

# A country of the mind

By what osmosis can even the streetwisest townie feel he comes from haunts of coot and fern? It's because everybody has one – a magic place of childhood. The lanes are always lyrical, the pastures always poetic. **Barry Devlin**, whose place Ardboe has already been peddled by his sister Polly Devlin in her book *All of Us There*, takes issue with her view and evokes its influence on himself.

Here is a photograph, held in my imagination, looped in my memory. It is Leningrad in 1917.

Here is Lenin on the balcony, haranguing a vast crowd. Behind him, assorted revolutionaries, among them the familiar goateed figure of Leon Trotsky.

Here is another picture, identical to the first; so identical that it is...yes, it is the *same* picture. There is Lenin, haranguing the vast crowd; behind him assorted revolutionaries include...well yes, where *is* Trotsky? Trotsky's not there. In his place there's... a *window*. Trotsky has become a non-person: the forces of history in the shape of the Politburo have closed ranks and *Vot!* No Trotsky. He's gone, not a trace. Trotsky's an ex-person.

That's how I feel. That's *exactly* how I feel.

Because for all of thirty odd years here I've been, contented, certain of my identity inside that collective identity that is my sisters; number five in that growing-up-on-Ovaltine, descending line of seven smiling children. And suddenly out of the blue my sister Polly writes this book about growing up in Tyrone and...I'm not in it. Revised, undrawn, excised. I'm an ex-person. The forces of literature in the shape of Polly's biro have closed lines and *Vot!* No Barry. I've become a window, a drainpipe, or in this case, the Azalea of Memory.

And, yes, I know why I was left out; not entirely because it tidied up the equation and made a book that was originally to be called *Sisters* a neat, organic unit; not entirely because it simplified a thesis about sisterhood that might have been compromised by the intrusion of an unmanageable

lump of Brother – although these were undoubtedly real reasons. I was unwritten because I was object to their subject, because I was (perhaps still am) the rock in the stream, swirled around, but unknown.

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There's a curious assumption here, whether real or literary I cannot tell, but an assumption around which Polly's book and perhaps even he real life chain of my siblings' sisterhood is based. That assumption is that there is an imaginative bond of sisterhood that duplicates or parallels the genetic bond; that in some arcane way my sisters were one: that they shared, not

merely a common genetic heritage (and oh how achingly evident that is on the rare occasions when that laughing tribe reforms in full), not merely a strongly defined family and cultural ambience but that they shared and continue to share an uncommon vision of their world and their place in it.

Because there's no doubt that the world my sisters grew up in, the place chronicled in *All of Us There*, exists in real life; it's on the map, you can drive there. But it doesn't exist as Polly paints it in her book.

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Because, although Ardboe is indeed a lovely place, bounded on one side by Lough Neagh (so close that the sough of its waters whispers the visitor to sleep at night) and on the other by the gentle slopes of Slieve Gallion Braw, the Ardboe that Polly describes, while it matches the physical location of the place, has a different geography; its little

hedgerows and shadowed lanes align along a different set of leys – the topography of memory and imagination.

So true is this that I'm certain that if you drive there, you will not find *that* Ardboe, though you may find the plantation and the white gates and see the bay windows awash with wisteria. Because the Ardboe that Polly describes is different. It is a place pre-ordered, structured by imagination *imposed* upon it: a combination of locality and action, constructed by a singular vision into a special thing.

Of course, magic places of childhood are not new. Indeed, from the Hundred Acre Wood to the cave of the Uggly-Wugglies they are the staple of those who would write about that exile from wonder that we call growing up: and, indeed, I'm not certain that Eeyore and Kanga didn't have a hand in drawing up the map of this other Ardboe.

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What is so extraordinary though, about this magic place and time, is that it seems not to be only Polly's imagination that colours the place, orders and composes it. What is striking is the unanimity of that imposed order, as if each of my sisters, as she moved into the ring, was handed on a charge, a colour, like a filter for the imagination.

When we were children we would look through the transparent wrapping of a Lucozade bottle and giggle at a world become bright yellow, was it the same kind of filter of the imagination through which my sisters stared big-eyed at the place of their childhood and its inhabitants?

According to *All of Us There*, it was. And extraordinarily, my sisters assert the same thing in their conversation, in their reminiscences, in every piece of their interaction.

Nor do I believe that this is simply an exile's memory of a charmed time and place; not simply the power of exaggeration (although none of the Devlins could ever resist making a good tale better). I believe it to be, rather, a common, imposed, imaginative

restructuring of a shared time and place; of growing up in Ardboe.

And, of course, I cannot prove any of this, only tell you that it is so: that the imaginative geography of Polly's Ardboe is that of all my sisters, unvaryingly, that they can find their way around this other Ardboe unerringly, using a set of fingerposts unknown to others, along lanes that look different – are different – past people who are real but shadowed with unreality, as through glass.

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My sister Helen has a framed photo found in a jumble sale in Fulham, a black and white photo of an English road on a July evening. The picture is artless, a snap, yet so strong is the ambiance that it fairly hums with the noise of insects and that background murmur of heat that is July in the

countryside. The photo is physically unlike anywhere in Ardboe; yet each of my sisters in turn has identified its place and its time – just this side of our crossroads, three o'clock, on the way home from school. Each in turn has been stopped in her tracks, has felt that frisson of recognition; not of the place, for it is not Ardboe, but of some magic combination of time and feeling that taps them (I almost said 'us') one more time into the world of *All of Us There*.

That common start of cognition, that shared empathy: I've seen it every time they are together, in their conversation, their gestures, even in their infrequent silences – a marvellous tantalising glimpse of a shared world, a kind of shorthand of the spirit that releases them from the exigencies of *this* time and *this* place and sets them back once again in that world in which they grew up: together!

So I know why I was written out of *All of Us There*; because my place is not in that chain, that charmed circle: a different set of imperatives set me outside, made me opaque to the scrutiny of my sisters' antennae.

But here's the great thing. I know (and perhaps my sisters know) that I too,

peered through that magic filter, walked lanes that paralleled and sometimes crossed those my sisters walked. And I know that I too felt that bond, was given the charge, knew when my time came that I had stepped inside the magic ring.

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So though I grew up alongside your charmed circle, sisters, rather than inside it' though my preoccupation with a different set of perplexities may have excluded me from your whispered intimacies, still your odd, frowning brother of those childhood photographs, grown upwards, outwards, knows the same secret places, the same summer lanes as you do. Anne, Marie, Polly, Val, Clare, Helen, let me call you by name. There's a road we know that leads past The Cross, over the banks into a July evening...come and walk it with me, one more time.