

# A debut novelist's moving portrait of the Irish working class

'Close to Home' by Michael Magee is an immersive novel about a 20-something searching for his place in the world

Review by Michael Patrick Brady

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Ireland was supposed to be different in the new millennium, with the Celtic Tiger in the south and the Good Friday Agreement in the north providing a vehicle to move past the island's history of poverty, sectarian violence and cultural repression. But this spirit of optimism was dashed by the Great Recession and has been further undermined by Brexit. Amid the turmoil, a new generation of Irish writers, from Sally Rooney to Niamh Campbell, is striving to articulate what it feels like to be caught adrift between a traumatic past and an uncertain future.

Irish writer Michael Magee's debut novel, "Close to Home," deftly captures the spirit of these times. Like Rooney, Magee explores the world of a literary-minded 20-something navigating the distinctions of class in an affecting story of self-discovery. But his voice is wholly his own: unflinching, direct, disarmingly sensitive and informed by his own experiences as a young man in the working class Belfast neighborhood of Twinbrook.

Sean Maguire, the 22-year-old protagonist of "Close to Home," regards his upbringing as both a source of pride and a millstone around his neck. When Sean returns home from university in 2013, he works dead-end jobs, gets high and picks fights. After an ill-considered punch leads to a close brush with hard time, he's sentenced to 200 hours of community service, which he uses to reflect on where things went wrong for him.

Magee creates a strong sense of place with his prose, which is rife with local color and makes liberal use of Belfast slang — Sean and his friends get high on a "wee toot" of "gear" (a line of cocaine) while avoiding the "peelers" (the cops), for example. The legacy of the Troubles pervades everything — at times Magee can come off a little didactic about its impact. But overall, the effect is immersive. Magee makes you feel like one of the gang, and the feeling of belonging he creates is intoxicating. It helps us understand why Sean finds it so difficult to leave this life behind.

“Close to Home” is populated with an array of colorful figures who add to the novel’s verisimilitude. Magee doesn’t trade in the kind of one-dimensional stereotypes you often see in depictions of the working class. Sean’s older half brother, Anthony, is a menacing, Begbie-esque presence at the start of the book; over time, Magee is able to give him a surprising degree of depth, and in the end, he and Sean are able to share a final moment of catharsis that is profoundly moving and feels entirely earned.

Magee is adept at showing how the boundaries of class can be disorienting — the feeling that you must shed your history and identity to succeed. A chance meeting with Mairéad, an old friend from the neighborhood who managed to find her way out, gives Sean, an aspiring writer, a peek into a more refined world that he longs to be a part of but is conflicted about joining. “It was like I had stepped out of myself,” Sean says of his efforts to fit in. “What I saw was another person with another voice.”

“Close to Home” illustrates what it’s like to grow up, as Irish poet Seamus Heaney described it, “besieged within the siege,” as Sean wrestles with the duty he feels he owes to his heritage, his community, his family and himself. Suffusing his narrative with honesty and grace, Magee succeeds in bringing his neighborhood to life for readers and suggests that amid what seems like a never ending struggle, there is always room for hope.

*Michael Patrick Brady is a book critic from Boston.*

## Close to Home

By Michael Magee

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