

Keeping going despite the prophets of doom

Joseph Horgan

The book is dead. No one reads now. If that is true, why does Ireland have any small presses, and ones publishing such commercial no-no's as poetry and short stories? Not that these are bashful affairs bringing out work for an élite readership. Not at all. For instance, Doire Press (doirepress.com) in County Galway and New Binary Press (newbinarypress.com) in County Cork have recently published respectively the Booker long-listed William Wall and rising star Karl Parkinson. Wall's *Hearing Voices/Seeing Things* and Parkinson's *The Blocks* have not gone unnoticed. Still, it can't be for the money and fame, so why do it?

For Lisa Frank at Doire Press serendipity played its part. 'We didn't set out to become a publisher; it just kind of happened', she says. Her partner, the poet John Walsh, was awarded a publication grant and the next thing they were taking submissions. According to Lisa, 'The economic downturn caused many bigger publishers to be conservative in their decisions, avoiding risks on genres such as poetry and short stories, which left a niche for small publishers like us'.

James O'Sullivan at New Binary Press says, 'When you're a small press, focusing on niche areas, you're operating in a sector that is always prone to economic uncertainty, regardless of the broader climate. So, I don't really think about the commercial side of things; I just focus on being a platform for authors who want to get their work out there. It's true we operate at a loss, but the more publishers out there, the more voices, and I like to think that the value of dissonance outweighs that of cents.'

Both publishers are active on Twitter and Facebook, and New Binary Press is involved with 'novelling', a form that combines text, video and sound. It has also been involved with Graham Allen's ground-breaking digital poem *Holes*. Although not stepping back into some kind of native conservatism, they



Lisa Frank and John Walsh of Doire Press.



James O'Sullivan, founder of New Binary Press, alongside award-winning Irish poet Leanne O'Sullivan.

are Irish publishers and that raises the question in a globalised, electronic world, and a less homogeneous Ireland, if there is such a thing as Irish literature any more, as opposed to literature from Ireland.

The answer is both yes and no. John Walsh at Doire comments: 'There is both. A book like Breda Wall Ryan's *In a Hare's Eye* can only be identified as "Irish" and could not have been written by someone who has not experienced personal and particular elements of Irish

culture. Sometimes books explore very specific elements of Irish culture, like Michael Whelan's *Peacekeeper*, about Irish UN Forces in war zones. On the other hand, many modern Irish writers veer away from Irishness. For example, in Helena Mulhern's *Ferenji and Other Stories* the setting is mostly Africa and Afghanistan. In William Wall's *Hearing Voices/Seeing Things* the characters, the prose and the take on reality are at once steeped in Irishness and then go far

beyond that into international dimensions.'

James O'Sullivan is equally embracing: 'There will always be Irish writing, and that has nothing to do with the origins of the author or publisher; rather, it is literature that is embedded in the very soul of our island. That can come from many perspectives, people and places. While it can be hard to define, you know it when you see it. Irish writing will never lose its fundamental traits, its desire to problematise nation, identity, religion. We live in a globalised world, but it still means something to be Irish, or to be of Ireland.'

And what of the physical book itself? Lisa at Doire Press is clear: 'I think the physical book and the e-book will co-exist. There will always be those who love the whole experience of the physical book, and there will always be those, especially the younger generations, who think everything is better on their smartphone or tablet. The hype was huge over the e-book when it was first introduced but for many people the interest didn't last. They missed the smell and feel of the book.'

At New Binary Press, which has embraced the digital world, James is even more emphatic: 'I hope that we will always have books, because books are beautiful. We publish a lot of born-digital literature—we're one of the first in Ireland—but there will always be a place for the book at my press.'

'This isn't just because of books' material and cultural importance. It's because they are far more liberating than the digital. If you buy a physical book, it's yours for life, and can be passed down for generations to come. You cannot say the same for e-books, which are based on a format that will probably be obsolete in a decade. Also, the technologies we are forced to use in the publishing world are largely proprietary. People want content on Kindle and iTunes, and that demand has established a dangerous axis of power to which the physical book is an antidote.'

Who knows what the future holds for books? But with these Irish presses, there seems, at the very least, to be one. ■

Where books begin

Alissa MacMillan

Writing is a solitary activity, but writing groups are thriving, making it more social, fulfilling a need and helping writers to write. A good group can remind you not to be boring, says poet John McAuliffe. It can raise your standards, fire up ambition and make you aware that there are readers out there. You learn from what other people are doing. When Maria Murphy wrote her first novel, a writing group was essential. Because of the feedback and encouragement, *For the Love of Martha* (Poolbeg; pictured) went from a novella to a time-travelling novel. It made the book, she says.

Groups meet in libraries, pubs, clubs, schoolhouses. The set-ups vary, but there are some common features. Usually one person emerges to take charge; there's a core of committed members; they meet about every fortnight; the best size is 8–12 people.

Aims often differ, explains John Martin, who is in two groups in Kildare. Prose is common, but so are other genres. Members of Murphy's group, the Naas Harbour Writers, started on poetry before moving on.

McAuliffe, Co-Director of the Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester, recognises a writing group as key to his formation as a poet. While a student in Galway, he joined Bridge Mills, a writers' group aligned with leftist and feminist activism. There he encountered some heavy hitters, all 'unforgiving readers, in the best possible sense'. Naturally anxious, McAuliffe found the group both confirming and nerve-racking.

Formats vary, but it's common for members to bring short pieces to read aloud. 'It's then you really see the mistakes,' Murphy explains. 'You see how often you've repeated a word; how the

flow is or isn't there.'

Some things help—writing exercises, putting poems in a hat, speakers, even biscuits. Martin once had members pick a painting at an arts festival and then write about it, reading their works as a festival event. Groups often organise events, through outposts like the Limerick Writers' Centre or the Munster Literature Centre, and often undertake joint projects. The Mitchelstown Writers' Group have published their second collection, *Another Mitchelstown Miscellany*. David O'Doherty, of the Cork-based

Virgin Slate, explains that they used to create collections but now there is no appetite for it.

Martin agrees about the value of a core: 'Once you're in a group for a while, people begin to trust each other'. McAuliffe also notes the need for people you trust, especially as you learn to take critique. He has learned to listen selectively, but found, as a knee-rattling newbie, that

'there were no excuses for a single word or line'. That kind of respect raises the bar. The process also helped him to see writing as a craft.

Groups often have a life cycle. Murphy sees them as something from which you move on, not necessarily a negative. For her second novel (*Rescued*, 2016), the publisher's deadline was enough for her to crank out chapters. McAuliffe, too, finds that 'there are times in your writing life when you don't need that censorious feeling—when you can try anything, without critique'. And even, perhaps, without thoughts of getting published.

Martin finds that many are in it mainly for the process. It's a good thing in itself, agrees McAuliffe: writing to write, and not always going it alone. ■

