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Michael Murphy met the Somerset-based writer, whose first novel, 'Dora' has just been published

## Polly Devlin: Ireland to fashionable London

When Polly Devlin chooses to follow her lyrical memoir of childhood "All of Us There" with a first novel "Dora" which traces, through episodes and sketches, the sentimental education of a girl who grows up in the north of Ireland, changing her name from Nora to Dora before taking flight for a new life in London's more fashionable quarters, we may safely assume that she's decided to protect the guilty and deliver volume two of her autobiography in fictionalised form.

Wrong. "Friends who know me well have said 'how can you be so hard on yourself?' When my expression suggests incomprehension they correct 'yourself' to 'Dora'.

"Of course I've used some material from my own life but what really causes people to think I'm Dora is the intensity of the writing. They feel it can only be based on grief. In fact I'm detached and hard on Dora in a way I couldn't be on myself. I might slip into being pleased with myself where I won't let her away with anything; I constantly turn her face around as you'd turn a dog's face, to say 'you did it, you look at it'."

The title is meant to be evocative. "I've never met a Dora but it has a 19<sup>th</sup> century ring to it and she has a sense of what used to be called the 'cardinal virtues', such as piety and fortitude. Piety she find difficult though. The spirit of the times isn't conducive to it and for Dora, arriving in London aged 19 in the '60s, well, it was an era of speed and pleasure, when we were all encouraged to indulge our appetites. Mind you, '60s promiscuity is a bit of a myth. There have always been a fair number of promiscuous people. Before the '60s there were 'bad girls' then it ceased to matter."

1964 saw a sharp change in her life when she won a *Vogue* talent contest with an essay on e.e. cummings. "In August I was in Ardboe after finishing teacher-training. In October I was zooming down the M1 with David Bailey. I wasn't blasé about it, but I wasn't overawed. In fact I was bloody annoyed; Bailey was getting £600 for his photograph, I got £8 for an article."

A sense of gratitude – not one of her cardinal virtues – holds many women in check in such circumstances, she feels. "It's a woman's disease. On the whole women are grateful for a kind word or a job or whatever. They feel they're indebted. A man is more likely to take it for granted. It's a particularly Irish affliction. We were taught to believe that suffering was virtuous, that it was what you should want. When you start working on that basis you're grateful for not suffering."

Did anything about this dramatic change in her life surprise or faze her? "I wasn't as impressionable as you might imagine. I'd read a lot. In retrospect, what's so shocking in England is the class system. When you come from Ireland you just don't notice these things. Whatever may be wrong with Ireland it at least doesn't have a class system. Or it hadn't; they may be busy establishing one down in Dublin.

"I was pitched into a very haute bourgeois world in *Vogue*. I was perfectly at home there. The saving grace about the way I'd been reared was that I wasn't taught any new-fangled or genteel or non-U things. Wireless and napkin and that sort of thing were part of my normal vocabulary. I said the right thing in a different but acceptable accent. Retrospectively, if I'd realised how much all this mattered I'd have been dumbfounded."

Surely in the '60s it was more important to develop your glottal stop than to swot up on Nancy Mitford? "It was fashionable to come from the working class. But isn't that about class, about clever East End boys being taken up by their betters?"

"My husband went to Eton. After I met him I met lots of Old Etonians. Very charming they were, with nice manners, but there's no doubt they operate a system. Take this Guinness scandal. It's predicted on class. Where were the blue-chip lawyers who advised Saunders, why weren't they in the dock? Because the establishment class looks after its own. It's the curse of England and it's as bad as ever."

Despite its curses she seems comfortably established in England with two big houses at her disposal; one in Somerset and the other, where I met her, in Hammersmith, west London. "They're both being run all the time. If it was a cornflakes in the car boot thing I wouldn't have it." Her sofas are covered in cushions. The walls are covered in paintings and plates. Cupboards groan with cups and saucers, plates (including one made for an Ulster grand jury in 1846), almost rococo early Beleek pieces, an endless profusion, which, if not quite orderly, manages to avoid that claustrophobic Victorian clutter.

“I’m a compulsive collector. Objects are my guy ropes. It’s an addiction, just like gambling or alcohol. In America they’ve started an organisation for compulsive shoppers. But meetings probably lapse into note-swapping sessions on this week’s best buys. There’s no known cure.

“It may have a lot to do with being Catholic Irish, with being of a people dispossessed. I read recently that there are virtually no Irish coffers or chests predating 1850. Isn’t that shocking – a people with a rich culture and a courtly language deprived of possessions.

“Oh look, I’m just trying to justify my rampant greed. My forebears were dispossessed so I’ll have that William Morris print and that nice Irish spongeware bowl, oh and I like that piece of needlepoint – and I’ll be back next week for more. I’m am awful hoarder. I have to cull occasionally but it’s painful.”

She’d like to move back to Ireland or, at any rate, to have a house there, but her husband Andy Garnett (an industrialist who makes devices for detecting subterranean pipes, wires, tunnels, etc.) doesn’t relish the prospect. “It’s not just *his* attitude. Whenever I mention the possibility of getting a house in Ireland people say: ‘Are you mad? Why don’t you buy one in the south of France?’”

And why not, given the food, the wine, the sun...? “I wouldn’t thank you for sun. there’s nothing to beat good English food and they’re getting it right in restaurants here. In Ireland they’re still copying the French and usually not getting it right – And they’re so overpriced – with very few exceptions. But I think I’ll go back eventually. I might have to compromise on Dublin rather than a country house though.

“The English countryside is so overcrowded – and not with country people. They think nothing of commuting 40 miles to the city. Somerset is a bit like Ireland, with hedges and small fields and smallish farms, at least by English standards.”

Does she miss the lovely Irish/Dallas bungalow at every turn on the road? “Oh God, I could live without that. But it’s better than the mock Tudor you get here. I have no time for people who haven’t lived in thatched cottages with flag floors telling people whose parents have that they should go back to that.”

The English irritate her at times. “I can’t stand the way they’ll try to caricature your voice. If I say I’m going to the shops some twit is likely to say: ‘Are you now, faith and begorrah’ in his best brogue. They think that’s funny. If they said they are going to the shops and I screeched ‘Jolly good show, darling’ they’d think I’d taken leave of my senses.

“They also believe that the Irish haven’t done well and that it’s their own fault. It’s such a reversal of history. If you start to tell them something about their brutal exploitation of Ireland they think you’re a petulant bitch. Sometimes it gets up my nose and I let fly – then I’m a bloody Provo.” She worries about Irish girls coming to England. “So many of them are just so nice, so good, and they’re not thanked for it here. They lack confidence in themselves.

“I’m so glad my own three girls are so confident. They’re not pushy or anything and they have nice manners, but they’re self-assured. They’re at that age – spreading their wings and taking flight – when you worry about them. But I’d worry so much more if they were crippled by shyness or deference. One of them, Daisy, said to me the other day: ‘Mummy, we always say we’re half-Irish, why don’t we say we’re half-English?’ I suppose if they were in Ireland they would.”

Daisy featured in her mother’s first film project, protesting at the fact that she was being filmed, at her school, while all the time the camera whirred. She hopes to embark on a substantial film project once this novel is cleared from her system. Most of her time however is spent “sitting around, sucking my teeth” but when she becomes obsessed with a project “I get a tremendous surge of energy and go at it like a thing possessed.”

Nigel Dempster recently wrote an article about the ten most captivating women he knew. Given his range of acquaintances making a selection must have been difficult, even dangerous. But top of his ten was Polly Devlin and after an hour in her company I can see why. Feline-featured, she’s lively, feisty and hops like a sparrow from one thought to another. She has a lovely unforced charm, or perhaps the effect is calculated. She says of her writing: “People say it’s very much my voice, as though I’m speaking directly to them. It’s more artful than they imagine. Most of ‘Dora’ has been written and rewritten 40 or 50 times.”

Good art hides its art.

*(‘Dora’ is published by Chatto and Windus at £13.99 in the UK).*