ARTS/CULTURE

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Mo Laethanta Saoire: Memories of my grandmother, by Gareth Hanrahan

The Cork author and games designer recalls trips to Tipp, and a burgeoning interest in choose-your-own adventure gamebooks

Cork author and video games designer Gareth Hanrahan in 1996, aged 8; inset, a more recent picture of Hanrahan.

"Summer would be beautiful, but this spring made promise of a greater beauty than summer could fulfill, hinted at a mystery that other summers had evaded rather than explained"
Elizabeth Bowen, Daffodils

WE'RE all in our little worlds, most of the time. Things of uttermost importance to one person go unnoticed by others, even those in the same space, even those closest to them.

I'm there looking for the car keys that are not in the bowl where they should be *come on where are the damned things have you checked the jacket you were wearing of course I have it's the first place I looked*, I'm tearing the whole house apart now, storming around the kitchen like a whirlwind, *doesn't anyone realise how important the keys are, if we don't find them it's a crisis, the whole day's schedule ruined, does anyone know where they are?*
And one of the kids looks up.
Daddy?
Yes (please say you know where the keys are)
Did you know that you can tame dodos in the game I'm playing?
You want to shout *can't you see what I'm doing how stressed I am how I've been running around looking for the keys* (oh there they are) *I don't have time to talk about dodos.*
We're in our own little worlds, and rarely do they touch, especially across generations.
But, sometimes there are moments like sparks, arcing across the gap.

My grandmother was vice-principal of South Presentation School. I remember wondering if she actually liked being a teacher, as she always referred to students as those 'terrible girls.' Those terrible girls would be out on the street again, perhaps, or making noise outside her classroom. The phrase entered the family lexicon. We all used it. What's that noise? *Oh, some terrible girls talking outside.*

Before becoming vice-principal, she'd been a teacher in Tipperary. She moved home to Cork after my grandfather's death, but she still knew people there, so every summer we – my mother, my grandmother, and I – would decamp to her friend's farmhouse. We'd drive up, the names of towns a litany. Mallow, Mitchelstown, Fermoy, Clonmel, Dragan, as it was in the beginning.

My memories of the first few visits are disjointed, like old photographs found scattered a drawer. The flies crawling over the sides of the cows, and how ineffective the swatting of the tails seemed. Climbing around a barn filled with bales of hay. The terrifying greyhounds kept in a shed, and how they'd snarl and pant through the little gap under the door.

There were other children living on the farm, my grandmother's friend's grandchildren, which made us friends twice removed, or at least obliged them to include me. Some summers, we got on well; others, less so. Our worlds intersecting only briefly, Brigadoon friendships, both parties shaped by the unknowable intervening eleven-and-a-half-months. We were never that close.

Apart from that one summer, where we all went to a savage land of sorcerers and barbarians - Allansia!

The *Fighting Fantasy* choose-your-own-adventure gamebooks had a phase of wild popularity in the mid-80s. Behind lurid covers depicting monsters, and those even-more lurid bright green spines you could spot from across a bookshop, were tales of fantasy where YOU were the hero. Turn to paragraph 16 to drink the potion, or paragraph 264 to smite the skeleton.

By chance, both the farm kids and I were into *Fighting Fantasy* that summer; better yet, my grandmother could be convinced to drive us to the bookstore in Clonmel every few days to restock. A feverish routine quickly evolved – each of us would start playing a different book.

When we'd completed the quest (or, given the astounding difficulty of some of the books, once we'd given up), we'd swap books. Adventure after adventure filled the summer days, each of us immersed in our own tale. We'd trade tips, call out warnings and cryptic clues. Beware the manticore! Bring gold to pay the boatman! Don't turn left in Deathtrap Dungeon! A private language rich in occult jargon, messages shouted across worlds.

Even when we weren't playing, even when we were out walking or helping on the farm, we talked about the books, and it bled into our surroundings. The land became enchanted. That old tumbledown wall surely must be the crumbling remnants of a castle. That muddy copse of trees, a doorway to the fabled Forest of Doom. The dogs in the shed – slavering hellhounds (SKILL 8, STAMINA 6, but extra damage from their fiery breath if they roll a six).

It's one thing to be lost in a book while you're sitting there reading it, but it's something else entirely when the book so charges your imagination that everything takes on that mythic sheen. That summer's sunlight filtered through from a different world, transforming whatever it touched.

I can only imagine what the adults thought of us – but they probably didn't. They had their own concerns, their own interests, their own worlds that only tangentially intersected with ours at the best of times. I remember being brought on a drive to visit other friends of my grandmother who organised events connected to Charles Kickham or Elizabeth Bowen or some other long-dead author whose books lacked the virtue of containing even a single goblin or dragon. I sat in the back seat, trying to roll dice as we bounced along country roads.

On the way back, we stopped at a padlocked gate. An overgrown laneway led a low building, long abandoned, weeds growing in the doorway, spilling out of the shuttered windows. It was the school where my grandmother had taught for years, a place of huge significance to her. It meant nothing to me then. Maybe I squinted at it, tried to imagine it as the entrance to a dungeon, but it was too drab, too concrete. I was relieved when we all piled back in the car and drove on.

Leanora Hanrahan, late vice-principal of South Presentation School in Cork and grandmother of Gareth Hanrahan.

> When I read it, the phrase leapt out off the page, a connection arcing across years and generations

When you live with teachers, the last two weeks of summer are always tattered, the unscheduled timelessness of July infiltrated by meetings and lesson planning and the feeling of impending doom. We left Tipperary and went home (turn to paragraph 400). We went back the next summer, but it wasn't the same. We'd all moved on, each in a different direction. Still friends, but fewer transmissions, fewer moments of connection.

A few years later, my grandmother retired from teaching, so the annual pilgrimage to Tipperary no longer had to be part of the summer holidays. She could drive up for a few days whenever she wanted.

She passed away while I was in college.

During the pandemic, I embarked on a project to read one short story a day. After working through all the collections of short fiction I owned, I ended up buying a collection of Elizabeth Bowen's work, which turned out to be weirder and much more to my taste than I expected.

One of the stories, 'Daffodils', is about a nervous young teacher who encounters some of her students during the holidays, and awkwardly tries to relate to them outside school. She refers to them as 'those terrible girls'. My grandmother had read that same story, had taken that phrase and used it, passed it onto the rest of the family divorced of context. When I read it, the phrase leapt out off the page, a connection arcing across years and generations. It felt like a moment out of time, like I'd just encountered her again years after she was gone.

As I write, summer's here. I won't try to fill the children's days. I'll let them find their own enchantments for the most part, let them inhabit their own worlds. But I'll show them some things that are important to me, and hope for a spark or two of connection.

Right now, if we're lucky.

But if it's something that they only notice many years later, that's all right too.

■ Gareth Hanrahan is a novelist and game designer from Cork. He recently published *The Sword Unbound*, the second instalment in his fantasy trilogy

Cork actor dips into own tour guide experiences

A familiar face from Killnaskully, the lack of secure income as an actor ensured Jack Walsh had to turn to alternative work, writes **Colette Sheridan**

CORK-BORN Jack Walsh (Jimmy in Killnaskully) knows all about the ups and downs of the life of an actor. Because of the inevitability of 'resting' periods, the 68-year-old decided to become a part-time tour guide, selling brand Ireland "with enchanting tales of ceol and craic" by day while by night, he was hunkering down in his damp Capel Street flat in Dublin, threatened with eviction because of rising rent.

But never one to miss an opportunity, Walsh has parlayed his story into a one man show, Welcome to Ireland – Meltdown of an Irish Tour Guide, which he will perform at the Cork Arts Theatre on August 7-10.

Walsh could have had an easier life. "As a young fellow from Ballinlough, I hadn't a clue about theatre. I thought the Cork Opera House was just for fur coats, a cliché I heard along the way."

After leaving school, Walsh got a job in a bank. "In those days, that was like a ticket to heaven. But I hated it. It took me a few years to be courageous enough to leave. I transferred to Dublin and enjoyed myself for a while."

But Walsh realised he wasn't at all suited to working in the bank. He fell in love with a woman who broke his heart. To try and get over her, Walsh took night classes in creative writing. He remembered a passing comment that his ex-girlfriend made, saying he'd be good at drama. He joined a drama class.

"I didn't really know plays but I was a good mimic." Encouraged to pursue acting by a former head of drama at RTÉ, Walsh studied theatre with Deirdre O'Connell who founded the Focus Theatre.

"It was the Stanislavski method, all very internal. It was really good for me to do. Eventually, I started doing mime classes with two guys who had been at the Marcel Marceau school in Paris."

Jack Walsh brings his new show to Cork Arts Theatre; below, Walsh in Killinaskully.

Lured by tales of great fun, parties, the charisma of Marceau and his theatrical technique, Walsh moved to Paris to study with the late French mime artist.

"At the time, mime in Ireland was sort of street corner stuff. In Paris, I came to realise that for the French, mime was an art form, right up there with painting.

"Marceau was amazing. I remember that he was in the Theatre de Champs Elysées for a month. He would do two-and-a-half hour-long shows on his own with no words. The place was full every night. He had such magnetism. The funny thing was there were people who were better at technique but he had a mixture of confidence and bravado, storytelling talent and an artistic knowledge that was unrivalled."

Walsh spent three years with Marceau, travelling to the US and Italy, working as an assistant to him. Walsh enjoyed the company of Marceau who, funnily enough, would never stop talking once he was off the stage.

About ten years ago, Walsh, divorced, was living in private rented accommodation in Dublin, feeling financially insecure. He had spotted tour guides and took himself off to Fáilte Ireland where he completed a course that allowed him to act as a guide to the city, often to groups of up to fifty people from cruise liners. It gave him plenty of fodder for his show in which he plays historical figures, tourists, landlords and a tour guide in danger of homelessness. These days Walsh still does occasional tour guides, but to smaller groups of people.

This grandfather points to the irony of talking up Ireland while rents are sky high and there is a housing crisis. He doesn't want to give away the ending of his show. Suffice to say, this sometime tour guide is in a better place.

"But there was a long time when things were extremely hairy and touch and go. There was an element of couch surfing as well which, when you're older, is quite humiliating."

However, Walsh doesn't regret his career choice but feels sorry for young people starting out. "It's harder for young people today to follow their hearts. When I was twenty, if you had any sort of a job, you could get by and rent some sort of a bedsit. We don't have bedsits anymore. There used to be places to live; loads of council houses for people that needed them and loads of flats. I can get a bit angry about the way things are now."

Walsh says that everyone in the Dáil should see his show. It may be humorous but it also shines a light on living conditions in twenty-first century Ireland.

■ *Welcome to Ireland – Meltdown of an Irish Tour Guide* is at Cork Arts Theatre on August 7-10

Sullivan is the toast of New York

HOW interesting to see John Jeremiah Sullivan's Pulphead make the New York Times' list of the 100 best books of the 21st century so far. As the accompanying blurb notes, "When this book of essays came out, it bookended a fading genre: collected pieces written on deadline by 'pulpheads', or magazine writers".

It was released in 2011 and Sullivan has largely gone to ground since then, a couple of pieces for GQ here, a story for UnHerd there. How interesting that Sullivan is the final guest on the Longform podcast, which began in August 2012 and has racked up nearly 600 episodes in the intervening dozen years. It's a simple concept - interviews with writers, journalists, filmmakers, and podcasters about how they do their work.

We covered it previously when the New Yorker writer Michael Schulman talked about the reaction to his viral feature on Succession actor Jeremy Strong.

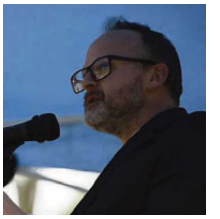
Not every podcast gets to say goodbye in its own way. See the Around the NFL podcast, from the NFL itself, which had devout listeners and built up a cult following not just in the US but in Ireland, the UK, and, well, around the world. There had been no new episodes since May until two months later it was revealed that two of the hosts had been let go, the podcast was being renamed, and the thing you had gotten used to was no more. See also: Sex, Lies and DM Slides (https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsandculture/arid-41000966.html). Maybe it's best for a podcast just to call it a day when it knows its time is up.

That's what Longform is doing. Co-host Evan Ratliff says that Sullivan has been one of the most requested interviews going back to the start of the show and so is a worthy way to go out. As he notes, it would have been a very different interview if done around 2012, with Pulphead on its way to becoming a word-of-mouth classic.

Early on, he talks about using 'Jeremiah' in his bylines to stand out from all the other John Sullivans in New York media. "It was my grandfather's name and my great-great-grandfather's name, going back to Cork county in Ireland. It's funny, when I meet Irish people, a surprising number of times, they can pinpoint the part of Ireland I come from by that name, even though you wouldn't think it's that distinctive, but it's just a very West Cork name. So it's grown on me even though it's kind of pretentious."

We're told Irish writing is in a golden age - maybe we can claim another one.

Eoghan O'Sullivan



John Jeremiah Sullivan is the author of the widely-acclaimed Pulphead.