

Irish Children's Literature

Siobhán Parkinson 2012

When Barack Obama visited Ireland in 2011, he was presented with a gift on behalf of the Irish nation: a first edition of a book of Hawaiian folk and fairy tales retold for children by the Irish writer Padraic Colum (*At the Gateways of the Day*, 1924). This considered gift made a symbolic link between the president's personal history as a native of Hawaii and Ireland's proud literary heritage.

The fact that President Obama has children made the choice of a book for children particularly apposite, but it is highly significant, all the same, that a children's book was regarded as a worthy gift for a major world leader visiting our country. This would have been unthinkable even ten years ago, but there has been a welcome shift in attitudes towards children's literature. The view that books for children constitute an inferior genre, somewhere between school textbooks and 'low culture', is steadily being eroded.

Children's literature is often thought of as books intended for a child audience. However, when Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, published *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726, it seems unlikely that he expected it to be widely read by children. It has nevertheless become securely ensconced in the canon of children's classics, and is frequently republished in abridged and illustrated forms for children.

It is, no doubt, the universal appeal to children of tiny people that has claimed *Gulliver's Travels* for the nursery, but it is curious that an 18th-century political satire should have become such a classic of world children's literature. One way or another, the case of *Gulliver's Travels* undermines the position of those who consider children's literature didactic, simplistic, coy or trashy.

If *Gulliver's* refutation of negative views on children's literature were the sum total of the contribution of Irish children's literature to the world, it would be no mean achievement. Happily that is not the case, and Irish children's literature, historical and contemporary, has much more than this to offer the world's children, from the exquisite art fairy tales of Oscar Wilde (*The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, 1888); the retellings of traditional tales by various writers of the Celtic Revival; through the hilarious writings of James Stephens (especially the wonderfully madcap *The Crock of Gold*, 1911); the fairy tales of Sinéad de Valera; the novels

of Patricia Lynch and Eilís Dillon; to the novels and picturebooks of today's Irish writers and illustrators for children.

The novels of the prolific Patricia Lynch, whose books were published mostly in the 1930s and 40s, are distinctly Irish in tone, setting and subject matter. Her first book, *The Turf-cutter's Donkey* (1934), is Lynch's best-loved title, and there are several sequels. It typifies Lynch's ability to create believable child characters in a realistic mode, and to give them fantastic and enthralling adventures. *The Bookshop on the Quay* (1956) is, by contrast, quite realistic – except for a rather strange encounter between one of the child characters and the ghost of none other than Dean Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Modern readers are not always comfortable with the idealised picture of Ireland that her books present, but Lynch has a real gift as a writer and her playful use of motifs from Irish myth and legend gives her books a particular charm. Some of her novels are still in print, and others have been reissued recently.

For years, Lynch was something of a lone voice in Irish children's literature, until the arrival of Eilís Dillon, whose work for children was published mostly in the 1950s and 60s. Lynch and Dillon are often bracketed together as the precursors of the contemporary Irish children's novel, but their work is different in most respects. What they do have in common is their love of traditional Irish life, but Dillon's work is generally less fanciful than Lynch's and more demanding of its readers. *The Lost Island*, *The Island of Horses* (1956) and *The Singing Cave* (1960), adventure stories for older children, are her best known books. Like Lynch's books, they are written in a distinctly Irish accent, but their themes are universal and their stories are adventurous and challenging. Dillon's books are an excellent choice for children with developed literary tastes.

Walter Macken came a little after Dillon and was mostly a writer for adults. His best-known children's book, *The Flight of the Doves* (1968), an adventure story set in rural Ireland, was later made into a film.

Lynch, Dillon and Macken wrote on Irish themes and their books explore national identity from an Irish perspective, but their work was published in Britain and clearly appealed to an audience beyond Ireland.

The publication in 1991 of Marita Conlon-McKenna's historical novel for children, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, was a pivotal event in the recent

history of Irish children's literature. This novel is set during the Irish Famine of the mid-19th century, and it was followed by two sequels, *Wildflower Girl* (1991) and *Fields of Home* (1996). Largely because it was the first attempt to mediate a central, painful event in Irish history for a young readership, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* has acquired an iconic status in Ireland, and it came to embody a new excitement about Irish-published books for Irish children.

This was not, however, an entirely new phenomenon. The books of Tom McCaughren, whose *Run with the Wind* (1988) and sequels remain popular, and those of Carolyn Swift and Tony Hickey, for example, had been published in Ireland in the 1980s and welcomed by Irish parents, most of whom had grown up on a literary diet of English novels written primarily for English children.

If *Under the Hawthorn Tree* was an opening remark in a national conversation about Irish history and how to mediate it to Irish children, it was eagerly responded to by a host of books for a more sophisticated, slightly older readership. *The Chieftain's Daughter* (1993) by Sam McBratney, *The Hiring Fair* (1993) by Elizabeth O'Hara, *The Guns of Easter* (1996) by Gerard Whelan, *Melody for Nora* (1994) by Mark O'Sullivan and Siobhán Parkinson's *Amelia* (1993) were written out of an Irish experience and for an Irish audience, but their appeal is much wider than that. Like any literature written with passion and precision about the local, they transcend their local concerns and can appeal to children for whom their immediate references may appear to have little resonance.

These novels, along with others by Michael Scott, Yvonne McRory and Michael Mullen, have a role to play in representing Ireland to international audiences. Readers can, as it were, eavesdrop on an Irish conversation about what it means to be Irish and what they overhear is bound to be more authentic than anything written specifically for foreign consumption or from an external perspective.

Retellings of Irish legends for children and Celtic fantasies for a teenage audience, such as those by Orla Melling and Michael Scott, were also popular in those heady years when books from Irish publishers for children were sharply focused on novels about Irish history and culture. Cormac Mac Róis's very fine Celtic fantasy trilogy, *Giltspur*, which appeared in the early 1990s, was highly acclaimed, and is among the best writing of this type from that time. Pat O'Shea's *The Hounds of the Morrigan* (1985), an immensely engaging, lively and amusing fantasy based on a careful study of Irish folklore, is something of an anomaly.

Published in the UK, it appeared to have sprung out of nowhere. O'Shea was working on a sequel when she died in 2007.

The Northern Irish writer Martin Waddell is perhaps best known for the very charming picturebook *Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?* (1992) and its sequels, illustrated by Barbara Firth, and for the extremely stylish *Owl Babies* (1992), beautifully illustrated by Patrick Benson. Helen Oxenbury illustrated Waddell's delightful *Farmer Duck* (1992). Waddell has a spare, wry style that works very well in picturebooks and undoubtedly accounts – along with his excellent illustrators – for their widespread and enduring popularity.

Martin Waddell has also written several reflective and mostly realistic novels for older children and teenagers under the pseudonym Catherine Sefton. The Sefton novels deal with difficult issues, including the political situation in Northern Ireland (*Starry Night* 1995 and sequels). One of his very best teenage novels, the heartbreaking *Tango's Baby* (1995), a sophisticated and empathetic study of how a teenage pregnancy can wreak havoc on the young parents, was published under his own name, and Waddell has now dropped the Sefton pseudonym. Martin Waddell's international reputation was consolidated when he was awarded IBBY's Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 2004, an accolade he shares with such acclaimed writers as Margaret Mahy and David Almond.

Perhaps the best known Irish picturebook of all time, *Guess How Much I Love You* (1994) illustrated by Anita Jeram, was written by another Northern Irish writer, the immensely prolific Sam McBratney. *Guess How Much* and its sequels have been a huge international commercial success and have been published in several formats and languages. Like Waddell, McBratney has a brief, simple style that suits the picturebook.

McBratney's historical novel *The Chieftain's Daughter*, set in ancient Ireland, was published in Dublin during the 1990s boom in Irish publishing for children. It is much less well known than the internationally successful *Guess How Much*, but it is widely considered to be one of the finest children's books ever to have come out of Ireland.

Maeve Friel's unusual timeslip novel dealing with Viking Ireland, *Distnt Voices* (1994) was part of the wave of Irish historical novels for children that were published in the early 1990s, though her other historical book, *The Lantern Moon* (1996) is set not in Ireland but in 18th-century England. Friel is a sure-footed and stylish writer and her voice deserves

to be more widely heard. Her more recent work has been for younger children and includes the Tiger Lily and the Witch in Training series.

Gerard Whelan's *The Guns of Easter* (1996) and its sequel *A Winter of Spies* (1998) and his collection of short stories, *War Children* (2002) deal with important episodes in Ireland's troubled history, and they have particular appeal for boy readers, complementing the historical work of Elizabeth O'Hara and Siobhán Parkinson, which are written from a female perspective. Whelan's other two novels are quite different. The award-winning *Dream Invader* (1997) is an unsettling psychological thriller, and the eerily engaging *Out of Nowhere* (1999) is best described as science-fiction.

Elizabeth O'Hara's very fine historical Sally trilogy is set in Donegal around the turn of the 20th century and consists of *The Hiring Fair* (1993), *Blaeberry Sunday* (1994) and *Penny Farthing Sally* (1996). Elizabeth O'Hara is the pseudonym of Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, who is also a highly respected writer for adults. Ní Dhuibhne has published two contemporary novels for teenagers in Irish, one of which, *Hurlamaboc*, has also been published in English under the title *Snobs, Dogs and Scobies* (2011) and under the name Elizabeth O'Hara. Her novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1991) is considered a book for adults, but it has several young characters and could appeal to a sophisticated teenage reader.

Aubrey Flegg's *Wings over Delft* (2003) is set in 17th-century Holland and its sequels have other European settings, but he also has two Irish historical novels, *Katie's War* (1997) and *Fugitives!* (2010). Marilyn Taylor's *Faraway Home* (1999) deals with the Jewish World War II experience in an Irish setting. John Quinn's nostalgic *The Summer of Lily and Esme* (1991), is well regarded, though it is a little old-fashioned. His *Duck and Swan* (1993) is a brave and funny book about intolerance and friendship.

Jane Mitchell's *Chalkline* (2009) is about boy soldiers in Kashmir. It was the surprise winner of the first Bisto Children's Choice Award, an award made by a children's jury. The surprise, it should be said, was occasioned by the maturity of the children's judgement in choosing a book with such a tough theme over more obviously entertaining books. Toughness is characteristic of Jane Mitchell's writing for teenagers. Her award-winning first novel, *When Stars Stop Spinning* (1993), was one of the first Irish novels to deal with teenage life.

Mark O'Sullivan is one of Ireland's very finest writers for older children and teenagers. His extraordinary, experimental *Angels without Wings* (1997) set in Nazi Germany, and his *White Lies* (1997) novel about race and identity set in modern Ireland, are frequently cited as among the very best Irish novels for young people, and *Silent Stones*, a powerful book about violence is also impressive. He has a most elegant and understated writing style as well as an uncanny empathy for teenagers. His most recent book, *My Dad is Ten Years Old and it's Pure Weird* (2011) is a moving novel dealing, with humour and delicacy, with the subject of brain damage and the appalling effects on a family when a parent regresses after a head injury.

Eoin Colfer is undoubtedly Ireland's best known children's writer internationally. His first three books, *Benny and Omar* (1998), *Benny and Babe* (1999) and *The Wish List* (2000) appeared during the boom years in Irish children's publishing. Colfer's great comic gift as a writer comes through loud and clear in these early books, which were all published in Dublin. But it is, of course, the Artemis Fowl series of books (2001 onwards) for which Colfer is world famous. These are hilarious and parodic spy adventure thrillers, full of action, written at a breakneck pace, and stuffed with jokes. *The Supernaturalist* (2004) is a science-fiction title, but it is his semi-historical novel *Airman* (2008) that has most taken readers by surprise. But nothing Eoin Colfer does should surprise anyone. He is an enormously talented and professional writer, who can turn his hand to almost anything.

Kate Thompson, originally English, has lived and written in Ireland for decades now, and she has been thoroughly adopted by the Irish children's books community. Thompson has a remarkable facility as a writer for young people and she is equally at home in realistic (*Creature of the Night*, 2008) and fantastic (*The Beguilers*, 2001) modes. *Annan Water* (2004) is one of the finest books for young people ever to be published by a writer living in Ireland. It is a haunting and tautly written love story with a tantalisingly ambivalent ending.

Thompson's most internationally acclaimed novel is the multiple-award-winning *The New Policeman* (2005). It consists of an amusing fantasy framed inside a realistic story of contemporary life in rural Ireland. It could well have been influenced by *The Hounds of the Morrigan*, but its main source is undoubtedly the appealing titles of the folk tunes Thompson likes to play on the fiddle. There are two sequels, *The Last of the High Kings* (2007) and *The White Horse Trick* (2010).

Although the output of children's books from Irish publishing houses started to decline around the turn of the 21st century, new writers for children continued to emerge. Oisín McGann started publishing in Dublin in the early 2000s, and later went on to publish in the UK. The futuristic political satire *The Gods and their Machines* (2004) deals uncompromisingly with religious fundamentalism and terrorism, and *Small-minded giants* (2006) takes an equally dark, dystopian view of the relations between humans and technology. McGann has both a strong sense of story, evident in his two Irish gothic Wildernsternnovels, and a sure, tough voice. His *Strangled Silence* (2009) is a superb political thriller, tightly written and unsentimental and with lots of appeal especially for teenage boys, a notoriously difficult readership to engage.

Conor Kostick appeared on the children's literature scene in the first decade of the 21st century, and his extraordinarily powerful novels take Irish writing for young people to a new level. His futuristic trilogy *Epic* (2004), *Saga* (2006) and *Edda* (2010) takes place partly in a virtual world. *Move* (2008) has a contemporary Dublin setting and links into a distorted realm. Another writer to be recommended especially for teenage boys.

Roddy Doyle is one of only a few Irish writers for adults to have turned his hand to books for children. His first children's books (the Giggler series) were light-hearted, clever stories that will entice even reluctant younger readers. His later books for older children and teenagers, *Wilderness* (2007) and *A Greyhound of a Girl* (2011) are sophisticated and elegant novels.

The adult novelist Deirdre Madden's very charming foray into children's literature, *Snakes' Elbows* (2005) was warmly received. Enda Wyley is better known as a poet, chiefly for adults, but she has also published a delightful children's novel, *The Silver Notebook* (2007).

John Boyne's Holocaust novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) was a huge commercial success and was made into a film, though not all critics reacted favourably to its treatment of its sensitive theme. Boyne had been writing adult books for years, but it was the publication of *The Boy* that shot him to fame. He has brought out a second novel for children, with the glorious title of *Noah Barleycorn Runs Away* (2010), a story with fantastic elements.

Siobhán Dowd grew up in England, but she is considered an Irish writer partly because of her Irish parentage and partly because most of her

books were about Ireland. She shot onto the scene in 2006 with *A Swift Pure Cry*, a story based on two notorious cases of teenage pregnancy and infant death in Ireland in the 1980s. Possibly because she was living outside Ireland, she was able to tackle this sensitive subject with a searing honesty. She died soon after the publication of her second book, *The London Eye Mystery* (2007) and her two subsequent books, *Bog Child* (2008) and *Solace of the Road* (2009) were published posthumously. *Bog Child* was probably her finest book. It deals with political events in Northern Ireland, and again, as a partial outsider, Dowd was able to take on subjects that writers living in Ireland found daunting. Dowd was a warm and engaging person as well as a committed writer with a wonderfully poetic style and her death was a great loss to Irish books for young people.

As the interest in children's books has grown over the past decade or so, more writers of popular fiction have also emerged. Darren Shan writes horror stories and fantasies which are hugely popular with young readers, both boys and girls. A character by the name of Darren Shan also appears in the teenage series, *The Saga of Darren Shan* (2000 onwards). Shan's contemporary Derek Landy writes hilarious and clever stories featuring a detective who happens to be a skeleton glorying in the name of Skulduggery Pleasant (first eponymous novel 2007). Very popular with girl readers are the books of Judy Curtin, Judy May and Sarah Webb. Anna Carey's amusing and very popular *The Real Rebecca* (2010) and Deirdre Sullivan's feisty and hilarious *Prim Improper* (2010) are decidedly girls' fiction too, but they are both more stylish writers than that term suggests, and they deal with serious issues of teenage life in a light-hearted way.

Sheena Wilkinson's first novel for teenagers is set in her native Belfast, but is not about the Northern Ireland 'situation'. *Taking Flight* (2010), a pacy, gritty urban novel, has already won two awards. Paula Leyden's first book, for older children or young teenagers, *The Butterfly Heart* (2011), is set in her native Zambia and deals with great delicacy and elegance with the issue of child marriage.

When novels for children first started to be published in Ireland from the late 1980s onwards, picturebooks were considered too expensive for Irish publishers to produce, and that is generally still the case. Our leading illustrator, PJ Lynch, has always published outside of Ireland. His style is classic and painterly and it is particularly suited to the illustration of fairy tales, legends and classics. He has illustrated the tales of Oscar Wilde (1990) and Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (2006). His *The Christmas*

Miracle of Jonathan Twomey (1995) and *When Jessie Went Across the Sea* (1997) are more domestic and realistic in style. His work is highly valued at home and abroad.

Although picturebooks were not and still are not generally published in Ireland, an exception was the Irish language publishers who have different funding arrangements. The text of Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick's first picturebook, *An Chanáil* (1988), which is still a firm favourite, was in the Irish language. She was taken up later by British and American publishers and has gone on to have a sparkling career as a writer/illustrator with such titles as *I Am I* (2006) and the philosophical *There* (2009). She has recently moved into writing novels for older children.

Niamh Sharkey's bright and sparky work as an illustrator has also been published mostly out of Ireland. Her earliest books were illustrated versions of traditional tales (such as *Tales of Wisdom and Wonder* and *The Giant Turnip*, both published 1998), but she moved on very quickly to writing her own material. *The Ravenous Beast* appeared in 2003 and the humorous *On the Road with Mavis and Marge* (2011) is popular. *I'm a Happy Hugglewug* (2006) is currently being turned into an animated TV series.

Mary Murphy writes and illustrates boldly coloured books for very young children. Her *I Like it When ...* (1997) and *I Kissed the Baby* (2003) have proved hugely popular with young children and their parents. Her Christmas Book, *Little Owl and the Star* (2001) has perennial charm.

In the last few years, we have had a sudden explosion of illustrator talent in Ireland. Oliver Jeffares's sweet and fey books featuring a small puzzled child (*How to Catch a Star*, 2004, and *Lost and Found*, 2005, and sequels) have enjoyed huge popularity, as have *The Incredible Book-eating Boy* (2006), *The Great Paper Caper* (2009) and *The Heart and the Bottle* (2010) for somewhat older readers. Kevin Waldron (*Tiny Little Fly*, 2010) and Chris Houghton (*A Bit Lost*) 2010 have taken the Irish children's books world by storm.

Apart from the output of Julie O'Callaghan (*The Book of Whispers*, 2006) and Matthew Sweeney (*Up on the Roof*, 2001), there has not been a great deal of children's poetry published by Irish writers. A most honourable exception has been the wonderfully produced and illustrated large-format *Something Beginning with P*, which contains a hundred newly

commissioned poems, by Irish poets, compiled by Seamus Cashmand and illustrated by Alan Clarke, Corinna Askin and Emma Byrne.

The 1990s boom in Irish children's publishing had run to ground by the early years of the 21st century. However, the excitement generated by the boom period had huge beneficial effects. Lots of new writers for children had emerged, and there was a new confidence about writing for children and the central importance culturally and commercially of books for children.

The feverish output of the publishing houses was accompanied by vigorous developments in the infrastructure of children's literature: Children's Books Ireland (CBI), IBBY Ireland and the Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature all joined the long-standing Reading Association of Ireland as organisations that encourage and support Irish writing, illustrating and publishing for children; the Bisto Book of the Year awards were developed; first the educational colleges and later the English departments in Irish universities started to teach courses in children's literature; studies of Irish children's literature started to be published; Irish children's literature professionals started to make international links; and Ireland has now come to be recognised as a country with a lively children's literature culture.