

## The Lingering Influence of Childhood Migrations

Sarah Broughton talks to the novelist Maggie O'Farrell

Maggie O'Farrell, award winning author of the hugely popular novels *After You'd Gone* and *My Lover's Lover*, is talking about displacement 'I think there's a strong tradition of exile and writing being linked; there is something about being a bit of an outsider in lots of places that makes you objective about the world, you see things differently – as a writer that's useful because you're always stepping back from the material.' She speaks from personal experience. Born in Ireland, O'Farrell moved to Bridgend at the age of two and lived there for the next eleven years – the longest period she has spent anywhere to date. From Wales she moved to North Berwick in Scotland and from there to Cambridge to read English. A year in Hong Kong followed before she settled in London. Now, in her third novel (to be published in 2004), she has written for the first time about Wales through the guise of a young Welsh man bought up in Hong Kong.

Since the publication of her first novel, less than three years ago, O'Farrell has made a significant impact on the world of contemporary literature with her 'dark, eloquent domestic narratives'. Not yet thirty, she was rumoured to be a very strong contender for the prestigious 'Best of Young British Novelists 2003' list, although O'Farrell herself is ambivalent about the significance of such things. 'I can see that publishers like lists and that it's nice to have a group of people – but by their very nature they're quite random. So much of it's luck and it landing on the right desk at the right time – or not.' The importance and value of such lists certainly pales into insignificance when compared with the reviews of *After You'd Gone*: 'superb...

deeply moving... the author's precise, pared-down prose is perfect...' (*The Times*);  
'Harrowing, profound, and beautifully written' (*The Independent on Sunday*);  
'Assured and seductive' (*Literary Review*). O' Farrell clearly doesn't need to lose too much sleep over the Granta round-up: this warm critical reception has been matched only by the popularity of her novels among an ever-growing readership.

The beginnings of the novel were, however, far from auspicious. 'It was one of those things,' says O' Farrell, 'where I didn't admit to myself what I was doing – I was just making up this thing in my bedroom that was getting longer and longer.' She had, in fact, written about 40,000 words by the time a friend asked her what it was she was doing every evening. She told him she was writing a story. He insisted that, at 40,000 words, it was a novel. It was a pivotal moment. 'It's such a frightening thing, you have to trick yourself into doing it – especially your first book. You have no idea if you're going to finish it or how it's going to work, it's an incredibly steep learning curve!' The turning point for O' Farrell was attending a writing course at the Arvon Centre. She describes herself as an 'Arvon Evangelist': 'I kind of think Arvon changed my life!' She showed the manuscript to her tutor who agreed with her friend it was a novel. The tutor then sent it to her agent which, as O' Farrell concedes was 'a massive, massive hurdle to get over' and, undoubtedly, an incentive. 'Oh God yes! Someone saying to you "It's a novel and it's good," '

She has always wanted to write and began keeping a diary from the age of six, but never admitted to herself that she wanted to become a *writer* – 'What does that mean? It's such a massive proclamation to make.' Her first attempts at creative writing were in the form of poetry. While still at Cambridge she attended workshops given by Jo Shapcott and began to write seriously. After moving to London she went to the American poet Michael Donaghy's evening classes and wrote a lot, but

describes it as ‘not terribly good’. A turning point in her writing life was when the mother of an ex-boyfriend lent her an ancient Apple Mac and she started to write prose – it was, she says, a ‘Eureka’ moment. She goes on to acknowledge her continuing debt to poetry ‘Not to denigrate poetry at all but I found it a good training ground. It makes you very economical, it makes you think about every word pulling its weight.’

After writing some ‘bad short stories’, O’Farrell began work on *After You’d Gone*. It is an intense, deeply affecting novel about the consequences of the loss of love. The protagonist, Alice, spends most of the book in a coma after stepping into traffic on a busy London road. It has been described as a ‘whydunit’ and, indeed, the reader is indeed immediately preoccupied with what Alice can possibly have witnessed which has led her to such an act of self-destruction. But, although that particular mystery takes the course of the book to unravel and is gripping in itself, it by no means begins to explain the addictively emotional content of the story which is what engages the reader so completely.

O’Farrell knew from the start that she wanted to write a contemporary love story which, in a world seemingly full of endless choices for today’s accomplished young middle-class women, had restrictions and boundaries imposed on it. John, Alice’s lover, is Jewish and he is forced to choose between her and his family – the repercussions of which are treated with almost unbearable poignancy at the dénouement of the novel. ‘I think a great part of love is actually fear of loss,’ says O’Farrell. It is a state of mind she conveys uncannily well for someone who freely admits she has not actually experienced what Alice goes through. The agent, upon reading the first draft, obviously agreed although she also ‘tore it to shreds, which was brilliant because it was a real mess. There was a lot of scaffolding I needed to take

down, and then she said “now go away and write it again.”’ The novel then did the rounds of the publishers only to be rejected by all of them. ‘So I did another re-write and it was sent out again and suddenly – publishing is such a weird thing – everyone wanted it!’ The hardback of *After You’d Gone* came out in 2000 to great reviews and average sales. The paperback, published the following year, soared into an old-fashioned word of mouth literary sensation – yet O’ Farrell remains endearingly modest about her success. ‘I suppose I had no expectations at all because it was my first novel and you don’t really know what’s going to happen. You just do what everyone tells you and the machinery works around you. I try not to think about it – but, of course, I’m *so* pleased that people like it’. She remains fond of the book. ‘Ali Smith said to me recently that she thinks your past books are like ex-lovers – there are some you get on really well with and you think “that’s great” and others that you’re kind of on speaking terms with and *then* there are the others.....! I think *After You’d Gone* – that was a good relationship.’

Before the first book was sold O’ Farrell had already begun work on her second novel, *My Lover’s Lover*. She was by now supporting herself as a freelance journalist having given up her job as information officer at the Poetry Society. ‘I didn’t get a massive advance, a nice advance, but not like I could give up and go and live in the Seychelles, so I worked full-time and fitted in the second novel’. *My Lover’s Lover* is, like the first novel, a love story – but of a more ethereal nature. Whereas the relationship between Alice and John in *After You’d Gone* felt as solid as bricks and mortar and, consequently, its demolition a deeply traumatic act – the two intertwined love affairs which drive the narrative of *My Lover’s Lover* are less tangible. It is, in more ways than one, a ghost story. Lily, Marcus’s new girlfriend, convinces herself that Sinead (his former lover) is haunting her, yet Lily herself

resembles a fragile, almost unearthly presence as she struggles to make an impact on Marcus. The book is an unsettling account of the obsessions and insecurities that can govern relationships.

O' Farrell has described it as being 'that whole domestic gothic thing again. The sense that horror and chaos are lurking just under the surface of ordinary everyday scenarios.' It allows, as one critic noted, O' Farrell to do what she does best – render the familiar truly unfamiliar. She confesses to realising when she was writing it that it wasn't going to have as wide an appeal as *After You'd Gone*. 'It's difficult – people who liked it want you to write the same book again, which you couldn't do even if you wanted to. You've got to move on'.

*My Lover's Lover* turned out to be something of a departure for O' Farrell – 'My next three novels are hopefully going to be very much family based and in a similar territory to *After You'd Gone*. I wanted to write *My Lover's Lover* because it was a break from that and I wanted to write something very dramatic about a number of characters in a specific time frame – a tight little group. The one I'm working on at the moment is very sprawling, It was going to be a novella but at the moment it's four hundred pages and growing!'

The novel in question, her third, is about emigration and there's no doubt that the experience of living in three different countries by the time she was fourteen has left a lasting impression on O' Farrell. She says simply 'Both me and my sisters can't really get away from the idea we don't really know where we belong. It's very hard. It's hard to explain it. It's hard not to know that. I mean there are people that have it a lot worse – obviously, but to a lesser degree....' Born in Northern Ireland, she had moved to Dublin by the time she was year old and then a year later to Bridgend when her father, an economics lecturer, got a job at the University of Wales. She is, she

says, still really fond of Bridgend and missed it ‘terribly’ when she left. She spent two years at Brynteg Comprehensive (the only part of her life in Wales she didn’t enjoy) and regrets that she wasn’t taught, as her sisters were, by Cary Archer, founder of Poetry Wales Press and former editor of the magazine *Poetry Wales*. ‘They said he was brilliant. There’s a really good emphasis in Wales on the arts, creativity and writing. I think it’s a very rounded education’. When her father accepted a job in Edinburgh, the family decamped up to North Berwick. It was hard work for O’ Farrell – she describes the learning curve as being ‘very rapid. You have to learn to fit in’. It was an experience she found herself repeating when she arrived in Cambridge. ‘It was really quite alienating and difficult and it wasn’t just the English cultural thing. The confidence of people amazed me – it took me a really long time to realise that they were just bullshitting!’

The lingering influence of the migrations of O’ Farrell’s childhood surfaces in the current novel. ‘I really didn’t want to write about the whole exiled Irish thing. Pete McCarthy’s done it so well recently and I think it’s been exhausted, so I’ve channelled all those feelings I have about it into this book’. Most of the novel is set in Inverneshire where O’ Farrell spent childhood holidays and focuses on the local Italian immigrant community, although there is also ‘quite a big section’ set in an unnamed Valleys town in Wales. She had planned to write a Scotland/Hong Kong novel but as she developed the character of a man born in Hong Kong to a Welsh mother she decided to write about Wales from the perspective of his grandparents in South Wales in the 1930s. ‘I had always wondered if I would write about the place and then it just seemed to be the right moment.’

For O’ Farrell only a small part of writing a novel is actually sitting at a desk typing, ‘There’s an awful lot of thinking that has to be done’. When she does write it

tends to be all day and through the night although she acknowledges that there are ‘days when you sit down and you know it’s just not going to happen – that sounds very precious –but there are days when if you sit there you’re just going to make yourself miserable, so you have to do something else!’ She has always read voraciously – from the time she was seriously ill as a child and had a long spell in the Heath Hospital in Cardiff ‘that was the point I started reading and I’ve never really stopped.’ She likes Jane Austen and in a more contemporary vein, Peter Carey, citing *Oscar and Lucinda* as one of her favourite books. ‘I loved Trezza Azzopardi’s *The Hiding Place* and Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* and Michelle Roberts’s work ....’

Whenever she finishes a novel O’ Farrell suppresses an urge to do something different, anything but be a novelist (her current fantasy is to be a paramedic). Instead she travels. Last year it was to Italy and Hong Kong, although that was mostly work – research for the new novel – and the year before she spent two months in South America. Luckily she doesn’t have to worry about her finances these days – no more interruptions while she composes an article about men’s underwear, although she worries that she now has too much time in which to write. ‘I’m not sure it’s that good for you to sit at home and write – you’re in danger of meeting yourself coming back!’ She read an interview with Isabel Allende recently in which Allende said that there is no such thing as writers block ‘you just have to live a bit more!’ O’ Farrell agrees ‘you have to live your life as well – you can’t just be “a writer”.’ After completing three novels in fairly quick succession she is pragmatic about the future. ‘I don’t think you can go on at that rate so I’m expecting not to’. If you’ve got nothing to say, she advises, you shouldn’t say it.

***Sarah Broughton © 2003***

***Published in New Welsh Review, No.59, Spring 2003***