

A man of great sensitivity and deep intellect



John Moriarty: regarded as one of the finest minds of his generation.
Photograph: The Irish Times

John Moriarty : John Moriarty, who has died aged 69, was a writer, philosopher and broadcaster.

His contributions to Joe Duffy's *Liveline* made him widely known, and his announcement on the programme that he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer resonated nationally.

John O'Donoghue, former minister for arts, sport and tourism and new Dáil Ceann Comhairle, last week said: "John was known as a charming, easygoing and unconscious poet and philosopher. He was a man of great humanity and compassion, displaying a unique combination of profound intellect and deep spirituality."

His publisher Antony Farrell of the Lilliput Press said that his use of myth and philosophy in his writing made him a "Tolstoyan figure".

"He was an interpreter of today, using the vision stories of ancient culture to interpret modern society. He had a childlike vision and radiance and his use of language was extraordinary."

A native of Moyvane, north Kerry, Moriarty was born in 1938 and educated in Listowel. He later studied philosophy and logic at University College Dublin, where his teachers included Cardinal Desmond Connell. Regarded as one of the finest minds of his generation, he secured a double first-class honours degree.

He taught English literature at Leeds and Manitoba universities, but after six years withdrew from teaching to go "walkabout", embarking on a "journey of discovery". In the course of his journey he lived rough in London, travelled widely in southern Europe and spent some time in a monastery in Oxford.

In the early 1970s he made his way to Toombeola, Roundstone, Co Galway, where he restored gardens and built his own house.

He remained out of the public gaze until January 1985 when, as a guest on *Dialogue* on RTÉ Radio 1, he was introduced by Andy O'Mahony with the words, "My guest tonight is one of the most remarkable people that I've ever met in my entire life."

Brendan Flynn brought Moriarty's work to the attention of Antony Farrell, and the Lilliput Press published *Dreamtime* in 1994. There followed the trilogy *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Crossing the Kedron* (1996), *Horsehead Nebula Neighing* (1997) and *Anaconda Canoe* (1998), *Nostos: an autobiography* (2001), *Invoking Ireland* (2005), *Night Journey to Buddh Gaia* (2006) and *Serious Sounds* (2007).

Armintha Wallace wrote of *Nostos* : "For a reader, the experience is akin to being on a raft in a stormy sea. One minute you're riding high, exhilarated, with a view to the ends of the Earth. The next you're in a trough with a wall of words on either side and no idea of what's going on."

Reviewing the book, Brian Lynch invoked Charlie McCreevy's phrase, "a high degree of unusuality". Notwithstanding the "depth of [Moriarty's] imagination, the frequently wonderful writing, the radicalism of his vision, his intellectual and spiritual courage, his eccentric charm, his highly developed sense of the ridiculous", he found by the end of the book that Moriarty had become "Messianic".

Paul Durcan, however, in his review of *Invoking Ireland* , foresaw a time when there would be university courses devoted to John Moriarty and movie-makers would vie for the rights to make a film of his life.

In the mid-1990s he returned to Kerry to live in Coolies, near Killarney. With few possessions other than books, he wrote every day in longhand, travelling to Killarney to have his manuscript typed and photocopied.

Moriarty was a passionate supporter of his county's football team and listened to all Kerry's games on radio or watched them on television in a neighbour's house.

"One of the crowning glories for me, when Kerry beat Mayo [in 2004], was not just the style of football but seeing Dara Ó Cinnéide going up to receive the cup on the Hogan Stand and talking in Irish." His enthusiasm for the Irish language knew no bounds.

"It's [a] great language and all you have to do is read Peig Sayers. When I read her book . . . it's like the Latin Mass all over again."

In 2002 he announced his intention to establish a Christian monastic hedge school, Slí na Fírinne, on a site between Kilgarvan and Glengarriff. It was to be "a place where Christianity can recover its nerve".

A former host of the television series *The Blackbird and the Bell* , in June 2006 an honorary degree in literature was conferred on him by the National University of Ireland, Galway. A final volume of autobiography *What the Curlew Said* is due to be published in the autumn.

His partner Eileen Moore, brother Chris, sisters Brenda, Phyllis, Madeline and Barbara, survive him.

John Stephen Moriarty: born February 2nd, 1938; died June 1st, 2007.

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