

Lyra McKee

*Lost, Found, Remembered*

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For educators involved in training the next generation of journalists, especially investigative journalists, on tertiary courses in the UK, Belfast-born Lyra McKee was not only a rising star to watch closely but could also serve as a stellar teaching aid. The quality of her work, her youthful appeal, her local roots, and her prominence as an openly gay woman journalist blazing her own trail amid a dearth of diversity in, and funding of, UK newsrooms meant she could be readily incorporated into lessons as an inspiration to students. Named in 2016 among *Forbes* magazine's 30 Under 30 leading lights in the media in Europe, having won the Sky News Young Journalist of the Year award as a teenager in 2006, McKee had earned a reputation as a muckraker whose passion was "to dig into topics that others don't care about" (*Forbes* 2016).

In an Editor's Note introducing Faber's collection of McKee's writings – released in time for the first anniversary of her death – we are reminded that she took on difficult, even taboo subjects such as "growing up gay in Northern Ireland, the epidemic of suicide among her generation in Belfast, and in her book for Faber, *The Lost Boys*, she was investigating the unsolved disappearances of children during the Troubles" (McKee 2020, p. ix). Of course, prior knowledge that she was shot dead, at just 29 years old, by a dissident republican in Creggan, Derry, brings immense poignancy to the reading experience. The collection succeeds, ultimately, as "both a celebration of her talent and a reminder of what we have lost" (p. ix) owing to her work simply speaking for itself, thanks to Faber's light-touch editorial approach. The brief Editor's Note paying tribute to her sets out a basic arrangement of the collection into three sections: "unpublished work in 'Lost', pieces that may be less familiar to the reader in 'Found', and the pieces that cemented her reputation" (p. ix) in 'Remembered'.

The first section features examples of her early poetry (dealing, notably, with issues of limited time and mortality) and extracts from *The Lost Boys*, including an account of the search for the body of a young man believed to have committed suicide on Belfast's Cave Hill. The account develops a distressing theme which runs throughout the collection, of the grim realities of the legacy of the Troubles – in particular, the many boys and young men of the 'ceasefire generation' who (like their conflict-era counterparts, and thus contrary to the fruits of peace, prosperity, and safety promised by politicians) "just vanished into thin air" (p. 41) by going away to whereabouts unknown, and killing themselves. Similarly, pieces such as "Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies" in section two and "The Ceasefire Suicides" in section

three, illustrate McKee's intense preoccupation with political, economic and social issues linked to the history of violence and collective PTSD in Northern Ireland.

Moreover, we are witness to McKee's own personal struggle to come to terms with her sexuality in relation to religion, those closest to her, and wider society. Her confident voice as a gay woman and LGBT activist, intertwined with her belief that she had found her true path by becoming a journalist, is predominantly in evidence in section three in such contributions as "A Letter to My Fourteen-Year-Old Self", "Fight for Equality Is as Much a Battle for Hearts and Minds as It Is for Legislation", and "How Uncomfortable Conversations Can Save Lives". In the latter, a transcribed talk which movingly concludes the collection, McKee points to extremely high LGBT suicide rates and quotes, at the end, Jeremiah 29:11 as a positive message for struggling LGBT young people: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (p. 177). Of course, we read this knowing that harm would befall her, and that her future would never happen. However, we can also appreciate that she had reconciled herself to the notion of a loving God, and that her activism and death can be situated as major spurs within the lead-up to the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

Another memorable passage arises in the eerily prescient "Requiem for a Journalist" in section two. Following the assassination of young Mexican online editor Jaime *Domínguez*, McKee expresses fears for her own safety as her work necessitates asking "questions about dangerous people" (p. 129). Chillingly, she even imagines attempting to evade a hail of bullets. She wonders how "my 'community'" (i.e. investigative reporters worldwide) would react were she to be killed: "Would they tweet, 'So sad, could happen to any of us'? Or would they actually do something?" (p. 129). She identifies (in 2013) a need for change towards a more connected and co-operative network of investigative journalists who are "actively collaborating and helping each other" (p. 130) – a trend which has gained impetus in recent years. Similarly, in "Want a Career in Investigative Journalism? Become an Entrepreneur" in section two, her questioning (also in 2013) of who is going to pay for the news in future has powerful contemporary resonance.

In all, this collection – its slimness indicative of a life cut short in its prime by a killer who is yet to be brought to justice – ensures McKee is 'un-silenced' and furthers her legacy. This is in keeping with her motivations as an investigative journalist, set out in "Picking the Right Stories to Investigate" in section three: "1) Injustice and 2) A need for someone to right the wrong" (p. 161). The collection also serves to promote the larger cause of journalism and especially investigative journalism. As with other high-profile murder cases (including *Ján Kuciak*, *Daphne Caruana Galizia*, and *Jamal Khashoggi*), McKee's legacy must ultimately have real-world impacts if muckrakers and journalists are to be properly safeguarded and funded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As McKee writes in "Picking the Right Stories": "For me, reporting for the sake of reporting is not enough. It must lead to a greater outcome than publication of the story" (p. 162).

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## REFERENCES

Forbes [online], 2016. "Lyra McKee, 25". Available from:  
<https://www.forbes.com/pictures/glke45eml/lyra-mckee-25/> [Accessed 18 April 2020].

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