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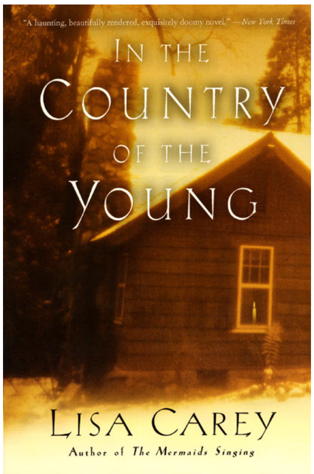
Book Interview



Lisa Carey

In the Country of the Young
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A Conversation with Lisa Carey

Q: In this novel, the characters and their stories draw deeply on Irish culture. Can you explain what it is about the Irish and Irish myth that attracts you? - both personally and as a writer?A: I went to Ireland for the first time in 1992, when I was twenty-one years old. The three-week trip was a graduation present from my parents, and I went with a boy I had a dangerous and debilitating crush on. The result of this was that I spent more time mooning over this boy than I did seeing Ireland. We followed a typical tourist path — pubs, castles, hanging upside-down to kiss a stone that I hoped would miraculously banish my shyness. Near the end of the tour, after our romance had clearly taken a turn toward humiliating mistake, we split up for twenty-four hours. The boy went to Sligo to see Yeats' grave, and I set out on an ancestral mission. Most of my family history begins in Ireland, but there was one story that I heard over and over as a child. My father's grandmother, Mary Conroy, who emigrated from Connemara at the age of sixteen, used to like to sit on the rocky shore of Brant Rock beach in Scituate, Massachusetts. She told her grandchildren that it reminded her of the beach where she was born. I couldn't have returned home peacefully without at least seeing this place. All I had was the name of the beach — Glassilaun — and a vague location on the west coast of County Galway. I took progressively smaller buses until I reached the closest town. In the tourist office of Clifden, I was given a map, a bicycle and a teasing smile that said: another American in search of her roots. I biked what I now know was about thirty miles — half the time standing on the pedals uphill, the other half-coasting downward past rocky but lushly complicated fields. I was told a number of times by small, wiry farmers that Glassilaun was "just down the road" and "isn't it a gorgeous day, so?" I was rained upon and dried out by the sun so many times, my clothes were stiff and musty. I saw my first full rainbow. I stopped in every local pub and endured odd looks as a I gulped down bottled water. My body ached so ferociously, I began to wonder if the trip was worth meeting the ghost of Mary Conroy, let alone setting my eyes on the little beach where she was born. Finally, my destination actually was down the road from an inquiry. A small, battered sign, lettered in Gaelic, pointed me down a boggy path. I dragged my bike for a quarter of a mile uphill, until I came face to face with what I still think is the most beautiful spot in the world. A small inlet, sand dunes enclosing a white, shell-littered strip of beach. A couple of tall, grassy islands (I found out later this is what Glassilaun means) which were walkable at low tide, barren at high. Two small, whitewashed cement houses in the modern Irish style, one at either end of the dunes. I don't know why I didn't knock on doors that day. Years later, when I lived in Ireland, I returned to Glassilaun, spent half a summer staying with distant cousins next door to the stone hut that once housed Mary Conroy and eleven others. But that first time, out of exhaustion or shyness or perhaps a vague notion that human contact was not what I needed, I sat alone on the flat, auburn colored rocks that sloped like shallow steps into the sea, and watched the seA: The rain showers and sunny interludes had become so repetitive and intertwined that for a while I was basking in warm light at the same time as a soft mist re-soaked my clothes. I sat there and thought about many things — my great grandmother sitting in the same place on two sides of the Atlantic, first longing to leave, then missing her home, how she was never able to return though I, two generations later, could come fairly easily on a holiday. About my large, extended family, most of whom had never seen Ireland, who were decidedly American but called themselves Irish out of a strong, almost religious reverence for this place. And suddenly, watching the rain clouds playing tag with the determined sun, it no longer mattered so much that my heart was broken with unrequited love for this infuriating but beautiful boy. The fact that I was a daughter, a granddaughter, a great-granddaughter, visiting the place where in a way I also began, seemed much more important. I promised myself I would remember that when I returned to the details of my life across the ocean. So, three years later, when I was starting my first novel and needed to find a place where I could delve into myself as well as collect ancient stories to highlight my modern ones (for this is what attracts me to myth — that we are all, essentially, retelling old stories), I went back to Ireland. It was the beginning of my family and, after five years and two novels, it became the birthplace of my adult life and work.

Q: How has your book been received by the Irish and Irish Americans?A: One of my favorite bookstores is Kenny's Bookshop in Galway City. Four narrow stories crowded with exclusively Irish books, all written by Irish authors. (If you want to read something written by people living in the rest of the world, you need to go down the street to the normal bookstore.) It is run by three generations of the Kenny family, in the old fashioned tradition — only employees who read and can recommend books are hired. Every research book I used for my novels, from Lady Gregory's myths to the modern Irish stories I combed for the secrets behind that unique Irish-English grammar, I found at Kenny's. When I moved back to America, I joined the book-parcel club, where every few months Mr. Kenny hand selects books he thinks I would like and sends them along with a handwritten note. He almost always chooses what I would grab myself if I were browsing. When my first novel, *The Mermaids Singing*, was published, I gave Mr. Kenny a complimentary copy. After reading it, he told me that though I didn't meet the criteria of being Irish-born (Irish-Americans are not considered Irish in Kenny's or anywhere else in Ireland), he had decided to stock my book. He did the same after reading *In the Country of the Young*. I consider this the greatest compliment Ireland could have given me, and it went far in dispelling my fear that the Irish, so talented and literary, would consider me an imposter. It was very important to me to accurately portray the country I loved so much. I like to think Mr. Kenny's reaction is evidence that I succeeded and not merely a reward for charging a small fortune on my MasterCard.

Q: Please tell us what it is about islands and the sea that intrigues you? The reader senses that the story is both limited and enriched by the island community and the surrounding seA:A: I have lived on three islands: Inishbofin, a tiny island off the coast of Connemara, Chebeague, in Casco Bay, Maine, and Nantucket. I escaped to each of them with the sole purpose of writing and, once there, came to appreciate the unique social community that all islands share — they are worlds enriched through the limitations of their landscape. When I lived on Inishbofin, my first island home, I helped my friends run the youth hostel. Every day I would greet eager Americans, Germans, New Zealanders, all with impressive hiking gear and the smell of those who feel they have more important things to do than change their socks. Their first question was always the same: What is there to do here? Of course, from one point of view, there was nothing to do. We gave them maps, with ancient sites circled and exaggerated, and this kept the energetic tourists out of the hostel. They would hike frantically for three days, spend their nights studying tour guide books about where to go after they left the island, and then depart, exhausted, and without, we felt, having seen the island at all. (When you live on an island, snobbery and tribal loyalty are intuitive, you whisper about tourists, and decide on first glance whether they will have any appreciation for the place.) On my first trip to this island, I was as frenetic as those I ridiculed later. I spent the first week power walking with a map, the second week sleeping all day, moaning about the lack of entertainment, and lethargic from my manic need to occupy myself. But one morning I woke up and settled in. I walked slowly, stopping to talk to islanders and help catch the occasional runaway cow. I swam and napped in the sun, let myself grow hungry before I even thought about what I would eat. I piled my coins on the bar at the one pub, ordered pots of tea and talked, depending on who I was sitting with (which depended on the time of day, the pub had its routines) about literature, music, politics, knitting, lost love, salmon fishing, the fallen state of the priesthood, and snooker secrets. I stopped wearing my watch. Time seemed to lose its meaning, or rather, stretch itself to mean something different than it had before. It was not just vacation-time — because I was working. I cleaned the hostel, read and researched Irish history, wrote ten to twenty pages a day. I had time to do all of this, and time to do nothing, because I was no longer distracted by details. Living on an island means that you don't have many choices — one shop, one pub, one road, one hundred residents, four directions in which to walk no more than three miles. Without so many of the little choices, it is useless to spend time worrying about them. It is the absence in island life that I think opens some people to a calmer, deeper, more contemplative existence. Those people that stay past the point where it drives them insane, that is. If you live on an island, you know one of two things to the bottom of your soul: Exactly where you belong, or specifically where you do not. Moving off an island is not like relocating to another town, it is more like leaving a country, an intimate one. I have been told that an islander, no matter where he goes, remains an islander forever. I have also been warned that if you are not born an islander, you will never be able to become one. I think that moving to an island is like being an expatriate — even while you choose another country because it speaks to you in ways your home does not, you will always be a foreigner on some level. Perhaps this is always why I have been drawn to island life as much as I am drawn to Irish life — details, and even shortcomings, in a foreign country are much more interesting than the ones at home. Strand me on a island and I know where I am, I learn every inch of it, and love it with a fierce, protective admiration, because there is nothing next door to distract or call me away. Islands hold me hostage, then slowly teach me to remain of my own will.

Q: In the Country of the Young is not the usual "ghost story;" instead of a central fearsome ghost, the supernatural is everywhere, ghosts are commonplace, and the dead are more vibrant than the living. What led you to this approach?A: *In the Country of the Young*, I'm embarrassed to admit, was born out of a nightmare. I was fresh from the publication of my first novel, wondering how, or even if, I would begin the second I had signed a contract for. Hoping for inspiration, I was staying in an artist's residency in Ireland — an 18th century Anglo-Irish mansion with elegant furniture and creepy nighttime shadows. At dinner, returning artists liked to torture newcomers with the house's ghostly history. Though I have never had a ghost sighting, I do have an overactive imagination, especially late at night, and the tales of ladies-in-waiting haunting the servants' quarters (my room was in the attic), were enough to humble me into sleeping with the light on. One bright night I dreamt that there was a ghost in my room, a young girl in an old-fashioned nightgown, who was speaking to me in that casual, un-melodramatic way worrisome characters adopt in dreams. I was not frightened, merely curious, until I realized, when she walked across the room, that her nightgown seemed to be getting shorter; her calves were suddenly visible when before the ruffles had stopped at her ankles. I went cold and breathless and whispered: "My God, you're growing." The shock of it woke me up. I don't usually find writing material in my dreams, but I was desperate, and the concept of a growing ghost did intrigue me. Trying to retrace how I decided to create a world where ghosts are everywhere is a bit like archeology — the evidence is there but it is dusty and the order and importance are not always obvious. My novels grow as they are written, images give birth to ideas and vice-versa, until, by the time I've finished, the world inside the novel is so complicated, I have forgotten how things started. The world of ever-present spirits in *In the Country* is most probably a result of reading about Irish ghosts while trying to develop Oisin's character — I needed to make him receptive to a ghostly visitor and his history came out of that need. Here is an authorial confession: In my memory, while writing it, *In the Country* was supposed to be about youth and age and the love between siblings. The ghosts were a lucky accident, born out of a nightmare, that I kept because they made my common themes a bit more exciting to explore.

Q: You are a new writer who has published not one, but two, novels at a relatively young age. Can you describe that experience? Did you always know you wanted to write?A: I was writing before I was literate. As a small child I often spent time in my father's home office, nestled in the crawlspace beneath his mammoth oak desk. As my father talked on the phone or edited student papers and court briefs, I filled borrowed yellow legal pads with line after line of squiggled nonsense — my imitation of adult cursive. I suppose you could interpret this, along with my fierce obsession with reading that often drove my mother to demand I get out of the house and do something, as always knowing I wanted to write. This doesn't mean I always thought I would be a writer; I also wanted to be a scientist, an emergency room doctor, an actress, a Catholic priest (I once stomped my foot at my amused grandmother and insisted this was possible), a teacher, the owner of a bookstore, and a character at Disney world. In a way, I still want to be all these things, minus the priest. Writing in school — essay tests in those squat blue books and research papers — came easily to me, though I didn't realize it until High School when I heard others moan about such things. Fiction, however, has always been a torturous venture, and I suspect it always will be. I am not one of those writers who delights in the process of writing. (I am suspicious of them actually — I think for most of us the delight is in having written rather than in trying to write.) Not that it gives me no pleasure; occasionally when a sentence or a paragraph comes together with few seams there is no greater satisfaction. But more often than not I am wrestling with it rather than basking in it. If it was easy, if I knew without a doubt how each novel was going to turn out, if I was sure that every day I would make it to my desk, let alone churn out a respectable amount of pages, I probably wouldn't do it. All writers have fantasies of success and reward. My publishing experience has been the reality in my life that most closely conformed to my fantasy. I was twenty-six, clueless as to how I would manage to repay my school loans with a frightening lack of any useful career skills, ashamed at the fact that, when not in Ireland, I still begged shelter off my patient parents who were beginning to fear that I was a bum, when I received a phone call from my new agent informing me of my first book deal. Five years later, I am still in a state of shock, both grateful and bewildered that I am supported in such a moody, unreliable endeavor, and that I have the privilege of contributing to the lives of others in the area of my favorite activity — the reading of a book.