

# The Crannóg Questionnaire

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

I came to writing relatively late, not having a word of fiction published until after I turned 40. My first story to appear in print was in *Crannóg* in 2011. My debut collection of short stories, *Dinosaurs on Other Planets*, was published in 2015 by The Stinging Fly Press. In 2018 I edited an anthology of work by writers who are also lawyers, called *Counterparts*, which was published by The Stinging Fly Press, proceeds to Peter McVerry Trust. I'm currently completing my first novel, titled *The Art of Falling*.

**When did you start writing?**

In 2009, when a sudden illness meant I had to stop working as a solicitor. When I was at home, ill, I started to write and I've never gone back to legal practice.

**Do you have a writing routine?**

I used to have quite a solid writing routine: I would drop the kids to school then go on to a cafe and write in a notebook for a couple of hours. On returning home I might put some of what I'd written that morning onto the computer, if I'd made enough progress, or else I would work on edits of something I'd written previously. In the evenings, I would aim to

write for a couple of hours after dinner. Since becoming a published writer, I do a lot of readings/events, also a lot of teaching, and I don't have that routine anymore. Also, with my three kids now at teenager stage, I find I'm spending a lot of my time in taxi driver mode! I'm hoping to adopt a new writing routine soon.

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

I don't picture a potential audience, it's more about trying to figure out what the story is, and who the characters are, and trying to get them on the page. As I come to understand the story better, I do try to remain aware of whether I am communicating it effectively, whether I am forging a connection with 'The Reader', that illusive creature who I see as being a different entity to an audience.

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

I always feel that I need a plan or outline or scaffolding of some kind, but then the story rarely turns out anything like the plan I began with. Even though I've come to know this by now, I still like to draw up plans – I think it helps me keep moving the story forward, bit by bit, even if the plan insists on changing as I go. The plan acts like a comfort blanket, I think – there's reassurance in knowing that it exists.

**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 don't have any name-choosing resources to recommend. Mostly, a name will simply feel right for a character. Then, as the story takes shape, there will be various reasons why the names, like the plan, will change. Sometimes this is a prosaic reason, for example too many names beginning with the same letter, or perhaps I will switch to a name that better suggests a particular period in history. Sometimes it will be because I've got to know a character as the story develops, and I decide that another name would suit them better.

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

I find sex scenes difficult to write. And I also struggle with scenes that involve inflicting a lot of pain, whether emotional or physical, on my characters. It's hard to know how to get the balance of that right. There's already enough darkness and ugliness in the world, and if a writer is thinking of adding to that, then I believe she needs to be clear, in her own head, as to why she's doing it.

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

After leaving school, I went to work for Cork Corporation (as it was called back then) and went to college by night. I did a BA degree and a Law degree and subsequently practised as a solicitor for many years before becoming a writer. I practised in the public, private and voluntary sectors, with a particular interest in the area of Housing Law. I worked in the legal department of housing authorities, and also in-house as legal adviser for a housing charity. I did my Master's degree on legal structures around Tenant Participation in the Management of Social Housing.

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

Pretty much anything. When I buy a book, it's usually fiction, and I read a lot of short stories. When I go to the library, I'll pick up all kinds of books, for example all sorts of non-fiction, biographies, cookery books, books on theology, gardening, physics, psychology. Anything that catches my interest as I'm browsing the shelves, really. It's one of the things I love about libraries – it's possible to take a chance on a book that you mightn't necessarily buy. Or to dip in and out of lots of different books, that you mightn't want to read all the way through.

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

*The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante.

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

No, stories are definitely a different thing all to themselves! Short stories can do things that novels can't. And vice versa.

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

I think writers have no more or no less of a social role to play than any other members of society. I'm not sure that it's possible to detach art

from society anyway, given that art is a way of communicating and doesn't take place in a vacuum. Every piece of writing engages with society in some way or other, either through what it puts in or what it leaves out.

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

I am very happy to have a short story called 'A Partial List of the Saved' included in *Being Various*, the Faber Anthology of New Irish Short Stories edited by Lucy Caldwell. I won the 2019 Sunday Times Audible Short Story Award.

**Can writing be taught?**

Yes. One of the breakthrough moments for me in my writing journey was realising that it could. There are elements of craft that can be learned and applied, and once a writer is prepared to put in the time and the work then it's possible to learn how to write a story that works (even if it takes years!).

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

In 2010, and again in 2011, I attended a series of workshops run by the Munster Literature Centre in Cork and facilitated by Lori Manrique Hyland. They were fabulous, and it was through those workshops that I met my writing group, a group that is still going strong all these years later. Having writers I can trust to give me honest and useful feedback has been invaluable. I went to as many workshops as I could in those first years when I was starting to write. Now I teach a lot of writing workshops. Because reading and writing go together, like breathing in and breathing out, I like to teach creative writing by a mixture of studying stories by writers that I admire, trying to discover how they did what they did, and also by doing writing exercises in workshop that help generate new stories. The exercises also serve as a means of putting what the participants have (hopefully) just learned into practice.

**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 Flash is driven by Twitter or social media, though it is perhaps easier to promote via social media, because of its length. I see Flash as being a form that lies somewhere between poetry and the short story. Its popularity may have more to do with our increased openness to

hybrid forms of writing, than to Twitter. I don't see Twitter leading to shorter fiction, though I do think it leads to shorter and less nuanced debate, unfortunately. I find Twitter very useful for book/article recommendations though, and for finding out details of literary festivals, for example – it's an excellent virtual notice-board.

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

That's a tough one. But then there's always room for one more question about dead animals – I never seem to tire of talking about that!

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

**E-books or print?**

Definitely print.

**Reviews – read or don't read?**

I read the reviews for my first book. I don't know whether I will read the reviews for my next book. It might depend on what my head space is like when the time comes.

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

Cork people understand that Cork is best for everything. If I wasn't from Cork, I might say that anywhere at all offers a writer inspiration. Chekhov said give me an ashtray and tomorrow I will give you a story (I'm paraphrasing). There are layers of potential inspiration in all things, if we are prepared to interrogate them.

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

Breakfast.

**Weekly series or box sets?**

It used be that I hardly ever watched TV. Then my kids got Netflix and now I watch *Derry Girls* and *The Gilmore Girls* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and whatever else they are into watching.

**Favourite colour?**

Purple.

**Rolling Stones or Beatles?**

Neither.

**Night or day?**

Day.