

A woman of many parts

EITHNE FARRY talks to Polly Devlin about her writing career and her acclaimed memoir *All Of Us There*.

POLLY Devlin leans back on the sofa of her lovely, airy home in London and declares: "I was never stunned by anything in my life."

Her voice is soft with the Tyrone burr of her very rural childhood, but overlaying that is the sheen of the woman who's made her way in a more sophisticated world.

She is the author of a beautiful memoir *All Of Us There* (Virago £7.99) a book of short stories, a novel, a collection of essays, a history of photography, a documentary and is one of the founding members of the Womens Irish Network (WIN). She explains that "of is the big word for Irish women in London, in 'I know of her' so I said let's take the 'of' out of there and lets get to know each other".

The members meet regularly at the sort of dos that are featured in the social pages of newspapers, and all the money they raise goes to the Irish Youth Foundation.

"It's just fun," says Polly, "and when you walk into the room, the noise, it's amazing!"

Polly Devlin was born in the remote townland of Mointerevlin, in the parish of Ardboe, near the shores of Lough Neagh. She grew up with five sisters, and a brother.

Her mother had about her "the power of an unfired bullet", whilst her father was "the most beautiful creature" but a true gambler, who lost Polly's school fees.

"I loved him, but if I found myself, by some unhappy chance, married to such a man, I'd leave him tomorrow."

Polly met her husband Andy, "an extraordinary gardener" at a dinner party in '60s London. "He was living in the most amazing flat, which used to be a sail makers' warehouse.

"Mary Quant was there, and other names that I found impressive. And Andy was this very unremarkable, unobtrusive gentle man."

During dinner "a marvellously

elegant, rather horse-faced girl, who worked for Dior in Paris" chinked her knife against her glass and proposed marriage to Andy.

"I watched him with deep interest. Afterwards I sidled up to him and asked: 'Are you going to marry her?' The reply was: 'No I'm going to marry you.'" Polly says, "and he set about it, and two years later I gave in. But then afterwards I realised he'd done me the favour..."

This sounds so '30s, so glamorous; and Polly from medieval, tribal Ardboe was part of it because she won a talent competition in *Vogue*.

"One August afternoon, very sunny, very still, very boring, 10 miles away from the nearest town, no transport, no television, thrown back on your own resources..."

As she speaks you can feel the heat haze, and that itchy scratchy feeling of nothing much to do, and all the time in the world to do it in.

"I'd read every book in the house. I was very well read, and I had a precious copy of *Vogue* (a rare commodity in rural Ireland in 1963) and there was a talent competition in the back, and I entered it and I won."

She submitted an autobiography in the style of Ulysses' Molly Bloom. "It was stream of consciousness, but not sexual," and declared the person she's most like to meet was the poet EE Cummings.

Polly wasn't stunned that she'd won. "I thought it must be an ordinary thing, if I could win a *Vogue* competition then anyone could."

"It's that lack of self-esteem. I think Catholicism destroys your self-esteem, it can make people stunted and twisted."

She adds: "But I grew up in a remarkable family, that was the rocket fuel behind me. In Tyrone there were no opportunities, but my grandparents were rich, and my parents had expectations, even if they didn't provide the wherewithal."

Polly is working on a book at the moment, but is finding it hard to get started.



POLLY DEVLIN: Combines her writing with many other interests.

"My great passion is for nature, for nature and conservation." She and her husband own 200 acres of land in remote Somerset, where thousands of varieties of orchids and wild flowers grow, and many animals with three legs roam the land.

"They're all from rescue centres. I imagine people wanting to phone the RSPCA when they see them, but

they're all well looked after." This keeps her more than busy, which she likes, but when she's not writing she feels twitchy, guilty.

She says: "If you're writing, you're recording, and if you're writing you're not doing things. It's an ambivalent mixture. On the one hand I have nothing to say, but then, nobody else can say nothing like me."

REVIEW

ALL OF US THERE,
Polly Devlin
Virago £7.99

WHEN Polly Devlin gave her mother a copy of this memoir, her mother said without any kindness "Who do you think will read this?"

It's a question that Emma Donoghue repeats in the introduction of the book which is now in its fifth reprint, and re-issued as a Virago classic. The answer is simple.

This account of a childhood — "a small story about a family" — resonates with truth, anger, and beauty; and it is captivating.

Set against the rural landscape of 1940s Ardboe, Tyrone, the book is alive with detail from a world that no longer exists.

Polly and her sisters roam through fields buzzy with insects, bright with "daisies and periwinkle and speedwell and multitudes of dandelion and ripplewort and wild raspberries bushes and hypericum".

They wander by Lough Neagh as "high spirals of connected insects form and rise along the shore," and locals are denied fishing rights in favour of an absentee landlord.

They visit the Pin Tree, where nails and pennies and miraculous medals are studded into the bark.

They pass small cottages lived in by ancient brothers and sisters who never married because they couldn't afford to. They encounter feckless cruelty, listen to the "come all ye" songs — "the music of a hidden Ireland with its complex harmonies and quavering gracenotes" and fight among themselves as close siblings do.

Devlin's gaze is unflinching as she looks back. Her observations on Irish Catholicism, history, superstition, culture are sharp and acute, but recounted with a lyrical grace.

All Of Us There is, without doubt, a modern classic.

EITHNE FARRY