
Short Stories, Novels and Spain. An Interview With Colm Tóibín^[1]

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Colm Tóibín (Enniscorthy, 1955) is the author of five novels, *The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and *The Master* (2004). This last novel won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Novel of the Year, the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger for the best foreign novel published in 2005 in France, and it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Colm Tóibín has a long career in journalism and was the editor of the magazine *Magill* from 1982 to 1985. He is also the author of several non-fiction books, including *Homage to Barcelona* (1990) and *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1994). He edited *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999) and has recently published his first book of short stories, *Mothers and Sons* (2006). Colm Tóibín attended the 10th International Conference on the Short Story in English, held at University College Cork on 19-21 June 2008, where this interview took place.

Colm Tóibín (Enniscorthy, 1955) es autor de cinco novelas: *The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) y *The Master* (2004). Su última novella ganó el Premio Literario IMPAC Dublin, la Novela del Año del *Angeles Times*, el Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger a la mejor novela extranjera publicada en Francia en el 2005, y fue preseleccionada para el premio Man Booker Prize. Colm Tóibín cuenta con una larga carrera en el periodismo y fue editor de la revista *Magill* de 1982 a 1985. También es autor de varios libros de ensayo, incluyendo *Homage to Barcelona* (1990) y *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1994). Editó el volumen *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999) y recientemente ha publicado su primer libro de relatos, *Mothers and Sons* (2006). Colm Tóibín asistió al 10º Congreso Internacional sobre el relato corto en inglés, que se celebró en University College Cork del 19-21 de junio de 2008, donde se desarrolló esta entrevista.

1. Thanks are here given to Belinda Carroll for her help in the transcription of Colm Tóibín's words.

Q: There is an established myth about the Irish character and the telling of stories. Do you feel the oral tradition informing your stories or the stories of other Irish writers?

A: I wish I could say that it makes no difference at all, because I think it's overmentioned that somehow Irish people are naturally writers, because it comes somehow from the culture of story-telling in a way that, say, people who write in Germany or France or England are more civilised and their writing comes from a more literary source. But, and I think this is very important, when you are young in Ireland you learn very quickly not to bore people, and it's one of the great things to know as a writer, when the story must be interesting and when it must stop; how to manipulate the story. If you're a child in a large family and your aunt comes to visit, you would watch her doing it quite early, unless she is a terrible bore, and if she's a terrible bore that is the worst thing she could be. Her morals could be bad, and no one would mind that so much, or she could be smelly, no one would mind. But if she's boring, that would be really dreadful. I had a large extended family and some of them would come to the house and it wouldn't be formal story-telling, they'd just talk, but the talk would be interesting.

You learned that naturally, and you also learned that talk was a form of disguise. People often didn't talk at all about what was most important to them. So that you learned to know that talk wasn't a way of telling people about yourself, but it is often the way of disguising yourself and so I suppose then you began to read, and when I began to read Camus, or Kafka or Hemingway I couldn't work with the system which says all the time that those stories of Hemingway's are full of silences, full of what is not being revealed, and the end of the story is ambiguous. That's something I recognised and knew and couldn't work with, but I don't think it's true to say that there is a continuous line between an old Irish oral tradition and a current Irish literary tradition. I think it's a dotted line, it's a faint line, it's a jagged line, but it is a line, but there is also a line to other things, including a central European literary tradition.

Q: This morning you said in the plenary session that it was as an adult when you re-discovered the Irish short story. Could you explain this?

A: I think it might also be close to what that period was. It was a period when America was sweeping in over Ireland and when you wouldn't dream of listening to an Irish band when you could listen to an American band. And if somebody said that something was American, even on TV, that would be very exciting. There was a glamour attached to France, or Spain or America. Certainly it was not attached to home. The island is very small and even something as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* seemed terribly dull: the battle of Catholicism, the battle of priests. Oh dear, stop this! Whereas if you could read Saul Bellow with his battle with his third wife, you know, or you could read Camus and read his battle with the self that he could not reach, or Kafka was so exciting! You know, with Joyce I wasn't interested in that, maybe Beckett I was very interested in, but I didn't realise then how Irish Beckett was, I presumed that he really had no connection with Ireland, but you find later on that he did. Maybe it was sort of 60s thing, that I experienced in the 70s, just finding your own country, my own background, which is rural, which is very dull in certain ways. In any case it isn't glamorous. It's just that the young go in search of glamour.

Q: You are a great admirer of Beckett's work. What do you make of Beckett as a short story writer? What do you like most of him?

A: I think it's hard to talk about Beckett as a short story writer. I don't think that he got into his stride in *More Pricks than Kicks*. And it's hard to call those later pieces short stories, he didn't call them short stories. The piece which I love most is a piece like *Company* and it is almost a piece for the theatre, but it's not; it's almost a short story, but it's not. And I think that very particular pieces you could almost call them novels, you call them narratives or fragments. I suppose that's terribly interesting, and it is his method, which is to apply a system of mathematics, almost, to language, for everything is so precise, so carefully described. The whole business of thinking is comic, the whole business of body is comic and the constant feeling that actually this existence of ours is very, very funny, so absolutely dark, I'm not sure which, and so you can follow that especially I suppose in *The Trilogy*, but also in something as dark as *Endgame* or even *Happy Days*. He worked with very little and he

achieved a lot, and I am interested in that idea. There is a lovely austerity about his prose style that's really wonderful. And the sense that there isn't any release except in laughter and even that won't last. That interests me.

Q: Would you draw a ranking of the best Irish short story writers?

A: No, but I would draw a ranking of short stories. It's a funny thing about that, that there are certain stories that really matter to me and I read them all the time. They would be James Joyce's short story "The Dead", Daniel Corkery's short story "Nightfall", Frank O'Connor's short story "Guests of the Nation", Eugene McCabe's short story "Music at Annahullion", Mary Lavin's short story "A Cup of Tea", Mary Lavin's short story "Happiness", Mary Lavin's short story "The Widow's Son"... and that's just for starters, I mean, I am talking from memory, just what would naturally come into my mind, there would be others. I would talk about those stories rather than writers. And there are other stories by Eugene McCabe as well, and John McGahern's short story "A Country Funeral", which is the longest short story he wrote, it's something that really, really affected me and I read it all the time. So of all the stories I have named, knowing them like you know songs, like if you go to the CD player and put on track 8, rather than play the whole CD, it would be just in certain moods you would go to look for them, and that's how I would do that. But if you wanted ranking I think the best way to go about it is to say 'who are the ones that are least known who should be better known?' and certainly Eugene McCabe would be very high on my list, as would Michael McLaverty, as would Bernard MacLaverty, and certainly Mary Lavin. Almost everything she wrote is interesting. And the entire book of stories *Dubliners* really remains an extraordinary achievement, something that can be read now not as a period piece, but something that is alive and that you can read and that sings to you still.

Q: I would like to ask about your own book of short stories, *Mothers and Sons*. Did it help having written novels first? Was this book some kind of break from writing novels?

A: The previous novel, called *The Master*, a novel about Henry James, was very successful. It made me some money and it was published all over the world, and I was very suspicious of that. It was nice at the time, I would have been disappointed had it not happened. It was an international novel, but I do worry about that, and I was terribly interested in going back very deep into where I'm from, and I'm not from a world like Henry James, and to writing very quiet rural stories about tiny moments, things that occurred, people missing each other, love not working, gnarled relationships... And I also had as a result of writing that, because the book was actually much longer, it was cut the book, so I worked for a long time on it, writing every day, working very hard, I had to develop a fluency and it's an odd business for a writer because it's like being an athlete, like that the more you run the more your breath can be controlled for better running. If you have written a very long novel and you've finished it, instead of feeling 'Oh, that's great, that's done', what you have is almost like training your voice for singing, that you have it now and you can work with it more fluently. I have always found trouble before with short stories, which is getting the beginnings out of them, how to start your short story, how to get enough information in the first paragraph without putting too much information in, how would you get it to seem natural, how would you get the first sentence of a story, and with this fluency I was able to work like that.

Q: What do you remember of writing your story for *Finbar's Hotel*? Was it weird for a writer to publish a piece and not putting your name on it?

A: It was very interesting because I think that I was friends with all of the writers, and all of the writers complained about each other to me but no one complained about themselves. It is an interesting thing about writers and suspicion, you know, some of them thought some of the others' stories weren't good, but no one thought their own one wasn't good. I felt I had no opinion, but yes, it was curious. We put into the contract that you could take your own story back and put a different title on it about five years or four years after the publication because I knew that it was fine for

the moment, but I wanted my story back, and I wanted to rewrite it and put into this book, which I did do.²

Q: I would like to ask you a few questions about your novels. In an interview you said that you were interested in poets who take an inordinate interest in form. “I love form”, you said.³ What about form in the novel? Are you concerned about form in novels as you might be in poems?

A: Yes, in the sense that I tend to control and therefore with the novels, with the exception of the novel *The Story of the Night*, which is written in the first person and therefore has to try and get the sort of flow and freedom of a voice speaking to you or whispering to you, and therefore the formal qualities are not so important as the tone of the voice of the novel, but with the exception of that novel I would have planned out in my head, often not in writing but I would know what form I was going to take and most strictly in the novel *The Heather Blazing* which is 17 chapters, which is in three parts and it has alternate chapters, which means it begins in the present, then the past, then the present, then the past, and it is controlled formally like that. I thought at the end that that system was too crudely formal and so I opened it up with *The Story of the Night* a bit more and then closed it a bit more with *The Blackwater Lightship*.

I’m terribly interested, in the same way as I talked earlier about not boring people, in how much information you need to give, how much you need to slow down a story, how much you stop that part and get on with the next part, and that that actually is form, that you are actually working on a formal structure, and that I do try and make that as graceful as I possibly can, and I’m interested in that idea of having a form that is worked out, controlled and not loose.

Q: Could you tell me something about *The Blackwater Lightship*, this family who gathers around one of the members who is dying, coming to terms with the past within the family ... isn’t that a common topic in recent Irish novels?

2. The last story in *Finbar’s Hotel* is the first one in Colm Tóibín’s book, *Mothers and Sons*.

3. Interview with Colm Tóibín. <http://www.colmtoibin.com/biography/qanda/CTBioQ.htm> (Accessed September 2008)

A: Yes. I had written *The Story of the Night*, which is set in Argentina and deals with large issues to do with dictatorship, how society becomes democratic after dictatorship, the silences during the dictatorship and the sort of large issues to do with political corruption. So, often one novel is a reaction to the previous one, and I wanted to go back home and it’s very much set where I’m from and it’s very much set in the literary tradition that I am from. It’s quite close, actually, if you look to Kate O’Brien’s novel *The Anteroom*, in other words, someone’s dying, it’s over a few days, there’s sexual intrigue going on. I decided that if I kept going with an international subject like *The Story of the Night* I would lose myself in trying to be famous or trying to be rich, trying to be successful, but I thought that if I wrote about the least promising subject, an Irish family in rural Ireland, over 6 days only six people with a boy dying and his grandmother, I thought that this will interest no one much. I wrote it quite quickly, quicker than the other books, in other words it took 6 months to write, which is for me really unusual. It came very fast, I was using things that I knew very well but I certainly had no very high hopes. I was introducing an ingredient into the Irish novel, which has not really been introduced very much before, it’s in some John Broderick, it’s in some Kate O’Brien, but the theme of homosexuality remains dynamite, not so much maybe now because things have even in the last nine years have come out, changed really quickly. But in 1999 to publish that book and to make a big fuss about it so that a lot of people decided that they’d have to read it, I actually realised somehow for Ireland it would matter a lot. The French might just think it was an old fashioned book, but in Ireland it wouldn’t be, because of that ingredient.

Q: When Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* was published there was not a great scandal.

A: *At Swim, Two Boys* was set in 1916, and it was a historical novel. *The Blackwater Lightship* is about a family, confronting the very issues which Irish society itself was confronting. Almost in the same ways of half confronting a traffic norm than discussing them, pretending they’re not happening, so it was very much a drama set.

Q: Do you think it opened the ground for other novelists who came afterwards?

A: I wasn't trying to do that as much as I was trying to exploit the dramatic possibilities of that.

Q: In *The South*, and in some other books, Spain, and more precisely Barcelona, seems to be a vantage point from which to look back to Ireland. What did you find in Spain that was so exotic?

A: If you come from Ireland, Spain, any part of Spain, it doesn't really matter where, is totally exotic. The way people look in the street, the way people use the street, the possession of the street, colours, food, attitudes towards clothes, towards the body, towards sex, towards religion, towards death, towards children, towards old people, towards windows, all of that struck me emotionally really hard when I was twenty years old and I went to live in Barcelona. And then, slowly, the extraordinary tragedy of the Spanish Civil War and there's nothing like it in the twentieth century for just the sheer waste of life on both sides and the savagery of this lovely place that loved festivals, suddenly turning into this terrible place that loved blood and whereas in Germany and in Russia and in Poland there had been pogroms before, so that the attack on the Jewish population that became the holocaust has its roots in history, the Spanish Civil War seemed just so astonishing, so I was interested in that, I was interested in the marks the Civil War had left on the place.

I arrived in Spain just before Franco died and I was there for three years first when democracy came and came so wonderfully, it was like a miracle, the night they legalised the Communist Party, Carrillo came back in from Paris, the night that Tarradellas came back in to Barcelona from the border. All those things were... exciting times. It never was quite clear what, there was enormous sexual excitement, the excitement over food and drink and colours and there was political excitement and it all got mixed up into a super pure excitement and some of that is in *The South*, and there's probably more of it coming, I mean, it takes me a long time to sort of digest things. There's probably more of that period going to come now in the foreseeable future. I had a few things in my head about these years and I put it into a non-fiction book called *Homage to*

Barcelona, and it's in a short story in *Mothers and Sons* called "The Long Winter". Yes, Spain still remains quite real exotic.

Q: Do you keep going there?

A: I have a house in the Catalan Pyrenees and more or less in the village where the woman in "The Long Winter" is going back to, that her brother lives in. I have a house there and I've been going to that village since 1976 and I've had a house there for the last ten or twelve years and I spend about three months of the year there and it's very remote, very rural, it's a good place to work.

Q: The films of Almodóvar must be credited for having projected Spanish culture to the rest of the world, and you have written about Almodóvar. As a Spaniard I am curious to know what is it that makes his films so attractive to non-Spaniards.

A: I think that his recent films are really very good, it's remarkable the change from *Todo sobre mi madre*, even *Volver*. His films have become richer and deeper and the whole way in which he takes homosexuality for granted that he doesn't make a film about the tragedy of homosexuality, he makes a film about the ordinary part of the strange way Spain is.

You know he got his training first in Madrid.⁴ His job was that if you brought in your old telephone, your old bakelite black telephone he would give you a coloured one, so all the women of Madrid came to get a coloured telephone so you get a terribly interesting view of the new Spain even before it was new. And all the buildings he uses are the modern buildings; if it's a prison, it's a modern prison; a hospital, it's a modern hospital; if it's a party, it's a modern party, and he got that sense of the sort of wonderful superficiality of Spanish life on Saturdays of shopping, of fucking, of drinking, of going to parties, of staying out all night that wasn't rooted in the past. People weren't blessing themselves and suddenly Spain became super-modern without ever having become modern. It was moved from becoming medieval to becoming super-modern, without the intervening hundred years.

4. In the 1970s Pedro Almodóvar had a job in Telefónica, the Spanish national phone company.

I suppose that the vision that the world has of Spain is of this old place, old buildings, old traditions, hidalgos, the King, old ladies, mantillas and suddenly he saw the way people lived and how people behaved was so funny, so new, so self-inventive, that the repression led to levels of self-invention which were immensely dramatic and often came out in colour or in people living very funny lives, doing exactly as they pleased, and that was dramatically very interesting.

Q: My last question must go back to literature. Sorry if you have been asked this many times before because of the success of *The Master*, but I would like to ask you what you found fascinating about Henry James to write a book about him.

A: Yes, Henry James did not have a life that was extensively exciting but everything he did was mysterious, in other words, there were levels of ambiguity about everything. And if you're a novelist rather than, say, a film maker, you can work with that because for example his best friends were really women, but he was homosexual; he loved solitude but he went to great numbers of parties; he loved his family but he got away from them as quickly as he

could. He was never a single thing, he was often two things or three things at the same time at war in his character, and he was neither American nor English in the end. He was a puritan from New England who really had no much Puritan feelings but he had a Puritan background. That he was someone who was mainly silent in Rochford. The novelist can work with silence in the way that a film maker or a dramatist can't work with silence. So I found all these things about him really interesting and I could work with them.

José Francisco Fernández is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Almería, Spain. He has edited two books on the short story in English and is co-editor of *Irish Landscapes* (University of Almería, 2003). His publications include the volume *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). His most recent work focuses on the narrative prose of Samuel Beckett and Beckett's reception in Spain, including "A Long Time Coming: The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett in Spain and Portugal", in *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Continuum, 2009).