

# Only Ever Honest

By Sarah Gilmartin

Louise O'Neill talks to Sarah Gilmartin about her writing, her activism and watching her novels grow wings of their own.

**A**claimed author, activist, fashionista, columnist, and frequent Late Late Show guest, Louise O'Neill has achieved more in the decade since she graduated from Trinity than many of us will in a lifetime. 2018 is arguably O'Neill's busiest year to date, with the publication of two new novels, *Almost Love* and *The Surface Breaks*, and a stage adaptation of her second book *Asking for It* premiering at Cork's Everyman Theatre.

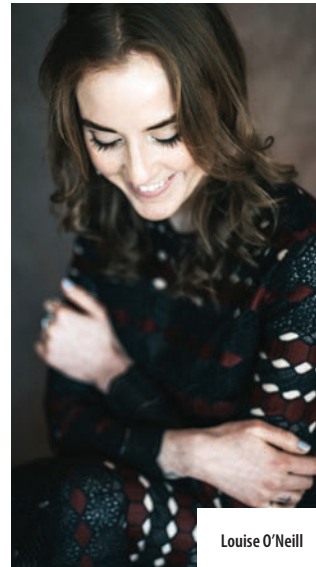
"It's really nice to be involved in creative projects where your role is to turn up to the premiere in a nice dress," says the Clonakilty author, with typical dry wit. Published in 2015, *Asking for It* was a huge success both commercially and critically, winning the Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards and going on to become one of the biggest selling books in Ireland in 2016. The novel sparked a debate about rape culture in Ireland, foreshadowing the global #MeToo phenomenon.

Nice dresses and premieres aside, did O'Neill find it hard to relinquish control of her book? "Very early on with *Asking For It*, I realised I was going to have to separate myself from it," she says. "It took off in a way that I didn't expect, not just in terms of how a book can be successful, but the impact it was having on rape survivors. It nearly became too overwhelming to accept that responsibility and I had to view the book as its own entity." O'Neill believes it's important to be open to the idea of collaboration when it comes to her work. "Meadhbh McGrath [the Galway playwright adapting the novel for Landmark Productions] has taken this on and it's her story now."

It is testament to the power of O'Neill's storytelling that her debut, the award-winning dystopian novel *Only Ever Yours*, is also in the process of being adapted for the screen. An imaginative and compelling book, it tackles issues of body image and female subjugation in a cut-throat environment where young women literally die if they aren't chosen by their male peers. Like much of O'Neill's writing, it has roots in feminist works such as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

O'Neill has been praised for her honest character depiction, though her protagonists have also been deemed unlikeable by mainstream publishing standards. Her first novel for adults, *Almost Love*, received criticism for its unsympathetic heroine Sarah when it published this year.

Does she find negative reviews hard to take? "I respect critics' opinions but I got the sense that the responses were gendered. Men aren't conditioned to think it's important to be nice, to be likeable. If you're going to write the inner mind of a woman, of anyone, you have to give a



Louise O'Neill

Photo: Anna Gronowicz

very honest, 360° portrayal of what a person might be like. I'm interested in interrogating ideas around likeability. It's something I've worked on myself and as I've gotten older, I don't care so much about whether people like or dislike me."

O'Neill has given many frank interviews about her past issues with body image and anorexia, which saw her

hospitalised during her time at Trinity. She took a year off books – before her final year majoring in English literature – and felt the College was very supportive of her returning to finish her degree in 2008. "They were so good to me, they even sorted out accommodation in Front Square. I was dying to go back. I really threw myself into my final year, I actually spoke in tutorials, and really enjoyed it."

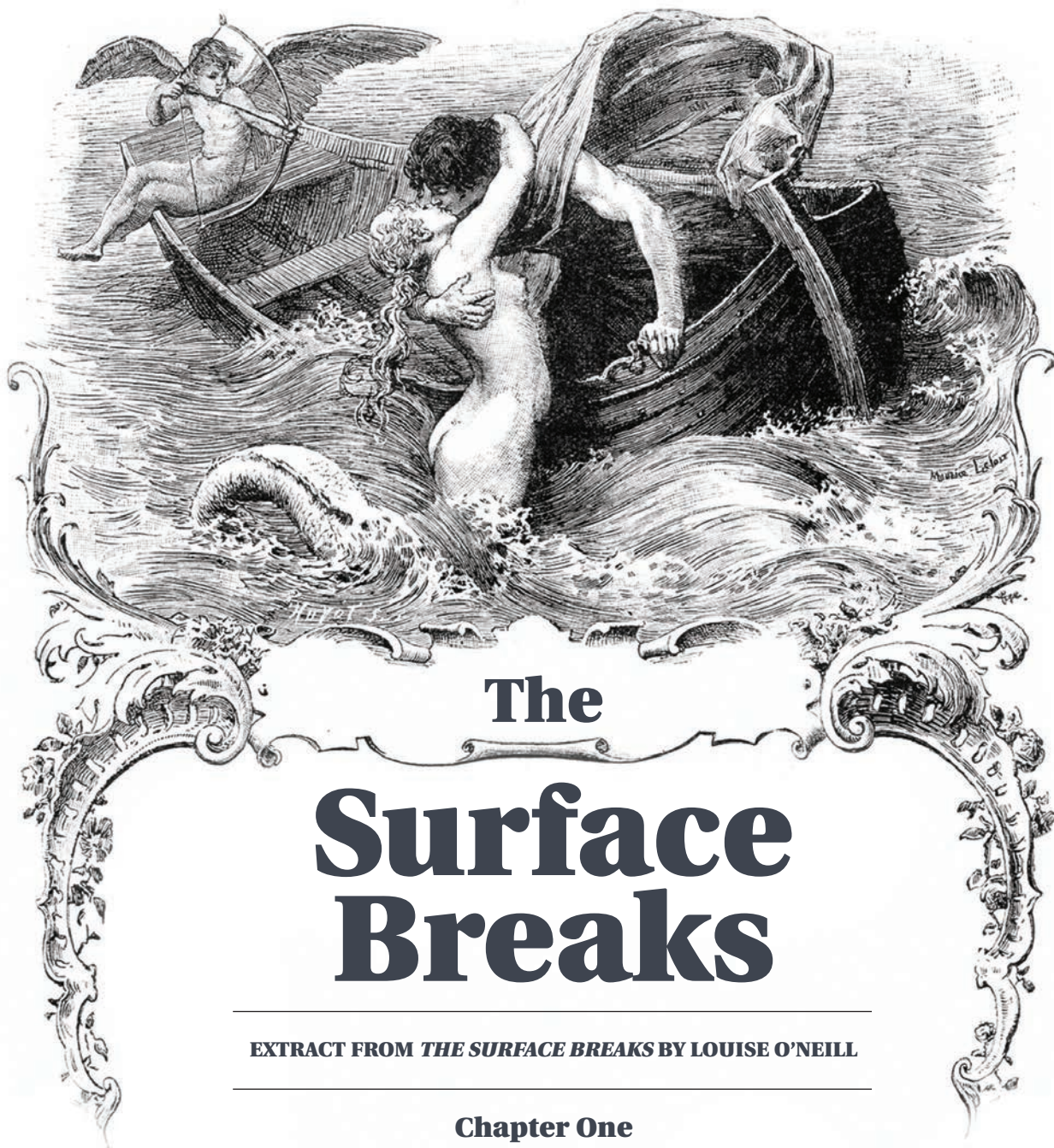
Anyone who has studied English at Trinity won't be surprised when O'Neill cites Professor Darryl Jones' Jane Austen module as a particular favourite, but she says the overall programme helped her get to where she is today. "I would love to go back and do it all again. What a privilege to sit around and read all the time. I never took any creative writing classes, but you learn so much reading for a course like that. You're taking books and deconstructing them, looking at them in a really analytical way."

O'Neill has been called prophetic for the way her novels have anticipated the recent movements in feminism across the world. Our interview takes place just after a huge majority of the country has chosen to repeal the Eighth Amendment, a campaign that O'Neill supported through her column in the *Irish Examiner*, on social media and by going door-to-door in Cork.

If she is a modern day sage, where does she think Irish society is headed for next? "Now is the time to redirect the energy into helping single mothers who are struggling and helping children in direct provision. If you're really concerned about the lives of children, there are many living in subordinate conditions in Ireland today and I think that's criminal. We also need to look at directing funds into organisations that care for victims of domestic and sexual violence. If you want a progressive future, if you want a country that cares for every single Irish person, you have to look at what the next steps might be."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Gilmartin B.A. (2004) is an arts journalist who writes a weekly column on new fiction for *The Irish Times*. She is co-editor of *Stinging Fly Stories*, published April 2018.



# The Surface Breaks

EXTRACT FROM *THE SURFACE BREAKS* BY LOUISE O'NEILL

## Chapter One

*You are not ready, my child. Be patient. Your time will come.*

I have been listening to my grandmother say these things to me for as long as I can remember. "But when will I be ready?" I kept asking her. "When, Grandmother? When, when?"

And she told me to be quiet. "It's for your own good," she said. "You know how your father feels about the human world. Do not let him catch you speaking in such a fashion."

I have never been allowed to talk much. My father doesn't care for curious girls, so I bit my tongue and I waited. The days of my childhood kept turning over; dissolving like sea foam on the crest of the waves. I have been counting them, the days and the nights, the weeks, the months, the years. I have been waiting for this day.

And now, at last, it has arrived. I am fifteen and I shall be allowed to break the surface, catch my first glimpse of the world above us. Maybe there, I will find some answers. I have so many questions, you see. I have spent my years swallowing them down, burning bitter at the back of my throat.

"Happy birthday, my beloved Muirgen," Grandmother Thalassa says, placing a wreath of lilies on my head. I am sitting on a throne carved from coral, staring at my reflection in the cracked mirror in front of me. It is a relic from a ship that was wrecked two years ago. The Rusalkas rose to the surface to sing the sailors to a watery grave, stuffing death into their bloated lungs. They sing so sweetly, the Salkas do. They sing for revenge for all that has been inflicted upon them.

My room in the palace is full of such finds;

**When my grandmother calls me "special", she means "beautiful". That is the only way a woman can be special in the kingdom. And I am beautiful.**

remnants of humans that descend from their world into ours, and that I hoard for my collection, piece by piece. A broken comb that I use to tame my long, red hair; a jewelled ring that my sisters covet and beg to borrow, but I shall not share. A statue of alabaster white, of a young man's face and torso. I wonder who he is, he whose face has been whittled out of marble. I wonder if he ever looks at the sea and considers its depths, ponders what could be found in its belly if he looked hard enough. I wonder if he knows that we even exist.

"It is difficult to believe that it is your fifteenth birthday," Grandmother says. "I remember the day you were born so clearly."

Everyone in the kingdom remembers my birthday, but not because of me. She knits a pearl into my fishtail, piercing the flesh with a razor shell. I watch as the blood drips away, trembling on the water before it melts. The pearls are large, heavy, and I must wear six of them for fear the other mer-people will somehow forget that I am royalty and therefore their superior in all ways. "It was clear you were special," my grandmother says. "Even then." But not special enough. Not special enough to make my mother stay.

Grandmother scrapes the scales away, ignoring my gasp of pain. Thalassa of the Green Sea does not care to hear such complaints. One cannot have beauty for nothing, she would tell me. There is always a price to pay, and she would gesture at her own tail with its twelve pearls. My grandmother is not royalty-born, so she is expected to be grateful for this decoration bestowed upon her by her son-in-law, the Sea King, and even more grateful that the privilege wasn't revoked when her daughter ... misbehaved as she did. Grandmother's family was of high birth, and well respected, but my mother was their ticket to the throne. Perhaps my grandmother did not realize the price her daughter would have to pay. Perhaps she did not care.

When my grandmother calls me "special", she means "beautiful". That is the only way a woman can be special in the kingdom. And I am beautiful. All of the Sea King's daughters are, each princess more lovely than the next, but I am the fairest of them all. I am the diamond in my father's crown and he is determined to wear me as such. He will hold my prettiness out for display and he will take any ensuing admiration as his due.

"My name is Gaia," I say. "That is what my mother called me."

"Let us not speak of your mother," Grandmother says. "Muireann had many ideas that would have been better ignored."

My breath catches a little. Muireann. We hear my mother's name so rarely. "But—"

"Sssh," she says, looking over her shoulder. "I should never have told you the name she chose for you."

But she did. My fifth birthday, and I begged her to tell me something, anything about my mother. She called you Gaia, I was told, and when I heard it, I felt as if I was coming home to myself.

"Gaia is not a name of the sea, my child," my grandmother says now.

"But it was what my mother wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she sighs.

"And my father, he agreed, didn't he? Even though Gaia was a name of the earth, and not of our kind."

"The Sea King was very fond of Muireann in those days. He wished to see her happy."

They thought my mother's love of the human world was innocent in the beginning. That was before she started to act strangely. Before she disappeared for hours at a time, giving increasingly elaborate excuses to explain her absence upon return. Before she was taken.

"And then my mother—"

"Your mother is dead, Muirgen," my grandmother says. "Let us not speak of her anymore."

But I don't know if she is dead, despite what they tell me. All I know is this: when someone disappears on your first birthday, your entire life becomes a question, a puzzle that needs solving. And so, I look up. I have spent my life looking up, thinking about her.

"She could still be alive," I say. "She's not."

"But how can you be so sure,

Grandmother? All we know is that she was taken. Maybe—"

"Muirgen." Her voice is serious. I meet her eyes, blue, like mine. Everything is blue down here. "It does not do a woman good to ask too many questions."

"But I just want—"

"It doesn't do a woman good to want too much either. Try and remember that."

Muireann of the Green Sea wanted too much. You're so like your mother, the old folk tell me (though only when my father is out of earshot. My father will not have talk of my mother at court), the resemblance is... (Freakish? Odd? What?) But they never finish their sentences. Such a pity what happened to her, they say instead. They have all accepted she's dead, even if we never had a body to bury in the deep sands. They think it's a shame, but what else could a woman like my mother expect? She had her own needs, her own desires. She wanted to

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escape, so she looked up too. And she was punished for it.

My grandmother picks up the final pearl now, her tongue sticking out in concentration. My tail must look perfect for the ball this evening. My father is always in a rather exacting mood on this date.

I wait until she is rapt in her work, and I look up again. I look at the dark sea, the crashing waves, straining to see the faint light beyond. That was where my mother went, up there. And that is where I must go to find the answers I need.

Grandmother tugs at my tail but I keep my head tilted back, staring at the surface. For I am fifteen now, and I can do as I please.



Published by Scholastic. Available in bookshops nationwide.