

She Moved Through the Fair

Hiring Fairs and Market Places

by May Blair
(Appletree)

This meticulous social history was obviously a labour of love, says **Cathal Coyle**.

A valuable picture of what farming was like in the past, *Hiring Fairs and Market Places* is meticulous in recording a way of life that gradually disappeared during the twentieth century with the advent of new technologies. It captures the atmosphere of the weekly marketplace in towns and villages across Ulster and the hiring fair which became a central feature of them.

The study is confined to the six counties of Northern Ireland and each county is surveyed in its own separate chapter. The book is supplemented by the songs and poems which were sung and recited by the entertainers at the fairs and by those who attended them.

The text also includes over 100 photographs, many of which are from family albums and private collections and have never appeared in the public domain before. These sources are complemented by oral anecdotes and recollections from fair participants and relatives, with John Martin of Augher talking about his father particularly poignant: 'And the first money ever he got, he got 31 shillings for four pigs in Fintona fair and he told me he was shaking hands with himself. And he got a pound a month out of the creamery. If he got 22s 6d you'd think he'd got a tall hat.'

From describing the sale of livestock at the marketplace, the author also looks at fairs from a social perspective. The fair was a source of entertainment for those who attended it and visitors could have seen ballad singers, dancers, fortune-tellers and sideshows of every description. The sheer detail of the marketplace is so

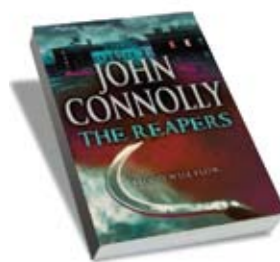
comprehensive within the book:

'Flax was sold in Irish Street and linen in Dobbin Street. When the linen market declined, Dobbin Street became the market place for poultry, eggs and butter. The weighbridge and the markets for pork, grain, grass seed, hay and straw were at the Shambles in Mill Street.'

A significant feature of the fair was the twice-yearly hiring, when farmers looked for workers and workers looked for employment. The traditional dates for hiring were the 12th of May and the 12th of November, though in reality hiring took place on the fair day nearest these dates. Many of the descriptions of hiring are first-hand accounts by the people who were hired.

A compelling characteristic of the hiring in West Tyrone towns such as Drumquin and Strabane was that it mainly involved young boys and girls who had left rural Donegal to seek their fortune. The primary incentive for the girls was to work for the farmers for a year or two and eventually get a job in Herdman's Mill which entitled them to a mill house. Hired men endured a harsh number of months from August to November when their primary function was to help with the harvest and potato digging.

While *Hiring Fairs and Market Places* is a welcome chronicle of Ulster farming, this labour of love (May Blair spent almost 20 years conducting the research for it) is also a contribution to the historical study of social and economic conditions in the north of Ireland over the past two centuries.



Reap What You Sow...

The Reapers

by John Connolly
(Hodder & Stoughton)

A new addition to the series that bravely takes it in a new direction, says **Tammy Moore**.

In *The Reapers* John Connolly turns his focus from the troubled, and trouble-magnet, some-time PI Charlie Parker in order to follow the absorbing characters of Louis and Angel instead. It might seem like a risky move – six highly successful books with Charlie Parker as the protagonist suggest a formula to follow – but there's a breadth and depth to the world that Connolly has created that makes you want to see what lies just around the corner. And just around the corner from Charlie Parker is Louis – his associate, his friend-of-sorts and his dark mirror image. A reflection that draws ever closer as Parker is forced further from the reassurance of his one-time role as a cop and Louis struggles to reconcile his burgeoning sense of decency (not exactly conscience, not Louis) with his essential nature. I've no doubt that many, if not all, of Connolly's readers were delighted to learn more about the principled killer.

The Reapers is Louis's book. There are no wrongs to right here or victims to be saved. Both sides of the conflict are just, both sides are grotesque. Years ago Louis murdered a man's son and now the man wants revenge; years ago Louis put down a monster and now the monster's equally monstrous parent seeks to destroy him. It's Beowulf with designer suits and automatic weaponry.

It's also a beautiful book. Not the cover, but inside. John Connolly is a man in

love with language and it shows in his work. It's not just that he has a knack for the beautiful, evocative turn of phrase, although it does, but the craft he puts into creating a moment and making it breathe. His descriptive prose is almost tactile, building lush mindscapes, and is a striking contrast to the wry, noir of his dialogue. The plot of the novel is quite straightforward. Early on, we knew who the antagonist was, his nature if not his name, and why he wanted to bring Louis down. Once the antagonist made his first move it didn't take long for Louis to find out that information too, but then it would have been contrived otherwise considering Louis's past and the contacts he has. Besides, the mystery that we're solving in the novel isn't who wants Louis dead, but who Louis is: where he came from, what made him who he is now. The addition of the scarred assassin Bliss to the hired killers sent to murder Louis, for example, is important not because of what he might do to Louis now, but because of what he was to him in the past.

That said, the few twists that do pepper the plot are all the more gripping for their rarity. *The Reapers* is a vividly-realised, gripping book that I would highly recommend. New-comers to the series should, if possible, start at the beginning but *The Reapers* can function as a stand-alone novel too.

Survivor

Martha Long's emotive memoir about her childhood in 1950s Dublin depicts a life lived on the edge, chequered with poverty, abuse but most of all – courage. **Claire Savage** spoke with the irrepressible woman who once uttered the heart-rending words: "Ma, He Sold Me for a Few Cigarettes."

'It's certainly not 'misery-lit' – that is most definite.' Long begins. From the outset it is clear that Long wants her experiences to evoke positivity in her readers, not misery.

'The book is a celebration of how humans can endure and fight to survive,' she says. 'Through sheer blood, sweat and tears you can arise above adversity and rise triumphant above the odds.'

Written in a bid to exorcise the spirit of the young girl who still haunted her years later, Long describes a life which began in Dublin's tenement slums and appeared to get progressively worse. She was forced to beg for food, shelter in churches and hostels and fend for herself in a cruel and unrelenting world. With her mother unmarried, poverty-stricken and abused by her partner, young Martha became the subject to a similar fate. Her mother's drunken partner – Jackser – abused



her sexually from the age of eight and subsequently prostituted her to his friends, sometimes for as little as the price of a packet of cigarettes. Yet despite all this, Long retained her strong spirit and refused to be broken by the events in her life.

She said: 'It was horrendous, but that is not the point. We can only deal with what we have and make the best of it. In most memoirs people look back but this actually evolves. It starts off when the child is very young. She doesn't tell you about her life – you follow her.'

Long narrated the memoir in the voice of her young self, yet refers to 'Martha' within conversation in the third person. This, she said, removes her from what went before. 'I've won – I'm somebody else now.' The book was initially meant as a personal and historical document for Long's three

children, as she wanted them to have a sense of their own identity. But once she started writing, Long found the words would not stop coming. She therefore decided to revisit the painful past she had buried away for so many years and let the little girl speak.

Ma, He Sold Me for a Few Cigarettes recounts the early years of young Martha's life, with a continuation of her harrowing journey due for publication in September 2008 – *Ma, I'm Locked Up in the Madhouse*.

Through determination and perseverance, Long has educated herself and sculpted out a new life over the years. She said: 'Now, I am no longer striving to arrive. I know who I am and I am accepting of myself. I am no longer searching for love and I have my children.' As for young Martha, 'I am very proud of her too,' she says.