



CREATIVE WRITING

Show and Tell

That creative writing can be taught is often debated but Henrietta McKervey, graduate of the Creative Writing Programme at UCD, is an advocate.

Postgraduate courses in creative writing have surged in popularity in recent years. Given UCD's long association with some of Ireland's greatest writers, including James Joyce, Mary Lavin, Flann O'Brien, Neil Jordan, Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, Colm Tóibín, Emma Donoghue and Maeve Binchy, it is no surprise that the university introduced its own postgraduate creative writing programme in 2006. And, if the recent run of publishing deals and awards are anything to go by, the decision to offer both an MA and MFA has paid off.

The Creative Writing MA combines studio-style teaching and workshops with structured classes in the craft of writing. The MFA (Master of Fine Arts) Fiction course was devised in 2011 in response to demand for an advanced postgraduate course. The first to be offered by an Irish university, the MFA offers close supervision of a novel or collection of short stories. Directed by James Ryan, the programme

team includes Professor Frank McGuinness and Writer Fellows Dr Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Dr Paul Perry. The Head of UCD School of English, Drama and Film is Professor Anne Fogarty. Every year a writer-in-residence is appointed in conjunction with the Arts Council and there are regular visiting writers, editors, publishers and agents. A recent development is the €150,000 Laureateship for Irish fiction developed by the Arts Council and supported by UCD and New York University (NYU). Devised to honour an outstanding Irish fiction writer and encourage the next generation of Irish fiction writers, during the three-year term of the laureate the recipient will teach creative writing to students at UCD and NYU.

James Ryan believes the alumni success may be due to "our approach, which is largely literature- as opposed to workshop-based." Éilís Ní Dhuibhne agrees that "probably the success of our students is a result to some extent of UCD's unique method of teaching creative writing,

UCD'S CREATIVE IRISH TALENT

Opposite page, clockwise from left: James Joyce (painting by Bill Lillibridge); Maeve Binchy; Mary Lavin; Neil Jordan, Flann O'Brien.

balancing studio-type work with instruction, recognising that students want to learn new skills and expand their horizons."

**YOUNG
SKINS
STORIES BY
COLIN BARRETT**

Something is going right, that's for sure. Recent alumni include Susan Stairs, Alan Timmons, Jamie O'Connell and Colin Barrett. Colin Barrett's debut collection *Young Skins* saw off major international competition to win the prestigious Frank O'Connor Short Story Prize, the world's richest award for a short story collection. Jessica Traynor won the 2013 Hennessy New Writer of the Year and was the recipient of the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary 2014; Helena Nolan won the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Prize 2011; Laura McKenna won the RTÉ Guide/Penguin short story prize 2012; and Natalie Ryan is featured in the 2014 *Faber Book of the Best New Irish Short Stories*. Dave Rudden recently secured a significant deal with Puffin. Scheduled for publication in spring 2016, his novel *The Borrowed Dark* has already sold in seven languages. From the MFA class of 2014, crime writer Andrea Carter has a two book deal with a major UK publisher and Paula McGrath and Claire Coughlan secured agents. And as many writers know only too well, getting an agent can be as big a deal as getting "a deal".

The Iowa Writers' Workshop was first to introduce creative writing as a syllabus subject in 1936. Hovering over all creative writing courses ever since is the opinion that they are attempting to teach that which cannot be taught. Speaking at *The Independent Bath Literature festival* earlier this year Hanif Kureishi (himself a professor of creative writing at Kingston University), said creative writing courses are a "waste of time" and that "probably 99.9 per cent" of creative writing students are entirely lacking in talent. Molly McCloskey, Arts Council writer-in-residence 2012/13, says "I've never understood why we go over this question ad nauseam ... I sometimes think we don't so much teach students how to write as teach them how to edit - how to improve upon those initial splats and splotches on the page, how to recognise what should be discarded, and why, how to recognise what's good in what they've written, and why it's good." James Ryan agrees. "It's comparable to education in any creative field," he says. "We can teach the craft, but you have to have a capacity to write in the first place. For the most part we are accelerating the pace at which a talented student is developing, but I don't think anyone supposes that we create that talent."

Being "forced" to engage with text he wouldn't normally have read and experiment with writing styles and subject matter was the challenge for Dave Rudden (MA 2013). "For a long time I sampled the narrative styles of others. Like putting on a series of coats, I wrote in Pratchett's voice, in Gaiman's...." Andrea Carter agrees: "My academic qualifications were all in law and so like a self-taught driver I had slipped into bad habits! The MFA sharpened my technique and made me braver.



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**JAMES RYAN,
UCD CREATIVE WRITING DIRECTOR**

CREATIVE CONNECTIONS

Left: Writer Colm Tóibín with James Ryan, director of the creative writing programme at UCD.

It forced me to up my game." Alumna Erika Meyers, who has published a novel *Strangers in America* as well as a poetry collection *The Career of Snow*, cites the "creative versatility" of the MA course as a positive influence. In both MFA and MA courses, the reading and writing load is significant, and those who succeed need to have what Molly McCloskey refers to as "the year-after-year doggedness that is required to get anywhere at all as a writer". This determination is particularly necessary for those balancing writing with other commitments. Grainne Shanley O'Toole (MA 2014) fitted the course into a schedule that already included a full-time job and two small children "and it somehow was all possible." On a practical level, Paula McGrath says the MFA "provided a teaching qualification and experience, invaluable as a source of income for those of us living on Grub Street."

Earlier this year, Anne Fogarty, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Eibhear Walshe edited a collection of essays called *Imagination in the classroom: Teaching and learning creative writing in Ireland*. It is the first extensive exploration of the history and practice of teaching creative writing as a distinct discipline in Ireland. In his speech at the launch, Frank McGuinness said, "Can it be taught? Naysayers bleat. Let me answer this by saying that was not even the question our education system asked itself for too long. No, it was content to assert it had better not be taught. That time is over."

Hanif Kureishi, take note. ■



**LITERARY
WINNER**
Henrietta
with Maeve
Binchy's
husband,
Gordon
Snell.

AUTHOR NOTE:

Henrietta McKerverey (MFA 2014) was awarded the inaugural Maeve Binchy Travel Award presented on May 28th to mark the occasion of Maeve Binchy's birthday. Thanks to this bursary - created to fund a travel opportunity that would enhance creative writing - she is exploring the sea areas of the Shipping Forecast in a project called *The General Synopsis at Midnight*. Her first novel, *What Becomes Of Us*, set during the jubilee of the Easter Rising, will be published by Hachette in March 2015.