Opinion
Culture

From left: Dylan Llewellyn as James, Saoirse-Monica Jackson as Erin, Jamie-Lee O'Donnell as Michelle, Nicola Coughlan as Clare, and Louisa Harland as Orla in "Derry Girls" (Courtesy of Netflix)

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American fans of "Derry Girls" can finally say their goodbyes to Northern Irish Catholic teenager Erin Quinn, her cousin Orla, and their friends Clare, Michelle and James as the third and final season airs Oct. 7 on Netflix. The five friends finally get to welcome in a new era of hope and peace, right on the brink of adulthood. In one of the show's final moments, we see them now 18 and voting in the historic Good Friday Agreement referendum of 1998, in which an overwhelming majority voted for a new power-sharing government that ended 30 years of civil war in Northern Ireland.

The show has been building to this moment since Season One. How will Erin and her friends make it through the Troubles? How will they make it through Catholic secondary school? The show's originality lies in the way it treats these experiences as nearly equal, both rife for laughs and learning.

Even more remarkable, it shows a political and religious conflict through the eyes of young girls — a perspective long overdue in cultural representations of the Troubles and Irish Catholicism.

"Derry Girls" is the creation of writer Lisa McGee, who based it on her life growing up in Derry. From its very first episode, the show juxtaposes the typical worries and awkward-meets-comical moments of teenage girlhood with scenes of the sectarian violence that made Derry notorious.

This isn't the Derry of Bloody Sunday in 1972, when British soldiers killed 13 citizens during a peaceful demonstration for Catholic civil rights. It's mid-1990s Derry, before the peace process began erasing many of the security measures that had become a way of life in the North.

At the beginning, we meet 16-year-old Erin (Saoirse-Monica Jackson) and her 15-year-old cousin Orla (Louisa Harland) fighting after one catches the other reading her diary, all the while soldiers and tanks patrol the city's streets and the news reports on the IRA bombing a local bridge.

Over breakfast, Erin informs her mother, Mary (Tara Lynne O'Neill), that fellow teen Macaulay Culkin is divorcing his parents. Mary mistakes the "Home Alone" actor for a Protestant kid her daughter must've met at some summer school "across the barricades" shenanigans.

Not that she has anything against Protestants. "I'm all for integration, I am. But if they're letting their wee ones divorce them," she says, letting her exasperated tone finish the thought for everyone.

Erin is an aspiring writer, while Orla is less focused, often spacy but wise in her own way. Erin and Orla live together, along with Erin's baby sister and parents (her father, Gerry, is played by Tommy Tiernan, one of Ireland's best-known stand-up comedians) and Orla's beauty-regimen-obsessed mother, Sarah (Kathy Kiera Clarke). Their Grandpa Joe (Ian McElhinney), who never misses a chance to knock his son-in-law down a peg or two, rounds out the extended family household.

Right from the start we know they're Catholics — holy statues decorate the shelves and photos of Pope John Paul II and John F. Kennedy share a wall (along with Dolly Parton).

As the girls set off for school, their mothers gripe that the latest bombing is ruining their plans for the day (for example, Sarah's appointment at the tanning salon). Later, on the school bus, Erin yawns as fully armed soldiers come aboard for a checkpoint. We get the point that these are people who haven't made peace with no peace so much as become used to the forced normalcy of it.

Erin and Orla's Catholic working-class best friends are no different — except for one, in a way that the show cleverly uses to poke fun at Irish provincialism and voice the befuddlement that non-Irish viewers might be feeling.

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Clare (Nicola Coughlan) is the social-justice-minded one who has anxiety attacks at the drop of a hat. (Coughlan is a master at showing Clare's hourly inner torments, like how she's going to make it through lunch fasting for the children of Africa.)

Michelle (Jamie-Lee O'Donnell) is the sex-obsessed one who is forever calling the forbidden Protestant boys and British soldiers "rides." ("There's something really sexy about the fact that they hate us so much," she says in the middle of the annual Protestant Orangemen's triumphal march through Catholic neighborhoods.)

James (Dylan Llewellyn) is Michelle's cousin from England, unceremoniously dropped off by his narcissistic mother to live with Michelle's family. He's the first boy ever to attend the girls' Catholic secondary school. A running joke is that everyone pretends they can't understand a word he says, while James can't understand why everyone pretends Troubles-life is normal.

If there's a breakout star in "Derry Girls" its Siobhán McSweeney as Sister Michael, the school's formidable, sarcastic, judo-practicing, DeLorean-driving headmistress. Sister Michael admits she became a nun for the free accommodation, rents out the sisters' habits at Halloween, and saves her most withering contempt for the handsome, "shiny-haired" young priest, Father Peter (Art Campion), who captivates the Derry girls and boy alike.

In Season One, Father Peter undergoes a vocational crisis, rumored to involve a local hairdresser. In Season Three, it's Sister Michael who experiences a vocational challenge, one that viewers will be happy to know exposes her as the not-so-secret feminist she is.

Siobhán McSweeney, right, as Sister Michael in "Derry Girls" (Courtesy of Netflix)

To American viewers, much of this Catholic-poking might seem offensive or profane, especially given the number of F-bombs the characters regularly drop. There are outrageous plots involving weeping statues and Grandpa Joe picking up a girlfriend at Stations of the Cross. (Erin: "Which station?" Grandpa Joe: "Jesus falls a second time.")

To the show's fans — and to anyone who's spent much time around Irish people — this is all characteristic irreverent Irish humor, a form of coping through centuries of colonialism and oppression.

"Derry Girls" might appear to not treat the faith too deeply, but it's clear the show's code is family, friends and peacemaking. In one of the best episodes, the girls (and boy) of Our Lady Immaculate College meet with boys from a Protestant school and are forced by Father Peter to undergo a "common ground" exercise. (The "across the barricades" scheme dreaded by Erin's mother.)

The teens are told to name some things Catholics and Protestants have in common. Instead, the students fill a blackboard with differences. Protestants like to march and Catholic like to walk. Catholics have more freckles. Protestants are taller. Catholics "really buzz off statues." (Sister Michael: "I do enjoy a good statue, it has to be said.") Protestants hate ABBA.

Father Peter's attempt to boil it all down to "We all feel, love, dream" only confuses the group. In the end, the kids find their own common ground: parents.

The cast of "Derry Girls" in Season Two (Courtesy of Netflix)

This may be the most revolutionary thing about "Derry Girls" — the way it centers the experience of teens, particularly teen girls. The Troubles in Northern Ireland has long been filtered mostly through male eyes in culture — at least the kind that's reached American audiences.

Back in the '90s, the era that "Derry Girls" portrays, many accolades were awarded to Northern Irish-based films such as Neil Jordan's "The Crying Game" and the Jim

Sheridan and Daniel Day-Lewis collaborations ("In the Name of the Father," "The Boxer"). In 2008, the film "Hunger" was a star turn for Michael Fassbender, playing the martyred Catholic hunger striker, Bobby Sands. Even now, films like Kenneth Branagh's autobiographical "Belfast" center the male Northern Irish experience.

The irony of men's dominance in cultural representations of the Troubles is that women have played a significant role in Ireland's peacemaking and political sphere. In 1976, the Nobel Peace Prize was given to Mairead Maguire and Betty Williams, who formed Women for Peace at the height of the Troubles. With Ciaran McKeown, Women for Peace became Peace People, which still works for international justice and peace today.

Two of the Republic's recent presidents have been women: the unabashed feminist Mary Robinson and Belfast-born Mary McAleese, the first Irish president from Northern Ireland. Both women pushed back against the Irish state's and Catholic Church's marginalization of women.

In "Derry Girls," Erin's notions of being the voice of her generation — and her diary entries filled with pretentious political rhapsodizing — are often poked fun at, but the show and viewers know her longing for peace is sincere.

Over and over, we see Erin and her friends reaching for peace and community, "across the barricades" — to Protestant kids, yes, but also to kids and people from other countries, ethnicities and classes. One of the girls comes out as a lesbian, and the response is touchingly ho-hum and supportive among this deeply Catholic community. Similarly, English-born, token-boy James adapts so well, he winds up screaming, "I am a Derry girl!", in the center of town at the end of Season Two. That's solidarity.

At long last, a show that doesn't make fun of youthful female perspectives but includes their experience in the story of Northern Ireland and the history of peace.

"Derry Girls" Season Three trailer for Channel 4 in the U.K.