

Phyllis Boumans

**Building a Modern Short Story Canon: Strategies of Taste-making
in the Review Section of *The Bell* (1940-1954)**

Seán O’Faoláin’s and Peadar O’Donnell’s *The Bell* (1940-1954) was Ireland’s most influential literary periodical in the middle of the twentieth-century. With its sustained focus on creative fiction and literary criticism, the magazine attempted to change the literary landscape by advancing a modern Irish short story which incorporated modern foreign influences to depict Irish life. In this paper, I aim to uncover the ways in which the review section in *The Bell* was used as a means of furthering certain formal and aesthetic patterns. I will argue that the book section was part of the magazine’s objective of promoting a modern Irish short story and building a canon of short story writers which followed editor O’Faoláin’s guidelines. Particularly under O’Faoláin’s tenure as book editor, the review section grew substantially, awarded more space to short story collections, and became a mouthpiece for his advice and editorial directions – on top of the editorials and regular features on writing that were already in place. In a questionnaire held under *Bell*-readers in 1945 which gauged readers’ opinion on the magazine and collected their suggestions for improvement, a reader called the book reviews “essays not reviews”. This assessment accurately captures the way in which O’Faoláin used the review section to reiterate, qualify, or elaborate his precepts.

I intend to show that the editor of *The Bell* used the review section to support his aim of modernizing the Irish short story in three different ways: first of all, by reviewing a particular set of short story collections – such as Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Demon Lover* or Franz Kafka’s *The Great Wall of China* – the editor spotlighted a certain type of modern short story collection which it endorsed, held up as an example and explicitly commended to readers of *The Bell*. Secondly, the reviews served as a space for O’Faoláin to apply and display his literary principles: the discussions of works were geared more towards the edification of *Bell*-readers in their own literary pursuits or to benefit their critical reading skills than anything else. William Saroyan, for example, is criticized for not following *The Bell*’s maxim to only “write about what you know” when O’Faoláin, in his verdict on Saroyan’s collection *Dear Baby*, writes that Saroyan is “weak when he writes about American America [...] and magnificent when he writes about Armenian America.” Similarly, echoing an earlier editorial in which O’Faoláin advocated a distance between writer and substance, Bowen is criticized for letting her feelings intrude, while Bryan MacMahon, frequent *Bell*-contributor and acolyte, praises fellow short story writer Michael McLaverty for his “emotional restraint”. On a third level, publications by writers that had been launched by *The Bell* were fed back into the review section (always preceded by the line “whose work appeared in *The Bell*”) to create a sense of *The Bell* as a springboard for literary careers and to brand the magazine as a canon-shaping enterprise. Taken together, then, this paper will explore how the review form was mobilized to promote a modern Irish short story.

Biographical note

Phyllis Boumans is a second-year PhD student at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Her PhD research,

supervised by Professor Elke D'hoker, investigates the publication and mediation of the modern Irish short story in *The Bell* (1940-1954) and the magazine's literary legacy.