



The Undertaking

by Audrey Magee

What right have I to write this novel?

There is a loop walk near my home which I took as I wrote *The Undertaking*, always travelling in the same direction, west to east, walking first along road, then along an often overgrown path packed with hazel, holly, ferns, brambles, blackberries and occasionally, peeking through the undergrowth, wild strawberries.

As I walked, my mind worked on this first novel that tells of Katharina Spinell and Peter Faber, two ordinary Germans caught up in the extraordinary events of WW2, my feet always holding the same even rhythm until a particular bend in the path when I stopped dead. Every time. And asked the same question. Every time. What right had I to write this novel? I was neither German nor Jewish. Nor was I Ukrainian. Or Russian. And I had no family links to any of these countries or people. I was Irish. I had nothing to do with any of it.

The usual arguments went through my mind – art has no international boundaries; the writer has freedom of choice and freedom to delve into any aspect of the human condition; all fine concepts but all rather lofty and pretentious when the writer is an unknown woman trudging through a Wicklow woodland.

I would stand in the same spot, paralysed, drawing yet again on Heinrich Böll. He had written about Ireland in his diary, *Irisches Tagebuch*.

I had read Böll during my studies of German language and literature at University College Dublin, loving his capacity to distil big ideas into simple language. Böll grew up in a Catholic pacifist home

in Cologne, was drafted into the Wehrmacht during the war and served on the French and Russian fronts. He was wounded four times and ended up in an American prison camp. He wrote to understand his experiences of war, to understand what had happened to his country, using a language that was pared back, cleansed of any legacy of Nazi propaganda.

But the writing was not enough. He needed a physical distance too from Germany. In 1957, twelve years after the war ended, he travelled to the west of Ireland with his family, setting up home on Achill Island in Mayo.

The Nobel laureate wrote about his encounters in Ireland of the 1950s, adamant that despite the poverty and the heartache of emigration, there was a wealth in Ireland and its people that Germany had lost. His German readers loved the journal; the Irish, though, were less enthusiastic. Keen to move on and modernise, they were uncomfortable with the way this man wanted to preserve them, to keep them from changing, to stop them from becoming more German, more European. I understood the Irish irritation – he wanted the pill kept out of Ireland so that women could keep producing wonderful Irish children – but I understood too the German beguilement with the Irish attitude to time, to living in a freer, more creative environment.

I took a deep breath on that woodland path. If he could write about my country, I could write about his. And I went on; with my walk, and with my novel.



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