

Although not specifically stated in the book, it soon becomes clear that *Milkman* by Anna Burns is set in Northern Ireland at the height of 'The Troubles', probably in the 1970s. It is written in the first person and has significant autobiographical aspects. The writing is almost narrative in style and most of the group found it quite difficult to read. Sentences are very long, as are chapters, which have few obvious breaks. However, perseverance is rewarded and this reader became increasingly familiar with the narrative style.

The narrator is an eighteen-year-old woman who spends time reading classic literature while walking; an activity that is regarded with suspicion by her community. In the case of the women, their lives are dominated by the begetting and bringing up of children, which they regard as the natural order of things. There is no mention of the men's occupations, but they seem to be divided between the 'renouncers-of-the-state' – presumably IRA members – or those who keep quiet. This lack of identification is a feature of the book, with few people being mentioned by name. The narrator has a 'maybe-boyfriend'; there are those 'across the road', 'across the border' or 'across the water'. The society is tribal and, to a large extent, dominated by the renouncers who met out punishment for what they regard as misdemeanours. 'Maybe-boyfriend' is a car fanatic and there is a section that describes, with sardonic humour, how his neighbours come round to admire a Blower Bentley that he has acquired, until someone spots 'the flag' on it. They promptly disappear, knowing that possession of something with 'the flag' can lead to trouble.

The narrator's mother is constantly arguing with her over her refusal to get married and start having children. 'First brother-in-law' is an ignorant oaf who spreads rumours about her, which the society is happy to believe in the same way as some people believe online misinformation today. She gets support from 'third brother-in-law' and kudos from the fact that the 'Milkman', who is a renowned renouncer, makes it clear that he fancies her. Her response to him is one of fear, certainly not desire. However, she does receive sympathy from the real local milkman, who had been spoken against in the community. When he had been mistakenly wounded in an assassination attempt, it turned out that he had been highly fancied by most of the local women, including the narrator's mother, but had broken their hearts.

The narrator discovers that 'maybe-boyfriend' was homosexual and, in her anger, agrees to meet Milkman, which turns out to be his real name. She then discovers that he had been killed by 'the other side', which lifts the weight of fear from her.

This book describes a society under a form of tyranny. The early 'renouncers' were seen as protecting the people from oppression but they were replaced by those who were more like gangsters after they were killed. *Milkman* conveys a sense of being trapped by fear very effectively, although the 'wee sisters' provide a source of considerable humour.