



Dr. Gail McConnell

reflection questions & episode transcript

setting the scene:

In a typical year, Corrymeela's meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness within the group. It might help to choose one of the [Very Short Story Questions](#).

As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn't wish to join such a conversation.

This is all the more important in this particular episode of the Corrymeela podcast. There are awful memories in people's lives they may not wish to disclose, or discuss. Not everyone who lives with the impact of conflict makes that known — some prefer to keep such experiences to themselves; and for many these topics are not subjective considerations, but rather reflections on the awful things people do to each other, and how long they last. What we know in Corrymeela is that in any room of people discussing topics of how politics, history and religion have had devastating impact on people, many stories of pain will be present in the room, as well as stories of courage; as well as many questions. We work carefully with groups to navigate the many experiences that are in the room, helping people to ask questions, helping others to keep stories to themselves, providing a community space where pain and privacy can be honoured alongside curiosity and courage and questions. These things — we all know — are all part of living with the impact of conflict. Pain, Courage, Curiosity, Questions and Privacy are all part of the lives we honour.

reflection questions:

1. An atrocity like a murder starts a line of grief and impact that continues into the future of every person affected. Hearing Gail McConnell's recollection of the events of 1984 now — in 2021 — what insight do you gain about commemoration, recognition, recompense and acknowledgement?

2. One of the profoundly difficult things Gail McConnell speaks about in this interview is the capacity to 'imagine other lives': other lives that are on the other side of violence and rage, as well as politics and religion. What do you think about this process of 'imagining other lives'? If you consider it a worthwhile practice, what leads you to think that? If you have caution about it, what are some of the things that add to your caution?

3. In the podcast Gail McConnell asks tender questions and difficult questions about her father. What are the important questions people in your community may benefit from by asking? Do you know any stories of when people have done this? How has it gone? What are the possibilities — and the threats — opened up by such questions?

4. Gail McConnell's artistic practice has been to use language to tell important truths, crafting them in her own way. Whose words have been trustable and guiding for you as you think of divisions in your community? What have their words given you?

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Dr. Gail McConnell. Transcript.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: conversations about politics, theology, art and history. A century after the partition of Ireland, and in this first year of Brexit, I'll be talking about Irishness and Britishness with a rich line-up of guests, who offer unique insights into contemporary life in Ireland and Britain.

On this week's episode, I'll be talking with Dr. Gail McConnell, whose poetry collection *The Sun is Open* comes out this year. This book considers life and death in all its tragedy: *'My dad was a prison governor in The Maze prison, and he was murdered outside our home in Belfast one morning in 1984'*; and she explains how she uses art as a process of making meaning: *'it's my way of trying to make sense of this history and of this past and to maybe find kind of deeper meanings in some of the seemingly sort of banal materials that are here'*.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Dr. Gail McConnell, Senior Lecturer in Irish poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast. She's also a poet herself. And today we're talking about her upcoming book: *The Sun is Open*. Gail, thanks very much for joining us.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's a joy. Just as we start, Gail, where are you talking to us from?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I am talking to you from my study, which is in my home in Belfast, in the east of the city. And you may hear my family downstairs baking cookies at some point during this!

Pádraig Ó Tuama

Fantastic, that'd be great. I hope there is some lovely interruptions of family! Gail, I wanted to jump right in to talking about this book of yours that's coming out soon- later on in 2021. This book called *The Sun is Open* comes out in the autumn. Could you tell us broadly about the book before we begin to talk about some specific parts?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah, so *The Sun is Open*. It's kind of, it's a title I like. I'm not entirely sure what it means- maybe that's a good thing. Its meaning I suppose becomes clear when you, when you find that part of the book. But it came about through finding a box of materials that I had gathered together - an archive of sorts - a public and personal archive of materials relating to my father's death. My dad was a prison governor in The Maze prison, and he was murdered outside our home in Belfast one morning in 1984. I was three and a half. I was standing at the front door with my mother, kind of waving him off to work- he was, had been checking underneath his car for bombs in the usual way (or what I thought of as checking for cats, when I was small). And two men, who had been holding up our elderly neighbours at gunpoint the night before across the street, came into the drive and shot him and he died pretty much instantly. And so at a very early age, my life was shaped by an experience of loss, but also of politics, of nation, of colonial histories, of empire, of class, of all kinds of things that I didn't understand at the time, but which left a profound imprint on my life. And I suppose trying to understand that event - why it happened, the histories that shaped its happening - has been in some ways kind of a lifelong project not only of my academic life but, you know, of my personal life too.

I found that aunts and uncles and grandparents and my mother had gathered together materials relating to his death from various newspapers, from parliamentary records- from Hansard, from all kinds of official documents, and sort of boxed them together. Or perhaps I boxed them together. How this archive came about I'm not even entirely sure, but I found that I had a box of materials relating to his death, some of which were very personal. I had his diaries from his time at Queen's when he was an undergraduate student in the late 1960s- where he studied history and politics. And I had materials relating to his time as a Scout and all kinds of things: guitar music books... and I had written a long poem called *Typeface* back in- it was published in 2016, I had been writing it in the years prior. And *Typeface* was really an exploration of my experience of reading a historical inquiry team report which was produced about his murder. And to me the most striking thing about this report was that it was written in the font Comic Sans which - if you don't know it - is a kind of 'jazz hands' font that's used for children's party invitations and church fetes. And so, to read phrases like 'laceration of the brain' in this font, was a very jarring experience and *Typeface* I suppose exists in quite an ironic and detached and angry mode to think about the writing up, the reporting of his murder. But *The Sun is Open* I think tries to do something different, which is to think about childhood, and to think about: yes, the event of his murder as being central to my childhood and to my formative experience. But as one of many things that was an event - an important event - along with friendships, schooling, going to church, learning Bible verses, my relationship with my mother, our neighbourhood, 1980s cartoons, video games, all kinds of other things...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah... *Bananaman!* Wendy houses...

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Bananaman! Exactly. And it was lovely to remember those things that I think I had thought I had forgotten- Wendy houses and *Bananaman*. And so anyway, this book, you know, tries to think about and situate the murder in the context of all of that too and to go through this archive. And to try to write out through the archive, and to remember and to record.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I've read *The Sun is Open* a few times this week. And one of the things that strikes me is that in the midst of all those kind of childhood memories - some of which are filled with delight - it's not like you're saying: 'and all these lead to this terrible event', you're just putting them alongside each other. And it's a really curious thing you do to put murder, alongside Wendy houses, alongside helicopters in the sky, alongside Bible verses, alongside Gospel Hall things, you

know- they're just there. And you're not trying to make it easy or even difficult, I think, for the reader to see them, you're just putting them out there.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Isn't that so much of our experience, though? That, you know, the tragic or the, just extraordinarily painful just enters in through the everyday- the ordinary, the domestic, it's, it's just this mixture. You know, I think there's a story that on the day that he was killed, I took my aunt by the hand and led her into the back garden and said 'you know, I think my Daddy is here he ran, you know, he's disappeared. He's run down here. Let's look for him'. And there was a sense in which, you know, it was just another day and he had disappeared from view and he must be in the back garden somewhere. I think, you know... yeah, so often, I think the truth of it is that these things are always mixed and muddled in together. And so it felt important to... to write a book that was true to all of that, where *Typeface* had been very focused on just this one event, I wanted to be a bit more expansive here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I was struck by one moment in the book where there's this kind of casual comment given to your dad. He - I don't know, maybe it was in a diary or something - mentions that he goes to the Strand Cinema, that beautiful kind of Art Deco cinema in East Belfast. And you've got this line where you say: 'I go there, too'. And I feel like I'm eavesdropping in a conversation with the 'him' that's not dead. And the 'you' that's kind of talking to him with a level of curiosity. He's alive for a small moment.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I think that was one of the really engaging things to me about trying to work with an archive, because in a sense, an archive can be a distraction from having to address the subject. And there's a moment in the book where I say: 'copy all this out, and I won't have to address you'. And then I swear, because I realised that in saying: 'I won't have to address you', I have, in fact, addressed my father. And it's this kind of strange dilemma of wanting to speak to the dead, but only having contact with the dead through these textual materials and yet - as you say - kind of starting a conversation with the dead through my responses to these materials and therefore forming a weird kind of intimacy with my father through... you know, a long time after the fact of his death. But through these seemingly impersonal - and sometimes more personal in the case of the diary - but seemingly impersonal records, it's these things that kind of bring about a conversation; enable me to address him but in ways that I am noticing are distant and kind of always at one remove and always self-conscious in a way too, I suppose.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, I mean, one of the features throughout the whole of the book are these extracts from a First Aid manual which kind of, sometimes I wonder- who're you keeping alive, who're you saving? I wonder if you could read the piece right at the beginning, beginning with 'Begin with victim'?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Mmm. So yeah, I found in my - when I was going through my father's diaries - I found this, in some ways even more striking to me than the things that he had written himself and the sort of everyday of what he was doing was, yeah, the First Aid instruction manual. And it just seemed to resonate in ways that... beyond its own intention. So yeah, this is how *The Sun is Open** begins:

BEGIN WITH VICTIM on his
back is how this could begin
place your mouth over his mouth
pinch his nostrils shut easier to
take what I have found and break
it up breathe steadily till victim's
chest begins to rise pause
every minute to glue it back
the wrong way take a deep breath
yourself if there is no air
exchange do not touch him

**The Sun is Open by Gail McConnell, will be published by Penned in the Margins in September 2021.*

I suppose in that, I'm trying to think about documentary and about taking what I have found - these archival materials - and what I do with them: the sort of responsibility of what I do with them. And you know, there's the line of 'glue it back the wrong way'. There's a sense in which I'm collaging them together in a way that isn't quite right, and isn't the way they began. But it's my way of trying to make sense of this history and of this past and to maybe find kind of deeper meanings in some of the seemingly sort of banal instructions and materials that are here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

And that line in it too right after 'glue it back the wrong way': 'take a deep breath yourself'. It sounds like you're instructing yourself also, in the process of opening up this box and sharing these archival materials and gluing them together in a way that glues your life and - like a pastiche or a scrapbook - together of these terrible things and these ordinary things. It feels like you're telling yourself: 'stay alive' while you do this.

Dr. Gail McConnell

Yeah, I think I heard it anew there just reading it to you. It's again, one of those lines, I haven't noticed so much. But yeah, you're absolutely right, I like that reading of it. Maybe for the reader too, because I think you know - this is not - in some ways it's not an easy book, or it's not a conventional book, in terms of its organisation: it's organised as these little columns of text on the page. It looks like something cut out of newspaper columns, or the Old Testament- they're kind of narrow blocks on the page. They're unpunctuated, they don't have titles. And so there's a sense in which the reader has to take a breath, and come with you into this archive and into this experience of it and to allow themselves to be, I suppose, kind of immersed and taken through this book. And hopefully, they will. Not everybody will! But hopefully they will.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, the way you talk about this box in the book, you call it 'the Dad Box', and sometimes talk about having that title turned toward the wall or having the box of archival material next to your desk as you write. The way you're even talking about it now, kind of makes the origin of this Dad Box seem shrouded in some kind of secret, d'you know: where did it come from? Who put the things in there? For whom? It seems like it has mystery to it.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah, it's true. I mean, it's one of those crap cardboard boxes from IKEA, is the truth of it... which kind of makes it funnier. But you know, in the book as well, I also try to think about, yeah, the putting together of that box, and I suppose these little blocks of text on the page are another way in which I try to recreate the box. So there's a bit... I'll read a little bit from it here, it says:

you assemble it yourself it
came flat pack a square with
folded sides you put them all in
place and twist in shallow
screws you punch the pins
through holes fold back the legs
put in what you have mostly
piles of cut-outs from the papers
eight inches thick church
bulletins school magazines
Hansard Bibles a Students'
Union diary from his time
at Queen's reports things
he wrote hey presto got a DAD
BOX wrote that on the side not
sure why when we have guests
I turn it to the wall when
I want to see inside I make piles
on the spare room bed and on
the floor then forget what it
was I was looking for*

**From The Sun is Open by Gail McConnell; upcoming from Penned in the Margins in September 2021.*

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I mean, that really is a description of process in as much as it's contained within this box, but to actually read anything in it you have to make this huge mess and sort of takeover a whole room. And I would just find myself invariably overwhelmed and just not remembering why on earth I had opened the box in the first place and feeling bad that I was taking over parts of the house to do this, but then always having this instinct to sort of pack it away, fold it away at the end of the day and to put it somewhere. And I'm conscious now as I'm speaking to you of its proximity inside a wardrobe just sort of two metres from me here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Even the 'hey presto' there; I think one of the things that you do in lots of your poetry - in this collection, in lots of your other collections that you put out - there is often the mixture between very serious material, and then everyday references like 'hey presto', or often enough you'll mention Googling or WordPress or IKEA, you know. There's a way within which these... it's extraordinary literary poetry, and then suddenly these things that sound like you're listening to the television, it just wafts in, or you're listening to people talking about setting up a new website. And 'hey presto's the

same, you know- there's a sense almost of the casual, interacting with the deeply uncasual in the sense of the solemnity of opening up this Dad Box.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I know, I think it's... I love and admire those poets who can get into their poems really that texture of just everyday life and speech. John Ashby used to speak about writing poems while being on the telephone and you know, having the TV on in the background watching cartoons. And his poetry is extraordinary, I think, for the elasticity and the ways in which he's able to pack in so much of the world. At the same time, I think it's really important in that, for there always to be humour, you know. I think *Typeface* had that kind of bleak humour. But I do think some of the writers I admire most are able to write about very dark subject matter, but always with a sense of comedy. You know, in the Irish tradition, I think about Beckett, I think about Flann O'Brien, Joyce too. People who are able to attend to the humour of the everyday- sometimes it's a gallows humour. But I do think- I'm always suspicious of books that don't have any kind of humour about them, whatever the subject matter, because I do think - and it's maybe especially true on this island - that we have a sense of approaching things wryly and with a kind of comedy and really no matter how dark things get. I want to be self-conscious I suppose about the undertaking of this, too. And that, it's just to weigh up very carefully. And to weigh the cost and consequence of it, so I think 'hey presto' yeah, is.... I'm glad you like that. It's important.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

I love it! And I did also find myself putting *Bananaman* into YouTube afterwards, because it has been over 30 years since I'd seen *Bananaman* but it's all there on YouTube!

Dr. Gail McConnell

But it's still good, right?!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

(laughs) It's still slightly ridiculous!

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Listeners, there is a treasure trove of *Bananaman*, *Bananaman* material on YouTube. It's wonderful.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean earlier on, you mentioned putting something side by side; you talked about 'around noon' on page 30. I wonder if you could read page 30 and page 31? You do this turn from one page to another of something phenomenally innocent, and then something overwhelmingly brutal.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah so, something to say maybe about the arrangement of these poems is that some of the text appears in a different colour. In the version I'm looking at at the minute it's grey, from the rest. And the greyed material is the found material- so things that I got from newspapers, in this case. So yeah, there are two pages. It's kind of side by side where the first one is... they both begin 'around noon'. And the first one is my version of events, I suppose. The second is just a verbatim account that was in a newspaper. So I'll read them together here:

Around noon, the girl took her
auntie by the hand to the rows
of rose bushes, where her father
wasn't

Around noon, the men sent out
for fish and chips and as they sat
eating they watched the lunch-
time news to find out if they had
killed their target.*

**From The Sun is Open by Gail McConnell; upcoming from Penned in the Margins in September 2021.*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Even fish and chips there, and lunchtime news. They seem to be so everyday, so ordinary, maybe a bunch of workers. And then suddenly we find out that this is the gathering of people who have arranged to murder your father and they're wanting to check the news to see if they had done what they had set out to do- if they had murdered the person that they'd wished to murder. What's it like for you putting those things side by side? 'Cause I need to tell you when I read those, I was filled with a rage. And then I found myself thinking like, I'm reading this at such a distance, that there's both vulnerability as well as phenomenal strength, I think - and maybe accusation - in putting those things side by side.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah, I remember sitting for a long time with that section of the paper, and really wondering what to make of it, what to do with it. In some ways, this was much harder material to absorb, than, you know, the details in the historical inquiry report about the laceration of the brain, or the kind of physical wounds or, or other circumstances of the murder itself; that sense of being able to eat lunch and watch the news. But also this, the curious... the curious not knowing; the anticipation of a kind of success, because the goal was the murder. So to think then of my father's killers as being in this strange position of anticipation and waiting and there being a vulnerability in that... if you think about it in the terms of kind of what they set out to do. I mean, it's... So much of this is difficult to imagine.

And yet, I think one of the things my mother has always been at pains to do is to encourage me to imagine other lives. And I think, you know- she had very strong Christian faith. And for her, grace and forgiveness were her way through this. And it was grace and forgiveness [that] allowed this event to be survivable. And one of the things I think that those theological ideas can do is to encourage you to imagine the lives of other people, including the lives of those who some might call your enemies. I don't, but... I do think it's maybe hard to describe, but from an early age, I was encouraged to think and imagine about this event from - as it were - 'the other side' or from the perspective of those who had chosen to do it. And so in that sense, I think this is a moment in the book where I can, we don't see... we don't see these people as gun wielding, but we see them doing something ordinary. And that's important too, albeit a kind of- there's a kind of something slightly stomach-churning about the idea of eating lunch while waiting to see this news, but at the same time it is an ordinary moment. And that feels important too. So it's a really complicated story. And it's a really complicated retelling of that story. And I hope necessarily so and that's why I think the kind of side by side placement does some of the work of telling it, but also leaves the reader to kind of... to make of it what they will, I hope. I hope there's enough space for the reader to draw some of their own conclusions about it.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the poet Dr. Gail McConnell talking about her forthcoming book: *The Sun is Open*.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Gail, there are so many ways within which you put certain events under the spotlight, and you've just spoken about one of those: looking at the ordinariness - what you even call the vulnerability - of people wanting to eat while they wait for... to know if they've murdered the person that they'd set out to murder. You put that under the spotlight. You also put your father under the spotlight: this book is a serious relationship with him in the sense of that there's things discovered in common- there's things of curiosity about him. But then, like on page 69, I wonder if you could read that? You examine what you might think of as a conversation between you and him regarding the prison system and his work within the prison system.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah, I'll read that.

for so long it was hard
to mourn thinking from that side
of things bad bastard screw
in the mechanism the
panopticon the architecture
of brutality knowing the theory
the cruel ingenious cage thinking
shit that's him on the wrong side
of the gaze*

**From The Sun is Open by Gail McConnell; upcoming from Penned in the Margins in September 2021.*

You know, I'm thinking there about kind of Bentham's panopticon and Foucault and architectures of surveillance and all that we understand now about how the mechanism of prison architecture works to induce in those who are imprisoned a sense of constant surveillance- the idea being that if you think you're being watched all the time, you'll begin to modify your behaviour and act in a particular way. And so the very architecture of the prison grows oppressive, whether or not you're actually being watched or not. And there are other parts... you know, I think about sort of the people and the way that just the act of looking can itself assert a kind of power dynamic over these bodies of Republican prisoners, who wanted to have their status as political prisoners recognised, but had it denied by the Thatcher government. Those were things that my father was irritated about- I know that he felt caught up in a system that was unjust, in the context of a British Tory government which didn't want to understand how the legacy of colonial history was being played out in the Troubles violence and within the prisons themselves. And, at the same time, from the perspective of the prisoners, you know, he's just a screw that is... I mean, he is the representative of the other side.

And in this context, there was only really allowed to be- kind of two sides. And so from that point of view, he's on the wrong side of the gaze- he's on the side of power and of the state and so on.

And you know, those are difficult dynamics for me to have to deal with. The sense of mourning or not mourning was also caught up in a sense of anxiety, shame, concern about well: what was his position in all of this? And, he was - at least to some degree, from some perspectives - a representative of a power structure that was deemed to be oppressive and *was* oppressive. So no matter how conflicted he felt he was also seen in that way. So it is - again - it's really complicated. And I tried to approach him with all of those complications around, and also in the knowledge that I cannot speak to him, that we can't have these conversations, but he was someone who read Irish history, who read Irish politics- I've inherited his books. So he knew, he knew exactly what his position was. And I think his decision towards the end of his life - just before his murder in fact - to speak out, and to critique the way in which matters of the prison were being handled and the unenviable position of the Northern Ireland office, was as a consequence of knowing about these complexities, I suppose.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, there's all these kind of social rules about the dead, you know- don't speak ill of the dead, etcetera. And you're not speaking ill of him. But you are speaking well *to* him in the sense of that you're having a serious conversation. And you're questioning what loyalty to somebody looks like; it's not like you're being disloyal, you're being profoundly loyal by saying: I want to have that conversation. Even with somebody who isn't replying. I found myself thinking that some of these poems where you look at his role - you look at the split place that he found himself in - I found those to be deeply loving, because I thought only somebody who loves somebody would ask somebody else those questions in the way you do.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Well, that is lovely to hear. And I feel... I feel very moved by your reading. I think the problem with this kind of binary two sides perspective is that either my father is the oppressor, or he's a victim. And, you know, for some he's a kind of martyr then, to a cause. And I have no time for that kind of logic, either. I don't find that helpful. And so yeah, I really hope that there is a loving conversation that is robust, and real with him, you know- I kind of wish I could have that conversation with him in person. But I do try to take seriously the decisions that he made in his life and to try to understand what it must have been like, and similarly what it must have been like for my mother, who I didn't want peripheral in this, either. You know, she's the one who's raising me and loving me and explaining to me kind of what has happened and sort of where we are now. And yet - inevitably, perhaps I suppose - so much of my attention is focused on his absence, perhaps more so than her presence sometimes. But I'm really heartened by that reading of my relationship with him in this. Yeah, I thank you for that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

While we're talking about this, I can hear your son jabbering away in the background...

Dr. Gail McConnell:

It's all happening!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm aware that in a number of your poems, you know you are... that time is a powerful feature. You were writing some of these poems as you were around the same age that your father was when he was murdered. And at the same time

when you and your wife were about to become parents, and you bring all of this out in some of your other poetries. There's something extraordinary about family, looking back, looking forward and being in this (literally!) pregnant moment. The way that time seems to contract and expand in your work also seemed to mirror the way that time was contracting and expanding in your own life, at that particular time of your life.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Yeah, it's a lovely thing to sort of discover writing poetry - or maybe I should say rediscover writing poetry - and in some ways, a later stage of my life: it's really only been since my mid-30s, that I've started to write seriously. And perhaps that isn't a coincidence. You know, I was writing *Typeface* realising that I was just about to turn the age my father was when he died. And, and I do think those things change your understanding of the past, but also of the present and of the future that you want. For me, it was a future that involved writing more poems instead of writing about other people's poetry. And then, yeah, now with our son Finn- he's two and a half. And I think living in that time, in infant time and in toddler time is another time zone again, and that has much to teach me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I wonder if you'd be happy to read, I always pronounce it wrong- Fothermather?

Dr. Gail McConnell

Fothermather, yeah! Let me just find it here. Do you mean the villanelle?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yes, I do mean the villanelle. Yeah, you might want to explain what a villanelle is, as well.

Dr. Gail McConnell

So this is a poem called 'Untitled/ Villanelle' from a pamphlet called Fothermather. And it's, well I'll just read it and then you can see what you think of it. So there, it starts with two epigraphs, which I'll read first, and the epigraphs then become the basis for the repeating lines in the poem. The villanelle's a form with a lot of repetition. So I'll read the epigraphs and then I'll read it.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

'I have often longed to see my mother in the doorway'. - Grace Paley

'Because having a father made me want a father'. - Sandra Newman

Untitled/ Villanelle*

I have often longed to see my mother
tap-dance in a top hat like she did before he died -
having (had) a father made me want a father.

A mather/ madder/ methers is a measure
that keeps it shape & holds what's stored inside -
I often see my mother.

Mistype the word it stretches to a fother
(a cartload carries fodder hitched outside) -
A father made me.

You come to know the one against the other.
You measure till the meanings coincide.
I have often longed to see my father.

My mother's mother died before her daughter was a mother.
Alone. She gave me all she could provide -
(not) having a father made me want (to be) a father.

What am I to you? Mother? Father? Neither?
Like cells, names split & double, unified.
I have often longed to mother
mother father fother mather matherfother fothermather

**'Untitled / Villanelle' by Gail McConnell is published in Fothermather (Ink Sweat & Tears, 2019).*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That line 'What am I to you?' is such a beautiful turning of this poem to this person who you didn't know yet.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I think, for a long time I was really worried about that question: what am I to you? You know, my partner carried our son and I didn't have a biological attachment to him, and before he was born, I was worried about who I would be to him and what I would be called, and it was an anxiety; it was a nervousness about how we would form a relationship. And there has been so much formation and Finn has been teaching me so much about formation, about how attachments are made, and they're made within and beyond biological ones. And they're made primarily - in our case -

through touch and through language, through nonsense, through babble, through play. And so now, the question isn't a nervous and anxious one so much, but it's one in which I can take the language that I've been given, and I can make my own nonsense from it. I can muck it up, mess it about and make my own term for the kind of parent that I am, which is fothermather. To Finn, I am just Mama. That's the name that he has settled on for me. So in some ways, it's also just simple and not that... it's not complicated. I make it complicated because I worry and get nervous and overanalyse. But for Finn, I'm his mama.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You have some other poems that kind of concern themselves with creatures - creaturely poems I've heard you refer to them as - narwhals and seahorses and worms. One time I heard you give a reading and you said that you were interested in those creatures because they, like you, have had to learn how to find life in strange places. And so there's a weight to those poems, as well as there being a kind of delight in the eccentricity. Weren't you saying that one of those animals - you were writing about a deep-sea creature - dangles its genitals in front of it as it seeks a mate?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Not something I do, I hasten to add!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

(laughs) Not yet, Gail! Not yet...

Dr. Gail McConnell:

(laughs) ...The cuttlefish is interesting. Yeah, I remember seeing this on - I think it was one of those David Attenborough *Planet Earth* programmes - but the male cuttlefish when he wants to mate with the female... Now, what's the story? He has, an, erm, he has eight... Oh, I have to get it now. You have caught me off guard on my own poem! Hang on... I didn't expect to hear genitals before noon! Oh, yeah. I know what it is, the cuttlefish. The male cuttlefish has eight limbs and the female has six- that's what it is. So when the male cuttlefish wants to mate with the female, he actually tucks two of his limbs away to camouflage himself as female, and then sort of moseys on over and sidles up to her. And then after he has, you know, yeah, formed this sort of intimacy, he's... there's a sort of a 'tada!' moment. Anyway, I was interested in terms of the forms of camouflage and dragging and sameness and so on that go on, but I think... yeah, animals, I mean, there are so many creatures who have adapted strategies of survival, that - the octopus, the worm - that are genius, really. You know, the octopus- when it (if it) becomes entangled with an enemy, it simply cuts off- it's able to cut off one of its eight arms and swim away, and then to grow a new one- to self-repair. Which just struck me as being a very wise and intelligent way of dealing with - well, maybe not dealing with conflict - but certainly dealing with a situation of entanglement and repair. You know, the worm, eats refuse for a living, eats waste for a living, but is able to kind of make the earth fertile... it's kind of responsible for the fertility of all the flowers and plants and everything we see around us just through eating and (well, and shitting!). Yeah, I think, I didn't realise it. I don't know, I think creatures have taught me a lot about different ways of living in the world- different possibilities.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Is poetry partly that for you- partly a way of surviving entanglement, or finding a way where something's taken away to find something else to grow?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Hmm. Yes, I think poetry can be so many things. But certainly, I think it allows me to step back from some of the entanglements of my own life (familial, historical, psychological); to look at them with renewed attention and to reflect on them and also to encounter myself anew. You know- to try to find some clarity on what is going on round about me, or to notice myself in the moment of not finding clarity on that and sort of where that leaves me.

So it... and it allows me certainly to relate to the dead. I won't say remember or talk to or elegise. Because it's none of those things simply put, but it's relationship, it allows me to relate to the dead. Yes my father, and others too. And for that, it's been very valuable to me. You know I think we sometimes struggle to speak in everyday life about our relationship to the dead. And yet, we as a state, and as individuals, are constantly negotiating our relationship with the dead, through commemoration, through memorials, through centenary years, all those kinds of things. We're constantly thinking about the generations [that] have come before us and about individuals who've come before us and where we are in relation to them. And yet I think we sometimes struggle to do that in a way that's a fully fleshed-out vocabulary and grammar for it. So for me poetry is an opportunity to try to think in more detail about my relationship with the dead.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Just as we finish I'm thinking about how *The Sun is Open* is going to be coming out in 2021, which as you were mentioning is a centenary year- centenary year of partition, something that's so intimate and individual. And you're not prescribing 'here is a strategic plan' for anybody, not even for yourself. You're putting things alongside each other that are in this mysterious Dad Box. How do you feel about this book coming out in this weighty year?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

It feels important. I mean, in a sense, it was happenstance that maybe unconsciously- it wasn't in the same way that I remember it felt important for me that *Typeface* appeared in 2016 in the middle of this kind of decade of centenaries, and at a moment where we thought about so many anniversaries from the Battle of the Somme, to the Easter Rising, partition... you know. It's... I think, there are many conversations to be had about the legacy of partition on this island, and there are many sad, very sad consequences from it. And that's complicated, and I hope that this book shows, I suppose, that in some ways, that the wounds endure in all kinds of ways and also that we have, we have a way of looking at the past and of relating to the dead, and of the dead of the politicians who made the decisions that they made and the dead of those who have suffered in conflicts as a consequence of those decisions. So it's an important moment, I think, for us to - not just to remember history - but to look at what we think we mean when we say history. Even the contested nature of the anniversary itself: is it partition, is it the beginning of something we might call Northern Ireland, whatever that is? I mean, these are, these are kind of differences and difficulties that are worth looking at anew and I hope that this book, in its complexity, is in a sense part of that conversation.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Is there another poem that you'd like to wrap up with?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Okay, I'll read *Worm* and then we can see if this fits in and if it doesn't not to worry- it doesn't matter.

Worm*

Burrowing in your allotted patch you
move through the dark, muscles contracting one by one

in every part, lengthening and shortening
the slick segmented tube of you, furrows in your wake.

Devising passages for water, air,
you plot the gaps that keep the structure from collapse.

Dead things you know. Plants and creatures both.
Your grooves shift matter, sifting as you go.

Eyeless, your appetite aerates.
Eating the world, you open it.

You ingest to differentiate.
Under the foot-stamped earth, you eat into a clot

of leaf mould, clay and mildew, and express what you can
part with, as self-possessed as when you started.

Your secretions bind the soil,
your shit enriches it. How things lie

now will be undone, will reoccur. You, a surface-level archivist
sensing all there is

can be gone through. The body borne
within its plot.

**'Worm' by Gail McConnell is published in Fourteen (Green Bottle Press, 2018).*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Gail McConnell you bring a wonder into the most beautiful and burdensome things, and your poetry brings wonder: the wonder of looking at archival material and the wonder of looking at history, and the wonder at looking at creepy crawlies and many other things that you find in the dark and bringing those into the light. Thank you so much for your time, and your extraordinary work and the gift of the work that you give to so many.

Dr. Gail McConnell:

Well, thank you, Pádraig, for the attention that you've given to my poems and to your insights about them- I'm heartened by what you see in there. I hope you're right! Thanks so much for having me. This has been a real pleasure.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My pleasure.

Our guest this week, Dr. Gail McConnell, is a lecturer in poetry at Queen's University in Belfast.

Her poetry collection *The Sun is Open* comes out in the autumn of this year, published by Penned in the Margins. Don't forget to listen right to the end for when Gail answers some of our 'Very Short Story Questions'.

Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and I'll be back next week with another episode.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

In one or two sentences Gail, I wonder if you could tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

It was trying as an Irish citizen to sponsor my son's Irish passport but finding that I couldn't because I was not his biological parent. But finding also that my partner, who was born and lived into her early 20s in the US, could as a new Irish citizen sponsor his visa as his biological parent. So it was a bittersweet experience of on the one hand, feeling excluded from something as an Irish citizen because of biology, but on the other hand, seeing my partner have this warm welcome into Irishness and be able then to act as Finn's sponsor and as his parent.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

When was a time when you read or saw or heard something and thought, oh, reading this I do belong, or 'that's me'?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

I've been thinking about this recently, because we've been reading with Finn Raymond Briggs' beautifully illustrated book *The Snowman* and watching the animation that goes along with it. And I have a little plastic snowman that I've kept - I think it was a bubble bath or something - but I've kept it all of these years from when I was a child that Finn has now adopted. And when I thought about this question, I thought about this and what is it about the snowman that

holds such meaning for me? And I think there is something about the experience of the little boy in that story who has this magical experience, you know - imagined or otherwise - with a snowman, which... he's an only child- I was an only child for most, you know, the majority of my life. But he also has this profound and primary experience of loss- the snowman melts at the end of the story, and ends on quite a sad note, in the sense where there's a moment in which the boy has to come to terms with the loss that follows this joyous experience. And I think that's a story that, yeah, resonates for me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And finally, Gail, are there friendships that you have that break the mould or expectation about friendships as you're expected to have?

Dr. Gail McConnell:

One of my closest friendships was with Ciaran Carson, someone who was 32 years older than me. And Ciaran, he started out as a mentor of sorts, and he remained a mentor. But over a few years of coffee and conversation about poetry and everything else, he also became a friend. And that friendship is one of the greatest and most unexpected gifts of my life. He left the world that we're in now, in the autumn of 2019, and I miss him dearly.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Gail McConnell, thank you very much.

Dr Dr. Gail McConnell:

Thank you, Pádraig.

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