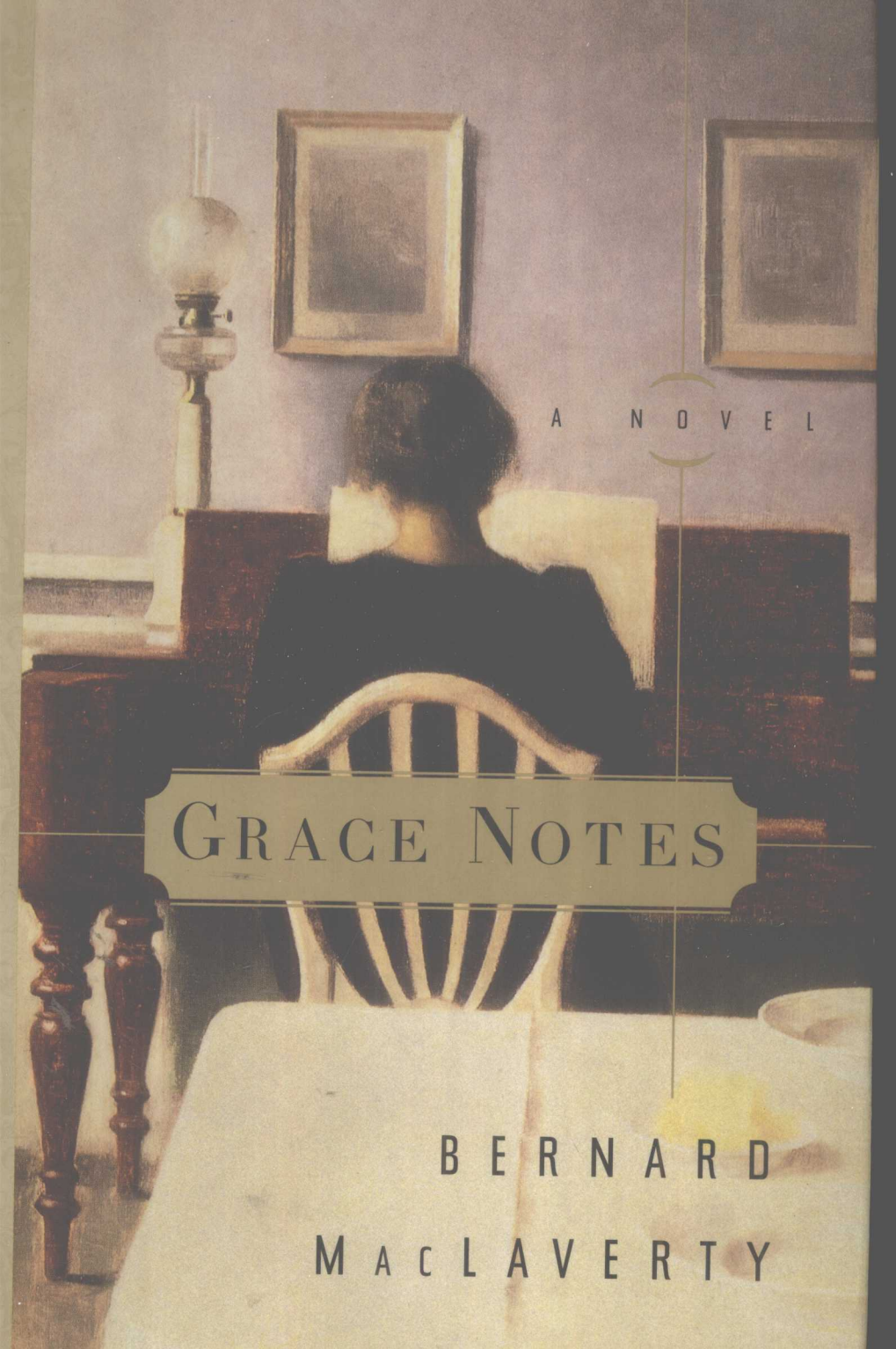
A NOVEL
GRACE NOTES
BERNARD
MacLAVERTY

# GRACE NOTES

## BERNARD MAC LAVERTY

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# GRACE NOTES

*by the same author*

SECRETS
LAMB
A TIME TO DANCE
CAL
THE GREAT PROFUNDO
WALKING THE DOG

For John

# Part One

SHE WENT DOWN the front steps and walked along the street to the main road. At this hour of the morning there was little or no traffic. If there was a car, then it sounded just like that – a car going past in the wet – there was no other city noise. It was still dark and the street lights were reflected on the road surface. She tucked her hair back and put her collar up as far as it would go. The raincoat was creased as if it had just been unpacked. She made her way to the bus station on foot carrying a small hold-all.

She was early at the airport stance and walked up and down the concrete pavement. It was lined and felt, through the soles of her shoes, like hard sand close to the water's edge. It was a way of not thinking – to concentrate on her surroundings. Somewhere a man was whistling – at least she assumed it was a man. Women rarely whistled.

In the bus she chose a place towards the back and put her knees up against the seat in front of her. The bus was empty and warm. She watched the chrome seat rails vibrate in unison as the engine idled. If she stared at things, then it helped block out stuff. Like Anna. She did not dare think about that. Two people got on. She noticed that her fists were clenched and she consciously relaxed them, turned her hands palm upwards on her lap to see if it would make a difference.

On the motorway they drove towards the January dawn, a sky of yellow light and dark cloud. Then as the bus careered through the rain and spray thrown up by the growing traffic, at seventy miles an hour, she began to cry. It came over her and she just let it happen. She tried to make as little noise as possible but the others on the bus heard her and looked round. It helped her to stop when she saw her distorted face reflected in the window. She had done it before – used the bathroom mirror in the same way. You just looked so awful, you stopped.

In the airport she bought her tickets with the money Peter and Liz had lent her. She sat in the middle of the concourse trying to think of nothing, trying not to listen to the airport chimes, the flight announcements. People walked around her but she did not look up. She continued to stare at her feet. She was wearing brown court shoes and denim jeans. Somehow talcum powder had got on to her left shoe and dulled the leather. She wondered how it had survived the rain.

At one side of the lounge men were building a staircase, hammering incessantly. Somebody was sawing wood by hand – better than the scream of a power-saw. She thought the sound nostalgic – like the hee-haw of a donkey. Somewhere a baby was crying. It was very young – a week, maybe two. The exhalation of each cry seemed infinitely long. She did not dare to think of babies.

She needed the toilet. Beside the sign for LADIES and GENTS was one for a BABY CHANGING ROOM. If only it was as easy as that. 'Don't particularly like this baby, would you mind changing it?' Afterwards, washing her hands, she looked in the mirror and saw her eyes puffy with crying.

An airport was the place for such things. People meeting and people parting. Tears of one sort or another. Some things were too painful. Offspring and what they did to you.

Everybody said she took after her father. The urge to cry came over her again but this time, facing herself in the mirror, she controlled it. She wondered what it would be like to face the mirror in a moment of joy. But this seemed such an impossibility. She took one of her red and grey capsules and washed it down, gulp-swallowing water sipped from the arc of a drinking fountain.

Outside the toilets school parties from France and Germany stood in stiff groups photographing themselves. They talked loudly without removing their Walkmans. Their headsets sizzled and tished. Two policemen went past in shirtsleeves – one hugging a machine-gun close to his chest.

Her flight was called and she went through Security and then through Special Security for those people travelling to Northern Ireland. The body search the uniformed woman gave her was close to being offensive. Breasts and buttocks flicked by her touch. A Special Branch policeman looked at her ticket.

'The reason for your trip?'

'I'm going home.'

'Business or pleasure?'

'Neither.'

He looked at her, his fingers playing with the ticket.

'For what reason?'

'A funeral.'

'Someone close?'

She nodded. He handed her back her ticket.

'Sorry. On you go.'

As the plane turned, the runway lights formed a squat triangle to the horizon. The window was covered with shuddering droplets of rain. The engine note changed, went up an octave, as they raced for take-off. Being pressed back into her seat as they accelerated was a kind of swooning. At this speed with the engine note almost a scream the rain droplets became minute, with tails streaking across the glass – like individual sperm.

On holiday her father wore an Arran sweater, full of cable and blackberry stitching, knitted with untreated wool – he said the untreated nature of the wool repelled the rain. Her mother said it repelled her too. The smell of it was something awful. Like a wet dog.

His voice was one of the greatest things in the world – just talking. He had a big Adam's apple which bobbed when he spoke. When she was very young she would sit on his knee and reach out a finger to touch it as it moved – the sound he made, guttural, so deep it resonated with her insides.

When they dropped down through the cloud at Aldergrove she saw how green the land was. And how small the fields. A mosaic of vivid greens and yellows and browns. Home. She wanted to cry again.

The bus into Belfast was stopped at a checkpoint and a policeman in a flak jacket, a young guy with a ginger moustache, walked up the aisle towards her, his head moving in a slow no as he looked from side to side, from

seat to opposite seat for bombs. He winked at her, 'Cheer up love, it might never happen.'

But it already had.

On the bus home she watched the familiar landmarks she used as a child pass one by one. Toomebridge, her convent school, the drop into low gear to take the hill out of Magherafelt.

The bus stopped at a crossroads on the outskirts of her home town and a woman got off. Before she walked away, the driver and she had a conversation, shouted over the engine noise. This was the crossroads where the Orangemen held their drumming matches. It was part of her childhood to look up from the kitchen table on still Saturday evenings and hear the rumble of the drums. Her mother would roll her eyes, 'They're at it again.'

It was a scary sound – like thunder. Like the town was under a canopy of dark noise. One summer's evening she'd been out a walk with her father and they'd come across a drumming match as it was setting up.

'Oi oi, Catherine, would you look at this nonsense.' He held her hand tighter. Land-Rovers and vans had been drawn up on to the grass verges. A party of men was gathering. A couple of drums were being taken from the back of a Land-Rover. The drums were two to three feet deep as well as huge in circumference. They were so big that it took two men to help each drummer struggle into his harness. They hung the drum around his neck and each drummer leaned back as far as he could and supported the drum against his stomach. Then they handed him two long rods. There was a thin drummer and a fat one. Both were hatless and in shirt-sleeves. The fat one had a tanned

face which stopped at his hat line. Above that, his skin was white. He rattled the rods against the skin of the drum, testing it. The drum was so big in relation to the man that Catherine thought of a penny-farthing.

'They're made of goat skin,' said her father. 'King Billy-goat skin. You could smell the stink of it from Omagh.'

When she'd heard the drums in her home their rhythm had been fudged by distance and the sound had become an indistinct rumble. Now here, close up, it was a different thing altogether. Her father leaned over to her ear as if to shout something above the noise of the drumming, but instead shook his head. When the drums ceased, he whispered to her, 'They're supposed to be able to play different rhythms, different tunes – *Lilliburlero* and what have you – but it all sounds the same to me. A bloody dunderin. On the Twelfth they thump them so hard and so long they bleed their wrists. Against the rim. Sheer bloody bigotry.' Catherine stared at the flailing sticks, felt her eardrums pummelled. 'They practise out here above the town to let the Catholics know they're in charge. This is their way of saying the Prods rule the roost.'

But Catherine was thrilled by the sound, could distinguish the left hand's rhythm from the right. She tried to keep time with her toes inside her shoes. There were slaps and dunts on the off-beats, complex rhythms she couldn't begin to write down – even now, never mind then. The two sticks working independently. The hands tripping each other up. A ripple bouncing back and interfering with the other ripples which had first started it. The drums were battered so loud she felt the vibrations in her body, was sure the sky and the air about her were pounding to the beat. It

didn't exactly make her want to dance, more to sway. But there was an edge as well – of fear, of tribal war drumming. The gathering of men turned to stare across the road.

'Come on,' said her father. 'You're looking at a crowd whose highest ambition, this year and every year, is to march down streets where they're not wanted. Nothing to do with the betterment of mankind or the raising of the human spirit.' Her father's hand tightened on hers so that it began to hurt. 'It's their right, their heritage. God love a duck. Bowler-hatted dunderheads. Gather-ups. The Orange dis-Order, I call them. And the politicians that lead them are ten times worse, for they should know better. The whole problem, Catherine, is racist. I've heard Protestants saying, "The one side is as bad as the other". It's just not true. It's the Protestant side's bigoted. The Catholics are only reacting to being hated. And it's a polite kind of hatred, too. Around the Twelfth the Prods'll say, "Hello." Any other time of the year they'll say, "Hello, Brendan." And it's not just the guttersnipes. If anything, the bloody lawyers and doctors and businessmen are worse – men who've been educated.'

In the town itself she was surprised to see a Chinese restaurant and a new grey fortress of a police barracks. She stood, ready to get off at her stop. There was something odd about the street. She bent at the knees, crouched to look out at where she used to live. It was hardly recognisable. Shop-fronts were covered in hardboard, the Orange Hall and other buildings bristled with scaffolding. Some roofs were covered in green tarpaulins, others were protected by lath and sheets of polythene.

'What's happened here?' she asked the bus driver.

'It got blew up. A bomb in October.'

'Was anybody hurt?'

'They gave a warning. The whole place is nothing but a shell.'

She stepped down on to the pavement and felt her knees shake. A place of devastation. The bus pulled away and turned the corner. The sound of its engine was drowned by the hammering, the scouring roar of cement mixers. A lorry with a crane reached round and lifted a pallet off itself. Unburdening itself. How was she going to get through the next couple of days?

She passed Granny Boyd's house, the door boarded up. It had always been open when she was a child. Catherine would skip across the street.

'Who's that?'

'It's me.'

Granny Boyd had a cat. Catherine liked to stroke its head and stare into its yellow eyes until it began to purr. She always bent down so that her face was at the same level as the cat's. Purring was the funniest thing, like a motorbike in the distance.

'Catherine, don't you dare. I've told you about kissing cats.'

'I wasn't going to kiss it. I'm just playing with it.'

When Granny Boyd was upstairs the boards squeaked and the light bowl trembled. There were dead flies in the light bowl. When Granny was out of the room, Catherine would look under all the sofa cushions and chair cushions to see if there was anything there, but there never was.

The pub was on a slight hill. When dogs pissed at the

door the dark lines ran diagonally to the gutter. The main double doors were closed with a black-rimmed card pinned to them. An Intimation. What a strange word. Her eyes flinched away from reading what it said on the card. She went in by the side door. Her father's name was hand-written above it – black on cream. *Brendan McKenna – Licensed to Sell Wines and Spirits.*

They had always lived over the pub with its buzz of voices. Bar talk. It had a door of grey glass which had a rim of clear glass to peep through. She hated having to go into the bar – the way all the men looked up and, seeing a girl, would stop talking. When she was fifteen she had come home one night from the school concert just about closing time. Men were coming out on to the street and she could hear her father's voice calling time. She had heard this scene every night from upstairs and been afraid of it – the loud voices, the shouting, the maleness of it. This was the first time she had ended up in the middle of it. Twenty or thirty men of all ages thronged the pavement. Fuckin this and fuckin that – before anyone saw her. Two guys were pissing in the shadows and their streams were ribboning out across the pavement. In the dark at first they didn't know who she was. There was some wolf-whistling and growling.

'Hello darlin.'

'Fancy going a dander up the road, love?'

'Show us the colour of your knickers.'

One man shoved another younger lad for a joke and he cannoned into her. Everyone smelled of stale smoke and Guinness.