

## Making Sense of/through the Family in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

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### Abstract

This paper examines how personal reconciliation with family secret, or attempts at such, addresses the broader need of Celtic Tiger Ireland in making sense of itself and its past. Anne Enright's Booker-winning novel, *The Gathering*, features a woman in her desperate attempt at making sense through writing: Veronica Hegarty overtly looks for the "seeds" of her brother Liam's death, while she implicitly struggles to understand her own being amid loss and pain. Much if not all of what has gone wrong happens in the family, whether in Veronica's own parental home or in her grandparents' house, where Liam was sexually "interfered with" by an old neighbor Nugent. What Nugent has done to Liam remains unclear, though its reverberation is no less palpable for that. Veronica tries to sort things out through creative writing, thereby performing the exceptional feat of emotional reconciliation with an unknown part of family history, which though seemingly intangible holds sway over the individual's wellbeing in the present. Veronica's psychological feat is also what the new Ireland under Celtic Tiger affluence needs to achieve. That is, *The Gathering* is not just the story of damaged individuals in one dysfunctional family. The Hegartys are portrayed as a typically Irish, and as Veronica claims, "Because our families contain everything and, late at night, everything makes sense." On the personal level, Veronica has made sense of herself in relation to her family. On the collective, national level, Enright makes sense of the Irish family for her readers through the Hegartys. In probing into secrets and "gathering" the pieces that make up the Hegarty family, Enright acknowledges unflinchingly what the family can do and has done to the individual, as well as the need to come to terms with the unspeakable past. Rudimentary as it seems, such acknowledgement—or sense-making—would be the essential first step for any emotional reconciliation, personal or national.

Keywords: Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, family, trauma, Celtic Tiger