

Maeve Kelly at 90

A Celebration of One of Ireland's Greatest but Least-known Writers

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This paper seeks to re-introduce an Irish writer who should be much more well-known than she is. Maeve Kelly has published novels, poems and short stories since the early 1970s, but she can hardly be described as a household name in Ireland. The re-launch of her short story collection, *Orange Horses*, in 2016, however, has given impetus to the idea of reassessment and revival, and this during a time in which women writers are clearly more prominent and popular than when Kelly's literary career began. From the early 1970s, Maeve Kelly was active both as a writer and as an activist for the women's movement. Due to the prejudices of a male chauvinist critical community, her narratives often tended to be pigeon-holed as reductively feminist, to be seen as an adjunct to her activism, when in fact the stories were markedly much richer, varied and literary than they were given credit for. *Orange Horses* unequivocally shows a writer of great maturity, ingenuity, power, and imagination, and one who never allowed message to get in the way of literary art. My paper explores the various literary aspects to her work which have remained unappreciated, or under-appreciated, for so long, bringing light to bear on her short stories and her novels. This paper can be seen as a timely celebration of Maeve Kelly at 90.

As an example of Maeve Kelly's literary art, I begin by providing a summary and assessment of her most famous story, 'A Life of Her Own', which tells of the relationship between a young girl and her aunt, and the happiness the girl derives from spending the summer with her on her farm each year. When the aunt tells the girl that she will get married soon, the girl's disappointment at hearing this activates what is a very common feature in literature, the notion of the end of childhood, and the bitterness engendered by that moment of transition. The aunt's marriage, she fears, will bring her idyllic summer visits to an end. Kelly's story, however, while it does deal with this painful process in the most intimate and dramatic terms, also adds an extra layer, about the freedom of women. Opposition to her marriage in middle-age comes from her brother, who treats her like a surrogate mother, and from her niece, struggling with her emotional selfishness. It is a testament to the author's literary skill that this very small-scale and intimate drama can be interpreted in wider, societal terms as an exposure of the difficulties mature Irish women can face in attempting to go against the wishes of others in order to gain freedom. In such a way, we can begin to see, or re-examine, the literary strengths of Maeve Kelly's writing. It is proposed that a new readership, both general and academic, begin to re-encounter, and re-evaluate, her texts, prizing the literary subtlety and complexity of Maeve Kelly's narratives.

Kelly's thematic focus is certainly and clearly on the injustices and problems caused by a male chauvinist and profoundly patriarchal society, but her characters are never puppets and the situations never anything less than compellingly dramatic or engaging. The author often draws upon her own life experience, making much, for example, of her experiences as a trainee nurse in England in the 1950s. From a short story which experimentally and ambitiously plays with narrative voice ('Morning at my Window') to a full-blown novel which follows the exploits of a young Irish lass training to be a nurse in London (*Florrie's Girls*), Maeve Kelly opens a door onto a world not covered very much in mainstream -often male- literature, that of nursing. Within these narratives there is much to be said on gender inequality, women's perspectives on institutionalized and calcified practices at work, and on wider questions like racial bias by the English toward the Irish, but the narratives are always character-first. The heroine of *Florrie's Girls*, for example, arrives in London with no preconceptions about anything; whatever she learns about work and the world from her particular, and particularly feminine, perspective, feels organic and unforced, and is consequently all the more engaging and dramatic for that.

Kelly's 1985 novel *Necessary Treasons* is also briefly examined here. While it is clearly a novel about gender inequality in Ireland, about domestic violence, and about the early steps of the women's movement, therefore derived

directly from the author's experiences, again I caution against the tendency to pigeon-hole the narrative as didactic. The characters, and the dramatic situations they find themselves in, are handled with a literary deftness and complexity too easily overlooked. Critics' praise of -male writer- Roddy Doyle's exposure of domestic violence as a symptom of Irish society's patriarchal tendencies needs to be seen in the context of the much more muted appraisal of Maeve Kelly's literary handling of the subject (which pre-dates Doyle). Shouldn't Maeve Kelly's achievement, I ask, have been more fairly judged for its boldness and honesty? I also suggest that now, in contrast to when she began writing, perhaps Maeve Kelly's work can finally be given the attention and appreciation it deserves. These are surely more enlightened times and women's writing in Ireland is enjoying a wave of both general and critical popularity. It is this hoped that Maeve Kelly's 90th birthday sees the beginning of a re-evaluation and re-engagement with her work.

Works mentioned: -

Orange Horses, Tramp Press, 'Recovered Voices' series, No.3, Dublin, 2016.

Necessary Treasons, Michael Joseph, London, 1985 / Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1991.

Florrie's Girls, Michael Joseph, London, 1989 / Blackstaff Press, Belfast. 1991.