

Writing in private, panicking in public

Elizabeth (EM) Reapy won Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards but the ordeal of being in the spotlight led her to seek therapy to cope with performing the work that she loves



Red Dirt won Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards last November. The ceremony was a black tie event in Ballsbridge. I accepted this award in front of 400 industry professionals and made a speech which was being recorded for television. As a person innately uncomfortable in the spotlight this was like head-on confronting a dragon. But as a new author thrilled to receive this commendation, I had to try to overcome my self-consciousness and represent all the work I'd done with a semblance of composure. It was a sort of out-of-body experience walking to the stage. I don't remember what I said in the speech but I recall lights, the crowd in their glamorous suits and dresses, the blur of faces. I had an intense desire to leave but was ushered to a green room and was then brought in for an RTÉ interview. I don't remember that either, I was very much on autopilot. Some part of me had shut down.

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Afterwards, the joy of winning didn't have a chance to sink in as I was still trying to calm down, to feel back in my body, back in the room. I was delighted for the book, for my family and the publishing professionals that had supported me and the following morning, replying to all the messages, emails, phone calls, thanking people for their goodwill, I could feel some joy reflected back from them. I could take it on that way. I went to bed though and slept deeply for most of the day, waking to reply to messages before passing out again.

Two days later, I was struck with a stabbing pain in my side. I couldn't walk or stand up. I was sent to hospital with suspected appendicitis. The highlight show of the awards ceremony was on that night. The doctors ran some tests and checked me over the course of the day but I was sent home in darkness, appendix intact. I watched the highlights through my fingers, reliving the fear I'd felt on the night, feeling nauseous all over again.

It can be a difficult and long process writing a book but one filled with a lot of satisfaction too. I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it. Over the years, I've prepared myself for becoming a professional writer. I quit teaching to do a masters in creative writing. I spent years as an editor for an online literary journal – wordlegs – to hone skills. I networked, went to professional workshops, residencies and most importantly, I wrote. I wrote thousands of stories and poems and scripts and essays and bitty things that will never see the light of day. I've taken feedback and rejection, tried to improve. I've put in years of practice and sometimes I get it right.

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Author John Green says, “Writing is something you do alone. It’s a profession for introverts who want to tell you a story, but don’t want to make eye contact while doing it.” It has, however, become a profession that’s increasingly social, despite its essence.

Public speaking has always been an area I’ve struggled with. When I was younger, living up in Dublin and diligently ambitious, I knew I had to get over my fear. I put myself forward for events and tried to do them without the crutch of alcohol. It was daunting and the sense of terror I had before reading, during it and even for a long time after, was stubborn to leave. I’d have met and spoken to people before or immediately after public speaking and not been there at all. I would be lost in a nervous blackout.

They say it takes time, it gets easier, but that panic remained even after years of doing events, though with time, I did improve at masking the tremble in my voice and the shake in my hand while I read. It wasn’t about me then, it was about the stories.

After the book awards, I wondered if I had a physical response to the emotional intensity of the preceding weeks, the nerves and worry about publicity and then the fantastic jolt of winning. Something had finally given. If I couldn’t enjoy myself at this point, I’d never be able to enjoy any external writing success in the future. I was profoundly grateful for the professional award, it meant so much to me for *Red Dirt* to be acknowledged but it also was a huge personal wake-up call. My options were to either do something properly about my fear of public speaking or stop writing for an audience altogether.

To me, the idea of not writing is akin to losing a limb or a sense. Writing is a part of me. I don’t know how to explain the subsequent desire for the words to be read, if it’s egoic or some mysterious creative drive, but the work isn’t whole until it has a reader. My job isn’t done until then.

A family friend mentioned Brain Working Recursive Therapy (BWRT), a new therapy where you create a different neural pathway response to a phobia. I went for a session and immediately knew things had been alleviated but at the following promotional events and discussions I was invited to, I felt familiar pangs of anxiety. The fear was deep-rooted so I went back for another three sessions to weed it out, to plant more enabling beliefs into my subconscious in its place.

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While there is a big draw to being a full recluse, cut off and holed up at my desk in rural Mayo, the sessions have provided me with a newfound perspective. I’ve since done readings and book signings and been present, had mental clarity and been able to express myself with ease throughout. In the absence of self-consciousness, I can see that public events are not about putting the writer under pressure to perform or to be something they’re not – they’re about celebrating the work with the readers who’ve connected to it.

Red Dirt by EM Reapy is the Irish Times Book Club selection for May 2017. This debut novel won Newcomer of the Year at the 2016 Irish Book Awards and was shortlisted for the 2017 Kate O’Brien Award. Over the next four weeks, we shall run a series of articles by the author and fellow writers on *Red Dirt*, culminating in a public interview with Elizabeth Reapy by Laura Slattery of *The Irish Times* at The Irish Writers Centre in Parnell Square, Dublin 1, on Thursday, May 25th, at 7.30pm, which will be uploaded as a podcast on May 31st on irishtimes.com