

Joe's Wedding

Gareth O'Callaghan



Today is the day I get married.

It was the only message that flashed across Joe Mooney's mind as he opened his eyes. The deep blue sky and the bright sun blinded him. The fresh westerly wind made his teeth chatter. The coldness and force of the wind against his face seemed strange. It's a dream, he kept telling himself. You're nervous so you're dreaming.

Someone must have left his bedroom window wide open all night. The sunlight was everywhere. There was nothing covering him. There were no blankets at his feet. He tried to open his eyes again. The insides of his eyelids felt rough and gritty. Where the hell had the roof gone? 'I'm freezing!' he roared. He popped his head up to check the bedside clock. He reached over to close the window. There was no clock. There was no window. All Joe could see was miles and miles of blue sky. He felt below him. Grass. Lots of it. Long grass and weeds.

It dawned on him that he wasn't in his own bed. His eyes stung. His head throbbed and his neck hurt. His brain didn't want to obey the order to think. He raised his head to survey his location.

Then he looked towards his feet. 'Sweet Jesus!' he screamed.

His clothes shocked him wide awake. He was wearing red nylon tights, shiny black plastic shoes, and a blue polo neck with a huge crest on the front and a yellow cape.

Panic set in. He sat up and looked around.

From: Gareth O'Callaghan: *Joe's Wedding*



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Edwin Higel

Open Door

Come on in!

In the mid-nineties *New Island* was, and still is, a small albeit perfectly formed Irish publishing house. So when one day Patricia Scanlan – even in those days one of the big names in best-selling popular fiction – rang me on my mobile and asked whether *New Island* would want to publish one of her books I replied after only the shortest of pauses: ‘Immediately! Tomorrow! ASAP! In fact, as soon as I get my car out of the ditch I have just driven into’.



Opening doors: Metamorphoses

In the late seventies, as a somewhat diffident trainee teacher in Stuttgart, I learned of the importance motivation can have both in teaching and learning, and worked ceaselessly to find its magic formula. However, the German educational system and I chose to go our different ways, and over time I had to redefine myself as the only Irish-German publisher there is, and now run *New Island* in Dublin, publishing both fiction and non-fiction books that chronicle the rapidly changing Ireland.

It was in this context that I had to undergo the prolonged process (still ongoing) of language acquisition, made possible by both

necessity and – you guessed it – motivation. I remember well the joy of finishing my first Agatha Christie, and progressing towards reading all the P.G. Wodehouse books I could lay my hands on.

In the late nineties I was approached by best-selling author Patricia Scanlan about doing a series of adult literacy books. As a former librarian she was very dissatisfied with the quality of texts on offer for the fight against the serious levels of illiteracy in Ireland and the UK: the percentage of adults with severe reading difficulties can be as high as 25%. She and her writing friends agreed to produce originally written stories/novellas, which we launched under the brand name of **Open Door**.

The Open Door Series

Now, with 31 titles in the series, these books have turned out to be a great success, and more titles will follow in the years ahead.

These books are contemporary, non-condescending, written specially for this purpose. Attractively packaged, they try to reward at entry level what the fully-fledged works of these authors offer to the developed or ‘normal’ reader.

Open Door for advanced students

The second metamorphosis, this time at conceptual level, occurred when I remembered the reading materials of old that I was confronted with in secondary school, with all

The Open Door Series

Original: Traditional literacy texts were often 'simmered down' versions of well-known or classic texts, or written by people exclusively with only their admittedly laudable linguistic and educational objectives in mind. Quite often, this led to dull, unmotivating texts. Instead we encourage popular and well-known Irish writers to provide an original, never before published story that lived up to the true meaning of 'novella' or 'novel'.

Written with creative but objective-based editorial guidelines: There are 'official' editorial guidelines that help prospective *Open Door* authors in shaping their contribution. Main features are:

- ▶ **A discernible plot** or storyline
- ▶ **Well-developed characters** – not too many
- ▶ **Syntax:** Keep sentences short, more full stops than commas than in 'regular writing'. Avoid sentences with multiple clauses.
- ▶ **Keep the language simple**, use common and simple phrases or words, and where a large multi-syllabic word can be replaced by a simpler word, do so.
- ▶ **The odd challenging word** (where it's a useful, story-shaping one) can be used, and it is desirable if it is repeated once or twice so that the reader can get used to it.

▶ **Short chapters** help, as this creates the feel and the structure of 'regular' novels.

Authentic: The stories relate to the physical and social environment of the intended readership, and common, topical themes: family, sport, human dilemmas, relationships.

Motivating: *Open Door* demonstrates to their readers that they can tackle an entire book for themselves, and feel encouraged to replicate that experience with similar, or even more challenging books in the future.

Rewarding: An emerging reader can take possession of accessible, stand-alone stories, not by hearing or watching it, but through the medium of the written word.

Attractively produced: Unlike its literacy and textbook competitors, there must not be the slightest whiff of medicine about the books. Our books don't say: 'Look at me, I am a student!' A sophisticated design and production aims to keep the promise that the *Open Door* name and logo suggest:

Come on in, and meet some of our best storytellers!



their inadequacies and shortcomings. They were either dumbed-down versions of 'the real thing', or left with all the linguistic or literary subtleties intact which, of course, went straight over our heads! I increasingly became convinced that the expectations and needs of mother-tongue emergent readers and advanced students of English were not that far apart when it comes to choosing their preferred texts.

So I embarked upon some market research in Germany and commissioned a consultant to help produce glossaries, as well as teachers' notes, for a number of *Open Door* texts that we felt might be suitable for German students. At that point I had planned to launch this experiment under *New Island* colours. It was

only after the consultant suggested that I have a word with his publishing contacts in Berlin 'as they might be interested': that I did, and never looked back.

I was overwhelmed by the genuine enthusiasm and professionalism the Cornelsen team brought to *Open Door* at editorial as well as marketing level, and there was no question that this publishing house is the best home possible for the *Open Door* in the German language areas. With their unique access to the secondary and adult student markets they will reach the biggest audience we could have hoped for – and this might even create new audiences for our authors' other novels also, both in English and in German translation. It is not often that globalisation has

produced such a *pleasing* result for all concerned.

Happy reading, and happy teaching!

Edwin Higel born in Kehl/Rhein studied at the University of Tübingen and 'Trinity College' Dublin. After a brief stint as a 'Referendar' in Stuttgart he launched himself into a career in Irish/British bookselling and publishing. In 1992, he set up 'New Island'. www.newisland.ie



Open Door was my brainchild

WHAT'S **NEW**
talking to Patricia Scanlan

? Ms Scanlan, you are the author of several *Open Door* titles. How did you become involved in this very special series?

: That's easy. *Open Door* was my brainchild. Before I became a full-time writer, I worked in Dublin public libraries. I was very aware of literacy problems, meeting people who could neither read nor write, but who wanted desperately to learn to do both. I also met literacy tutors who railed at the lack of suitable material and I felt the frustration of handing 50-year-old books more suited to seven-year-olds, which were frequently all we had in stock for adults with literacy problems. In the early Nineties my first novel, *City Girl*, was published and it was while I was working on my second, *Apartment 3B*, that a literacy tutor jokingly said to me that I should write a novel for my local literacy group. It gave me food for thought.

Could I write a book suitable for people who were improving their literacy skills that would engage their attention and, most im-

portantly, wouldn't patronize them? It was a daunting task. I spent a long time writing *Second Chance*. In some ways I felt it was the most important book of my career, a true test of an author. At first it was difficult. I was conscious of keeping the sentences short and vocabulary simple, while also keeping an adult engaged. I wanted the reader to be eager to turn the page. I wasn't sure if I was succeeding. It was a lonely book to write. I was nervous giving the manuscript to the coordinator of Finglas Literacy Group but her response was so enthusiastic I was on a high.

Second Chance was published in 1994 and I remember saying at the launch how wonderful it would be if other popular Irish authors would write a novella so that literacy students would have a wide variety of choice. People thought it was a great idea. I went home happy that I had done something worthwhile and carried on writing my third novel.

Feedback from literacy groups to *Second Chance* was amazing and I was invited to

speak to groups countrywide. I presented literacy certificates to students and their courage and determination humbled me. Sadly, the publishers of *Second Chance* did not pursue my idea of a series. Nor did any of the literacy agencies that attended the launch. I approached New Island in 1998 with a view to publishing a series of literacy novellas written by well-known Irish writers. I was determined that the books would have the highest production values, so that no reader would feel embarrassed or ashamed to be seen reading one of the books in public. The team at *New Island* was highly motivated, committed and enthusiastic. It was exciting to say the least. Fortunately I have several writer friends, so Deirdre Purcell, Marian Keyes, Cathy Kelly and Sheila O'Flanagan, to name-drop a few, were frog-marched to their computers with strict instructions to write a page-turner with short sentences and simple vocab. Ha! Wiped the smiles off their faces for a while. I wrote to Roddy Doyle, Joe O'Connor and Vincent Banville, among others, as we wanted to keep a gender balance. Many men don't like reading 'women's books'. The response was gratifying – the *Open Door* series was born! It would never have worked without the commitment, enthusiasm and sheer goodwill of those fantastic writers.

All of us agreed that writing these novellas was challenging but immensely rewarding. We did have a few hiccups, like the literacy tutor who objected to a 'farting pony' or the prima donna award-winning author who wrote a story so convoluted that even the publisher didn't understand some of the words used. When gently asked if he could do some re-writes, he snootily assured us that he'd never been asked to change so much as a comma by any of his publishers and that he



certainly wasn't 'dumbing down' his work for anyone. We are at the moment discussing our sixth series. We have 31 books including a poetry book published and rights sold in many countries. We want to publish more non-fiction and we want to publish poetry. We want to do it all.

? What in your opinion makes *Open Door* so special?

: The concept was very simple and very effective, but even more than that, it has far surpassed its original requirement. *Open Door* has become an educational tool not only for emerging readers with literacy problems, it has now become an educational aid to those interested in improving their English language and reading skills. Many immigrant advice groups here in Ireland are now using them to assist foreign workers to improve their English. They are also used for the same purpose in the UK. A researcher for BBC Radio 4 who was Iranian told me she had read them all and progressed to some of the author's full-length novels.

Many teachers are using them in secondary schools to encourage teenage readers to get into the habit of reading, the goal being to promote the joy of reading so that the students will go on to read all the author's full-length novels. This strategy is working in many schools.

? So the *Open Door* concept is really the exact opposite of that weary old warhorse the 'Easy Reader' [= classical literature deliberately simplified and abridged]?

: Absolutely. Many of these novellas are original works and are being enjoyed by

readers of all ages and reading abilities. They sell quite well at the airports we've been told.

? Isn't it doubly difficult for an author not only to have to write a creative text, but at the same time to have to discipline herself/himself to a rather tight framework?

: I prefer to use 'challenging' rather than 'difficult'. It's all a question of attitude. For authors it's a learning experience and very invigorating. Paring down and adapting to the requirements has been very positive for me as an author. As the Series Editor I can say that some authors grasp the concept more easily than others and some of the novellas have a fairly rigorous edit. There are authors, like Roddy Doyle for example, who was once a teacher, who need little or no editing.

? Our target group of readers for the *Open Door* series here in Germany is a different one from yours in Ireland. What do you think will prove to be the chief benefits for young learners of English in Germany?

: At one level, they are not that different where the series is used as a teaching aid and not a 'literacy' aid. Your young readers will be reading books that won't make them feel they are 'schoolbooks'. The stories are interesting and varied and will suit all tastes. Because many of the authors are number one best-selling authors in Ireland and the UK who sell millions of books between them, the subject matter of the novellas will touch a chord with your young readers. The 'universal experience' that readers throughout the world feel when they read one of their books will be felt by your students also and they will



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relate easily to the characters. Because the vocabulary and grammar is very accessible and simple, your students won't have huge difficulties with it.

I feel it will make the teaching of English a much more enjoyable experience for both students and teachers.

? Should the *Open Door* books prove to be popular in Germany, would you – or perhaps another of the authors involved – be prepared to come to Germany and present the series to one of our many language teacher conferences?

: I think we'll all be arguing about who should go. You'll certainly see one of us and I have no doubt at all the series is going to be hugely popular.