

FROM
DUST to
STARDUST

A NOVEL

KATHLEEN
ROONEY

Interview: Kathleen Rooney on Silent Film Stars, Fairies, and Her New Book *From Dust to Stardust*



ELIZABETH NIARCHOS NEUKIRCH

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I first encountered Chicago author Kathleen Rooney years ago at The Neo-Futurists' funky New Year's Eve bash, where her collective *Poems While You Wait* was delightfully typing up custom poetry on-demand on vintage typewriters. A sense of discovery and whimsy is a common thread in much of Rooney's writing, from her last novel *Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey* (half narrated by a taxidermied pigeon at the Smithsonian) to her recent poetry collection *Where Are the Snows* (winner of the X.J. Kennedy Prize from Texas Review Press) to her enchanting new book, *From Dust to Stardust*.

From Dust to Stardust is inspired by the life of silent film star Colleen Moore, an iconic Hollywood flapper of the 1920s who made more than 60 films. Rooney tells the story of fictional actress Doreen O'Dare as she navigates fame, fortune, a less-than-perfect romantic life and an ever-growing collection of miniatures—which end up in a meticulously designed, one-ton Fairy Castle on display at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry (MSI). That last bit is nonfiction: Colleen Moore hired dozens of her Hollywood friends to help build, design, and decorate her dream castle, before taking it on tour across the states during the Great Depression to raise funds for children's charities. Afterwards, the Fairy Castle went on display at MSI, where it has invited visitors to believe in magic since 1949. Rooney will discuss *From Dust to Stardust* at book signings and events across Chicago in the coming weeks, including a panel on "Hollywood Women" during Printers Row Lit Fest this Saturday, September 9, a screening of the Colleen Moore film *The Power and the Glory* at the Music Box Theatre on Saturday, September 16 and a joint event with author James Kennedy at the Book Stall on Tuesday, September 19.

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Can you tell me about the first time you encountered Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle, and your fascination with it ever since?

My family moved to the Chicago area from Louisiana in the late 80s, and when I was eight years old, my parents took us to the Museum of Science and Industry. I loved the whole museum and I still recommend it to everyone whenever

they are coming to Chicago, but I was just stopped in my tracks by the Fairy Castle. And I think part of the reason is that it's so weird; it's not especially scientific or industrial. It does have running water, and lights that work, so it is a huge feat of engineering [...] but it stood out among the museum's other holdings in that it was very artistic. I'm told my parents had to kind of drag me away, I was ready to stay there. At the time, you would pick up a little black receiver and Colleen Moore's voice came out of it! That's why I was so excited to use that as the frame of this novel, because I sat there and I wanted to listen to every word [...] you got to hear Colleen saying things like, "In the library, this chair is so weirdly shaped because the little fairy child likes to read with his feet in the air." And you're thinking, is that true? Does this grown-up woman really believe that it's true? Because I, as an eight-year-old, thought it could be true. It blew my mind.

Can visitors to the Museum of Science and Industry still hear Colleen's voice recording?



Colleen Moore, Photo by Henry Freulich, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Unfortunately, you can't [...] it's a result of Colleen having a clause in the contract where she could come into the museum to see her Fairy Castle any time. She would bring her grandkids to the museum and play with her toy, which I think is beautiful. As a result, she would sometimes redecorate, and so through her own love of her toy, she rendered the original audio script incorrect. That was why the museum had to change it, so now it's an actress speaking to you.

Over the years, from your childhood to this day, do you have a favorite room, or item, or feature of the Fairy Castle? What is it?

I was raised Catholic, and I'm not observant anymore but those traditions stay in a person. [...] Even to this day, as I went back to write about it, I wondered, am I remembering this right? Because it's been a minute and this is so insane: in the chapel of the Fairy Castle, Colleen has what has been presented to her, and what she believes to be, a piece of the one true cross. That's in the book. It's supposedly a piece of the cross that Jesus Christ was crucified on [...] Claire Booth Luce, who was married to the publisher of TIME magazine and who was the U.S. Ambassador to Italy—she went to the Vatican and the Pope gave her that as thanks for being a powerful Catholic. She gave it to her friend (Colleen). I think that there is something beautiful and magical about the willingness to believe that an artifact like that could exist and could be in this dollhouse.

(Visit the MSI website to learn more about this relic and other miniatures in the Fairy Castle that are thousands of years old.)

***From Dust to Stardust* is steeped in so much history and detail, it really feels for readers as though we are reliving Colleen's life and her Hollywood rise right alongside her. Where do you like to begin in terms of historical research?**

Where it begins depends on what's available with the given source. In the case of *From Dust to Stardust*, I'm lucky in the sense that Colleen Moore was so famous, there are a ton of newspaper articles and all those great old-timey gossip columns, so you can go and find a lot of what was said about her. [...] Later in her life, she was asked to write her autobiography, which I use in the novel—*Silent Star* came out in the late 1960s, followed by her book *How Women Can Make Money in the Stock Market*. I try to read those super big, exhaustive materials first, if they exist, and then set them aside so I don't just sit there writing a biography and telling you every detail. Then from there, this is a thing I learned from Martin, my spouse who's a writer, he says do your research and then stop and start writing; don't research concurrently, but research when you get stuck.

Along with these books and articles, I imagine you must have watched many of the remaining movies that Colleen Moore made, both silent films and talking films. As you were watching these films, what did her performances teach

you about her personality, as you're recreating that and imagining what she must have really been thinking about these roles and women's roles in society at that time?

My favorite is called *Why Be Good*, where she again plays this flapper type who has to thread the needle between what society expects and what she really wants. I think now, when we think of flappers, we think of a costume party or Zelda Fitzgerald [...] But when you go back and watch Colleen's films, what you see is this dramatic shift from the 1910s, where womanhood or girlhood is still very sweetheart, long curly ringlets, tight corseted dresses, and if a man wrongs them or harms their virtue, they're done. It's almost Victorian [...] and then what you see with the flappers in the 1920s is: life isn't over. They have sex, they drink, they smoke, they drive cars, they spend money! And all of that just seems normal now, but at the time it was shocking. I try to convey that with the movie that you can't see, the eleven-minute fragment, it's just one reel left of *Flaming Youth*, her 1923 movie—even today, it's spicy. You see her flirting with this guy who was her mom's lover back in the day, or you see her going to this huge pool party where people are taking off their clothes and skinny dipping. When you think of 1923, you can see why it got banned in Boston, and a movie theater proprietor in Seattle got sent to jail because he chose to show it. Women's societies and religious organizations all over thought it was corrupting the morals of young women. So that is what I'm struck by: how Colleen just seemed like she was born at the right time to burst this young woman zeitgeist of freedom onto the unsuspecting public.



Kathleen Rooney with Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle at the Museum of Science and Industry. Credit Beth Rooney.

As I was reading your novel, I got this sense that we're traveling with Colleen through a "mind palace" or "memory palace" where the physicality of the rooms, their location in the castle and imagining the different fairies, is triggering memories for her. How did the framing and structure of this novel come together for you? (In *From Dust to Stardust*, Doreen O'Dare is making an audio recording about her Fairy Castle at the Museum of Science and Industry.)

For me, structure is really important. As someone who writes poetry, fiction, nonfiction, kids lit, I write almost everything, and novels are the most architectural form of writing. I know there are writers who say, "I just hear a character start talking and see what they tell me." And I think that's awesome, but I come at it from a more blueprint-y perspective, where I really need to know: how am I going to get from point A to point B? There's a concept that I teach to my students, called "the occasion of the telling," which is that question we have every time we read something. Why is this person telling this story? Why are they telling it in this way? Meaning point of view, voice, all of the craft stuff. And why are they telling it now? Especially in first person narration, I love it when there's a reason.

Very important question: do you believe in fairies?

Yes! I do. I believe in fairies and I believe in ghosts and I believe in the idea that this world that we see, the visible world, the rational world, cannot be all that there is. And I am not dogmatic about it—I don't need other people to agree with me. I think a lot of people do [...] But one of the things that appealed to me, both as a child and why I wrote about this now, is the power of wonder. This ability of people to individually and collectively look at something and feel curiosity and awe and a sense of, I think, existential humility. [...] One of the things that I hope to convey with this novel is that Colleen Moore didn't have to do this. She had so many things going on, she could have just built the Fairy Castle and moved on. But she chose to tour it. And I think part of that was her desire not to make everybody believe in fairies, but to get them to believe in magic.

Kathleen Rooney's *From Dust to Stardust* was published by Lake Union Publishing on September 5, and is available at your local independent bookstore or the publisher's website.

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