



Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (ed.). *Look! It's a Woman Writer!* Dublin: Arlen House, 2021. pp. 349. ISBN: 9781851322510.

In *Look! It's a Woman Writer!*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne brings together Irish women writers born in the 1950s to reflect on how gender as well social and economic changes have shaped their writing and careers. The collection is an outstanding example of how asking contemporary Irish women writers to delve into their literary experience can help us understand recent cultural developments and establish connections between different women who have worked, in the last few decades, from various standpoints and genres—poetry, fiction, non-fiction and drama—and have done so, more often than not, under Eavan Boland's influence.

As an intellectual, activist, scholar, and, most prominently, writer, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is perhaps one of the most outstanding names in contemporary Ireland and far from a foreigner in the world of edited volumes. Not only did she co-edit *The Viking Ale. Articles by Bo Almquist* (1991) and *Northern Lights, a Festschrift for Bo Almquist* (2001) with Séamas Ó Catháin, she likewise edited *Voices on the Wind: Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight* (1996) and *WB Yeats: Works and Days. A Book to Accompany the Yeats Exhibition at the National Library* (2006). Besides her prolific and widely prized literary production both in English and Irish, Ní Dhuibhne regularly engages in feminist debates on women's writing; for instance, she discussed not only feminism but also Irish identity in the launch of her latest, prior to this reviewed volume, work, *Little Red and Other Stories* (2020). Her recently edited collection, *Look! It's a Woman Writer!* (2021), follows up some of the most widely known Irish women writers born in the 1950s, including herself, born in 1954. She defends that there is something specific in this generation of women writers that revolves around the role gender played in their careers. In her own words, “We were saying the woman's voice must be heard” (McPhee).

As an early Spanish researcher diving in Irish women's writing, I am dismayed by how often we tend to forget that women writers have been—and still are—silenced or at least backgrounded as a norm. Take, for instance, the syllabus of English Studies

courses, which is still dominated by male writers both in Ireland, as denounced by several authors of the volume, and in Spain. Only exceptionally can students read women writers; additionally, there are even fewer Irish women writers in the canon and, consequently, the curriculum. In this context, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne provides an in-depth and dense recollection of testimonies of several Irish women writers whose writing careers have been developed in the last four decades. The character of the book is highly—and necessarily—political, because it seeks to give a voice to those women who managed to write and publish in an Ireland that witnessed free education in 1967, the economic depression and massive emigration in the 1980s and the Troubles from the 1960s to the 1990s.

*Look! It's a Woman Writer!* has a foreword by novelist Martina Devlin, an introduction by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and an afterword by the Arlen House editor Alan Hayes, along with twenty one chapters in which recognised Irish women writers reflect on how they became writers and on the obstacles they had to face to write and publish in Ireland. The twenty one women invited to pen a chapter in free form about their own experience as writers in the volume are: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Catherine Dunne, Lia Mills, Medbh McGuckian, Evelyn Conlon, Mary O'Malley, Liz McManus, Mary O'Donnell, Moya Cannon, Celia de Fréine, Mary Dorcey, Anne Devlin, Mary Rose Callaghan, Mary Morrissy, Áine Ní Ghlinn, Sophia Hillan, Ruth Carr, Cherry Smyth, Máiríde Woods, Ivy Bannister, Phyl Herbert. Although there are missing names of Irish women writers born in the 1950s, the volume does offer safe space to discuss how gender and free education affected their careers.

*Look! It's a Woman Writer!* opens strongly with Martina Devlin's "Foreword", herself a bestseller author, award-winning journalist and novelist born in the 1960s. Here, she briefly reflects upon the changes on the publishing scene in Ireland by recalling her childhood with the other "tribe," her five brothers, separated by their gender roles and expectations. She powerfully emphasises the importance of free schooling in the Republic of Ireland, marking a pivotal juncture in Irish history and a transformative moment for women. Those women who dared to write faced obstacles, not only the rejection of their writings, but male conservative gatekeeping in literature as well.

The "Introduction" is written by the editor of the volume, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who briefly introduces the issues that motivate the present book: the need to not forget the women writers born in the 1950s. Ní Dhuibhne agrees with Martina Devlin's identification of free education as a decisive opportunity that opened alternative paths to Irish women. Considering the last fifty years, she suggests that, in 2021, fiction in Ireland "might seem" to be dominated by women; and yet, she was motivated to bring together the autobiographical

essays in *Look! It's a Woman Writer!* after the Waking the Feminists movement in 2015 when they protested against the poor representation of women playwrights on the Abbey Theatre's programme commemorating the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising.

One aspect pointed out by most women writers of the volume is the creation of women-only workshops. Interestingly enough, most workshops mentioned were organised by Arlen House and, more often than not, by Eavan Boland, who seems to sew the whole Irish literary system together. Already in 1978, she contacted Arlen House to offer her support to their activities, which included being the judge in literary competitions as well as creating the foreword to the first book of Arlen House, *The Wall Reader* (1979). Not only did she participate in the founding of the Women's Education Bureau (1984) as artistic director and general editor of *The WEB journal* (1987), but she also directed writing workshops for Irish women, creating physical and metaphysical spaces for women. Boland's efforts promoted not only Irish women's writing, but also the research of their texts by bringing their literary production under the spotlight.

*Look! It's a Woman Writer!* closes as powerfully as it opened with the afterword by Alan Hayes, current editor of Arlen House, titled "Irish Literary Feminisms, 1970-2020." Here, Hayes provides a brief review of the editorial work on women writers of the last fifty years. He explains that post-independence Ireland became an increasingly conservative society in which the position of women was heavily disimproved, both by the Censorship of Publication Acts and by the ongoing negative attitude towards women writers. In this atmosphere, important feminist presses were founded, including Arlen House (1975), Irish Feminist Information (1978), Women's Community Press (1983), Attic Press (1984) and Women's Education Bureau (1984). Hayes likewise briefly mentions some of the biggest names of the last fifty years, including directors, editors and writers, with a special emphasis on Eavan Boland. Furthermore, Hayes explains that the publishing system in the 2010s and 2020s differs vastly from that of the late twentieth century; however, the field is not unprejudiced, as gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity among other factors remain obstacles. He argues that publishing now is about marketing and numbers rather than artistic talent and quality work.

*Look! It's a Woman Writer* is a most valuable addition to the longstanding inquiry into the arduous advance of Irish women writers also scrutinised in collections like *Creation, Publishing and Criticism. The Advance of Women's Writing* (2010), edited by the Spanish scholars María Xesús Nogueira, Laura Lojo, and Manuela Palacios, who similarly sought to ponder the conditions for the contemporary emergence of Galician and Irish women writers.

The broadness of testimonies, albeit restrained to the physical limits of a volume, within *Look! It's a Woman Writer* stems from the balanced selection of the writers asked to take part in it, managing to represent women authors of fiction, poetry and drama who knew they wanted to write since childhood and those who did not realise it until later in their lives; women writers who “became” authors after moving to Dublin and others who would have never dared to write and publish in Dublin; women writers who like to be categorised as “women” writers and those who feel uncomfortable with this gender label. And yet, all these writers share similar birth dates and the influence of Eavan Boland on the workshops she organised and on the Irish literary community in general. All together, *Look! It's a Woman Writer* constitutes an extremely rich instance of reflection upon what being a woman and an author in late twentieth century Ireland entailed, and how twenty-first century Irish writers are now reaping the fruits of their struggles.

Vanesa Roldán Romero

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