

Genesee Storytellers commemorate the luck of the Irish

By Emily Morrison

Green beer, shamrock shakes, and the wearin' o' the green may have begun to wear a bit thin by two days after St. Patrick's Day. But whether you have a dollop of Irish blood coursing through your veins or simply love a good old-fashioned fireside yarn, you may want to consider the tradition of Irish storytelling, before setting aside your tattered volume of Willie Yeats or Padraic Colum for another year.

On Sunday, March 1, the Genesee Storytellers ushered in the season with a yarn-spinning "jam session" at Jazzberry's Restaurant, 713 Monroe Avenue, Rochester. "The Luck of the Draw" comprised a healthy dose of Celtic tales, sprinkled here and there with a few generic ones that weren't nearly as much fun, for those bent on commemorating their heritage in any kind of timely fashion.

Nevertheless, the tellers were animated and the tales enjoyable, and listeners came away feeling sufficiently regaled with blarney to make it at least until the appointed hour of the annual downtown St. Patrick's Day Parade this past Saturday.

Peg Glisson kicked off the latest in the group's series of open tellings with "Oonagh and the Giants," a traditional Irish tale of legendary hero Finn M'Coul, his wife, Oonagh, and Finn's fellow giant, Cuchulain. Afterward, Ann Gibson followed with a non-Irish yarn (but, as she temporized, "a good lucky story" nonetheless) called "Tiger's Minister of State."

A visiting storyteller from Syracuse stood up next to "tell," and soon others in the audience were emboldened to join Glisson and Gibson in the impromptu session.

When Genesee Storyteller Louise Kanaley took the floor to tell an Irish tale, folks in the gathered company sat up and took notice. (Her husband, she allows, is more Irish than she, but we won't quibble.) Kanaley let fly with the story of Redmond O'Hanlon, the famous Irish highwayman. Her telling was done in a skillful brogue worth almost as much to the listener's ear as the 20 gold sovereigns unwittingly traded by the gentleman robber for a pouch of copper coins lying by the roadside in Kanaley's riveting tale.

The Genesee Storytellers, a group of librarians who work in public and school libraries throughout Monroe County, are dedicated to linking literature and the folk



Genesee Storyteller Louise Kanaley, right, entertained a full house at Jazzberry's Restaurant.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

arts through live storytelling sessions for children of all ages. "We formed because we all tell stories within our jobs, but we wanted to reach different and larger audiences — adults as well as children," explains Kanaley. The Jazzberry's sessions are co-sponsored by proprietor Susan Plunkett.

Other open tellings at Jazzberry's have departed from different seasonal focal points. In November, the Genesee Storytellers held a session entitled "Harvest Moon;" in December, "Winter Solstice;" and in February, "Heart's Delight." Next month, April Fool's Day will be commemorated with a telling appropriately called "Wit's End," slated for April 5 at 3 p.m.

Yet few generic folk tales have the power to capture the imagination as Irish stories do. Matthew Arnold, in his definitive study of Celtic literature, called the characteristic Celtic imagination "a passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the despotism

of fact." The language of magic in Irish tales makes them a potent antidote to the realities of the adult world, as well as a fascinating imaginative odyssey for children.

"Irish stories cover a broad spectrum," Kanaley affirms, "some more suitable for adult audiences than others." She cites as representative types the many faery and leprechaun stories, legends of giants (such as that of the Giant's Causeway, still visible between Scotland and Ireland, according to Kanaley, who attributes its formation to Finn M'Coul), folk humor stories, mythic stories, and tales of early heroes such as Diarmuid, Finnian and Ossian, much celebrated by such chroniclers of Celtic mythology as Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

It may well be true, as Yeats wrote in his essay *The Symbolism of Poetry*, that in the Irish idiom "it is not possible to speak an

abstract thought." So concrete are the visual and aural images in Irish tales, especially as expressed by a practiced teller, that the giants and wee folk, the simpletons and sages, the heroes and villains come to vibrant life.

Consider the ancient tale of Hudden and Dudden and Donald O'Neary, told and retold before smoldering peat fires in Irish cottages that stood for generations — a favorite story of Louise Kanaley's today. Like the cowhides in this deceptively simple tale of foolishness and greed, such stories are truly worth their weight in gold.

The Genesee Storytellers are available to give performances; public programs for organizations, libraries, agencies and holiday events; school programs (in-school residencies, performances and workshops); and workshops for adults and children. For information, call (716)924-5801 or 924-2536.

Are folktales better read — and dead — than never told at all?

Not all of us are born raconteurs. On certain spooky August evenings, my father could spin a version of *The Monkey's Paw* that would have me and my cousins literally leaping out of the porch swing when the wretched human appendage "jumped." Unfortunately, my father's talent hardly proved hereditary.

My own ad-libbed tales are anemic facsimiles of the genuine article. But when my seven-year-old clamors for a story, all I need is the catalyst of the printed page to make me break wholeheartedly into obscure dialects, varying voices, intriguing sound effects and a chromatic scale of inflections — as long as no other adult is within earshot.

Irish storyteller Seumas MacManus, an author of *Hibernian Nights* (which comes heartily endorsed by Rundel Library children's room director Barbara Billingsley, also a member of the Genesee Storytellers), disparages the "read story" as being nowhere near as vibrant as the "told story." Before the advent of the printing press —

and, in our own time, television and that omnipresent enfeeblor of imagination, the VCR — people depended on the now-lost art of storytelling for their nightly entertainment.

In her eulogy of the founding in 1926 of the Irish Folklore Institute (now the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin), storyteller Eileen O'Faolain also comments the told story. "It is a delightful experience to hear a good storyteller telling a tale, or even hear it over the radio or from a record," she wrote in the introduction to her collection of Irish folktales, *Children of the Salmon*. "It has so much more to it than we can ever guess from the reading — the changing tones of voice, the dramatic pause, but above all, the artful handling of the particular devices peculiar to folktales which make altogether for another and a different pleasure."

That singular pleasure, she continues, relies for its effect on repetition of incidents, alliteration, rhythm, characteristic "runs" that describe vigorous action, and the set

openings and endings of told tales. Relating how emissaries of the Irish Folklore Commission traveled around the south of Ireland making recordings of the last of the old Gaelic storytellers before their stories could die with them, O'Faolain described the experience of one Mr. Caoimhin O'Danachair, who recorded the contribution of an aged *shanachie* (storyteller) in County Kerry.

On the tape, the background noises tell the tale of storytelling come to life — the sounds of wind and sea, of crackling fires, of clocks ticking and chiming, the cries of animals and the song of birds, the scraping of a chair being drawn up to the storyteller's hearth by a rapt listener. "Thus," O'Faolain concludes, "the atmosphere lives in a way far different from the impression given by any written record."

Is it true, that, as Seumas MacManus insists, "the read story may be said to be a dead story, prone on the printed page, entombed between boards, while the told

story is a very much alive story, glowing, appealing and dancing with energetic vitality?" Is a story better read, indeed, than never told at all?

As far as I'm concerned, the printing press is no villain. If the pen is capable of opening the floodgates of imagination where the larynx fears to tread, so be it.

Last night, I read my son Charles Dickens' "The Magic Fishbone," Edward Lear's "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" and Rudyard Kipling's "The Elephant's Child" and the two of us attained new heights of wonder and fatuous glee. Tomorrow, we'll attempt Padraic Colum's "The Stone of Victory" or "King Fergus and the Water-Horse."

I'll be uncharacteristically scintillating, the cat will purr in blissful oblivion, Gabriel will giggle and we'll keep next month's electricity bill within almost reasonable limits.

Life in the age of television could really be far more dull, at twice the price.

S/D/W group schedules social in Ovid for Saturday, March 21

The Separated, Divorced and Widowed groups of the Finger Lakes will sponsor a drop-in social after 8 p.m. at the home of Edith Lavarney, on Kinne Road off 96A in Ovid. The social is scheduled for Saturday, March 21. Beverages will be provided, and snacks are welcome.

For information or directions, call Edith at (607) 869-5236; Gail, (607) 869-5894; Ruth, (607) 6765; or Carl, at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry at (315) 789-2686.

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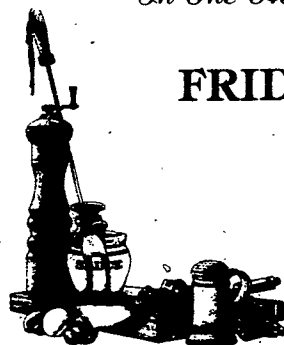
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