



## An Interview with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

**Ludmilla Kostova**

“St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne was born in Dublin. She was educated at University College Dublin (UCD) where she studied English and folklore. She subsequently obtained a PhD in Irish Folklore from the National University of Ireland (NUI). Ní Dhuibhne is a member of *Aosdána*, the Irish Association of Artists. She writes in both English and Irish and is the author of more than thirty books, including seven collections of short stories, several novels, children’s books, plays, poetry, a memoir, an anthology of essays by Irish women writers, and a lot of scholarly articles and literary reviews.

Ní Dhuibhne has been the recipient of many literary awards, among them the Stewart Parker Award for Drama, three Bisto awards for her children’s books, and several Oireachtas awards for novels in Irish. Her novel, *The Dancers Dancing* (pub. 1999; new edition 2007), was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, and her collection, *The Inland Ice*, was selected as a “Notable Book” by *The New York Times*. Ní Dhuibhne is one of Ireland’s most important short story writers; her stories have appeared in many anthologies, including *The Faber Book of Best Irish Short Stories* and *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*.

Ní Dhuibhne’s work has been translated into German, Italian, Czech, Japanese, and Bulgarian. Bulgaria is one of the European countries in which she has developed an interest over the years. Ní Dhuibhne has studied Bulgarian at the Summer School for Bulgarian Language and Culture, hosted by the University of Veliko Tarnovo, and at Trinity College, Dublin. Dimitar Kamburov, Lector in Bulgarian at Trinity College, is the translator of a collection of her short stories into Bulgarian.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** You have published in a variety of genres and art formats, ranging from children’s literature and crime fiction to poetry and drama for stage, radio, and television. Your novel *The Dancers Dancing*, usually classified as a “Gaeltacht Bildungsroman,” and a lot of your short stories are taught at universities in North America and Europe. You write in two languages, English and Irish. In an interview you have said that your command of English is stronger, but you also feel an obligation to write in Irish. Could you elaborate on this?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** The answer to this is a little complicated. Our linguistic situation in Ireland is somewhat unusual. From 1169 until 1922 Ireland was under English rule, to a greater or lesser extent. From the sixteenth century English became the language of power and gained traction in Ireland. Still, a majority of Irish people spoke Irish until the nineteenth century. It is believed that the great “language shift” was gathering momentum in the early 1800s. By the beginning of the twentieth century the majority were English speakers. (If you imagine Bulgaria becoming Turkish speaking under Ottoman rule, this is what happened.) Still, a minority spoke Irish as their first language, mainly in some remote regions in the west of Ireland, now called “Gaeltacht” – Donegal, Mayo, Galway, and Kerry. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a cultural revival started in Ireland – The Celtic Revival. Readers will be familiar with W. B. Yeats, who did not know Irish but drew on Irish myths and stories for inspiration. The literary renaissance was accompanied by a language revival, an attempt to restore the Irish language. When

---

**CORRESPONDENCE:** Prof. Ludmilla Kostova, PhD, Department of English and American Studies, University of Veliko Tarnovo, 2 Teodosi Tarnovski St., Veliko Tarnovo 5003, Bulgaria. @ l.kostova@ts.uni-vt.bg

we gained independence from England in 1922, this attempt continued. Irish was designated the “First National Language.” All children learn Irish in school from the age of four. It is a compulsory subject.

The attempt to revive the Irish language as the everyday language of Ireland failed. English is the first language of the vast majority. But Irish has survived as a minority language. About 30,000 people in the Gaeltacht regions in the west speak it as their first language, and a much higher number speak Irish in the cities, at home with their families, in Irish language schools, and so on. Almost everyone knows some Irish (since they learn it for many years in school. It is a difficult language however, highly inflected with a complex grammar, so surprisingly few people learn it well.)

I belong to a family which was Irish speaking up to a point. My father came from a Gaeltacht region in Donegal and was a “native speaker” – he had been bilingual from early childhood. My mother did not speak Irish, but my father did, and I attended a school where only Irish was spoken, so I was bi-lingual from about the age of five. Still, when I began to write and publish stories, I wrote in English. I thought of English as the language of literature. In 1995, a theatre director of an Irish language theatre invited me to work on a play in Irish. When the play was performed (in the Peacock, the small theatre of the Abbey, our national theatre), it was a success. I also realized that, apart from the language, I shared a frame of reference with the audience that would not be the case with English speakers. I didn’t have to explain references to songs, books, and stories – even to jokes. They shared a whole culture with me. I felt at home. I also felt that there was a certain obligation on me to continue to write in Irish. I thought that this was one thing I could do for the cause of the language. I realized that the Irish language was a gift I had got from my parents – I never had to learn it. My father had been a native speaker and it is safe to assume that in his family Irish had been the language for hundreds of years. I didn’t want to be the generation that broke that chain of transmission.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** Interestingly, you have produced crime fiction in Irish – with a focus on two amateur detectives with distinctively Irish names, Saoirse Ní Ghallchóir and Garda Máirtín Ó Flaithearta. Even though elements of crime fiction have penetrated “high” literature, it remains part of popular culture, and, like other popular genres, needs a large readership. How does the crime genre work with a readership proficient in a lesser-used language such as Irish?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** Crime fiction in Irish seems to work well. Before I wrote my novel, *Dúnmharú sa Daingean* (*Murder in Dingle*) I hadn’t written in this genre – nor had I written fiction in the Irish language. I had noticed when I was reading in a foreign language (Swedish) that I found crime fiction easier to read than literary fiction. In crime novels, the vocabulary tends to be limited, the sentences are short, and the plot lines are so compelling that the reader wants to finish the book. A publisher asked me to write a novel in Irish – which, as I already said, the vast majority of Irish people learn as a second language. I decided to write a simple crime novel that people might find easy to read. As it turned out, it was a hit; it was a best-seller by Irish language standards. Since 2000, when I published that novel, several crime novels have been written in Irish by other authors and they seem to do well.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** Could you speak about the genesis of your other work? Would you describe the short story as the genre most congenial to you? There is a well-established Irish tradition in the production of short fiction. The late William Trevor, for instance, described himself as “a short story writer, who happens to write novels.” Have you felt in a similar way about your own writing?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** I feel like William Trevor. I am first and foremost a short story writer. Dorothea Brande, in her book *On Becoming a Writer* (1934), one of the first creative writing manuals and a very good one, writes: “In my experience, the pupil who sets down the night’s dream or recasts the day before into ideal form, who takes the morning hour to write a complete anecdote or passage of sharp dialogue, is likely to be the short storywriter in embryo.” I think that describes me. I like to catch impressions, events, and experiences quickly, draft up my outline story, and then work on it, honing it, deepening it. I think short stories, although they have a narrative content, are close to poetry. Closer to dreams and the unconscious. They suit me better than the long haul of the novel.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** In an interview you speak about the importance of *place* in fiction, and you say that you want the author to translate place into words in a way that would enable readers to imagine that they are in it. However, you also speak about *inventing* scenarios and worlds. Your short story “Nadia’s Cake” is set in a village called “Helansi” in the original and “Izvortsi,” in Dimitar Kamburov’s Bulgarian translation. To what extent is Helansi/Izvortsi a *real* place or should we mostly see it as an *invention*?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** It is an invention. But it is based on impressions of villages I have visited – always briefly – in Bulgaria. I think I wrote this story while in Bulgaria, in Veliko Tarnovo, where I attended the Summer Seminar in Bulgarian Language. I just wanted to write something relating to Bulgaria, to capture something of it in my writing. I decided to experiment, to let my unconscious do the work, to write what came into my head. It is a way of writing, rather like accessing a dream. (Of course, I had to tidy it up and give it a structure.)

**Ludmilla Kostova:** For obvious reasons, “Nadia’s Cake” made a deep impression on me, and I kept re-reading parts of it. For me, your story is the fictional enactment of a dark fantasy about Bulgaria’s Roma minority that many Bulgarians accept as a fact. The evil gypsy, who will beat, rob, and kill you, is the unassimilable Other, who figures in Bulgarian cautionary stories for children, and, to modify one of Richard Kearney’s pronouncements on British perceptions of identity and alterity, “haunts the unstable borders of [Bulgarian] identity.” Significantly, to the outsider Jen, in her Alice-like “naivety,” the Roma appear to be only a little different from the Bulgarians in the village. I wonder if my interpretation resonates in any way with what you had in mind when you wrote the story?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** Yes. Absolutely. I had encountered many instances of what looks like deep prejudice against the Roma, in Bulgaria. There is plenty of prejudice in Ireland against the Irish travelling community (as we call them – the Irish gypsies) – but it is mild by comparison with the dislike and distrust that many Bulgarians feel for their gypsy communities (possibly, indeed, because the Irish Travellers form a very small proportion of the population.) I understand, rationally, how very complex the issues regarding the Roma in Bulgaria are. Jen is perhaps rather a typical foreigner who thinks she rejects the prejudice, but at the same time absorbs some of it – especially the fear. And she is a reflection of me - I was surprised at the strength of prejudice, and didn’t believe all the stories, but at the same time I would be careful walking past a gypsy village. When I dug into my unconscious, or allowed its impressions to surface, as I did with this story, it’s interesting that all this material about the Roma came up. (In reality, in Bulgaria I have had no encounters with the gypsies. I have passed by some of the “villages” and have seen the little horse carts, and so on. I have been warned against going to certain places. That’s all.) I see the story as a satire, a sending up, of the common prejudice – working by exaggeration. What happens is so absurd and unlikely. I enjoyed creating all the characters in the story – Nevena, the lovely old woman who owns the guest house, the Ivans (the gypsies), Nadia, the kind gypsy mother, the passengers on the bus. (The passengers on the bus are based on real life. I have always found the people on the little buses to be enormously kind and helpful.)

**Ludmilla Kostova:** A lot of your fiction focuses on Irish female characters. The time settings in which they are placed differ widely, ranging from the 1840s in “Summer Pudding” and the 1890s in the “Sally” trilogy, through the 1970s in *The Dancers Dancing*, and ending with the post-Celtic Tiger years in *Little Red and Other Stories*. Do they have anything in common, apart from their Irishness?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** What they have in common is that they probably reflect aspects of me, their author. Even when the characters live long ago, or seem different from me in details, I think they are versions of myself. And I think that’s what Dorothea Brande means when she says a short story writer is the sort of person who writes down their dreams – rather self-obsessed, possibly!

**Ludmilla Kostova:** Women’s writing is an issue with which you have been concerned for a long time. Your most recent publication is an anthology of essays by Irish women writers entitled *Look! It’s a Wom-*

*an Writer! Literary Feminisms, 1970–2020.* I believe that you yourself started publishing your work in the 1970s. What is it like to have been a woman writer in Ireland over such a long period of time? Can you speak about some of the problems that Irish women writers have faced?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** The answer to this question could be very long! My motivation in assembling this anthology of memoir-type essays, by women writers born around the 1950s, was my feeling that this was a lucky time to be born if you were an Irish female with an interest in writing. It did not look like that at the time. In the 1950s the Irish literary scene was very male-dominated. Of course, women wrote and published, but not very many, and the big names in fiction, poetry and drama were male. But things changed! The liberal 60s were around the corner. By the time I started publishing stories in the mid-1970s questions regarding gender equality were being discussed in Ireland. In 1973, for instance, a previous bar on married women working in the Civil Service was lifted. Before that a woman had to resign from her job as soon as she married. Legislation regarding equal pay for equal work was discussed and eventually enacted. Before, a man got more pay than his female colleague for exactly the same job. Contraception was not fully legalized in Ireland until 1985, but from the mid-1970s some access to it was possible, especially for educated women in the city. In short, the position of women in the society in general was improving. Feminism had come to Ireland. This had an impact on literature. It was recognized that the woman's voice was largely absent from Irish literature and some steps were taken to change this. For instance, two women only publishing houses were set up in Ireland – Arlen House (1975) and Attic Press a little later. Other publishers, seeing the way the wind was blowing, began to cultivate women writers. Literary editors in newspapers and journals realized that it might be a good idea to review books by women, and even to commission women to write reviews. So, if you were a woman starting to publish books in the 1980s you were in a much better position than you would have been in, say, 1950. By now – 2021 – there is a fairly level playing field, as far as fiction and poetry are concerned, in Ireland. I don't believe it is a disadvantage to be female, although not everyone would agree with me. Theatre in Ireland, however, is still heavily dominated by men, for some reason.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** Which writers and books do you admire most? Is there a book or a short story that you feel particularly drawn to and keep re-reading it?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** I am very fond of Alice Munro, Jhumpa Lahiri, William Trevor, Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, and of course Chekhov. I love Alice Munro's short story, "Family Furnishings," a story about writing short stories, and re-read that frequently. At the moment – and it is a long moment – I am reading, *Kradetsat na praskovi* [*The Peach Thief*] by Emilian Stanev, very slowly, in Bulgarian. I have to look up many words in the dictionary because he has a rich vocabulary. I read two or three pages a day. I love his writing, the great descriptions of place, of nature. He is amazingly good at writing about emotion – love. I have been reading this during lockdown, and I feel in am in Veliko Tarnovo when I read it, or think about it. In 1918. The experience of reading so slowly helps, I think, to allow me to immerse myself in the setting – the cabin in the orchard, the garden. It is a very interesting experience.

**Ludmilla Kostova:** Your work has been translated into different languages and you have done readings in several countries. I suppose audiences responded differently in each case. Could you speak of the Bulgarian response to your work?

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne:** The collection of short stories, translated by Dimitar Kambourov, was launched in Sofia in 2019. I spent about a week in Sofia, and Veliko Tarnovo, around then, doing readings and interviews. I was delighted by the interest shown in the book, and people responded to it with great enthusiasm. I guess, though, when books are translated, the author often doesn't get much feedback on how the translation is received in the new country. When I go to other countries to do readings and so on, it is always a positive and pleasant experience.