

TLC Showcase

DEIRDRE SHANAHAN

Introduction to the novel	2
Extract from the Novel: Birds of Erin	4
About the Writer	10

Introduction to *Birds of Erin*

Birds of Erin is about exile, alternating between self imposed and desired. It is set in England and Ireland over 70 years, combining family saga with an exploration of guilt, work, love, notions of home and exile as well as the question of whether crimes ever go unpunished. The novel explores the question of whether John can ever settle in England especially with the guilt he carries and whether his children can. The first half is told through John's point of view. The second half of the novel, alternates between John's point of view and his daughter Laoise's.

*

John (known as the Irish Sean on his arrival in London) is running away from his past, trying to layer his life in order to forget his involvement in the accident of his work mate, Quilligan. John comes to London to work in the late 1940's and inadvertently causes the injury and death to a work-mate. Fragments of the past come back, haunting him until he has to confront them. The novel seeks to show the strains and delights of a family over decades from when Sean comes to live in England.

Birds of Erin starts in England with John in his garden, setting up a water feature and swings back into the past of just after the war when he has arrived in England. Driven by twin desires to hide from actions which caused the death of a man and a burning desire to make money, his life becomes entangled in a series of poor decisions. He borrows excessively to build a house in Ireland, while his business in England fails. He is torn with ambition for his children but unable to help his aimless son whose life unravels.

The novel starts in the 1980's the day of the wedding of Martha, one of John's daughters. It spools back to the late nineteen forties when he first came to England, following his time until arriving at the point of the wedding. This is mid-way in the novel and from then until the end, the narrative alternates between John's point of view and that of his daughter Laoise. Through her we see the point of view of his children, the fall-out from his decisions and the gradual fragmentation of the family as it adjusts to losses and departures.

The critique from Jude Cook, who read for The Literary Consultancy, was a great boost as it meant the whole novel had been read as one piece. Because of its form, and coverage of decades, I had concerns about it as a whole. Did it all fit together? Did the characters carry the novel? The report was very positive and gave me enormous confidence. The report made me see the novel in dimensions I had not realised and made me more determined to seize its potential. A professional objective evaluation of the whole was invaluable and I could not have moved forward without it.

Birds of Erin, by Deirdre Shanahan

Extract

London 1981

If it were not for the sun glinting on the pool of rainwater in the slight dip of the lawn, John would have thought he was back home in Cloghan, swiping the earth with a clean cut of the *slane*. Ever since he could manage the grip of one, he had worked on the bog every May along with his cousins and others from his village. But the sun told him all he needed to know. It was a clean bright day after sudden rain, allowing him to check on the little statue. He jabbed the shovel, the pressure of the grip whitening his knuckles as the blade cut into the soil. London Clay but he needed to get this job done and get back to the house and dress for the wedding.

Clods of earth stickened. His fingers reddened with pressure. His back tightened. He had lost the ease of a young man. He had to keep reminding himself he had not the strength or agility he used to have. He wiped his warm forehead and pushed down on the shoulder of the blade, hitting a quarrel of stones. Scattering them. One knocked against his toe. Mud flicked onto the blade. A fat globule slid to his shoe. He should have worn the heavy, old ones kept for outside. Kneeling, he brushed off the mud. Jagged slivers of broken crockery with a wavy decorative line lay at his feet. A glimpse of a pattern that might have been on his mother's jug. Picking up the pieces. She was at the door of the house as he left that day, her arm raised in a wave as he boarded the neighbours trap for the journey to the station. He lay down his palm on the soil to steady himself straightening up.

Febrile soil broke in his fingers, lodging behind his nails. A trail of dirt. Like there used to be, though God knows, this was not as easy as it once was. He could have lifted shovelfuls all day in his youth when he cracked open the earth. Splitting it. Firing in the heave of all his strength. This soil was thick and dark. Strong enough to hold the Italian-style water feature. A chubby, naked fella, his stomach and backside fat as a spud, held a tray aloft from which, when he had made the connections and settled the piping, would stream a continuous strain of water. Moira would like it even if she would not like the cost. He would have preferred the figures of three girls dancing, their robes flowing like water, reminding him of their daughters, although, the

notion of his girls dancing in dresses little more than underclothes, was unnerving. He stabbed in deeper. The soil broke into slodges. The warmth of the work seeped in, the back of his neck warming. He was not dressed for this. And would need the devil of a good wash when he got in. Skin on the pads of his palm was softening. Damn it. Blisters. He wiped his moist palm on his trousers and gripped the spade tighter.

The statue was unsteady but off cuts would give support. He checked the shed. Tucked in the corner of the garden, masked by the silver birches, it was ruined with years of wear. The boxy shape was like his grandfather's hen house. As a lad he had sought eggs, loving the oozy warmth of the straw in the low dark. He had sought in every hole and crevice for the rich spoils of the fat golden brown hen. A pin prick of bird-song caught. The shed was not the hen-house and could never be. He ran his palm on an overhang of asphalt roofing. Eaten with time, it split and cracked and a golden smudgy moss glowed an edge of velvet. The window frames were loose and door had worn wooden panels where grainy splinters broke even though he had nailed new strips of wood across the weakened parts.

The shed leant to one side and needed replacing. An old spade and fork leant against the wall. He had taken them from a site years ago but whether it was in London or up the country he could not recall. In between the prongs of the fork, particles of dried mud clung, hardened since he worked the garden of their first house, laying a path and setting out flower beds. Ronan used to toddle in and play with the little drawers of nails and screws, so that later, a chisel would be found wedged behind the lawn mower or a plane pushed behind jars of nails.

He turned, knocking against a tool-box. A spirit-level slipped and fell. A wave of rising dust shimmered in the air. He picked it up, its long liquid eye, darkly green as Pike's he had fished as a lad. The bubble travelled within the oblong glass. Complete. Solitary. Imprisoned in the smooth, golden-brown wood. Shame needled him. He should not have taken it. He had made little use of it other than making shelves. Unlike Quilligan. He had said, 'I work with wood. A carpenter. I'm not meant for this job.' But what was taken, was taken. He bent, searching for wood. His back was tight. Old bones creaking. The door of heaven opening. Though he might end up in the other place.

"Dad. Dad," a voice carried over the trees and bushes. "Where are you? It's time to come in and change."

Laoise. He tipped his head to hear better. She was always the one to find him. Of all his children, she loved the garden as much as he did, finding him when he hid in the shed for peace, from when she was the height of his knees and he used to unroll lengths of string for potato rills. As soon as she could walk, she padded on the soil, leaving her little imprint. He showed her how to dip in her tiny hands and place a spud there and there, at intervals in a straight line. Not too close. With room to spread.

If she came down to him, she would break the silence and they might chat before the day rolled ahead. Reassuring one another on how it would run. He let the door swing open on its greasy hinge. Too late. Her voice faded. The garden showed only the Rhododendrons and roses, Camellias and Honeysuckle, and the Irises standing like soldiers. She must have lost heart and walked clean away, back up the lawn to the house. A shame. They had only brief times, with her busy at work. If she had found him, he might have raised his eyes to her and told how this week, the first in April, thirty years ago, he had come to England, how he had been a different person then, with even a different name, he was still getting used to it.

*

The slick of his shovel broke the earth. Thick and smooth to the lip, London clay, the lads said. Sean pressed down and hefted a clod. Down and up. His boots were heavier each day with lumps of earth sticking. Warm air breathed on his neck and his back ached. He hacked, charging at the earth so that sprays of dust exploded, drying his face. He needed strength. This was not for the faint hearted and he was no longer the lad of fifteen who cried when a fork slipped on his foot. He pushed the wheelbarrow to the hut the far side. He washed his hands and dried them on a piece of 'The Daily Sketch,' which the gaffer had left. A picture showed the King inspecting a bomb site in East London. Earth spewed. A hurl of broken mounds and shattered houses like rotten teeth. Charred and cracked walls and buildings. The article said people wanted to return to homes even if they were damaged. Plucky ones. He was not sure he would do that.

Nearly 7 and he had been up since 5. His left knee throbbed. Always in the afternoon, near the end of a long day closing. His body was wracked. The ditch, was said to be to support a tower for a bridge to hold a road dug on, sleeves rolled to the elbow, skin on his palm hardening as he hefted the shovel into the ground. He kept on, ripping the earth as the day warmed. Drills shattered the earth, grinding. In the distance,

where stones and grass had to be cleared, bulldozers roamed like huge animals in a wilderness. The mouths of mixers gasped while hour after hour, he raised the pick axe, slugging it down in sheer and empty repetition.

He walked across to the van where McCaffrey was blocked in hard black letters along the side. Three fellas were bundled in the back while a stocky man with a woollen cap pulled down to his ears, sat with Flynn.

"Hiya Tom."

"Dan. Howareyedoin'?"

"I never saw you last night. Where were you?"

The voices carried. Friends. All friends. Nabbing bits of cigarettes between themselves. Trucks with cement lined on the slip road. A mixers mouth was wide open. Piles of sand and gravel spread. It was like a desert. Land that gave up nothing except what it could be made into. A road. A road heading into the depths of England, cutting through fields and villages but the making of it paying well. He would stick it out. For this year at least.

"All in?" Flynn called, over his shoulder. "I don't want to waste precious time." A flourish of a red scarf showed from the top of his shirt, as if he was going to a dance or a wedding.

They drove for an hour, past rows of houses in dense roads of terraces. Making good speed of up to forty, Sean guessed. Tucked in the back, pushed against an elbow. Like birds in a nest, his grandfather might have said. One Spring day, they had walked miles and the old man had pointed out a sparrows nest tucked tightly in the eaves of a house. Tiny ones flittered to a rise of land. A family of birds living in it, the old man said. *Alt na nGealbhan*, Hill of Sparrows. He had said Sparrows had been around at the time of Our Lord and were even mentioned in the Gospels, leaving Sean wondering if his grandfather was not as old as the bible itself.

At 'The Crown,' they scrambled out onto the pavement, stood and stamped their feet to brush off the cold. He would rather have gone back to the house, to the room for a lie down but there was little company in a kettle and tea with no milk and a draught.

The windows glowed blood red and vibrant green in swirls and lashes while the stone brick had ornate ridges so he might have thought it was a castle. Standing

back from the road, with a wide frontage for cars and vans, it had a dominance and grandeur had had never associated with pubs.

Flynn led, pushing open the doors of the saloon bar. A haze of warmth of beer and smoke. Talk and laughter roared.

"How are you?" the bar-man swiped a tea cloth over his shoulder.

"Fine out," Flynn called.

"Have another."

Sean's eyes tingled. Cries and shouts butted over his head. He followed on, an easier path to the bar.

"Tomorrow again?" Flynn turned to him with a skip of a laugh that betrayed he knew damn well that choice was not up to them.

"I hope so," Sean said, over the smoke and confusion of voices rubbing against each other.

"You'll make a packet," Flynn laughed, black eyes sharp, the severe line of his nose giving him a pinched look. "Have your fortune made in no time and be out of here." He pulled on his Woodbine.

In the light, he was older, the stain of a beard on him. He held up a one pound note to catch the eye of the bar-man.

"Will I take the load off you?" the bar-man smiled.

"You can. And we'll make a good night of it..." the man in the cap laughed. "Would you like a tip also?"

"What've you got?"

"Silver Galleon. Tomorrow in Doncaster. 3 to 1 on."

Sean pushed to the end of the counter. He was in the money but he had to make it last. He didn't want to be like the other lads with drinks on the slate. The trick with money was not spending it. Everyone, even the dumbest was good at that. A couple more years. He'd have it stashed. He ordered and took his drink to a corner.

"Up Galway," one of the lads with sandy hair, shouted.

"The Cork fellas'll win it," a man whose flash of dark hair fell in his eyes, shouted.

He'd never get a job like the Dublin lads who did neat, quick work as plumbers or electricians. A good bit of learning between them. They were not slamming up bricks and mortar. A *gombeen*, they had said amongst themselves, out of the fields with no knowledge but of soap and prayers. But if he stayed on, he might learn the skills off them. Information passed along. That was the trick. Make good use of it so he was not the one at the bottom stuck in the mud.

Through the door to the gents, two men were shunted outside by a bigger fella holding onto their collars. They would likely end up in a mess on the pavement, blood on their shirts and brows, a smell of piss on their trousers. They were no one he recognised. A roar of talk and the start of a song his father used to sing, rode over the tide of calls and shouts.

"... old Napper Tandy and I shook him by the hand ..."

"I was looking for you." Flynn tugged his arm.

It could not be the job, surely. He had made no slip ups. The first day on the job, he had picked up another man's shovel. But he had learnt.

"Is there a spare bed in your place? Could you fit in another?"

"I'd say so," Sean said.

"We've space enough, haven't we?" the fella who used all the milk, slapped Sean's back. "We've three doubles and only the four of us in it. Mrs Wilson'll be glad enough for the extra money."

"Your man, Quilligan needs a bed." Flynn nodded to a tall man with a light brown hair and a lean, square face. He had light grey blue and stood bright and lithe as a teacher. Or scholar.

"Of course," Sean said.

"A Clare man like yourself. Is it twenty three Ranleigh Road?" Flynn's face was beery with sweat.

Sean nodded. There was space in the bed but the room already held four.

About the Writer

Deirdre Shanahan's fiction has been published in Ireland, the USA and the UK in journals including, 'The Massachusetts Review,' 'The Southern Review,' 'Iowa Woman,' 'Paris / Atlantic,' 'Writing Women,' 'Passport,' and 'The Cimarron Review,' where she was featured in their International Series. Other stories have been shortlisted for prizes including, The Aidan Higgins Prose Competition, the Asham Award, the Willesden Herald Award, Impress Prize, Mslexia Competition judged by Tessa Hadley, the Fish Competition judged by Joseph O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain Competition, the Jane Austen Society Competition judged by Michele Roberts for which she won a writing retreat at Chawton House, the Lightship Publishing Award for which she won a mentorship and the Paris Literary Prize run by Shakespeare & Co Bookshop.



Some of her work was selected for WritersHub from Birkbeck, University of London and for Liars League, London. She was placed second in the inaugural writing award from Spread the Word and included in the prizewinning ebook anthology.

Her work is in anthologies from Fish Publishing edited by Joseph O'Connor as well as in others from Serpent's Tail, Honno Press edited by Michele Roberts, The Phoenix Book of Irish Short Stories, from which her story was singled out in a review in The Irish Times and New Writing from Vintage / British Council.

Most recently, she was invited by Cathy Galvin to read at The Word Factory, Waterstones, Piccadilly with Ben Okri and David Vann.