

Ink, grit and a shot at glory

Kieran Beville examines the Gerald Griffin Competition for emerging novelists



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Portrait of Gerald Griffin by Richard Rothwell

THERE'S an unmistakable buzz running through Ireland's literary scene—and it's coming from Limerick—born a competition that's quickly becoming a proving ground for bold, fresh voices in fiction: the Gerald Griffin Literary Competition, now in its second year and gaining serious momentum.

The winner of the 2000 competition will be announced on Thursday, September 16 at 6:30pm in An Droichead Gallery in Adare. Guest readers and musicians will be included. Admission is free and all are welcome to attend. The winning manuscript will be published in October/November by the Limerick Writers' Centre.

The competition honors Gerald Griffin (1815-1862), the Limerick-born novelist, poet and dramatist whose works captured the complexities of 19th-century Irish life with honesty and emotional depth. Griffin's legacy is one of unflinching storytelling—in spirit that this prize seeks to embody by encouraging bold, uncompromising fiction.

Griffin wasn't afraid to tackle difficult themes like social issues that confronted society, identity, and morality in ways that still resonate today. Griffin's most famous novel, *The Colleen Bawn*, is a gritty portrait of Irish rural life that inspired many theatrical adaptations. The prize's name is both tribute and challenge to writers without compromise, to speak truth to power, and to tell stories that matter. Gerald Griffin lived for a time with his brother in Adare and is also the author of the acclaimed poem *O Sweet Adare*.

The competition was the brainchild of local poet and author Claran O'Driscoll and is run and organized by the Limerick Writers' Centre (LWC), the prize offers emerging novelists a rare opportunity to take their first steps from manuscript fragment to published book—with support, mentorship, and a platform that's more about substance than spectacle.

CLEAR, SIMPLE, BUT POWERFUL

The competition's aim is to red through the noise and spotlight authentic storytelling from a wide range of voices. Writers, of any nationality or residency, were invited to submit a 1,000 to 2,000-word extract from an unpublished adult fiction manuscript, within the call-out window. Ten writers were

then invited to an intensive month-long development workshop in February led by novelist, mentor and poet, Claran O'Driscoll, who guided participants in refining their narrative voice and expanding their openings into fuller, richer texts. The workshop offered more than craft critique; the writers were challenged to dig into their character truths and sharpen their thematic focus. It became a crucible where raw talent was tempered into refined, compelling narrative.

FROM MANUSCRIPT TO PUBLICATION

After the workshop, six finalists moved on to complete full manuscripts of at least 50,000 words over the following months. These completed works are now with the judges, Claran O'Driscoll and Kerry Beth Beville, who will select the winner to be published by the LWC's small but dedicated press, accompanied by a launch event in Limerick later this year.

This prize is not just about a cash award or a certificate—it's a real career springboard, combining editorial support, community, and visibility.

"It's about creating a path," says Dominic Taylor, director of the LWC.

"We want to give writers not just a prize, but a real chance to develop their work and reach readers."

Finalists receive one-on-one editorial feedback, public reading opportunities, and access to LWC's growing network of literary professionals—vital stepping stones in a notoriously difficult industry.

HONOURING GERALD GRIFIN

As mentioned earlier, the competition is named after one of

Limerick's most illustrious writers: Gerald Griffin (1815-1862). Novelist, poet and playwright he was the author of *The Colleen Bawn*, which was based on the gripping story of The Colleen Bawn, involving the murder of a young Irish Catholic girl (Ellen Hanley) by a Protestant Anglo-Irish man (John Scanlon).

The book later became a literary sensation and inspired a stage play, a musical adaptation and a silent movie *Lily of Killarney*.

Griffin's novel, which transposed its setting from Limerick to Killarney, played a pivotal role in propelling the literary tourist industry. Interestingly, the book was championed by none other than the American poet Walt Whitman.

LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

Last year's winner, Preppa Heffernan, set a high standard with her novella *Head First*. From a humble, coming-of-age work that earned praise from critics and readers alike.

Her success has inspired other hopefuls to take the plunge in this year's competition.

Heffernan, from Kinase, Co Cork, launched out in Kinase during a packed crowd and critical acclaim, transforming what was once an unknown manuscript into a must-read for contemporary Irish fiction fans.

BUILDING A LITERARY COMMUNITY

Beyond the prize itself, the LWC fosters an ongoing network of writers, offering readings, mentorship, and opportunities to develop their craft beyond the competition cycle. Plans to expand the programme in the coming years aim to make the Gerald Griffin Prize not just a contest, but a catalyst for sustained literary growth. Witness isn't the end—it's the start. LWC is building a community where writers support each other and grow together.

WHY IT MATTERS

In a publishing world often dominated by established names and market trends, the Gerald Griffin Competition offers an important alternative—a place where new voices are nurtured and celebrated for their originality and courage.

For the writers taking part, it's more than just a prize. It's a chance to be heard, to grow, and to step confidently into the literary landscape.

And in a city with a rich tradition of storytelling, that chance couldn't come at a better time. Somewhere, today, a writer is finishing a chapter. They don't know if it's good, but they're writing anyway.

And next year, they might just submit it to the Gerald Griffin Competition. And if they do, Limerick will be ready to listen.

Competition. And if they do, Limerick will be ready to listen.

THE JUDGES

The competition's prestige is highlighted by its judges. Claran O'Driscoll, who lives in Limerick and is a member of Aosdána. He has published a book of poetry, the most recent being *Angel Heart* (2002), a childhood memoir titled *A Summer Among Falling Leaves* (2000), and two novels *A Year's Midnight* (2002), and *The Golden Age* (2004).

And Kerry Beth Beville, an accomplished author of two short story collections *Secretary Luv*—winner of the *CS Thelma Christie Prize*—and *Remember to Forget Me*. Her work has appeared in renowned publications like *The Granta*, *Granta*, *Granta*, *Granta*, and *The Washington Post*, and has been recognized in *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Essays*. A former Fulbright Fellow at the University of Limerick, Beville now serves as associate professor and co-ordinator of the MFA and undergraduate creative writing programmes at Georgia College and State University.

Her memoir, *Memoirs May Be Made*, is set to be published in October 2003.

For more info or to prepare your entry for the next year—visit limerickwriterscentre.com.