

Ireland photo album



A few scenes from the adventures of our intrepid readers afoot in Ireland.

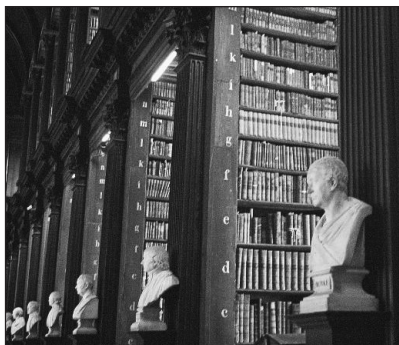
The idea of Books Afoot trips is to combine reading and book discussion with plenty of walking and exploring, usually related in some way to the books we had read or

the ideas we discussed. In Ireland, that meant getting to know the two cities where we stayed, Cork and Dublin, and getting out into the countryside, as well.

The latest Books Afoot adventure

took two groups of reader-travelers to Ireland in June.

With a range of things to do, places to explore, and people to meet, opportunities for photos abounded.

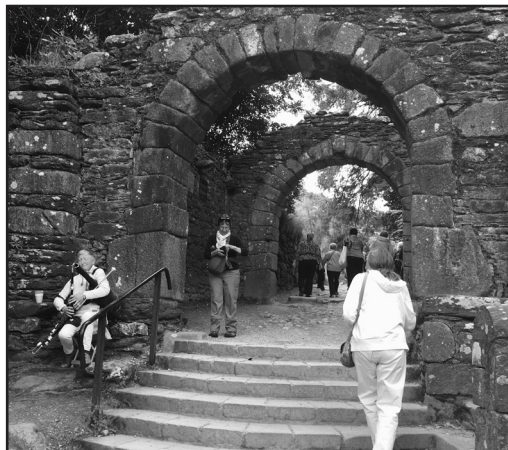


WHERE THE HECK ARE WE (above)? As we followed in the footsteps through Dublin of characters from two of our books, occasional map checks were necessary.

HIKING IN THE PAST (below). A woman playing Irish uilleann pipes greeted us as we explored the ruins of an ancient monastic site in the Wicklow Mountains south of Dublin.

EMIGRATION (top). Cobh, not far from Cork, is a lovely harbor town with a profound history. More than half of all emigrants who left Ireland in the century starting with the Famine sailed from here. Annie Moore was one, and her statue stands at the harbor's edge. She was the first immigrant to pass through Ellis Island when it opened in 1892.

OLD BOOKS (above). For readers, any visit to Dublin must include a visit to Trinity College, to walk through the Old Library, with its imposing stacks, and to view the ancient Book of Kells.



Photos by Martha Bird, Terri Foley, Heidi Galer, Katie Gierok, Sara Lindgren, Lynn Melena, Charlene Neumann



ROAD TRIPS

From Dublin, we took two day-trips to walk through quiet countrysides.

At Glendalough, about an hour south of Dublin, we walked through the green and serene valley, along tree-filled hillsides and two small lakes, the air filled with birdsong (left).

Our trip to the Burren area, in County Clare, took us across the country to the west coast, to meet with writer Cora Harrison and to experience the unique and evocative limestone uplands where she sets some of her books.

The first group posed at the trailhead that leads to Mullaghmore Mountain (left); the second group ate a picnic lunch in the same spot while Harrison told us more about the land and culture of the remote area (lower left).

The drive to the west was a long one, and on the way we enjoyed seeing the landscape unfold and change as we crossed the country. On the return trip, after a long day, some of us took advantage of the drive to catch a nap, like mother-daughter travelers Alice Newell and Katie Gierok (below).

“We walked through the green and serene valley, along tree-filled hillsides and two small lakes, the air filled with birdsong.”



Touched by Irish tales



*To know a place, read the literature of the place.
And if you're lucky and can talk to the writers,
all the better. By Mollie Hoben.*

**In preparation
for our readers'
excursion to
Ireland**, Books Afoot
participants all read at
least these five books:

**Spill Simmer Falter
Wither**, novel by
Sara Baume

The Long Gaze Back,
anthology edited by
Sinead Gleeson

**My Lady Judge
and/or A Shameful
Murder**, by
Cora Harrison

Fallen, novel by
Lia Mills

Are You Somebody?,
memoir by
Nuala O'Faolain

A year ago, when I was in Dublin, scouting out a possible Books Afoot trip to Ireland, I came across a postcard that said "Irish Writers"—and showed images of 12 men!

If nothing else had convinced me, that postcard told me that it was time for our women-reading groups to get there.

I was already discovering the heritage of great writing that Irish women have created over the years, and I was excited by the current surge of notable books by gifted young women.

So plans were made and dates set, and in June this year, two groups of eager reader-travelers spent eight days each on the Emerald Isle.

We were based in Cork and Dublin, with day-trips to a few other parts of the country. As always on Books Afoot excursions, our itinerary skipped over most of the typical tourist spots and activities. We were focused on Irish women writers, and our activities were based largely on the books we had read.

Student apartments on the campuses of University College Cork and University College Dublin were our homes away from home. As we walked and rode buses around those two cities, we were seeing them through the stories we had read and been touched by. When we headed off into the countryside, the same dynamic was at work.

Books Afoot travelers came to Ireland expecting to be enchanted—by the Irish people, the landscape, and the literary culture—and they weren't disappointed. What many did not expect, though, was the pervasive sense of history we encountered, how alive it is in the culture, and our own growing interest in it.

Each day we set aside time for discussion of the books we had read. And we were honored to be able to meet with three writers, in sites related to their work.

Sara Baume

Sara Baume is a young writer who has achieved international acclaim for her first novel, **Spill Simmer Falter Wither** (2015).

When I wrote to tell her that we would be reading her novel and to ask if we might meet her when we got to Ireland, I didn't have high hopes. I knew she was busy making appearances everywhere, and her second novel was just coming out.

But she wrote right back and said, "I always respond to interesting emails." She'd be happy to meet with us, she added.

We gathered in the library in the harbor town of Cobh, where Baume grew up. Her novel is set in the village across the bay and the surrounding countryside. It's a lyrical tale about a

When I think of Ireland now

**Books Afoot readers
remember and reflect.**

I think of
green, green, green,
writers, poets, rebels.—Jane Mylrea

I would like to be in Dublin again at Hodges
Figgis Bookshop, in the large room devoted
to Irish literature, history and travel, with
hundreds of books to inspect and covet, and
a few to possess.—Sara Lindberg

Photos of the authors by
Terri Foley, Heidi Galer,
and Lynnne Melena

man and a dog, two outsiders.

Baume gave us a rich look into her process of writing the book, and was delighted with questions that made her think about it in new ways.

The story was a challenging one for many readers, but also rewarding. “Sara’s character study of Ray, a marginalized loner in his final days, presents a dark story that will always, always stay with me,” said reader Alice Newell. “She put me inside Ray’s skin.”

Baume told us that when writing it, she thought of the book as her “practice novel,” and she was “confounded by its success.”

Cora Harrison

Mysteries are not typical Books Afoot fare, but most readers were surprised at how rich an experience it was to read the work of mystery writer Cora Harrison, whose two series feature strong female protagonists and are set at important points in Irish history.

Harrison’s Reverend Mother series is set in Cork in the tumultuous early 1920s, and those of us who read **A Shameful Murder**, the first in that series, learned a lot about the city and its history.

Her series set in the 16th century in the area of Ireland called the Burren, features Mara, a judge in the traditional Irish (i.e., pre-English) legal system. Those who read **My Lady Judge**,



Sara Baume chatted with readers after our gathering in the library.

the first in this series, were fascinated to learn about the traditional Irish way of doing justice and the surprisingly open culture for women of the times.

Harrison grew up in Cork, and now lives on the edge of the Burren. We went there to meet her, a long coach ride from Dublin to County Clare on the west coast.

We talked with her about her writing and the inspirations for her books, and she took time to accompany us to a spot in the Burren that features in the book we had read.

She inspired us with her openness, her wit, her passion for the land she lives on (“I think the Burren is the most beautiful place on earth”), as well as her own story. A teacher by profession, she didn’t start writing until she retired, 20 years ago.

“Cora Harrison made a difference for me,” said reader Thea Zatocil, “because she’s vibrant and alive and writes stories full of eras and people and places new to me.”

Helen McGonagle

Helen McGonagle is a librarian, historian and writer in Cork who focuses on women’s history. She works in the city’s central library, where one day she happened across some forgotten records from the library’s early years. These were the source of much interesting informa-



Cora Harrison in the Burren with our group.

“Our itinerary skipped over most of the typical tourist spots and activities. We were focused on Irish women writers, and our activities were based largely on the books we had read.”

BOOKS AFOOT, TO 12

I think of the country’s history—from the medieval monks (Glendalough ruins), to the 16th century (Cora Harrison’s **My Lady Judge**), to the potato famine and out-migration (Cobh), to the Easter Rising (Lia Mills’ **Fallen**), to the recent past (Nuala O’Faolain’s **Are You Somebody?**).—Lynnne Melena

I have a richer appreciation for the long struggle this small country endured and the courage to become

independent. I treasure the warmth and humor I experienced in my daily travels and encounters with the Irish people.—Noell Reinhiller

I think of a beautiful country with an eloquent people who have maintained their spirit through centuries of exploitation and oppression.—Cathie Nicholl

I think of unexpected sunshine, small magic, and great conversations.—Sara Walz

BOOKS AFOOT, FROM 11

tion, not least for McGonagle, information about the Ladies Reading Room—a room set aside for women only, a “haven from library loafers and loungers.”

McGonagle was fascinated, and she set about learning more. Her research led to a book, **A Room of Their Own**, which the library published as part of a series on the history of libraries in the city.



Helen McGonagle (left, with Heidi Galer) gave each of us a library bag with a copy of her book and a book about the recreation of the library after its destruction in 1920.

A ladies reading room was considered “an absolute necessity,” McGonagle told us, “for encouraging respectable women into public libraries.” What she discovered, though, was that the newspapers and periodicals stocked for the women were fewer and less diverse than those in the main reading room, and that they reflected little of the lively and growing feminist and nationalist presses of the times.

This conformed with the prevailing attitudes, “which did not consider women to be serious readers.”

Our wide-ranging conversation with McGonagle touched also on many aspects of women’s history in Ireland over the last century. Her book was not one we had read ahead of time, but we found that in our discussions of the other books we often made reference to what we learned from McGonagle, which helped us

better understand what we had read.

Other books we read

Fallen, a novel by Lia Mills (2014), immersed us in Dublin at the time of the Easter Rising in 1916, as experienced by a young woman who is trying to find her purpose in life in the tightly constricted world available to women at the time.

The novel was chosen for the 2016 One City: One Book programs in both Dublin and Belfast, the first time this has happened.

Fallen is Mills’ third novel. She published **Another Alice** in 1996 and **Nothing Simple** in 2005, both nominated for Irish literary awards.

Nuala O’Faolain’s memoir, **Are You Somebody?** was a surprising and huge bestseller in Ireland when it appeared in 1996 and was popular in the U.S., too. Many in the group had read it when it first came out, but reading it now, to discuss in Ireland, gave it a whole new dimension.

We learned about a remarkable woman, living a life that didn’t fit with the expectations for women in Irish society, struggling to believe in herself and feel good about her choices. She also gave us a picture of the male-centric intellectual and literary life of the ’60s and ’70s in Ireland, and the flourishing of the feminist movement there.

The anthology of short stories by Irish women writers, **The Long Gaze Back**, was named Irish book of the year in 2016. With its range of writers covering more than 200 years, from Maria Edgeworth in the early 19th century to the fresh new voices just making it into print today, the book offered us a marvelous introduction to the wealth of Irish women’s writing. Lots of great stories, all worth discussion.

Great Books

Both groups selected Sara Baume’s **Spill Simmer Falter Wither** as the “Great Book” of the books they read. But every book was nominated by some readers, reflecting what several stated, that each book helped us understand Ireland better, and all were rewarding reads.

I remember the view of the sea from the charming library in Cobh. And I’ll always think of the Burren. So I guess the landscape for me is a big part of my thoughts of Ireland.—Pat Schnack

I think of an island of relatively few square miles, but covered with many histories. We focused primarily on contemporary writers, but those writers gave us good

looks at earlier times—Carolyn Burnett

I will always associate Ireland with the women I traveled with—smart, insightful and knowledgeable. I learned as much from the group as I did from the reading.—Leah Speltz