

'What joy it was to be, what joy'



Siobhan Dowd died in 2007 aged forty-seven. In the last years of her life she wrote four exceptional novels, the first of which was published in 2006. And although it is fairly safe to assume that had she lived she would have added to that number, to dwell on that tends, somehow, to diminish her achievement. For the four novels she left are among the most accomplished for older children (if for sake of argument we include *The London Eye Mystery* in that age range) published in the present decade. As pertinent, challenging and humane as one could wish, with characters as distinctive as those presidential likenesses carved on Mt Rushmore, and written with a clear, poetic economy that bears as much resemblance to the fashion magazine style of some older children's books as it does to an academic textbook. This quartet – completed, as Frank Cottrell Boyce said, more or less in *'the fearful gap between diagnosis and death'* – is her legacy to her readers.

Trying too hard to equate events, places and characters in an author's work with the known facts of their life can be counter-productive. It's apt to leave one stranded in obstructive cul-de-sacs – the Shakespeare-knew-a-lot-about-the-law-therefore-Shakespeare-must-have-been-a-lawyer sort of thing – and with a forgetful disregard for the writer's natural instinct for researching, thinking and asking questions. There are, however, some basic facts about Siobhan Dowd that illuminate specific aspects – no matter how selective or oblique these may seem – contributing to the depth and pleasing complexity of her work.

She was born in south London to Irish parents, spent summer holidays with her sisters in the family cottage in County Waterford – washing in rain water and reading by candlelight – and, later, at another family home in Wicklow Town. Her novels – one pair (*The London Eye Mystery*; *Solace of the Road*) set in England, the other (*A Swift Pure Cry*; *Bog Child*) in Ireland – reflect this sharing of geographical localities with canny neatness. And the latter two – taking place, respectively, in 1984 and 1981 – have other, and subtler, divisions to take into account. Whereas *A Pure Swift Cry* is firmly grounded in a small, fixed community in the Republic, *Bog Child* is located close to the border in Northern Ireland, a confusing, indeterminate area that mirrors the complexities and ambiguities of those troubled times.

Siobhan Dowd was brought up a Roman Catholic and attended Catholic schools in south London. When she was fourteen she told her mother that as she no longer believed in the doctrine of transubstantiation her adherence to the Catholic faith had ceased; a strict regard for truth that prefigures her protagonists'

down-to-earth responses to religious matters. Here again, there is a sharp divergence between the 'English' and the 'Irish' books, a difference of emphasis that, intended or not, can't help but reflect the contrasting outlook of the two societies, Ireland in the 1980s, England in the present day.

For the indomitable Shell in *A Swift Pure Cry*, a Hardy-esque heroine who endures, her integrity unscathed, religion is an unquestioned part of the fabric of life, as numinous and pervasive as incense. Religious imagery and biblical quotations pop into her consciousness as freely and as matter-of-factly as the manifestations of her dead mam's spirit. When her alert, playful mind alights on doubt – *'In Shell's mind, Jesus got off the cross and walked off to the nearest bar'* – it is immediately banished by the presence of the new curate: *'Jesus Christ had come back to earth in the shape of Father Rose'*. And when her stillborn baby is born – in a scene of rare and unflinchingly courageous realism – and buried in the field in a grave marked with a ring of stones, she and her younger brother and sister, a self-supporting trio now owing to the virtual absence of their alcoholic father, naturally and unselfconsciously cross themselves.

Like Shell, Fergus in *Bog Child* is at the mercy of the power of the past, of the way things are, but, unlike her, he is only too aware of it. With his brother Joe on hunger-strike in Long Kesh, the Troubles are a constant presence. There is, it seems, no foreseeable end to the bombings, the sectarianism; *'the old grudges leapfrogging over generations, reappearing in different forms'*, as prophesied in Fergus's dreams by Mel, the Iron Age bog child. Fergus, too, is a 'bog child', immured in the clinging mud of old loyalties, old hatreds that mire his relationships – the girl from Dublin, the off-limits friendship with a Welsh squaddie. Although brought up an Irish Catholic, the Church is no longer an option: *'I'm just worn out with all the praying,'* he tells his mother. He harbours few religious thoughts. The closest to praying he gets is when he's in bed with Cora: *'Suffering Saviour. Dying's like this.'* And yet even he can hardly believe his ears when she tells him that she and her mother are not Catholics. *'You mean you're Protestants?'* he asks, dumbfounded.

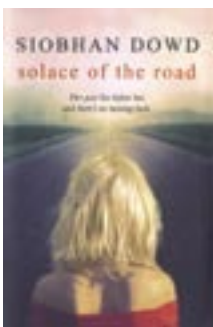
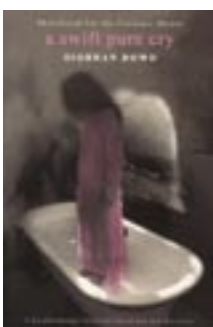
When the novels change setting and move across the sea to England religion becomes, virtually, a non-subject ('We don't do God'), surfacing only when deemed necessary, as an answer in a crossword puzzle might be. Nevertheless, both Ted in *The London Eye Mystery* and Holly, a.k.a. Solace, in *Solace of the Road* have contemplative

moments in otherwise energetic but secular lives during which they take a few moments out to consider the Almighty.

Ted's Asperger's syndrome has resulted in an encyclopaedic brain, a strictly literal view of the world and an obsession with detail. 'This is how having a funny brain,' he begins his narration of the events surrounding the disappearance of his cousin Salim, 'that runs on a different operating system from other people's helped me to figure out what happened.' Given his penchant for minutiae and getting to the heart of the matter, it's no surprise that he finds time to examine the validity of the transcendence of God. His appraisal is the natural continuation of a meditation on the inevitability of death prompted by his father being called away (an absence of fifty-four minutes, or 3,240 seconds in Ted-think) to identify the body of a young Asian boy in the police mortuary. 'I thought about God and immortal souls and eternity,' Ted says and recalls a conversation he had 'years ago' with a priest: 'I'd asked him, "If God made me, who made God?"' The priest's answer amounted to little more than doctrinal buck-passing: 'He [God] is beyond our understanding'. Ted closes his eyes and strives to imagine this God. 'But no matter how hard I thought, all I could see were clouds of confusion in a vast and silent universe'.

Holly Hogan's life so far has been severely circumscribed by social workers and secure units. Dismissing her new foster parents as one-hundred-percent Mogits (Miserable Old Gits) she makes a dash for it, towards Ireland - a fabled land where 'dogs laugh, showing their bellies' - and her absent mam. Sporting an 'ash-blonde, drop-dead gorgeous' wig, a legacy from her intended foster mother's chemotherapy, 'Solace the Unstoppable, the smooth-walking, sharp-talking glamour girl', hits the road, sustained by memories of her mam and the dubious 'sky house' where they were last together. Trekking westward from Oxford (where Siobhan Dowd lived in her final years), she hitches her way into Wales and on to Fishguard and the boat to Ireland. At one stage, having reneged on a lift because of the driver's presumed suspicions, she wanders into a field and considers that God, because of the kindness of strangers, maybe 'does exist a tiny bit . . . gets inside you and makes you do good things and you don't even know he's there.' But, 'He'd probably never come near my sort,' she concludes, without rancour.

Siobhan Dowd's books entertain, inform, shock, surprise and reaffirm hope. Ted, Holly, Fergus and Shell all undergo moments of epiphany, of stepping from confusion or darkness or despair into light. Ted's, befitting his acutely deductive mind, is cerebral: the light-bulb



moment he solves, with Holmesian perspicacity, the mystery of Salim's disappearance. Holly's takes place as she allows herself to recognise the truth about the 'sky house' and is able to ditch the Solace persona: 'and Holly Hogan, aged fifteen years and one day, was back'. Fergus's arrives in stages once he can distance himself from feeling that 'he was made of a thousand and one beads in a kaleidoscope . . . dropping into a brand new pattern every five minutes'. Shell, upbeat and irrepressible as ever, contemplates past, present and future and cannot suppress her euphoria at the wonder of it all: 'What joy it was to be, what joy'.

Siobhan Dowd treated her readers as co-equals and spurned any temptation to write down to them. The transparency of her writing - an example of Orwell's dictum about good prose being like a windowpane - invites readers into what seems to be touching-range of her characters. And the characters themselves are treated as autonomous, sentient creatures that take up space and cast shadows. It's as though she regarded herself as transcribing, rather than guiding, their thoughts, words and deeds; a generous magnanimity that reflects and complements her lifelong zeal for human rights.

She joined International PEN in 1984, as a researcher for its Writers in Prison Committee, later moving to New York for seven years to do similar work for American PEN. There, she founded and led the Rushdie Defence Committee and travelled to Indonesia and Guatemala to investigate human rights conditions for writers. Back home in the UK, she co-founded English PEN's Readers and Writers programme, which takes writers into schools in socially deprived areas, prisons, young offender institutions and community projects. She had a special empathy with the Roma people and co-edited an anthology of Romany poetry and prose. In 2004, newly married and living in Oxford, she served as Deputy Commissioner for Children's Rights in Oxfordshire, working with local authorities to ensure that statutory services affecting children conformed to UN protocols.

In the same year, her first piece of fiction, 'The Pavee and the Buffer', a short story about an Irish Traveller boy, was published in Tony Bradman's anthology *Skin Deep*. The storytelling is confident, composed and fully realised, a harbinger of what was to come. And Kit, the girl in the story, displays unmistakable hints and traits that point towards the future Shell.

Chris Stephenson

Bog Child has just won the Bisto Children's Book of the Year Award (as did *The London Eye Mystery* previously).

Siobhan Dowd's dying bequest was the foundation of a trust, 'to support, in all ways possible, disadvantaged young readers in the UK and Ireland. It was one of the very last things on Siobhan's mind and clearly for her the most pressing cause in our society today'. For details: www.siobhandowdtrust.org

A Swift Pure Cry Random House £5.99 ISBN: 978-0099488163

The London Eye Mystery Random House £5.99 ISBN: 978-0440868026

Bog Child Random House £6.99 ISBN: 978-1862305915

Solace of the Road David Fickling £10.99 ISBN: 978-0385609715

Skin Deep (ed Tony Bradman) Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 978-0141315059