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"'A story is a living thing': a conversation with Oein DeBhairduin about the importance of Irish Traveller voices and authentic representation"

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of Irish Travellers in Irish youth literature and culture and the importance of Irish Travellers' own voices and storytelling. Negative conceptualisations and stereotypes regarding Irish Travellers and the Irish Traveller community have a long history in Irish literary traditions, media, and publishing. Recognising, disrupting, and re-writing these conservative and normative regimes are crucial for imagining and enacting more equitable and inclusive literature for all young people. This interview conversation with award-winning writer, activist, and educator Oein DeBhairduin discusses issues involved in representing Irish Travellers in literature and media, the importance of Irish Travellers as storytellers and creators, norms around what constitutes "Irishness," and the significance of independent publishers regarding inclusive publishing.

KEYWORDS

Irish travellers; diversity; inclusive publishing; Irishness; traditional stories

Introduction

There has been a long literary tradition of negative, stereotypical, and discriminatory conceptualisations and representations of the indigenous ethnic minority of Irish Travellers. Making up approximately 0.7% of the population, the Irish Traveller community is often referred to in derogatory English-language terms such as "tinkers," "pikeys," and "knackers." In the Irish language, Travellers are called An Lucht Siúil (literally, "The Walking People") or "Ridirí an Bhóthair" ("Knights of the Road"), while Travellers refer to themselves as Pavees, Mincéirs, or Mincéirí, Due to their nomadic history and minority-ethnic position, Irish Travellers can experience discrimination and ostracism, have unequal access to education and public services, and often be viewed by settled people as anti-social, misfits, tricksters, or as presumed perpetrators of criminal activity. A history of Irish anti-Traveller racism and assimilative state settlement policies have been linked to the legitimation and reproduction of social inequalities including class and gender.[1] This "discursive practice creates polarity between the 'settled' population and the 'Travellers,' who are implicitly blamed by the state for their disadvantages," and the widespread construction of negative stereotypes and discriminatory representations of Travellers and Traveller culture has led to the continuous positioning of "Travellers as outsiders."[2]

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In 2017, Traveller activists and allies succeeded after a long campaign which advocated for ethnic status, and the Irish government formally recognised Travellers as an indigenous ethnic group with a unique heritage, culture, language, and identity. On 1 March 2017, the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, made a statement to Dáil Eireann confirming the Irish State's recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group within the Irish nation:

> Our Traveller community is an integral part of our society for over 1,000 years, with its own distinct identity – people within our people . . . . It is therefore a historic day for Travellers and a proud day and a day of maturity for Ireland. Lá iontach tábhachtach é seo do Lucht Taistil na tíre. Lá dár saol, mar a déarfá. May all the people of our nation live in the shelter and never in the shadow of each other. Or as the good Traveller man taught me how to say in Cant,[3] this is a borradh táileasc for the mincéir.[4]

However, hostile and disparaging representations and reactionary discourse still tend to pervade much of mainstream Irish literature and media and the Irish imagination. If and when the Irish nation-state and the Irish imaginary have acknowledged and portrayed Irish Travellers stereotypical, exoticising, and prejudiced representations of Irish Travellers and Traveller culture are pervasive and often embedded: as José Lanters notes, Irish literature has "never represented [Irish Travellers] as just themselves, but always as Other to the norm of the settled population."[5] Irish Travellers' relationship with space challenges what Roberta Piazza terms "society's spatial logic" in relation to mobility, space, and identity, and how "the physical spaces" occupied by liminal groups such as Irish Travellers "are not uncontested realities and how liminal individuals engage in a continuous negotiation with mainstream spatiality." [6] In *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities*, Michael Ó hAodha charts how the nomadic culture and "society within a society" of Irish Travellers have been regarded as a source of suspicion, how images of Travellers have been created and distorted in Irish literature, and how the "occluded voice" of Irish Travellers interacts with ideas and practices of modern Ireland and the question of national identity.[7] In his exploration of anti-Traveller prejudice and the "development of the Traveller image as 'Other' through mystical and binary discourses of alterity"[8] in Irish literature and the Irish imaginary, Ó hAodha argues that:

> Until the recent arrival of a more overtly multicultural society in Ireland, Travellers have constituted the "Other" for mainstream Irish society. As "Other" they have often acted as objects on whom power is exercised. Their representation and the roles constructed for them have been determined primarily by the settled community and have been influenced by the need to define national, social and class identity.[9]

Negative representations and interpretations of the nomadic nature of Traveller culture are especially significant in light of the traditional generic pattern of children's literature of the "home-away-home" narrative which Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer asserts constitutes one of the most key characteristics of children's literature: indeed, that it is "the most common story line" in these narratives.[10] Similarly, Mavis Reimer in the Introduction to her edited collection, *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada*, which explores ideas and ideals of home, homing, and nation in youth literature, observes how home is so powerfully centred and embedded in youth literature that it acts as "an auratic term."[11] Drawing upon postcolonial theory, Reimer and Claire Bradford problematise the centring of home in youth and youth literature and interrogate the implications of this

hegemonic term in relation to literary expressions of "homelessness," liminality, displacement, difference, and non-belonging.[12]

Ideals of the child and childhood have long been infused in the Western imagination with norms of race, ethnicity, and class, and these norms and conservative ideologies pervaded twentieth-century Irish youth literature. Early-twentieth-century texts such as the traditionalist and didactic novels of Patricia Lynch's *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey* (1934)[13] and *King of the Tinkers* (1938)[14] were underpinned by suspicion and the supposed dangers of "invasion" and "threat" associated with Travellers. This othering and reductive discourse dominated the following decades of Irish youth literature and works. While novels for teenagers such as the *Duck & Swan* series (1993–1998)[15] by John Quinn and Colman O'Raghallaigh's Irish-language novel, *Strainséirí* (2007),[16] promise a more sympathetic approach towards the potential for friendship and love between privileged settled teenagers and young Travellers, the mindsets and experiences of the majority, settled culture are prioritised and being an Irish Traveller is portrayed as deficient and anti-modern. As Carole Redford observes, Irish Travellers remain positioned as "the traditional people of 'difference' in Irish society" and the sedentary teenagers' stereotyping of Travellers and anti-Traveller prejudice infuses these relationships with a "mixture of fear and romantic attachment."[17] Marita Conlon-McKenna's 1992 novel, *The Blue Horse*,[18] seems to be a rare example of a novel centring on the perspective of an Irish Traveller child who is forced to live as a settled Traveller after her family's caravan burns down. The novel was awarded the 1993 Bisto Book of the Year Award – Overall Winner (national awards now known as the KPMG Children's Books Ireland Awards which are open to authors and illustrators born or resident in Ireland) and was positively regarded for its exploration of discrimination and bullying that the young protagonist faces due to her ethnicity. While the novel appears to centre Irish Traveller experience, the novel is written by a non-Irish Traveller and majority-culture author rather than by an Irish Traveller and the narrative focuses on a presumed sedentary reader and invoking their empathy for the plight of the othered Irish Traveller.[19]

Since the turn of the millennium, Irish Travellers have increasingly begun to speak for and represent themselves through organisations like the Irish Traveller Movement (a national membership organisation representing Travellers and Traveller organisations across Ireland) and the Dublin-based Pavee Point Traveller and Roma[20] Centre (a national NGO comprising Travellers, Roma, and majority population that works at local, regional, national, and international levels to address Traveller and Roma inequalities and promote human rights.)

The inclusive independent publisher, Kids' Own, has played a significant role in producing and amplifying multimedia work created by Irish Traveller young people as well as promoting parity of esteem in the contemporary Irish literary landscape for Irish Traveller-produced and Irish Traveller child-centred texts. Books created and co-created by Traveller and settled children across the island of Ireland such as *Clotty Malotty and All Her Friends: Collection of Rhymes and Jokes with Artwork* (2003),[21] *Grow Up Strong: A Book about the Lives and Experiences of Traveller Children and Young People Living in Cork, Ireland* (2014),[22] and *This Giant Tent: A Children's Celebration of Traveller Culture and Identity* (2019)[23] enable these young people's voices to be heard in the public sphere. The children's jokes, stories, illustrations, and autobiographical writing dynamically negotiate icons and stereotypes of what constitutes Irishness. These witty and confident multimodal narratives explore complex issues of ethnicity, identity, belonging, and difference,

celebrate young Travellers' own voices and creative agency, and act as important counter-narratives to anti-Traveller stereotyping. Kids' Own's publications authored and led by young Irish Travellers such as *Can't Lose Cant: The Old Language of Irish Travellers, by Children in County Kildare, Ireland* (2003)[24] and *Cant Turn Back*: *A Book All About Travellers* (2008)[25] serve an important role in recording and celebrating the Traveller language, Cant/Gammon, which is recognised in Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[26] Such works affirm a multiplicity of languages and experiences within Irish culture and speak to the potential for polyphony within Irish youth literature.

At a 2020 webinar conversation on "'Capturing the Contemporary:' The New Irish Studies," Rosaleen McDonagh – academic, playwright, activist, and disabled Irish Traveller woman[27] – traced how "the canonical exclusion of Traveller writing" has been "paired with the misappropriation of Traveller works and aesthetics throughout Irish literary and visual culture."[28] However, McDonagh observed the recent "shift" that has been taking place with Traveller creators telling their own narratives and how these texts operate as part of a "cultural renaissance by diverse artists … which may not yet be recognised in mainstream culture, but which promises to challenge an Irish society which sees minorities as a token 'bit of colour.'"[29] The mobility and liminality of Irish Travellers unsettle and disrupt traditional normative conflations of Ireland, a unified Irish people, and sedentary links with and ownership of land. Recognising and imagining the Traveller subject with equity and respect offers tantalising possibilities for problematising and disrupting norms of settled authority and power and for challenging conventional understandings of what is constituted as "normal" Irish identity and "Irishness." Oein DeBhairduin's works for young people play a leading role in this emerging trajectory of Irish Travellers as creators and inclusive publishing for children and young adults that challenges traditional norms and power regimes.

An award-winning writer, activist, and educator, DeBhairduin was the first Mincéiri/Irish Traveller to work in the Oireachtas, engaging in educational inclusion and cultural rights policy matters. He is a long-time board member of many Mincéirí community groups and was a vice chair of the Irish Traveller Movement, a Council member of Minceirs Whiden (a Travellers only forum established to promote an understanding and recognition of Travellers as a minority ethnic group in Irish society), and an originating member of Tome Tori, the Gammon-Cant (Shelta) speaking group. DeBhairduin is also the Inclusive Histories Curator for Traveller Culture with the National Museum of Ireland, and his focus within the National Museum is developing a Traveller-specific collection, as directed, supported, and identified by the indigenous ethnic minority community. His works are committed to shared kinship across and between cultures and to celebrating and retelling old tales with modern connections and dialogues.

DeBhairduin's debut book, *Why The Moon Travels* (2020),[30] is a landmark publication in Irish literature as the first collection of folktales written by a Traveller about Travellers and illustrated by a Traveller. Rooted in the oral tradition of the Irish Traveller community and retold with haunting illustrations by Leanne McDonagh, the book won both the Judges' Special Award and the Eilís Dillon Award at the national 2021 KPMG Children's Books Ireland Awards. In his Introduction to the collection, DeBhairduin describes the heart of the Traveller community as "a bonfire of remembrance and connection."[31] DeBhairduin continues this evocative metaphor and a passion for exploring connections with nature in the 2022 collection of stories, *Weave*,[32] which he created in collaboration with Irish author,

Deirdre Sullivan, and Chinese artist, Yingge Xu. Designed by artist and bookbinder Éilís Murphy in a tête-bêche format (a single volume in which two texts are bound together with one text rotated 180 degrees to the other), the eight short stories are inspired by the eight festivals in the wheel of the year and richly intertwine storytelling, ritual, folklore, and contemporary imaginings. DeBhairduin's 2023 picturebook, *The Slug and the Snail*,[33] was illustrated by Olya Anima and nominated for the Yoto Carnegie Medal for Illustration 2024. Rooted in the oral tradition of the Irish Traveller community, this gentle allegory about identity, acceptance, and diversity for young readers involves two slugs who travel happily together until a crow asks them where their home is. The younger brother is embarrassed and makes himself a shell, calling himself a snail while the older brother carries on as he is. The brothers initially grow apart but, over time, learn to respect each other's way of life. DeBhairduin's most recent publication is the 2023 collection of ghost stories, *Twiggy Woman*,[34] which similarly draws upon the oral tradition of the Irish Traveller community. Helena Grimes' spooky, compelling black and white illustrations richly complement DeBhairduin's eerie folktales and lyrical style. In this collection, DeBhairduin re-envisions and re-tells chilling tales for modern times and weaves "threads of connection between our mundane outer lives and our deep inner world."[35]

In the following conversation, DeBhairduin discusses the importance of storytelling and the importance of Irish Travellers telling their stories, his approach to re-calling and re-telling Irish Traveller traditional stories, and his experiences weaving his narratives for contemporary audiences.

***Note**: This interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams on 13 November 2023. It has been edited for length and clarity. The guest editors are very grateful to Oein DeBhairduin for his generosity and time in agreeing to be interviewed and to be part of this special issue.*

Patricia Kennon (PK): Could you share with us your own experience when you were young with oral literature and with reading? Did you have similar or different experiences with them? How did you regard the relationship, if any, between them?

Oein DeBhairduin (ODB): I grew up in a family where stories had great power and importance and vitality. Stories were a tool of entertainment but also a way of exchanging generational knowledge and guidance. Since I was young, stories have offered me very complicated scenarios, understandings, and emotional experiences. My parents approached stories and storytelling as a very strong tool in order to give us a gift that the world wasn't inclined to give us. I was brought up with the understanding that Travellers are deeply important, that we're a central part of the world, and that our stories have an ancient lineage that needs understanding. This was something that was deeply important to me then, as it is now. Even now in modern life, when people have different interpretations of Travellers as sometimes very cruel or whatever stereotype it is, I'm still positive. I still feel that we belong to each other. That we have a shared history here. We belong together. We're not behind you as a kind of retrospective people. We've always been side by side but we just have a different road. But if you only see us from one point of view, you lose the entire insight into us as multiple. Growing up, I grew up in a house full of books. One of the first things my father did when we were very young, he must

have spent his entire wages on a series of books, *The Encyclopaedia of Science*, which had twenty volumes. Although we were pretty much on the poverty line which I didn't realise until later, my father saw the investment in it. These are tools that we can use again.

Books and reading and listening to the radio were very much part of ordinary life. There's sometimes this idea that Travellers don't enjoy reading but that's very much a generational concept. There were always books everywhere. But this isn't always reflected in most Travellers' experiences – especially my generation's. When we went to school, we were put in intermediate classes and Traveller-only classes and that lineage continued through the 1980s and 1990s through to the 2011 Census.[36] We still have Traveller-only schools in the country which is concerning as well as a lack of guidelines regarding our ability to integrate, celebrate, and include Travellers and Traveller culture. Oral stories and storytelling have been central but also visual media and artwork and painting are stories and storytelling too. Having that freedom is so important and I wouldn't strip reading and books and oral storytelling and pictures down as being separate. They're different tunes in a song, with different tones. They're all part of the overall song of life.

PK: How then did you go about deciding the tales, for example, in your collection of stories, *Why the Moon Travels*? What was your process for selecting stories for this collection?

ODB: We're not a people short of stories but there were some stories that kept coming up in conversation with people and in my own mind. Before the idea for the book started, I had a blog ("Keeping A Campfire,")[37] and I had been writing for years. I had this conviction that I didn't want to write anything to do with Travellers because I felt it would be very tokenistic or when I did write something about Travellers, I was writing for the community only. But the stories that were haunting me were Traveller stories. We're the originators and protectors and carriers of the stories but we don't hold the stories in a controlling way so that I'd be upset if someone else were to tell a particular story. The stories pass through me. So long as we recognise where the stories came from, that's the important thing. Collaboration was important during the process and we have to be open to negotiation with people about stories. I don't want to create products. I *could* sell my culture and my identity very easily. I just want to share things that touch me and make the world and the part of the world that I'm living in brighter and more intimate and more connected. The stories also had to interest me. I can't just turn up and "tell a story." That's an artificial performance. You have to be touched by something and it has to be a conversation or a memory or an experience. The stories in the collection are the stories that resonated the loudest. Some people have looked at the collection and asked about the themes we used or how we plotted them. We didn't! Subconsciously, they might have blown through the air on the ebbs and tides that we all have but it was that these are the stories that want to be told at the moment.

I do believe that a story is a living thing and they help with fears and hopes and desires. If I pass a story to you, I pass a part of myself to you and to the person behind you and me. In my mind's mind, I was making this small little bird and nurturing it and hoping to let it go and that it would find its own home. This is something I do with all my work. I think,

"I'm making this thing and letting it go." A lot of people impart this sense of "value" on work but I don't. With how society teaches us about work and about how people exchange, I think a lot of people are very tense about those issues but I'm thankfully not. For me, these stories will find a home that they need to find and these are the ways that the stories need to be expressed into the world. Wherever the stories go is wherever the stories go. I already know that the stories have a home in me and in the people whom I adore. So, "go to the world!."

PK: How have international audiences responded to your books?

ODB: What's struck me most is that there are so, so few people, including Irish people, who actually know anything about Traveller culture. They know a lot about trauma and about our conflicts but they know actually very little about us as a cultural people, how we see the world, how we connect with our places, or the history that we're carrying. The process of creating the book along with the book tours and sharing Traveller stories have all brought me a lot of personal joy. Sometimes, our work becomes work towards an audience rather than the work itself being the work and that being the important part. It comes with privileges and excitement and it also needs a lot of trust. I trust myself to know that the stories are going to find the home that they're going to find. However, I was very surprised in the wider mindset about how little people knew about us. But, then, where do Irish as well as international people actually find information about us? The vast majority of stories about us in any shape or form are not from us so they're not Traveller stories. They're settler stories. They're settled people's versions repeated and repeated and repeated. This is not something that's just affecting Travellers, it's affecting everyone. If we're excluded, this takes effort. It's not just a passive thing.

I think a way to bridge those gaps is stories. Unfortunately, we have had very few spaces for communication. So, the work I'm doing is part of that wider narrative but it's also hopefully bringing us together more in our shared commonalities and connections through stories rather than through separation. Differences are important but they can also drive us away from each other. In the picture book, *The Slug and the Snail*, the two brothers love each other but can feel divided. The story isn't saying the brothers had to be perfect and at the end of the story, they're still not sure how to engage with each other. Life is complicated and things happen. But they're still brothers, they're still connected and they still came back together.

PK: What connection or relationship does your work as the Traveller Culture Collections Development Office with the National Museum of Ireland have with your identity and work as a creator?

ODB: They're just stories. All the objects in the Collections and in the Museum are stories that come in another way. At that time, the Museum had collected about 200 objects mostly consisting of tinware and paper flowers.[38] There was nothing on children, politics,

games, women's lives, religion. My immediate reaction was one of an echo of the pain of all that was ignored and overlooked. We all saw the Museum as a place that was very open to us and to the re-interpreting of the objects and democratising our voices in those structures while also being limited in the realities of the legislating structures of a National Museum being funded by the State. We used oral histories to engage those spaces to bring together people and the histories and the objects. And it wasn't just me deciding what to inscribe and how to inscribe those voices. I worked with them so that it's their voices and their points of view. That's storytelling. I love when people have different views and perspectives. They're all legitimate and we're not here to establish one cosy authoritative voice. I often say, "everyone agrees, we're not in a community, we're in a cult." The fact that we have all these different opinions and experiences, it makes my heart so joyful. Our work at the National Museum of Ireland is a way of sharing stories and connections, of both sanctuary and surprise, that connects us in a way that becomes more real every day.

PK: What role do you think language has regarding the representation of Irish Travellers and Irish Traveller life?

ODB: There are different layers of language. I'm a very strong advocate for oral language. Cant is part of who I am. Stripping someone of their voice is to strip them of part of their identity. There are things in Cant that don't and can't make sense in English. It's also the language around us and about us. Quite often, I'm asked, "Are you a settled Traveller?." I would say, "No," and I would ask, "why are you asking?." People might then ask, "We're wondering if you live in a camp or a site or a house?." I would ask "Why? Why are you asking? Is this going to change our treatment of each other? Are you going to treat me as 'less' or 'more' of a Traveller?" I'm always interested in how language impacts people feeling further away from someone or closer to someone. These are narratives that are used. "Are you settled? Are you more like me? Are you nice, better, closer-to-us Travellers?." It also becomes an undercurrent of ethnic denial. People don't say "settled Roma" but there's a denial of Travellers being their own ethnic group. I'm interested whether people are using language to distance themselves from me or are you striving to be closer to me? There's a cultural language style that's in majority Irish settled culture that's different from how Travellers use language. We talk over each other while we're talking with each other and we also speak more quickly and more loudly and with a higher pitch. Sometimes settled people see Travellers talking together, especially a group of young men, speaking quickly and loudly together and the interpretation of difference is seen as threatening. But if you knew what was happening, it's just chatting.

PK: You've collaborated with a range of Irish and international illustrators, for example: Helena Grimes for your collection, *Twiggy Woman*; with Yingge Zu for your collection, *Weave*; and with Olya Anima for your picturebook, *The Slug and the Snail*. Are you mindful of anything about the visualisation of Irish Traveller stories and voices when you're collaborating with illustrators?

ODB: When I collaborate with another author or an illustrator, I'm not going to dictate exactly what the stories mean or how they should flow. I can't hold them to a story so tightly that it kills their version and feeling of it. I have to honour the artists and we all have to have the freedom and trust of the process. Having conversations is so important and being open during the conversations. Each story is an expression of hope. Even when it's a painful story, there's something that wants to be told. How the stories are interweaving between people and for different people is part of the excitement and vibrancy of the process. If someone I was collaborating with were to come back with exactly what I had said, I think you've settled the story. You've paused it. It needs to be a living thing. I know that's not how everyone else works but I think it would dishonour the work and it would dishonour the artists if you're too overly directive. It would take the life and joy out of the story. If anything, stories are designed to be sharing, caring, and about exchange.

It's really important on professional, personal, and creative levels that we all have permission to fail at things. There are always nuances with intercultural exchanges and with different cultural backgrounds. We consciously and unconsciously re-affirm our own world view. If, for example, the text said that there was a knock on the door, someone might assume that the characters are at a house. But trailers have doors too, and I'm really interested that the stereotype association and the stereotypical visualisation of a house happened. It's part of our responsibility with stories and with storytelling to name where the story comes from as much as you can. You try to be as truthful as you can with it, and then you have the responsibility of passing it on.

PK: You also collaborated with the Irish author, Deirdre Sullivan, for your story collection, *Weave*, which uses a tête-bêche format. You both share a passion for folklore, storytelling, and ritual and the stories beautifully bring together the new and the old, the Irish and the international, and the individual and the collective. How did you collaboratively approach this collection?

ODB: We really wanted something physical and tactile. We wanted the book to be designed with a sense of physical contact and flow so the book has to be turned over and around and moved as part of the reading process. We didn't want to put Deirdre's words, then my words, and then Yingge's images, and squash them together. These are all expressions of the stories and how we're choosing to weave them together, like the title of the book. We didn't want to make a monocultural representation and we're going to honour the woven work as it is. I'm very thankful to my publisher, Skein Press, as I don't think most publishers would let many creators do this. I had heard from other writers about the importance of the relationship with your publisher and it is so important. I'm not going to sell who I am. I'm not a product and I don't want to create a product. We had a sense of mutually-shared respect of what we were doing and how we wanted to do it, and we had the freedom to let it go and to let it grow. At our first meeting with Skein Press, we didn't want traditional power dynamics or weird hierarchies that I'm not

interested in. We wanted to know "do we match? Do our mutual needs gel so that we can create this partnership? Can this be a home for this work?."

PK: Your books to date have all been published with Skein Press. This independent publisher is committed to inclusion and to supporting writers traditionally under-represented in Irish literature. Skein Press collaborated with inclusive Irish independent publisher, Little Island Books, to co-publish your picturebook, *The Slug and the Snail*, and they also collaborated with Little Island to co-publish the 2024 picturebook, *The Fairy Queen*, a tale rooted in the oral tradition of the Irish Traveller community by activist, storyteller, and poet, Chrissy Donoghue Ward and illustrated by Monika Mitkute. To what extent do you think independent publishers have a particular role to play regarding diverse creators and minority voices?

ODB: I think everyone has a role to play but, at the moment, the changes are mostly coming from independent publishers. To create those relationships which support diverse perspectives and voices takes more intimate teams in independent publishing spaces rather than mainstream publishers. It's everyone's responsibility so long as it's not tokenistic. One of the first things I ask when I'm invited to go to an event or to speak on a panel is "why are you inviting me? Why should I go?." Often people reply with reasons like "we want to give your work more exposure" but that doesn't interest me. Virtue signalling also doesn't interest me. If they say, "we think you'd enjoy the work" or "we think you'd connect with the people," I say "sign me up!." They're using similar language but they involve a different intention and I'm always thinking about the authenticity of the voice that needs to be heard. I think sometimes with large corporations that that nuance doesn't always come through. The narrative and landscape have been changing but there's still need for a lot more change. When I'm looking and engaging with Traveller experience and Traveller culture – because it's all very individual – I try to look at "what are the parts that are part of who are? What's the trauma response? How do we work that out?."

I envision this triangle with Irish Travellers being demonised, over-romanticised, or else capitalised on. Very rarely are we actually realised as just people. This dynamic is always changing and I'm interested with how do we get closer to that central point of being actualised as people? It's a dance I do with myself when I'm thinking about publishing and publishers. That's the challenge. I'm not just interested in the outgoing work of the publishers themselves. Who's doing the commissioning work? Who's doing the editing? Who's on the Board? It's the whole system. The idea of authority is very interesting to me. There was an event I was at about changes in publishing and a man asked me "What authority are you invested with?" which I thought was a great question. I started listing that I've sat on the Youth Council of Europe, I was vice chair of The Irish Traveller Movement, I've worked on policy, I've been an advisor to the Irish Senate. But then at the end, I said, "no, *I* did. I give myself the authority to do this."

We're basing ourselves on this weird hierarchy of colonial structures about who has the right to the voice. No, mine is just as legitimate. We don't have a King of the Travellers. We're all autonomous people. My voice is just as legitimate. If my work is underpinned by

human rights as much as possible, and I'm advocating for participation including participation for myself, and I'm participating in a way that I found peaceful and reflective of my sense of core values and what stirs in me in a real way, then that's what's important. This whole question of "who has the authority" is an illusion. It's a social construct that we're all signed up to. We are the right.

PK: Your work to date has encompassed ghost stories, a picturebook, and nonfiction. Could you share with us what your upcoming work will involve?

ODB: I'm working on a collection which brings together herblore, story, techniques, and customs, and practical skills within the community, and explores over thirty plants, herbs, and associate stories, recipes, remedies, and techniques.[39] There's a long tradition in Traveller culture of taking herbal remedies and herbal knowledge, clasping them in stories, and passing this lore on through stories. How we engage with our values and how we honour our relationship with place and protect our stories: it's a whole bundling. Bringing together that ancestral knowledge, there's a playfulness and a textuality to it while working with the nation that we are in so that we can find ways that we can bring the stories with us and pass them on. Everyone's an artist, and art is everywhere. It shifts the idea that minority people live on the edge of society. But really, I live at the centre of my own world. It's society that's standing around the edge of me. The dominant narrative is that we're forced as a minority group to manoeuvre ourselves around the more dominant voices. No. We still have voices. It doesn't mean that we're at the edge of each other. It just means that we're orbiting in different ways. It's about the power in that language and the stories we tell and share, and how art can support or push back or extend that conversation.

Notes

1. Cf. Jane Helleiner's study, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture*, which brought together ethnographic research and archival research (e.g. local government records, the provincial press, and debates of the Irish parliament).
2. Snowdon and Karlsson, "A Critical Discourse Analysis," 1, 11.
3. Cant, also known as Gammon, is a traditional language spoken by Irish Travellers. Travellers may also call this language Shelta. This language was included in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage listings in 2019 (along with the Traveller craft of tin-smithing) which means that the Irish government agrees to promote, protect, and celebrate these elements of Traveller culture on an equitable level with wider Irish cultural practices. See the entry regarding Cant/Gammon at the Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage website: https://nationalinventoryich.tcagsm.gov.ie/cant-gammon/.
4. Houses of the Oireachtas, "Dáil Éireann debate," n.p.
5. Lanters, "We Are a Different People," 25.
6. Piazza, *The Discursive Construction of Identity and Space*, 212.
7. Ó hAodha, *Irish Travellers: Représentations and Realities*.
8. Ó hAodha,*"Insubordinate Irish"*, 37.
9. Ibid., 193.
10. Nodelman and Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, 197–8.

11. Reimer, "Introduction," xiii.
12. Reimer and Bradford, "Home, Homelessness and Liminal Spaces."
13. Lynch, *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*.
14. Lynch, *King of the Tinkers*.
15. Quinn, *Duck & Swan*.
16. O'Raghallaigh, *Strainséirí*.
17. Redford, "Difference and Conformity," 121.
18. Conlon-McKenna, *The Blue Horse*.
19. Cf. scholarship on settler colonialism practices, multiculturalism, and diversity in youth literature e.g. Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*; Ong's "Critical Multiculturalism and Countering Cultural Hegemony with Children's Literature"; and Boffone and Herrera's "Race and Ethnicity in Children's Literature."
20. Roma is an Indo-Aryan ethnic group who traditionally live a nomadic lifestyle.
21. Kids' Own, *Clotty Malotty and All Her Friends*.
22. Kids' Own, *Grow Up Strong*.
23. Kids' Own, *This Giant Tent*.
24. Kids' Own, *Can't Lose Cant*.
25. Kids' Own, *Cant Turn Back*.
26. Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, *Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, https://nationalinventoryich.tcagsm.gov.ie/.
27. Cf. McDonagh's collection of essays, *Unsettled*, which explores ableism, abuse, and racism from a feminist perspective.
28. Darling, "Capturing the Contemporary," n.p.
29. Ibid.
30. DeBhairduin, *Why The Moon Travels*.
31. Ibid., viii.
32. DeBhairduin, Sullivan, and Xu, *Weave*.
33. DeBhairduin and Anima, *The Slug and the Snail*.
34. DeBhairduin, *Twiggy Woman*.
35. Ibid., 2.
36. Historically, Travellers have often been marginalised in the Irish education system. Traveller-only classes did not end in Ireland until 2004. Cf. The Irish Traveller Movement website, https://itmtrav.ie/our-work/education/, for an overview of Irish Travellers and the Traveller way of life within the Irish education system.
37. DeBhairduin, "Keeping A Campfire."
38. These include distinctly registered objects and those that might be considered of "concealed" connection.
39. Expected publication is in late 2026 or early 2027.

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