

TEENAGE INSECURITIES

I WAS FEELING rather pleased with myself as our March deadline approached. I'd counselled my eldest child through an emotional drama worthy of Oprah, nursed the youngest through a horrific bout of flu, complete with delirious fevers and projectile vomiting, clocked up almost 200 kilometres getting my fifteen-year-old to and from his Transition Year work placement, and managed to stay on top of said deadline. Then I called Little Island to arrange an interview with Geraldine Meade, author of *Flick*, a rather fine novel for young adults that kept me reading until 2 a.m. the previous morning. So convincing is Meade's portrayal of a teenage girl struggling to come to terms with her sexuality, that I'm surprised to hear that she is neither a teenager nor involved in any significant way with young adults. No, she's the mother of six children under seven. The youngest is just eleven weeks old! That puts me in my place at the back of the class.

The *Flick* of the title is Felicity Costello, an ostensibly ordinary sixteen-year-old who plays the guitar, doesn't study enough and tells her friends everything, except the one thing that's eating her up. *Flick* is a girl struggling with her feelings for other girls, terrified of what people might think if they knew she was a 'freak'. Instead of facing up to her sexuality, she tries very hard to conform to the expectations of her friends and family, with almost fatal consequences. But Meade's novel isn't just about being gay.

"It's about the pressures of teenage lives generally," she says, "the terror of being different in any way, the emotional peaks and troughs of relationships. Growing up, I was never interested in girls, but I remember a lot from my teenage years, the insecurities, the need to fit in. I went to a convent school in Laois during the eighties; there were three hundred girls there, and there must have been at least a few who had feelings for other girls, but it was never made public. There must have been people who suffered in silence. People say it's easier today, that anything goes, but I still see a lot of pressure to conform to the norm, whether it's about how you look, who you go out with, whatever. There's still a lot of labelling going on amongst teenagers, and people are made to feel very guilty and alienated."

Meade says that writing is her way of finding some head space and escaping the hectic business of rearing small children. A primary school teacher, she took time out from her day job in 1997 to study for an MA in children's literature at St Patrick's teacher training college in Drumcondra. This led to a part-time lecturing position in the college, in addition to her full-time teaching job at nearby St Patrick's primary school. In 2001, she was seconded to the Primary Curriculum Support Programme, advising teachers on the implementation of the new curriculum. She also

joined Children's Books Ireland and became chairperson of that organisation in 2003.

"I really wanted to get more involved in children's books," she explains. "I was meeting a lot of authors and illustrators and I wanted to write myself but I never thought I could. In 2006, I stepped down from CBI and decided to give it a go. I wrote a couple of picture books and sent them to Blackrock Publishing, which had just started up at that time. The editor there, Sine Quinn [TD Ruairi Quinn's daughter], was very encouraging. She began to look for illustrators and we were talking regularly. Then, there was nothing."

Blackrock Publishing had been launched amid some fanfare, with investment from Dublin-based Montaigne Investment Corporation and experienced staff, including Quinn, who had worked for publishers in the UK and the US, and Ronan Gallagher from Four Courts Press. The company was headed up by Michael J. McCann, former chairman of the Irish Writers' Centre. But within about eighteen months of its start-up, Blackrock Publishing sank without trace, much to the dismay of a number of high-profile authors, including Emily Hourican (one-time editor of *The Dubliner*), who had been commissioned to write a novel for an alleged advance of \$24,000.

"I was confused at first, because everything had been going so well, and then disappointed," Meade recalls. "But I hadn't signed a contract

so at least I wasn't tied to Blackrock in any way. I put the picture books aside and decided to work on something else. I wrote the first few chapters of *Flick* and I showed them to Seamus Cashman, who I'd met through CBI. He was very encouraging, so I wrote some more. I wrote after the children went to bed, not knowing where the story was going. But it took on a life of its own and I ended up writing about 150,000 words, three times more than I needed.

"When I heard that Siobhán Parkinson was setting up Little Island, I sent her what I had written. She gave me a lot of advice on cutting and editing and tightening up the story. I worked on it again for about two months and when I brought it back she said she was interested in publishing it. It's very different now from the original manuscript, but I was happy to take Siobhán's advice and learn from the experience."

Though she enjoys teaching, particularly younger children, Meade doesn't see herself going back to school any time soon.

"I'm on maternity leave now and I'll probably take unpaid leave after that," she says. "I love being at home with the children, and I'm also working on a number of writing projects: I think that's what I need to be doing for now." □



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