

ALISON GARDEN

‘Making it up to tell the truth’: An interview with Colum McCann

Colum McCann is a writer celebrated for his dedication to the international: born in Dublin, in 1965, he now resides in New York City, where he is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at Hunter College, after having travelled extensively. His fiction is similarly mobile and he has written about a Romani woman in former Czechoslovakia (*Zoli* 2006); an Irish man in Mexico and his Mexican wife in Mayo (*Songdogs* 1995); the Russian ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev (*Dancer* 2003); the Subway tunnels of New York (*This Side of Brightness* 1998). Most recently, in *TransAtlantic* (2013), McCann continued the current trend in his work of writing about historical figures, including sections on John Alcock and Teddy Brown, Frederick Douglass and Senator George Mitchell.

McCann started his career as a journalist, so his penchant for writing about real figures is not entirely unexpected. His father, Sean McCann, wrote for the Irish newspaper *The Irish Press* and McCann elected to study journalism at the College of Commerce, in Rathmines (the College now forms part of the Dublin Institute of Technology). In 1983, McCann won the ‘Young Journalist of the Year’ award for a piece he wrote about domestic violence against women in some of Dublin’s most impoverished areas, beginning to show the empathetic engagements with what McCann has labelled ‘the anonymous other’ that have been a driving force in his work. McCann was subsequently given his own column in *The Irish Press* but, driven by a love of the American Beats and a desire to get out of Ireland, he left Dublin at the age of 21 in 1986 for the United States. After his failed efforts at setting himself up as a writer – including an attempt at writing a novel on an old Remington typewriter using a continuous roll of paper, like Jack Kerouac’s original *On the Road* (1957) manuscript – McCann decided he needed to expand the horizons of his own experience. He set off on an eighteen month bicycle trip across the United States, beginning in Massachusetts, snaking down the East Coast

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into Florida, down into New Orleans, Texas and Mexico. He completed his trip by travelling north, through Colorado and Wyoming, finishing up in San Francisco.

The experiences of the vast open spaces of the Mid- and Southwest of the United States find their way into McCann's first novel, *Songdogs* (1995), where McCann uses his own route as the map for two generations of the novel's characters, Irish Michael and Mexican Juanita, and Conor, their son. Reflecting on the differences between the 'confined' spaces of Ireland and the plains of Wyoming, Conor observes, 'land like [Wyoming] seeps its way into you, you grow to love it, it begins to thump in your blood' (94). This early novel gives a clear indication of the progressive and generous vision of Ireland and its diaspora that has characterised McCann's work. One of the most striking features of *Songdogs* is McCann's portrayal of Juanita's plight in Mayo and the difficulties she has, as an immigrant, adjusting to life in Ireland. The novel prefigures the wave of immigration that Ireland was to experience during the Celtic Tiger era and in this way, McCann examines and subverts ideas of an Irish migrant experience.

McCann has spoken about the way that this bicycle trip opened up a new catalogue of voices and stories, many of which have filtered into his own work. This layering of voices and stories is a distinguishing feature of McCann's prose style. Originally displayed in an embryonic way in *Songdogs* – Conor's narration is overlaid with the imagined voices of his parents and those that they encounter – this has now developed into a signature style across his subsequent five novels. In the interview below, McCann discusses the way in which Irish fiction has traditionally eschewed the 'one voice; one tone; one movement' of the English realist novel, and we might read his distinctive narrative polyphony as an example of this. It is also, argues McCann, a deliberate challenge to the singular narrative of history and the 'official' story that is passed down; his wealth of voices probe at the notion that any one narrative can claim an exclusive hold over history or fact. Indeed, the fictionality of history is something that is becoming increasingly of interest to McCann. His use of different voices also places an emphasis on the manner of telling and how stories are relayed: it highlights the importance of storytelling. Below, you will note that McCann makes reference to the 'democracy' of storytelling, and the rights that we all have to share our stories. To this end, McCann was one of the founding members of Narrative4, a not-for-profit organisation that encourages disadvantaged youths to swap and share stories in a bid to foster 'fearless hope through radical empathy'. For McCann, storytelling goes beyond national borders. His braided

narrative form, constructed through multifarious narratives, compliments and furthers his transnational aesthetic in that it accommodates a diverse range of ethnic, cultural and national voices.

Given this distinctive style of his novels, it is no surprise that McCann is a highly accomplished short story writer. His first collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, was published in 1994 and one of its stories, 'Through the Field', was selected by Dermot Bolger as part of his edited collection, *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1994). In his introduction, Bolger applauds McCann's international leanings, arguing that his short story is fully evocative of Texas and celebrates McCann's ability to look far beyond Ireland in his writing. McCann too, enjoys the fluidity of belonging to more than one space, and venturing, imaginatively, into other geographies. In this vein, his collection *Everything in this Country Must* (2000), consisting of two short stories and a novella, 'Hunger Strike', meditate on the Troubles in the North of Ireland. McCann's mother was from Derry and McCann spent large amounts of time in Northern Ireland in the summers of his childhood in the 1970s.

Redemption and healing are recurrent themes in McCann's work. His first novel to focus on the United States, *This Side of Brightness* (1998) delves into the lives of three generations of an Irish-African American family and the traumas and destitution that mark their lives. In *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), in which multiple narratives unfurl around Philippe Petit's 1974 high-wire walk between the Twin Towers, McCann redirects the energies surrounding the attacks on the World Trade Centre to New York of the 1970s and in so doing, constructs a novel which is ultimately hopeful for the future. *Let the Great World Spin* was selected by two teachers at Newtown High School, Connecticut to help them deal with the horror and grief caused by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings of December 2012. McCann himself spent the day with students at the school in April 2013.

Colum McCann's fiction has won numerous awards, including the Hennessy Award for Irish Literature, the Rooney Prize and a *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* from the French government. *Let the Great World Spin* won the 2010 Best Foreign Novel Award in China, the American National Book Award 2009 and the Irish IMPAC prize 2011. In 2013, *TransAtlantic* was long listed for the Booker Prize and McCann was awarded an honorary doctorate by Queens University Belfast.

I had the great pleasure of interviewing Colum McCann at Ulysses Pub in New York, sat perfectly halfway between the Irish tricolour and the flag of the United States. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the funding which made this interview possible.

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Finally, I would like to thank Colum McCann himself for being so generous with his time and thoughts, and allowing me to publish this interview.

Q. A recent critical companion to your work, Eoin Flannery's *Colum McCann and The Aesthetics of Redemption* (2011), places you within the Irish literary tradition, whereas another, John Cusatis' *Understanding Colum McCann* (2010), considers your fiction as part of a series of books entitled 'Understanding American Literature'. How would you respond to this and how would you position yourself within the literary landscape; do you find national labels enabling or restrictive?

A. It's nice to be considered a part of both, so you sort of straddle the two. Michael Ondaatje has this thing called the 'international mongrels of the world'. He's a classic example for me. He was born in Sri Lanka, educated in England, moves to Canada, but writes his first book about a jazz singer in early twentieth century New Orleans. To me that's a perfect collision and that's the way I sort of see my fiction: not operating within any specific national boundaries. When it comes down to it, when you're finally asked what sort of writer you are – other than just a writer – and you have to put a label on it, I have to be an Irish writer. I come from that tradition. I was born into it. I still plough it. But what interests me is the idea that you might be able to break form and break ideas of national landscape and break borders, and so, for example, write a novel about a Russian ballet dancer and have it operate within the sphere of Irish literature as I tried to do in *Dancer*. So it can be interpreted in an Irish context, it can be interpreted in a Russian context, it can be interpreted in an American context, or even in the context of being an 'international mongrel.' So I am quite happy to think that all of these things operate for me: which is kind of greedy in a way!

Q. No it's not greedy, not at all. Following on from that then, do you think there is something about being Irish, given Ireland's long history of emigration, that means that your national identity is always already more fluid and transnational?

A. I would say so, yes. Yes. I come from a country that has

always been leaving in one sense or another. Part of the sadness of the Irish character is the very fact that we have such a relationship with leaving. I'm not sure that the Irish identity is more fluid because of this or if there are a number of other factors too – we're a small nation, we're non-threatening, we fit in easily, we adapt. But we can also be very narrow-minded and try to enforce our identity on other people. Sometimes we become more Irish when we go abroad. This is a little sad, but it's also the emigrant trying to remember. Sometimes I think we emigrate precisely because we want – and need – to remember. Joyce said, in a letter to the English painter Frank Budgen, that he had been so long out of Ireland that he could all at once hear her voice in everything. Also there is the notion that we can be very territorial about our past. But in essence I think we are a fluid people. Certainly I like the idea of being transnational and at the same time cleaving to where I came from.

And I think we are held together by our culture. Storytelling is the glue of a scattered people. We need our stories to hold us together.

Q. You've also mentioned in other interviews that you consider yourself both Irish and a New Yorker. Cities have traditionally been characterized as more cosmopolitan and multicultural; do you think it's easier to associate with a city than a nation?

A. Well with this particular city it's easier because with New York it is such an international landscape. It's one of the few cities in the world where you can land and immediately have an allegiance to New York – you can become a New Yorker almost on your first day. You can't become a Glaswegian on your first day, I don't think, or a Dubliner on your first day. That's part of the fluidity that I suppose I've been looking for, or where I feel comfortable in that fluidity: because this is a transnational place. I have more of a difficulty with the idea of being an American writer. So instead I say I'm a New Yorker. Again there is a greediness here – I don't want to be labelled American but I want the benefit of being in New York. 'Do I contradict myself? Very well I contradict myself.' It's my Whitman moment. 'I contain

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multitudes.’

Q. You’re just as perceptive writing about a multi-ethnic Ireland as you are a multi-ethnic US. Is the multiracial, multicultural landscape of your prose an aesthetic effect for you, or a genuine reflection of the world you see around you?

A. It is reflective of the world around me but when it gets put in a literary periscope it becomes a deeper issue because books themselves have their borders, they have their boundaries: they have their first page and they have their last page; they have a beginning and they have an end. Yet one’s cultural ideas and one’s cultural identity are more fluid than the books. But if the books are written in such a way that they have openness to them; what happens is that they can reflect those cultural ideas. I think that an Irish writer confronting a multi-ethnic New York is also writing about Ireland – even if he or she doesn’t mention Ireland once in the text. We allowing Irish readers to say that our experience of elsewhere is valid too. Our experience of Brooklyn informs our experience of Sherrif Street, Dublin.

Q. In your new novel, *TransAtlantic* (2013), as with some of your other work, most notably *This Side of Brightness* (1998), you explore the intersections between the Irish (and Irish-American) and African-American communities. In *TransAtlantic*, much is made of Frederick Douglass as ‘the Black O’Connell’, for example, in reference to the important relationship between Douglass and Daniel O’Connell, the campaigner for Irish Catholic Emancipation in the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Do you think the two groups share a particular affinity?

A. In *TransAtlantic* I take the story of Frederick Douglass arriving in Ireland [at the beginning of the Irish famine in 1845] and then in 2011 there’s a character who comes into the story – a Kenyan named David Manyaki. He rescues a house and a letter that have been moving fluidly between these two sides of the Atlantic. So the narrative kind of goes back to a form of Douglass, but it’s a confident young Kenyan intellectual who lives in Dublin. I don’t know what that means or why it occurred. I suppose

I have been exploring the relationship between Irish and African people for quite a while now. I cannot pinpoint a moment when it occurred to me that this is what I wanted or needed to do. It began when I started writing *This Side of Brightness*. Part of the function of that blurring between the Irish and African-American was purely logical; when I was in the tunnels [underneath New York City] hanging out with the homeless people, the vast majority of them happened to be African-American. If I was going to write an honest novel, it would have to confront some of the African-American experience. So I braided in the Irish experience with the African-American experience through the marriage between two of my characters. So part of that was just because of story and not due to any ideology or intellectual bent that I thought would work. So in a way it was an obsession born out of the practical. But the further I get away from it, the more I realise that I *do* think that there is this touchstone of common experience there between the two communities. I am aware that you can do that with many cultures. You know, the Irish and the Greeks; the Irish and the Swedes, the Irish and the Colombians. But there is a particular identification between the Black and the Green, if you will. The idea of oppression. The idea of belonging. The idea of staking a claim to a piece of territory. Even if you talk about Northern Ireland and how we organised our civil rights marches, how we organised our civil rights dialogue – the murals of Frederick Douglass in Belfast; murals of Miriam Makeba, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King; they went through the streets of Derry singing ‘We Shall Overcome’: you know, taking inspiration from the American civil rights movement. So there is an identification – whether it is logical or not is another question: one hopes it’s not sentimental.

Q. That was a great answer, thank you. What is it about Eastern and Central Europe that attracts you? Both *Dancer* (2003) and *Zoli* (2006) deal with numerous countries from the region, including the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

A. Well originally it was just because, again, it was a story that obsessed me. I’m generally corralled by images rather than ideas. So the image that led me to write *Dancer* came from a story told to me by a young man in Dublin. He told me that when he

was seven years old, his family got his first TV. At first there was no reception and his father, a drunk, beat the living daylights out of him in frustration. But the next day my friend, Jimmy, plugged the TV into an extension cord and carried it out onto the balcony of the flats. The very first image that came on the TV was Rudolph Nureyev dancing, and he fell in love with him. And I thought, what an incredible story – about Dublin, about fathers, about culture, about celebrity and about Rudolf Nureyev. But I also knew that it would never fit into the larger part of Nureyev's 'official' historical biography. It deserved to be told but it was too 'anonymous' to be part of his official history. Yet I knew down deep in my bones that fiction operates in those anonymous moments. Those moments are, in fact, the lifeblood of good stories. I was also aware that fiction could tell a story as powerfully as non-fiction or 'history'. Part of the challenge, for me as a writer, is to find the anonymous moment and to insert it into the larger historical frame and for it to make sense as part of this larger historical frame. A fiction writer as an unacknowledged historian, if you will. Making it up to tell the truth.

Q. That actually leads on very nicely to my next question. You've said that in your work you try to give voice to the anonymous other and I was wondering if you could talk about that further. What is the relationship, for you, between history and fiction?

A. I think you've got to bring it down to the notion that history is written by the winners – and this is a notion that's been around for a long time. And also the notion that history is a series of agreed-upon lies; and that generally history is 'agreed-upon' at a higher level than most people, like you and me, will operate in. So if we bring the history back down to earth and if we put it in the small house, or the field, or the factory, if we put history in these places, it becomes a new sort of history. A true history that wasn't legislated before; it doesn't mean that one history is necessarily better than the other. You can see it is a sort of – and this is interesting although it's off the top of my head! – a sort of Celtic pattern: you know the outside circle, then coming slowly, slowly, slowly into the centre circle. I would always find the ordinary person at the very centre of that Celtic pattern. I like that idea. The wider circles are written by the politicians and the cor-

porations and the supposed ‘winners.’ They have controlled the story for a long time. We have to learn to give it back to the proper owners of history – the ordinary person. I think it’s the job, the real job, of the fiction writer – or the poet, or the playwright or the journalist – to go in and discover the value of that supposedly anonymous life and then insert it into that larger historical narrative, if you can. To make sense of, and retell, the story over again. John Berger says, ‘never again will a single story be told as if it were the only one’. So for centuries we’ve told stories as if only one of them exists, but so many of them exist. There are so many facets. Every story is many stories. And this goes to the heart of the democratic notion of storytelling; that storytelling is the purest democracy that we have. With storytelling there need be no regard for borders, no regard for boundaries, no regard for wealth: everyone has a story. You have a story; I have a story; the woman down the street has a story. We all have a need to tell it, a desire to tell it, a compulsion to tell it: we *have* to tell it. Enter the poet or writer who acknowledges that and then we can start to reframe the story.

Q. I think that’s a really exciting way of looking at literature. I agree with it a lot; of course literature can be political and a force for change, but people working in and with literature are often put under pressure to defend it and its role in society. In many ways, it has the ultimate role in society. But moving on. In an interview with Michael Ondaatje, you asked him if he thought content dictated form. Do you?

A. Yes. What it all comes down to is language and language has the power. The way you put the language down on the page will eventually reveal to you the structure of your story and the form of your story. It all comes from the soil of language. And it’s also about embracing mystery. Mystery joining things together. Letting the content flow so that it finally finds the right form. The more experimental, or the more open, you’re prepared to be with the fact that you don’t really always know where you’re going to go, or what’s truly going on with your own thoughts, the richer your work will be. It’s about being open to mystery. Which sounds kind of twee, or new age-y, but I don’t think it really is. When it’s properly examined, language gives us the vessel that

eventually reveals the way the story should be told. That means you have to be open to poetry, you have to be open in all sorts of ways. Having an idea is all well and good – we can all have an idea – but we can't all write *Ulysses*, unfortunately.

Q. If we think about your use of literary form, your novels are quite unconventionally constructed and you've also written two collections of short stories. I was wondering about your use of the short story as the form you used to reflect on Northern Ireland in *Everything in this Country Must* (2000). You've mentioned Benedict Kiely's *Proxopera* (1977) and Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) as being key texts for you in illustrating what life is like, and was like, in the North of Ireland. Obviously Deane's text isn't a collection of short stories but it reads a little like it could be, consisting of often disconnected episodic fragments. I was curious to see if you consciously used the short story as a means of slotting your own work into that tradition?

A. I wrote *Everything in this Country Must* just after having completed *This Side of Brightness*, which had been considered very much an American novel, whether rightly or wrongly. And part of me bristled that people thought I was an American novelist and that I'd left my country behind. Some of the most informative years for me were between the ages of seven and twelve when I spent a lot of time up North on my mother's family farm. So I thought, in order to re-prove my Irishness, I'm going to go back into the heart of the matter and the most overarching national question, for me, at that time was: what is going on in Northern Ireland? Why does this exist? How do we negotiate it? I didn't consciously go with short stories, but I had a few ideas that I wanted to work on. I wrote the story 'Everything in this Country Must' first, then I wrote 'Hunger Strike', then I went back in and inserted the story 'Wood', which has a different political slant to it. I was trying to talk about young people and how their political consciousness gets formed. In fact in some ways I think it's my favourite little book; partly because it's my orphan book and doesn't always get read. It's also because it goes to the heart of the political question, for me, anyway. Also, the Irish are good at the short story.

Q. Absolutely. I have a bit of theory I've been working on as short stories as a form of literary anti-colonial protest, because the English realist novel has been so closely associated with imperialism and I think perhaps this is why the short story has done so remarkably well in Ireland and also in the United States, in the earlier twentieth century at least.

A. That's a very interesting notion. I think you're possibly correct here. If you take many of the great Irish novels, you'll see that they're written in numerous voices, or from numerous stand-points, with a narrative generosity, whereas the traditional English novel tends to have that one voice; one tone; one movement. There's nothing wrong with it, but it does have a confidence to it, a touch of Empire about it, if you will; a sort of 'I have my story to tell and *this is it*' and it doesn't waver. A lot of Irish novels tend to be digressive, they tend to spin in different directions and don't have a specific fulcrum along which they progress. I think that ties in with notions of colonialism, the experience of *being* colonised. It also ties in with language: the Irish language was taken away from us. One of the ways that Joyce thought about it was, 'I will take this language that was given to us and I will re-appropriate it and remake it'. I'm sure that ties in with your argument.

Q. Yes definitely and I think that's what short story writers were doing with the novel, re-appropriating it and making it work in completely different ways.

A. I have this idea that the short story is a universe and a novel is too, except the short story is an imploding universe and distils down to a very tight ball of energy; the novel is an exploding universe, sending out shrapnel in lots of different directions. I miss the short story. I have been writing novels recently. Some of it just comes down to the very vulgar notion that you have to sell books and novels sell more than collections of short stories do. I have kids to feed. 'Children pry up our rotting bodies with cries of earn, earn, earn.' Jim Harrison says that!

Q. Your treatment of the North of Ireland with *Everything in this Country Must* is actually quite unusual. Joe Cleary has argued in his book, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (2002), that the North of Ireland has been dealt with in 'hermetically compartmentalised terms' and 'not as part of a shared history' that includes both the Republic of Ireland and the UK (77). I think you are very adept at negotiating the relationship between the two Irish states but also gesturing beyond even the borders of Ireland, at even larger landscape of transnational trauma. I was hoping perhaps you might be able to talk a little about this.

A. That's exactly what *TransAtlantic* is about; that is part and parcel of what I wanted to do with my new novel, to pull them together. You have the North and you have the South and then in the final chapter there's this woman up North who goes to the Republic to try and sell a letter she believes belongs to Frederick Douglass. And so the novel goes to the heart of your question – expanding the border of what is national, crossing it, giving it breath, transcending it, questioning it, and even traumatising it. To be quite frank, a lot of people didn't think I should write about Northern Ireland. This was after *Everything in this Country Must*. This was bizarre to me, but it's true. I can write a novel about homeless people living in Subway tunnels, I can write a novel about a Russian ballet dancer no problem, but to write about the North? Oh no, no, no. It felt like people were saying to me, you're stepping out of your territory; how dare you? I found this staggering. I mean it's a hundred miles from Belfast to Dublin, but it's a hell of a lot more from Dublin to New York, it's three thousand six hundred. A lot of things were said to me – 'you've no right to go into this territory, leave the North to northerners' was one of them. It was as if I couldn't know it because I didn't live there. But I could know something else, I could know Africa or Alabama but I should not know the North. 'You should leave the North to northerners and the South to the South,' was the perception. But it seems to me that the proper process of peace, reconciliation, decency, involves understanding someone else's story, as I was saying earlier, stepping in the shoes of somebody else. In certain ways, I always had to make myself into an outsider to go back in and write about Northern

Ireland. If my first book had been about Northern Ireland, it would have been a different thing. Although the final story, 'Cathal's Lake', in my first collection of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), is about the North. It's one of my favourite stories actually. Thankfully things have changed recently and the reaction to *TransAtlantic* has been very, very strong, and nobody has said anything to me about over-stepping my territory. Maybe that has to do with the peace process itself. Or maybe it's just that our lungs are bigger. We live, finally, in a wider world.

Q. 'Cathal's Lake' is a great story. I know there's some transcultural work going on with it too, which perhaps you could discuss: the layering of a story from the Talmud with a Northern Irish Context.

A. 'Cathal's Lake' is based not on an Irish myth, everyone always thinks of the Irish myth, The Children of Lir, and even though it is in a certain way, the idea of rebirth through the form of swans, really, it goes back to a Jewish myth of the thirty-six hidden saints, the *Lamed Vavniks*. In that myth there are thirty-six saints in the world, men – of course, although it should be men and women – humble men, carpenters, farmers, cobblers and they bear the sorrows of the world. But there's one saint who's lost faith and lost his line of communication with God; and it seems to me that's what Cathal is. Cathal is very much an Irish figure, he's a farmer, but he goes back to this Jewish myth: he is carrying the sorrows of the world, and he has lost his line of communication with God. Nobody needs to know that to read the story but that's where it came from for me. That was the force through the flower, if you will.

Q. I think it adds a really interesting element in terms of connecting to a larger transcultural framework of storytelling. I'm not sure if this was intentional or not but a lot of your stories are, for me, quite evocative of Kafka with their emphasis on the body and trauma as a performative act, particularly hunger and starvation. Is this something that you are consciously aware of? What is it about embodied experience that has such enduring appeal for you as a primary focus in your work?

A. Well, the short story 'Hunger Strike', from *Everything in this Country Must*, goes right to the heart of Kafka's concerns and work on the body. I wish I could say I was better versed in Kafka than I am. I was of course aware of 'The Hunger Artist', however. And yes the body has often been a site of enduring focus for me, especially in *Dancer*. My work spins around the body and how it moves through space. I like the idea that the movement of the body is reflective of the movement of the mind. We become what we are thinking. We move through space as we move through our imaginations.

Q. You've noted previously that the Northern Irish writer Benedict Kiely has been a huge influence for you. In your story 'Everything in this Country Must', there's an incident where the narrator counts out three bullets. Was this a direct allusion to a similar incident in Kiely's 'Bluebell Meadow', where the narrator counts out six bullets?

A. No, not consciously, no. I love Kiely. Kiely was very important for me when I was about sixteen, seventeen, and he is still important to me today. He used to hang out with my father. He helped me out when I was in my early twenties and encouraged me with my writing. I would go to his house and he would appear at the door in his pyjamas, at midday, with a bottle of whisky in his hand that he'd have just cracked open, as he'd have finished writing. No matter how late he was up the night before, he was always up at seven in the morning. I think an awful lot of Kiely has seeped into my work, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. I used the three bullets because I wanted the reader to think, first of all that's he's shooting at the British Army truck that's leaving, secondly that he's going to shoot himself and then that he's shooting the horse. Just to complicate it at the end. It was a dramatic effect for me.

Q. I've another specific question about an intertextual allusion. I find the anorexic nun, Brigid, in 'Sisters' evocative of the iconic image of the Famine: Bridget O'Donnell and her children. This is just one of many instances in your work where intertextual connections are made to a large range of cultural texts and im-

ages. Could you comment on the role of literary influence in your fiction?

A. One of the things that I find important is acknowledging this debt to your literary forbears. A lot of writers will claim that these associations to other texts that readers find in their work don't exist, that they're not there. But if they're there for somebody else, it just makes the text richer, so that the literary experience, the critical experience, brings something to the novel that expands it as a work of art. So rather than people thinking that it's wrong or stilted to find some things in the work that weren't intentional, I think it's beautiful. So I'll steal that from you! My line is that we get our voice from the voices of others and even if we haven't read it, it somehow creeps in. I see lots of Irish writers who say things like, 'I don't know who Ben Kiely is', and therefore he didn't influence me, which is a sham really, because you're influenced even when you don't realise it. It's like music: you've heard it even if you haven't directly heard it. There's a certain guitar riff that somebody else steals and it becomes part of the whole fabric of the musical landscape and you have to acknowledge that you're never there on your own. The idea that you can be sprung from some sort of dry well and somehow have a voice is patently absurd. We are an accumulation of others. Which means that we're also an accumulation of other places. *E pluribus unum*. This is our DNA. We are bound to it.

Q. I just wanted to go back to an earlier question about your interest in, and use of, the starving body. In *TransAtlantic* you devote lengthy passages to the utter terror and horror of the Famine and its devastating effect. Do you think your earlier works that are not directly about the Famine but include starving bodies, like Brigid in 'Sisters' and Corrigan in *Let the Great World Spin*, are also a way of dealing with the traumatic legacy of the Famine?

A. It's something that in Ireland we haven't really, truly, properly confronted. Not in the same way that, say, Jewish writers have properly confronted the Holocaust. There's always a vague embarrassment in Ireland about the Famine, as if it's sort of twee somehow; something that's over and we can forget about it or at least not mention it too much. I think it plays into the narrative of Irish culture in ways we don't even realise, like the Hunger

Strikes in the North for example. If you wanted to shame your landlord, in Ancient Ireland, you would go and lie on his doorstep and not eat. It was a form of personal political protest. I think all this inhabits us much more than we will actually acknowledge, which is why *TransAtlantic* tries to pull that stuff out again. Yes, I desperately wanted to write about the Famine. It has ancient echoes for me. In some ways I think that *TransAtlantic* is an alternative history.

Q. In addition to the bodily trauma that you explore in relation to hunger, you often put your characters through horrendous accidents – car crashes and industrial accidents. There seems to be quite a link between trauma and modernity for you.

A. I suppose I do! Hmmm. Part of that has to do with plot and creating a dramatic line that I want for my characters. Is it accidental that it occurs? Obviously not, there's obviously something going on in the back of my mind but sometimes I don't want to think about it. I use this line from Dostoevsky all the time, that 'to be too acutely conscious is a disease'; and if I knew why I did certain things I wouldn't do them again. For example, a few years ago I did an interview where the interviewer mentioned that in my first three or four books I wrote a lot about maps. When I discovered that this was true, I couldn't write about maps again!

Q. In *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), the year 1974 acts somewhat like a transnational connective tissue. You start off early on with the bomb in Dublin – again, moving the Troubles outside of the North – then you have Philippe Petit's walk between the Twin Towers and the Vietnam War is an obvious undercurrent too. Petit's walk being used as an allegory for the attacks of 9/11 is interesting in itself. You've talked previously about how you thought about the importance of the words – World, Trade, Centre – and it seems to me like you've used all the disparate threads of your novel to weave a very global fabric in response to an event that, it has been widely argued, was dealt with in quite a nationalistic manner. Was this a knowing effort on your part?

A. Part of it was an accident that it all took place in 1974,

but because everything took place in the same year, you notice the connections and your mind whirls in exactly the kind of ways that you're talking about. For Ciaran to come out of the bomb in Dublin in 1974 and make his way to the United States and then the legacy of what was happening in Vietnam speaking to what was happening in Iraq in the 2000s, speaks to that tissue that goes between these times and these wars. I think tissue is an important word, because it's not muscle and it's not ligament, it's that other stuff that surrounds them. I was aware of it, yes. I didn't want to become hyper-aware of it. You'll see with *TransAtlantic*, most of these ideas that you're talking about are coming together with *TransAtlantic*. But not in a direct way, because I think it's not interesting to be so direct about it. The reader will discover what their intelligence will allow. For some people the Alcock and Brown section will just be a rattling read about an airplane journey. Others will notice that goes to the heart of my argument about peace and decency – and my efforts to 'take the war out of the machine'.

Q. I think you can read all of your work as 'connective tissues' and that this is a vitally important context for your literature. Literary criticism and culture more widely tends to view the world through quite restrictive national paradigms. It's something you yourself have written about; in your introduction to *The Collected Stories of Benedict Kiely* (2002) you said that readers often tend to think of books as having a national identity encoded in their spines and that this wasn't a helpful way of reading literature.

A. I think if criticism can embrace itself as a sort of poetry and can rely on some of its own intuition, then it becomes even better. The critic as someone who embraces mystery and contradiction, even in their own arguments. So the criticism can be expansive and generous. So it doesn't focus in and really burn itself down to a particular segment of the page, so that the act of proper critical thinking, if it has an agile relationship to the text, it all becomes so much better. It doesn't become polemic or didactic.

Q. I wanted to ask you actually why the artist has such

enduring appeal for you. You frequently explore the experience of artists of various kinds and yet you never resort to a clichéd representation of the artist as tortured by existential angst.

A. It really bothers me when writers propel themselves up on this holy pedestal of 'art' and start rattling on about the difficulty he or she embraces as part of making art. I don't like the idea that the artist is somehow more important than the person who buys the art or is the subject of that art. If you think about someone like L.S. Lowry, and all his matchstick men, those matchstick men are just as important to the intellectual canvas as Lowry himself. In fact they endure more. The subject of the art is certainly more interesting than the artist himself. I think that goes back to the idea that you leave your work open; you *must* leave your work open. That then elevates the position of the 'anonymous other.' The artist must realise that he or she is not *entirely* in control. But if you elevate the position of the anonymous, you also elevate the emotional intelligence of the artist rather than degrading the artist, which gives it a further depth. Am I talking shite? I might be. I'll have to go away and think about it. But I do like the idea that the subject of the art is as powerful to the creation of it. And that there is more dignity in the work when you don't complain about how hard it is. It should be a joy, even if it is difficult. 'The Fascination of What's Difficult' in the Yeatsian way.

Q. One such prominent artist is the photographer Michael from your early novel *Songdogs* (1995). You've mentioned previously that photography is your favourite art form, but I find that it can be quite problematic – exploitative, even. Susan Sontag famously asserted that it led to individuals establishing a 'chronic voyeuristic relation' to the world. How does it fit into your thoughts on art?

A. I don't know. I love photography but I will say this: I do not own a camera. I don't believe I should carry a camera around. If I carried a camera around, I would always be taking photographs and I would become hyper aware of the process. I think it comes back to this notion that you can't let your art intrude on your life in certain ways. You have to go ahead and just live things. But I do think I'm a photographer anyway. I love the idea that you can paint a photograph – which is an absurd notion.

How can you paint a photograph? But that is what I'd like to think of my work as doing: painting a photograph with words. The reader then walks into that photograph and because you have painted the depth, the experience becomes three-dimensional. I wish I were a photographer; I wish I was a visual artist, but I'm not. But I try to recreate these things with language.

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