

## **“Corkonians in a Multicultural Ireland” An Interview with Lisa McInerney**

**Interview conducted by Krisztina Kodó**  
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**Abstract.** The theme of the interview is “Global English(es)”, which presupposes that English is no longer the exclusive terrain of the English people, as it has transcended its original role and has come to be used in several well-defined variants in all walks of life, including education, science, arts, and business. The international conference that took place on 28 and 29 March 2022 at Kodolányi University, Hungary explored this functional and thematic diversity in search of answers to the question of the role and function of English today.

My approach within the interview with prominent author, Lisa McInerney, focused on Irish identity, Irishness in a multicultural society, and Ireland and Irishness globally. Thus, the identity of the “Corkonians” globally.

Lisa McInerney discussed forms of heritage and its multicultural impact on modern Irish society; forms of identity in relation to the young generation of Irish being born into mixed marriages; and the notion of the “exile theme” and its relevance in contemporary Irish society, as presented through various characters within her novels.

**Keywords.** Global Englishes, identities, Irishness, multiculturalism, Corkonians.

**KK:** The city of Cork is the setting of your novels, *Glorious Heresies*, *The Blood Miracles* and *The Rules of Revelation*; what influenced you to choose this particular city and not for example Dublin or even Galway, which is closer to where you live presently?

**LM:** I don't think anybody needs another novel about Dublin. When you talk about traditional, typical Irish literature, the setting is usually Dublin or a rural farm in an idealised, isolated place. Cork is Ireland's second city, and the city where I went to university. I left home at seventeen, and so Cork became home to me at an important time in my formative years when I was finding my way. Cork is unique in Ireland. It has its own slang and has a very distinct accent. It's a very walkable city; it's relatively small. The population is 581,231<sup>1</sup>; just the right size for stories that rely on hidden or historical connections between characters, and coincidences too. The city became very influential for me, something I could capture in my novels.

**KK:** How long did you live in Cork?

**LM:** I studied there for two years. Then I went back to my hometown, Gort in County Galway, but I returned to Cork a few years later. My husband is from Cork, our child attended school in Cork, and I worked in Cork's construction industry for years.

**KK:** In your novels you speak of the Corkonians; Who are they? How would you define them? What distinguishes them from other regional identities?

**LM:** Cork is Ireland's second city, and everyone knows what second cities are like. People from a 'second city' tend to have a very specific attitude about how important their city is, and perhaps how it should really be the capital city. This is definitely true of Cork! So, there is a kind of humorous rivalry between Dublin and Cork. Cork is very much a southern city with a huge natural harbour, the second largest natural harbour in the world; its port is very old and established. In Ireland, people are usually dissatisfied with their hometowns, but not the Corkonians. There's a joke we tell in Ireland: 'How do you know if someone is from Cork? Don't worry, they'll tell you.' Corkonians have the reputation of being relentlessly proud of

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers are based on the 2022 April national census; The population included 294,229 females and 287,002 males in Cork City and Cork County which represents an increase of 38,363 people since 2016. (<https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/arid-40902230.html>).

being from Cork. They have a very strong sense of identity; Cork is often referred to as The People's Republic of Cork, and Corkonians say they're 'Irish by birth, but Cork by the grace of God'. A Cork accent rolls up and down, like the city's hills, they say. It's very distinct. The Corkonian vernacular is distinct even within Ireland, using a lot of words and linguistic patterns specific to the city. These come from a lot of different sources. Cork was once an important trading city, so historically there were a lot of overseas influences; many family names common in Cork today date back to Norman rule; the Irish language played its part; and of course, Corkonian people emigrated and borrowed words from other cultures, too.

**KK:** Maureen says in *The Rules of Revelation*, "Corkonians would leave you waiting but they wouldn't leave you down". (65) Would you comment on this?

**LM:** Maureen at this point in *The Rules of Revelation* is very concerned about her place in the city and her place in broader Irish society. She is sixty-eight years old, and she grew up in an Ireland that doesn't really exist anymore. For anyone not familiar with Irish history, from the 1990s, Ireland became secular very quickly and fiercely after being very religious for a very long time. The whole identity of Ireland and that of Irish people changed very rapidly. Somebody of Maureen's age remembers a much more restricted and moralistic Ireland, and so she feels rather disconnected from the modern, secular Cork, and feels like the struggles of women of her generation have been forgotten about or consigned to history. In *The Rules of Revelation*, Maureen takes to walking around the city, trying to come up with some kind of philosophy or a feeling of belonging to this place. One of her dilemmas is that she can't seem to find any female heroes or famous people that Cork City might have had, and she recognises this absence for the first time during an encounter with some German tourists, who are visiting Cork City. The Germans have missed the beginning of a walking tour they'd planned to join, so Maureen decides to play at being their guide. It's only when she begins to list famous Corkonian people that she realises that all the names are male. The line "Corkonians would leave you waiting but they wouldn't leave you down" comes from this scene: Maureen convinces the tourists that it was their own fault that they missed the walking tour, because although Corkonians aren't often punctual, they are otherwise dependable. I would like to read this excerpt from the novel.

**KK:** Maureen represents the past and through that the memory. She is more like a relic of the past. Memory is an important feature in the novels. In your third novel, *The Rules of Revelation* you write the following: “The city pulsed. It had no memory; it was defined by memory. People tied to place, and bound to their fucked-up histories, their imperfect relationships” (36). So, what does memory mean?

**LM:** That quote comes from the section of the novel where the protagonist is a female character named Georgie. She appears in my first novel as well and ends up leaving for London in a kind of exile, but she returns in the third novel. She struggles with this decision. She left Cork because she was involved with the underside of the city, and with some dangerous people from whom she had to escape. She worries now about how the city and its people will react to her return and asks herself whether she deserves to be remembered at all. She is at once a victim and a villain, an ordinary woman, and a sinner: contradictions she doesn’t know how to navigate. In a way the same goes for Maureen, and, as you said, she is a relic of the past. When Maureen was younger, she was quite rebellious; she was against all the moralising aspects that restricted Irish lives. So, for her to define herself as a person who rebelled against and rejected this moralising aspect of her community and then for it to change while she is away from Ireland, and not be a part of the changes that take place in Ireland, causes contradictory feelings. Maureen is therefore defined by these memories. Memories that have no real resonance in today’s Ireland; there is no place where she can reconnect with that part of Ireland. So, there are similarities between Maureen and Georgie who both went away and then came back again. Both are very much obsessed with the idea that the city is like a human thing, something that is concerned with having stories and memories, something that they can’t really trust because they’re unsure of their place in those stories and memories, and what role the city might cast them to play.

**KK:** Memory is one of the basic themes that go through the three novels. Everyone is intent on remembering the way things were whether it was better or not, and everyone seems to have their own individual ideas. But all the characters seem to be muddled and uncertain about their past. In the first novel the foundation for the story is laid out, then everyone goes off somewhere; then in the last novel, *The Rules of Revelation*, everyone comes back home. Finding their home and establishing themselves is in fact finding their identities.

**LM:** Yes, that is interesting because we all know that our memories are conflicting; the way I remember something is not how you may remember the same thing. A part of it is memory, but another part of it is a story that you constructed based on that memory. Which is something you may or may not be able to control. The title of *The Rules of Revelation* reflects on how everyone seems to have a story of their own, or stories to tell, but not everyone agrees with these narratives, and so disclosing them—revealing them—leaves the characters open to conflict or criticism, or even to trauma. They all have different ways of telling their stories, and processing what their stories mean for them and for others. That’s a fascinating thing when it comes to personal history; this is really about our own personality, ultimately who we are. It’s interesting and fun writing about characters who have these competing narratives about where they have come from and what it all meant.

**KK:** So true. No two persons will tell the same story the same way. When we consider Ireland, it always has a female gender. In your novels, however, Cork has a male gender. Why?

**LM:** There is a brilliant essay by the Irish writer, Kevin Barry, titled *The Raingod’s Green, Dark as Passion*, and published by Granta in 2016, in which he posits that Cork is a very male kind of place. He suggests that if you were to imagine Cork as a person then it would be as a man and explains exactly the physical attributes of this man that personifies Cork. It really struck me; I thought, Oh God, that’s so correct. Cork has that contrast with Dublin that leads to that underdog warrior kind of energy, stereotypically male. This is something that I wanted to incorporate into the novel. Therefore, I wrote Maureen as being concerned with this feeling of male energy, and being so annoyed about it, because she had always been defined by the restrictions placed on women. She had a baby outside of wedlock when she was nineteen, her son Jimmy. And because Ireland was deeply Catholic, she was deemed not worthy to raise her son; raising a child as a single mother was out of the question. His grandparents adopted Jimmy and raised him as their own, and it was arranged for Maureen to leave the country. Therefore, all the challenges that she had to face in her life are specifically related to her gender, her being a woman. Being back in Cork after all this time and feeling that male energy just makes her mad; it feels like a further rejection, and like her struggles have been dismissed. That is why she is looking for a female hero that could stand alongside all the men who she mentions as being important figures in the history of the city. Later, however, she does find female heroes. In a twist that shows how out of touch Maureen truly is with her home city, everyone but her seems to have been aware of these important women. Mother Jones, the union organiser, is the

most prominent of the names Maureen is made aware of; she's specifically annoyed that it's a man who tells her about Mother Jones!

**KK:** Maureen then represents all the Irish women, who dared to have a baby outside marriage. These women were considered the black sheep of their families. To continue with the idea of Ireland inventing itself in *The Rules of Revelations* you write the following: "It was said that Ireland was reinventing herself, as if this was some rare event and the country wasn't in a constant state of dithering. Postcolonial, post-Catholic, post-tiger, post-Brexit, junctures tracked by little ould invigilators peering out windows with net curtains bunched in their fists, and every new collapse portending a new wave of Notions" (10).

**LM:** This is Irish history. In very recent times, that is in the last hundred years, Ireland has been in a state of conflicting interests. Anyone knowing some Irish history will know that the reason we speak English and not Irish is because we were colonized for many hundreds of years. We won our independence, but for many decades we struggled as a post-colonial state, and we had to forge a new Ireland in the shadow of this painful history. And the mistake we made, according to my opinion, was to let the Catholic Church very early on become entrenched in the Irish political state and Irish life, to such an extent that those who live outside Ireland could not have imagined. For example, Bishops were consulted on the constitution; we were a totally Catholic state. Why did this happen? Because the colonizers, the English were Protestants, therefore as a way of defining ourselves we created a Catholic state. Therefore, we became deeply, even defiantly Catholic, and even today most of the schools and hospitals are still run by the Catholic Church. As well as the rigidity this brought to Irish social and family life, it created a lot of tension with Northern Ireland, and within Northern Ireland, where the vast majority of Catholic citizens aligned themselves with the Republic rather than with Great Britain. Then in the 1990s, several revelations about abuses committed by the church came to light. This was not only child abuse but also the abuse of women, illegal adoptions, prominent priests were discovered to have wives and families. So, in the 90s there was a collapse in the church's authority. Then the late 1990s brought great wealth and prosperity to Ireland; this was the Celtic tiger era. Suddenly Ireland, the poorest country on the western edge of Europe, was flooded by money and foreign investment; money was injected into education, and technological efficiency developed. Standards of living rose, and all of a sudden, the Irish were buying investment properties throughout Europe! However, around 2007 and 2008 the property bubble collapsed, bringing about the demise of the Celtic tiger, and we found ourselves in economic recession. More

recently, we are once again defined and troubled by our relationship to the UK. Because we have a land border with the UK, Brexit affects us more than any other country in the EU. Throughout its history Ireland has moved through phases, one after the other very quickly, which forced us to constantly redefine ourselves as a country, and in our Irish identity. And if you write there is always something to tackle, always some new question about ideas on our identity. So, for a writer this may be called a very rich time to write about our country and who we are.

**KK:** Yes, indeed. Presently, Ireland has several important centenaries: 2016, then 2021 and 2022. But let me continue with the theme of identity and quote from *The Rules of Revelations*: “It was 2019 and a funny time to be Irish. At no time in Ireland’s history was it not a funny time to be Irish” (10). History that reconnects with Irishness?

**LM:** There is always something happening in Ireland; you get used to living in a particular way and then something changes again. In recent years we have had two significant referendums: the legalizing of same-sex marriage in 2015 and the legalizing of abortion in 2018. These were seen as very much a clean break with the Catholic Church. For Ireland to reject the church’s teachings with such vehemence was really quite something. So again, there is that state of redefining ourselves and by overcoming this fight we ask ourselves what the next issue should be. There is this constant state of flux, and so it’s always a funny time to be Irish. I used the word “funny” there very specifically because the way that Irish people think and talk about themselves, the language they use, shows that humour is very important. The Irish like to tell tall tales and like to make each other laugh. And for many the psyche would be, well, if you can’t laugh then you cry. So, you must keep laughing. So always a funny time, yeah.

**KK:** Yes, it is. Let’s continue with this theme, because there is another appropriate quotation, I would like to ask you to reflect on. This is also from *The Rules of Revelation*: “To be Irish was to be certain that things were going Ireland’s way at last, and certain that there wasn’t a hope in hell with Ireland’s luck. To be Irish was to be resentful, flippant, European, nationalistic, demented. The island of saints and scholars and not a saint left among them” (7).

**LM:** This is again the Irish dichotomy, the constant contradiction of being Irish. You can be one thing, but you can be something else as well. ‘The island of saints and scholars’ is how we liked to be known back when we were a religious state. Our literary history is very important,

going all the way back to the *Book of Kells* and the monks who were at the forefront of recording Irish history. And this remains an important aspect of Irishness. I don't know if we are still scholars, but we do like education, reading and writing, but we are certainly not saints, at least not in the way that we used to define the term. So, the contradiction of Irish life is what I wanted to gather and do it in a light-hearted way. But this dichotomy does still exist. Yet, we have accepted this, and we are amused by it.

**KK:** So, there is a two sidedness to every Irish, like two sides of a coin?! In investigating the theme of identity, we can't skip the modern facets of life, namely multiculturalism, because Cork is a very multicultural city. The three novels offer glimpses of a modern and multicultural city, which is described by Ryan Cusack's character. But the past of Ireland still lingers through Maureen's presence; thus, there is a duality of past and present apparent throughout the novels; how does this support present Ireland?

**LM:** This is an interesting question. This relates not only to Ireland but also other nations. It's how we move forward which is in fact by pushing against the past or wanting to change something. Even now as we talk about Ireland being post-Catholic, we can acknowledge that Catholicism is culturally still quite important. We're not religious, but there is still a Catholic aspect to our culture. Even the small secular rituals of Irish life today are still quite Catholic. You get your children baptised in a church even if you have no interest in going to church or you don't believe in God. The idea that we are a multicultural European nation and interested in the global questions shows that we are marching toward the future, and at the same time we are defined by what has gone before. We are still holding on to certain scaffolding, I suppose, of what we used to be. We are a country that is fiercely looking forward and at the same time desperately holding on to the past. But that's kind of healthy though, isn't it? You want to know where you've come from. That's why I'm interested in characters like Maureen, who is obsessed with what happened in the past because she is still trying to understand it. And contrasting her with Ryan who doesn't remember this past because he is just fifteen at the start of the first novel. His Ireland is a post-Millennium one, and it is always going to contrast with Maureen's version. And I think that's interesting to walk the same street with characters who have different histories.

**KK:** So past and memory is an inherent feature of the human being. What about authenticity? Can we say authenticity versus identity? How authentic, in terms of Irish identity, are Ryan's

and Maureen's characters? Have they become multicultural city-dwellers, or have they retained a distinctive Irish feature?

**LM:** This is such an interesting question. We would think that Maureen is typically Irish because she is from the Ireland that fits that traditional image, the small, poor country on the western edge of Europe, rather than the globalised, European country we are today. But at the same time Maureen did live in London for forty years, something that was not at all unusual for people of her generation: Ireland has long been defined also by the mass emigration of its people to countries like the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada, where they might have settled and raised families, or where they might only have worked for a time in order to send money home. We have a huge diaspora. This does not mean that Maureen took part in English society, because many emigrants mixed exclusively within the large Irish communities living in England. So, you could remain utterly Irish in England. Maureen's Irishness is defined by strife, trouble, and oppression. Ryan is different because he is so much younger. He would have been born in the mid-90s, and for him Ireland has never been anything but a European nation. His Ireland is a country from which people emigrate with the intent of seeing the world, rather than from economic necessity. In Maureen's case, she travelled abroad because of shame, like many young women like her. Others of her generation went abroad for a better life. But for people of Ryan's generation, it's more likely that they think of themselves as global citizens, who travel to see the world, to learn about new cultures, to meet different people, to satisfy curiosity. So, this is a very positive thing as opposed to a very negative thing. In terms of Irishness, of course, both experiences are authentically Irish. Naturally, with the passing of time and generations the meaning of nationality constantly changes. And each generation obviously provides new meanings and answers. (It should be acknowledged that once again, young Irish people are emigrating in significant numbers due to our housing crisis!)

**KK:** Yes, absolutely. Another important concept is globalism; one of the features of globalisation are the children of mixed marriages; these may represent different cultural ethnicities, for example Ryan Cusack, the main protagonist has an Irish-Italian background, and speaks fluent Italian; is he Irish or Italian? Which identity does he adhere to?

**LM:** I think Ryan would love this question. The great advantage for him is that he can be either: Irish or Italian, and he probably changes his mind on that every so often. The older he gets, the more he appreciates his having dual heritage. He sees the advantages of being bilingual. Ryan

comes from a working-class family from the northside of Cork, which is traditionally an underfunded area, and being from here, his place in the world is diminished by lack of opportunity and resources, and by prejudice. For him to have another nationality would have expanded his sense of belonging to the world, something he would have otherwise not had under his circumstances. And it was a nice thing to write a character who was so explicitly European. I think for many Irish people, and my generation especially, being European is very important. We tend to be very pro-EU here, one of the reasons being that we are a postcolonial country, and when we joined the EU, we were finally able to feel that we were equals of the UK and not subordinates. So, there is a lot of positive feeling about the EU in Ireland because joining allowed us to feel equal to our neighbours and to understand ourselves as a country with much to offer. These are things that none of us take for granted that is why. therefore, characters who identify as very explicitly European make a lot of sense in a trilogy of books that is tracking Ireland over a period of fifteen years.

**KK:** Why Italian? Why not Hungarian? Was there any specific reason behind this choice?

**LM:** I promise I will have an Irish-Hungarian in the next book. Italy made sense to me because Ireland has such a shared experience with Italy. We both had massive emigration movements a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago: the Irish emigration to the United States in huge numbers at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century parallels the emigration of the Italians. And the Irish and the Italians ended up spending a lot of time together in close quarters and this is evident from the amount of Americans who tend to claim Irish and Italian heritage! We got along *very* well. So, the two nations have that shared idea of travel and emigration, even exile, if you want to put it that way. And they also come from the same Catholic culture, as well, so there were other overlaps. So, it made sense to me to have Irish-Italian characters in the trilogy.

**KK:** Yes, I agree with you. In your last novel, *The Rules of Revelation*, which is the closing of the “Cork city set” and Ryan, Georgie, Natalie return to Ireland. What draws them back? Seonmi, a South Korean character in the novel, says at one point: “Ireland must be a very traditional country” (172). How does tradition fit into a global society?

**LM:** That is an interesting question. Why do we return? I can only speak for Ireland, and I don’t want to suggest that this is unique to Ireland. I think most people globally have a strong

connection to home. And especially with Ireland I think it is something very specific to the way we speak, the way that we tell stories, and the way we think about ourselves. We do carry it with us quite a bit, this concept of Irishness. We are very proud about being Irish, so the idea is that you never really leave Ireland, you never become something else. We are always very proud of being from that little rock up there in the north Atlantic. And from the characters you mentioned, I think it is especially Georgie who felt a kind of confusing pull back home. Another character, Natalie, from a more privileged background than Georgie, came back because she had an internship to go to, so she had work lined up. Ryan came back because he has a son and wanted to spend time with his child. Maureen comes back after forty years in London because her son Jimmy has now established himself as a man of money and means, who feels strongly that his mother should be in Cork. Georgie, however, should have stayed away and remained in London. For her, this pull to home feels negative. The idea of this feeling a pull to home implies that one doesn't feel complete anywhere else, or feels transient in another space, and only feels like a complete person when at home. That feeling of not being able to feel comfortable anywhere else can be a bad thing, as well as a good thing. . So, Georgie comes back and spends most of her time in *The Rules of Revelation* wondering why she did, and she almost sabotages herself, making mistakes that would jeopardise the possibility of getting back to London and reconnecting with the normal life that she had created for herself. For her, being Irish was more important than being comfortable.

**KK:** Yes, this coming home concept has a great impact on the lives of the characters in the trilogy. Just to return to one of your comments where you said that the Catholic Church was not necessarily present anymore but rather its routines. Can you elaborate on that?

**LM:** I mean if you try to remove religion from a society... religion is not just a belief system; it's also heritage, identity, the routine of a normal life. Lot of things are built around this faith system, and if the religion disappears then the rest doesn't necessarily go. And if you try to remove this then what do you put in its place? People like to have their lives divided into rituals, mementos, occasions. So, we still see a priest as being a local figure of importance. But not so much as being a spiritual authority. This was the reason we experienced so many difficulties because at the time the priests really abused their power in horrific ways, they were unapproachable, seen as being above reproach, and many of them ruled by fear. Today priests are now seen as the pillar of society in a more positive way. A parish priest might be involved in the local GAA or fundraising efforts, charity, and even schools for example. That said, a

typical priest in Ireland now would be someone in their seventies; we don't have young priests. In the next ten to fifteen years there is going to be an even bigger problem for the Catholic Church in Ireland, because the staff is just not there anymore. To get back to your question, most of the remaining influence of Catholicism in Irish cultural life is seen in those rituals: in the baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. And, too, the way in which the Irish use the English language; it is peppered with religious phrases and statements like "Oh Jesus" and "Oh God" and "Jesus, Mary and Joseph". When my first novel was translated into Italian, my Italian translator had to ask me what level of blasphemy such sayings were — were they seen as very offensive. I had to explain to him that this kind of language isn't taken as blasphemous in Ireland at all, because even the priest would say phrases like these, and would not think anything of it. So even that way of using language has been stripped of all authority and power and has just become another kind of twist in the vernacular.

**KK:** I was wondering, the fact that you had Ryan who was bicultural; but have you had any characters that are from a completely different cultural background? And how would you feel about writing about such a character?

**LM:** Oh, that is a great question. Up to very recently Ireland was very homogenous, and white Irish ethnicity was almost ubiquitous. For example, the small town in south County Galway I come from has less than three thousand inhabitants, and throughout my childhood, the vast majority of these were white Irish or white Irish Traveller, with a few families with other white European heritage—British and German, usually—and only a handful of people of other ethnic backgrounds. Then, twenty years ago, we had an influx of Brazilian people. A few guys came over to work, and then brought their families, and then they brought their families. And suddenly, my very tiny and very Irish town became an Irish-Brazilian town. This was like a shot in the arm; it brought life to our basically dying town, where before there weren't enough people, or employment opportunities, a town where it was common and expected for its young people to leave. Immigration in Ireland in general has brought a slow dilution of that homogenous Irish identity. And there's no harm in that. I'm quite excited about what Irishness is going to look like in the future. We'll see. There is something very positive and heart-warming about new Irish people, people who come over here and take Irish citizenship and bring so much richness to Ireland. And they take Ireland and our ways into their hearts as well. So, it's a very positive thing. How would I feel about writing a character who came from a different background and had a different experience? I wouldn't avoid it, but you need to be

sensitive about it, research it, and talk to people. And if you are telling a story, make sure that you are not taking space from someone who has a more authentic story to tell. I would like to write something that is outside of my experience of Ireland, so hopefully, we'll see.

**KK:** Yes, and perhaps include a Hungarian in you next story? I would like to thank you so much for being here and taking part in this engaging discussion; I really enjoyed our talk, and I am sure our audience as well, thank you very much.

**Lisa McInerney** is the author of three novels: *The Glorious Heresies*, *The Blood Miracles* and *The Rules of Revelation*, a trilogy. She has won the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Desmond Elliott Prize, the RSL Encore Award and the Premio Edoardo Kihlgren for European literature and has been nominated for the International Dublin Literary Award, the Premio Strega Europeo, the Sunday Times Short Story Award, and twice for the Dylan Thomas Award. Her work has featured in *Winter Papers*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Vogue* *CS*, *The Irish Times*, *BBC Radio 4*, and numerous anthologies. She is published in 11 languages. In 2022, Lisa was appointed editor of *The Stinging Fly*. Her website: <https://www.lisamcinerney.com/>

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Received: 30 June, 2022

Final version accepted: 1 November, 2022