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## In praise of Mary O'Donnell, by Eamon Maher

*Eamon Maher*

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Born in Monaghan and now living in Kildare, Mary O'Donnell is the author of 13 books of poetry and fiction – a new poetry collection, *Those April Fevers*, is due out with Arc publications later this year. She was elected to Aosdána in 2001 in recognition of her literary talents. In addition to her creative writing, O'Donnell has also presented three series of poetry programmes on RTÉ radio and is a regular contributor to *Sunday Miscellany*. She worked for a number of years as a journalist, mainly as theatre critic, and her contributions to newspapers such as *The Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, together with her many contributions to literary journals, span a broad range of topics.

So we are talking about someone whose oeuvre is significant but who nonetheless eludes easy classification among both peers and academics. Sometimes writers who straddle poetry and fiction fail to nail down a place in the canon of either genre. Better known as a poet – her first collection, *Reading the Sunflowers* in September, was published by Salmon in 1990 – O'Donnell's willingness to tackle challenging topics such as the evolving role of women in Irish society, sexuality, religion, intergenerational relationships, menopause, immigration and patriarchy, often at a time when many in Ireland were far from comfortable with such frank treatment of these issues, may have had an adverse impact on the critical reception of her work.

O'Donnell's first novel, *The Light-Makers*, was a literary bestseller which went on to receive the *Sunday Tribune's* Best New Irish Novel for 1992. It deals with the travails of a childless middle-class couple whose marriage is in ruins. The middle-aged heroine, Hannah Troy, after her appointment in the Women's Centre is cancelled, wanders around Dublin and reviews an existence that appears frustratingly insignificant. Much of this is attributable to her obsessive personality, possibly a factor in her husband's infidelity, but one also has the impression that occasionally things just do not work out in life.

The positive impact of *The Light-Makers* was undone somewhat when O'Donnell's second novel, *Virgin and the Boy*, was published in 1996. The later novel deals with the relationship between a female rock star and a 19-year-old boy, 14 years her junior. The tone, setting and narrative style have changed considerably between the first and second novel, probably not for the better. But experiments are often necessary in order for a writer's authentic voice to emerge – witness McGahern's less than accomplished novels, *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*, before the masterpiece that is *Amongst Women*. And for all that *Virgin and the Boy* is a flawed novel, it is still a pleasure to read and contains many insightful comments about the human condition.

*The Elysium Testament* (1999) demonstrates O'Donnell's fascination with how spirituality can bring about healing, even to the most wounded of souls. There is a clear connection in O'Donnell's work between the religious imagination and her sense of herself as a writer. In a collection of essays, *What Being Catholic Means to Me*, she stated that religion and art share certain key preoccupations: "They teach the practitioner to attend to the small details of life, that are the pivot-points on which the spirit thrives. [...] In other words, in thinking as a writer and a person with some religious feeling, there is always another horizon to be crossed." These sentiments offer a good summation of O'Donnell's artistic quest: rather than constantly dealing with the same material and the same human dilemmas, she seeks out new horizons.

This is evident from her fourth novel, *Where They Lie* (2014), a scrutiny of a Protestant family's grief in the wake of the disappearance of two murdered members, whose bodies have never been recovered. The book examines the nature of the unsuccessful search for these bodies and the unexpected truths that are uncovered along the way. A philosophical and intellectually challenging novel, replete with skilful probing of religion, violence, guilt, mental instability, *Where They Lie* justifiably elicited a very positive critical response and seems to have confirmed O'Donnell's status as a novelist of substance.

When assessing the value of any artist, one of the primary considerations should be their capacity to make us see things differently. Mary O'Donnell demonstrates an unshakeable belief in the power of words to change things for the better. It is through poetry that she comes closest to the transcendent: "In beauty and the perception of beauty, I can feel myself re-attuned to the idea of the godly. For me at such times, there are no barriers between the religious and the artistic." The work is true to this ideal, with its successful melding of the spiritual and the aesthetic, and it is this quality that will continue to attract readers to O'Donnell's work long after some of her commercially more successful contemporaries have faded into oblivion.

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