Responses to the International Literature Festival Dublin

by Ashleigh Young, Claire Mabey, Kirsty Gunn

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The annual International Literature Festival Dublin gathers some of the finest writers in the world. This 2018 edition, comprised of over 100 events in 36 locations in Dublin, from May 19th to 27th, had a special focus on New Zealand writers, with Kirsty Gunn, Hera Lindsay Bird, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Ashleigh Young in attendance.

Contemporary HUM invited the writers to reflect on their own experiences of the 2018 ILFD and of presenting their work in this context. An introduction by Claire Mabey, Director of Lit Crawl Wellington, who was key in initiating a relation with ILFD Director Martin Colthorpe, sets the scene of this special invitation of New Zealand writers to Dublin.

Six years ago in Dublin I was inspired by the city's grimy energy in a way that changed the current course of my life. I was there on something of a fact-finding mission, meeting theatre companies and writers and arts organisations to fuel my curiosity about the Irish arts scene which I intuited had similarities with Aotearoa's. Everywhere I went there was the same depth of grit—a certain approach to getting on and making things, telling stories, despite weather, despite being small and having funding troubles. Dublin is little but fierce. On coming home to Wellington I finally noticed the same attributes: little but ambitious with an immense history of people who just get on and make things, make art, despite a lack of rate payer dollars, despite weather.

LitCrawl started a few months after I got back from that Dublin adventure. It felt like the right thing to do: Wellington, like Dublin, has a robust and ever-evolving CBD and a mighty population of writers, indie publishers and people poised to discover the stories they're telling. Bringing people, places and writers together in a way that harnessed Wellington's own brand of grimy energy (beating down Cuba Street on a Saturday night is no chic affair - it's sensible shoes, it's ensuring you've had a drink or two, it's action) worked. Five years later we're up to the fifth edition and still gathering momentum.

It has always been our intention to maintain links and relationships with people and organisations overseas who share our ambitions and understand our mission: we are passionate about paving opportunities to share the talent we are so privileged to hear here, overseas. Creating a link with International Literature Festival Dublin and its programmer, Martin Colthorpe, was a fruitful venture from first contact. In fact it felt full circle given Dublin's early influence on our own work. Martin's programming is collaborative, adventurous and exciting. Over email we threw ideas around and then came an opportunity, thanks to Creative New Zealand, to bring Martin to Wellington in 2017 to experience our small but vibrant city and little but ambitious festival. There is nothing like being in a place to sense a possibility.

Seeing Hera Lindsay Bird, Ashleigh Young, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Kirsty Gunn in the International Literary Festival Dublin 2018 programme feels wonderful. As though conversations between plotters has created a dotted line between our cities, like what you'd see on an ordinance map, something tangible and shared, a pathway between people, place and stories.

Of course, it's an entirely different experience actually flying from your home to go to a festival overseas to speak to a completely new audience in an entirely new venue and cultural context. At the heart of it all, the very best energy is shared when authors are cared for and are able to do their best work. Writers are taonga (treasure) and you always hope that they are valued and treated as such. —Claire Mabey



Kirsty Gunn speaking with event chair, Carlo Gébler, International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



Kirsty Gunn speaking at International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



Kirsty Gunn, International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



Kirsty Gunn, *Caroline's Bikini*.

Dublin International Festival of Literature and Caroline's Bikini: A response by Kirsty Gunn

All Literary Festivals are a bit of a gamble. Will it indeed be a literary festival? With poets and new criticism and literary projects and interesting novels and non-fiction? Or more of a books festival, promoting celebrity chefs and past politicians along with bestselling authors and only a sprinkling of the "literary" to give proceedings a bit of gravitas? Even when reading the programmes of these events in advance it can be hard to tell what gives. A festival may seem like it's going to be one thing, by the look of the line up and venues, but an international blockbuster or two with a high profile author on a world tour can tip the atmosphere into something more like a carnival or a giant book shop – both lovely in their way, of course, but maybe not quite what has been expected.

I knew what to expect from Martin Colthorpe's International Literature Festival Dublin, though. I had met Martin before, when he was Programme Director for Literature at London's South Bank Centre, and I'd been part of an event he'd programmed there with the groundbreaking critic and writer Gabriel Josipovici, as well as my friend Delia da Sousa Correa who I met through our work with

the Katherine Mansfield Society and with whom I share thoughts and discussions of New Zealand and the landscape and places we both left behind there and love.

So I was delighted when Martin emailed to invite me to be part of his new project at Dublin, and he explained to me that New Zealand literature was to be a focus for the festival, and would I be interested in talking about my new novel as part of that?

Straight away I had to tell him that the book that's just come out, "Caroline's Bikini", is set in London, and has a very London feel. Although at times the author does wonder if it might be better suited, with the title that it has, being set somewhere like New Zealand. Somewhere, as we read, full of summers and swimming pools and "that lovely lake...I'm almost sure I've written about before", "that quality of clear blue water contained in summer heat".

That wasn't an issue, though – and the minute I arrived at the Smock Alley Theatre and met with Martin and his colleague Andrew Deering I realised that this was the kind of festival exactly that I liked: small, friendly, where writers and audience members mingled in the cafe outside the auditorium talking about books and ideas. I met with my interlocutor, Carlo Gebler – whose work I admire and whose mother Edna O'Brien I love, for herself and her books - and we talked about the theme of love and literature for a happy hour in the small auditorium that was lit with a mellow light and made me feel like I was sitting in some Dublin bar at 11 o'clock at night. Perfect for a novel set in pubs and awash with gin!

Carlo had decided that "the big subject" as he put it, love, should be our theme for the event. I'd never thought about a books event being presented in those terms before and it became a really interesting way in to describing what the new novel is all about, not just in terms of content – that's quite straightforward as "Caroline's Bikini" is a love story after all - but in form and style. I found myself realising how much I loved all the characters in my novel – no matter how shallow they may seem, some of them, or tactless or without feeling - because of the way I'd written them. And realising too, that because of this, I had fashioned the whole book so that it would showcase this affection, for the style of it, and

for its characters, using humour and gossip and throwaway detailing in a voice bounded and complicated by subordinate clauses and a self aware use of vocabulary and various literary devices.

It's love that, I hope, makes *Caroline's Bikini* a comedy in the most general sort of way – full of affection and good feeling and joie de vivre that means that, in the end, all's well that ends well. The Festival in Dublin had a mood of conviviality and informality that suited my enterprise entirely.

Without love, said Carlo, sounding so gorgeously Irish and just like his mother, a book is only a jumble of words. Spoken in a city soaked in ideas of love and God and emotion and yearning, his words resonate with me still. —Kirsty Gunn



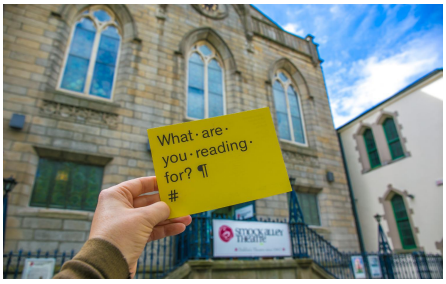
Ashleigh Young on the *Women and the Essay* panel, with Daisy Hildyard and Joanna Walsh. International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



Ashleigh Young on the *Women and the Essay* panel, with Daisy Hildyard and Joanna Walsh. International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



International Literature Festival Dublin 2018.



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Dublin International Festival of Literature: A response by Ashleigh Young

Speaking in front of a crowd has never come easily to me, and it comes even less easily when I'm in another country and am aware that some of my mannerisms (I use that word loosely) won't translate. My first event was 'Women and the Essay', with Daisy Hildyard and Joanna Walsh, and of course I was nervous – the subject felt huge, almost flammable. It was the weekend of the Ireland abortion referendum, and the atmosphere was electrified. I spent a lot of time just walking and watching. It was interesting to me how, when you spotted a group of campaigners from some distance away, it was possible to discern whether they were Yes or No. The No campaigners looked to me disconsolate, static. Even when standing in a group, each person appeared isolated from the others. And I wondered whether it helped the Yes campaign to be able to draw upon the simple positivity of the word Yes, with its sense of forward movement, of openness, of possibility, of change.

Before the session with Daisy and Joanna, I started thinking about the term 'woman essayist', or 'female essayist', and, as usual, I got sidetracked in my thinking. You never hear the term 'male essayist'. We just say 'essayist', a title that suggests someone of general intelligence and sense and courage. Cheryl Strayed has said that the term 'woman essayist' kind of sounds like the essayist is in quarantine, not yet ready to be unleashed upon the world – which I think is exactly right. Maybe once essayists who identify as women can be known simply as essayists, then that will be something new. Mary Ruefle has this line 'to be alive without a body – isn't that the afterlife everyone dreams of?' and I love that but it makes me think maybe women *essayists* won't be just essayists until we're all in the afterlife.

At least, those were some of the things I wish I'd said in the session, but I stumbled over my words as usual. Somehow, it didn't matter: Sinead Gleeson was the best, kindest chair a person could ask for – patient, generous and warm. Our event was at Smock Alley Theatre, a glowy, intimate theatre that felt right to talk about books in. Even though it was a small crowd, they were a nice crowd. If I had to choose between a huge indifferent crowd and a small but friendly one, I'd always choose the small one.

I went to a brilliant session with a writer whose book I only just happened upon in the Gutter Bookshop – *Mind on Fire*, by Arnold

Thomas Fanning, a memoir about his bipolar disorder and his sense of having lost a decade from his life, due to his illness. There's a sense of him being carried, relentlessly, from situation to situation, trying to hold on when things are good but perpetually coming unstuck. I felt so lucky to read this book and then, the very next day, to go to see the author speak – with such generosity and lucidity – about it. I was totally transfixed. The other event I saw that I kept thinking about for days after was Hera Lindsay Bird's reading, held at Poetry Ireland. I've seen Hera read her work many times. But it was so thrilling to see her read here, and to see a full room of people taking in her brilliance for the first time. I felt almost maternal and then I wondered: is this patriotism, that I'm feeling? Anyway, I felt proud.

Another event I did was at Words Dublin, an industry conference held at the Museum of Modern Art. I loved the simplicity of the brief for my event: talk for 20 minutes about the work you made. The title of the event was 'How I Made This'. I sat in my hotel room and wrote a talk. It turned into a personal essay, and I found myself writing things like, 'I tried to write a few novels, and short stories, but before long I realised all of my characters were just slightly melted versions of my father'; as I wrote I was aware that I was probably making things harder for myself than perhaps they needed to be, but I decided I would just roll with it, since I was running out of time. I'd promised myself that *this* time I would not still be writing my talk on the way to the event in which I would give the talk. (Needless to say, I was.)

The other two conference participants – documentary maker Colin Murphy and playwright Colm Keegan – were both terrific and a lot more experienced than I was at presenting at a conference like this. The talk I gave was accidentally far more personal than the presentations Colin and Colm gave, and perhaps I should have talked to the conference organiser more beforehand, and got more of a read on the event before diving in and, well, sharing so much of myself. Something I've learned very recently, though, is that if you've planned something, you have to commit to it. In the past I've done very half-hearted or rushed readings, worrying that I didn't fit in and should just get out of the way. It is so much better, though, to dive in with everything you've got. It's better for you, better for the people who've come to hear you. I can't think of any

situation in which this doesn't apply. The worst that can happen is: it won't quite come off. But at least it won't be boring, and you'll have given people something to talk about. A literary crowd will always go crazy for something to talk about. —Ashleigh Young

Biographies



Born and raised in Te Kūiti, New Zealand, Ashleigh Young is the author of the critically acclaimed book of poetry *Magnificent Moon* (2012) as well as the essay collection *Can You Tolerate This?* (2016). A series of twenty-one personal essays, *Can You Tolerate This?* tells the story of a girl growing up in a small New Zealand town and making her way as an adult into the wider world. The essays roam freely between preoccupations, yet are consistently entertaining in their search for clarity amid uncertainty.



Claire Mabey (b. 1985, Tauranga) is a literary programmer and producer with a background in publishing and in multi-arts festivals. She has studied English Literature and Art History at University and completed a Diploma in Publishing. Mabey is the director of LitCrawl in Wellington, and along with her partner Andrew Laking, she is one half of Pirate & Queen Productions.



Kirsty Gunn is a New Zealand author whose writing is shaped by her life abroad in the British Isles. This sense of 'placelessness' has meant her writing itself becomes a place, and has inspired her particular interest in the form of the novel. She cites the great New Zealand modernist Katherine Mansfield as a key inspiration, and a presiding influence on her work.

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