

# The Crannóg Questionnaire

Nuala O'Connor

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**How would you introduce yourself as a writer to those who may not know you?**

I'm passionate about fiction, primarily – I write short stories and novels. I also write poetry and essays. I've a particular love for historical fiction and women's untold stories. My latest novel *Becoming Belle* is set in Victorian London and Galway and is about the scandal surrounding a woman who married into the Irish aristocracy.

**When did you start writing?**

When I was a kid – I wrote poems and stories (all awful) and I kept a diary (also pretty rubbishy). I came second in a national poetry comp at the age of nine with a poem about Traveller children written in Irish. The comp was judged by Michael Hartnett and I remember my mother's reverence around him when we met for the prize ceremony. That stayed with me and gave me a quiet confidence in my own writing.

**Do you have a writing routine?**

Yes. I'm very protective of my writing time and get cranky when I'm thwarted by mundanities. I like to be at my desk about 8.30am and I stay until about midday, with a break for a cuppa. I write best in the morning and I slip easily into writing mode. Like any habit, it's a normal part of

my day and I just get to it. I'm a better person to be around, having written.

**When you write, do you picture somehow a potential audience or do you just write?**

No, I don't have an audience in mind. I don't think about anything other than what I'm doing. Sometimes I can see where my editor will sigh and want to change things and I rehearse my defence. Some things are negotiable, some things are not. Language – *my* language – is sacred to me and I defend obscure words and colloquialisms strongly.

**Some writers describe themselves as planners, while others plunge right in to the writing. Would you consider yourself a planner or a plunger?**

Plunger. I am a planner in real life but I have freedom to roam and be unrestricted when I write. That helps me enormously in my day to day life – I often wonder how non-writers take care of their mental health. Writing is my comfort, my sanity, my joy.

**How important are names to you in your books? Do you choose the names based on liking the way they sound or for the meaning? Do you have any name choosing resources you recommend?**

I'm obsessed with names and with choosing the right ones. I keep name lists and I want to steal real people's names all the time. But I restrain myself.

I choose names because they're beautiful or because they're perfect for a particular character. I do a good bit of research to make sure a name fits. Novel #6 will be about a woman called Stella. This has been my plan for years (I've been poking at this novel from a distance for a long time) but now I have a very dear friend called Stella, and another friend just named her baby Stella, and it's suddenly wall-to-wall Stellas in my life but the name fits, so I will use it.

I find names everywhere, in the newspaper, in spam, in other books. I'm just careful to split the first names and surnames, not to co-opt people's actual names.

**Is there a certain type of scene that's harder for you to write than others? Love? Action? Erotic?**

Plotty scenes. I mean, something has to happen, of course, in a story or novel but I'm disinterested in plot as a concept. I like the 'what-happens'

to grow out of my characters' faults and I never know what will happen until I'm right in there with them.

**Tell us a bit about your non-literary work experience please.**

Current? Or previous? All my work these days is connected to writing (teaching, mentoring, reviewing, readings, panels etc.) In former lives I worked in a youth hostel, a theatre, a writers' centre, a translation agency, a mobile phone shop, a computer company, a wholefood shop, restaurants and hotels galore, a book shop, a library, various unis. I'm not great at 9 to 5. I like the freedom of being self-employed though the pay is shit and the workload crazy.

**What do you like to read in your free time?**

I read twenty books at a time. Research for my novel-in-progress, mostly, but also books of essays, novels, and short fiction collections. Currently: Peter Orner's superb essays on short fiction, life and writing; I just finished Eugene McCabe's sublime novel *Death and Nightingales*. I have Bobbie Ann Mason's short story collection *Love Life* on the go. I rarely read what's current – I've too much to catch up on. Oh, I'm also reading various classics and I re-read David Sedaris if I need a laugh.

**What one book do you wish you had written?**

*Silk* by Alessandro Baricco. Ostensibly a novella about a silk merchant who travels to the Far East and falls in love, but really it's a comment on the strength, resourcefulness and patience of women. It is beautifully written and translated (I read the Guido Waldman translation most recently and I thought he did an excellent job.)

**Do you see writing short stories as practice for writing novels?**

Nope. They are entirely different forms that provide entirely different 'hits' for the reader and the use of different writing muscles for the writer. Short stories are vigorous and gappy. Novels are more ruminative and tell-it-all. I love both but the short story is harder altogether to write because it has to be a particular artistic experience and it must have active absences – the reader has to work harder with short stories and needs to be willing to do that work. Novels are comfort blankets, short stories are more like a lumpy cushion to the back that can be wildly comfortable given time.

**Do you think writers have a social role to play in society or is their role solely artistic?**

Through art you can help people understand what it means to be human. You can provide solace. Artists can be politically active or not as they so desire. It comes down to personality whether you want to march out with placards. You can be anarchic and not leave home, though.

**Tell us something about your latest publication, please.**

My novel *Becoming Belle* is about real life, proto-feminist music hall girl Isabel Bilton who, after various troubles, falls in love with an Irish viscount and elopes with him. His father gets between them – the Earl finds Belle scandalous and common – and the book looks at how the lovers manage the court case the Earl cooks up against them, and other difficulties.

**Can writing be taught?**

You can teach students to write better sentences, to understand what good fiction, poetry etc. looks and sounds like. Only the ones with tenacity will keep writing, though. Being a full-time writer is not for the faint-hearted. I think, maybe, all these taught courses in unis raise expectations a bit too much. Not everyone has a book in them. Full stop.

**Have you given or attended creative writing workshops and if you have share your experiences a bit please?**

I've been to workshops, good and bad. If you come out of a writing class having learned one useful thing, then it's been worth it. Some writers are poor teachers, some are great. I teach and I love it in the moment, but I don't chase down teaching jobs as they are so time consuming, and I prefer to stay at home and actually write. I love when students are engaged and interested. I don't enjoy teaching people who don't read, or who seem to have few opinions on the work we look at etc. I love teaching older people – they are great talkers and always have brilliant personal stories.

**Flash Fiction: how driven is the popularity of this form by social media like Twitter and its word limits? Do you see twitter as somehow leading to shorter fiction?**

I don't think Twitter has much to do with it other than there is a very active and supportive flash community on Twitter, but they are usually linking to e-zines and sharing info on calls for subs, rather than sharing story tweets. Very short stories have been around since Aesop and the Bible, since Poe and Chekhov. I've always loved fragments and short

forms, I devoured Ivor Cutler as a teenager. I'm a fan of small things and flash fiction feeds that passion perfectly for me.

**Finally what question do you wish that someone would ask about your writing, and how would you answer it?**

EEK, what? Well, I wish someone would say, 'Nuala, do you need a day off from writing?' And then force me to take that day off. I think I'm over committed. I have to, in the morning, resist the urge to shove my family out of my way so that I can get to my desk. I have a new mantra: 'There *are* enough hours in the day.' I'm trying to be less hysterical about the constant urge to write, the need to be always in that headspace. I suppose I crave it because, for me, it's freedom, but I need to find other ways to relax and wind down and just be. I'm trying to teach myself these things but there's a great big resisto-tron inside me...I'm working on it!

**Finally, finally some Quick Pick Questions:**

**E-books or print?**

Both.

**Dog or cat?**

Cat.

**Reviews - read or don't read?**

Always read.

**Best city to inspire a writer: London, Dublin, New York (Other)?**

All three but, for loyalty's sake, I'll pick my hometown, Dublin. Also I'm doing a residency in Paris next year for a month, so no doubt there'll be inspo there.

**Favourite meal out: breakfast, lunch, dinner?**

Lunch. Less formal than dinner.

**Weekly series or box sets?**

Oooh, I'm very impatient. Box sets.

**Favourite colour?**

Blue.

**Rolling Stones or Beatles?**

Neither.

**Night or day?**

You can't have one without the other. At a push, night.