

Interviewing Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

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Abstract: *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne* is a novelist, playwright, and a storyteller. She graduated in English and Folklore at University College Dublin (UCD) and did her PhD at National University of Ireland. She has taught Folklore and Creative Writing at UCD. Eilis has won several awards, among them the Irish Pen Award in 2015 for the outstanding contribution of her work to Irish literature. She has published extensively both fiction and academic criticism and she is a member of the Irish Association of Artists (Aosdána). Her literary work comprises of over twenty-five books.

Keywords: *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne; fiction; creative writing; Irish language.*

END: Firstly, I'd like to say a huge thank you, *go raibh mile maith agat*, to Laura and Munira. It is fantastic to be here at the University of São Paulo. At events like this, I usually read something that I've written very recently and that's what I am going to do now. I'm going to read my latest story which was published about two weeks ago in the Irish Times as part of their summer series of short stories. It was a commissioned story and we were given the theme of escape. This story is called "Berlin". Afterwards, I will read a short extract from the novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*. So I will start off with "Berlin", which is unlike most of my short stories, in that it is more eventful and dramatic than they are as a rule. It has a certain academic flavour – much of it is set in a library – so perhaps this is the right audience for it. So, "Berlin":

One Friday the Wall comes down. Meaning, the gates open, the guards leave their posts, anyone who feels like it can walk through from one side of Berlin to the other. Lolly and Bill and Ryan and Amelie watch the event on the RTÉ news in their little house in Stoneybatter. On the screen are crowds dancing and laughing and singing. Violins. She hums along. Freude Freude. She has an impression of candlelight, lanterns, soft festive flickerings, as at a summer garden party. It is November.

Can it have been such a surprise? Some dramatic things happen out of the blue: accidents, lightning strikes, mass shootings by crazy Americans. But not big political events. The process of liberation has been going on for years. Glasnost and perestroika have entered the English language, words as familiar as vodka or caviar. The kind-looking soft face of the Russian president was on TV every

turn about. But Lolly has been so preoccupied – the house, the children, all the satisfactory private stuff that constitutes life – that she hasn't paid much attention to what was going behind the Iron Curtain, even though it has important implications for her. The last thing you can imagine is a big public answer to a personal question, because, no matter how well you know the truth of it, it's hard to believe in your bones that the personal is political, and vice versa.

Exactly 10 years earlier Lolly had been in Berlin. Nobody had the slightest expectation then that the Wall was entering its last decade. Lolly thought it had been there for ages, since the end of the war, although in fact it had been erected in 1961. Already by 1979, it felt old and permanent. She was spending that year, the year between August '78 and '79, in Copenhagen, on a research scholarship: the research was a history of a story which had first been documented by a German poet in the 12th century and had since then been written and told by various writers and storytellers over most of Europe. The story was a fairytale about an abandoned child, a bit like Hansel and Gretel, a scary story that folklorists believed contained metaphorical references to infanticide, child exposure, and such unspeakable customs, widely practised in the days when people had no birth control. She had acquired versions of the story from archives all over Europe – thick shiny photocopies with the pungent chemical smell photocopies had in the 1970s. But there was a version she hadn't managed to get, in the Humboldt Library in East Berlin. Her letters had not been answered. Since she knew a girl who was studying in West Berlin, she decided to go down there and visit her and the divided city, and check the reference in person. She went on the train and the ferry and then the train from Rostock on the Baltic coast down through East Germany, where the green fields, the higgledly-piggledy farms, the unkempt hedgerows, looked strangely familiar. That year, her life was full of surprises. Who would have anticipated that East Germany would look a lot like Tipperary, say? And not a bit like the tidy fields of Denmark.

She went through the Wall at Friedrichstrasse railway station, where there wasn't really a wall, just several little grey booths like ticket offices, where they scrutinised your passport with obsessive anxiety and asked searching questions in impatient, rather rude, voices.

Like the countryside, East Berlin was a surprise. It was much nicer than West Berlin, at least the bit on the other side of Friedrichstrasse.

The big plaza, like the forum in Rome or the agora in Athens. The noble museum with classical statues standing quietly in the sunshine. Everything built of old grey stone. Cafes with tables outside on the square. A fountain.

It was the sort of place where you'd expect to see hundreds of tourists, but there were not many of them. And where was everybody else? The East Germans? Slaving away in ghastly factories? Foostering despairingly in their flats in the grim Stalinist blocks? Locked up by the Stasi?

Well. It was 10 o'clock on a Wednesday morning. Maybe the city just hadn't got going yet? Like any other city.¹

END: I think I might stop it for now. You'll have to read the end of it. You can find it online in the Irish Times, it will still be there. Now I'm going to read just a very short extract from my novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* which is related to Tolstoy. In fact, it is a version of *Anna Karenina* brought up to date and set in Ireland during the boom. I wrote it because Tolstoy had written his novel as a sort of critique of the high society, Saint Petersburg's society, at the end of the nineteenth century in Russia. There was a need for books about Irish society, its manners and modes, during the Celtic Tiger years and I thought I'd use Tolstoy's novel as a model. I didn't have access to high society in Ireland, or rich society, but I have a lot of access to one group of people, the literary society. In my novel, I satirised the literary scene in Dublin, which was a risky thing to do. I'm going to read a piece that comes towards the end of the book. There are two characters in it: Leo, who is based on Levin in *Anna Karenina*, and Kate. In *Anna Karenina*, as you will remember, Levin is the ideal individual, the good guy, who lives in the country, has high moral standards, in sharp contrast to the decadent city dwellers. He marries a very nice girl called Kitty, so she is Kate in my book. My Leo lives in Kerry, and brings urban Kate back to his little house on the Atlantic coast. Again, you'll have to read the book to find out exactly what happens. This is a little scene. When they arrive at the house everything is in disarray. They open the door and immediately a swallow who has been nesting in the porch of the house flies into it and they can't get it out. So, it is the first night of their landing in Ireland and it is disturbed. They are trying to do anything than falling asleep. I'm going to read the page of the encounter with the swallow:

Just before four in the morning, Kate heard a strange noise. Someone was knocking on the door downstairs. She was half-asleep and tried to ignore it. Perhaps it was a dream. She had been dreaming of something wonderful and she wanted to return to the dream, but the knocking went on and on.

It was light already, or half-light. Leo was sound asleep. She got up and went down the simple wooden staircase with the iron banister. The room downstairs, her living room now, was full of blueish grey light, a light she seldom saw anywhere: the light of dawn. Now she could see that the knocking was caused by the swallow. Not Charlene. The swallow was banging its head against the window, trying to get through the glass. She went over, wondering if she could open the window. She jumped. Outside the window, staring straight at her, was an animal. A fox.

Although urban foxes were common in Dublin and some of Kate's parents' neighbours in Foxrock claimed to feed them as they were pets, Kate had

never seen a fox a close quarters before, not a living fox – dead ones she saw all the time, on the road.

This fox did not run away. He... she assumed it was a male... stood perfectly still, like a statue. His colour was unlike anything she had ever seen, unlike any colour in any paintbox in the world. Such a red... a golden russet, a colour for which she – who had names for many shades and nuances – could find no word. An unearthly colour.

The fox's eyes were piercing. Sharp, focused.

She shivered.

He was really staring not at her but at the bird. Quite clearly he was hoping to eat the swallow. And the swallow was hoping to get out and fly away. It flew against the glass, like a demented thing, again and again. The fox did not move at all. It waited for the swallow to come out and land in its mouth. Patient and cunning, it waited.

But the fox was not all that cunning. There was one element in the scene that he was not reading correctly. It seemed that neither he nor the swallow understood what glass was. Understood that even it was there, transparent, but keeping them apart.

The window, she saw, turning her mind to practical manners, could not be opened. It was a pane of glass fixed into its large frame. The other one, its companion, was a door. She did not know if it was right to let the bird out now that the fox was there, but she opened the glass door.

The swallow, which had been stupid in many ways, now used its intelligence and flew out of the house unhesitatingly.

Out it flew, one wing damaged, down the garden and into the sky.

Down on the silvery ocean the islands loomed, dark and huge, whales in the water.

The fox, as soon as the door opened, moved across the terrace, still hoping to catch the bird. Moved not as swiftly as it could – it limped on three legs, one held aloft, broken.

For a minute every hair on Kate's body stood on end and she felt briefly freezing.

The sky was an eerie white-blue colour. The grass was long like corn, full of vaguely shaped flowers, their colours pale and indistinct as yet, in the dawn light. Everything was still, but she had the feeling that the grass was hiding a myriad secret lives. She had seen a fox and a swallow, but the grass out there was full of other animals that she could not see, all out there, hidden from her view.

She tried to follow the fox's progress through the grass but that was impossible. As the light strengthened – which it did, very rapidly – she saw

something she had not seen before, which seemed to have grown in the field, like a tree, since she had got up. It was a scarecrow, with black wool for hair and funny old hat with a daisy in the brim, grinning on its scarecrow stick down towards the end of the garden. That must be where Leo had his vegetable patch, she thought.

It was a beautiful scarecrow, Kate saw. It was smiling, benign, not the kind of scarecrow that would frighten anything.

A swallow, a fox, a scarecrow.²

PA: Thank you very much Eilis for this beautiful reading. I think everyone is full of images, metaphors and stories in their minds right now. Connecting to the readings you've just done, could you tell us a little bit about the reason why you choose to use resources such as fantasy and magic realism, as well as all images and metaphors in your writing? In which way do these resources help you communicate something that maybe other kinds of literary resources don't allow you to?

END: Well, magic realism is a very nice term first. In a way I think this story "Berlin" and all the academic aspect of it, going to the library reading the folktale there and so on, explain my background, why I am steeped in all this stuff, the oral tradition of Ireland and indeed of Europe. I began as a young writer knowing nothing about this material. I was introduced to the world of Irish folklore, something which I would have previously dismissed as nonsense, just leprechauns and faeries down at the end of the garden, in an academic setting at University College Dublin. I came to it in this rather dry way initially. University College Dublin has one of the treasures of our country really, the archive of the National Folklore Collection, which contains literally thousands and thousands of stories collected mostly during the twentieth century by the Irish Folklore Commission. So I started off thinking of literature as something which was only written down quite naturally. I thought as a young person I wanted to be a writer. This was when I went to college in 1971. There was no question of creative writing courses or anything like that then. So I thought I'll study pure English. My modest ambition was to read everything that had been written in English, then I'd be a writer and would know how to write. Accidentally while I was doing that I got introduced to folklore, folktales, fairy tales and the oral tradition. I suppose my sense of what literature is expanded because I realized of course the written literature is the tip of the iceberg that is preceded for thousands and thousands of years everywhere by the oral storytelling. That resource is so rich. I suppose our theory is that stories survive because they have something to tell us. If a story is dependent on being told it will only go on being told for as long as people want to hear it and for as long as it is expressing something that matters. Even though the fairy tales, the Grimm type of fairy tales, seem so fantastical to some extent and I think that a lot of the symbols and metaphors in them resonate in us in some deep way that we may not quite even understand and that's why they continue to be popular at some levels. I write about contemporary life mainly. I don't

write very much historical fiction, though my own life is becoming historical I think. Occasionally I use folklore motifs and stories. I think it does add to the contemporary text. It colours the texture and it makes it richer. Sometimes I am not quite sure exactly how that is working but I know that is the case.

PA: Eilis, one of the very common themes of your writing is reflecting upon the work of the writer. How do you consider yourself as a writer? Which of these definitions – novelist, playwright, storyteller or poet – do you feel more comfortable with?

END: I write in many genres, not very much poetry. I think short story writer and fiction writer is the label I would feel happiest with. I don't write very much drama, although I enjoy writing it when I happen to do it. I think the short story is my favourite genre. I have more collections of short stories than any other kind of book. I feel the short story is a type of fiction where poetry and prose merge. Short stories always work at a metaphorical level of imagery as well as at the level of the narrative. You still have to have a story. I believe that. I want stories. I love stories. Something has to happen. But the short stories also operate at the level of language and imagery, metaphor and symbol, and the meaning is contained in those things as well as in the actual plot and characterization.

PA: This year has been commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising. There is an excerpt in one of your stories, *A Literary Lunch*, in which one of the characters, Francie, quotes Patrick Pearse, when he says “the pen is stronger than the sword”, and then he concludes that Pearse preferred the sword at the end and gave up the pen. This character is also ironical when he doubts whether the Rising was popular at the time at all. How does your work and professional activities this year have been rethinking the event?

END: This year has been the centenary of the Rising and we've been commemorating it all year. I've written one piece in connection with the anniversary. UCD, where a few of the leaders of the Rising were students or staff, celebrated it in a very imaginative way with a dramatic presentation called *Signatories*. They invited seven graduates of UCD who are writers and we wrote monologues. I was assigned Seán Mac Diarmada, one of the signatories of the proclamation of the Rising which took place on Easter 1916. I wrote it in a rather ironic way. Mac Diarmada is one of the leaders about whom people know rather little – he is shadowy. He looked lovely, he had a beautiful face with which we are all very familiar, the same photo is shown all the time. But the celebrities of the Rising are Pearse and Connolly, so I wondered who's getting Pearse and Connolly? (laughter) Of course I had to find out something about Seán Mac Diarmada. He was a fanatic in some ways as they all were. He was rabidly nationalistic; he hated the English and was eager for the armed uprising. He was very much in favour of that. And he believed it could be successful, against all the odds. He used to recite a terrible poem by Ethna Carbery called *Brian Boy Magee*, which is replete with images of 'my mother hanging by her head and my father drenched in blood'. He recited this

at parties. As I got to find out more about him I came to admire him very much and admire the heroism of those who rebelled. I can only speak for myself but I think it actually applies to many of us in Ireland. I think we have reached a stage where we are no longer ashamed of the Rising. We've gone through phases. I was 12 in 1966 in the celebration of the 50th anniversary, a hugely triumphalist celebration of the Rising. I mean I loved it. I was swept along with the enthusiasm and wanted to go out and fight the English after singing the songs and watching the pageants which they did at that stage. For the 75th anniversary there was nothing. We had revised our new Irish history and we didn't want to hear about the 1916. It was almost an embarrassment. But I think now for the centenary we've reached a stage where we can look at it in a balanced way and admire what is to be admired when you get to know these people. Seán Mac Diarmada was 33, same age as Jesus Christ, and they were aware of these things. He was younger than my sons and he died for Ireland. It's an easy thing to say but when you allow yourself to imagine the event fully, when you get to know the individuals involved, their circumstances, their idealism, you realise how courageous and noble they were.

MHM: Eilis, I'd like to talk about your novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*. From 2011 to 2015 I had a grant to study the Russian literature in Ireland. There are two important moments: the first one with Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor and George Moore; and the second with Friel, Kilroy, McGuinness, all of them rewriting Russian literature. When Anne Fogarty was here in Brazil, I told her I was puzzled that nobody rewrote Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Then Anne said she had a friend who had rewritten Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The name of the novel was *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*. She generously sent the book by post, I read it and I was enchanted with it. How was the process of rewriting Tolstoy's novel in contemporary Dublin with scenes such as Anna Karenina taking the Luas and walking down Grafton Street? Was there a plan you wanted to follow? Or was *Anna Karenina* just a frame, as Joyce in *Ulysses* had a frame from Homer, to discuss the lives of twenty-first century Dubliners?

END: I wanted to write a novel. I am not very good at plotting. I am a short story writer and plot is not that important to short stories, but it so happens that I also like writing novels. So I thought if I could take somebody else's novel, one with a good plot and a good framework, and use it as my basis, that would take care of the plotting problem. I also wanted to write about Celtic Tiger Ireland, and as you know, *Anna Karenina* is to a large extent a sort of observation and look at society in Russia during the period of the novel. I thought it would work as a template, and I loved the novel anyway, of course that was very important. Sometimes one forgets how small things inspire. The train is a major image in *Anna Karenina* obviously. It opens with Anna Karenina meeting Vronsky at the train station in Moscow and it closes with her being beheaded by the train, not a very nice ending for her. Trains were fairly new in Russia when Tolstoy wrote his novel and he was very interested in them, and in the way in which new modes of transport could influence lives. I am rather interested in that too. I wrote *Fox,*

Swallow, Scarecrow around the time Dublin got the tram, the Luas. We were so thrilled. We thought we were just so wonderful now that we have a tram. I know the train was a big deal in Russia at the *Anna Karenina* time. We were like that about the Luas. People were going for rides at the Luas for the sake of getting on the Luas. We were allowed to go free on the Luas for a couple of days just for the experience of travelling on a tram. And we have two lines. We have the Green Line, which is the south city line, and the Red Line, which is going out to Tallaght. The lines represent class divisions in Dublin. The Green Line is very posh. I got the impression that to get on the Green Line you had to be all dressed up and looking smart, whereas on the Red Line you could be wearing your jeans, trainers and scruffy looking going out to the western suburbs of Dublin. I wanted to write about that. As you know I take the train and the Luas as part of the story. I turn it on its head. Tolstoy is quite moralistic. He is sympathetic to Anna but she still dies at the end. That does not happen to my Anna.

MHM: My second question refers to the title which points at an original strategy of transposition because you don't call it *Anna Karenina* or any other *Anna* but this intriguing title. I would rather say that this is not a transposition but a trans-creation of the Russian novel. Would it be too farfetched to say that Kate, Leo, Anna, Jerry and all the other characters are your Everyman, to use the medieval title? Are they universal in the sense that they experience this imprisonment through ambition, despair, and all the other things you show in the novel? For me, all of them are the swallows banging on the window. I was impressed with your sentence: "the fox doesn't move, he just stares". I thought the fox would be fate.

END: Thank you. I think that is a wonderful interpretation of it. I think it is valid. I think the characters are trapped by history as I believe we all are. You know how difficult it is to really rise out of the historical circumstances which you just happen to find yourself, to transcend your historical context. If I had been born in the thirteenth century I would be very different in my attitudes and beliefs to what I am now as a product of the twentieth century. I think the novel might be about that. When I was reading it, *The Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* piece, which is central to the novel, it is very mysterious and I didn't really quite know exactly what I meant but it had to be there, the entrapment of the characters and fate. The fox is history, or fate, or destiny waiting outside the window. The scarecrow is the benign. It is actually a modern symbol. This is a kind and benign scarecrow who tries to save Kate from her final and completely accidental fate of which she has absolutely no control and which is completely undeserved. I suppose in Tolstoy's novel there is a pattern in a way he is sympathetic to *Anna Karenina* but she is punished in the end for her fall from grace. I think what I am saying maybe is that there isn't a pattern apart from circumstances which enclose you. I think that is what it is but I think your interpretation is absolutely fantastic, Munira.

MHM: As you also write plays, have you thought of transposing your novel, which is so visual we can almost see the fox, to a play or a film? As for example Patrick McCabe did with *The Butcher Boy*.

END: Well I'd love to do a film of it. I think it would be more of a film than of a play somehow. And as I was mentioning to somebody else, a really great playwright, Marina Carr, has written a play based on *Anna Karenina*, which will be produced in The Abbey pretty soon. Well, a movie would be great.

MHM: Do you think it would be difficult to do it?

END: Thanks to Tolstoy there is plenty going on in my novel book. No, I think it would be easy to make a film of it.

Audience: You mentioned that the story you read from was commissioned and you were given a topic. How did that affect the creative process?

END: It is very tricky when somebody asks you to write a story on the theme of escape. Of course it is a very broad theme and so on and so forth. I always say yes. Of course I'll do it and you have three or four months to think of something. It is different from something that occurs spontaneously. You could write about almost anything on the theme of escape. Many of the stories by other people were not such literal interpretations of it perhaps as mine. But when I began to think about it I suppose in a way to plan it, to think of a trigger, I thought all the time of the Berlin Wall and of a visit that I actually made there. I've changed things, it's fictional, but I went to the library in East Berlin in 1979 or whatever it was. That moment kept coming back to me, that visit, the enormous difficulty of going to the library to get a copy of fairy tales, thanks to the Wall, the loops I had to go through just to get through the Wall and into the Humboldt Library. It was ridiculous. It stayed in my mind and I wanted to write about it. Then I expanded it into a story. But there are all kinds of (writing) restrictions (one has to deal with). When writing stories for a newspaper it has to be three thousand words. You have a word limit. I tend to write stories that are about ten thousand words. My first versions are that and I may go back to them. But on the other hand it is a good discipline and you've got your deadline and you have to do it. Now I teach creative writing. I've been doing that for about seven or eight years and I am constantly tossing out triggers to the students and they go away and a week or two later they come back sometimes with great stories. Creativity is a pretty robust little aspect of our mental process. You can do it to order up to a point if you have to.

Audience: Is there any theme or topic you avoid because you feel you are not ready for that? Or are you supposed to write about everything?

END: I can't think of anything I would avoid. But no doubt there are many themes and topics that I avoid unconsciously and of course many that I simply could not deal with. If somebody came along and said: 'will you write a story about that?'. I don't know. Maybe about sex and violence. My imagination isn't strong enough now to think of what it is I would avoid if I was asked to.

Audience: I'd like to ask about your writings in Irish. Which language do you prefer: Irish or English? And why?

END: I was bilingual from childhood. Nevertheless, English is my first language and the language I am best at really and most comfortable in. I wrote in it quite a lot for many years. I had already written three or four books in it when I began to write in Irish. I started writing in Irish because in around 1995, I think, the director of an Irish theatre company in Dublin, the Douglas Hyde Theatre, came to me and said she was looking for a woman who could write a play for her because she could only get men. Irish language literature actually is very dominated by men. I did some research on the novel in the Irish language just recently and during the twentieth century two hundred and thirty novels were written in Irish, which is a good number for a minority language, and out of those only nine were written by women. It is just extraordinary statistics. It is astonishing. Why is that is interesting. So anyway I wrote the play based on a few of my short stories for her and it was on the Peacock. It was my first play and my first time writing in Irish. All that worked well. Then I realised, yes I can write in Irish. For me as somebody who had been brought up with Irish, I went to Irish schools and so on, there was a sense of homecoming in the Irish language. In the Irish language community, I had expected them to throw bricks at me because I thought they would see as a kind of traitor, one of these people with an Irish name who writes in English. But in fact the community was very welcoming. So I continued doing it. But I write in a different way. I mean it's simpler. The first novel I wrote in Irish was a detective novel, not something I would be writing in English. I thought I would write something people would read because for most Irish people reading in Irish is hard, it is a struggle. Then I've written some novels for young people in Irish. I have written a series of literary novels, *Cailíní Beaga Ghleann na mBláth*, *The Little Girls of Glendalough*, which is a bit like the *Dancers Dancing*, my other novel. It is easier for me to write in English though.

AU: What is the trigger that makes you write a short story? Is it the character? The atmosphere? The structure? Is it all of them?

END: I think it is more likely to be the atmosphere and emotional experience than anything else. I think the inspiration for short stories as I write them is closer to the kind of inspiration that poets have than that of novelists. It is difficult to pin down what a short story is but I would say mine often comes from a memory or experience of some kind, as in the story I have read here. It is this sort of lingering memory of being in a library in Berlin that kept coming back to me and then it goes from there. It gradually gets plotted and structured but the first draft arrives from an emotional experience, from an impression or a memory that has had a strong impact on me.

MHM: Thank you very much for you lovely reading and interview. Thank you very much for coming and we hope to see you again in Brasil.

Notes

- 1 The Irish Times, Summer fiction: Berlin by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Saturday August 13 2016. In: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/summer-fiction-berlin-by-%C3%A9il%C3%ADs-n%C3%AD-dhuibhne-1.2754456>).
- 2 In: Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís. *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2007.
[1](Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís. *Berlin*. The Irish Times, Summer fiction: Berlin by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Saturday August 13 2016. In: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/summer-fiction-berlin-by-%C3%A9il%C3%ADs-n%C3%AD-dhuibhne-1.2754456>).