

Memoirs

Nuala Ní Chonchúir

When I was 10 years old, my favourite auntie asked me: “What are you going to be when you grow up?”

“A bus conductor,” I said.

My mother laughed. “Some bus conductor you’d make – your head’s always stuck in a book.”

It was true. And if I wasn’t reading there was often a pen in my hand. I had already decided – as a child and in spite of myself – to live a life devoted to books.

The nuns who taught me at secondary school often talked to us about vocations; they were hoping, I suppose, that some of us would veil up and replace them. One nun told us you would know you had a vocation because it would be whispered in your ear. I waited for that whisper: the idea of being a nun appealed to me as much as it appalled me. All that solitude! All that *solitude*... The call from Jesus or whomever never did come my way, but from a young age, someone or something persistently whispered in my ear: “You want to write.” Someone or something was handing me my vocation: “You want to write.”

When I grew up, I worked in theatre, in a book shop, in a library, and at a writers’ centre. Despite working in bookish jobs, it would take 18 years from the bus conductor conversation for me to fully realise that what I really wanted to do, above all else, was write. And, moreover, to realise that it was possible to do it.

I started with poetry but soon discovered in short fiction a truly comfortable and exciting place for myself as a writer. Though I continue to write poetry – and novels now too – the short story has become my home, my preferred mode of expression. Short fiction suits modernity; it suits contemporary life – it captures the here-and-now extremely well.

In a country of rapid change, like Ireland, with women’s roles and position changing more than anyone else’s, the short story, in particular, is the perfect medium for chronicling big cultural shifts. It is useful for examining power struggles and for focusing on contemporary issues such as the juggling of work and motherhood; relationships between lovers; divorce and isolation; and the collapse of the church. As an immediate art form, the short story, for me, is the ideal conduit for what I want to say.

At the start of my serious devotion to writing, the more I wrote, the more I discovered that my writing explored the body – the physical body – and that I was attempting to make this exploration a visceral experience for the reader. I wrote about – and continue to write about – women’s physical relationships with lovers; pregnancy and miscarriage; and attitudes to the body in various societies but, mostly, in an Irish context.

In a Rumpus interview, author Lidia Yuknavitch, who shares this ambition to get the reader experiencing the body in her fiction, put it this way: "...the chief reason I try to get the reader to feel their own body while they are reading, is this: we live by and through the body, and the body, is a walking contradiction. I love the walking contradiction of the body. I want to make corporeal characters, corporeal writing; I want to bring the intensities and contradictions and beauty and violence and stench and desire and astonishing physicality of the body back into literature."

As I set out on my journey as a writer, I was not just that but a reader too; I read, hungrily and without discrimination. And, for a time, through reading, I wondered about the notion of writers influencing other writers. If I enjoyed another writer's work – say Eavan Boland's or Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's – did that automatically mean I was influenced by them? I preferred to think that I engaged with and enjoyed their work, rather than that I was influenced by it. If influence is really a form of homage or even imitation, is that why I resisted the idea of it? I think I wanted my work to stand on its own and be original without acknowledging the influence of any other writer. It took me a while to realise I was fooling myself. A woman writer needs foremothers and, as it happens, I am blessed with mine.

I distinctly remember the sharp intake of breath when I first read Eavan Boland's orgasm poem "Solitary" where no one sees the narrator's "hands//fan and cup" as they bring her to a point where she is "animal/inanimate, satiate." I had a similar reaction to Mary Morrissy's story "A Lazy Eye," where the narrator, Bella, suffers a messy period in a sleeper-car on a train and is expelled from the train as a direct result. When I read these works, I was struck by their matter-of-fact, bodily and sensual honesty.

When I read Irish women's literature of love, lust and the body – by Eavan Boland, Mary Morrissy, Anne Enright and many others – I didn't instantly think, "I could do that," but I did absorb the fact that women can write frank and sensuous work about their own experience of the body and sexual love; I recognised brave and beautiful literature that I identified with. And it wasn't, I think, until I fell deeply in love myself that the spark of their tender and raw writings lit a fire under my own work, in both poetry and fiction.

In her keynote speech, delivered at an Irish Studies Conference in Ontario in 1981, Lorna Reynolds contested that "the women of Ireland, whether we look for them in legend, literature or life, do not correspond to the stereotypes that have, so mysteriously, developed in the fertile imaginations of men."

That same conference deliberately did not focus on women's present, rather they made the decision to look at Irish women in writing "less in response to contemporary feminist concerns than in recognition of a firmly established tradition; Irish writers, musicians and painters have consistently represented Ireland in female form – as revered goddess, enchanting princess or pitiable old woman; even, in disillusionment, as an old sow capable of cannibalism." What, I wonder, was wrong with the concerns of women writing in the eighties that they could not be discussed and explored? There was too much

reality involved, perhaps: too many leaking bodies and cries for equality. The “firmly established tradition” sadly had few women’s voices in it; that is, women talking about women from their own experience.

Ireland was a late-blossoming place: in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, a young woman writer was more likely to be getting married and starting a family, than weaving flowers in her hair and indulging in free love. She may also have been reading a diet of older works, mostly written by men. Our society was repressed by both State and church, and women’s sexuality was ignored, at best. Single mothers were locked away in institutions, for example, and contraception was illegal.

Eavan Boland opened up Irish poetry to women’s lived experience in the domestic setting, from kitchen to bedroom. By celebrating and giving voice to women’s very real sexual lives, she chipped away at the wall of ignorance and un-acknowledgement about something that was real and present. In her fiction, short and long, Edna O’Brien wrote frankly of the sexual awakening of teenage girls and her books were banned as a result. I am grateful to Eavan Boland, Edna O’Brien and others for their pioneering work. As Eavan said in her essay “A Kind of Scar,” women’s move from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to being their authors, was “a momentous transit.”

I became a teenager in the 1980s so luckily, for me, the transit was already underway by the time I began to take writing seriously. But there can be, even now, a lingering question mark over women who write about the body and sex as they experience it; it’s a subject that still has the power to shock and surprise. Indeed, I lately provoked the ire of a letter writer to the *Irish Times* because of a short story of mine that was published in that paper in July. The story featured a couple in Paris who were based on Christ and Mary Magdalene. The letter writer said: “The contrived subject matter was little more than porn, a sacrilegious parody that was totally reprehensible, the sex connotations totally tasteless and unnecessary. Or did the author think all this clever?”

I can’t say that I think I am especially clever but the story was lovingly written and there is very little in it that could be construed as pornography. But it illustrates that in Ireland, in matters of the body, perhaps particularly where religion is invoked, there are still those who want to keep everything under wraps, in literature as much as in life.

Flaubert said, “Our subjects choose us.” Women’s bodies belong to women and often I choose the body as subject matter when I write, or it chooses me. Male writers have revered and delighted in women’s bodies, but being a woman, inside a woman’s body, is complex and not easily understood from a male perspective. We menstruate, we lactate, we give birth. We take in, we give out. The womb is central to our lives and bodies but we never see it, so there is an element of unknowing, even of our own selves.

Catherine Bellver wrote: “The female body is not for woman an external, discrete object, an alienated Other, or a reflection of her unconscious desire. Her feelings toward her body may be ambiguous and strained...When her body speaks, it becomes a speaking subject, an expression of desire, and a generator of meaning.” So the body is seen and felt from the inside out and not the other way around; it is this experience of the flesh

which I then transcribe into fiction and poetry, whether as the loved and celebrated, or awkward and uncooperative body of its owner.

There is great freedom, indeed, in talking about the body through fiction and poetry, choosing the right words and set-up to explore personal and intimate moments. Language is something I take care with when I write. I came to fiction through poetry, with all the attention to language that entails, and I had a bilingual childhood: English at home, Irish at school. My first stories were concerned with telling things lyrically.

Traditionally, Irish people have had a fickle but loving relationship with language; we embraced English in favour of our native Irish language, but bent it to suit our own tongues. As both reader and writer I am in love with language on many levels. Like all writers I delight in it, enjoying both stylists such as John Banville, and the clean, clear sentences of the likes of Claire Keegan.

My childhood was steeped in language – my father was (and is) an accomplished oral storyteller. He is unafraid of both the colloquial and the learned phrase, and all of it is put to use in the stories he tells and invents. I used his language – my family’s language – especially in my novel *You* which was set in 1980 and told from the perspective of a 10 year old girl; a girl on the cusp of adolescence who embodies all that is awkward and funny about that age. Her own body intrigues her and she talks about it with a limited store of knowledge, using, often, invented words. For me, finding the right language to express all that the human body is and does can be a challenge but it is a welcome one.

Metaphor, of course, is always useful in talking about the body and sex, especially in poetry – for example, orchids for male body parts, pomegranates for female. (I’ve used both). But ambiguity in poetry also reminds me of my frustration as a schoolgirl as yet another teacher attempted to explain yet another impenetrable poem: “If that’s what he *means*, why doesn’t he just *say* that?” was our collective cry in class.

There are those, of course, who don’t shy from using real words for body parts and/or sex. In her second poetry collection *Gethsemane Day*, Dorothy Molloy spoke candidly of pubic hair, breasts and buttocks. And in *Philomena’s Revenge*, Rita Ann Higgins wrote gleefully of sparking nipples and the full tongue that would make the narrator “burst forth/pleasure after pleasure/after dark.”

In the late eighties British artist Helen Chadwick, who had been criticised for using her own body in her works, decided to no longer represent her body in her art. She said: “It immediately declares female gender and I wanted to be more deft.” I can sort of understand that impulse to want to appear sexless – so as to be on an equal footing with male artists or writers – but I did wonder what real value there was in wanting to appear gender neutral? Women *are* different, and it’s our very different approach to our bodies, and the sex we have with them, that makes our art relevant. Not better, not worse, but good and important. Of course Helen Chadwick did say she hoped to be “more deft” and, in fact, she continued to comment on the body through her art until her death.

In an interview about my poetry collection *Tattoo ~ Tatú*, I was asked – by a male interviewer – whether sexual poetry was the domain in which I found most inspiration

as a poet. The question surprised me, though he did also say that he found my collection broad ranging. Still, it was the poems of the body that, for him, stood out. (He actually said they “sprung out”!) In my answer to him I said that a lot of my work is informed by visual art, and women’s place in history and in society, and that the body and love are to the forefront as part of that. I also said that for a woman reader it can be really affirming to read poems about sex that are not from a man’s point of view.

My short story collection *Nude* excited some reviewers with its possibilities. *Verbal Magazine* said: “The stories about nakedness, impure and complicated, are erotic but, if I may be allowed the paradox, decently so. Of all literary genres, writing about sex is the most difficult, having to find a path between the gross and the comic.” And a recent *Sunday Times* review of my latest collection of stories, *Mother America*, stated: “...in the difficult task of writing about sex, the author shows particular flair.”

French writer and feminist Hélène Cixous believes that because feminine sexual pleasure has been downgraded throughout history, women need to reclaim it by writing about it. “Write yourself. Your body must be heard,” she urges.

As a woman writer who turns to her own body, as well as others’ bodies, for inspiration, I try not to fictionalise, mythologise or glamourise but, rather, speak openly and honestly of all that my body means to me and what I find there. I write about the body not so much as a way of reclaiming the supine, silent woman of some writings, but as a method of exploring the sometimes solipsistic, sometimes unfriendly relationship women have with their bodies; and, importantly, as a way of celebrating through words the joy and pain inherent in what it means to be a woman inside a woman’s body.

Notes

- 1 Nuala read ‘Scullion’ and the poems “Die Schwangere,” “A Sort of Couvade,” “Sien,” “Frida,” “The Cat and the Man.”

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