

## Always have mentors, people you trust

The last letter that Medbh McGuckian got from fellow poet Seamus Heaney was to praise something she'd sent him. He said he wished he'd written it.

"Which was typical of his grateful mindset," she said of the late Nobel laureate, "and why I still feel I can aspire to him perhaps even more directly now. The most essential thing is to have or seek some lofty soul or enlightened spirit or sprite whose own writing makes you want to write.

"I think poetry is a highly specialized art when fully engaged with," McGuckian said, "And we should be humble knowing the best poets can write the worst poems if they get above themselves, if they think they can do it on their own.

"It is quite clear that some people have a natural gift they may not even realize," she added. "It is important to recognize and nurture it. To stay balanced, as delving deep into the subconscious can be overwhelming and dangerous – so always have mentors and people you trust to refer to."

McGuckian said that poetry is a "celebration of life's multiplicity and beauty despite inevitable disease and death, in particular here my own battle with mental illness and my mother's constant physical derpidude culminating in her slow and dancelike departure.

"The poems try to explore the complex entangled acceptance and questioning of existence that surrounds blood and love relationships, especially the deep loss of one's earliest house however long ago and disarranged."

Her latest in a long list of titles, "The High Caul Cap" (Wake Forest University Press), "suggests the enormous pressure of achieving enlightenment through passing, the need for talismans, for protection from nature, the ultimate reassurance of rebirth in whatever form, the cap is an end and beginning."

### Medbh McGuckian

**Date of birth:** Aug. 12, 1950, in the middle ages.

**Place of birth:** In North Belfast near the Castle. (Mother from Markets area in downtown Belfast. Father from a hill farm in Glenshesk, one of the nine



Medbh McGuckian.

glens.)

**Spouse:** John McGuckian, geography teacher, poet, playwright novelist, footballer from Ballymena.

**Children:** Three boys now in their 30s, Liam, Fergus and Hugh, and a girl, Emer, in her mid 20s.

**Residence:** Near where I was born and weekends by the sea in North Antrim.

**What is your writing routine? Are there ideal conditions?**

My writing is at once disciplined and sporadic. I need a lot of time to build up towards a new poem but the actual writing can be sudden and brief. Not always depends on the intensity of feeling. For instance when Seamus died I had a swift flurry of half a dozen poems in a few weeks but that has died now with the fading as it were of the initial bruise.

out bravely to competitions, you might win and that catapults you skyward.

**Name three books that are memorable in terms of your reading pleasure.**

The kind of books I look for reading pleasure are primarily biographies or autobiographies. I find them fascinating they are so real. Right now I am reading one about Gandhi, a negative analysis of him -- how he would sleep with young girls in order to try out his chastity etc. I don't always agree with the books because the writer may have their biases, but it is always good to follow a human being of some importance in and out of this life.

**What book are you currently reading?**

The book I am currently reading although I tend to read many books at once so I don't get bored, and sometimes find it more interesting reading books backwards, or upside down, is Virginia Woolf's "Selected Diaries," which is so genuine and detailed although we are worlds apart.

I am not easily impressed by books of poetry having been so saturated in them. One I loved recently was by Anne Carson about her mother's death, which resonated sharply with me and the breakup of her relationship. It was actually very much a novel in verse.

**Is there a book you wish you had written?**

An academic critical book or set of essays about poets or poetry such as Seamus Heaney or Paul Muldoon have produced.

**Name a book that you were pleasantly surprised by.**

American New York poet Eileen Myles's "Inferno," a poet's novel, I thought would be pretentious but actually is very funny, very J. D. Salinger, very poignant, unputdownable as they say, very feminine and witty heartbreaking in the sense of loneliness and the vivid actuality of its time and place.

**If you could meet one author, living or dead, who would it be?**

If I could meet one author just now it would be the late Seamus Heaney, just to see how he is or say goodbye temporarily. He has been our most significant recent loss and one has not quite adjusted to it since he was so ever present, majestic as

a Slieve Gallion mountain.

What book changed your life?

It was his first collection that changed my life. My father came in, pointed to a page in the newspaper, saying to me aged 16 or so, "There's a boy has bypassed them all," meaning, as I read it, one who has sailed past the nets of religion, nationality, race, to achieve independence, autonomy, his own voice in the British and subsequently the world market. So notwithstanding that the book title awed me, how could one begin life with a word like "Death"? I sailed myself down to the Central Library as the local library did not have it, ordered it in, pored over it in total incomprehension, copied out the poems I could relate to which were many, learned how to write likewise in a sense.

I should add, what it was about Seamus's first book. That it was laid in the countryside around me, the farms and fields rivers and roads local to me and known. It seemed to grow out of the same soil of repression, Catholicism, resentment, deprivation, unfranchisement, intolerance, displacement, as I understood from my parents and my own background. It seemed to flower out of a new level of education that was based in Latin and English literature yet jarred with the pieties of the rural domestic verities that had no language. Every poem seemed real to me and warm, living and pure, grounded yet free, and taught me the necessity of searching for the exact word for the meaning.

**What is your favorite spot in Ireland?**

Ballycastle Beach, with its glorious otherworldliness, its opening unto faerie fields forlorn, its wide expanse, its fury and sound, its unpredictable highs and bipolar lows, its female enclosures and male rearings, its subtle rainbows and rainwatered spectrum of colors, its icy and looming and Sistine clouds. The way the glen pursues it and the hill embraces it, the way.

**You're Irish if...**

If you're Irish come into the parlor, I suppose, although I found all that side of identity narrow and masculine and suffocating rather than liberating. I could not quite see myself as fully or only Irish. As Seamus says, we live here in two places at once. I have found more welcomes on the mats of local Protestants in the North here than in the Mourne or Killarney. With such a tragic congested contested history of bombs and bullets over the 30 middle years of my best part of life this is not a joke or to be analyzed lightly.



**What advice do you have for aspiring writers?**

It would be presumptuous of me to advise young writers although I teach creative writing to 19 year olds and mark their work. I try to tell them to be wild and outrageous but it has to be genuine not staged. I say to read, read and learn new words new combinations of words like never to say the first thing that comes to mind like "red lips" when you could say "bloodripened" or something more startling. We need always to jump into the reader's mind the way adverts and e mails now do so intimately and even rudely but we must be polite not rude. I say send your work

### The Irish Echo Quiz Answers

1. Lusitania
2. Minneapolis-St. Paul
3. Jodie Foster
4. Abraham Lincoln in Kentucky; Barack Obama in Hawaii
5. Nancy Kerrigan
6. J.M. Synge
7. "The Partridge Family"
8. Limerick
9. Tottenham Hotspur F.C.
10. California.

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