

FROM THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *STRANGE FLOWERS*

DONALD RYAN

'I think you have to truly love people to write like this'

RACHEL JOYCE

the queen
of dirt island



Donal Ryan

THE QUEEN OF DIRT ISLAND



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About the Author

Donal Ryan is an award-winning author from Nenagh, County Tipperary, whose work has been published in over twenty languages to major critical acclaim. *The Spinning Heart* won the Guardian First Book Award, the EU Prize for Literature (Ireland), and Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards; it was shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Desmond Elliott Prize, and was voted 'Irish Book of the Decade'. His fourth novel, *From a Low and Quiet Sea*, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Costa Novel Award 2018, and won the Jean Monnet Prize for European Literature. His most recent novel, *Strange Flowers*, was voted Novel of the Year at the Irish Book Awards, and was a number-one bestseller. Donal lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. He lives with his wife, Anne Marie, and their two children just outside Limerick city.

Also by Donal Ryan

The Spinning Heart
The Thing About December
All We Shall Know
From a Low and Quiet Sea
Strange Flowers
A Slanting of the Sun: Stories

To my mother, with love

*Let the books remember the local battles.
Re-write the plot. Let the harvest wither.
This is your life. She is your great event.
Keep her in the sun.*

'History', Mary O'Malley

End

She was born.

Small but healthy, a fortnight early. Through a soft misty rain on her third morning her father drove her home, slowly, swaddled tight against her mother's chest, her mother kissing her cheek over and over.

Her father's face was rough and tired from work and lack of sleep. He couldn't stay to see them get settled because he had to go straight to work, so he left his wife and his first child alone in their newbuilt bungalow in a small estate at the foot of the hill where he'd been raised, where all his people before him had farmed the land and lived their lives.

His heart was light as he drove away. He was doing his duty by his woman and this new woman who was his daughter, these two people he was sworn to provide for and protect. The obligation was heavy but would be worn lightly. He'd never shirk nor resent the burden of this work he had now to do. Everything had a glow about it, a sharp halo of pure light, and the long straight road between the village and the town stretched itself before his car obediently. The sun had pushed itself up across the new day, the rain had stopped and the clouds were washed and bright.

A figure in the distance, hunched and dark-suited, slouching towards the town, turned half around at the sound of his engine, and stood to wait. He slowed and stopped and reached across to open the passenger door from the inside and the man sat in, a man he knew, a man whose sons were his friends, whose daughter he'd courted for a while one long summer years ago, a man he liked and respected and who smelt on this spring morning like yesterday's drink, a smell safe and familiar, like apples windfallen and turning rotten.

God bless you, the man said. Any stir? And he smiled and told the man his news, and the man slapped his own knee and offered his bony hand across to shake the new father's hand, saying, Well now, well now, God is good, welcome to her, welcome to her, and may God be good to her all her days. What'll ye call her? I don't know yet. We don't know yet. Eileen wants to wait a little while. To see what name reveals itself, she says. And

the passenger laughed then, high and loud, and slapped his knee again. That's a good one! Ha-ha thee, faith, I have it all heard now. Reveal itself! Well, anyway, it's as good a way as any. What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

And they were laughing as the creamery truck rounded the only bend between the town and the village of the new father's ancestors, and thundered towards them wide of the centreline, a good shade too fast, and in a flash and a heartbeat both men ceased to be.

Blossoms

She was four in her earliest memory, or maybe just turned five.

It was springtime so it must have been near her birthday. The cherry blossom tree was heavily flowered at the edge of the small front garden; it was itself the greater part of the memory. Or maybe it was her birthday, because someone was taking a photograph and she was standing beneath the cherry blossom tree with sunlight dancing green and pink across the grass, her grandmother on one side of her and her mother on the other side, each of them holding one of her hands, as though they might at any moment start to tug in their opposite directions and pull her clean apart.

But that violence must have attached itself to the memory afterwards. She surely hadn't thought it at the time. What was clearest about the memory was their reflection in the long window at the front of the small house, how clear it was, the tartan of her mother's short skirt, the heavy grey of her grandmother's cardigan, the way they were linked to each other like a daisy chain. And the back of the man who was taking the photograph, long and white-shirted, his head bowed downwards to the old-fashioned camera that he had held out from himself, low down below his stomach.

Why did she remember the image of his back so clearly and not his front, his face? Why had she fixated on their reflection and not their realness? It never happened anyway, her mother told her years later, when she asked who the man was that had taken the photo. I can guarantee you, she said, that no man stood out there on that lawn and took a photograph of you and your grandmother and me. Where is it, so, if it really happened? The photograph. Did you ever see this famous photograph at your grandmother's house or here in this house or anywhere else for that matter?

She wondered why her mother was so adamant about the memory's falseness. She knew her mother was wrong, of course. It had really happened, almost exactly as she said, with just a few details up for argument, like whether or not it had been her birthday, and who the man

was that her mother said never existed. It could have been one of her father's brothers, though neither of them had long backs, or some relative or other who had faded from their lives. It could have been a neighbour. It could, she supposed, have been a boyfriend of her mother's, though her mother denied that she'd ever entertained a suitor, even for a moment. Her husband might have been gone from this world but he was and always would be her husband and that was all there was to it now for good and for glory. The memory was real, though. The cherry blossom blazing pink, the grass warm under her feet, her grandmother's hand, her mother's soft hand.

Freedom

Saoirse was the name that revealed itself.

Freedom. Once in the kitchen she heard her mother saying maybe it was foolish. A foolish choice. I wasn't in my right mind and Father Ambrose even asked me at the time was I sure and of course I said I was. He asked would I not consider Mary, after you, or Bridget, after my own mother. Maybe I should have, Mary, should I? If she ever goes to America the Yanks won't have a clue how to pronounce it.

But Nana retorted, Yerra Yanks my eye, what in the name of God and His Blessed Mother would cause you to worry about some Yank getting his tongue in a knot in some far distant time? What do you or any of us care about that shower? We owe the Yanks nothing, girl, least of all the consideration of pronounceable names. All they ever did was twist names to their own ease, anyway. That place is full of O'Brains and Mahonerys and Mulligrews and Contertys and names that never existed because the donkeys on Ellis Island couldn't be bothered their lazy arses to write down people's names properly that were falling starving off of the boats and nor could their descendants that got all the jobs in the offices giving out visas and such.

Nana went on and on for a while like that, and she started to pretend to be one of the people in the office in America where people went to have their names made shite of, talking in a loud put-on accent, and her mother was laughing so much she could hardly take a pull of her cigarette properly. Anyway, said Nana, when the laughing was over. We had no choice but to call her that good name. After all the battles our people fought along the years against the English to be free. There were martyrs made on every road of this country. And Saoirse pictured Nana on her daily walk the two miles down from the farm on the hillside above the village, praying for the dead that lined the road.

She saw then from where she was sitting at her jigsaw on the floor in the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room, almost out of the sight of her mother and grandmother, that the two women were holding hands

across the table, and they were looking down at their joined hands. She wished in that moment that she could join their sadness, for the man in the photos over the fireplace and along both sides of the hallway with the dark hair and blue eyes and shining smile, father to her, son and husband to the women in the kitchen, but she couldn't. She felt about him only a deep curiosity, about how he had ever existed above his grave and outside of his own photographs, how she was exactly half of him and half of her mother. It was all a wonder.

Fathers

Every other house in the small estate that had children in it also had a father, a living one.

None of them looked like they were of much use except for cutting grass with the same shared lawnmower, taking turns to cut the verges and the small green area at the front of the estate and the smaller green at the back. Most of them worked in the town four miles from the village, leaving in the mornings wearing jackets and coming home in shirtsleeves, smoking as they parked their cars. Some of them drove vans with their names on the sides or the names of businesses, advertising their services, a plumber, a carpenter, a wholesale butcher, an electrician.

The butcher had a smiling cow on the side of his van. The cow had long eyelashes and bright green eyes. Nana thought it was very funny that the cow looked so happy. Look at her off, God help us, as happy as the day is long, not knowing she's for the high road. The poor old cows have an awful life, you know. Pregnant nearly as long as they're alive, never by choice, and their children whipped from them one after the other.

One of the fathers cycled to work and his children would wait at the front of the estate for him every evening. Saoirse would watch them from the front window, sitting on the wide sill, leaning her forehead against the cool glass. They'd start to get excited when they heard the sawing creaking noise of his bicycle chain on its cogs, the smaller one, the boy, hopping from one foot to the other and pointing out to the main road at the junction near the estate's entrance.

When their father rounded the corner at the junction and was in their sights they'd run towards him shouting, Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! at the tops of their voices, reedy and shrill, and she would sometimes hear her grandmother say to her mother, Will you listen to those children, the screeching out of them. What in the hell has them so excited? The same commotion every single day. I'd say they're a bit touched. Eileen, are those two children of the Joneses imbeciles or what are they? They couldn't be the full shilling anyway. Running out onto the main road like