

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2022/23 SEASON



THE QUIET GIRL
(Language: Gaelic)

Director: Colm Bairéad, 2022. Running time: 94 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 1st March, 2023.

“This beautiful and compassionate film from first-time feature director Colm Bairéad, based on the novella *Foster* by Claire Keegan, is a child’s-eye look at our fallen world; already it feels to me like a classic. There’s a lovely scene in which the “quiet girl” of the title, 10-year-old Cáit (played by newcomer Catherine Clinch), is reading *Heidi* before bedtime, and this movie, for all its darkness and suppressed pain, has the solidity, clarity and storytelling gusto of that old-fashioned Alpine children’s tale – about the little girl sent away to live in a beautiful place with her grandfather.

The setting is the early 80s, in a part of County Waterford where Irish is mostly spoken (subtitled in English). Cáit is a withdrawn little kid, one of many siblings, always wandering off on her own over the farmland: the opening shot of her is a deception of sorts, hinting at a chilling destiny. Cáit is often wide-eyed, silent and watchful, to the irritation of her exhausted and now once-again heavily pregnant mother (Kate Nic Chonaonaigh) and her thuggish, abusive and hungover dad (Michael Patric). Naturally without telling Cáit or being mindful of her feelings in any way, her parents decide they need a break from looking after her and pack the girl off for the summer to her mother’s cousin Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) and her taciturn farmer husband Seán (Andrew Bennett), whose vastly more prosperous and better-run smallholding infuriates Cáit’s sullen dad when he drives up in his car to drop her off. He can hardly summon the good manners to make conversation before getting back in his car to drive back home and in his boorish haste, he has a lapse of memory which is to have serious consequences for Cáit’s new life.

Crowley and Bennett give heart-wrenchingly excellent performances as the unhappy, childless couple who have taken Cáit in: particularly Crowley as Eibhlín, a well-bred, intelligent, elegant woman who is brightly engaged with the child as no one has ever been in her life. But Cáit is quick to understand that they have a “secret”, which her sneering father already seems to know about.

As this long, hot summer progresses with the endlessness of childhood, Kate McCullough's superb cinematography and Emma Lowney's production design create a magically beautiful new world for Cáit to feel at once threatened and exalted by: almost every shot is a vividly composed, painterly gem. Above all, there is a mysterious artificial rainwater pond in surrounding woodland which Eibhlín says has supernatural powers. A vinegary tang of black comedy and cynicism is provided by neighbour Úna (a terrific performance from Joan Sheehy) who looks after Cáit one afternoon and brutally tells the girl all about what her foster parents aren't telling her – and Bairéad cleverly allows you to suspect that Eibhlín wanted Úna to shoulder the awful burden of revealing this. Cáit's quietness is perhaps the quietness of an abuse victim, or perhaps the quietness of a clever person who knows that not talking is the way to survive. As Seán tells her: "Many's the person missed the opportunity to say nothing." And when Cáit returns home, it is her failure to obey this golden rule, and blurting out the phrase "nothing happened", which is to cause a new stab of pain.

In another kind of movie, a lazier kind, all this stillness and rural beauty, seen by an enigmatically silent child who is accustomed to vanishing invisibly into the landscape, would be the ominous foretaste of something horrible or violent to come just before the final credits. But *The Quiet Girl* is doing something gentler than this, as well as realer and truer. It is a jewel."

Peter Bradshaw, *the Guardian*, 11th May, 2022

"Nothing puts the fear of god into a classroom full of raucous Irish children like the sound of an exasperated, nerve-shot teacher shouting 'Ciúnas!' (the Irish word for silence). It's a command that has the power to turn rosy cheeks porcelain, and transform small smiling faces into contorted masks of worry.

The terror that follows a call for ciúnas! is one that Cáit, the young girl at the centre of Colm Bairéad's Irish-language film, appears to carry at all times. It's as though she's been told to be quiet so often (or worse, ignored), she's learned there is little point in making any noise at all. Instead she wanders off into the long grass, stashes herself under her bed away from the clamour of her many siblings, and waits silently in the pub as her father sinks another 'liquid lunch'.

But what Cáit lacks in loquaciousness she makes up for in curiosity – a trait Bairéad underscores by keeping the camera on her almost constantly. When Cáit's parents argue over plans to send her away for the summer and leave the family with one less mouth to feed, she is right there on the landing, absorbing every unguarded word: "How long should they keep her, until after the baby?"

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the mother asks the father, who swats the thought away like a nuisance fly: “They can keep her as long as they like.” These words are spoken in English, making the growing schism between Cáit and her family feel even greater.

An *Cailín Ciúin* – which made history this year as the first Irish-language feature to show at Berlinale – was adapted from the 2010 story *Foster* by Claire Keegan, and the film takes much of the dialogue from Keegan’s sparse but melodic prose verbatim. It’s a book that runs on feelings – making it a perfect fit for Gaeilge, a language that can put the heavy physicality of emotions into words (‘I’m sad’ in Irish – *tá brón orm* – translates literally as ‘I have sadness upon me’).

Without the help of the first-person internal monologue that Keegan used, Bairéad has managed to transmit Cáit’s every mood through the crystallising performance of 12-year-old Catherine Clinch, who had never acted in front of a camera before. When Cáit’s father drops her off at the home of Eibhlín and Seán Cinnsealach, an older farming couple she has not seen since she was in a pram, we feel her unease through every eyebrow twitch and forced, slanted smile. Shooting in full-frame Academy ratio, director of photography Kate McCullough captures Cáit moving between pale yellow doorways, squaring the difference between this place, her home, and the discomfort that lies in between.

Here food is brought to the table without anxiety; a nurturing love is shown through cut tomatoes and ridged slices of beetroot – all of which her father treats with mild disdain as he gibes about how Cáit will eat them “out of house and home”. It’s what Keegan called “the way men have of not talking”, men who instead “kick a divot out of the grass with a boot heel”. To have brought the child here at all is an admission of struggle, and so he amps up the cruelty to give the illusion of choice. “Try not to fall into the fire, you,” he tells Cáit as he drives off with her suitcase still in the car.

And so they dress her up in a plaid shirt and too-long jeans, with Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) orienting her in her new home through instant maternal affection. This is a house without secrets, she tells her, though Seán’s initial standoffishness – and the child’s wallpaper in Cáit’s new room – suggest they’re living with more than one.

Through a shimmering near-montage of moments – onion-chopping, hair-brushing, trips to a spring well, slow-mo runs through an arch of trees – we watch Cáit move organically from awkward interloper to daughter figure. At times, the crisp shots and liquidy use of light can feel close to a Kerrygold ad, but the film’s sharp emotional intelligence stops it tipping into the realm of commercial sentimentality. This is seen in Cáit’s wretched encounter with a busybody neighbour, who dishes out more questions about the Cinnsealachs than nettles have stings. Her nosy, venomous chatter lets out that household secret. But instead of shattering the foundation they’ve built, honesty gives way to a greater connection between Seán and Cáit. “You don’t have to say anything,” he tells her in the light of a pearly moon. “Many’s the person that missed the opportunity to say nothing, and lost much because of it.” By the end, Cáit chooses ciúnas not out of fear, but because she has found a new sense of self – someone who understands all that can be gained in the simplicity of silence.”

Katie McCabe, *Sight and Sound*, 13th May, 2022.