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# Siobhan Dowd: A shining talent who tragically ran out of time

In May last year, Siobhan Dowd was named one of 25 'authors of the future'. She died of cancer three months later. Here, fellow authors and friends remember the shining talent

Peter Stanford • Sunday 23 March 2008 01:00 •  Comments



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There are examples of outstanding writers who have made their mark in print late in the course of their lives – Mary Wesley and Diana Athill immediately spring to mind – but there are few, arguably, who have done so to such startling effect as Siobhan Dowd. In the last two and a half years before her death, Dowd handed her publisher four remarkable novels for older children. Two – *A Swift Pure Cry* and *The London Eye Mystery* – have both gone on to critical and popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Dowd was nominated for the Carnegie Medal and the Booktrust Teenage Prize and won the Blanford Boase, the Bisto Eilis Dillon and the NASEN/TES Special Needs Awards. Waterstone's named Dowd, in May 2007, as one of 25 "Authors of the Future". By a bitter irony, three months later she died, at the age of 47, from breast cancer. Of the two remaining novels from what her friend, the novelist Rachel Billington, calls Dowd's "late and happy flowering" as a writer, *Bog Child* is published this month. Her final work, *Solace of the Road*, will appear next year.

Her success came, Billington says, as something of a surprise even for her close friends. "Until 2004, Siobhan had appeared to be someone devoted selflessly to helping others, particularly other writers, working for [the writer's organisation] PEN on its Writers in Prison committee and Readers and Writers programme. In other words, she seemed absolutely the opposite of what most novelists tend to be: rather self-centred people."

That element of wanting to help others remained with Dowd right to the end of her life. In her last weeks, knowing that her battle with breast cancer was lost, she set up a charitable fund, with Billington among the trustees, so that the proceeds from her writing could be used to help bring books to children in deprived circumstances.

Dowd's husband, Geoff Morgan, a librarian and musician, recalls that she had always intended to settle down to write, but had had so many other things to do in the meantime – including, during her seven years living in New York in the 1990s as a human rights activist, leading the Salman Rushdie Committee USA after the fatwa was imposed on him. "She always felt that she needed to experience life first in order to write to the standard that she aspired to. What she hadn't expected, when she finally got round to writing, was that she would have so little time left."

It was shortly after her marriage to Morgan in 2004 that she was diagnosed with breast cancer. "She had been writing *The London Eye Mystery* and *A Swift Pure Cry* before her diagnosis," Morgan says. "The chemotherapy could make it very hard for her to write, but she did. We always tried to brainwash ourselves that she would live for ever. It was the only way we could approach her illness – to grab every strand of hope."

Dowd sent her first manuscript to the children's publisher David Fickling, who runs his own imprint within the Random House empire. "What I remember most clearly about *A Swift Pure Cry* was that it was extraordinarily well written for a first novel. So much so, in fact, that it didn't really read like a first novel at all. It was as if it had sprung fully fledged from Siobhan's imagination. Her prose style was very simple, but always pertinent and poetic."

It is the story of Shell, a young Irish girl who has lost her mother and has an abusive father. It tells of her escape, pregnancy and the tragedy and traumas that follow. "It is a fantastic book," says Dowd's friend and fellow children's writer Meg Rosoff. "Without an iota of sentimentality, Siobhan's perfect instincts for the struggles of the human heart manage to guide her heroine towards a hopeful, even joyous conclusion."

In an age when publishers talk endlessly of "cross-over" titles, for both adult and child readers, Rosoff sees *A Swift Pure Cry* as part of a much more exclusive field of classics that are genuinely suitable for all ages. "It is one of the very, very few books, ostensibly written for children, that are equally readable and enjoyable for adults. With lots of so-called 'cross-over' books, adults can, of course, read them, but not get so much out of them as children will. I would place *A Swift Pure Cry* in the same category as Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* or T H White's *The Once and Future King*. It is luminous, life-affirming and passionate."

At first Dowd made no mention of her illness to her publisher, and even when she told him of her battle with cancer, she insisted that it be kept secret in case it distracted from the books. Fickling remembers asking her once if she felt her brush with death had played some part in the extraordinary outpouring of creativity in those last two and a half years of her life. "She frankly denied it. She simply said that she had always wanted to write but hadn't got round to it. It was a straightforward reply, but perhaps there was an element of not even wanting to contemplate the alternative in case it got in the way – like all those clichés about an electric light bulb burning brightest just before it goes. Siobhan wasn't the sort of person who wanted to think like that."

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Meg Rosoff shared a platform with Dowd at the London Book Fair in 2005. "I had just finished having treatment for breast cancer and talked about that to the audience and how it had impacted on my writing. Siobhan talked only about the thrill of publishing her first novel. Afterwards, as we sat together on the stage, she leant over and whispered, 'I know exactly what you're talking about. I have breast cancer too.' My memory is that the diagnosis was already clear, that it had spread. I'm certain that she knew she wasn't going to live a long time, and that must have played a part in the urgency that she felt, writing as if her life depended on it."

The four novels she completed, are all, Billington points out, very different. "With the new one, *Bog Child*, Siobhan is, admittedly, returning to Ireland, but *A Swift Pure Cry* was in many senses your classic Irish novel, something that was in her bones and her background [Dowd was brought up in London by Irish parents], whereas *Bog Child* is about Northern Ireland in the early 1980s at the time of the Troubles."

Dowd was so energetic and positive, Fickling remembers, that "I found myself forgetting very quickly she was ill, which is I think what she wanted me to do. So when she died, I was profoundly shocked by it. She never evinced illness. She never talked about it. And I have an abiding sense of how much more she had to do, where she might have flown." Rosoff has similar memories. "Siobhan didn't wear illness on her sleeve. As far as I knew, she was doing all right and then suddenly, out of the blue, I got a text from her, saying her chemo had gone wrong and she was in a hospice. At first I thought I was misunderstanding what a hospice was for. She couldn't be dying, I thought, but the next day she did."

Reading *Bog Child* now, however, Rosoff feels that it contains – for anyone who knew what Dowd was going through as she wrote it – a reflection of the author's own struggle for life. "I don't think you would notice it massively if you weren't aware of Siobhan's own story, but it is, for me, clearly a book written by a dying woman. At its most obvious it is about the discovery of a 'bog child', the body of a dead girl in a peat bog, and how her voice comes back from beyond the grave. The narrative, as it progresses, is more and more about questions of life and death."



There is, in the book, the hope of resurrection and of coming back from the brink, but that was not to be for Dowd. The tragedy of her premature death, all are agreed, is that she still had so many more books in her.

"Some writers end up writing the book that has always been inside them and then they are done," says Rosoff. "With Siobhan, I know she had an inexhaustible supply of story ideas. It is impossible not to feel cheated by her death."

Billington finds comfort in a passage from Dowd's introduction to an anthology that she edited of writings from jailed authors. "I wonder if, at the end, she thought of the writers she had helped over the years, all round the world, now that she had become a writer herself," Billington reflects. "In that introduction, she wrote something that could properly apply to herself: 'In these pages the reader will find men and women of great resourcefulness, stretched to the limits of their endurance, but still able to display virtues such as good humour, dignity and philosophical detachment.'"

*For more details about the Siobhan Dowd Trust, visit*

[www.siobhandowdtrust.org](http://www.siobhandowdtrust.org)

## **The extract**

### **Bog Child, By Siobhan Dowd (David Fickling £10.99)**

'...I stepped up on to the block and turned towards them... I smiled down a last time and turned away to the east. Rur, I prayed in my head. Have a care. I felt his breath on my neck. I smelled his smell. The merest rim of the sun nudged up over the mountain.

The metal slid home, fast and free. I took my last breath and let it go... Silver light fizzed and shot apart. Love fell in particles, like snow...'

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