

Interviewing Celia de Fréine

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Abstract: *Celia De Fréine is a poet, translator, playwright and short story, non-fiction and screenplay writer. Célia has published extensively and won several awards, among them the Patrick Kavanagh Award (1994), Best screenplay at the New York International Film Festival, (2009) and Arts Council of Ireland Grants (2013).*

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The final outcome of an interview that had initially happened back in 2010 and got finished only in 2018 made me go back to the first time I had the great privilege of meeting the poet, writer, screenplay writer and great woman Celia De Fréine. It was in Galicia, 2008. It was October and our friend in common, Manuela Palacios, had organized a very innovative and thought-provoking seminar called Creation, Publishing and Criticism: Galician and Irish Women Poets, held in beautiful Santiago de Compostela, by some of the most welcoming guests ever! I remember arriving just right on time for the event and at lunch time, so I entered the picturesque restaurant where some of the participants and writers were happily having one of those very delightful and many-course Spanish lunches. As I walked in, I glimpse at this very smart, elegantly made-up face, smiling lady who was introduced to me as Celia De Fréine! My reaction was to think to myself “- is this real or am I still dreaming over the Ocean, as I did some days ago, before reaching Oporto?”. Yet, the very natural manners with which the whole group acted and the kind smiles accompanied by smooth, gentle talks made me realize that was the great time of my life (as many to follow that one, fortunately!): I could talk to the writers I had long admired and, in particular, the outstanding Celia De Fréine! The afternoon walk with her, and some of the other folks participating in the seminar such as Sean Hardie (poet Kerry Hardie’s husband), José Francisco Fernandes (from the University of Almería) and others around the splendid cathedral in Santiago de Compostela and the local monuments and landscapes proved to the effectiveness of diverse environments in learning. Once we could talk to the writers as we moved around the gorgeous landscapes, we could fully integrate in the activity of reflecting upon writing/reading and creating amongst other themes. I had left determined to continue my own research about women poets comparatively, translate them and think of the relevance of all that in our era...

The following year, I was contemplated with a research grant from the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal for studying the women poets comparatively and in 2010, as part of this project, I became a rolling stone in Ireland, crossing the country by train after the poets, interviewing them, trying to understand their motivations, their contingencies, their creative modes, their aesthetics.... I still try all that...but I have got lost on the ways of trying to do that and so many other life’s opportunities... So when I had the chance of going back to this particular interview that occurred in July, 2010, in a café in Dublin, I could only accept the challenge!

Once again, I found the comforting smile of a generous poet who took her time to spend a whole hour in a vivid, sunny morning with me talking about her vast and enticing works that range from poetry (written bilingually and already prized) to historical and comic plays, novels and films.

Eight years have elapsed since 2010, which was when De Fréine kindly met me in Dublin. Computers have caused us to change and revise most questions and answers. Ideas have flown. The power of De Fréine's writing has grown amongst scholars and communities. Yet, the joy of reading a multifaceted lady that translates multiculturalism in her writings is unique! Not to mention the complex webs of thought that De Fréine's works have caused in her audience/reading public.

After all, the ten years have helped consolidate not only friendship but human understanding around the production of art and the dialogue that various types of literary art establish with belonging, namely, Irish belonging.

I hope you enjoy De Fréine's sheer wisdom and, like me, appreciate meeting the poet. You'll make the most extraordinary literary journey into the universe of a culturally rich lady who is always ready to share and far from afraid of expressing her thoughts and feelings!

G.W.: Which can be considered the most powerful events in your personal life? Moving to other places, getting married, travelling...?

C.F.: The effects of travel and relocation are much in evidence in my writing. As a child and young adult relocation came about as a result of change in family circumstances. More recently, I have travelled to read at international literary festivals or to avail of writing residencies.

During the first two decades of this century I have spent time in Koper (Slovenia), Monsanto and Coimbra (Portugal), Paris and New London (USA). These residencies, along with trips to my son's farm in La Balestra (Sardinia) have impacted on my life as a writer and have resulted in four bilingual books of poetry *imram : odyssey*,¹ *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*,² *cuir amach seo dom : riddle me this*³ and the as yet unpublished *I bhFreagairt ar Rilke : In Response to Rilke*.

When I was six months old I moved with my parents from Northern Ireland to Dublin. When the Irish Free State had been established in 1922 a border was created between the six counties in Northern Ireland, which remained in the United Kingdom, and the twenty-six counties in the South. As both my grandfathers were employees of the British Crown at the time – one a soldier, the other in the Coastguard Service – both were obliged to move to Northern Ireland with their families. My parents were both born in NI but economic circumstances forced them to move south.

G.W.: How have such events influenced your attitude as a writer?

C.F.: The border, manned for years, by customs officials and at times by soldiers, has contributed to making me the writer that I am. I have spent my life travelling back and forth across this imaginary line from Dublin, where I grew up and still live, to the seaside town of Donaghadee where my extended family were based. I write in an effort to make sense of my ongoing journey between two jurisdictions on one small island.

When I married in the early seventies I moved with my husband from the city to the suburbs in West County Dublin. There were two reasons for this: we couldn't afford to buy a

house in the city and because the move meant we were close to my husband's work. I had been forced to resign my job in the Civil Service on marriage. In 1985, after thirteen years in the suburbs we moved back to an area in Dublin close to where I grew up. Although I had started to write before this time, it was then that I began to write in earnest.

G.W.: What is the meaning of writing to you? What makes you write?

C.F.: As mentioned, I write to make sense of my life. Also to clear my head of thoughts and ideas. Where subject matter is concerned, I have always written about the lives of women whom history has forgotten or side-lined. For instance, *Fiacha Fola*⁴ (Blood Debts, its translation to English)⁵ is a book of poetry which gives an account of the Anti-D Scandal in Ireland in which over 1,600 women contracted Hepatitis C. Another book of poetry *A lesson in Can't*⁶ is inspired by the seven years I spent teaching members of the Travelling Community.

G.W.: Can you tell us about your writing rituals or are they secret?

C.F.: Generally speaking, I write in the morning and edit in the afternoon or evening. Sometimes I write in the early hours if some burning issue is on my mind and I have to jot it down before I can fall asleep. Both *Fiacha Fola* and *A lesson in Can't* are unusual in that I wrote each of them over the course of one day. I had obviously given them much thought in advance and they emerged fully-formed, as it were.

The first draft is of the utmost importance. It doesn't matter how awful it is – once it's down on paper it can be reworked. I find that I write the first draft of most of my work when I'm in Connemara in the West of Ireland, where we now have a second home, or when I'm abroad. Dublin, with all its distractions is better suited to editing.

G.W.: Which would you say are the writers that inhabit your creative universe?

C.F.: Shakespeare and the Bible are huge forces to be reckoned with, though it might be difficult to say to what extent I am influenced by them. When it comes to drama I'm drawn to absurdist such as Brecht, Ionesco, and Beckett. Máiréad Ní Ghráda, author of *An Triail*⁷ is an on-going presence in Irish-language drama. Where poetry is concerned I enjoy the work of Wislawa Szymborska, Adam Zagajewski and Charles Simic. I also return regularly to Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*⁸ / *The Midnight Court*⁹.

G.W.: What is your relationship with tradition?

C.F.: Because I have been fortunate enough to travel widely, I draw on many traditions in my work. One example is *I bhFreagairt ar Rilke : In response to Rilke*, my collection of poetry in which I engage with some of the poetry written in French by Rainer Maria Rilke. Another example is the poem *Máthairtheanga*¹⁰ *Mother tongue*¹¹, a poem on the idea of what happens when a language is proscribed. I had Harold Pinter's play *Mountain Language*¹² in mind when I wrote this.

I have written a full length play *Slán : Safe*¹³ in response to *An Triail*, probably the most popular play ever written in Irish, which tells the story of a young single mother who, rejected by society, takes the life of her child and then her own life. I wrote my play fifty years after the premiere of *An Triail* in an effort to explore Irish society and its changed attitudes to the issues dealt with in Ní Ghráda's play.

The biggest example of tradition / influence on my work is probably Merriman's 1,000 line poem *The Midnight Court* written in 1780. *The Midnight Court* tells of a court convened at midnight and presided over by a fairy queen in which the plaintiff, a young unmarried woman presents her case: she cannot find a husband. Many young men are reluctant to marry, others marry an older woman who owns land. *The Midnight Court* is also a terrific social document in which the clothing and dwelling places of the day are described and the sexual mores of the country discussed and debated. It is inspired by the eighteenth century Irish form the *aisling*. My first literary venture in 1982 was to translate and dramatize the poem. Since then I have written two plays in response to it: *Desire : Meanmarc*¹⁴ and *Plight : Cruachás*¹⁵.

While I'm open to any influence / tradition / form, it is worth mentioning also that *imram : odyssey*¹⁶ draws on the Imram, a traditional Irish form; *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*¹⁷ is inspired by the Polish alphabet genre; *cuir amach seo dom : riddle me this*¹⁸ takes its cue from the riddle, a traditional Slovene form.

G.W.: Being a woman makes you a different writer? If so, how? Would you say this is no longer an issue in contemporary Ireland?

C.F.: Being a woman and writer is still an issue in contemporary Ireland. It takes only a glance at publications / literary journals / theatre productions / recitals of music composed by women / art exhibitions to see that women are under-represented in the Arts.

Waking the Feminists¹⁹, an assembly of over five hundred women who came together to challenge the Abbey Theatre on its lack of plays by women kick-started a movement in theatre which seeks to change the status quo. More recently on 9th July 2018 ten prominent Irish theatres, supported by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, came together to commit to introducing policies to ensure gender equality in theatre. A banner proclaimed 50 / 50 in 5 years. We live in hope.

G.W.: Having in mind the great drama you have written, as well as the poetry, how do you view the different genres in literature?

C.F.: Poetry is my first love. It is the genre in which my voice is clearest and loudest. Next comes dialogue for stage and for screen. Lately I have been developing the art of the ten minute play and have had many of these short plays produced²⁰.

Prose has always been a challenge – I tend to balk at the number of words. However, I have just completed the biography of Louise Gavan Duffy²¹. With over 80,000 words this has been somewhat of a challenge and has taken a huge chunk of my time to complete. However, I now no longer balk at the prospect of writing in prose. At present I am writing a thriller but cannot wait to get back to editing the many poems that await me. A couple of plays beckon also.

G.W.: In your opinion, what is the role of the writer today, since technology has changed the world in unexpected ways?

C.F.: There is no doubt that the **role of the writer has changed but we are versatile creatures**. While it remains a challenge to have books published and plays produced onstage, we can adapt. Our books can be read on kindle and our plays and films can be viewed on YouTube.

As writer I am also actively involved in organizations that lobby for the rights of writers. This can be challenging work also.

Notes

- 1 *imram : odyssey*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2010.
- 2 *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2011.
- 3 *cuir amach seo dom : riddle me this*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2014.
- 4 *Fiacha Fola*. Celia de Fréine. Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2004.
- 5 *Blood Debts*. Celia de Fréine. Scotus Press. 2014.
- 6 *A lesson in Can't*. Celia de Fréine. Scotus Press. 2014.
- 7 *An Triail. Mairéad Ní Ghráda*. First performed 22nd September 1964. Damer Theatre.
- 8 *Cúirt an Mhéán Oíche*. Brian Merriman. (leagan drámata le Celia de Fréine). LeabhairCOMHAR. 2017
- 9 *The Midnight Court*. Brian Merriman. (translated & dramatized by Celia de Fréine). Arlen House. 2012.
- 10 *Máthairtheanga. Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha*. Celia de Fréine. Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2001. Page 74.
- 11 *Mother tongue*. Scarecrows at Newtownards. Celia de Fréine. Scotus Press. 2005. Page 73.
- 12 *Mountain Language*. Harold Pinter. TLS. 7-13 October 1988.
- 13 *Mountain Language*. Harold Pinter. TLS. 7-13 October 1988.
- 14 *Desire : Myanmar*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2012.
- 15 *Plight : Cruachás*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2012.
- 16 *imram : odyssey*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2010.
- 17 *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2011.
- 18 *cuir amach seo dom : riddle me this*. Celia de Fréine. Arlen House. 2014.
- 19 *Waking the Feminists*. First meeting. 14 November 2016. The Abbey Theatre. Dublin.
- 20 The ten-minute play *Seamstress* was presented in the National Gallery of Ireland as part of an 8x10 production by Umbrella Theatre Company in 2014 and 2015, as was *Beholden*. *Seamstress* was subsequently developed to thirty minutes, renamed *Beth* and produced as part of *Katie & Beth* (*Katie* by Lia Mills) during the Two Cities One Book Festival, 2016 and also during the Dalkey Book Festival and at the Mill Studio Dundrum, the same year; *A Summer's Tale* was produced as part of the *Eight of Hearts* by Umbrella Theatre Company in 2015, as was *On the Bull Wall*; *Aoife Rua* and *Rose* were produced in the National Gallery of Ireland as part of *From Patrick to Pearse* by Umbrella Theatre Company in 2016, *Rose* was produced as part of the show *Forgotten* in Rathfarnham Castle as part of the Red Line Festival, 2017; *Laurels*, *Veronica*, *Pearl of Great Price* and *What Only the Blind Can See* formed part of the group show *The Meeting* based on the life and work of Frederic William Burton and produced by Umbrella Theatre Company at the National Gallery of Ireland in November & December, 2017 and at the Lexicon Studio, Dún Laoghaire in November, 2017. All of the above shows, produced at the National Gallery of Ireland, were commissioned by the Gallery.
- 21 *Ceannródaí*. Celia de Fréine. LeabhairCOMHAR. 2018.