

*Before plasma TVs and DVDs, stories
— the oral tradition —
were critical forms of entertainment.
An Irishman, **Brendan Ring**, carries on his
family lineage by weaving tales that
pass on his history, heritage and humor.*

PLUS, storytellers
Barbara Eady and Florence Toledo
give voice to their cultural traditions and tales.

The Storyteller

BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON

*"The things a man
has heard and seen
are threads of life,
and if he pull them
carefully from the
confused distaff of
memory, any who
will can weave
them into whatever
garments of belief
please them best."*

— WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

So, have you heard the one about the Irishman who walked into a bar to apply for a job and 10 years later walked out the owner? No, this isn't a joke. It's a story — a story about a storyteller. The Irishman is Brendan Ring, proprietor of Nighttown restaurant and bar. Top of Cedar Hill, Cleveland Heights. (This part of the arr-tickle is best read in da t'ickest Irish brogue yew can conjure in yer head, as if Himself were tellin' ya.)

Anyway, this Ring fella is an honest-to-God *shanachie*, a teller of old tales, sort of, and he charms all who enter his saloon by leaning into a personal conversation with them at the bar, asking them,

"What's your story?" Then listening. Everyone is rich with stories. The human experience is a great thing. Or he regales them with his own, drawn from a repertoire as vast as the Irish Sea, an oral anthology of colorful characters and their funny, crazy or dangerous exploits. Just ask his customers. Go ahead. Prowl the bar, like he does. All the regulars will tell you, "Oh yes, he can really spin them."

How could he not? Ring was born in a place called Cahersiveen, for godsakes. "The town of Siveen." Named for a Celtic princess whose 500-year-old — 500! — castle still stands outside of town. County Kerry. The West Country. Southwest tip of Ireland, a quaint coastal

village with 2,500 people and 52 bars. Where it only rains twice a week: the first time for three days, the second time for four.

Where Ring's grandfather, Eugene, was one of the founders of the Irish Republican Army, whose punishment for his role in the Easter Rebellion of 1916 was banishment from the island in the harbor to the mainland, forever branding his family "The Exiles."

Where Ring's father, Owen, turned down a reporter job with *The Daily Mirror* in London to stay and care for his dying mother, working his way through various well-intended, ill-fated ventures — little things, milk run, coal delivery, this, that and the other thing. Regretful.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE JANOS

Writing secretly in his office, where his son often stumbled onto great, unpublished prose.

Instead of a journalist, he became a storyteller. Point to any person, any shop in town, any rock in the bay, and he could spin you a yarn. Keep you enthralled, as he so often did at the kitchen table. Or on the street. Or at the bar. With kids in tow after football games.

Wait. Do you know how our boyo got his name? For a time in the '60s, his father's business was commercial fishing. Once, in 1963, while Owen ruminated on his wife, who was near delivering another baby, a fog came down. No compass could be found. The fishermen heard the surf pounding, but they couldn't see it. Like all Irish guys, what's there to do but drop to your knees and say a rosary to St. Brendan, the patron saint of navigators? "If Brendan delivers us from this predicament," Owen vowed, "I'll name my son Brendan." Of course, the fog lifted right there and then. Well, actually, it was six hours later. Has to be a good dose of blarney involved or it's not worth the tellin', you know. So for the sake of story, the sun burst through there and then, and the next Ring had a name.

"I think the storytelling started with my father," says Ring's sister Derrui, an actress, who recently appeared in "Proof" at the Cleveland Play House. Herself named for a Celtic mythical figure, Derrui of the Sorrows. "Brendan's just like him in that he tells a story with a strong beginning, middle and really good catch always at the end."

Ah, he was also born into a time when old people, like his grandda and grandma, were still respected and lived out their lives in their families' homes. There were no old-folks homes in Cahersiveen. Now, there are two.

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tradition, were critical forms of entertainment. The banshees hadn't yet been chased off by electricity. There were no TVs. Well, there was the one the harnessmaker put in the middle of the street for everyone to watch the moon landing in 1969, while the old fellas argued it was a CIA plot. The harnessmaker is gone. Plasma TVs and the Internet thrive all over Ireland.

While growing up, Brendan was sent to engineering school, English school. Everything. Couldn't do any of it. But what he could do was talk to people. "The reason I could do it was because I'd been doing it since I was 4 or 5 years old," says he. "I'd be in the back of the milk truck with my dad in the morning. The old people would be coming out, talking about the weather, the fishing, the sky, this, that and the other thing.

You'd listen to them, how they'd talk, then you could talk to anybody."

Of course, there was also the tailor, Michael Dan O'Shea, who'd call the kids into his shop for a cup o' tea and a chat as they walked home from school. He'd put on the old gramophone records that would spill forth with forbidden, jumping jazz. He'd sew clothes and weave stories at the same time. Sometimes breaking out his old Blue Shirt uniform from the '30s, representing the Irish equivalent of the Nazis. Sure, it was in the schoolbooks, but why not learn it firsthand? There's no degree for storytellers. No, ye met the scholars comin' home.

"The only t'ing I ever got an A in my life was history, because I liked that," Ring reveals. "A lot of the history, especially Irish history, was interspersed with truisms from these old people that you could always throw into your essays and whoever was marking them couldn't not love it. So there."

So little did he like school that he found a way out of finals his second year of college. But it wasn't entirely his fault. He's a troublesome youth out drinking late one December night who finds a motorcycle with a key in it. He takes it. Naturally. Once his arm heals from the crash, his father sends him to New York — St. Patrick's Day, 1984 — just for the summer, to make a man out of him. Brendan knows he'll never come back. How could he after taking the No. 1 train and emerging from the subway onto Fifth Avenue, the whole teeming sea of humanity worlds away from a little fishing village in Ireland?

He tends bar in Manhattan, adding chapters and chapters of stories to the ol' noggin. He even flirts with becoming a writer, with the encouragement of his teacher, Philip Roth, no less. But he doesn't

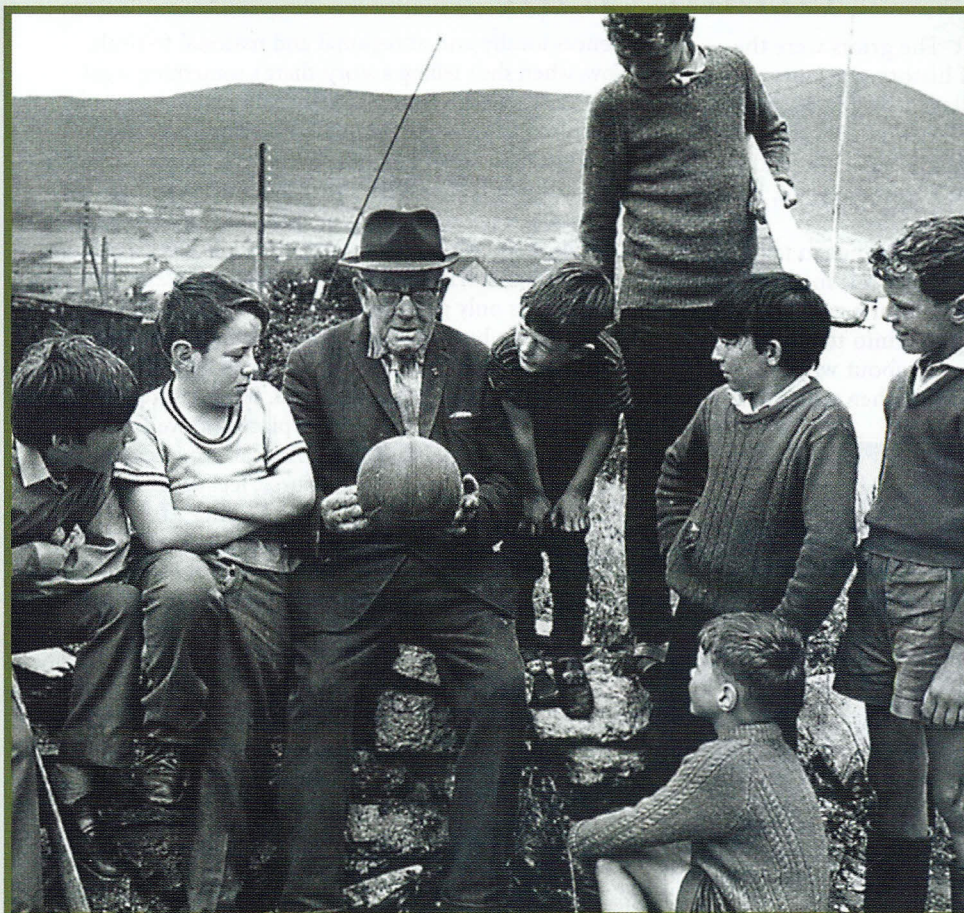
Brendan Ring's Favorite Story

It was 1916, and for about nine months before the revolution in Ireland, my grandfather had been working as an undercover operator in the Marconi telegraph station. His father was the manager of the station, so no one suspected him.

About a year prior to the revolution, he sent out a message to a guy in Newfoundland that he was trying to sell a bicycle. See, the British had a censor in the station, where the transatlantic cable was, so my grandfather said, "Let me send out a really ludicrous message and see if they think it's code."

Well, no one grabbed it, so he started sending out messages about a Mrs. Moriarty who was pregnant. "Dear Joe, her pregnancy is progressing as expected." This was the code that had been passed on to a writer at *The New York Times* by Eamon De Valera, one of the leaders of the Irish Nationalist movement, on his trips to America.

Then the revolution erupted in Dublin on Easter Sunday, 1916. The British shut down all lines of communication out of Ireland. They didn't want the world to know that this was happening, because they



were going to quell it in two days. So they had censors monitor all the cable stations. But here comes my grandfather's innocuous message, "Mrs. Moriarty successfully operated on today." The following morning *The New York Times'* headline was: "Revolution in Dublin. News comes from a fishing village in the West Coast of Ireland of Revolution in Dublin."

Well, the message could only come from one fishing village for starters, because that's where the cable was, so they came to the station, and my grandfather and his brother Tim were the operators that were on the night the message was sent. Because my grandfather had children, all they did was exile him to the main-

EUGENE RING, AT 84 IN AUGUST 1970, TALKS FOOTBALL WITH A BUNCH OF BOYS IN COUNTY KERRY, IRELAND. THE BOY SEATED IN FRONT WITH HIS HANDS ON HIS KNEES IS BRENDAN, EUGENE'S GRANDSON.

land two miles away, where he stayed the rest of his life, for many years with an old British soldier guarding him outside his door. They sent Tim to a brutal prison camp in Wales called Frongoch, which in Irish terms is like saying "Auschwitz" to a Jewish person. He came back in 1919 a broken man and died about six months later.

When my grandfather died in 1984, because he was an old IRA man, the men carrying the coffin on their shoulders to the gravesite were accompanied by about

800 people and two undercover cops. They went in. Put the coffin down. The priest said his thing. Next thing, out from behind the fence come three guys in balaclavas and berets. They stand over the coffin, let off a volley of shots. The cops are trying to get through the crowd. The guys disappear over the fence, get in the car and they're gone. So it was the-atics right down to the end. And today, the National Museum of Broadcasting in Dublin has the actual Morse key on which my grandfather sent the message.

have the discipline.

In 1992, his wife gets transferred to Cleveland, Ohio. "Cleveland?" his beloved barflies groan. The only thing to do there is drive a truck, Ring reckons. Till one day, our Irishman finds something to save his life when he walks into a bar. The interview doesn't go well, so he starts to walk out. The owner, John Barr, a maverick's maverick, asks him to stay. Ten years later, Barr asks his younger partner to buy him out. Now, Nighttown, named for the red-light district in Dublin as depicted in James Joyce's "Ulysses," is his.

Next thing you know, he trades tales — often into the wee small hours of the morning, with a bottle of whiskey to oil discussions — with the likes of Wynton Marsalis or the Three Irish Tenors or Terry Sullivan, *GQ's* food writer, who proclaimed Nighttown one of the two best restaurant bars in America.

Without a place to share stories every day, Ring says, he would die. So God gave him the great, sprawling serial novel that is Nighttown. Ask him about "The Case of the Abducted Bust" or "The 80-Year-Old Seductress." Joyce would be proud. Ask him about any of the myriad pieces of art hanging on the wall. Each a story. Especially the newer prints he's added of people hanging out in saloons. Ghostly portraits. Everyone in a bar is a ghost.

Still, in Ring's storied heart, often to the dismay of long-time staff who've memorized many of his yarns, Ireland reigns forever. "I was so lucky to grow up where I did, see the things I saw, hear the things I heard in that little town," Himself remarks. "We spent endless hours with old people as a kid, and it always seemed to me that the poorest people were the richest people in what they gave to me." So there. ■