

Whyerland

The first word many people, including myself, think of when they think of Ireland is “green.”

I’ve always wanted to visit the Emerald Isle, the land of my maternal grandfather’s people, and take in the verdant hills that end in jagged cliffs above the sea. I’ve imagined standing on the edge, embracing the sting of the sharp wind under a slate-gray sky as I breathe deep the smell of the angry Atlantic below. I’ll look at the hills around me to find patches of their vibrant signature color popping out from the near-perpetual mist, reminding me that even in this wild, desolate place, life, and probably even a little bit of magic, thrives.

It is an idyllic dream, one that I know I will fulfill someday. Like many Irish Americans, I yearn to visit this land of my ancestors not only to connect to a mystical land of rich tradition and story, but to connect to my own family roots as well. Americans with Irish ancestry far outnumber Irish people in Ireland at this point. It’s almost a cliché, especially growing up in the Northeast. We’ve created a picture of this “homeland” that we’ve never called home that becomes a folktale in and of itself, more idealized and ethereal with each passing year and each passing generation. Our version of Ireland is of a peaceful place that evokes a simpler time. It’s an escape from a deeply divided and contentious political climate, from the chaos of what seems like perpetual bloodshed by our country at home and abroad, from starkly unequal economic conditions, propaganda, tribalism, anger, and hate.

To believe in an Ireland free of these things is a lie, of course.

As I began working on this piece, I wrote the following sentence: “Ireland continues to influence the descendants of those who left, even a century or centuries later.” And then I realized I

actually had no idea of Ireland's influence on the lives of the Irish diaspora beyond the superficiality of St. Patrick's Day parades, stereotypes about alcoholism, and the occasional proverb. Do the lives of today's Americans who claim Irish ancestry have anything to do with past, present, or future Ireland at all? And what's more, who actually cares? Why this, and why now?

I live in a world and a country where hatred is enjoying something of a resurgence in popularity. It never stopped, of course, but it's been in a particularly "loud and proud" phase since the mid-2010s and shows no signs of slowing down a decade later. Othering people based on arbitrary characteristics and ignorance continues to perpetuate and worsen inequality, intolerance, and violence, especially against people of color. We've got real problems and a history here in the U.S. that seriously needs to be reckoned with. White privilege, including my own, needs to be acknowledged and addressed so that all Americans can move forward into a more equal society. It's uncomfortable and supposed to be; but shouldn't I have the courage to lean into *that*, the discomfort and reckoning, if I truly want to use my voice to make any kind of difference?

I'm a white woman who grew up upper-middle class in Connecticut in the 1990s. My parents owned a small business. They worked damn hard to establish, grow, and make it successful, but also never had to worry about if their skin color would hurt their chances at getting a bank loan. We went to Walt Disney World on vacation once a year. For me, going to college was a given, an expectation. The few times I've been pulled over by the police when driving, I never feared for my life, but was able to cry my way out of speeding ticket from the LAPD once. I have lived a

privileged, charmed existence that so many do not get to experience. And while I am grateful for the positives it has afforded me, it isn't right that I had advantages based on the random circumstances of my birth.

So, while I truly believe in the power of storytelling to change lives, to advance the empathy critical to a more peaceful society, to the general wellbeing of individual people and humankind as a whole, how the does investigating and writing about the story of my Irish (read: white) heritage really help anything or anyone? Isn't genealogy just something that Boomers who get spooked by critical race theory and they/them pronouns like to do as a vanity project? At the very least, devoting time, creativity, and energy to exploring my Irish roots makes it easy to close my eyes and ears to the dire issues of my American present, and I'd be lying if I said that wasn't tempting. Having white privilege means having the luxury of essentially ignoring race or racial issues if and when I want to. And believe me, as an empath with an anxiety disorder, sometimes I really, really want to ignore them for the sake of my own sanity because I'm already too stressed out by a hundred other things (looking at you, climate change!).

My liberal guilt has had me spinning in mental circles about all this for weeks. And yet, somehow, I keep coming back to Ireland and my Irish history as something I need to not just know about but write about. For some reason, I think it's a piece of this whole puzzle as I try to figure out how I fit in this world and how my life and work as a writer can maybe, just maybe, make things a bit better on this green Earth we all share.