

Poetry and prose by Martina Evans, Ailbhe Darcy and Paula Meehan

'Now We Can Talk Openly About Men', 'Insistence', and Ireland Chair lectures

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John McAuliffe



Martina Evans: intervenes strikingly in the literature of Irish history during and after the War of Independence

Poets' prose

Poets' prose is a genre unto itself, independent of the larger provinces of the essay, the polemic and the memoir. Seamus Heaney, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Paul Muldoon have previously offered brilliant, sideways reorientations of the poetry canon, and now the most sustained effort yet to develop this genre has emerged in the series *The Poet's Chair: Writings from the Ireland Chair of Poetry*. **Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them** (UCD Press, €20) collects three lectures by the last incumbent, Paula Meehan. Meehan's prose, as is often the case with poets, proceeds as much by association and leap of imagination as by argument. It is an often thrilling book, and no reader will be unilluminated by its insights into the co-ordinates and tensions that shape the making of a poem, and a poet.

Her ideal of the poet as teacher is clear in the way she situates her practice in relation to the workshop environment ("a healing place . . . a wounding place") where she learned much, and where she herself has taught and inspired other poets. The figures who recur

across her lectures – Gary Snyder, Carol Ann Duffy, James McAuley, Eavan Boland – are teachers whose work is praised for its wisdom.

The importance of poetry as wisdom is also evident in Meehan's reverence for poetry's unmodern roots. She values, as a creative source, the ancient dimensions of etymology, fortune-telling and the occult, aligning her poetics with her fellow mythophiles Ní Dhomhnull and Robert Graves. Modern ways of knowing the world are valued but as sources: a bioscience paper ("every polar bear alive today has mitochondrial DNA from a single ancient Irish brown bear") occasions a new poem; "machine memory" reminds her of poetry's "hunger for memory".

Meehan illustrates her case that poems uncover a truer, more comprehensive sense of self with telling autobiographical fragments. In inner city Dublin, in eastern Washington State, Leitrim and the islands of Ikaria and Papa Stour, she attends to the relics of memory, the natural world and seasonal time: she knows that poetry can seem "a puny act" but argues that it tunes into a mythical forcefield that, often beneficially, unlocks us from day-to-day perceptions and routines.

At a moment when arguments rage about poetry's competing responsibilities to a community and to the solitary dream and vision, Meehan reminds us that it is possible to take both sides: proud to have seen the "changed relationship to hierarchical ideas around the canon and who makes it, who shakes it", she is also clear that "poetry is not sociology, poetry is not history".

John McAuliffe's fourth book is The Way In (Gallery, 2015). He teaches poetry at the University of Manchester's Centre for New Writing