



Mary O'Donnell: an attempt to get under the skin of men

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opening story, 'A Genuine Woman', a wartime romance of sorts, her first attempt at writing. "It was the era of *Gone With The Wind*. There was a chasteness in the air, a restraint and a holding back. The final sentence is, 'We never did more than kiss.' By contrast 'Border Story', in which a couple of 1970s youngsters hurtle towards Clones in a fast car, has a

sort of post-coital final line: 'Must have been a good night in Belturbet.'

O'Donnell's wide-ranging but intimately observed stories, written in bursts over the past 15 years, offer a mosaic of unconnected characters that nevertheless somehow merge in the imagination into a portrait of a changing Ireland, as indeed does *The Place Of Miracles*, her new and selected poems.

"When I was growing up, literature was always respected in the family, and the possibilities and the power of it, and maybe stepping back a bit from the tribe and putting yourself away to one side either to reflect or to make up new stories.

"Writing a poem or a story made sense to me. When I was nine and bored I wrote a wee four-line

rhyming poem which my mother sent the children's publisher Paul Hamlyn. He wrote back, 'Dear Mary, We read your poem and we think it's really great.'

Unfortunately we don't have a niche for it at present but do please keep writing and let us know.' I'd probably have scribbled on anyway, but it encouraged me and throughout my teens, if I was sad or frustrated, I'd make sense of it through the act of writing a poem about the stars or the night sky."

She learned German, French and Latin as well as English and Irish at St Louis, Monaghan. "I loved the roots of languages and seeing the connections. I think all my life I have had an instinct for words and gathering them." Her first poems were published in *New Irish Writing* by David Marcus, and Salmon Press published her first collection, *Reading The Sunflowers In September*, in 1990. Soon after, Poolbeg Press published her stories *Strong Pagans* and her first novel *The Light-Makers*, which became a bestseller.

She has worked as a translator and for a while as drama critic for the *Sunday Tribune*, but without being tempted to write plays - "I love drama but I don't want to be part of it." She lives in Straffan, Co Kildare with her teenage daughter Anna and her husband Martin, assistant headmaster of Clongowes College, whom she met as a student in Maynooth. Most mornings after leaving Anna to school she'll go to a cottage in the grounds of Clongowes to write, and recently completed the first draft of a satirical novel.

"It gets you out of the domestic thing," she says. "Anais Nin said that anyone who is serious about writing should be single and childless. But having a hermetic existence is not for me. I'm absolutely of this world. I don't think it matters what work you do in life as long as it ignites you in some way. I think all our work has another purpose beyond this life. I really believe that our work is part of our purification."

'Storm Over Belfast' and 'The Place Of Miracles' are published by New Island Books