



Caroline Barry & 'The Dolocher'

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by Rachel Casey –

Speaking to Caroline Barry, we quickly learn that the inspiration for her debut adult novel, *The Dolocher*, came from one of the oldest, and least known, Dublin ghost stories.

"My husband bought me a collection of ghost stories for Christmas and I found a little two-page account of *The Dolocher*. It freaked me out so I began researching it. The more I researched, the more fascinated I became."

This folk-tale tells the story of a condemned murderer and rapist who kills himself in prison before he can be executed. The people of Dublin think they are free of this scourge, but when a spate of attacks eerily similar to those of the dead criminal begin, the rumour that his demon is back and terrorising the streets starts to gain momentum.

Caroline explains that "the story is still preserved as a folk-tale in the Liberties in Dublin but outside of those environs, very few people know the legend."

And it's here that she starts her own story.

Olocher, the murderer, has slit his own throat in his cell in the Black Dog prison. But something starts to attack the prison guards, and one of them is convinced it was the ghost of Olocher he saw, come back from Hell in the form of a half-man, half-black pig.

So it's up to Solomon Fish, a broadsheet writer, and his landlady and local apothecary, Merriment O' Grady, to find out whether the Dolocher is just superstition, or if the demon inside Olocher has returned from the grave to wreak havoc

Beginnings

Born in Tallaght, Barry credits her love of writing to her time in college and afterwards, working in arts administration.

"I met lots of artists, writers and musicians and still very much love the company of artists. I studied art in Dun Laoghaire but left art college early, disillusioned and directionless. I then went to UCD to study English Literature and Art History and I loved every minute of it."

She first realised that she wanted to write a novel while reading Raymond Chandler.

"I realised his chapters were very short, some as little as two pages and I suddenly thought, 'I could write chapters this length...I could write loads of them...and if I stuck them all together I would have a book!' The next day I set about writing my first YA novel *The Rocket Girl*. A novel is a huge project it stretches over at least two years and involves lots of writing and rewriting so approaching it in short 'bite size' chapters is a way of getting into it."

And while she doesn't write in these 'bite-sized' chunks any more, it's obvious that some of her other early influences are still important to her.

"I was reared on urban myths and country folk ideas including the belief in the 'death knock' and 'the banshee'. I read very early 'Gothic' novels as part of my essay focus in college and love dark tales of possession, or haunting stories filled with the macabre. I also collect stories from people who have had genuinely 'ghostly' experiences and fortunately I have had some strange experiences myself. I am always grateful when something strange happens since it disturbs my 'cultural' thinking and throws up a lot of questions about the nature of life."

It's these questions that motivate Merriment O' Grady in *The Dolocher*. She is a woman of science; an apothecary who doles out medicines and cures based on symptoms. She can't bring herself to believe that the creature stalking the streets of Dublin is a demon from another world. When she comes face to face with the Dolocher herself, she has to question her entire belief system.

"The Dolocher asks questions about the idea of 'spirit' and possession." Barry tells me, "the gothic world is one that reminds us that something 'other' is close and that we should be ever mindful that all is not as it seems."

"Comedy is hugely important in my work"

But it's not all Gothic narrative and darkness in this book.

There is some fantastic comic relief that comes in the form of Janey Mack, an eight-year-old girl who Merriment finds scavenging through her bins, and decides to take her on as an apprentice. Janey's unique take on life and the pearls of wisdom she comes out with throughout the story will genuinely make you laugh out loud.

For instance, when probing Merriment about her past, Merriment counters, "Are you always this previous?"

Janey Mack answers, "I think so, miss. I've no idea what you mean, but I'm sure yer right. And I have to say, now that I've offended ye, and y'er going to sack me anyway, that the tea is awful."

Barry maintains that,

"Comedy is hugely important in my work. Light and shade is very important when writing. Atmosphere can be relieved or exaggerated by numerous tools, laughter followed by tragedy emphasises 'loss' much more effectively than only focusing on intense sadness. Some people might have kept the novel only 'Gothic' and 'dark' and that's OK too. I just like to laugh."

Georgian Vibrancy

The setting of *The Dolocher* is as important to the story as the characters. Georgian Dublin was defined by a split between the lower and upper classes. Tenement houses were abundant and pick-pockets, prostitutes and beggars were rife throughout the streets. A few of the characters in the book are based on real people of the time, including Hawkins, the Keeper of the Black Dog prison, and Margaret Leeson, the brothel owner.

"The period totally fascinates me. I love the vibrancy of Georgian times, the rakes and rascals and eccentrics, I did a lot of research, but I must say it didn't feel like work at all. The hard part was cutting historical information out. For instance, there were a lot of bears in Dublin, kept in the back yards of peruke or periwig makers. The very idea that a periwig apprentice might have to pop out the back to feed the bear is just astonishing. Sadly, the bears were killed for their 'grease', seemingly only 'bear grease' did the best job on keeping curls firm and shiny and only the very rich could afford this odoriferous commodity."

Unfortunately, the bears didn't make it to the pages of *The Dolocher*, but Barry manages to paint a wonderful picture of Georgian Dublin that evokes every sense. The reader is convinced they can feel the grime and dirt between their toes as they walk with the characters and smell the meat pies being sold in Christchurch Market.

Gestating Period

The writing process that Barry has developed over the years is "a mixture of clumsy, chaotic, confusing, exhilarating and annoying. First there is the 'gestating' period, when a book is brewing, the story is clumsy and awkward and full of elbows and half formed ideas."

To work through this phase, she uses a 'look book'.

"I gather images from the net on how I want the book to feel, the tonal quality of the colours, the mood of the characters. I gather images that resonate with the main idea and see if I can find faces to capture a certain look that I might want my protagonist to have. Then I jot down fully fledged scenes, jewels that float on the dark sea of a half formed idea. I try not to over work things. Too much plotting can kill the energy of a book."

"I listen to music. I do research, take notes, drink coffee. I get up and do housework, anything would be preferable to having to sit and type. Then one day I start and, as everyone knows, the start of a novel is just a fantastic experience, the kind of buzz that just blinds you to the god-awful horror that is the half-way point of the book. The middle of every novel is its own special kind of hell. You have to reverse out of cul-de-sacs, commit to the story, make sure that there is a refreshed energy surge, something that will get you to the end of the project and then when you get to the end...well to use a famous quote 'you never finish writing a book. You abandon it'. Writing a book is like trying to tame a lion, you have to work very hard to make sure it doesn't bite your head off."

Faith or Failure

Her advice to any aspiring writers looking to start their own novel?

Have 'faith'.

Love the story you want to tell. Don't worry when you get frustrated, despondent, tired or knocked back, just pick yourself up, dust yourself down and keep at it. Learn the craft of storytelling by going to workshops and by 'doing' the writing. Find other writers, they will know what you are going through, they will inspire you, they will enrich your life, encourage you and help you to keep the 'faith'.

Barry is keeping busy at the moment writing scripts as well as her second Gothic horror novel, *Chawke and Flint*, inspired by the Hellfire Club, which sounds like it will be just as engrossing as *The Dolocher*.