



## Ep. 84: Author and lecturer Dr Oona Frawley

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You're listening to The Nerve, an English and arts podcast from SETU.

I'm your host, Dr Jenny O'Connor.

Welcome to a new year and a new series of The Nerve.

We often interview writers and academics on the podcast, and today we have two for the price of one.

Dr Oona Frawley is a lecturer in the Department of English at Maynooth University, whose research interests span late 19th and 20th century Irish studies, memory and trauma studies, eco criticism and writings from New Zealand and Australia.

However, as if this weren't enough, she also writes fiction and nonfiction.

Her first novel, *Flight*, was published in 2014 and was nominated for an Irish Book Award.

And her most recent nonfiction work is *This Interim Time*, which was published in 2025.

In the meantime, she has edited and authored numerous academic publications, too.

So you've been really busy, Oona .

It's making me feel really lazy over here.

So a huge welcome to the podcast.

And thanks a million for for chatting with me today.

Thank you so much for having me on.

I'm delighted.

So, Oona , I read *This Interim Time* over Christmas.

It's a work of nonfiction, as I said, and it discusses the links between New York and Ireland that your family has as part of the book.

Could you explain your origin story, I suppose, a little bit to our listeners?

Yeah, absolutely.

My parents were both Irish.

They were both from inner and Dublin, and they decided to emigrate to the United States at a certain point.

They had no family.

We had no history of anyone else in the family ever emigrating before.

So this was quite a jolt in the family and very unusual that that's the case.

And in any Irish family, you usually find that.

But they were the first.

They left in, I think it was 19.

I actually don't know the year.

That's kind of surprising me now.

But I think it was 1961, 62 around then when they left Ireland.

They'd been married for a period of time, but they left for a very particular reason, and that was because my father and this is, I hope, not giving away too much about the book, but he had gambled away their house.

And this was what propelled them out of the country.

And as in those days, many wives went along with their their partners to places that they didn't necessarily want to go because that was the done thing.

And they made completely new lives for themselves, quite happy ones, but very unusual ones, I think, for an Irish immigration story because they were actors.

They weren't emigrating with a specific goal of other career in mind.

Yeah, that was much more precarious, wasn't it?

Really?

Yeah, it was quite precarious.

And one of the standing jokes in our family was that at a dinner party when I was about five with all of my parents, actor friends there, that they asked me, did I want to be an actor as well?

And very seriously, apparently, I don't remember this, but it was told over and over again, very seriously.

I said that, no, I did not want something that was so unstable.

I was going to be a writer to great guffaws of all the writers or the actors there.

That's great, isn't it?

You're so stable and you're flighty.

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So I understood what it meant, even at that age, that it did mean precarity.

It did mean, you know, that you didn't know what job was coming next.

So, yeah.

And so you're growing up over in Manhattan then.

What was it, you know, did you always feel this drawback towards Ireland?

Did you think that you'd end up here ultimately or not?

It's funny.

My parents always refer to Ireland as home.

You know, so even, you know, I had a call from home.

There were letters from home and all of those kinds of the language of home was very much present in the house.

So even though New York was home to me, Ireland was this other home that was always present.

And no matter how little acting work there had been, my mother always saved to go to Ireland.

So that was the place that we always visited every single summer.

Even if my mother couldn't afford for herself to go, she would send me.

It was very important to her that I had this link with her family.

My father didn't have contact with his family particularly, but my mother's family, they were very, very close.

And she really wanted me to have that experience.

So it was also home for me.

Like I cried when we left as well every summer coming back or every holiday.

It was very difficult for me.

And yeah, I always I always felt strong here.

Any chance I had to spend extended periods, periods of time, I took them.

And what part of Ireland were you returning to then?

Were you returning to Dublin?

Yeah.

And did you have lots of cousins and relatives there?

Yeah, I had loads of relatives.

I was very close to some of my aunts.

I used to go and stay with them when I eventually did a year abroad at Trinity as an undergrad.

I was in and out to all of my different aunts the whole year.

Like I actually I remember thinking at the time I was about 18 and I remember thinking, like, I really need to spend this time with my family because I don't get the chance.

In New York, we had nobody.

We literally had no other relatives bar one kind of great uncle.

That was my dad's great uncle who lived in the States.

And and he died when I was 14.

And he was the only other relative I knew in the United States at all.

He was like my grandfather.

So there was nobody.

Wow.

That's such a difference, isn't it?

It's so, so, so different.

Yeah, it's such a difference.

Yeah.

And can I ask you then about the idea for writing this memoir, you know, because it's not necessarily an obvious next step, let's say, or it's not necessarily an obvious thing to do.

The structure is quite unorthodox as well.

I like the Irish examiner's definition of it as a beautiful, delicate, skillfully meandering book because it touches on so many different aspects of our humanity and death and grief and things like that as well.

Yeah, I mean, the structure was was deliberately fragmentary.

And I think that's because I felt myself that while memory is fragmentary, as we all know, but also I think there's a sense in which our lives are fragmentary.

You know, we're all dipping in and out of different things.

You know that we you know, even to come to this podcast, we come from other things, we go out to other things.

There's a sense always that we have these other things going on in our lives.

And I was always intrigued with that idea that, you know, I might walk into a lecture and and seem like I was prepared and together.

But actually, I just left like a bawling baby.

And, you know, I felt like did I did I manage to get the baby puke off my back before I came into the classroom and my head was running with like all the things that I had to do afterwards?

So, you know, we all we all live like that, though, with that sense of like the you know, I think there's this beautiful description of George Eliot's in Middlemarch where she describes a character having, you know, riding several horses at once.

And that's how we live.

So I wanted to try and come up with a form that reflected that chaos of, you know, what it means to to be alive and manage all of these things and particularly grief.

And so did you have core ideas that you wanted to get through, get across or how did you decide on those memories, which are the most important memories?

Because, of course, one of the things that I liked about the book as well is sometimes it's these small little tiny moments, actually, that become, you know, very significant in our lives.

And we don't always remember them or we don't always document them as we should maybe.

Yeah, I don't know.

I mean, you know, if you've read the book, you'll you'll know.

And maybe listeners won't be aware of it if they haven't read the book.

But this came out of a failed novel.

So I actually had started writing a novel about my parents who were married for 20 years before I was born.

So there was this period of time this long before.

And I was intrigued with their lives in that period because they had had quite peripatetic, you know, moved around a lot to very interesting parts of the United States, Arizona, New Mexico, Mexico and over the border into Mexico as well.

And I was kind of always trying to write this piece of fiction, but it kept failing on me.

And I realized at one point that I was avoiding the eye.

I was deliberately trying to kind of keep myself out of it because that felt much more comfortable.

And it was only when I finally allowed myself to be in that sense of discomfort about like I am putting myself back into this this narrative that then those memories began to kind of make sense to me.

And I suppose the final unfortunately, the final spark for that forum was losing one of my best friends.

And I was so devastated by my friend Nancy's loss.

And this was just as lockdown happened.

It was actually she died six years ago yesterday.

And in that kind of lockdown period, I started trying to, you know, reinvent my anger in a very old fashioned way, I suppose, by writing journals, which I hadn't had time to do.

And during lockdown, I returned to that.

But they were very fragmentary because I was so angry.

I didn't even know how to to put things together.

But it was the combination of those things.

I think the failure and the loss that kind of pushed me into this this strange form of fragments.

Wow, that's so interesting, and I'm really sorry for your loss, especially coming up on Nancy's anniversary, because I loved Nancy.

I loved the character of she's not a character.

She's a person, but I loved her as a figure in the book.

She is so vibrant and she really comes off the page.

You really understand, I think, certain core things about her through her and discussing her, actually, and the connection with your parents.

There's something like that I was wondering about, which was, you know, if your parents are involved in a career like acting and because, you know, emotions and nerves and things like that are very much on the surface.

Like, do you end up becoming quite an empathetic person?

Do you do you feel?

Because I think as well in that connection with Nancy, we really get a sense of your empathy, the way that you are able to build these really strong connections with people.

I think it is definitely a product of being an actor's or a child of actors.

I've thought about this a lot because I think I grew up in a space.

I think I was privileged to grow up in a space, despite, like, you know, the difficulties that my father had as an alcoholic.

They were my parents were both incredibly empathetic people.

And I think you have to be to be a good actor, to imagine yourself into somebody else's shoes.

But because I wasn't an actor and I never wanted to be, I think it kind of went into overdrive that I I kind of as a child, I was one of those kids who just, you know, I would like cry if I saw somebody else crying like I couldn't.

You know, it's always like feeling along with the other peoples.

Like I'm still like my own teenagers and my husband, like, think I'm hilarious.

Like I'm in an airport and if I if I'm watching a couple, you know, saying goodbye in an airport, I'm in floods of tears.

Like I can't I get so sucked into the the drama of other people's stories.

So on the one hand, that's a terrible disadvantage because, you know, you look like a Muppet, like, you know, crying through an airport.

But on the other hand, I really value that as a you know, I've kind of tried to accept that about myself, especially as I've gotten older.

Like it's it's not a bad thing to to try and understand where people are coming from.

So, you know, I think also as parents, like I found it agonizing to watch a friend know that she was going to have to, you know, step away from her child.

That was horrible.

And I wanted to try and support them as best I could.

So, yeah, I mean, I tried to put that into the book.

So I'm glad that it came out a little bit about Nancy.

Yeah.

And I I am somebody as well who kind of cries at ads and then.

Yeah.

Or songs.

Yeah, songs in the car on my way to work.

And I'm like, what am I doing?

Yeah.

I, though, like have real trouble remembering moments of my own life, never mind, you know, eulogizing or remembering the lives of others.

So I was just wondering about the degree of responsibility that you then have to endure when you are writing about members of your family.

And I know like that, that your parents had both passed on before you wrote this.

I mean, presumably that was essential.

I mean, I don't know how you would manage to do that.

Otherwise, would you have felt able to write about them while they were still alive?

Or I actually would.

But I don't think I would have.

I don't know that I would have been capable of writing it so openly if I had been younger.

So I don't think I would have minded.

Actually, I've kind of I feel that my parents would be very accepting of this.

In fact, they were both always telling me, wouldn't this make a great story?

I wouldn't this mean there was like part again of our family space was thinking about how things were narrativized.

The responsibility I did feel, though, was to Nancy's family.

That was a big burden for me as I was writing the book.

And as I realized that she was going to be part of the book, I really wanted to be very careful to make sure that I was upholding her memory and doing her justice.

And that was very hard because I don't think anybody ever can.

So I also tried part of the difficulty for me was making clear that it was only my memory of her that I didn't ever feel like I was.

I wasn't trying to co-opt her as a person or co-opt her family's grief, which was, of course, so their loss was so much worse than, you know, that of just a friend, if you want to put it that way.

So that that was very nerve wracking for me.

And it was it was a huge relief when her her parents and her sister and her husband and daughter, you know, liked the book and and were supportive of it.

That was that was, you know, to be honest, I've never had a book like this before.

It was I've never written anything personal before, you know, and we all get anxious about reviews.

But actually, I didn't really mind about the reviews.

It was maybe my age, too.

But the big thing that I wanted was for them to be happy with it.

So, yeah, I can totally understand that.

I presume it was then quite an emotional book to write, though, too.

It must have been.

It was pretty hard.

It was not.

There were days where I was like I had to, you know, be reminded.

My husband was terrific.

He would be like, you know, you're doing this voluntarily.

Like you opted to do this.

Nobody's making you do this and you can stop.

And actually, I sometimes needed to be told like that's, you know, that's enough for today and, you know, maybe just step away.

And, you know, I was lucky I had kids who were really grounding me and, you know, making me laugh and, you know, friends who would like take me out of that headspace.

And, you know, students are great for that, too, just to get away from, you know, because you don't want to just like be like super weepy and, you know, indulge yourself.

And, you know, Nancy was a very funny person.

We had great crack together.

So I also tried to draw on that spirit and, you know, pull myself out of that.

You know, you don't want to wallow.

Yeah.

Yeah, it is important.

I am reading *Flight* at the moment, and I just want to bring you back to something that you said earlier, because in that book and in this interim time, there are these very complex associations with the idea of home.

And of course, *Flight* then also has, you know, the idea of the immigrant experience and the relationship that an immigrant has to the country of their birth versus the country that they have usually involuntarily come to.

This book was written in 2014.

If that I mean, the tensions around that story seem to have, you know, gotten worse, if anything.

It's interesting.

It's actually amazing to think about that now.

I was thinking about that recently.

Somebody else asked me about it because actually I wrote that novel much earlier than 2014, but couldn't find a publisher who would take it on because at the time there was a sense of, well, how can we publish an Irish novel, which was how people wanted to market it with a black character at its center?

And I mean, this was shocking to me even at the time.

And so I read it around the time of the citizens referendum, but it didn't find a home for all those years.

And in fact, at one point I was asked, would I consider a publisher asked me, would I consider making the changing the central character into a white Polish character?

So I was like, well, you know what?

I'm actually OK with it just being a file on my computer.

That's that's fine with me.

So it was it was about 10 years before it found a home with Trump.

I was really grateful for their support, but it does seem to have gotten worse.

It's a really it's a strange situation, isn't it?

That I thought I was writing that as a, you know, we're over that, that hump.

But we're not.

All of these questions have come back with with a fury.

I don't think any of us could have predicted them.

No.

And that whole, you know, idea of the character who is in that real liminal space between belonging and not belonging.

Is just, you know, your heart kind of breaks for her.

And she has this secret, of course, as well.

So not only is she in this country on her own, but she is pregnant.

And so, you know, the fact that she's carrying this burden is just such a like I was just really moved by her.

And, you know, she's so stoic and in a sense, then.

Yeah.

And she has no choice, like many immigrants.

I mean, I think, again, my parents' immigration story is very different because they had a choice like they didn't have to leave.

They opted to leave.

But that's, of course, not the case for so many people who are forced into migration patterns all over the world by their situations.

And and Sandrine was one of those people.

And it is heartbreaking, you know, to consider like the kind of then the treatment that people receive then after having gone through the hardship of having to make that heartbreaking decision to leave home and leave a family.

But then to arrive and find that you're, you know, you're mistreated or you're certainly not welcome, even if you're not mistreated outright.

And I was increasingly struck at the time I was working when I was writing it.

I was working in a restaurant that was very, as you can imagine, a lot of migrants.

So I was finishing my PhD and a lot of people were working illegally.

And it was it was really it was very moving to kind of hear people's stories and see why they had decided to come to Ireland or felt they had to get away from whatever situations.

And I really wanted to try and do justice to that story in some way, too.

But I should say, though, I was also conscious of the time I remember waiting for a couple of years and thinking, surely somebody else, you know, who's from one of these communities is going to write this story or write of these stories.

And for a long time, they they didn't come.

As we know, they're still not really being published in great numbers.

And I did hesitate about that as well.

But I also felt like, wow, well, these are really important stories.

They're really parts.

They're part of our community network in general in Ireland.

And I wanted it to be part of the Irish literary landscape.

I don't know what I would I choose to write that book now, maybe because there are voices who can write those stories, you know, for their own communities, maybe not.

But at the time, it just felt like I was looking around thinking, why?

Why is this not, you know, on the table, at least part of the conversation?

Yeah, that's so interesting, actually, because, yeah, 2014, when it found a home with Tramp Press, and I might bring you back to Tramp Press in a second, actually.

But, you know, that was that was a time in which it maybe, well, as you say, you know, there was this there were two sides to it.

Those voices weren't coming through themselves.

But also it was maybe more acceptable to write, you know, a character like that.

Whereas now, like, do you feel would you feel the pressure of the the kind of claim of cultural appropriation or something like that around writing characters from other countries?

I mean, I know that like writers have very complex ideas around these things, but it's very complicated.

It is.

It is very complicated.

And I have I have a lot of thoughts about this, actually, because my second novel couldn't be placed at all for for very similar reasons.

So it's completely unpublished, which, again, you just accept like, OK, it's going to be another file on the computer and this is complete.

But, you know, you make peace with it because I was like, I'm not going to change it because in that particular book, there was a biracial narrator.

And again, I found this a little bit baffling because it's not that I felt I was trying to co-opt stories.

In fact, it was the opposite.

It was that this is this is the space that I grew up in.

And New York was so multicultural.

I literally grew up in a building that was occupied by people who worked at the UN from all over the world.

So those are my playmates were, you know, people from all different cultures and parts of the world.

So it seemed very natural to me that this would, of course, be part of your your community.

And that novel was set in New York, but nobody would touch it at the time.

And again, I wonder whether that's changed slightly now.

I mean, you know, the thing I always talk about with my students is, you know, well, Shakespeare didn't need to be a more to write a fellow.

It's not just about, you know, it's not about necessarily just about cultural appropriation.

It is about empathy.

And, you know, we we've all seen those studies about, you know, fiction or literature in general, I presume, you know, opens opens people's empathic connections.

And I'm a strong believer in that, that in that possibility.

So I find it very sad that these books don't get published.

Although I do, you know, I would always feel like, of course, it's more appropriate for somebody who's from a very particular community to tell those stories.

And I'd be more than, you know, I'm delighted to see a press like Skene Press, for example, making those voices heard.

I think they do a wonderful job.

And I would be, you know, 100 percent behind those that that kind of project.

But I also feel like there's room for, you know, other empathetic, you know, supportive narratives.

Absolutely.

I think that that cultural appropriation narrative can sometimes obscure this other this other problem, which is, well, is anybody going to actually support writers of color?

You know, queer writers, you know, what what's going on there?

Can I just ask you about Trump Press, actually, because, you know, they're doing such important work, aren't they?

And yours was was yours was their first kind of novel that they published under their name.

So they're like they're just occupying such an important space in the Irish literary world right now.

Tell us a little bit about your experience of working with them.

Oh, it was amazing.

I mean, they were you know, I was it was like the I was I felt like I was their baby book because it was the first book.

So it was an experiment for them that I think they learned a lot.

I learned a lot.

But they were just wonderful to work with.

And it was so fantastic to see the success that they went on to to achieve, you know, in very, very shortly afterwards.

They're just extremely passionate about literature and they get very, you know, they commit to a book and they're just 100 percent behind it.

And that's that's very unusual in the publishing industry and the kinds of voices that they've made, not even the kinds of voices, but also the kinds of narratives, you know, everybody from Sarah Bound to, you know, Mike McCormack and where they're going now.

It's different again.

I feel like they kind of respond to their own passions, which is just incredible.

You know, I don't know another press that is able to do that in quite the same way over such a period of time.

And it'd be really interesting to see, you know, how their list develops in the next 10 years.

But yeah, I just think they're amazing.

I have such admiration for them.

And they were great to work with.

They were really great crack.

You know, just they are, as you as you see them in interviews, that that was what they were like to work with.

They were just wonderful the whole way through.

Yeah, I'd really recommend listeners to go to their website and and take a look at the books, you know, because I think it's important when you're buying books or you're buying a gift for somebody that if you can actually support those types of authors and those types of public publishing houses, you know, you're really contributing, I think, to the richness of our literary landscape.

It's so important.

Oh, absolutely.

Yeah.

Can I bring you back as well to kind of the overlap between your academic interests and your creative writing interests?

So, you know, I can see that there is kind of an overlap in memory and trauma there.

Would you have any ambitions to kind of write any cli-fi or like eco-criticism inflected books or maybe historical fiction?

Anything like that?

Did any of those appeal to you?

Well, well, the one that was not published is a cli-fi novel.

It has it has a lot of elements to do with that in the text.

I don't know about I'm I'm not sure about historical novels.

I'm working on a novel at the moment, which is slightly historical, I guess.

I guess I hesitate to say it's historical because it's still in my lifetime, which feels like it just makes me feel really old.

That's kind of set in 1980s, 1990s America, and then coming back into Ireland all to do with rock climbing.

So a kind of departure from in subject matter, but still to do with immigration, people, you know, moving across borders for various reasons and being compelled to kind of up sticks and move.

I'm just very interested in those life cycles and how they impact on family lives.

And I think I'll always come back to that.

And it's not just my immediate family's situation of kind of going back and forth, but it is also, I think, just part of growing up in New York City where everyone had those stories and they were so complex and had such complex knock on effects for generations into the future.

So I think I'll always come back to to those questions.

Lastly, just to return to this interim time for one second.

And it struck me about, you know, how open you have been about your your life, your personal life.

And I remember when I was in college, particularly, I don't I don't think it's the same for our students now.

I hope it's not.

But I would have considered my lecture to be this kind of unreachable figure at the top of the room in front of hundreds of us, very much a closed book rather than an open book.

I presume you don't mind being vulnerable in front of a crowd of students if you're publishing work like this.

No, I don't.

I think I probably came of age like as an academic at a time when we were very much told to like to keep ourselves out of the classroom.

This was, you know, back in the late 90s in New York.

And I always found that very difficult, you know, to to put on some kind of mask and walk in.

And it felt really unnatural to me.

And I felt like the connections that I had with students were actually when I was being myself.

And so it was unpopular at the time and not recommended.

I don't know now whether that's I do see more people who are, you know, just are themselves in the classroom.

I think that's really important because the students need a person.

They don't necessarily need a figurehead.

So absolutely.

And I think, you know, over the years, I'm sure you found this yourself.

Like the feedback you get from students is actually about those moments.

Like I, I actually I am slightly embarrassed about this, but it used to happen every year where I would always happen to be giving a lecture on Oscar Wilde and it always happened to be around his birthday.

And I would always cry in the lecture.

I couldn't help myself.

Like I'd get to get to the ballad of Freddingdale and I would I would read a section out loud and I would end up like choking back tears.

But it was actually probably the time that the students listened to me the most carefully because they were like, wow, this must be really serious if she's she's like crying in front of us.

So there's I guess there's, you know, I have found value in it.

I mean, I wouldn't do it deliberately.

I wouldn't go in and try and dramatize it.

But, you know, on the occasion when, you know, a certain president was elected and I had to go into a lecture that morning, like I did find it really difficult.

And I had to stop and apologize to the students and explain why.

But I think that that's in some senses, it also gives them a way to also approach you about things that they're going through.

And not that we're counselors for each other, but, you know, just to allow for that, that kind of the reality of that in the classroom, I think is important, especially when we're teaching creative writing.

How are we going to keep that out?

Yeah.

And so you're teaching creative writing students as well, then, as well as kind of teaching on literature modules.

That's right.

Yeah.

So we in fact, I'm mostly teaching creative writing now because we have a new BA in creative writing that started this year, which is very exciting for us with my colleague Linda McKeown and Paul Lynch.

And it's just you know, it's an amazing opportunity for us.

But it's also a real privilege to see how people are coming in and what kind of work they want to produce and to try and nurture that as they make their way through college is, you know, it is it is a deep privilege, you know.

Fantastic.

Well, look, Oona , thanks a million for chatting today.

And I wish you all the best with the upcoming semester with all of the writing that you're doing as well.

And especially with this interim time, which is, you know, only released this.

Well, I was going to say this year, it's 2026 now, so last year.

And so there's definitely lots of life in in that book.

Yes.

If you haven't checked it out and especially if you're interested in themes of memory and of grief, of belonging and a family, I would recommend that you check it out.

Oona , thanks so much.

Thank you so much, Jenny.

Great.

That's brilliant.