

## The Reluctant Terrorist

By Sharon Shervington, 2 September 1990

Nothing cheers a writer so little as well-intentioned commiseration for not having attained the vast readership admirers think one deserves. And yet there are certain authors whose gifts so exceed their renown that their situation inevitably inspires this sort of unhelpful puzzlement and indignation.

One such writer is Brian Moore, whose 16th novel, "Lies of Silence," is characteristically first rate. The recipient of major awards in Canada and Britain, Mr. Moore has so far failed to achieve what the pollsters succinctly call "name recognition" in the United States, perhaps because his work ranges so widely, from intense novels of sensibility ("The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne") to suspenseful, ingeniously plotted thrillers with moral and metaphysical themes ("Cold Heaven," "The Color of Blood"). Perhaps the problem is that Mr. Moore's nationality involves multiple hyphenation - born in Belfast, he has spent much of his life in Canada and now resides in Southern California. Or the problem may even lie with the estimable qualities that are found in his diverse books. This is not, after all, an era of fevered acclaim for the quietly controlled, the intelligent, the spiritually minded and unassuming.

Paradise for the reader, purgatory for the critic, the plot of "Lies of Silence" is one that only a spoiler would reveal - and risk ruining the surprises that detonate throughout the novel like cleverly hidden and elegantly designed incendiary devices. (The notion of "unbearable suspense" is, of course, a cliché, but I found that I kept briefly putting down the novel to postpone the moment when I had to face what might happen next.) Set in contemporary Northern Ireland,

"Lies of Silence" centers on Michael Dillon, the manager of a grand old Belfast hotel, an establishment to which families traditionally come for graduation luncheons and where, on a morning just after the novel begins, a well-known Protestant rabble-rouser is scheduled to address a convention of the Canadian Orange Order. In Dillon's Belfast version of a normal life, the "Troubles" and the presence of British soldiers are a daily fact; body checks and bomb threats have come to seem routine: "A queue of cars was waiting to be admitted to the hotel grounds. Security was tight, for the hotel had been bombed last year. The occupants of each car must get out and go into the adjoining hut for a body search, while the car itself was checked over by the outside guards."

Dillon is one of those Irishmen one recognizes fondly from the work of Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor and William Trevor; we know, even upon first meeting them, that these men are not destined for great happiness, that even the small pleasures life offers them will sadly come to nothing. As the novel opens, Dillon is tormenting himself over the (one might think) straightforward choice between his shrill, unstable wife and his loving mistress, a young BBC reporter whose imminent transfer to London triggers the first of the personal crises that set the plot in motion.

Although to Dillon these difficulties seem singularly oppressive, they strike us as neither exceptional nor uncommon until, in the course of one frightening night, he unwillingly becomes involved in a violent I.R.A. terrorist plot. Suddenly his domestic difficulties are both heightened and dwarfed by an almost impossible

moral dilemma that transforms his private life into the sensational stuff of the evening news. The effect on Dillon is seismic, and soon there are aftershocks - a succession of ethical temptations and decisions that sends him fleeing to London and changes forever his notions of heroism, of the possibility of escape.

Graham Greene has called Brian Moore his "favorite living novelist." Although the two writers are significantly different, Mr. Greene's remark does suggest the affection we often feel for those whose interests and virtues remind us warmly of our own. Like Mr. Greene, Mr. Moore often focuses on men (and in Mr. Moore's case, women) in situations of extreme crisis. Both write brilliantly about how various sorts of spiritual and historical struggles (crises of faith; political, moral, romantic crises) can overlap and complicate one another - and in the end turn out to be separate manifestations of a single human condition. Finally, both Graham Greene and Brian Moore write spare, swiftly plotted fiction that is capable of supporting considerable thematic weight.

So, too, "Lies of Silence" has immense tensile strength. One is struck by how austere its sentences are - and yet by how much the novel embraces, how much disturbance it generates without ever stooping to theatrics, how daringly it approaches and eludes the clutches of melodrama. It is possible to read this book purely for the pleasantly unsettling angst its dramatic plot induces. But it is more rewarding to pause and admire its flashes of depth and the nifty way in which Mr. Moore takes textbook-case ethical quandaries (the good of one versus the good of many, the right to a private life versus social responsibility) and uses the

techniques of fiction to give them an agonizing, provocative spin.° Certain scenes - Dillon's wife's conversation with a jumpy,° teenage I.R.A. volunteer and, later, his own confrontation with a manipulative Catholic priest - can be read as paradigms° of how to create tension and surprise while remaining convincing and without contrivance.°

Over his long career, Brian Moore has mastered the literary magic trick of making the weighty seem graceful, making the dense and complex seem effortless and unadorned.° One hopes that "Lies of Silence" will inspire more readers to discover Mr. Moore's earlier work, to experience the range and agility° of this fine writer's sleight° of hand.

## 'ANY OF US COULD BE HOSTAGES'

"I wanted the book to read like a thriller, but to be something more," said Brian Moore of his latest novel, "Lies of Silence." "I didn't want to do a whole book about Northern Ireland, but I did want to talk about how often ordinary people are taken as hostages, their homes invaded - and the moral choices they're forced to make. I go back to Ireland often and no one ever talks about the hostages."

Speaking by telephone recently from his home in Los Angeles, Mr. Moore compared life in Northern Ireland with the situation in Kuwait and Iraq. "We're in a position now where any of us could be hostages," he observed, "and that can create the dilemma of loyalty to family versus saving the lives of others."

But, Mr. Moore added, both in his book and in real life, the hostages are not the only victims. "The I.R.A. members who do these jobs are young, poorly educated and disillusioned. Imagine all your life being unemployed and discriminated against. These terrorist groups give them a sense

of belonging. It's a way to be big with their peers.° It's not that different from the street gangs in Los Angeles, the Crips° or the Bloods.°"

The parallel is especially clear, Mr. Moore pointed out, since neither the I.R.A. nor the American street gangs have much of a political agenda, beyond getting rid of their enemies. "There is terrible job discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland," he said. "It's like the black situation here; you have to address economic concerns before you can handle the rest of it."

Yet despite° the novel's political overtones, it is also, Mr. Moore said, "a love story" - one that raises its own troubling set of questions. "What happens," Mr. Moore asked, "when a woman gives up her career to marry, and it just isn't enough for her? She can't just pick it up five years later. And what happens when a man chooses a wife mainly for physical attractiveness rather than compatibility°?"

There are not necessarily any clear answers to such questions, Mr. Moore said. But his books give him a chance to make readers think about their endless complexities.

## Vocabulary

*reluctant* widerwillig  
*commiseration* Mitleid  
*renown* Ruhm  
*indignation* Empörung  
*pollster* Meinungsforscher  
*succinctly* kurz und bündig  
*hyphenation* Kopplung  
*estimable* beachtenswert  
*era* Epoche, Ära  
*acclaim* Beifall, Anerkennung  
*unassuming* bescheiden  
*purgatory* Fegfeuer  
*spoiler* Verderber  
*incendiary* aufwieglerisch  
*rabble-rouser* Demagoge  
*fondly* zärtlich  
*destined for* bestimmt sein für  
*tormenting* belästigend  
*to trigger* auslösen, veranlassen  
*oppressive* bedrückend  
*dwarfed* verblasst  
*seismic* erschütternd  
*human condition* Umstand des menschlichen Lebens  
*spare* sparsam  
*swiftly* schnell, eilig  
*tensile* dehnbar  
*austere* ernst, streng  
*daringly* gewagt  
*to elude* ausweichen  
*clutches* Klauen  
*angst* panische Angst  
*to induce* hervorrufen  
*quandaries* Zwickmühlen  
*spin* Trudeln, Drall  
*jumpy* nervös, kribbelig  
*paradigm* Denkmuster, Vorbild  
*contrivance* Erfindung  
*unadorned* schmucklos  
*agility* Gewandtheit  
*sleight* Geschicklichkeit  
*peers* seinesgleichen  
*yet despite* doch trotz  
*compatibility* Verträglichkeit