

LITERARY INSIGHTS INTO CONTEMPORARY IRELAND: AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE DUNNE

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Catherine Dunne was born in Dublin in 1954 and studied English and Spanish at Trinity College Dublin. She lived in England and Spain for a while but has spent most of her life in Ireland. She taught at Greendale Community School and left her job in the 1990s to devote herself to full-time writing. She was politically involved both in the 1986 and the 1995 campaigns to allow divorce legislation in Ireland and her concern about the condition of women in Irish society is projected throughout her writing, set mostly in Dublin.

Her literary work includes novels, poetry and short stories. Her first novel, *In the Beginning* (1997) was translated into several languages and was shortlisted for the Italian Booksellers' Prize. *A Name for Himself*, her second novel, was published in 1998 and was also shortlisted for the Kerry Ingredients Book of the Year Award. In both of them she criticises the faults of the Irish social system and advocates a revision of the attitudes towards the institution of the family that may grant a more individualistic development of men and women's identity in her country. *The Walled Garden*, her latest novel so far, and highly acclaimed by literary critics, was published in 2000 and explores the complexity of mother-daughter relations resulting from the traditional Irish expectation of women to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the common good. Catherine Dunne has contributed to the *Charity Anthology*, a collection of short stories to be published in spring 2002 by Town House and she is also preparing a collection of interviews with Irish emigrants living in London, to be issued in autumn 2002.

She now lives facing the bay in the north side of Dublin with her husband and son and is currently working on a new novel that will turn her writing to the problems of the North of Ireland but still focussing on the effects of Irish history and society upon women. As a woman writer in a country where the literary canon has consisted mostly of male authors, she is one of the many new voices that are challenging the definitions of Irishness, femininity and Irish literature at the moment.

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The following interview took place in Dublin, on November 24, 2000. In the lively hall of the Westbury Hotel, beside an ever busy Grafton Street, we talked about our perceptions of contemporary Ireland and Irish women, as well as our work and our projects.

Despite the current modernisation of Ireland, the Celtic tiger and all the social and political changes, Irish society retains, to a great extent, the old traditions that date back to the foundation of the State at the beginning of the twentieth century and even earlier, and this has resulted in the marginalisation of women as regards the control of their own body and their own life. Would you agree with this or do you think that the condition of women in Ireland has changed measurably?

We all live in periods of change –that's what life is all about– but the pace, the range of the change that has taken place in our country in the last thirty years has taken everybody by surprise. I was a teenager in the 1970s and this city bears no relationship to the city I knew then, absolutely nothing. There was nowhere you could go for a cup of coffee, just one or two cinemas, and if you wanted a meal out it had to be only in one of the expensive hotels. The city and the economy are vibrant now, the workforce is very well educated. The things which my son –he's now eighteen– takes for granted, I wouldn't have dreamt to be possible when I was his age. I had to go away, to work in London, to live in Spain, to see. One of the main changes that has happened during these years is the status of women and all those changes were very necessary. Women's access to third level education, for example, has changed substantially. Lots of women, married or single, are working now, which certainly wasn't the case in the 1970s, but you find that the bosses in most of those institutions, even those that are heavily female dominated, are still men. So although lots of things have changed, lots of things still haven't changed.

However, I would be very wary of not becoming complacent thinking that all of the battles have been won. There are a great number of Irish women going to the United Kingdom for abortions, which has had a huge effect on thousands of lives. I really resent the way the debate here becomes polarised: you're either for abortion or against it. How can you be *for* abortion? It's not a desirable way in which you want to spend a weekend, for example, or something that everybody should have. It's a necessary evil and something that people should have access to when they need it. I'm not pro-abortion, I am pro-choice, there's a very important distinction. I resent the hypocrisy of those politicians who have not stopped this nonsense by changing the Constitution. Technically, at the moment we have the most liberal abortion laws in Europe and yet women cannot access it. Legislation is necessary. These things affect women's lives deeply but they haven't been addressed, no doubt because women don't make up a lot of the vocal lobby as far as the politicians are concerned. They are constantly looking over their shoulders, wondering where their next voters are coming from. Apart from that, comes the fact that we've been a Catholic culture for so long, there's no question about that. The Church and the State have been hand

in hand since the foundation of the State, and their marriage, if you like, is indissoluble, and obviously that legacy has caused problems. The Church is losing control more and more with every passing year and that is good for Irish society. In terms of controlling our fertility, again we have a farcical situation in this country. In the contraceptive train in the 1970s, people who went to Belfast to buy condoms were arrested, which was absolutely ludicrous. Fortunately, all of that has changed. Anyway, the abortion issue is still the same and it saddens me deeply. We all know people who have been pushed in that situation, who have been lonely, not being able to have their friends and family around them, which, to me, is adding punishment to tragedy. I don't see any need for it.

Besides, in all the areas where women have traditionally been the major force, in nursing, for example, those jobs have been incredibly badly paid, and still remain not at the level that they should be. It's ironic how we have been the country that exported nurses all over the world but now we're importing them from countries like the Philippines. That in a sense is great, it's some sort of cultural diversity, but the salary scale and the way these jobs are rewarded are still not enough. Also, in terms of education, most of the teaching profession, particularly in primary level, is female but the vast majority in the position of principal are men. Things have changed gradually, in the sense that now in interviews you cannot ask someone "who would mind your children while you are at work?", which women were frequently asked in the 1970s. It's probably changing but it's ironic that you had to fight hard to keep your place in the work force when you had children, even in the 80s, as I did. However, now the ads on the radio, the television and newspapers are inviting married women to get back to work. It reminds me of one of the positions in the UK during World War II, when, while the men were out at war, the women got out of the house into the munitions factories and were told that it was good for their children to be looked after in crèches, where they could socialise; then, as soon as the men came back, they were thrown out back to the house again. What is happening in Ireland is the reversal of that: now they need us, they're bringing us out into the work force again. There are more opportunities now for women in Ireland to work in a more family-friendly job, lots of part-time jobs on offer, and women whose families have grown up are going back into the work force. There are other attitudes that have taken a lot longer to change and those things will take generations to erase, if ever.

In that sense, would you consider yourself a feminist writer?

Not a feminist writer. I don't say I write something that is consciously from a feminist perspective. I write what I observe and people draw conclusions from that. I'm feminist, I make no apologies for that, but I take another side when I'm a novelist, which is different. That's one of the reasons why after I wrote my first novel, *In the Beginning*, I refused to write another similar book because I didn't want to be pigeonholed into that category "this is a feminist writer and we can expect more of the same again and again". I deliberately did something completely different from the point of view of a man, something which was a work of the imagination but which I could not possibly have experienced for myself. To grow as a writer is very

important but my politics is irrelevant to what I write. It can probably be discerned from what I write but I certainly don't write stories to convince someone that one position is better than another.

Critics like Catherine Nash, C. L. Innes, Richard Kearney and many others have analysed the so-called "feminisation of Ireland", a phenomenon that emerged from the nationalist actions at the beginning of the twentieth century, turning women and the female body into icons of the new culture that the Church and the State were trying to re/invent after the English colonisation. In your opinion, what have been the main consequences for Irish women after the colonial period and the nationalist struggle?

I often wonder what people mean when they talk about "the feminisation of Ireland". It doesn't mean that women suddenly became visible where they hadn't been before, because if they became visible, it still took them a very long time to become acceptable. If you were to read History books written about post-Independence Ireland or even before that period, you go back to the work done by the Land League, for example, and you see that there was an enormous work done by women, whose role has not been acknowledged or explored in the same depth. I read Margaret Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* in my early twenties and I was completely taken aback that women did actually play a huge role. If you look at the role of Women Workers Unions at the turn of the century, with figures such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, you realise that all of those active and powerful women are a portion of Irish history that has been ignored. In Ireland there has always been a clash between traditional expectations, demands... The instinct is always that the woman's place is in the home but that has been very slowly changing. In terms of the perception of Ireland, it's only places like the gender studies centres that highlight all these roles. I know history is written by winners, but still I would find it even more obvious that Irish history is written both by and for the men, so there's very little that has been said from women's point of view. That's why I think thirty years from the 70s until now have made such an incredible difference. Suddenly those years have been a period when women have emerged from where they're supposed to be kept traditionally. There's now more social "permission" that women operate outside the sphere of the home. However, you speak to any woman who's working outside the house and traditional inequalities of not sharing housework, childcare...still exist to a large extent, unfortunately. I don't think in that sense Ireland is different from anywhere else.

Judging from the dates of publication of your three novels, your writing seems to be condensed in a short period of time, but considering that atmosphere you have just mentioned, I wonder, what made you start writing?

It looks like there were three novels in a few years but I have to tell you exactly what did happen. The first novel, *In The Beginning*, actually began life twelve or thirteen years ago, when the first divorce referendum was being planned and I was active politically in that campaign. I began working on *IB* then but I had a small child at that time and I just ran out of time and energy to deal with it, so I left it and I

began working on short stories and poetry and other things in the intervening years. Then, during the second divorce referendum, I was shocked that all of the stories that I had heard the first time were actually the same, nothing had changed. I don't know why I would have expected anything to change but to me it was particularly poignant that the same stories were being repeated over and over again. Because there was no divorce legislation in Ireland, but this isn't the only reason—, men tended to do what we call "divorce Irish style", which is simply abandon their families and go to England. That by no means happened in every case but it happened in a significant number. We've always had a tendency in Ireland to export our social problems to Britain, such as working class mass emigration to Britain and also to the USA, when there was no employment here, or thousands of women who go to London every year because we have no abortion legislation that works in this country. This was yet another kind of strand in the hypocrisy where, although we had no legislation for divorce, there was no mechanism to bring back those men and make them responsible for supporting their family. For many women I spoke to, both in the first campaign and in the second one, there was a common tale that the main difficulty for them was not that the marriage had ended, although that in itself was very traumatic, but the way in which it had ended. Suddenly twenty years of relationship and investment, work and all these things which I think sociologists call "love labour" were worthless. They were left with a family but they had no means of supporting it since they had dedicated themselves to bringing up children. All the aspirations in our Constitution were that motherhood is a sanctified role and that women should not be forced to go out to work due to economic necessity, but the reality as I saw it was very different. That made me start writing again and go back to the four stories that I had left. I simply pulled out one, which became the story of Rose, and eventually it was finished and published in 1997. It was accepted by the publishers in 1995 but there wasn't any room for publishing it until 1997. In the meantime, I had already started the second book so it was two full years in the writing although it was published in 1998. And the third book, *The Walled Garden*, did actually take two years full time since I wasn't working at anything else, no teaching, no other paid work. So what I say to people is that really, what you're looking at is three books in fourteen years, which is how it worked out.

Then, was there a moment when you decided you would become a novelist or was that something you always wanted to do?

I've always been writing. I never regard writing as anything separate from reading. My older brother taught me to read before I went to school and I can remember as a child I just read voraciously. I know I used to write for pleasure even in primary school but I have no memory of what that was. The first memory I have of anything that has stayed with me is some really truly appalling poetry I wrote when I was twelve. Then I did a lot of short stories, which I would send to David Marcus, who was one of the leading lights in Ireland in terms of developing new writing all through the 1970s and 80s. He had a *New Irish Writing* page and he would encourage submissions from people who were trying to write. Although they didn't get published we had this "correspondence" because he would write about

what he thought worked in the stories and send them back to me, which was a wonderful feedback. That was enough for me at the time; the publication wasn't the issue, it was just something I wanted to do. But that changed. In 1991 my second son was stillborn and that was a huge personal tragedy. The writing became then something I had to do to fill my days, to stop myself going insane. About a year later I started to spend, although I was still working full time, every spare moment writing and writing, and that was the major time when *IB* was reworked and got ready for publication. But I've never seen anything separate in reading and writing. My memory is that I've been doing both of them since I was a small child.

Throughout the Irish bookshops one notices that there are many Irish women writers publishing novels, short stories and poetry at the moment. Hence, the absolute presence of male writers in the Irish literary canon and the exclusion of women writers seems to be coming to an end. However, among female authors there is a strict distinction between the work of writers from a very academic background and those thick, so-called "popular novels". What do you think are the main factors for that distinction, particularly in Ireland?

I believe there is room for everybody and that reading has to be a pleasure. The person who does the hard work has to be the writer and not the reader. Certainly with *IB*, I never would have said I intended to write something overtly political or sociological. It was a story which had, I felt, a universal significance, which in terms of Ireland hadn't been explored before. I know people try to categorise and say "you're more literary fiction than popular fiction" and they say someone else is more popular fiction than literary fiction....I think it doesn't really matter. I'm not interested in making distinctions, you know. There are types of books that I like to read and they're books in which the writing is good, characters are well developed, but the plot is not necessarily significant. I like to read about the interaction between characters, perhaps where some of my own experience is reflected, and if not, to enter into a world of experience which I wouldn't ordinarily have had. But I don't dismiss what is called "popular" fiction. A lot of them are very well written and that is the only distinction I would make: whether the book is well written or badly; the category it falls into after that doesn't interest me. This sounds terrible, but I've tried to read some popular fiction and I simply cannot finish the book because the writing is so bad. There are other authors, Marian Keyes, for example, whose leap from what she used to do and what she wants to do with her new book is extraordinary. I think it's great that she has managed to cross these two boundaries. That's the only important thing to me: whether it is well written, then I want to read it, if it's badly written, I don't. There's so much out there that I want to read that I'll go for what I know I want to read first. My bedside table is already this high and I think life is too short to read them all.

My impression after reading your work is that you seem to be interested in portraying universal themes like human relationships, family, the construction of identity... focussing on the experiences of female characters but also on men, so that your work can be said to appeal to a very heterogeneous audience. However, do you have a specific kind of audience in mind when you write?

No, I can't say I do. Writers write books because they want people to read them and we go from perhaps one set of themes to another. My fascination in the first three books has been what I refer to as "the theatre of the family". The drama, the stories, the personal relations and the interaction that go on in the family are of endless fascination to me. I believe every family is dysfunctional in its own way, it's just a matter of degree. When children are growing, the parents are growing at the same time and there's nobody I know who has found difficulties with teenage children to be something that you say "oh, that's no problem". Some people handle some situations well and some others badly, but nobody is perfect. The important thing, particularly in the second book, was not so much the personal baggage, the difficulties people have in their childhood, but how they try to deal with them as they get older. The whole idea of having an emotional vocabulary, an emotional articulacy is crucial. Women tend to have an emotional vocabulary, but many men do not and I think that's a real tragedy. In my own family that's something I try to resolve. What I say to my son is that it's ok if you're upset or angry about something or if you want to cry, but please talk about it. How people interact, facing difficulties and keeping their family together, whatever the notion of that family is, is very fascinating to me.

Your first novel, In the Beginning, tells the story of Rose, a devoted wife and mother who is suddenly abandoned by her husband and she must take care of her two children on her own. However, after facing some difficulties, she finally succeeds in finding a balance between her womanhood and motherhood, two concepts that have been strongly associated in Ireland for a long time. How do you understand the change, if any, in the role of women within the family?

I think women have now more self-confidence and a higher self-esteem. In the early 70s, it suddenly became acceptable this desire of women to go out to third level education. Up until then, you went to school, you did a course and you got married, whereas a few years later, women were looking for further education as often as their brothers had done. The increased educational opportunities, the increased self-esteem and that kind of social colleague, workplace feedback... all that began to give women a greater sense of their own work. It might sound cynical but because society measures everything by money, the fundamental difference in terms of self-worth seems to be the ability to be economically self-sufficient. If you have your own money you're in a different situation as regards power and status than when you have no money. When families work, and they have worked wonderfully, when the mother and the father agree that one stays at home while one works because both jobs are valuable, if that works, it's wonderful. But the problem is that many times it doesn't work. In situations like Rose's, when her marriage broke down she had no economic independence whatsoever, so for her it was a battle of economy, of survival, of self-esteem. For many women I spoke to around those two campaigns, the fundamental issue was to suddenly realise how vulnerable they were. They thought that if society measures people for what they earn, they would measure themselves for the fact that they could be economically independent. That was the road Rose had to go through. I am not saying that self-esteem is only based

on money, it's not, but economic independence is an extremely important part of it. I understand that men take a great deal of their self-esteem from the work that they do. Women are a little bit more holistic: they get it from friends, children, family *and* from work, but the other three, without work are not enough.

IB is a novel with a clear biblical dimension, evident already in the title. The Old Testament tradition of the creation of the world and humanity helped you to arrange the progression of the story but also to provide a different perspective of women's position in a Catholic society, as Ireland has been for so long, and their ability to re/create their lives.

I did that very deliberately. I thought I could add a little fun, and Rose is her own God trying to re-make her family. I wanted to turn the traditional concept of God and the power over his head, showing that women were perfectly capable of having the same amount of power, in perhaps a limited sphere, as Rose's has to be, because of her situation. It also gave me a very recognisable universal structure. It was fun when God might make all the trees and I had Rose watering the plants... that sort of thing. It gave me a solid structure to base the story on. One of the problems about the structure is that some people took it literally and I was criticised for making it appear that someone could recover from a broken marriage as quickly as that, and of course, that is just a metaphor. Interestingly, among a lot of women I spoke to, when they knew that their relationship had been dead for a long time, the recovering time had been incredibly quick, because it is simply a case of acknowledging and moving on. In other situations when women genuinely don't know that their relationship is over and still are operating under the illusion that everything is fine, obviously the trauma is a lot bigger and the recovery time is a lot longer. But I have seen friends who remade their lives in a space of twelve months, and the sense of relief of being out of something that was so awful has given them the freedom to go on to do other things.

Women's access to paid employment is also portrayed and problematised in IB. In the case of Rose, with her cooking for a catering company, she manages to make her home also her workplace, which I think you planned successfully. How do you consider that access for women like her?

Rose belongs to that generation who didn't have further education, which meant that when things fall apart around her, she has to find the solution. The doing of that in her own home was a metaphor for the fact that everybody, particularly women in that sort of situation, can have resources which they have never called on, and it's only, like everybody else, when a crisis happens, that they realise what inner resources they have. The whole idea of the only way you could be a good mother was by being at home with your children has been repeated because of Catholic culture, and not only in Ireland. It was a nice irony to have her capable of drawing all these resources from the work she had done in the home for so long and make herself independent. In my own family, my mother, for example, was a very bright woman but due to economic circumstances in Ireland when she was a child, she had to leave school after primary school, which in those days used to continue until they

were fourteen. At fifteen she went to a sewing factory, but in her later years she did all sort of courses and further education outside the home. On many occasions she felt that there were so many opportunities that she had missed and that didn't make her a less of a mother. We had this kind of conversation before she died. For Rose that becomes something that is a moment of self-definition, when she stops being a mother long enough to realise that there are other parts of her life, that she has to be a woman, an individual who has needs, and not always those needs have to be submerged under the needs of the family.

Divorce is a key issue in IB, because the story, as you said, was conceived around the campaigns, but the controversy is mostly analysed from the perspective of a middle-aged woman. After all the work you did for divorce legislation, do you think that Irish women possibly experience divorce and all the problems that it involves differently from Irish men?

I think it's a difficulty for Irish people in general. We're back to the Catholic culture. I don't believe that serial divorce solves anything. I have read recently that Ireland in its attitude to divorce and remarriage is very similar to Italy, which has a similar catholic background, as Spain does too. For Irish and Italian people, separation, not divorce, is the end of a relationship, and if that is all that's required, people don't seek divorce. Divorce is only sought when embarking on a new relationship. That's an interesting distinction. When the referendum was passed in Ireland, we were throwing up our hands in horror saying "our society is going to fall apart and everybody is going to be rushing to divorce...". It has not happened. There's a tiny number of people who have actually sought and obtained a divorce and then, others simply remain separated, because that is enough for them. Without divorce, I think I used this phrase in *IB*, it's like having "a funeral without a body". The fact that the number is small is irrelevant; the fact that the option is there, that it is available, is extremely important. I really don't know if Irish men would find the seeking of divorce any easier than women. I think it's more a cultural thing than a gender thing, but it's just my feeling, I have no statistics to back that up. I'd say that traditionally, wherever divorce is available it's far more women who seek divorce, rather than men. Culturally it's difficult for both sexes, but in line with other countries, it is especially instigated more by women than by men.

In Ireland, lone parent families, particularly women-headed households (single mothers, separated or divorced women, widows or any other kind) and their children have been condemned for their transgression of the codes of family formation but in the last few decades their value as alternative family patterns has been positively reclaimed, as it is conveyed in your work .

Absolutely, no question about that. I get really annoyed when I hear people talk about so-called "family values", because they refer to mother-father-children, the nuclear family, as we come to know it. The family for me has so many broad definitions that it's wherever an adult takes responsibility over children related by blood or adoption. When people talk about the support of the family, I absolutely agree with that, but we must include all the different notions of the family,

particularly now. The structure that people would like to see, father, mother and children, just doesn't exist on its own, so all the other realities of one parent, of whatever gender, and children are much more common now than the nuclear family and I think they should be supported in the same way.

In your two other novels, A Name for Himself (1998) and The Walled Garden (1999) the action is set again in Dublin and the protagonists undergo several experiences so that they discover the importance of recuperating the memories of their past, their childhood experiences and family relations, however painful or disappointing they may have been. In that sense, family is portrayed as a crucial issue for Irish people, as it is indeed in your work, isn't it?

Yes, absolutely. The family has always been regarded as the most important building block in society. I don't have a problem with that as long as we agree that its definition has to be broadened. One of the things which have always angered me is the fact that in Ireland it has been regarded as such a sacred institution that whatever was going on behind its door was private and the State had no role in interfering. The amount of sexual abuse cases coming out of the woodwork, in the latter ten to fifteen years, are giving a light to that. When the family works, it's wonderful and it protects children to grow... but there is a darker side of the family which Irish people have tended not to want to see. That's one of the things I wanted to look at in *A Name for Himself*, that the family can be an incredibly damaging institution and that very dark things have gone on behind closed doors in this country for years and years, in terms of incest, child abuse, brutality. I think it's growing acceptance not only with children taking cases against their fathers –because it has been universally fathers who did sexual abuse– but also because of the decreasing power of the Catholic Church. The Church and the family, the two main bastions of our society, have been systematically abusing children since the foundation of the State and before. Children were taken into Church-run orphanages because the Church deemed that their parents were not worthy enough to look after them. Then, those children were systematically abused and the only response from the authorities was to move the priest from area to area rather than fire them. So this whole notion of the family being sacred, I don't have any time for it. I want the homes, the schools and the churches to be safe for children, and if that means keeping someone out of the streets for the rest of their lives, well, ok, so be it. Apart from that, in terms of technology, society here has been exploded over the last number of years and that includes the dangers of the Internet. I wouldn't want to blow it out of the proportion because I know that still more children are abused by somebody they know, an uncle, or a family friend, than by paedophiles in the internet, but it's yet another organisational factor of the abuse which we should stop, because there isn't any protection from it. Again, I don't know what sort of legislation one should put at case, but it's something that worries me. One of the things I really admire is the courage of young men and women. Recently, I saw that a whole family had been viciously abused by their father; they all came out and the man is behind bars for the rest of his life. Then, there was a young girl whose father had abused her since she was four, and he got three years. This was a man who was

in charge of a victim support group in the North of Ireland for families who had been injured by paramilitaries, so you have this hypocrite pretending to work for victims from another sphere while at the same time he was abusing his own daughter. All of the young women and men who have come out to say "this has been happening in our home" are giving others permission to come out and say the same, so the abuse cannot be covered up any more. There is now social respectability for people who tell what went on in their families and understanding that what you see on the surface, the ordinary face of the family is not what you get behind closed doors. I think that's a very healthy growing up. This is only one of the factors that contribute to the loss of the power of Catholic Church over Ireland, while the other is that the Church doesn't thrive for ever, possibly it has its own power when people are economically poor and that's no longer the case in Ireland. All of that has changed.

I must admit that I loved the recurrence in your three novels of people's ability to create things with their own hands. In In the Beginning, Rose makes cakes and sweets for a living, in A Name for Himself, Farrell paints and restores old pieces of furniture and finally Alice, the widow in The Walled Garden, is a dressmaker who also loves gardening. It seems then that the literary expression allows you, and I suppose many other writers, to symbolise how people are able to construct their own identity.

I think that creative impulse, however it manifests itself, is an important thing that makes us human. That's a part of the human spirit that I like most, that I admire most. For Rose it was something as ordinary as cooking, and it becomes a way in which she can reconstruct her world. With Farrell I used it in a slightly different way. Unfortunately for him all of the anguish which he should have spoken comes out in his hands and he restores beautiful furniture whereas he should be restoring his own life and making it new again. His tragedy was that he didn't have the emotional vocabulary to do that. If he could have done that as well as having that emotional vocabulary, what happens at the end of the book wouldn't have happened because he would have recovered. And also with Alice, that kind of creativity is, I believe, how you literally regenerate yourself. When people write music or poetry, or with any of the arts, is when they can be at repose, when they can stop being someone who's constantly doing something and just be themselves and express some part of their personality, of their longings. Whether it's with their hands or with their head, it doesn't matter. I think everybody needs something like that; life is very cruel sometimes in the spiritual sense, if you don't have something in which your body as well as your spirit is involved.

As regards the form and the structure of your works, the stories are told from the different points of view of the characters involved, by means of chapter divisions, letters or some other strategies. Considering that you are a woman writer and that women have been excluded from the literary canon of Ireland and, as you have mentioned, from the most important aspects of Irish society, is that the same message you are trying to project, that there are multiple versions of Irish society?

Everybody has their own truth and everybody sees the world in a very individual way. I don't think I am trying to give any message to anybody. Readers can extrapolate from what I write any message that they wish and I would either agree or disagree. My main concern in each of the three books has been to look at times of growth in people's lives, which usually coincide with times of crisis. I understand that by means of those crises there are opportunities for us. I have seen many people turning their life around in a very simple way. I do believe that people have the capacity to change. It's very heartening to see how people work their way through crisis and emerge stronger or at least wiser at the end of it. That's why Farrell's story for me is so sad, because he doesn't bring the experience of life with him and remake it into something that can change him positively. He becomes stuck at some stage where death is the only viable option, whereas it is not; the other option was also available but he didn't see it. Women seem to be, for biological reasons, a lot closer to blood and death than men are. That sense of life being finite, that it will end some day is much closer to women. You've never seen a woman or a sister or a mother rejoice as a man goes out to war, for example, which men see as some exciting adventure. That knowledge through blood at childbirth that death is only that far away, I think, makes us look at life in a very different way.

What are your plans for the near future? Are you working on a new novel?

Yes, I am working on a book which is based on Belfast at the turn of the twentieth century. My grandmother on my father's side had an arranged marriage. She was married to a man, who became my grandfather, when he was forty and she was eighteen. That apparently was more common in our culture then than it is now; I mean, we all know that in Indian society arranged marriages are very common, but apparently they were quite common in middle class families in Ireland at that time. She had two sisters, and each of them led very different lives. I have some biographical knowledge, not an awful lot because my father is the youngest of that family and all the others are dead. I picked up some pieces along the way as a child but obviously there are very few people to whom I can speak about what the three sisters were like. Anyway, I've taken that as the background of the novel and I want to look at how life would be for her, not at the fact that she was married at eighteen to someone who was forty, but that she was moved to Belfast where sectarianism was growing strongly. It was the time of the failed Home Rule bills and also the growth of the Orange Order, of violence, the position of working class Catholics, all that sort of thing. So there's a much broader canvas than in the other three books. Family is still at its core but, in this case, it's a family of three sisters, one of whom spent her life in Belfast bringing up eight children. She was a very good pianist so that's her creative outlet, that you would like to read. Another sister became a nurse at the time of the suffragist movement and the final sister married a farmer and lived in County Meath so she had the rural experience to counteract the urban experience. As you see, it's three very big and complex stories that I am trying to intertwine. At the moment I have a lot of research done and I have written half of the first draft, but it's just the first draft. I think the difficulty I see at the moment is how to get the three stories as one tapestry, but that will come in time, I hope.

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