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## Kavanagh winner writes poetry out of memories of hurt



[Connie Roberts: 'I wanted to write my own history'](#)

Poet Connie Roberts took the memories of her harsh childhood in an industrial school in Westmeath and created prize-winning work of stunning power, writes **EILEEN BATTERSBY**

FREEZING FOG and ice had made the roads to Inniskeen dangerous. Elsewhere, in other parts of Co Monaghan and throughout the country, snow was already falling. The first tremors of anxiety about the weather were beginning to be voiced, as the cold spell began in earnest and the first cars to be abandoned made a forlorn sight.

Inside the Patrick Kavanagh Centre, Connie Roberts, winner of the 38th annual poetry award named in his honour, stands at the podium reading from her collection, *Not the Delft School*.

The poems, some of which have been published individually, are based on her childhood memories of growing up in an Irish orphanage in the Midlands:

“I have no Mossbawn/to take down from a shelf/and leaf through. No banks of earth stitched with ferns and bluebells; no rabbits running through the thicket/nor

wrens sheltering in the boxwood hedge. My *omphalos* is a pigeon-grey orphanage yard/clotted with kids: see-saws; pissy knickers: a clay-filled *Kiwi* tin on a hopscotch square;”(From *Omphalos* ).

The audience is quiet, attentive as Roberts reads *The Closet*, a poem about how her doll was taken from her. Inniskeen is Kavanagh’s home village where many of the inhabitants quote freely from his works. They know the poetry and some remember the man, a blunt individual who would have had a field day attacking the economic shambles currently being imposed upon the nation. Kavanagh’s grave is only metres from where Roberts is standing, reading her poems, evoking an Ireland of harsh childhoods marred by drunken fathers and passive wives that is still only too familiar.

Roberts is the middle child of 15 living ones, “I have seven older than me and seven younger”, Roberts left Ireland 28 years ago, at 20, to see what life in the US had to offer and she has stayed. America has been good to her.

“I’m not interested in the misery memoir but my subject matter is part of my life and I wanted to write my own history. It’s what I was given, it’s the clay. But the words are mine and it’s the words, the poetry, that’s being acknowledged, not the life.”

Roberts is quick, lively company, has a good sense of humour and that odd, hybrid accent Irish people acquire when they settle in New York. The content is grim. Her mother had “21 pregnancies in 25 years – /Three still born, three miscarriages,/15 healthy babies . . .” (From *The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe* ).

Those 15 surviving children were eventually taken into care when Roberts was five years old. The convent orphanage was run with brutal efficiency. “At one stage my mother asked me would I like to come home with one of my brothers. I had been my father’s favourite.” The return home in 1971 lasted 10 months, then Roberts and her brother were back at the orphanage. Her mother died a few years ago, but her father lived on, apparently unaware of the damage done. Roberts is a survivor whose decision to leave Ireland made her a poet.

She was born in Ballybrittain, Edenderry, Co Offaly and along with most of her siblings was sent to Mount Carmel Industrial School, an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy in Moate, Co Westmeath. “Aside from that little break, I lived there from the age of five until I was 17 and did a secretarial course and got a job in Dublin. One of my brothers was in the States and I decided to ask him could I come over for six weeks or so and see what it was like. And I stayed.”

She left as one recession was in full flow and now returns, briefly, just as another one is preparing to crucify the population. There is nothing bitter about her as she shows me a photograph of her as a child in a group which appeared in the *Sunday Press*, and inspired one of her poems: *On Looking into The Sunday Press Photo of Mount Carmel Children Looking into a Stable*. She considers herself lucky.

Some time after arriving in New York, Roberts met Pete Hannigan, a detective. My face must have lit up on hearing this, but she laughs and says, "he's not that kind of detective". He encouraged her to go to college. "There I was, a mature student, 35, sitting among all these young people." She studied English literature at Hofstra University in Long Island where she lives. Was she a reader before she left Ireland? "No, I wasn't. It's funny, I'd never read any poetry apart from what we learned at school. I had to go to America to begin reading Irish poets. It's true." She looks at me with her direct gaze. "American women poets introduced me to Irish poetry." She now teaches creative writing at Hofstra and is also involved in the Irish Studies programme.

Heaney's work has become important to her, as has Kavanagh's "and winning this prize is a great honour, not just because of Kavanagh, but because of who else has won, poets like Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin [1973] and Harry Clifton [1981] and I was second before, in 2007, with some of these poems, so yes, it means a lot to me." Attending various poetry workshops helped encourage her to write. "I heard Molly Peacock, she read from *Say You Love Me*. Roberts describes it is a shocking account of a girl being forced to tell a brutal father she loves him. "I suddenly realised 'what, you can write about that?' It made me think and then I began. Poetry grabbed me by the throat." Earlier this year she won the Dromineer Literary Festival Poetry Competition.

Her mother's experiences made Roberts reluctant to have children. "I remember when she was dying; I kept asking her should I have a child. I did in the end, I had my son when I was 41." Were her brothers and sister upset by her reliving the past? "Well, I have been careful, I spoke with them about it, wanted to make sure it was as I remembered." She has established a relationship with her father. Bright and practical, there is nothing theatrical about her, nor is she dreamy or vague. It is easy to see why she can instil confidence in students. "I don't like the victim mentality, things happen. You carry on. I want to get away from my experiences now. I am hoping to write about Peter Tyrell, he was in the industrial school in Letterfrack; that was a dreadful place."

## Memories of childhood Omphalos

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to take down from a shelf  
and leaf through. No banks of earth

stitched with ferns and bluebells;  
no rabbits running through the thicket,  
nor wrens sheltering in the boxwood hedge.

My *omphalos* is a pigeon-gray orphanage yard  
clotted with kids: see-saws; pissy knickers;  
a clay-filled Kiwi tin on a hopscotch square;

*British Bulldog* ; freckled faces; conkers on  
shoe laces; pig-tailed girls twirling twine  
jump ropes by Saint Martha's Kitchen;

*Jack stones; scabby knees; chinny alley marbles.*  
And alongside the cloister, two-seater barn-red swings  
we rode like horses till supertime's holler.

My initiation that summer in '69:  
galloping from the scullery to  
the laundry – my brother riding piggyback –

I tripped. Like dripping solder, globules of blood  
fell from my nose to the concrete turf,  
my baptism a brazen call to bear witness.

## Arts & Crafts

Besides the woolen tea-cozy the portly teapot  
Never wore, the rag-doll sewn from cast-off

Bodices and pinafores, the lollipop house

Chock-full of crocheted doilies and embroidered

Handkerchiefs, the hollow papier-mâché head  
I carried under my arm from school, there was

The Christmas crib, where clumps of cotton snow  
Plucked from sanitary towels (stolen from a locked cupboard

In Our Lady's dorm), absorbed the bitter wind that winter,  
Protecting the bloody Lamb bleating in the manger.

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