

CORK

Ireland

*The Cork International Short Story Festival is one reason to visit this thriving town in south-west Ireland, says local writer **ALANNAH HOPKIN** – but there are plenty of other reasons too. Here is her guide to the area*

In Cork people do not wait to be introduced but launch straight into conversation with whoever happens to be next to them – as Her Majesty the Queen discovered when she visited Cork's English Market, and had an impromptu laugh at fishmonger Pat O'Connell's remarks.

The Cork International Short Story Festival, held annually in late September, upholds this tradition, and is a great place for writers of all sorts to meet. It is wonderfully egalitarian; everyone mingles, everyone talks to their neighbour. Your neighbour might be a famous name, an unpublished beginner or a facilitator from the daily workshops (from €150 for four sessions), an internationally

renowned academic, or one of the many local writers, like me, who enjoy the annual influx of new faces.

A compact city just an hour's flight from most UK airports, with a great artisan food scene and a walkable historic centre studded with interesting hostelries, Cork is the perfect festival destination. During the Cork Jazz Festival in October the city is overrun with cool dudes in shades, while in late May the riverbanks are packed with thousands of spectators at the Ocean to City Maritime Festival. The Short Story Festival is one of the smallest on the calendar, and is conducted discreetly, among consenting adults, as it were, with audiences ranging from 30–120. It has hosted a shelf-full of writers – from

Richard Ford and Edna O'Brien to Canada's Alistair MacLeod and Anne Enright; from Colm Tóibín, Rose Tremain and Grace Paley to Yiyun Li, winner of the Frank O'Connor Award for the best story collection in 2005.

Cork city is an attractive place, with seagulls crying moodily as they cruise above the gracious Georgian buildings of the South Mall and Grand Parade, home of Cork City Library, the festival's daytime base. Because the city centre is an island, created by the River Lee dividing into two channels, bridges and quays abound. As a result, it is as easy to get lost in Cork as it is in Venice. But just ask a local and you will be put right – that is if you can interpret the Cork accent, which is said to go up and down as steeply as the hilly northside of the city. Football fans are amazed to find that all the taxi drivers sound like Roy Keane, probably Cork's most famous son of the moment, though perhaps Fiona Shaw could pose a challenge since her Harry Potter connection.

The festival was originally named after another famous Corkonian,



Fishmonger Pat O'Connell shares a joke with the Queen in Cork's English Market

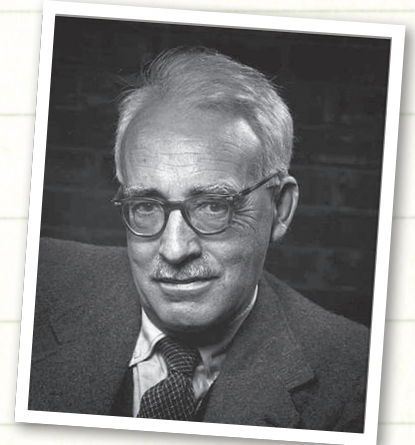
Cork International Short Story Festival 24–27 September 2014

The world's oldest annual short story festival, produced by Munster Literature Centre. The line-up for 2014 will be announced in the spring. Past writers have included Jhumpa Lahiri and Louis de Bernières, among many others.

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munsterlit.ie and
corkshortstory.net

is an accomplished poet, and also Director of the Munster Literature Centre which occupies the O'Connor birthplace. From the attic of a tiny terraced house this amiable, easy-going character magics together a programme of readings, book launches, competition prize-givings and workshops with a high proportion of free events. The evening venue, Triskel Christchurch, is an airy, light-filled space, built in 1717 to replace the church where in 1594 the poet Edmund Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle, celebrated in his *Epithalamion*. More details can be gleaned on the festival's literary walking tour.

The English Market opposite Christchurch has over 100 stalls of artisan food and other produce.



Cork writer Frank O'Connor

Festival-goers relax at the market's Farmgate Café, though in fine weather a pint of stout outside the Electric bar with views of the ubiquitous river, is tempting. The Long Valley serves pastrami sandwiches so large that it is impossible to eat them politely, while the Bodega and the Oval bars

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writer Frank O'Connor. Born in humble circumstances in 1903, O'Connor came of age in time to fight in the Civil War, an era recalled in his story 'Guests of the Nation'. Such

lively cosmopolitan city, where people can browse for new and secondhand books in four large, uncensored emporia, including a bustling Waterstone's.

With a great artisan food scene, and a walkable historic centre studded with interesting hostelryes, Cork is the perfect festival destination

an exciting start to adulthood was hard to follow, especially, O'Connor felt, if you were a librarian in Cork, living in a country that banned your books. So he left, and advised all other Corkonians with literary ambitions to do the same. O'Connor prospered in London, where he became known as an outspoken critic. In the US he wrote for the *New Yorker* and taught at Ivy League colleges.

There is something very likeable about Cork's big-hearted celebration of a native son who couldn't wait to leave the place. But the provincial backwater of O'Connor's youth is only a faint memory in today's

The festival has close links with Cork City Council and University College, Cork (UCC), co-sponsors of the €25,000 award, the world's biggest short story prize. Some of the courses are held on UCC's campus, and attended by students on its Creative Writing MA alongside festival-goers. In the lifetime of the festival, the short story has gone from poor relation of the novel to the new Big Thing, ideal for time-strapped online readers, and the favoured form of both the 2013 Nobel Laureate, Alice Munro, and the Booker International prizewinner, Lydia Davies.

Festival Director Patrick Cotter



Kinsale, the 'gourmet capital of Ireland', is only eighteen miles south of Cork
Inset: Blarney Castle is half an hour away

are atmospheric early evening spots. The Crawford Municipal Gallery has a café run by the legendary Ballymaloe foodie empire, and interesting maritime paintings too. Café Paradiso, a vegetarian restaurant with such delicious fare that even

and treat themselves to the luxurious Hayfield Manor, hidden away in the university quarter. The same area has a choice of B&Bs: try Garnish House for typical Irish hospitality, Lancaster Lodge for modern design. The Imperial Hotel in South Mall, closest to the

The festival finishes on Saturday, leaving time to explore Cork's hinterland, including Cobh/Queenstown, Blarney Castle and Kinsale

the most dedicated carnivores do not notice the absence of meat, is near the university. The Market Lane Restaurant in Oliver Plunkett Street is a busy, inexpensive bistro that sources most of its food in the market.

The Maldron, part of a small budget hotel chain, has a pool and is where all the writers stay. Those with deep pockets might follow Edna O'Brien's example (she won the prize in 2009)

festival venues, has been restored to the splendour of its Georgian heyday, but remains reasonably priced, with a lively bar and coffee shop.

The nicely landscaped campus of UCC is worth the 15-minute walk. The Tudor-Gothic-style quad (1845) has a display of pre-historic Ogham stones, and is complemented by the Glucksman Gallery (2005), and the Honan Chapel (1916), a showcase of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement.

The Festival finishes on Saturday, leaving Sunday to explore Cork's hinterland. Cobh/Queenstown was the deep-water berth for the ocean liners, including the *Titanic*, that carried emigrants away up until the 1960s. At high tide, the half-hour train journey is as exhilarating as a fairground ride, when the line, engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, is suspended on

the water's surface. Cobh is a steep, characterful port with two visitor centres, a cathedral by E W Pugin and a Victorian waterfront promenade.

Or take a half-hour local bus ride to Blarney Castle. Kissing the stone is optional, but do climb to the top to appreciate the sheer heft of the building, a massive stone tower house, and the views of the Lee Valley. The extensive gardens have a grove of ancient yews, river and lakeside walks. The Blarney Woollen Mills next door is Ireland's biggest craft shop.

Eighteen miles south of the city is Kinsale, a historic town on a wide, attractive harbour. While most Cork towns are twinned with modest villages in Brittany or Wales, Kinsale is twinned with Antibes. Very grand, but a yacht is not obligatory: you can use the hourly bus service. Wander the narrow streets, sampling boutiques, galleries, bookshops and cafés, and choose a place to enjoy the local seafood: café, restaurant, pub or chipper. Wherever you go, you can be sure it will be fresh, and it will come with the chance for yet another conversation with perfect strangers.

FURTHER INFORMATION

General Tourist Information

www.discoverireland.ie

Cork City Tourist Information

Office Aras Fáilte, Grand Parade, Cork City Tel: +353-21-425 5100 email: corktio@failteireland.ie

Cork City Airport is a ten-minute taxi or bus ride from the city centre, and is served from the UK by Aer Lingus, Ryanair and jet2.com. www.corkairport.com

PLACES TO STAY

Maldron Hotel John Redmond St, Cork Tel: +353-21 452 9200 www.maldronhotelcork.com

Hayfield Manor Perrott Ave, College Road, Cork Tel: +353-21 484 5900 www.hayfieldmanor.ie

Garnish House Western Road, Cork Tel: +353-21 427 5111 www.garnish.ie

Lancaster Lodge Lancaster Quay, Western Road, Cork Tel: +353-21 425 1125 www.lancasterlodge.com

The Imperial Hotel South Mall, Cork Tel: +353-21 427 4040 www.flynnhotels.com

