

New Irish-American Writing

'Big-hearted vision, soaring language'

By Irish Echo Staff
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It's been worth the wait. In 2015, County Offaly immigrant Connie Roberts, a winner of a number of poetry awards and a finalist for several more, finally got to see her work in book form.

Author and New York Times columnist Dan Barry has said of "Little Witness," which is published by Arlen House: "In her vivid recounting of a childhood spent in one of Ireland's notorious industrial schools, truth hides behind no 'masquerade of metaphors.' Roberts honors children, holds adults accountable, and finds acceptance, all with a reportorial rigor that, through her soaring language and big-hearted vision, achieves poetic art."

Barry added: "This is the poetry of rock-hard experience. It will skin your soul."

Paula Meehan, appointed in 2013 by President Higgins as Ireland Professor of Poetry, wrote: "Poetry and history meet in this work in a powerful confluence of energies. Here we are given the formation of a compassionate and loving soul, and also a lens through which we are gifted a clear-eyed vision of the young Irish state. This is brave and generous work, technically accomplished, beautifully crafted and deeply moving."

Roberts, who came to United States in 1983, in 2010 received the Patrick Kavanagh Award for her manuscript "Not the Delft School." The same year she was awarded first prize in the Dromineer Literary Festival Poetry Competition. In 2011, she received a Literature Bursary Award from the Irish Arts Council. In May 2013 she received the Poetry Collection Award at the Listowel Writers' Week Festival and last summer she won the Boyle Arts Festival Poetry Competition.

Roberts teaches creative writing at Hofstra University, New York, and is part of Hofstra's Irish Studies program. She is a regular participant in Artists Without Walls events in New York City.

NOT THE DELFT SCHOOL

For *Vonnie McDermott*

If I were in a Vermeer or a De Hooch, I'd rest my head on a mother's lap, the radiant light from the outdoors illuminating the spacious, tiled kitchen, as she tenderly searched my hair. But I am in Saint Brigid's dormitory—grey linoleum floor, alb-white candlewick bed spreads, porcelain sinks—with a dozen aproned girls and Miss Higgins.

Older girls search younger girls' heads with fine-tooth combs, stopping every now and then to squash a louse or nit between thumb nails. One girl, for fun, shakes her head over a sink. Scores of wingless insects, like grains of ground pepper, cling to the china whiteness.

The housemother douses some heads with paraffin oil; others get their hair tied up in green and gold ribbons. Overhead, a fluorescent light flickers.



Connie Roberts.

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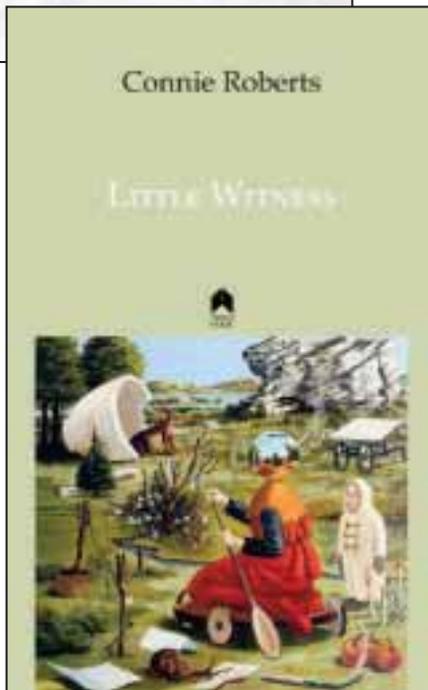
For *foster mother Eileen Sheerin*

Back when the collar and the wimple were law, when you didn't cross the cassock or the habit, she stood her ground. When she'd meet the Cheshire-cat nun in town, she'd *nod-nod-nod*, then carry on about her business—put down a few pounds on that grand set of china in Joe Feeley's, pick up an extra roll of wallpaper for the end room or a few balls of wool for that Aran jumper. When the Head Nun wanted to send me, in my 14th year, to the doctor's house in Kilbeggan, to house-keep, she told her she had work around her own house—*Oh, I've windows to wash, walls to paint, Sister.*

But devil a window I washed that summer, my sun-soused days spent traipsing out the Swimming Pool Road—towel and togs under my arm—my two-and-a-half pence tucked in my pocket, plus a little extra for the requisite cream bun in The Oasis on the way home.

When the Head Nun again wanted to dispatch me (despite my protestations) to my parents' home, she assured her she'd deliver me—*Oh, I'll drive her myself, Sister, after our holiday in Butlins Mosney.*

Not a bit of her—she kept me under her red coat, in her chalet, by the boating lake and the sunken gardens.



And when I aged out of the orphanage and was released into her care—warned, mind you, not to sponge off her generosity, to soak up my secretarial studies (be a quick brown fox, not a lazy dog)—she did what any good mother would do when her pup is hurt by word or world: put her foot on the clutch, shifted gears, pulled over to the side of a quiet road.

THE POTATO PICKER & THE TV RENTAL MAN

The purple evening creeping in around him,
Frost not far off, legs straddling the drills,
He stoops, like one of Millet's gleaners,
To pick the last of the late potatoes.
If he hears the motor car pull up on
The verge of the vetch-tendriled ditch,
he doesn't
Lift his head. Inside the house, two children,
Seated on Formica chairs, stare at the black and white
Western—gun-smoke and dust-clouds circling
The wagons—the rabbit ears set at ten past ten.

As the soft-shoed man struggles to open
The wrought-iron gate with the obstinate television,
Before stowing it in the boot, the potato-picker,
His head hanging between his arms like a pendulum,
Keeps picking, picking, picking. Hands as big as shovels,
He cradles each potato, gently scrapes the earth
From its cold stoniness, before placing it in a burlap sack.
Tomorrow, he'll dig a pit and store his harvest

In layer after layer of warm straw;
come winter,
Feast on a bounty of boxty,
colcannon and champ.

QUIET TIME

For *Rita*

Long after the keys stopped jangling
and the corridor lights were quenched—after double-checking to see my younger sister was asleep—I reached, in darkness, behind the purple velvet curtains for my orange. (I'd have bought it with my pocket money in Jack Galvin's earlier in the day.)

Cradled its pockmarked skin slowly in my hands, inhaled the scent of a Valencia grove before plunging my thumbnail into its abundant peel.

Pulled it back slowly, like a band-aid from a scraped knee. As the staff downstairs steeped the grey porridge for next day's breakfast, I piled the thick rinds higgledy-piggledy on my chest; licked the piquant

spray from my palms and fingers. Segment by juicy segment, savoured the succulent fruit in my mouth. Alone—the council men digging in the pipes beside my bed, on a tea-break—in my aromatic orangery.

Next morning: awoke to the smell of my sister's pissed-in oilskin bed.