Immigrant and Irish Identities in Hand in the Fire and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014

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Abstract: In her article "Immigrant and Irish Identities in Hand in the Fire and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014" Dervila Cooke discusses the intertwining of Irish and immigrant identities. Cooke examines the connection between openness to memory and embracing migrant identities in Hamilton's writing both in the 2010 novel and as a whole. The empathetic and inclusive character of Helen in Hand in the Fire is analyzed in contrast to characters who have repressed memory including the Serbian Vid. Helen’s ties to elsewhere, her openness to new influence, and her willingness to engage with traumatic elements of the past (Irish and Serbian) make of her a redemptive character. In Hand in the Fire, engaging with the past through the metaphor of self-renovation is seen as potentially healing. The novel connects the retrieval of memory with the (self) acceptance of migrants and of traumatic events in Irish experience.
Immigrant and Irish Identities in *Hand in the Fire* and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014

In a 2014 interview, Hugo Hamilton reflected as follows: "We are all storytellers of our own memory, of our own existence. The story is the person. So what is realism? It’s not actually the world we’re in, it’s the facts we tell about that. It’s the story we tell each other. It’s the stories that are missing some-thing. You know, it’s not the world that is true—what is true depends on who you meet. And that’s a very Irish thing as well. In the Irish language it’s the first thing that people say to you: Cén scéal agat? What story have you got? So, what is a person without a story?" (Smith, 2015). Declaring that he identifies with Vid, the Serbian immigrant to Ireland who is the main character of his 2010 novel *Hand in the Fire*, Hamilton stated that the book was "my version of the world" which would seem to suggest that it is in some way "his story." As Hamilton intertwines Irish and immigrant identities and stories in *Hand in the Fire*, the retrieval of memory—of "the stories that are missing"—emerges as an important factor in the self-acceptance of migrants, and also in the self-knowledge of members of the host society. I will also reflect on similar tropes in Hamilton's other work between 2003 and 2014.

Hamilton, who came to prominence in 2003 with his memoir *The Speckled People*, was born Johannes O hUrmoltaigh in 1953, but changed his name to that of a family friend, bishop Hugo Lied-ner (1915). Hamilton’s German mother Irmgard came from a staunchly anti-Nazi family and lived through Hitler’s reign. She met and married the fervently Irish-speaking Séan O hÚrmoltaigh in Ireland after the war. Séan (who rejected his English-language identity as John Hamilton) was the son of a sailor in the British Navy who lost his memory and reason in World War I. This paternal grandfather was an outsider in Irish society because of his mental illness and because he had fought for Britain. Hamilton is married to a journalist of immigrant extraction (United Kingdom Irish), who, like Helen in *Hand in the Fire*, attended boarding school and had a family who emigrated to Canada (see Egan). He has published short stories, memoirs, and novels including short stories set in Berlin and Irish detective novels. He has recently turned to drama and has also written essays on Germany and Ireland. His work explores personal memory, the desire to forget and remember, trauma, national histories, migrant or uncertain identities, and the figure of the outsider.

Like his character Vid, Hamilton felt uneasy with English, a language taught to him as a foreign tongue at an Irish-speaking school in Dublin (see Winch) and banned from his German and Irish-speaking home. Yet, *Hand in the Fire*’s complexity lies in the symbolic nature of its characters and plot. Vid encapsulates states of liminality in many ways: as an outsider, he is not only a projection of the author, but also represents Hamilton’s German immigrant mother. He even shares aspects of Hamilton’s militant Irish-speaking father, who chose to become an outsider linguistically to many people in Ireland (see Winch). His amnesia evokes that of Hamilton’s paternal grandfather. Vid is also a reflection of the troubled Irish character, Kevin Concannon, who like him has a weighty but largely unacknowledged past. Most obviously, Vid represents the wave of immigrants mainly from Eastern Europe, Nigeria, China, the Philippines, and Brazil who came to Ireland in the 1995-2007 economic boom. Hamilton uses his customary compassion to explore complex networks of displacement and exclusion, and the impact of the repression of personal, familial, and societal secrets upon identity, whether immigrant or Irish.

Jason King argued that the literary device of interethnic romance has often been used too simplistically in recent Irish fiction that purports to be multicultural. He sees the device as frequently fore-grounds the elision rather than accommodation of cultural difference, for example in Roddy Doyle’s *The Deportees* ("Irish Multicultural Fiction" 167; see also McIvor 41). *Hand in the Fire* uses—and arguably upends—the trope of union between outsider and insider in interesting ways. While Irish woman Helen and Vid come together towards the end of the novel, this is not a case of a deeply romantic. Kevin goes down on bended knee to Vid to apologize for punching him, forces his tongue into Vid’s mouth in a sudden kiss on a fishing trip, and they open a box together that looks like it might hold “an engagement ring” (125). Kevin also sends Vid to Dursey Island, the site of a previous romantic tryst between Helen and Kevin. He includes Vid in his other romantic relationships, as when he urinates on Helen’s car in Vid’s presence and has sex with another woman while Vid sleeps on another bed beside them. This intense relationship between Vid and Kevin mainly serves to emphasize Kevin’s repression of deep aspects of his psyche. These include his attraction to Vid as a reflection of his own past as a misfit and as a substitute for the lonely immigrant father he has rejected. It is for these reasons that Kevin employs Vid to work on his mother’s house, which she is now renovating with money bequeathed by emigrants in her family. Like the father in Hamilton’s 2003 memoir *The Speckled People*, Kevin Concannon is a volatile, passionate, towering figure full of helpless fury. Both were bullied at school in Ireland for being differ-
ent. Hamilton’s father suffered from a limp and lost his politically and socially unacceptable father early in life. Kevin, the son of emigrants who returned from England, was persecuted for not having an Irish accent. Now a success in art, he casts off all trace of his English accent. Kevin rejects his own vulnerability by rejecting both his past and his alcoholic father Johnny, who remained abroad to work while Kevin was growing up. While his emigrant and fatherless past complicates his character, Kevin is in many ways a metaphor for what Fintan O’Toole in his 2010 essay Enough is Enough called the “substitute identity” of Celtic Tiger Ireland’s sometimes superficial confidence (O’Toole qtd. in Born and Slaboy 23).

Ronit Lentin described Ireland’s encounter with its “Celtic Tiger” immigrants as “the return of the national repressed” (Lentin qtd. in King, “Irish Multicultural” 177), during which Irish people were confronted with the mirror image of their own long experience of emigration. This may explain why Kevin is initially drawn to Vid, who no doubt reminds him of his own previous outsider status. Yet it is also part of the reason why Kevin soon rejects Vid, who reminds him too much of his own lonely experiences, now concealed by his professional and social persona. Like his mother Rita who rejects her husband Johnny, excluding him from the family and refusing to open his letters, Kevin is reluctant to deal with anything difficult. There is even a suggestion that he may have framed Vid for his crime (55, 84). When his eighteen-year old sister Ellis becomes pregnant, she bullies her with his mother’s tacit agreement into agreeing to travel to Britain for a pregnancy, not even considering for a moment that Ellis might be able, or indeed want, to take care of a child. He prefers to exist in a vacuous existence mired in the oblivion of drunken nights on the town and serial infidelity. Like Kevin, Vid repressed his father suffering from a limp and lost his politically and socially unacceptable father Johnny, who remained abroad to work while Kevin was growing up. While his emigrant and fatherless past complicates his character, Kevin is in many ways a metaphor for what Fintan O’Toole in his 2010 essay Enough is Enough called the “substitute identity” of Celtic Tiger Ireland’s sometimes superficial confidence (O’Toole qtd. in Born and Slaboy 23).

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In many respects, Vid is a manipulated partner in the relationship, most remarkably by accepting to take the Irishman’s place in court for Kevin’s violent attack on a thuggish Irish electrician. Kevin manoeuvres Vid into this strange position under the pretext that the attack occurred because Kevin was defending Vid (35, 92). Kevin’s violence seems partly fuelled by the anger he carries within him at the police, who suffered as an English-raised Lithuanian boy in England. Kevin describes the electrician as a “racist bastard” after his daughter kisses him, and Vid’s co-workers call him Vim, the name of a cleaning product for bathrooms. An employee at the builder’s providers asks him every time he sees him about Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb war criminal (154). The electrician’s Irish gang are overtly tribal. They beat and almost drown Vid’s Lithuanian friend and co-worker Daunis, who do not suspect that Kevin might be responsible for the attack on the electrician as they assume him to be Vid’s employer and not his friend. In both instances of violent crime, Vid is suspect- ed escaping only because of a technicality in one case and video evidence in the other.

More insidiously perhaps, both Vid and Darius are objectified as being workers above all else. Even Rita objectifies Vid (219), despite her paradoxical desire to delve into his past, as a substitute for emotional intimacy with the husband she has rejected, whose life as an emigrant parallels Vid’s own. Johnhimpers his voice but Vid’s worker status to Kevin, perhaps because he himself has been reduced down to the quality of worker (202). In a nod by Hamilton to the frequent Irish practice of calling all Eastern Europeans “Polish”, Vid is further deindividualized by being lumped into this category. Hamilton’s decision to focus on non-Polish immigrants in Hand in the Fire is a pointed one for this reason. Liuda, Vid’s Moldovan girlfriend for a time, is valued only as a sexualized object by Vid’s Irish co-worker and is “imported” by an Irish businessman (61-62, 152) and exploited by a series of others. Vid longs to be a part of the Concannon family and “not just a worker” (47) and tries, like Darius, to assimilate linguistically into Irish society, with mixed results. Yet in other ways he is a passive recipi-
ent of his fate, and displays little individual agency at first. It is not until his romantic fusion with the more compassionate Helen that Vid gains the confidence to act against Kiri, and to become "a protagonist" (261) by reinstating Ellis with her individual freedom and dignity. In this act Vid symbolizes the excluded scapegoat taking his place in Irish society. Vid decides to break into the Concanon house with Helen to rescue Ellis. He declares: "This is where I entered into the story of the country at last. I became a participant, a player, an insider taking action. Not letting things happen around me as if I was still only an immigrant and it was none of my business. I was not trying to make a name for myself or anything like that, but I was entitled to play my role as an ordinary inhabitant who belonged here." (261) Vid has enlightened this passage and draws on the "national generation of paralysis" where he rejects his previous need to "assimilate" into Irish society (116). The term Vid uses repeatedly is "Integriert," but Zamorano Llena is correct that it initially appears more like an unquestioning assimilation.

Questions of compassion and solidarity are an important part of Hand in the Fire. Vid has compassion for the many persons who need it in the Concanon family, most notably for Johnny, whose departure from Ireland he imagines in detail (119-122), and also for the youngest daughter Ellis. Ellis bears the name of Ellis Island, a place of immigration and emigration, between departure and arrival, and has "emigrated to the land of dreams and drugs" (181). Because of the family's rejection of Johnny, she feels cut off from her "genetic inheritance" and hence from an important part of her past (206). She becomes part of what Vid describes as "a separate ethnic group", living with her drug addict friends on the outer edges of society (185). Vid even has pity for Kevin himself, despite his emotional and physical abuse of him (256-68). A key element in the novel is his compassion for his cousin Mairé Concanon, the drowned pregnant Mid Furee, who was excluded by her own people (like Vid's own father before he was killed 230). He travels to Furbo in Connemara and walks the long journey to the church at Barna "because I wanted to know how long the trip would have taken for a woman carrying a child" (175). Vid has little compassion for himself, however, feeling a huge sense of guilt (78, 105, 113, 196, 205, 224) and that he is "unfit to integrate" and has "brought disease" into Ireland (105, 205). Vid has done nothing wrong but carries a sense of national guilt. His abuse by Kevin and his Nazirish Irish guilt deepens his internalized feeling of worthlessness. Bullying can turn "the image of Hamilton's own family, as described in The Speckled People, where the children were repeatedly 'executed' as 'Hitleri' and 'Eichmann' by neighbouring Irish youngsters, and bullying of a linguistic and sometimes physical sense was carried out by Hamilton's father as he sought to exclude the English language from the household. The compassion afforded Hamilton's mother in The Speckled People is easily understandable, given that she was a lonely outsider in 1950s Ireland with a traumatic past full of horror and national guilt, as a native of a country that was remembered mainly for the Holocaust and Nazi tyranny. Vid is in many respects the Serbian equivalent of Irmgard in Celtic Tiger Ireland, as Hamilton has suggested (431). In another parallel with Hand in the Fire, and pre-figuring Vid's compassion for Kevin, The Speckled People also displays compassion for a tyrannical figure, the narrator's father, who as noted was bullied severely in youth, and who comes across as in some senses pioneering and idealistic. Yet nothing is blindly accepted: in The Speckled People Hamilton clearly condemns views and actions he considers reprehensible, including the father's anti-Semitic writing, which suggests an inability to realize that there could be such thing as an Irish Jew, or that individual members of any ethnic group might feel that they could be Irish in other ways than by speaking Irish or engaging in traditionally Irish games and music (248-54). The issue of compassion surfaced in Hamilton's 2004 article for The Guardian entitled "The Loneliness of being German" where he wrote of German people's inability to comprehend the compassion he showed his father in The Speckled People. He explains their failure to understand his compassion for the fate that had to be decided by the Nazi, by the names of their parents and grandparents so completely. He also writes that their rejection of their past has left them without a home, as they have disconnected from the nationalistic and Nazi-connotted notion of Heimat (homeland). Ireland appealed to many Germans as an island of romantic mythology that could provide an alternative home, as described by Heinrich Böll in his memoir of 1950s Ireland, Irisches Tagebuch and in Hamilton's updated take on this in 2007 in Die Redeselige Insel. In Hand in the Fire, Vid feels he cannot go home. Yet there is a suggestion that he may do so in the company of Helen, who offers to accompany him to Bosnia and specifically to Srebrenica in order to help him confront his national past.

There is a strong sense in Hand in the Fire that in order to grow as a person and as a nation, the parental generation must be acknowledged, a separate ethnic group, living with her drug addict friends on the outer edges of society (185). Vid even has pity for Kevin himself, despite his emotional and physical abuse of him (256-68). A key element in the novel is his compassion for his cousin Mairé Concanon, the drowned pregnant Mid Furee, who was excluded by her own people (like Vid's own father before he was killed 230). He travels to Furbo in Connemara and walks the long journey to the church at Barna "because I wanted to know how long the trip would have taken for a woman carrying a child" (175). Vid has little compassion for himself, however, feeling a huge sense of guilt (78, 105, 113, 196, 205, 224) and that he is "unfit to integrate" and has "brought disease" into Ireland (105, 205). Vid has done nothing wrong but carries a sense of national guilt. His abuse by Kevin and his Nazirish Irish guilt deepens his internalized feeling of worthlessness. Bullying can turn "the image of Hamilton's own family, as described in The Speckled People, where the children were repeatedly 'executed' as 'Hitleri' and 'Eichmann' by neighbouring Irish youngsters, and bullying of a linguistic and sometimes physical sense was carried out by Hamilton's father as he sought to exclude the English language from the household. The compassion afforded Hamilton's mother in The Speckled People is easily understandable, given that she was a lonely outsider in 1950s Ireland with a traumatic past full of horror and national guilt, as a native of a country that was remembered mainly for the Holocaust and Nazi tyranny. Vid is in many respects the Serbian equivalent of Irmgard in Celtic Tiger Ireland, as Hamilton has suggested (431). In another parallel with Hand in the Fire, and pre-figuring Vid's compassion for Kevin, The Speckled People also displays compassion for a tyrannical figure, the narrator's father, who as noted was bullied severely in youth, and who comes across as in some senses pioneering and idealistic. Yet nothing is blindly accepted: in The Speckled People Hamilton clearly condemns views and actions he considers reprehensible, including the father's anti-Semitic writing, which suggests an inability to realize that there could be such thing as an Irish Jew, or that individual members of any ethnic group might feel that they could be Irish in other ways than by speaking Irish or engaging in traditionally Irish games and music (248-54). The issue of compassion surfaced in Hamilton's 2004 article for The Guardian entitled "The Loneliness of being German" where he wrote of German people's inability to comprehend the compassion he showed his father in The Speckled People. He explains their failure to understand his compassion for the fate that had to be decided by the Nazi, by the names of their parents and grandparents so completely. He also writes that their rejection of their past has left them without a home, as they have disconnected from the nationalistic and Nazi-connotted notion of Heimat (homeland). Ireland appealed to many Germans as an island of romantic mythology that could provide an alternative home, as described by Heinrich Böll in his memoir of 1950s Ireland, Irisches Tagebuch and in Hamilton's updated take on this in 2007 in Die Redeselige Insel. In Hand in the Fire, Vid feels he cannot go home. Yet there is a suggestion that he may do so in the company of Helen, who offers to accompany him to Bosnia and specifically to Srebrenica in order to help him confront his national past.

There is a strong sense in Hand in the Fire that in order to grow as a person and as a nation, the parental generation must be acknowledged, and the "home" (or home country) must be explored, with whatever faults they may have. To do so requires opening history's secrets. Apart from the secret father Johnny and the drowned Maire Concanon, there are several other bearers of resonant Irish secrets in Hand in the Fire. These include Traoloch the abused orphan labourer for whom Helen feels such pity in Carrick-on-Shannon; the painter who grew up as an illegitimate child in a Protestant orphanage; or indeed Nurse Bridie's own lost illegitimate child, who was given up for adoption and whose presence haunts the start of the book. Such secrets darken the lives of the families that carry them, which is why Vid wonders why Johnny cannot be allowed back at least into the perimeter of the family. The moral police prevalent in the Ireland of the youth of Irish people such as Maire Concanon, Nurse Bridie, Traoloch, and the Protestant painter echo the secret police of Serbia and indeed of Lithuania (Darius's mother was the village informer). The men of Furbo and their Catholic priest are explicitly likened to the secret police (89) as is Rita Concanon herself (82, 102). The secrets of the moral police share the characteristic of being quick to judge others, and can be prone to scapegoating, in order to deflect attention from themselves. When Vid reflects on how his father was killed he comes to the conclusion that "his own people" did it, for fear of what he could reveal about them (229-30).
He also wonders whether the villagers drove Máire Concannon to suicide or drowned her because she was about to reveal the identity of the father of the child in her womb (221). Vid, in contrast, is slow to form opinions (233) and is a loyal friend. Yet he is also slow to act against injustice, including against himself, at least initially. It is his own passivity in not intervening when he sees a woman being beaten by her male partner in a car that most shocks him. The event, and his cowardly non-intervention, taught him "a lot about the Concannon family and also about myself and the whole world around me" (220), as his reaction is one of fear of getting involved. While reluctance to take action can stem from "the paralysis the people felt in the face of authority" (89, 211), it can also stem from the fear of getting involved. The novelist in the Concannon family feels the impetus to remember his traumatic past. The start of his romantic relationship with Helen occurs soon after this realization. Although both Kevin and Helen are symbolic partners for Vid, the only successful relationship is with Helen. Helen is the most compassionate of the Irish characters. She is also in touch with her own past and those of others. She visits the site of her emigrant father’s house, speaks openly of her family’s conversion to Protestantism as a way of surviving during the 1840s Famine, and talks to Vid with great sadness and warmth of the mistreatment of Traolach, who grew up in an orphanage, perhaps as an illegitimate child, and was shunted from institution to institution and perhaps abused as a child (108-10). When she tells Máire Concannon’s story, Helen suggests that the priest might have suggested marriage as an option for the pregnant woman, instead of the incitement to drowning that Kevin and Johnny both attribute to the priest (111). While they feel it is natural to want to repress difficult elements of one’s life, Helen is more inclined to seek a constructive solution that involves facing the facts. It is only when Helen is able to tell his story, and only with her that memory of his traumatic personal and national past can resurface (226-30).

Helen is more mature than Kevin and also than Rita who lacks the ability to forgive or help Johnny. Symbolically, Rita has a collection of wind-up toys, which suggests that she is not fully grown. Helen is able to admit the secrets of her family, and is a naturally empathetic character who displays solidarity with others, as evidenced most clearly in the break-in she initiates to free Ellis. She is also open to new influences in the future. Her relationship with Vid seems promising (267-8). Yet the strongly future-oriented ideas that mark the end of the novel by way of the “kinds of funerals” (272) that Vid and Helen have in mind is symbolic. Helen has a conversion to Protestantism, as a way of surviving during the 1840s Famine. While they feel it is natural to want to repress difficult elements of one’s life, Helen is more inclined to seek a constructive solution that involves facing the facts. It is only when Helen is able to tell his story, and only with her that memory of his traumatic personal and national past can resurface (226-30).

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and indeed Beckettian, aspects in Hand in the Fire, likening it to "a classic work of European modernism" and referring to Vid as a tragic character faced with an absurd court case. Hamilton does indeed reference Beckett in the novel (88) and there are also elements of Joycean paralysis. Johnny, Vid, and indeed Ellis, Kevin and Rita are all in some way trapped and unable to act for different reasons. In this at times absurd novel, Helen frees Vid, through her gentle encouragement to speak about the past, initially simply by listening. Similarly, in Disguise, Gregor's separated wife Mara engages with his mother on his behalf, which brings some sort of familial resolution at her death.

Hamilton's work oscillates between the desire to forget and the need to remember. In his 2011 novel The Hand in the Fire, tangible reminders of the War of Independence. Vid is nearly drowned when the Irish thugs chase him, and a self-destructive fire burns the archives of Vid's memory (80). Fire is here frequently associated with the Celtic Tiger years of the 1990s (132-34). The overwhelming support for the 2015 gay marriage referendum is a hopeful sign of a step towards inclusion and respect among the Irish people (176). Yet, writing at the end of the Celtic Tiger years, Debbie Ging cautions that "the nation that somehow Ireland's newfound prosperity and assumption of a proud place on the world's stage has necessarily made it a more inclusive and progressive society requires closer scrutiny" and concludes by asserting that "it is arguable that the nature and scope of Irish identity has never been so elusive and contested" ("Goldfish Memories", 200).

Has Ireland really become as "broad and inclusive" as President Mary Robinson hoped in her 1995 speech to the Oireachtas marking 150 years after the start of the Famine? While the President's remarks focused on widening the definition of Irishness to include the Irish diaspora in all its forms, they have often been taken to suggest a new era of inclusiveness in Ireland more generally. There is no doubt that Ireland has become less entrenched in notions of what one is and what one cannot be. The mid 1990s ceasefire and subsequent peace in Northern Ireland that Hamilton includes in Hand in the Fire is one manifestation of this, although Kevin fails to see it as anything more than the result of "free market capitalism" (132-34). The overwhelming support for the 2015 gay marriage referendum is a hopeful sign of a step towards inclusion and respect among the Irish people (176). Yet, writing at the end of the Celtic Tiger years, Debbie Ging cautions that "the nation that somehow Ireland's newfound prosperity and assumption of a proud place on the world's stage has necessarily made it a more inclusive and progressive society requires closer scrutiny" and concludes by asserting that "it is arguable that the nature and scope of Irish identity has never been so elusive and contested" ("Goldfish Memories", 200).

Celtic Tiger Ireland is a brash place in Hand in the Fire, full of hen parties and self-exhibition as exemplified by Kevin's own exhibitionist tendencies. It has turned its back on history and tradition, symbolized by the modern wardrobes that seem so out of place in Rita Concannon's home. This Ireland is an uncertain place. The new generation of emigrants are well-educated and very quickly do well where they land (183), but there are at least three suicides in the novel, continuing through the generations. These include the probable suicide of Mâire Concannon and the two drowned youths who turn up in Dublin bay, one of whom surfaces just before Vid, and the other who drowns. While no sense is given of the personal circumstances behind the suicides of the two youths, the loneliness they suggest adds to the sense of entrapment in the novel.

The twin motifs of drowning and fire create a climate of confusion, anger, loneliness and exclusion. Vid is nearly drowned when the Irish thugs chase him, and as noted there are three actual drownings. A painting of a ship in distress connects Vid and Johnny (232). Kevin's and Vid's friendship is a fiery confusion and a self-destructive fire burns the archives of Vid's memory (80). Fire is here frequently associated with the Celtic Tiger years of the 1990s (132-34). The overwhelming support for the 2015 gay marriage referendum is a hopeful sign of a step towards inclusion and respect among the Irish people (176). Yet, writing at the end of the Celtic Tiger years, Debbie Ging cautions that "the nation that somehow Ireland's newfound prosperity and assumption of a proud place on the world's stage has necessarily made it a more inclusive and progressive society requires closer scrutiny" and concludes by asserting that "it is arguable that the nature and scope of Irish identity has never been so elusive and contested" ("Goldfish Memories", 200).

Handshakes and handshakes are also symbolic. The handshake shared by Johnny and Vid: "the longest handshake that I can remember" (170) emphasizes their common experience of migration and connects them very deeply. There is no handshake between Kevin and Johnny, as Kevin does not want to engage with his past (200). Kevin's hand gestures are theatrical, possessive, or controlling (49, 125...
By contrast, Helen's cool hand on Vid's skin urges Vid towards memory and healing (230), and when Rita "finally" gives Vid her hand at Johnny's funeral there is a sense of human connection (255). Kevin insists to Vid that "a friend is someone who would put his hand in the fire for you" but this is glib verbiage (30) on Kevin's part.

In conclusion, Irish and immigrant stories reflect one another in *Hand in the Fire* and each appears to benefit from the other. Kevin and Rita learn to treat Ellis with more tolerance, and Ellis and Vid partake in self-renovation through their explorations of the missing stories of their respective pasts. In Ellis' case this is with the support of neutral, non-judgemental friends, and in Vid's case with a roaming and hearteningly humanising name. The empathy provided by Helen's non-judgmental listening ear and quiet companionship looks set to allow Vid to explore the traumatic memories that impelled him to emigrate, while also developing his sense of belonging in Ireland, as a normal inhabitant and participant. *Hand in the Fire* shows the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the past (personal and national) as it cannot be repressed out of existence. In this, the parental generation is a key factor, as is clear from the emphasis on Johnny and Rita, and on the drowned aunt. It is also key in *Disguise*; had Gregor's adoptive parents been willing to talk to him about wartime Germany and his own uprootedness as a child, he would not have grown up with an all-consuming yearning to belong (to Jewish identity) and to re-invent himself so radically. What *Hand in the Fire* ultimately advocates is not self-invention but self-renovation, in a sensitive manner that takes account of the past framework of one's life, and of the national histories to which one belongs. Hamilton engages in exploration of his own multiple belongings. His imaginative empathy and openness to the divergent and idiosyncratic pasts of both parents—one migrant, the other "outsider Irish"—continue to inform his "spckled" identity. His empathy and compassion are reflected in the migrant characters of Vid, Irmgard, and Helen, yet he also explores the repression of painful experiences relating to migration or its effects, through the characters of Vid, Kevin, Rita, and Gregor and his adoptive parents. More importantly perhaps, *Hand in the Fire* goes beyond migrant memory to suggest that national pasts require opening up, just as Ireland needs to embrace new influence, new participants, and new stories.

**Works Cited**


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