



NOVELIST ANNE ENRIGHT

“My favourite plant is the arbutus — the native *Arbutus unedo* and the Pacific one, *Arbutus menziesii*. I first came across this tree where it grows on the Pacific coast of Canada. You’re in these amazing pine forests, and then in a break in the forest, or hanging out over the sea from the rocks, are these amazing sculptural trees. The bark peels and has this beautiful reddish bark and a really smooth under-bark, so it’s an incredibly tactile experience. When you see one, you just want to touch it, or to climb it. It’s just a fabulous tree.

Anyway, I really liked this tree — it’s easy to like when you’re in Canada. Then I came back to Ireland and I was working for RTÉ and they have one of these big arbutus just outside the canteen. It’s beautiful. The *Arbutus unedo*, the Killarney strawberry tree, I have in my garden. It’s a really hard-working piece of botany. It’s evergreen and it has beautiful red soft berries, which are not poisonous to



children, and simultaneous little white flowers. The one that we have in Ireland isn’t as big as the one in Canada but it’s native. Because I’m in Bray, I’m lucky with the weather, I’ve very little

problems with frost near the sea, so it’s really thriving. Because of this great microclimate here, you can grow anything. Well — up to a point. I had a bit of a disaster in the snow — a couple of things got wiped out.

You can always tell when a writer is a gardener, because they’ll say ‘cotoneaster’ or something in the middle of a story. And before you’re a gardener, or if you’re not a gardener, that whole language doesn’t make any sense to you at all. I wouldn’t throw in a plant name, because I wouldn’t throw in a jeans label, because some people don’t speak the language, but I would use very specifically native Irish plants. There’s a child in *The Gathering* called Rowan, and there are some rowan trees in it, and that’s a native Irish tree and would have a strong under-tug of significance for me.

When I was doing a book called *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, the location was semi-tropical, so the vegetation was really important in the sense of lushness and growth — and rot. But there was only one tree that I mentioned, although I did quite a lot of study beforehand, and that was one they called the ‘red-man’s skin’, because it peeled. A bit like an arbutus actually — it’s another red peeling bark. But you’d get the joke no matter if you didn’t know the tree. You can throw in things like a willow or something. They’re very lyrical, and sometimes can be too lyrical.

I don’t have a very big garden but when I arrived I made the garden — and then immediately abandoned it to weeds. Before anything else, it was the one thing I was delighted to have when we moved out here. It’s lovely. I’m quite keen. I kind of plant things so they’ll thrive and then I ignore them, so it’s very overgrown and abundant. I’m not a neat kind of gardener, I suppose.

— in conversation with Yvonne Gordon



ANNE ENRIGHT was born in Dublin, where she now lives and works. She has published one collection of stories, *The Portable Virgin*, which won the Rooney Prize, and three novels, *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?* — shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel Award and winner of the Encore Award — and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*. Her first work of non-fiction, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, was published in 2004. *The Gathering* won the Man Booker Prize 2007.

