s, where people were graffitiing overparamilitary murals. And it really was,

to go back to that thing about what's the purpose of the murals? It's to remind you who controls this place. And what's the purpose of graffiti?

It's to say, not that much you don't. So that, all of that, so the authority figures, the paramilitary organizations, if you were a teenager and you were street drinking, you might get picked up by the cops.

It was entirely likely that you would kind of get your, be colored by paramilitaries who would take the drink off you and worse, or glue sniffing and stuff like that. So that was another form of authority. And so you wanted to snub your nose to that.

And I've got a line of Padraic Fiacc since I was at the Blue Flag on Vailay, about I stick my tongue out at all. I think it says stick my tongue out at all, the powerful. There's an impulse there if you're to rebel against what was in a previous moment the rebellion.

So and then there was a period where we were looking for softening the murals, no paramilitaries, looking for cultural figures who represented or rarely represented our city as a whole, usually a particular area.

So you have people being appropriated by particular sections saying this represents us. And so there was some of that. And then there was just that maybe third wave, which was just, *no, I don't care about the paramilitary organization.*

I know me and getting this up on the wall. You know, I care about what I'm seeing elsewhere, these other brilliant graffiti artists, and I want to channel some of that and do some of that. So I think probably now all of those things exist together.

You know, at various times, the hooded paramilitary gun then have made a comeback. Sometimes if there's a feud going on between paramilitary organizations, you'll see big new murals advertising one or other of them. But so those militaristic ones exist alongside the cultural ones, which exist alongside what is, let's face it, also cultural. It's the culture of graffiti.

But sadly, a generation that I am not a part of, but more power to them and more power to their aerosols.

JP:

More power to the aerosols. I feel like that's a good motto to turn to home then.

Glenn, the final thing we like to do on the show, if you want to take it up, is we like to close by recommending as a Recallable Book, something

else that was not discussed today, that might likely appeal to readers, to listeners if they like this,

they might want to read this book. Have you got one for us?

You're going to tell me now I did mention Milkman so many times, didn't I? I wrote over and over again, I know it.

I've mentioned it five times in previous episodes.

Yeah, I know, I know, I know, there's a reason for that.

Here's a book I'm going to say, because one of the books that I most often do when I talk about wanting to write fiction myself, I very often mention some of the *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* in particular.

But actually, because he was dealing in Midnight's Children, he's dealing with the partition of India. That moment when India comes into the moment that India comes into being and the creation of this whole new country.

For me, growing up in a place, my grandmother was born in a pre-partitioned Ireland. So she lived in two countries without ever moving.

But the other book that was really important to me, because it had similar ambitions of trying to deal with what nation meant, was the *USA* trilogy by John Dos Passos.

So I read that, knitted all kinds of things that literally was written from the 1920s. There are three volumes (That's why it's called the Trilogy, Glenn)There are three volumes. I read it in single volume form, but they were published in over a 10 year period. Really, he had little sections that were newsreel, where he incorporated events.

He had stream of consciousness, he had numerous characters that he was following. It excited me beyond belief. When I started to write, I thought I would love to write a novel set in Northern Ireland, that had the same kind of ambition as USA by John Dos Passos. What can I tell you?

Twelve works of fiction, five works of non-fiction and I have cumulatively and singularly failed. But yeah, read John Dos Passos.

Well, I mean, it's sort of unfair. You've succeeded at being Glenn Patterson by failing at being John Dos Passos.

Yeah. Well, I guess the thing is that John Dos Passos never succeeded in being me. So I suppose we have that in common.

JP:

David, what have you got for us?

Have you got a book?

DC:

I think I have two things actually, and I'll bring it back to Belfast as someone who's not from there. I know you just expanded us out here, Glenn, and one of them, and I'm not just saying this because you're in front of me.

So I've been really interested in Belfast, but more generally, in the long tail of conflict. What sort of happens after a conflict gets directly addressed, and how does it still manifest in ways that are sometimes read as a legacy and sometimes not?

And I will say the two things I've read more recently that have really gotten me thinking hard about that, the first is your really recent book, Glenn, *The Northern Bank Job.*

So not enough, but an account of this, quite one of the largest bank heists in UK history, I'm assuming is still the case, so in 2004.

And I was expecting a really engaging tale of the actual heist, which the book includes, but also the second and third part of the book are really, I read it at least about the place and time in which it occurred.

So this is after the Good Friday Agreement, around thinking about the role of an entity like the IRA, who's still in the process of decommissioning weapons and things.

That's great.

So anyway, I felt like I learned a lot about that. And then the other book that I will say, and you mentioned his name earlier, if I'm pronouncing it right, Eoin Macnamie. Eoin Macnamie. His recent book, *The Bureau*, which I managed to see a reading of when I was in Belfast earlier this year. I felt like it was in a novelistic form.

There were a lot of intersecting themes about the ways in which an operation that was explicitly political kind of continues to play out, whether it be through a criminal organization or just a way to address interpersonal conflicts.

It kind of gets read through political capacities. And anyway, I thought both of those books were really wonderful accounts of this long tale.

GP:

Thank you. Thank you for that. And do you know what? I haven't actually yet read The Bureau. And I read all of Owen's books. But when I saw it, I was waiting for the Northern Bank Job to come out.

And when I looked at the advanced publicity of it, I thought, I'm going to read that and I'm going to be dismayed because my book is coming out after. And it felt like there were certain, as you said, there were maybe confluences there.

So I'm looking forward to reading that once I get that stupid thought out of my head, that there's only that space.

And maybe the last thing I will say is that when I was at that unveiling of the blue plaque to Padraic Fiacc, I did happen to notice, gathered around outside the Falls Library, one or two people whose names maybe pop up in The Northern Bank Job, as maybe having some knowledge or understanding of what happened on the 20th of December 2004 when 26.5 million pounds went walkabout from The Northern Bank in Belfast City Centre. Was it that?

JP:

This is the past is not dead. It's not even past. So I'm actually going to pick up a totally different thread of our conversation.

I'm going to recommend the Kevin Lynch book, *The Image of the City* from 1960. Because I was really struck by our discussion of the visible and invisible ways. The neighborhoods are Balkanized or the true demarcation of parts of the city.

And that book is so great. There's a chapter on it in Boston about the way that the image of Boston, there's certain gores and triangles that people never remember. They just disappear.

And that point about the psychic landscape and the real built landscape, kind of co-constituting the reality of the city. I think it's great.

And I really appreciate, Glenn, your point about helping us think how Northern Ireland and Belfast specifically can be its own unique place as every place is, but also paradigmatic for things that we don't notice in other places in the world.

But they're actually going on similar for similar divisions and class and economic divisions too.

GP:

Yeah. So I just made a note of that because yeah, that's one to go to. So thanks a million.

Yeah.

Thank you. So Glenn and David both. It's just a great...

Thanks, David. Thanks, John. I really enjoyed this one.

Yeah.

And I just thank you all, Recall This Book listeners, for listening and tune in for more of the same. Folks, from all of us here, bye-bye.

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