



Cynthia Neale's Reflections on Writing:

I seek to sew my stories together with the unbreakable golden thread of hope. This golden thread oftentimes is a rare and buried treasure that has to be found with great tenacity and prescience. Hope can come liltng and skipping throughout lighthearted and humorous stories, whether they are written for adults or children. It is often wild and untamed, and can easily be used up and lost upon the reader. It must be delicately distilled to become pleasurable and enduring in such whimsical genres.

Years ago, I wrote The Mapledale Series for middle grade readers. One of the books is titled, The Cat Lady of Mapledale and it is about the quintessential eccentric old lady who lives with many, many, many cats. I was privileged to grow up in the small town of Odessa, New York who had a real cat lady living on Main Street just a few doors down from the post office. I saw her once and never forgot her. She added texture and curiosity to my blooming imagination one summer as I daily walked to the post office to get our family's mail. It was the late 60's and it wasn't unusual to see a few hippies pass through, but a cat lady living amongst us was even better than hippies come to town! She hobbled down the sidewalk in bulky black old lady shoes with laced up ties, wearing stockings rolled up just past her ankles. Her dress was grayish blue and over it she wore a grayish apron with tiny faded flowers. Her hair was gray and coarse, springing out from the side of her head like wires. Her eyes were bluish gray and she wore a large floppy black hat. In fact, everything about her possessed a gray hue. And when she left the post office that day, I think I saw a grayish cloud follow her out! I stood in the tiny post office and gawked at the marvel of her walking down the street. And the smell! I'll never forget the odor emanating from her. I turned around and there was the post master spraying Lysol all over the room wearing a face revealing immense disgust and irritation. I asked him who she was. "Oh, just an old woman who lives with lots of cats who never bathes!" By the time I had grown and left Odessa, I left with a large trunk of stories. To this day, I do not know if some of them are real or imagined, but the legend of the cat lady lives on. The scent of Lysol and cat lady lives on in my memory, and all too sadly what lives on is the story that years later she was found dead with her many cats nibbling on her decaying body!

When I wrote my humorous children's story (without the decaying body), I invented a larger than life character who is misunderstood, lonely, and ostracized in a small community. I wished to entertain young readers with this story, but I also wanted there to be tangible hope for all the lonely, neurotic, and different people living in small towns.

The Irish Dresser, A Story of Hope during The Great Hunger (An Gorta Mor, 1845-1850) is a story of hope during the Irish Famine whereby over a million people perished due to hunger and disease. Thousands of ships brought more than two million Irish people to North America in search of a better life. Ireland, an English

colony, was profoundly altered socially and culturally by the Famine. This event was one of the greatest human tragedies of the nineteenth century.

Why a story about The Great Hunger? I believe that most stories choose the writer and we often become the ghostwriters for our ancestors or other people's ancestors. I had been learning Irish set and ceili dancing over the years and the Irish part of me was being awakened for the first time. Not only was I dancing, I was reading voraciously everything I could about Irish history and culture. I became intrigued, puzzled, and passionate about this period of their history. I devoured every dire fact and tragic tale I could find. I couldn't understand why such a horrid event only rendered a few lines in most history texts. And mostly, I was in awe how such vivacious and jubilant music could rise out of the ashes of the Famine. I researched and read, wept as well as danced, while I wrote the story of Nora McCabe and her family in Famine Ireland. One evening while dancing at a pub in Rochester New York, I looked up at a framed poster of an Irish dresser on the wall. It was obviously an 1800's old dresser (comparable to what we would know as a china cabinet), but the photo was taken in the 1960's because a picture of the pope and John Kennedy sat on it, along with a host of other things, such as china and tobacco pipes, and a red hen standing below it. I danced and imagined the cupboard below the dresser becoming a hiding place for a young child. It could become a refuge from the world, a place to dream and imagine, to feel safe in and garner hope for the future. I had my own special place to read and write in as a child. It was an old Ford abandoned to a hay field away from my family. It had a big cushiony seat that I would sit in during every season but winter. It was also a haven away from some disturbing episodes in my childhood. The Irish Dresser story began unfolding as I danced and looked at the photo of the Irish dresser. It would become a symbol of hope sitting next to the McCabe's hearth in their simple cottage in Ireland. It would be a place for Nora to dream of luscious cakes and fairies in, to gain hope and strength to face the onslaught of hunger on herself, family, and country. And when the family departed for America, the dresser would become her hiding place as she traveled on a ship and experienced a harrowing adventure.

Tom Hayden, editor of the book, *Irish Hunger, Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine*, writes, "We have not healed from these repressed horrors; it is as if unmarked Famine graves are in each of us." Could I write a story that would bring these horrors to the surface that floated like debris from a wrecked ship in the Irish psyche, reconstruct what happened and bring about understanding and healing? Could children read this story and care about the present day hunger in the world? It took me three years to research and write the book and eight years to find a publisher. Could I give suffering a face and honor the Famine victims?

God's own fairies kept me persevering and believing this story was a worthy one to be told. As I continued in my pursuit of a publisher, I received over 60 rejections and received many epiphanies on the journey. Just after September 11th, I drove from New Hampshire to upstate New York to stay with my mother in Watkins Glen, a charming and idyllic countryside with many waterfalls and reverberating tales from my childhood. I woke up early one morning and pulled a book off the shelf. Inside was a line from one of my favorite Irish poets, William Butler Yeats, "Come away O human child, to the waters and the wild, with a fairy hand in hand, for the world's more full of weeping than you can understand." And it was a time of weeping that none of us could understand. I left the house when the dew was still on the grass and hiked to my favorite waterfall. The healing waters of the land and the fallen rays of the sun upon the earth touched my heavy heart that was weighed down by the events of September 11th as well as just having received a rejection letter from a publisher who had been interested in my book but who now thought it a story not appropriate since the tragedy of September 11th. I began skipping

and holding out my hands to welcome a fairy in each one. Whether or not I danced with the fairies that morning doesn't matter as much as the hope that filled my being. I would still grieve and be disappointed, but I had hope. And "hope," Emily Dickinson said, "is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the song without the words and never stops at all."

Shortly after this, I received another rejection letter from a publisher. It was then I decided to put away this story and work on other stories I had been neglecting. I threw the manuscript across the floor and declared to my husband that I would no longer seek a publisher. A day or two later, I received an order of books in the mail from a bookstore in Galway City. I am a member of their book club and every six months I receive an order of books in the mail. One of the books, *Surplus People*, by Jim Rees, was in the order. It is about an entire estate in County Wicklow whereby 6,000 people were sent to North America by Lord Fitzwilliam during the Famine. In the index of the book were names of the ships and some of the passengers. One of the ships was *The Star*, the very name I had picked for my ship in my story, not knowing there was a real ship by that name. One of the families was named Neale, the same name as my own family, and a young girl from that family was the same age as my protagonist. I wrote the author in Dublin and he said to me, "Don't stop trying to find a publisher for your story. Your ancestors are whispering in your ear to tell their story." It was a short time afterwards that I received news that White Mane Publishing Company would publish my book, *The Irish Dresser*.

The Irish Dresser was published in January 2004. The dream and vision I possessed has become a reality as I speak at bookstores, schools, pubs, and festivals about this time in Irish history. At every book signing event, I scatter fairy dust I found in Watkins Glen (from the fairies at the waterfall?). I also donate 10% of the proceeds of the sales to Oxfam, a humanitarian aid organization.

Alas, I could not leave Nora on the shores of America once she arrived. Or I might say that Nora would not leave me alone after she arrived. I have written the sequel, *The Irish Dresser, A Story of Hope in New York City*, which continues the story of the Irish in America. At present (July 2005), the sequel has not been published. I am currently researching and writing a third book in the *Irish Dresser* series. This book is not a children's story, but is historical fiction for adults. Nora is grown and experiencing life in New York City, and I am again straining and seeking the golden thread of hope for her life during this turbulent and violent time in American history. Recently, I walked about my house feeling discouraged about gleaning hope for the story. I had been researching and reading other novels from the same period. Little hope was shining through anything I was reading. Then I picked up the latest issue of *National Geographic Magazine* and came upon a large photograph of what looked like a painting of a waterfall, a mystical and beautiful place I'd like to visit. I read that it is a photograph of a small slice of a rock called pietersite. This mere rock possesses a secret world with secret designs that the photographer, Bill Atkinson sought to capture with his camera. I went to his web site and saw magnificent and glorious photographs of the insides of other rocks he has photographed. And then I knew that this image is what I need to capture as a writer—the captivating beauty of the story. Not just the story, but the inside of the story. This symbolizes the hope that I need for my story. I have cut this photograph out of the magazine and keep it by my side as I write about Nora in New York City in 1855. And recently I learned that there was a real Norah McCabe who came from Ireland in 1848 to New York City. I am not alone with all my doubts, fears, and failings as I write, for as Nora often says, "God's own fairies are with me." The golden thread of hope dances in the darkness.