

The Crannóg Questionnaire

Niamh Boyce

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

I've published two novels, *The Herbalist* and *Her Kind*, both of which were based on real life trials, the most recent, *Her Kind*, was inspired by the sorcery trial of Alice Kytler. I've also published a poetry collection, *Inside the Wolf*, and write short stories. Though my novels are historical, and combine fact and fiction, most of my other writing is contemporary, and a little more surreal.

When did you start writing?

I've written since I can remember. Notebooks were where I reflected, ranted, drew, played with ideas, wrote poems, cleared my head, puzzled, made lists, promises, resolutions. Though I wrote nightly and read constantly, I never considered publishing anything, or really saw what I was doing as writing at all. I often wrote poems, to try and catch moments, make sense of feelings. I worked with images mostly, and alternated between writing poems and making painting to explore the same subject. This practice was something that stayed at the edge of my life, something I fitted in around everything else. Writing for real, or writing in a definite focused way, didn't happen until 2008 after workshops with John MacKenna. I began writing short stories, and became hooked. John is a brilliant writer and a generous writing teacher.

That was a pivotal time creatively. *Crannóg* published *Wild Cats Buffet* in 2009 – it was my first published story. I was thrilled.

Do you have a writing routine?

It varies according to my workload, but I prefer to write in the morning nowadays. I used to be a night writer – I could work till 4 am writing – but I smoked back then, and I think that helped keep me going. If I have to, I'll write late into the night, but I prefer to get the work done early, otherwise I'll be anxious that something will happen to stop me getting to the work. With novels, I write first drafts into a notebook, and type it up later. With stories, I tend to work on the laptop. If everything is going well, I will make new work early in the day, and I research in the evenings.

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

For a first draft – I don't think of a reader. I try not to think at all. I avoid having an 'idea' – and just write. My aim with writing at this stage is to surprise myself, to drift and remain uncensored. I don't worry about quality, or sense, or coherence. I thoroughly enjoy this stage, there is such potential, the work could be anything, go anywhere. Once the early draft is complete, I leave it aside, and then pick it up a few weeks later. At this stage, the only reader I have in mind is myself – so I revise for sense, get to know the characters better, rework scenes. I enjoy this stage too. Then there's the phase when I (mistakenly) think the novel is finished, and I print it out and read it with A Reader in mind. That's when I regret the fact that I don't plot and I wonder what in hell was I fecking thinking creating such chaos, and wonder will I ever find the story, or make sense of what I have written. I do not enjoy this stage. It is usually the longest and most challenging part of the process. That's when I go looking for inspirational quotes, and make diagrams, and list chapters, and list all the scenes I forgot to write, that a reader will need if they are ever going to make sense of the book.

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

I am a plunger. I cannot plan. I have tried to. After the process described above, I once outlined a whole novel – character arcs, story arcs, chapters etc ... once I had done that, I had zero interest in writing it.

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?

That's interesting – in terms of my novels, they're real characters mixed with fictional ones. With *Her Kind*, I kept the names of the six or so real people who were involved in the sorcery trial. Alice Kytler, Bassilia, Arnold Le Poer, Richard Ledrede, etc ... but with Petronella, who is central – I wanted to distinguish my fictional character from the real woman, in my own mind. I'm not entirely sure why, but I needed to do that to be able to write her story. I called my character Petronelle rather than Petronella. It was a tiny change, one letter – but it freed me creatively. I also used fourteenth-century sources to become familiar with the names of the times – the Liber Primus Kilkennius was very useful.

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

The suffering of women has often been an aesthetic exercise in literary fiction. A complete lack of anger, combined with exquisite suffering seems to be their lot. Because I love words, and images and metaphors – I had to examine that aspect of *Her Kind* and ask myself, 'am I making it beautiful?' Because it's not beautiful.

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

I have worked as an indexer, a chambermaid, factory worker, a researcher, a housing advice officer, a social policy officer, a community development worker, a community arts tutor and a librarian.

What do you like to read in your free time?

I love non-fiction that reads like fiction. *The Suspicions of Mister Whicher*, by Kate Summerscale was compelling. *The Darkened Room*, by Alex Owen is an excellent book on Spiritualism. *Montaillou* is a fascinating look at the fourteenth-century inquisition records of Jacques Fournier. P.V Glob's *The Bog People* is so moving and lyrical – Heaney was influenced by it. Fiction-wise, I loved Ali Smith's *Artful*, which weaves lectures on writing with a ghost story. I stay up through the night with Yrsa Sigurdadóttir's crime novels. I was really struck by *Pond* by Claire Louise Bennett. And *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk is just fantastic.

What one book do you wish you had written?

None, to be honest – but if I had to choose, it would be Angela Carter’s story *The Tiger’s Bride*, from her collection *The Bloody Chamber*.

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

They are different creatures, aren’t they? Not all novelists can write a decent short story, and not all short story writers can, or want to, write novels. Writing short stories isn’t practice, or a warm-up for the work of writing a novel – but because they require such attention to word choice and structure and scenes selection, I think writing them, or even trying to write them, will improve a writer.

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

That’s tricky. I have complicated and contradictory thoughts on that one. 1. I don’t think there can be such a thing as ‘solely’ artistic. Nothing is apolitical. To declare yourself apolitical is to align yourself with the status quo, with those in power. 2. I don’t want a social role in terms of my creative work. I want to write whatever comes. But whatever comes is often about power, and that’s political. 3. I hate the idea of having an agenda, I think it corrupts the creative instinct. 4. I can’t declare that I have no agenda, as (see above) ‘nothing is apolitical.’ 5. The role Irish artists have played in the past few years has been inspiring and brought change to our society. 6. I guess artists have a social role to play.

Tell us something about your latest publication, please.

My novel *Her Kind* has just been published by Penguin Random House. It’s a reimagining of The sorcery trial of Alice Kytler that occurred in fourteenth-century Kilkenny. The case was a landmark case in the history of the witchcraft trials, predating the European witchcraft trials by two hundred years. It’s been called an ‘atmospheric magical thriller’ by Hilary A. White in the *Sunday Independent*. It was shortlisted for the EU Prize for Literature; the judges called it ‘as searing a critique of our own time as Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*’.

Can writing be taught?

I believe it should be taught, and taught to everyone at a young age. It’s a tool. A mode of expression.

1. I think creativity is there for anyone to tap into, that there is healing and transformation to be accessed and that writing or art isn’t the

exclusive property of the talented. I think anyone who enjoys writing should write, and relish it.

2. Not everyone writes well, and even those who can write well often don't have what it takes to create a publishable story, or to finish a novel. There is the private realm, where we write for ourselves, or for a few – and there is the public realm, where we consider publication, authorship.

3. One does not have to automatically follow the other. If, by writing, we mean writing for publication, writing to become an author, only so much can be taught. Lots of people have talent, what they don't always have is the persistence, and a strong enough desire to tell their stories.

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

Before I began to write, I was a facilitator with a community development background – and I think that was a help when I began to teach writing workshops. I've taught creative writing for beginners, novel writing, fact to fiction, short story writing, etc ... I really enjoy this aspect of being a writer, especially when working on my Fact to Fiction courses. It seems to suit how my personality works. I really love seeing people tap into their creativity. I like discussing the nuts and bolts of fiction. I enjoy getting a lot done, in working intensively. We always write together. I think that's important. There's a magic that happens, when people write together. I came to writing myself through a writing workshop, so I think they have the potential to be transformative. Libraries often run free creative writing workshops, where they pay the writer, and people participate at no cost to themselves. So workshops are much more accessible than a longer course.

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?

It's hard to know, isn't it? Would flash exist without social media? I think so, it predates it – but the popularity is probably linked to our use of devices, and our shorter attention spans. I don't know if Twitter leads to shorter fiction, it seems to lead to shorter tempers. I've only begun to use it properly myself – so I don't have much of an insight into its ways.

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

This doesn't apply here, but ... When *The Herbalist* came out, I sometimes felt like wearing a big fake moustache (on panels in

particular) so people might mistake me for a Writer, and ask me about the actual writing (form, language, style, sentences or use of images, metaphors, anything ...) instead of asking me, so very often, about Gender, about the fact of being a 'Woman' writer, about writing strong 'Female' characters. When I was published back in 2013, I was quite surprised by this, at how my novel about a person coming of age was not seen as a universal story, in the way books by writers who didn't need fake moustaches were.

Finally, finally some Quick Pick Questions:

E-books or print?

Print every time.

Dog or cat?

Dog every time.

Reviews – read or don't read?

Read.

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

Paris

Favourite meal out: breakfast, lunch, dinner?

Lunch.

Weekly series or box sets?

Neither. The cinema.

Favourite colour?

Red.

Rolling Stones or Beatles?

The Beatles.

Night or day?

Night.