

## In Place of a Foreword: Encounter with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

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The recent publication of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Selected Stories* last September marks a very significant step for a writer who has never stopped being engaged in the art of storytelling. Her varied and intense writing career spans over almost thirty years, so this collection is a sort of celebration of one of the deepest, most sensitive, resonant and effective voices in contemporary Irish fiction and writing. Ní Dhuibhne has received a wide range of Arts Council bursaries and awards, her novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2000 and she was awarded the prestigious Irish Pen Award in 2015, an honour given, among others, to Edna O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston and Frank McGuinness. A very special moment of official recognition was the Symposium "The Writing of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne" organized by the School of English, Drama and Creative Writing at University College Dublin held in January this year.

It is therefore a great honour for *Studi irlandesi* to have the opportunity to publish a new short story by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "The Kingfisher Faith", which in terms of content, plot, narrative organization and style in a way is a sort of continuity and a new departure in her writing.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has published novels engaged with different concerns, such as environmental issues in the futuristic novel *The Bray House* (1990), the rite of passage of a summer in the Gaeltacht in *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), and the present (now past) of Celtic Tiger Ireland in *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007). She has written fiction for children and young readers as well as plays and novels in the Irish language, has participated in the collective volume *Ladies' Night at Finbars' Hotel* edited by Dermot Bolger (2000), and in the collective comic crime novel *Sister Caravaggio* edited by Peter Cunningham (2014). A professional folklorist, Ní Dhuibhne has published extensively on different aspects of Irish folklore, also taking part in the innovative Urban Folklore Project in the 1980s. She taught Creative Writing at UCD for a number of years until her retirement in 2016, an experience she describes in the volume edited by Anne Fogarty, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Eibhear Walshe, *Imagination in the Classroom* (2013).

However, it is in the realm of the short story that Ní Dhuibhne's voice finds a most suitable and effective expression. Her first collection *Blood and Water* came out in 1988, showing her special narrative strategy of interlacing old stories and their modern counterpart, for example in the pioneering story "Midwife to the Fairies", in which her postmodern rewriting of a traditional tale interlaces with the ancient legend, graphically rendered in italics, and cross-references provide modern contextualization to traditional motifs. For example, the midwife of title is called to assist a young woman in labour in the same way as in the traditional story she is summoned to assist a fairy woman in labour.

A similar strategy appears in stories from the collections *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991) and especially *The Inland Ice* (1997), in which a rewriting of the traditional tale "The Story of the Little White Goat" with the title of "The Search for the Lost Husband" provides a thematic background for the stories in the whole collection. In *The Pale Gold of Alaska* (2000) Ní Dhuibhne mixes her background in folklore with a greater concern for contemporary Ireland, which becomes a priority in *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012), whose title comes from an Irish proverb – "Ar Scath a Chéile a Mhateireann na Daoine", people live in one another's shelter. The fictional estate of Dunroon Crescent in South County Dublin is a setting for potential disorder, and danger may come from your neighbours as well as from outside. A variety of motifs and themes intertwines with the main plot, drug addiction in "The Shelter of Neighbours", anorexia in "Bikes I Have Lost", the difficulty of communication between generations and sexes in "The Man Who Had No Story" and "It is a Miracle". Characters occasionally migrate from story to story, like Audrey who returns fleetingly in "Red-Hot Poker" as someone who "suffers from depression", and Finn O'Keefe, the writer of "The Man Who Had No Story" who reappears also in "The Shelter of Neighbours". Story organization is often based on Ní Dhuibhne's usual alternation of past and present, which highlights the obsessive presence of the past with which it is not easy to come to terms.

This is what happens in "The Kingfisher Faith", which exploits consolidated narrative strategies in Ní Dhuibhne's fiction.

The story opens on the *ille et nunc* of space and time: "The plane landed in Dublin at 8.00 a.m.", looking backward and forward simultaneously. The end of the long flight from Australia also marks a new beginning for Kelley, who is moving into her new house that was being refurbished during her absence. Little by little, fragments of her past life emerge, she has children and grandchildren in Brisbane and in Spain, she is learning Spanish. "Spanish. Why learn it? His wife speaks perfect English, the little boy is bilingual. They don't even want her to speak Spanish, it's pure self-indulgence [...]". Kelley lost her husband due to prostate cancer three years ago and this is basically the reason for leaving "the big bungalow by the sea where she

had lived with [Erik] for thirty-five years” and moving to the Dublin north side. Unfortunately work is still under way, with “a huge electric saw on the kitchen floor, and a cement mixer in the back yard”, so her new beginning in her new house is to be delayed. There is something else that causes some sort of delay. Three letters with the Breast Check logo await her. “There were three envelopes and three letters [...] They had written three times”.

The narrative core of the story revolves around Kelley facing the second step of investigation, a common experience for a lot of women underlies the story, which is organised into five sections, four of them with a subtitle as well as a number. This is quite unusual in Ní Dhuibhne’s fiction, which exploits the narrative device of subtitles only in the long short story, or novella, “Bikes I Have Lost” from *The Shelter of Neighbours*.

“The Kingfisher Faith” does not provide a subtitle for the first part, which acts as an introduction by setting Kelley’s return from Brisbane. This is a stylistic choice as the paratextual element of the story’s title introduces the bird imagery that underlies the text and is a catalyst already in the first paragraph. Enjoying the Australian “burning sun” and “clear skies”, Kelley feels “a bird, a migratory bird, a swallow sailing swiftly above her own life”. The metaphor is emphasised by the use of alliteration, shedding light on the bird’s flight as well as the sense of freedom embedded in flying. Bird images are evoked later on when at the hospital everything is “sky blue”, but only in the final part, Part 5, “The Kingfisher”, does the kingfisher of the title become prominent.

Traditionally birds are messengers of the gods and a kingfisher is generally considered a symbol of peace, prosperity, abundance, grace, it is all in all a very positive sign. The Australian laughing kookaburra belongs to the same family, which may create an implicit cross-reference to Kelley’s trip to Australia. In Greek mythology, Alcyone dies of grief at her husband’s death by drowning and follows him into the sea, to be then transformed by the gods into a kingfisher as a sign of her devotion. A kingfisher is notably a water bird and water imagery appears in the story in the simile used to describe Kelley’s expectations for her new house, “But today was the day when the house would reveal itself to her in all its bare beauty, like Botticelli’s Venus rising from the *waves*, the *tide* of the builder’s energy and creativity [...] It would be whole and lovely as a *shell*” (emphasis added).

Though explicitly mentioned only in the final part, the kingfisher and its imagery underlie the whole story, marking the love between Kelley and Erik, and the context of illness and disease and the process of grieving. This takes place in particular in part 3, “Ladies in Sky Blue”. The five sections of the story are uneven in length, and in all of them Ní Dhuibhne exploits the narrative strategy of inserting blank spaces, gaps, among paragraphs, often made of just one sentence or even one single word or exclamation as a way to add emphasis. This happens in part 2, “The Letter”, to convey the wor-

rying message of the three letters, but especially in part 3, which is also the longest. Anxiety seeps through the three one-sentence paragraphs marked by gaps as the receptionist “Doesn’t even ask her to spell her name”. / “Nobody knows how to spell Kelley’s surname.” / “This person obviously knows something”. Likewise, Part 3 closes with a list of three names and surnames, again separated by textual blanks.

Part 3 is also characterised by the use of the present tense, which conveys the immediacy of the second check procedure, while memories of her husband’s illness and death shift to the past tense. The alternated use of past and present is a distinguished marker of Ní Dhuibhne’s fiction highlighting the inseparable overlapping of memories and the present moment. “The Kingfisher faith” also presents a high number of alliterations, “the front foyer is full – full of women and not a few men”, or “Their shoes or sandals, sticking out from under the gowns”, of similes, “The place is as silent as a tomb”, of direct questions, “Are all the silent women people who have got the second letter, calling them back?”, of repetitions, “*People* are always saying – *people* in newspapers, *people* on radio shows, *people* of that sort [...]” (emphasis added), of oxymorons, “sweet sorrow”, and all these stylistic choices merge with intertextual references to literary and non-literary texts somehow related to death and the process of grieving. The sentence “There is nobody who will be devastated when Kelley sheds off the mortal coil” is an open indirect quotation from *Hamlet*; on the other hand, Elizabeth Kübler Ross’s work on the various stages of reaction for cancer patients dominates the second half of Part 3.

In Part 4, entitled “The Test” – this being actually both a mammogram and an ultra sound scan – the fragmentation of the text into one-line or one-sentence or one-word units intensifies, and leaves Kelley in a further waiting room, in a limbo. The story of Kelley’s tests remains unfinished as Part 5, “The Kingfisher” moves back to the past tense to shed light on the memory of a glimpse of a kingfisher, “the flash of blue”, whose suddenness is marked once again by the stylistic choice of a one-sentence paragraph, soon to be followed by one word: “Kingfisher”. The lack of definitive or indefinite article personifies the bird and makes the encounter even more special (“She had never seen one before”), a nearly magic event leaving the end of the story open on a feeling of extraordinary joy that surprises Kelley with faith in the future: “It was, she thought, a good omen”. “It” has a double meaning, this being the kingfisher according to tradition, but also the freshly perceived feeling of surprise, a sign of life and continuity.

*Studi irlandesi* is grateful to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne for considering the Italian scene for the publication of a previously unpublished story and for offering the readers of the Review the possibility to encounter the wide spectrum and perspective of her fiction. *Go raibh míle maith agat, Éilís.*