

Prophet Song

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

Published in 2023 and awarded the Booker Prize that same year, Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* paints a dystopian picture of the immediate present. Unlike the hypothetical futures that often characterise the genre, the novel is set in a contemporary Ireland that is immediately recognisable, at a time when an authoritarian government is gradually consolidating its hold on power. Rather than recounting the seizure of power itself, Lynch focuses on its impact on ordinary lives, examining the most everyday actions and intimate relationships.

The narrative follows Eilish Stack, a scientist, wife, and mother of four. When her husband, Larry, a trade union official, is arrested by the new state security forces, family life begins to unravel. Political events remain largely off-screen; the reader gains access to the world only through Eilish's limited perspective. This narrow focus is one of the novel's most remarkable effects. Like the heroine, the reader progresses through uncertainty, without an overview, forced to interpret fragmentary information and contradictory rumours, the gravity of which they never quite gauge.

More than a novel about fascism, *Prophet Song* is a novel about the inability to recognise fascism as it arises. It is not incidental that Eilish is a scientist, trained in rational thought and accustomed to a world that behaves predictably – her professional habits of mind make her, in principle, the least likely to succumb to wishful thinking. Yet Eilish repeatedly delays the moment when she must evaluate the full extent of the danger; she waits, hopes and procrastinates over irreversible decisions. The novel precisely maps what psychologists refer to as the normalcy bias – the tendency to believe that tomorrow will be like today, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Rather than focusing on how a dictatorship arises, the novel's real question is why those who see it taking hold nevertheless continue to believe that normality will eventually return.

Moreover, the regime does not initially manifest itself in the spectacular form of mass violence. Instead, it advances step by step through a succession of intrusions into everyday life. Democratic institutions continue to exist in name only, as their functions are gradually stripped of their substance. In this respect, the novel engages with Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "state of exception", whereby legal safeguards are suspended in the name of a crisis whilst institutional structures remain officially in place.

This development is captured above all at the level of the family. The family unit acts as a micro-society through which the novel explores the effects of authoritarianism on human relationships. Significantly, the novel offers few forms of solidarity beyond the family itself: friendships, neighbourhood ties, and collective communities remain largely absent. As public spaces close down, politics shifts into the domestic sphere. The home gradually ceases to be a refuge; fear, silence, and surveillance creep in. The novel distributes opposition along gendered lines: Larry embodies an overt form of resistance that ultimately leads to his arrest and their son joins the armed rebellion, while Eilish is assigned a quieter form of resilience – care, protecting children, preserving emotional bonds in a crumbling world. *Prophet Song* thus demonstrates how authoritarianism reshapes not only public spaces but also domestic intimacy – and the gendered roles played out

within them.

The novel also illustrates how authoritarianism can transform one's perception of time. The characters spend their lives waiting: waiting for their arrested husband to return, waiting for news, waiting for the situation to improve, waiting for the right moment to leave. This waiting saturates daily life and paralyses the ability to act. But it is not merely a side effect of political crisis: the suspension of agency that waiting produces is itself a form of governance, a way of keeping people in place without the need for direct coercion. The regime thus alters not only institutions and social spaces, but the very texture of how individuals inhabit time.

The novel's refusal to take sides extends to the civil war that gradually engulfs the country. Before reaching this point, however, *Prophet Song* systematically stages the failure of more conventional forms of political action. Public demonstrations, media exposure, international pressure, and even digital communication prove incapable of slowing the regime's advance. As armed rebellion grows against the regime, *Prophet Song* offers no suggestion that the insurgents represent a better alternative – the violence they bring is depicted less as a path to liberation than as another force capable of destroying ordinary lives. The novel does not ask readers to choose a side; ordinary civilians are caught between forces that, whatever their political aims, prove equally destructive to everyday life. Faced with the futility of armed struggle, the novel turns instead to resilience as its true subject – the quieter, sustained effort of holding a family and a self together when no political outcome seems within reach. This is, in the end, a deliberate narrative choice: rather than following the son into rebellion, *Prophet Song* stays with Eilish, making resilience, not resistance, the measure of what survives. This internal focus is sustained by the novel's structure: long sentences, an almost total absence of paragraph breaks, and minimal typographical markers – creating a relentless narrative flow that Ron Charles has described as a “grammar of dread.” Syntax itself seems on the verge of disintegration, as though the political collapse finds its formal equivalent in language. Readers are trapped in a continuous narrative that produces a persistent sense of claustrophobia.

This formal choice is also a political one: by refusing any detached perspective, Lynch rejects any analysis of the causes behind the regime's rise to power. Who supports it? What social and economic forces made its rise possible? These questions remain unanswered. Just as the novel refuses to offer a political alternative to the violence it depicts, it refuses to explain that violence – leaving experience as the only ground left to stand on. The novel thus seeks to evoke what Lynch himself calls “radical empathy.” Throughout the narrative, Lynch repeatedly exposes the gap between mediated catastrophe and lived experience. What appears from a distance as news, statistics, or political crisis becomes, for Eilish, a series of intimate losses, anxieties, and impossible decisions. This empathy takes its full weight only at the very end, when Eilish and her two surviving children are forced into exile, and the narrative slows down to register the indignities of flight itself – exhaustion, extortion, the humiliation of arriving as a supplicant in another country. It is here, more than anywhere else, that the reader is made to feel what the novel has been building toward: not the abstraction of authoritarianism, but its cost, counted out in a single body and the bodies it carries with it.

The novel ultimately immerses the reader in what it means to live through the gradual advance of authoritarianism, posing a deeply uncomfortable question: how long would we continue to call a world ‘normal’ after it had already ceased to be so? In this sense, the novel returns to the epigraph from *Ecclesiastes* that opens it: “there is no new thing under the sun.” The catastrophe appears unprecedented only to those living through it; from a broader historical perspective, Lynch suggests

that such collapses belong to a recurring political history that democracies repeatedly convince themselves they have escaped.

References

Charles, Ron. "Booker Prize Winner 'Prophet Song' is a Prophetic Masterpiece." The Washington Post, 27 Nov. 2023.

LANGUAGE: English

This title was not censored before publishing