



The Granta Book of the

IRISH

SHORT STORY

Edited and with an introduction by

ANNE ENRIGHT

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GRANTA

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INTRODUCTION

Anne Enright

The short story is, for me, a natural form, as difficult and as easy to talk about as, say, walking. Do we need a theory about going for a walk? About one foot, in front of the other? Probably, yes. 'I made the story just as I'd make a poem;' writes Raymond Carver, 'one line and then the next, and the next. Pretty soon I could see a story – and I knew it was my story, the one I had been wanting to write.'

It is the simple things that are the most mysterious.

'Do you know if what you are writing is going to be a short story or a novel?' This is one of the questions writers get asked all the time. The answer is 'Yes,' because the writer also thinks in shapes. But it is foolish asking a writer how much they know, when they spend so much time trying not to know it.

This is what the American writer Flannery O'Connor did not know about her iconic story 'Good Country People'.

When I started writing that story, I didn't know there was going to be a PhD with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realised it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg. I brought in the Bible salesman, but I had no idea what I was going to do with him. I didn't know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before he did it, but when I found out that this was what was going to happen, I realised it was inevitable.

She does not say when she knew she was writing a short story, as opposed to the first chapter of a novel – or a radio play, or the rough draft of an epic poem – at a guess, it was quite early on. The writer's ignorance may be deliberate, but it plays itself out in an established space. The sentence is one such space; the story is another. In both cases, form and surprise are the same thing, and the pleasures of inevitability are also the pleasures of shape.

This is not an argument for a lyrical as opposed to a social theory of the short story: characters are part of it too; the way people do unexpected things, even if you have invented them yourself. The short story delivers what Flannery O'Connor calls 'the experience of meaning'; the surprise that comes when things make sense.

Much of what is said about the short story as a form is actually anxiety about the novel – so it is worth saying that we do not know how the novel delivers meaning, but we have some idea of how the short story might. There is something irreducible about it: 'A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way,' says Flannery O'Connor, 'and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.' The novel, on the other hand, is not finished by its own meaning, which is why it must grow a structure or impose one; making the move from story to plot.

Short stories seldom creak, the way novels sometimes creak; they are allowed to be easy and deft. Some writers say that the short story is too 'easy' to matter much, some say it is the most difficult form of all. But if the argument is about ease as opposed to difficulty, then surely we should not undervalue ease. And though it may be easy to write something that looks like a short story (for being not long), it is very hard to write a good one – or to be blessed by a good one – so many of the ones we read are fakes.

The great Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor thought it a pure form, 'motivated by its own necessities rather than by our convenience.' I am not sure whether the novel is written for our convenience, but it is probably written for our satisfaction. That is what readers complain about with short stories, that they are not 'satisfying'. They are the cats of literary form; beautiful, but a little too self-contained for some readers' tastes.

Short stories are, however, satisfying to write, because they are such

achieved things. They become themselves even as you write them: they end once they have attained their natural state.

Or some of them do. Others keep going. Others discard the first available meaning for a later, more interesting conclusion. In the interests of truth, some writers resist, back-pedal, downplay, switch tactics, come back around a different way. Poe's famous unity of impulse is all very well, but if you know what the impulse is already, then it will surely die when you sit down at the desk.

There are stories in this anthology that are beautifully made, like Seán Ó Faoláin's 'The Trout', and there are some that are slightly untidy, but good anyway. This is what Ó Faoláin himself called 'personality', saying that what he liked in a short story was 'punch and poetry'. The tension is always between the beauty of the poem and the felt life of the novel form.

Frank O'Connor bridged the gap between the aesthetic and the cultural in a more romantic way. 'There is in the short story at its most characteristic,' he writes, 'something we don't often find in the novel, an intense awareness of human loneliness.' His book *The Lonely Voice*, which was published in 1963, is still a touchstone in any discussion of the short story form. The question he asked – as this collection also asks – was why Irish writers excel at the short story. The answer, for him, lay in the loneliness to be found among 'submerged population groups'. These are the people on the margins of society; the outlawed, the dreaming and the defeated. 'The short story has never had a hero,' says O'Connor, offering instead a slightly infantilising idea of 'the Little Man' (as though all novels were about big ones). Americans qualify, because America is made up of immigrant communities, but the proper subjects of the short story are: 'Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers' and, we might note, not a single English person of any kind. The novel requires 'the concept of a normal society', and though this, O'Connor seems to say, is available to the English, there is in Irish society a kind of hopelessness that pushes the artist away. The resulting form, the short story, 'remains by its nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic and intransigent.'

In his useful essay on the subject, 'Inside Out: A Working Theory of the Short Story', John Kenny says that the short story has flourished 'in those cultures where older, usually oral forms, are met head on with

the challenge of new literary forms equipped with the ideology of modernisation.' O'Connor's theories place the short story as the genre of the cusp between tradition and modernity. The story is born from the fragmentation of old certainties, and the absence of any new ones, and this produces in the writer a lyric response, 'a retreat into the self in the face of an increasingly complex . . . reality'.

The first thing to say about O'Connor's ideas is that they rang true at the time. Whether or not the short story is, in essence, an assertion of the self – small, but powerfully individual – to the writer it certainly felt that way. It is interesting to test that sense of 'the Little Man' against a new, more confident Irish reality; one in which good writing continues to thrive. Is 'submerged' just another word for 'poor'? Is the word 'peasant' hovering somewhere around? There is so much nostalgia about Ireland – it is important to say that this is not always the fault of its writers. They may be closer to the oral arts of folk tale, fable, gossip and anecdote, but speech is also a modern occupation. Irish novels may often reach into the past, but the stories gathered here show that the form is light and quick enough to be contemporary. If you want to see life as it is lived 'now' (whenever the 'now' of the story might be), just look at the work of Neil Jordan, Roddy Doyle or, indeed, Frank O'Connor. Meanwhile, whoever thinks the short story somehow harmless for being closer to a 'folk' tradition has not read John McGahern, whose stories are the literary equivalent of a hand grenade rolled across the kitchen floor.

Seán Ó Faoláin, that other pillar of the twentieth-century Irish short story was wary of the lyrical view. In his book *The Short Story*, published in 1948, he writes, 'Irish literature in our time came to its great period of efflorescence in a romantic mood whose concept of a writer was almost like the concept of a priest: you did not just write, you lived writing; it was a vocation; it was part of the national resurgence to be a writer.'

Indeed, the number of stories about priests and the sadness of priests that have not made it into this volume are legion – parish priests, curates, bishops; all lonely, all sad as they survey the folly of their congregations, and ninety-nine per cent of them celibate. I left most of them out for seeming untrue, and offer instead a couple of stories, by Maeve Brennan and Colm Tóibín, about the more interesting loneliness of the priest's mother.

In the same way that it might be said that much of what is written about the short story form is actually anxiety about the unknowability of the novel (which we think we know so well), perhaps much of what is written about Irish writing is, in fact, anxiety about England. Sometimes, indeed, the terms 'England' and 'the novel' seem almost interchangeable.

Perhaps it is all a yearning for what O'Connor called 'the concept of a society' – in its absence, we must do what we can. And if we can't be as good as them, we'll just have to be better, which is to say, more interesting. Ó Faoláin says it pretty much straight out: what he likes in a short story is personality, and the problem with the English is that they don't have any. 'The fact is that the English do not admire the artistic temperament: they certainly do not demonstrate it.' Dullness is their national ambition and preoccupation. 'In short, the English way of life is much more social and much less personal and individual than the French.'

Ó Faoláin can't quite fit America into this scheme. 'Why America should produce interesting personalities in the short story I simply do not understand unless it be that American society is still unconventionalised.' Even O'Connor's 'submerged' Americans surface with some rapidity. I don't want to dishonour O'Connor or Ó Faoláin, who are heroes to me now as they were to my youth, and I am certainly not saying that the English are interesting, in any way – God forbid – I am just saying it is there, that's all: that national prejudice is still prejudice, even if you come from a plucky little country like Ireland, where it's only endearing really, apart from when it's not.

What interests me is the way O'Connor and Ó Faoláin talk, not about how wonderful the Irish are as artists, but how vile they are as critics. Ó Faoláin describes the conditions for the Irish artist as 'particularly difficult . . . complicated by religion, politics, peasant unsophistication, lack of stimulus, lack of variety, pervasive poverty, censorship, social compression and so on.' An ambitious Irishman, O'Connor writes, 'can still expect nothing but incomprehension, ridicule and injustice.'

Of course, things are different in the twenty-first century, now that poverty has been banished (or was, for a whole decade) and the success of our writers is officially a matter of national pride. But it is perhaps still true that if Ireland loves you, then you must be doing something

wrong. There is a lingering unease about how Irish writers negotiate ideas about 'Ireland' (the country we talk about, as opposed to the place where we live), for readers both at home and abroad. We move, in decreasing circles, around the problem Ó Faoláin voiced in 1948. 'There was hardly an Irish writer who was not on the side of the movement for Irish political independence; immediately it was achieved they became critical of the nation. This is what makes all politicians say that writers are an unreliable tribe. They are. It is their *métier*.'

I first read O'Connor when I was maybe ten, maybe twelve years of age. I chose his story 'The Mad Lomasneys' for the way it stayed with me, quietly, ever since. If you wonder whether this is the selection of a twelve year old, I admit she is certainly here too, that the reason the short story remains an important form for Irish writers of my generation is because the work of O'Connor and Ó Faoláin and Lavin were commonly found on Irish bookshelves, alongside, in my own house, *The Irish Republic* by the nationalist historian Dorothy McArdle, and *Three to Get Married* by the reverend Canon Sheehan (the third in question, I was disappointed to discover, being God). Our sensibilities were shaped by the fine choices of Professor Augustine Martin who set the stories for the school curriculum, among them 'The Road to the Shore', a story that revealed as much to me about aesthetic possibilities and satisfactions as it did about nuns. We were taught French by reading Maupassant and German through the stories of Siegfried Lenz: though if the short story is a national form it did not seem to flourish in the national language of Irish, where all the excitement – for me at least – was in poetry. The fact remains that I grew up with the idea that short stories were lovely and interesting and useful things, in the way the work of Dorothy McArdle and the Canon Sheehan was not.

This may all be very 'submerged' of me, but that is to patronise my younger self. I still find the modesty of the form attractive and right. How important is it to be 'important' as a writer? The desire to claim a larger authority can provoke work, or it can ruin it. In fact, writers claim different kinds of authority: these days a concentration on the short story form is taken as a sign of writerly purity rather than novelistic incompetence, though it still does not pay the bills. (This was not always the case. Ó Faoláin lamented the popularity of the form which 'is being vulgarised by commercialisation'. 'Readers and editors,' he writes, 'must often feel discouraged'.)

'The Mad Lomasneys' is a story by O'Connor that is not much anthologised. This may be, in part, because it does not present a recognisable idea of 'Ireland'. It does not deal with the birth of the Irish Free State, like 'Guests of the Nation', or with childhood innocence like 'My Oedipus Complex' or 'My First Confession'. I did not reject these stories for being too 'Irish': so many of O'Connor's stories are good, I just wanted to see what happens when you give the bag a shake. I realised, when I did this, there are even more stories about choice and infidelity in the Irish tradition than there are about priests. I don't know what this means; why both Sean Ó Faoláin and William Trevor, for example, write endlessly about love and betrayal or, to take the problem further, why 'either/or' is a question asked by the work of contemporary writers like Keith Ridgway and Hugo Hamilton, who then answer 'both'.

Is choice a particularly Irish problem? What about shame – a streak of which runs through the work collected here? Humiliation, perhaps? Maybe we should call that 'the problem of power'. There is also the problem of the family, which is the fundamental (perhaps the only) unit of Irish culture, and one which functions beyond our choosing. Until very recently, you could only marry once in Ireland – though this does not answer the question of how many times you can love, or what love is. Catholicism may give Irish writers an edge when it comes to talking about the larger questions, but you could say the adulteries in Trevor owe as much to Shakespearean comedy as to the problem of the Catholic Church. In fact, I think Trevor owes much to the English short story tradition (as does the work of Clare Boylan), but let us not confuse things here. Let us keep everyone in the one box, and then talk us about the box, its meaning and dimensions, and then let us paint the box green.

Perhaps we should move beyond the box to ask: are all short stories, Russian, French, American and Irish, in fact about loneliness? I am not sure. This may be part of writers' nonsense about themselves, or O'Connor's nonsense about being Irish, or it may just be the general nonsense of being alive. Connection and the lack of it are one of the great themes of the short story, but social factors change, ideas of the romantic change, the more you think about literary forms the smaller your ideas become. Life itself may be a lonely business (or not): the most I have ever managed to say about the short story is that it is about

a change. Something has changed. Something is known at the end of a story – or nearly known – that was not known before. ‘We are on our own’ may be one such insight, but others are surely possible.

I put this selection together as an Irish writer – which is to say, as one of Ó Faoláin’s ‘unreliable tribe’. Some of these stories made me close the book with a slam. ‘Music at Annahullion’ by Eugene McCabe, for example, defied me to read anything else that day, or that week, to match it. I found it difficult to finish Maeve Brennan’s ‘An Attack of Hunger’, because it came so close to the pain it described (is this a good way to whet the reader’s appetite, I wonder?). The world in Claire Keegan’s ‘Men and Women’ stayed with me from the day I first encountered it. I looked for stories that had made me pause when I read them the first time around: stories like Colum McCann’s ‘Everything in this Country Must’ that I finished in the knowledge that I could not, in any conceivable universe, have written such a thing myself.

Perhaps Irish writers, like Irish actors, rely more than is usual on personality in that balance of technique and the self that is the secret of style – the trick might be in its suppression, indeed, an effort that must fail over time. Banville, O’Brien, McGahern, Tóibín – these writers become more distinctive as people, even as their sentences become more distinctively their own. It is a jealous kind of delight to find on the page some inimicable thing, a particular passion, and if the writer is dead, it is delightful and sad to meet a sensibility that will not pass this way again. The shock of recognition runs through this anthology. As much as possible I have tried to choose those stories in which a writer is most himself.

A writer has many selves, of course, and an editor has many and mixed criteria – some of them urgent, as I have described, and some more easy. The selection is from writers who were born in the twentieth century (cheating a little for Bowen, who was born in 1899). I wanted to put together a book that was varied and good to read, with a strong eye to the contemporary.

If this selection has anything to say about Irish writing, then it does so by accident. I chose the stories because I liked them, and then stood back a little to see what my choice said – about me perhaps, but also about how tastes change over time. There is a deal of what Ó Faoláin called ‘personality’ at play in the stories chosen here, but,

at a guess, not much that he would recognise as 'charm', or even (God save the mark) as 'Irish charm'. It is too easy to move from 'personality' to a mannered version of the self, and this can seem a little hokum to us as the years pass.

It is possible that, as truths emerged about Ireland, or refused to emerge, Irish prose writers became more blunt or more lyrical, or both at the same time. Folk tale and short story pulled apart over the years – a split made radical in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's 'Midwife to the Fairies' – only to rejoin in the recent work of Claire Keegan. Fashions are darker now. New work is sometimes tainted by misogyny, and this seems to me as lazy a reach as sentimentality was to the writers of the 1950s and – who knows? – as likely to look a bit stupid, in years to come (perhaps this is what makes Patrick Boyle's 'Meles Vulgaris' so amazing, for being out of joint with his time). But these are all trends rather than truths, and only to be noted in passing. Time makes some stories more distant, while others come near, for a while. What I wanted to do was to select work that would bring a number of Irish writers close to the reader, today.

Some great Irish writers – Sebastian Barry, Patrick McCabe, Dermot Healy – love the stretch of the novel or they love misrule. Some, like Deirdre Madden or Clare Kilroy need space to think or to plot. But this book celebrates a fact which I have so far failed to explain, that so many Irish writers also love the short story. They defy current wisdom about the book business and, in their continuing attention to the form, refuse to do what they are told. This may be partly because of the small but crucial distance Irish writers keep from the international publishing industry. The stories in this collection were written for their own sake. They were written in rooms in Monaghan or Dublin, in New York, Dún Laoghaire, Devon, Wexford, Belfast, Bucharest. It seems to me remarkable that the members of this scattered tribe, each in their solitude, has managed such a conversation. The stories in this anthology talk to each other in many and unexpected ways. Is this another aspect of the short story that we find unsettling: its promiscuity, its insistence on being partial, glancing and various?

My romantic idea of Ireland did not survive the killings in the North, and the realisation, in the 1980s, that Irish women were considered far too lovely for contraception: it foundered, you might say, between Dorothy McArdle and Canon Sheehan. Perhaps, as a result,

I found it difficult to lose myself in the dream that was the recent economic boom. My romantic idea of the writer, meanwhile, did not survive the shift into motherhood. I might have felt lonely and wonderful, but with small children, I just never got the time. But though I am not a romantic, I am quite passionate about the whole business of being an Irish writer. Ó Faoláin was right, we are great contrarians. When there is much rubbish talked about a country, when the air is full of large ideas about what we are, or what we are not, then the writer offers truths that are delightful and small. We write against our own foolishness, not anyone else's. In which case the short story is as good a place as any other to keep things real.

Anne Enright
July 2010

Contents

Introduction	Anne Enright	ix
<i>The Road to the Shore</i>	Michael McLaverty	1
<i>The Pram</i>	Roddy Doyle	12
<i>An Attack of Hunger</i>	Maeve Brennan	32
<i>Summer Voices</i>	John Banville	51
<i>Summer Night</i>	Elizabeth Bowen	61
<i>Music at Annahullion</i>	Eugene McCabe	90
<i>Naming the Names</i>	Anne Devlin	102
<i>Shame</i>	Keith Ridgway	123
<i>Memory and Desire</i>	Val Mulkerns	136
<i>The Mad Lomasneys</i>	Frank O'Connor	149
<i>Walking Away</i>	Philip Ó Ceallaigh	174
<i>Villa Marta</i>	Clare Boylan	179
<i>Lilacs</i>	Mary Lavin	187
<i>Meles Vulgaris</i>	Patrick Boyle	212
<i>The Trout</i>	Seán Ó Faoláin	229
<i>Night in Tunisia</i>	Neil Jordan	233
<i>Sister Imelda</i>	Edna O'Brien	245
<i>The Key</i>	John McGahern	264
<i>A Priest in the Family</i>	Colm Tóibín	274
<i>The Supremacy of Grief</i>	Hugo Hamilton	288
<i>The Swing of Things</i>	Jennifer C Cornell	294
<i>Train Tracks</i>	Aidan Mathews	306
<i>See the Tree, How Big It's Grown</i>	Kevin Barry	326
<i>Visit</i>	Gerard Donovan	337
<i>Everything in this Country Must</i>	Colum McCann	343
<i>Curfew</i>	Sean O'Reilly	351
<i>Language, Truth and Lockjaw</i>	Bernard MacLaverty	367
<i>Midwife to the Fairies</i>	Éilís Ní Dhuibhne	380
<i>Men and Women</i>	Clare Keegan	388
<i>Mothers Were All the Same</i>	Joseph O'Connor	399
<i>The Dressmaker's Child</i>	William Trevor	411
Contributors		427
Acknowledgements		438
Permissions		439

THE ROAD TO THE SHORE

Michael McLaverty

"'Tis going to be a lovely day, thanks be to God,' sighed Sister Paul to herself, as she rubbed her wrinkled hands together and looked out at the thrushes hopping across the lawn. 'And it was a lovely day last year and the year before,' she mused, and in her mind saw the fresh face of the sea where, in an hour or two, she and the rest of the community would be enjoying their annual trip to the shore. 'And God knows it may be my last trip,' she said resignedly, and gazed abstractedly at a butterfly that was purring its wings against the sunny pane. She opened the window and watched the butterfly swing out into the sweet air, zigzagging down to a cushion of flowers that bordered the lawn. 'Isn't it well Sister Clare wasn't here,' she said to herself, 'for she'd be pestering the very soul out of me with her questions about butterflies and birds and flowers and the fall of dew?' She gave her girdle of beads a slight rattle. Wasn't it lovely to think of the pleasure that little butterfly would have when it found the free air under its wings again and its little feet pressing on the soft petals of the flowers and not on the hard pane? She always maintained it was better to enjoy Nature without searching and probing and chattering about the what and the where and the wherefore. But Sister Clare! – what she got out of it all, goodness only knew, for she'd give nobody a minute's peace – not a moment's peace would she give to a saint, living or dead. 'How long would that butterfly live in the air of a classroom?' she'd be asking. 'Do you think it would use up much of the active part of the air – the oxygen part, I mean? . . . What family would that butterfly

belong to? . . . You know it's wrong to say that a butterfly lives only a day . . . When I am teaching my little pupils I always try to be accurate. I don't believe in stuffing their heads with fantastical nonsense however pleasurable it may be . . .' Sister Paul turned round as if someone had suddenly walked into the room, and she was relieved when she saw nothing only the quiet vacancy of the room, the varnished desks with the sun on them and their reflections on the parquet floor.

She hoped she wouldn't be sitting beside Clare in the car today! She'd have no peace with her – not a bit of peace to look out at the countryside and see what changes had taken place inside twelve months. But Reverend Mother, she knew, would arrange all that – and if it'd be her misfortune to be parked beside Clare she'd have to accept it with resignation; yes, with resignation, and in that case her journey to the sea would be like a pilgrimage.

At that moment a large limousine drove up the gravel path, and as it swung round to the convent door she saw the flowers flow across its polished sides in a blur of colour. She hurried out of the room and down the stairs. In the hall Sister Clare and Sister Benignus were standing beside two baskets and Reverend Mother was staring at the stairs. 'Where were you, Sister Paul?' she said with mild reproof. 'We searched the whole building for you . . . We're all ready this ages . . . And Sister Francis has gone to put out the cat. Do you remember last year it had been in all the time we were at the shore and it ate the bacon?' As she spoke a door closed at the end of the corridor and Sister Francis came along, polishing her specs with the corner of her veil. Reverend Mother glanced away from her, that continual polishing of the spectacles irritated her; and then that empty expression on Sister Francis's face when the spectacles were off – vacuous, that's what it was!

'All ready now,' Reverend Mother tried to say without any trace of perturbation. Sister Clare and Sister Benignus lifted two baskets at their feet, Reverend Mother opened the hall door, and they all glided out into the flat sunlight.

The doors of the car were wide open, the engine purring gently, and a perfume of new leather fingering the air. The chauffeur, a young man, touched his cap and stood deferentially to the side. Reverend Mother surveyed him quickly, noting his clean-bright face and white collar. 'I think there'll be room for us all in the back,' she said.