

Writing my way out of Ireland

An interview with Briege Duffaud

by Marc Amfreville

Briege Duffaud is an Irish expatriate living in Brittany. She was born in Ulster, into a Catholic family. She has been writing for the past twenty years, mostly journalism and recently two novels, A Wreath upon the Dead (1993) and A Long-Stem Rose (1994), and a volume of short stories, Nothing like Beirut (1994). She left Ireland at the age of twenty-two, lived in England and Holland before finally settling in France.



Would you mind telling us why you left Ireland?

I left because Northern Ireland is very small, very narrow, very constricting. The world was out there, it was wide, I wanted to travel, but I got as far as London. And it was the sixties and London was the world of our time, so I stayed there. Then Amsterdam became the world for a while, so I went there too. And from there I arrived in France and stayed because I married a Frenchman.

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The interview took place on February 14, 1997 at Briege Duffaud's residence in Lamballe.

Before we talk about A Wreath upon the Dead, could you tell us a little more about the other novel and the volume of short stories you wrote?

Well, the other novel is called *A Long-Stem Rose*, the title comes from a song by Leonard Cohen and the novel is about the eighties and about France. And about exile. There's a volume of short stories, which started life as a very autobiographical novel and I didn't dare have it published, so I scrapped it and then used parts for what turned out to be rather long short stories.

So let's move on to A Wreath Upon the Dead now. Although this issue of Sources is to include a review/summary of your novel [see p. 166-69], I think it would be interesting for us to have you summarise it, in your own words.

A Wreath Upon the Dead has been called a political novel, that's totally untrue. It is a novel about different generations of people trying to come to terms with life and the environment in which they were placed, were born,

and it happened that this environment is Northern Ireland: some of the generations lived in peace, some of the generations lived in war...

Perhaps we should say, for those who haven't read it, that it spans several generations. It starts with...

Yes, it starts with the Great Famine of 1845 and it finishes with recent history and each generation has been involved directly or indirectly with the effects of history on their lives and on their future destiny. But the politics and the struggles of war have always been a background rather than an essential part of the novel. The novel does deal with the more basic lives of the people.

Is that why you seem to question the political label that has been attached to the novel?

Yes. I suppose you could call it political, but it's political in the way that *Madame Bovary* is a sociological study of rural Normandy in the nineteenth century. My characters happen to live in a situation, in an environment that has been constantly at war.

Could you perhaps account for the title?

The title is a quotation from a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, who was a poet writing in the forties, fifties and sixties. He was a very non-traditional Irish poet in that he questioned the received ideas about nationalism, the special Irish quality of the Irish, about heroism. The quotation is "They put a wreath upon the dead because the dead will wear the cap of any racket," and effectively, in my novel, people who were ordinary, struggling characters trying to make their lives, were by circumstances in the following generation regarded as heroes or as villains because of what they did. Myths grew up about the hero figures and as the years went on, as the decades went on, they took on an extraordinary dimension. The novel tries to show that they were simply human beings.

Is that what started the idea? I have read the book, among other things, as the story of hero-making processes. Would you say that this is one of the themes that you first had in mind when you started thinking about the novel?

It wasn't actually, no. The novel started as all novels do, as an attempt to kill off my own demons, to make some sense of my relationship with Ireland, with my family, with the Catholic Church, with all the taboos that were making my life a misery when I was an adolescent and a young woman, and which I saw were making the lives of many young women and many young

men at the time very difficult. And I wasn't able to confront them until I was in my forties, and I simply put them into perspective, and in an historical situation; I realised that this was not something peculiar to me, but something peculiar to Ireland and maybe to any very closed, very Catholic society. So I did begin the book in the twentieth century, with a group of young women trying to live in their own ways, trying to break away from their upbringing and then, as it went on, I realised that this wasn't really enough, because I was writing in the late nineteen-eighties and I couldn't ignore what was happening in Northern Ireland at that time. So I had to put the lives of these women into a context, and I began to do a lot of research on what could possibly be the ancestry of people of that milieu.

So you started off with a contemporary story and moved back towards the nineteenth-century famine?

That's right, yes. I started off with a group of people of my own generation, and I realised that I couldn't write about them, well I could have written about them in isolation, but it would have been a very banal feminist novel, such as everybody was writing at that time. And I decided to put it into a wider context, and that's why I brought in the historical thing, because I realised that the forces these young women were struggling against weren't specific to that particular time they were living, but did have their roots in the context of the parents' lives, the grandparents' lives and thus in the wider political ethos of the twentieth and nineteenth century.

Everything you say brings many questions to my mind. For example, on a recent TV show, Laure Adler's Cercle de Minuit on Irish writers, you said, I think, that the real enemy of Irish people nowadays was not the IRA, or the British government, but rather the Church, which you have briefly alluded to, just now.

Yes, I wouldn't say *nowadays*, because things have changed, even in the past ten years. But certainly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, from the Famine onwards, the Catholic Church had an enormous responsibility for inciting hatred, for inciting segregation. In my own time, when I was a child, when I was an adolescent, our whole lives were shaped by our Catholicism. The priest in every community was the ruling force. In everything, in education we weren't allowed to go to state schools, our parents were threatened with excommunication if they didn't send us to private Catholic schools. We weren't allowed to go out with Protestant boys, we weren't allowed to go to soccer matches, we had to go to Gaelic football matches which were presided over by the parish priest. Even the *bal du samedi soir* was presided over by the priest who went around afterwards with a stick, beating young couples out from behind the hedges. So, our whole lives in

working and middle class Ireland were shaped by the Catholic Church, and it had a very limiting effect on us. We weren't allowed to look outside our own social class, outside our own religious group. We weren't allowed to have ambitions to go and make our lives in England because it was a bit of a disgrace to leave our country and become an immigrant.

In the novel itself this is shown as dating back to the nineteenth century by the very interesting story of a maid, a Catholic maid, who is hired by a Protestant woman, is quite happy with her position, and is forced by the priest back into her own community, being threatened with excommunication if she stays on.

Yes, this was very, very common at that time. It was just "a last resort" to go and work for people who weren't of one's own religion. Because of the danger of mixed marriages. The Church wanted to keep the community pure and catholic and mixed marriages were a fate worse than death. So, yes, that maid, she was actually in the nineteen-thirties, and she was working, she had a very good position with a Protestant school teacher, and her priest and her family were afraid that she would lose her faith, become a Protestant. And so they got her a much harder job with a rickety Catholic family. And this was something that one heard of quite a lot when I was a child. In fact there were a lot of our neighbours going to work as maids and as barmaids, barmen, waitresses and so on. The thing to do was to stay in one's own community, no matter how hard the work was, no matter how low the pay was, it was much better to stay in a Catholic job, rather than work for Protestants.

So I made an interesting mistake. I said nineteenth century, whereas this was in the nineteen-thirties. History does seem to repeat itself in Ireland. Because there is a story that amounts pretty much to the same in the nineteenth century, isn't there?...

Yes, the story of the maid who changed her religion and was beaten to death, or something like that, by her family. Yes. I read that story in a journal by a Protestant minister who was serving in Ireland during the Famine. And he did a lot of very good work among the poor, among the people who were starving, he was very charitable. And he kept a diary, and one of the incidents he came across was this maid, who had changed her religion. Her brothers and her father took her and beat her until she was crippled. I don't know how frequent that was, but there was certainly an awful lot of intolerance. In the nineteenth century, you see, most of the Irish priests were descended from French Jansenists, they were trained by French Jansenists who, I think, had to leave France and went to teach in Ireland, and the Irish clergy were extremely puritanical compared to those anywhere else.

On that television programme, you were opposed to other Irish writers on the issue of a writer's commitment. I was under the impression that there was a definite line of "ivory tower" type of writers who were taking part in the debate, and you sounded very offended and, if I remember correctly, you said something like "How can one be Irish and a writer and not write about Ireland?"

Yes, this "ivory tower" thing is a reaction against the writers of the past, against people like Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and so on, who were bourgeois people writing about working class communities and having—well I suppose, writing about them in the way that Pagnol, for example, would have written about Provençal peasants without knowing very much about them—having a fairly idealistic vision of them. So writers later (from, say, the nineteen-fifties, nineteen-sixties onwards) decided to ignore our Irishness, to write about us as though we were members of an international community. I talk in my novel about Edna O'Brien, for example, who writes about fairly jet-setting, beautiful young women, and John McGahern who, in his short stories anyway, and some of his novels, does write about highly intelligent university students who have a fairly high-powered life-style, and they do ignore the fact that the majority of Irish people do not live on that plane at all. The majority of Irish people are still absolutely obsessed by their history. They are about twenty years behind the rest of the world, as far as sexual liberation, as far as political liberation and so on go. And I, who come from a very, very *populaire*, a very working class background, I'm perhaps more aware of this reality than people who grew up in a nice suburb of Dublin.

I did seem to be criticising John McGahern on that television programme and just now, but it's simply that I come from Northern Ireland and he comes from Southern Ireland and realities are extremely different in each half of the island. I am talking about people whose lives have been shaped by a knowledge and by, in many cases, an approval of violence, even if they've never come across violence in their everyday lives. The majority of Ulster people would not, themselves, indulge in violence, but they would have an instinctive understanding of why violence might seem necessary in some situations. Even I, who am no longer particularly Irish, do have that understanding, because of the pressures of my upbringing. People like John McGahern, people like Edna O'Brien, people like Joseph O'Connor, the writers of now from the south of Ireland have never lived under those pressures, and they can afford to see Ireland simply as another member of the European Community with sophisticated inhabitants. When you visit Crossmaglen—you perhaps see a different reality.

Do you think however that you may be sharing the reality of the oppression of the family? I'm looking for things you may have in common, on both sides of the

border. There is such a strong emphasis on the oppressive role of the family in your novel...

Yes, that is something I share with both Edna O'Brien and with John McGahern, this total dictatorship of the family in Ireland. As an individual, one doesn't count very much, one's needs don't count very much in the traditional Irish family, one exists as part of an entity and everything one does, has to be done for the good of the family. I mentioned in my novel, actually I mentioned it in the same context as I mentioned Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, that these writers do live in the same Ireland as those unfortunate teenagers over the past ten years or so, who still at the end of the twentieth century find a pregnancy such a terrible, overwhelming shame that they will give birth and drown the children, or simply go off and give birth at the back of a ditch, you know, and die in the attempt, because they're so terrified of bringing shame on the family.

You see, in everything you say, one feels you are impatient with, perhaps even critical of, Irish society. But at the same time, reading your novel, one does feel such an immense irrepressible love, affection—irrational ties. Maybe you'd like to comment on that apparent paradox?

Yes, I would like to think that that is Art! In fact I don't have very much deep affection for Ireland anymore. I think I've broken off my ties with Ireland. I hope I have. I am very, very impatient with it.

But would writing perhaps be a way of maintaining those ties?

No. I had seen writing as a way of breaking them, of cutting the cord completely. And I think I did succeed. I used, in *A Wreath upon the Dead* especially, those aspects of Ireland that horrify me, that scare me. I deliberately used them in the way that for example a composer would use the passion of Christ as a basis for an oratorio... Pasolini used the passion of Christ as the basis for a film. It was something that I knew, something that was there. But I wasn't necessarily terribly implicated by that time with the reality of Ireland. My characters were. I wasn't.

This is time for a question about that central character in the novel, Maureen. She is a writer, she lives in France. You're a writer, you live in France. Of course, when one begins to know you, one does realise how different you are from the narrator. But perhaps you would like to tell us how close you feel to her?

Yes. Maureen is me, up to a point. There but for the grace of God go I. Maureen and I shared a childhood. That's certain. We shared part of an

adolescence. Maureen left her ghastly boarding school at the age of fifteen and went off to live her life. I continued, and began to live my life a bit later, consequently. I did not marry an English millionaire... Maureen was carried along by the received ideas of her time. She was a conventional person. I was not. Maureen escaped from her childhood and adolescence soon enough to be able to become conventional. I didn't. I had to fight my way out of it with blood, sweat and tears. OK, we both lived in France... Maureen lived in France because a millionaire husband had paid a vast sum of money for a ruined château. I lived in France because I came to do the *vendanges*... I fought my way out of Ireland through being a *marginale* in the sixties.

But she seems to have been a little like that too. She has at a certain point an involvement with the Socialist Party, doesn't she?

Yes. And so did I, yes. That was in her teens, when there was a political party in Northern Ireland that seemed to be about to become a Socialist Party, and in fact this was the only way that a working class Catholic could get out of her Catholic working class background, and get into the middle classes. You joined the Socialist Party—the Ulster Labour Party, it was called—and you listened to modern jazz instead of listening to rock and roll. And this was one way in the late fifties and early sixties of becoming middle-class in Ireland. Maureen did that. I flirted with that too for a while. It was a way of getting to know Protestants. And getting to know Protestants was one way of becoming liberated.

Why did you choose to make her a writer of cheap romances? Before she writes her first novel, Maureen seems to have written cheap, sentimental trash, which you haven't.

Yes, that again was another way of getting out of one's working class background if one had any sort of literary talent, whatever. I began writing at the same age as Maureen, but I wrote poetry at that stage, and short stories, and I wasn't getting very far with them. I mean, I got paid something like three pounds for a short story, and I realised that I couldn't live on that. So, I stopped writing during all my youth. She continued writing, but she was a much more sophisticated person than I was and she had her eye all the time on social success. I did know a lot of people. A lot of my friends at that time were like that, they were in advertising or working on magazines and so on, and they had lovely lifestyles, and while I was sitting around in squats in London smoking joints, they were giving dinner parties... It was at that point that my character and Maureen's diverged.

Maureen also, once a famous writer, goes back to Ireland. There is that bittersweet, very interesting moment when she meets her family again, and feels misunderstood. I guess that is a thing you have experienced, or have you not gone back to Ireland?

I have, unfortunately, gone back. Maureen kept these wonderful relations with her family all the time, and her mother wrote her these beautiful letters, very literate, very articulate, keeping her up to date with everything that was going on. My mother wrote me letters of abuse all the time, telling me how I was ruining my life, you know, and why wouldn't I be a teacher and do something decent, or why didn't I come back and marry a good Catholic and do things like that. So that was quite different. I didn't have a good relationship with my family in the same way as she did, but I did go back because—it's, as I mentioned earlier, this domination of the family—I always felt that no matter how much I did, no matter how far away I got from them by rebelling, perhaps they were right after all. So I used to go back and check up from time to time and then flee. But, like Maureen, when I went back, I was OK with my family. But when I went out in the village and met people I'd been at that ghastly boarding school with, no matter how enlightened I knew my life was, no matter how sophisticated I knew I was compared with them, they made me feel that I was still a little peasant with nits in her hair. So this happened to Maureen, and this happened to me too. And we dealt with it in our own ways.

There was definitely a ring of truth to certain of those moments, that's why I asked you the question. To stay with the book, there are two aspects of the novel I was particularly sensitive to. First, what I would call the creation of different languages according to the different narrators you use. Perhaps you could tell us what you found most difficult? Was it to recreate the nineteen-sixties, very contemporary type of language, or rather the nineteenth-century sort of prose?

No, the nineteenth-century prose, that was easy, because I read a lot of nineteenth-century novels. I mean I love Jane Austen, for example. "Marianne's diary" was very easy. That wrote itself practically. The historical things were great fun to write because I was brought up on a vision of Ireland seen through upper-class English eyes. The Reverend Flowerdew, with his accounts of voyages among the peasantry, I was brought up on that sort of thing. Some of it was deliberate parody of cheap patriotic novels—"A Forgotten Hero" and the chapter of "Maureen's novel." I enjoyed doing all that specious profundity. We had a house full of old books and that was easy enough to do. The folk song was great fun to write too.

And to translate, I can tell you...

As for the Sixties, of course, I knew the language, the idioms, the *argot* of the Sixties. That wrote itself. What was very difficult was the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties. I wanted to be authentic in that. A lot of it—I didn't realise when I was writing it—was actually buried in my unconscious memory, for example the account of that maid and her dreadful life. When I was a small child, I used to listen a lot to conversations in my parents' house, my grandmother's house. And apparently, subconsciously I conserved a lot of this, a lot of what I had heard. Because many of the things that came out in that story of the maid and in the story of people living through the Second World War, were things that I didn't know I knew. But my mother told me, yes, these were things they used to talk about in the house when I was a very small child, you know, three or four years old. So I must have tape-recorded that somewhere in my subconscious, and while I was writing the novel, it came out *tout cru*.

I'm glad you have brought that up because that was the second aspect I was going to allude to. I was very sensitive to the recreation of a child-like type of vision. I am thinking particularly of quite funny moments, frankly comical moments, when, for example, little Maureen confuses Cromwell soldiers with Roman soldiers, mixing up religious history with the history of Ireland.

Yes. Well, that was part of this terrible domination of the Church. I mean, we all grew up thinking that Jesus was probably an Irishman, and that if he wasn't, he ought to have been, because outside of Ireland there was no salvation. And religion and Ireland were so inextricably bound up. I mean, when my mother first came to France, she assumed that the French were all Protestants because they were all rich!

You mean, when you were already here and she came to visit?

Yes. When I was living in France in the seventies, she came to visit me and she saw that people looked very, very prosperous at that time, before *la crise*, compared with Irish people. The houses were beautiful, people were elegant and so on, and she assumed that these must all be Protestants. She couldn't believe that France was a Catholic country, because it was so rich. And we were brought up to believe that the poor Catholic Church was oppressed everywhere in the world. And you couldn't attempt to tell anybody what a ghastly, rich organisation it is, because they wouldn't have believed it. Everybody worthwhile must be Irish. I mean, Shakespeare must have been Irish, his great-grandmother at least... and so on. Everybody's Irish. So

obviously, Cromwell's soldiers, the Roman soldiers were one and the same thing. They were all persecuting poor Ireland. That's how we grew up.

So, since we are talking of your generation in Ireland, of present-day Ireland, perhaps you could evoke the Sarah and Malachy couple, in the latter half of the novel?

Yes. I've been talking all along about the Ireland of my generation, church-dominated, history-dominated... and we mentioned the Socialists, joining the Socialist Party as a way of social climbing. And the great thing about my generation is that there was a Socialist Party in Ireland, that you could have thought that eventually there would be some sort of international aspect to an Irish future, where we would get out of this obsession with our past and go forward to sing the *Internationale* or whatever. As time went on, as the sixties wore into the seventies, for example, there was no longer a Socialist Party, there was a Nationalist Party and a Loyalist Party, each one with their own type of subdivisions. And at that point, hope of a future died. Hope of an international future died. Because, whichever side you were on—the Nationalist side, Sinn Fein, IRA, Anti-Partition, Nationalist Catholic-this or Catholic-that—or whether you were on the Loyalist side, your future was centred on this little province, whether it was going to remain attached to England or to become independent. And given the realities, given the demographic realities for a start, no particular solution to that problem seems possible. Not that I'm a politician, it just doesn't seem to be. So the younger generation of Ireland, who didn't have any hope for the future, who didn't have the liberation of the sixties, the sexual revolution of the seventies, the sort of thing which happened in other parts of the world, what did they have? They had their identity as Catholics or as Protestants. The young people tried to look outwards, the way young people do everywhere, like the Sarah and Malachy characters who epitomise the generation who were in their teens and early twenties at the time of the novel, and didn't have much of a future outside of political identities. And even though they tried, in their own ways—Malachy through drugs, and Sarah through her wish to revenge herself on a father who had abandoned her—they still found themselves caught up in politics. They were totally uninterested in politics. They had their own hang-ups, their own neuroses, but they couldn't resolve them on any personal level. They still had to be caught up in this larger obsession, which was the Nationalist or Loyalist issue.

Now, this is of course related to the question of pessimism, since this trap Sarah and Malachi find themselves locked in resembles Cormack and Marianne's type

of trap, five generations earlier. So that the overall impression is very pessimistic. Is that what you wished to convey?

Yes. Because now it is not only a question of Northern Ireland. More or less everywhere since the break-up of the Soviet Union, since the break-up of the post-colonial euphoria in different parts of the world, national identity has become so important for everyone. Even in France at the moment, it's practically impossible to express oneself on any individual level, one is always the mouthpiece of some social class or some political class, or some tribe, quite simply.

In the French translation of your novel, you added a sentence. I'm quoting from memory. You said: "The gunmen might miraculously turn into statesmen." Should we take this as the final streak of optimism, or as one more ironical comment on the situation?

I think one more ironical comment. When I wrote the novel in English it was at a time when nobody even dreamed of such a concept as a cease-fire, or of the IRA moving towards peace talks or any sort of settlement. And then suddenly, the year after the novel was published in Ireland, there was a cease-fire, suddenly everybody was believing that the IRA were transformed into little saints with halos and wings and all the rest of it and I didn't particularly believe that they were and I was right. And I think maybe eventually they will transform themselves into statesmen, but I doubt it very much.

In the end, you bring together the Palestinian cause and the Irish one, that is, more precisely, the IRA part of the Irish question.

Yes, so look at Palestine, so look at South Africa. It isn't Utopia. It isn't peace yet. Something has been dragging on in all of these places for years and years and maybe eventually, miraculously, it will turn into lovely, peaceful, I won't say Utopia, but what we all hoped for. And maybe in Ulster too. But I doubt it.

Now, of course, my question has further implications than just the Sarah and Malachy couple. I'd say that the overall impression is that passivity and political activism are equally decried throughout the novel. Is that one of the possible lessons that you wish us to draw from it?

Yes, there's an interesting character in the novel. He's interesting because he represents a part of me. Eric, who is a good old sixties liberal, who dreamed of revolution, of a Brave New World, and who in his thirties and forties is sitting there writing courteous letters to dictators in the name of Amnesty

International, and he realises the utter uselessness of what he's doing, because any dictator worthy of the name would take one look at the letter and use it as toilet paper, but he keeps on doing it, because there's nothing else to be done. And in Northern Ireland, besides the Nationalists, besides the Loyalists, there's quite a sizeable minority of people like Eric and myself...

Although he's a Protestant, and a wealthy one, isn't he?

Wealthy, no, middle-class, yes. He is a teacher, but I suppose he is wealthy compared with Maureen's family.

I'm thinking of his family, he comes from a wealthy family...

Yes, they're a very well-heeled family, and it's the wealthy, well-heeled people who are above the political struggles, can afford to be, and Eric finds the only way he can hope to change anything is by conventional liberal gestures... He can't afford to get out of his milieu, and for example desegregate the education of his children. He's afraid to send his children to a Catholic school, in case they get knifed, or something, so he has to continue perpetuating the old segregations, and lives in a Protestant neighbourhood, sends his children to nice Protestant schools and salves his conscience by being a member of Amnesty International.

By creating a museum. Perhaps you could tell us about that.

Yes. One of his ways, harmless ways, which won't endanger his family in any manner, of approaching himself to the other side, to the Catholic side, is by creating a museum of folk culture, preserving three old shanty houses, which date from the time of the Famine, and filling them with artefacts of Catholic poverty; and he simply doesn't see at the time how stupid it is, and how it can be interpreted as a hostile gesture, rubbing the noses of the Catholics in the inelegancies of their lifestyle. Eventually, he does see this, but by the time he sees through all the emptiness of this liberalism, it's too late.

And of course the interesting thing is that the house he turns into a museum is the one Cormack had left from in the nineteenth century, before leaving Ireland for America. And also the place where Sarah and Malachy die in the end.

Yes, and this is a deliberate metaphor. Nothing changes in Ulster, we still keep running on the spot of our little obsessions. The same house that was the scene of Cormack and Marianne's descent into hell that their lives became, later on becomes the setting for their great-great-great-grandchild's end as well.

You see, you've just said "we" still keep running...

Oh God! [laughs]

So, this book may have been a way of cutting off some ties, but it is also, I've been thinking, a way of maintaining some of them. Perhaps in a less conscious type of way. But it cannot be totally innocent that you write a book which will show French readers, for example, a large part of Irish history they've never heard about. Are you conscious of that historical, didactic, highly interesting dimension to your work?

I perhaps was, at the time. It's six years since I wrote this book, and at the time, yes, I think I did want to show the French readers, if any, that Ireland was a highly complex place, because at the time, the French idea of Ireland was pretty simplistic and pretty folksy.

You're helping us move away from A Taxi Mauve stereotype, aren't you?

Well, I hope so. I hoped so when I was writing it. But in writing it I think that I have moved myself away from a fixation on Ireland, so that I can see Ireland now, perhaps, as a foreigner might see it.

Any projects for the future?

That's something I don't like to talk about. It might bring me bad luck. I'll probably be writing another novel about different things. Better keep quiet about it.

One final question, perhaps. Could you try to help us define what being an Irish writer means to you?

To me, no, it doesn't mean very much. Given that I have lived out of Ireland for so many years, and yet write about Ireland, I write as a person who knows Ireland thoroughly, but when I meet other Irish writers, I'm not considered to be an Irish writer. I'm considered a French woman who writes about Ireland, which is a pity perhaps. But in fact, the writer I feel closest to in experience, background, personal hang-ups is Annie Ernaux. Leave out the political violence, and Claghan is very close to Yvetot. The tragedy is that one can't leave out the violence, but that's a very narrow way of defining an Irish writer, which is why I prefer not to define myself as one.

Is that why you chose to write under your husband's name rather than your family name?

No, it's because I preferred my husband to my family. I didn't particularly want to be called by my father's name. I know it's supposed to be a great advance now that in their professional lives women choose to use their family name rather than their married name. It's meant to define them as authentic human beings rather than as just their husbands' wives. But in fact they're defining themselves as their fathers' daughters. I mean, if they chose their mother's maiden name, it might be more logical. Though, there again, isn't that just their grand-dad's name? And so on, *ad infinitum*... Anyway "Duffaud" is prettier than "Finnegan".

