

**Elaina Ryan, Director of Children's Books Ireland, presided over the Little Island celebration held on May 14th and delivered a beautiful speech on the importance and achievements of our publishing house to date.**

When I read in the Irish Times a couple of weeks ago that I would be presiding over Little Island's fifth birthday party, I was somehow even more chuffed than when Siobhán first asked me to say a few words. I did envisage a sash and a sceptre, but I didn't want to take the attention away either from Patricia Forde's fantastic novel *The Wordsmith* or indeed from the birthday itself.

It's fitting that *The Wordsmith* is the 50th book published by Little Island – a book about the curation of words, about the importance of the arts, and about one young woman's fight to preserve language, creative expression and beauty in a society that desperately needs it. Ireland in 2010 was not in the same drastic position as Ark, but in the same way that Letta and the Desecrators believe that song, music and language are necessary for a society to function, Little Island's beginnings were rooted in the belief that there was a need to bring new voices to Irish children, both from Ireland and in translation.

The arrival of Little Island on the publishing scene was hugely important in a way that I don't think I fully appreciated at the time, although the response to it from many of you and from the wider children's book community in Ireland told me very quickly that this was an extraordinary development, and a welcome one. In one way, it was a brave thing to do, establishing an imprint, as it was then, solely for children's books, at a time when there were so few publishers producing books in the English language for young people in Ireland. But in another sense it was absolutely necessary: voices in translation are crucial now more than ever as Ireland continues to change and as the worldwide campaign for representation of diversity in children's books grows ever stronger. And Irish writers and illustrators need support, need pages for their words and their art to land on, need guidance and skill when it comes to making their books the very best and most beautiful that they can be before they go out into the world. So as brave as it may have been to establish the imprint, there was a sense of belief both within and outside of the company which allowed Little Island to evolve into an independent entity after just a year in existence, because people were sure that this publisher was needed, was already doing excellent work and was worth investing in.

I count myself extraordinarily lucky to have worked at Little Island from the start. It makes the highlights in the following years all the more meaningful: I have been in a room when a student has named a Little Island debut as their favourite writer. I have toured with writers around the country and I have seen them develop in a way that is impressive, exciting, yet never surprising. I have met incredible people, both real and imagined – it seems unfair to pick particular characters from the books but I can boast having read 49 of the 50, and I plan to rectify that last one by getting my hands on a copy of *Pucker Power* tonight, having missed what looked like a brilliant launch with an actual pug last week! These books are really special for their readers, and they bring them from remotest Sweden to Mexico or Derry, to imagined Dublins and real Belfasts, to cow beauty pageants in Finland and murder mystery in Muinbeo. Some of the books reflect home for young Irish readers and others take them far away, to a long time ago or what might lie ahead.

Working with children's books, as many of us know, is a joy, but publishing, in a small company, on a small island, next to a larger island which speaks the same language, is also a lot of hard work, and I think it's important to recognise that Little Island has worked hard for its successes and continues to strive for the highest of standards – when it comes to seeking out the best in writing and illustration, in production values, and in all of the many other processes that go into getting a book from a manuscript on a screen into the hands of a child who will love it.

It is a fact that Little Island would not exist today were it not for Siobhán Parkinson's ambition and determination. As Ireland's inaugural Laureate na nÓg from 2010 to 2012, she excelled while maintaining her careers as a writer, translator and publisher. She had a vision for what Little Island would be and could be, and she knows the entire landscape of children's books in Ireland and internationally. She was uniquely positioned to make this work, and she had then, and still has now, everyone rooting for Little Island to succeed. Siobhán is an extraordinary mentor: she was for me in the four years we worked together, she is for the writers she publishes and I have no doubt that she continues to be for Gráinne Clear, who is an able, enthusiastic and talented publishing manager. (I promised I would avoid all seafaring and island-related metaphors, so I will refrain from referring to Gráinne as the first mate.) Gráinne brought fresh energy and new skills to Little Island, and has just the right combination of imagination and intelligence to do brilliant things.

Proud parents of a youngster like Little Island are always concerned with firsts, and the series of 'firsts' that Little Island has achieved in its five years is remarkable.

From first books to first awards, Irish and international, Little Island boasts CBI book of the year award winners and shortlistees, Bord Gais energy awards shortlistees, White Ravens and indeed a Reading Association of Ireland award given to Little Island to recognise the quality of its list as a whole. Most recently, Deirdre Sullivan's *Primperfect* was one of three Irish shortlistees for the EU prize for Literature, alongside books for grown ups, which represented a coup not just for Deirdre and her publisher but for children's books in general, being considered, as they ought to be, on an equal footing with books for adults. Then there were first reprints and rights sales, sending more books out into Ireland and overseas, bolstered further still by distribution in the UK with Walker Books and into the US. Firsts in new languages come all the time, from German to Swedish and Finnish to Brazilian Portuguese. First colour illustrations and an céad leabhar as Gaeilge came together with Alexandra and Fionnuala, with their stunning red highlights from Carol Betera's drawings, and soon afterwards a first full colour picturebook – the stunning *Wizardling* from Binette Shroeder. A new first is on the horizon with Kevin Stevens' next book – an adult book entitled *A Lonely Note*.

This list of firsts might seem like I'm rattling it off, but what I'm trying to say is that Little Island is growing up and growing up fast – the milestones are flying by and the company is evolving and getting better and better. But what hasn't changed, I think, is the sense of community that exists between Little Island's islanders, in the broadest sense. Siobhán did her level best to teach me some German at one point, and one of the words that stays with me is *Gemütlichkeit*, which, Wikipedia tells me, describes a space or state of warmth and friendliness. From the authors of the first six books (Jean, Tom, Renate, Burkhard, Mark and Maeve) to the 50th, I have no doubt that the relationship with the people behind the books, including the editors and designers, is one of Little Island's great strengths, that authors and illustrators feel they are in good hands, that their publisher truly believes in their work and that they will go to great lengths to ensure its success.

And as well as that great good feeling, it is also a testament to Siobhán, Gráinne and the team of supporters that is behind Little Island, that as a business, it is here five, years on, proudly publishing excellent books and no doubt with big plans for the future.

So on that note, I would ask you all to raise your glasses in a toast: to Little Island, and the next five years.