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Innocence lost: attempts at renaissance in David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

Like many of his contemporaries, David Park has chosen pregnancy and childbirth as metaphors for the transitional phase of Northern Ireland following the Troubles. His novel, *The Truth Commissioner*, with its characters hell-bent on redemption, offers a glimpse into what a post-Troubles Northern Ireland can and cannot look like. While his fictional truth commission seeks to alternately illuminate and sanitize the truth, Park interrogates its meaning in a world where innocence has been lost and cannot easily be regained. All the characters are haunted by transgressions from their past: an estranged daughter, a dead child, a lost boy. Their collective futures and renaissance lie solely within the next generation – a generation untainted by decades of fear and trauma. They've had their childhoods and children taken from them. Their only hope at redemption is putting the ghosts to bed before the new seeds are sown.

Connor Walshe has lost his life. Michael Madden has lost the innocence of his youth. Francis Gilroy has lost the trust of the community in his ability to guide the new youth. James Fenton has lost the ability to dream of a son filling the hole in his and Miriam's life. Maria has lost her brother. While the truth commission does not execute its intended aim – Rafferty is never exposed as the true killer of Connor – it does, albeit clumsily (and perhaps inadvertently), bring us to a renewed sense of hope. Stanfield, whether he deserves it or not, is able to reunite with his daughter Emma and meet Alan his son-in-law and Tom, his first grandchild. Madden manages to escape the clutches of the IRA and rescue Kirsty before escaping

on the plane back to Florida. Fenton makes peace with the mountain and the two boys he feels he's let down. He survives his suicidal ideation. But the greatest hope lies with the unborn and just born.

One of the byproducts and unintended consequences of the Troubles was a whole generation of young people falling through the cracks. Park shows us this not only through Walshe and Madden but the young people at the West Belfast club Lynch encounters: "The whole bloody world's gone to the dogs. All they're interested in is getting smashed out of their heads. No interest in anything else." (Park 303) Lynch is without any self-consciousness. It's his generation – the generation of parents that were only interested in one thing and it wasn't parenting – who've created the conditions under which the youth were misled. It's they who've created a world in which Connor Walshes and Michael Maddens can be used up and then thrown away once they've served their purpose. While the parents were fighting their war, ostensibly a religious war – a civil rights war – their children were left to their own devices and lost sight of their religion and civility. Without parental supervision an entire generation was lost amidst drug and alcohol abuse, petty (and sometimes violent) crime, and teen pregnancy. Park's hope is that the generation comprised of Florian, Tom, and Ramona's baby will not be treated so carelessly. Only then will Northern Ireland's rebirth be complete.