

Talking with William Trevor: 'It all comes naturally now'

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Fourteen novels, eleven collections of short stories, several novellas, plays and books of memoirs, together with numerous prizes and awards, speak for a life devoted to the craft of fiction. But Mr Trevor is a professional writer who likes to keep a low profile and would rather listen and write than talk about his work. Although extremely gentle and patient in his role of interviewee, he confesses that his craft is instinctive and that he is unable to discuss or analyse whatever meanings, intentions or implications critics and readers may find in his fiction. In a note, he informed me that he did not like and avoided giving interviews but that he was willing to converse with me. What follows is an edited transcription of two telephone conversations with Mr Trevor, held in November and December 2005.

Thanks for your kindness, Mr Trevor, in accepting my request. As I told you in my letter, my interest lies in ethical questions, personal relationships and the human condition as it appears in your work.

I'm also interested in what you are interested in.

Because, well, some critical studies of your fiction tend to take your novels and many short stories, especially the ones set in Ireland, as allegories of Irish history, of Anglo-Irish relationships or of the legacy of colonialism.¹ And this in spite of the fact that you have said that you are not a metaphorical writer (Aronson 1999: 42) and that your intention is not that of writing allegorically.

I think that really I'm a storyteller. The point is that the way a story or novel strikes critics and readers in general after I've written is really up

to them. They may find allegory or anything else that I haven't put in and that wasn't my aim at all. But, if they find anything in what I write which I haven't intended, it doesn't matter. That is what writing is all about. It's all about creating something which is then picked up, as it were, by other people. The most important thing for me is to communicate, with, well, at least one person.

Sometimes your stories have a performative aspect. That is, they make the reader think. And not only that, but, at least in my case, many situations, attitudes or actions in your fiction reflect episodes that I find familiar, that I have lived as well. And, while reading, I feel in some way that I'm going through those experiences again.

Yes. That's very good of you to say that because they should make you think and when they do, they work. When they don't, they don't work so well. I don't do anything more than write about people. If by chance, if on the way, I illuminate human nature in some way, well that's perfect.

¹ See, for example, Tracy 1999; Harte and Pettitt 2000; Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2003 and McDonald 2005.

There is, as an example, a story I read a while ago, “Mrs Silly” (1992)² where there is this boy at school ashamed of his mother. And I remembered being 13 or 14 and not wanting to be seen with my mother, being ashamed of her. So the story made me relive those times and feelings and reflect on them.

It’s quite a common thing, I think, in children, the feeling of shame. I write about things because I want to find out more about them. I write almost entirely from a sense of curiosity. I’m a very curious person, and since I want to know the answers, the only way I can do it is to actually write a story, and at the end of the story I know a little bit more about, for instance, the way in which mothers or fathers embarrass children. That boy’s attitude in “Mrs Silly” may not matter: it’s not something that is deep, it’s not the end of the world. But at the time of course it seems the end of the world to him. That is what the excitement of that story is.

Of course, later on you overcome that feeling, but that boy in that story is fully ashamed of his mother and then experiences a sense of guilt acknowledging his feelings for his mother. It’s not so easy to pin down the reason why you may feel ashamed of your parents.

Yes, yes. All you’ve said is kind of grist to the storyteller’s mill, really, because guilt is a marvellous subject to write about. Shame and desire, all those things can almost automatically turn a plot into a story when you’ve found the right characters to present them to the reader. You have to have your characters. That particular story you’ve mentioned could have been written about a much older either girl or boy, or in fact the other way round altogether. I mean, the embarrassment that sometimes parents have because of their children. But I didn’t choose to do that, although one has all those options and that’s what makes life exciting.

In your stories family relationships are frequently difficult, as if there were a kind of mismatching between parents and

children, and also between husbands and wives; as if everybody wanted to be a different person or to be with a different person.

Yes, it’s a very interesting area and you could see why one is curious about it. I write, for instance, a lot about women out of straight curiosity, because, not being a woman, I don’t know, and the only way I can find out the things that puzzle me is to write about them. When I write a story about women, I always hope to get it right and be true in what I am saying, but in some way the story does it for me. I can always tell if a story is working or not. If it’s not working, I put it away. If it is, I just finish it. I’m very instinctive in what I do. I’m almost entirely an instinctive writer.

Yes. You have frequently said that you are not an intellectual writer and that you don’t like to analyse your work.

No, not at all, I rely on my instinct rather than my brains.

You seem to like eaves-dropping and listening in to people, and there are many characters in you fiction that are very curious as well, maybe resembling in some way the position of the writer, of the maker of fictions.

You have to have sympathy; a part of listening is sympathy. At the same time, I’m not a very gregarious person; I’m very shy. The very fact that I have difficulty quite often with people is a good thing for me because it seems that I happen to have a very beady eye. I’m very interested in people, in anyone. I’m interested in people in shops, people I don’t know at all, or on the street. I make up disgraceful stories about them just by guessing. And that’s how it works. The way I think I write is by creating the actual raw material of fiction first of all, rather rapidly, very quickly, and then this has to be turned into a story or novel. I get quite a lot of manuscripts that people send me, young people asking me what I think of them. And almost all of them are still raw material which hasn’t been pushed or stretched or chopped up in order to give it form. What they’ve done is just to start the job but they haven’t completed it. You have to start with a mess, which is rather like the mess we all live in in the world, you know. You start with that mess and you really have got to create for yourself in your fiction. And then, the next thing you do is to

² If not otherwise stated, references to Trevor’s short stories will be to the 1992 Penguin edition of *The Collected Stories*.

make that palatable for the reader. The reader is terribly, terribly important because without the reader, as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing. It's a kind of relationship, sometimes almost a friendship.

You see your short-story writing as a way of grafting pattern and order on chaotic raw material. But you established a difference in an interview (Stout 1989: 139) between the novel and the short story. The novel imitates life and is more chaotic for you; it seems to you that you cannot round off novels or complete them in the same way you can do with short stories.

Well, that is true. The two forms are completely different for me. I'm really a short-story writer but I'm lucky that I write novels as well because when you get tired of the one form and you can't write in short stories – you know, I have to write every day because I get depressed if I don't, and I get sort of tired of one short story after another – then it's lovely to turn to the novel. Then when you have been grappling with a novel for months or even years sometimes, it's very nice to push it aside and go back to the short story. I'm very lucky in that respect. It's just a piece of nice good fortune for me.

I would like to ask you now about the endings of your novels, more particularly about the choices the characters make, for example, Tom in *The Silence in the Garden* (1988), or Felicia in *Felicia's Journey* (1994) or Lucy in *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002). Why is it that they choose to renounce a very valuable part of human life: love, sex, the possibility of a home and a family? Is it out of guilt or out of stoicism? Is it their way of transcending history?

It's very difficult for me to answer this question. I'm very bad at analysing what I write. I can't do it. It's rather like a tennis player who can't analyse why he or she is a good tennis player. You can't study it. It's the opposite of being an academic. I don't talk an awful lot about what I write. You mightn't think so, since just now, here am I talking to you, but I don't do it very much. I keep pretty quiet because you can talk it out of existence. The other and even better answer is: "I don't know, I really don't know". I might invent an answer for the question you've asked me which I could believe to be true but I don't think it probably is.

It seems that mystery is for you one of the most valuable things in life. There is in your fiction this feeling of ordinary life as being ineffable. This sense of mystery is also quite well worked out in your use of suspense and surprise, your fondness for thriller structures and conventions in narratives that are not thrillers, and in the way you distribute the information. For example, I remember this short story with a shocking ending, "The Teddy-bears' Picnic" (1992), or "Solitude" in your last collection *A Bit on the Side* (2004); how we learn the truth slowly and gradually in this case.

By mystery I mean something that we don't understand, and I do think that it's a very important part of life not to understand things. I use all the resources you have mentioned just now, but not deliberately. It just happens to be the way I write a story. To me, even talking to you now, it's very difficult to be abstract about it. It's much easier to just simply do it and get on with it. What I can say is that mystery does interest me because it is a very interesting quality in people: their struggle with mystery and what they make of it, and the illusions that they actually have to dream up in order to tell themselves or to convince themselves that they have solved what appeared to be a mystery. Because in order to do that you need to solve apparently the mystery of God and I think that's not necessary. I think it's best left the way it is. But I'm running against what most people want to do. It's the observation of that, of people's bewilderments and despair that really fuels my ability as a writer. First of all, I'm interested in people, I'm very curious about people and I write out of this sense of straight, ordinary curiosity. I want to find out myself. That's why, as I've told you before, I write so much about women. I find women good to write about because for me it's a strange world and I like strange worlds. I like entering, as it were, in those places which I don't know enough about and I want to find out more. This is not an overwhelming part of my writing equipment. I don't settle down to do that sort thing with something in mind. It comes naturally and, as I've said to you, I am a storyteller; I want to tell stories and I like telling stories and I do what I like. I'm always a little bit nervous that people will take me too seriously, because for me it's a rather simple activity. You are sitting down in the very early morning – I get up very early now because it's

the best time of day – and I write for a couple of hours. If I get some work done, well and good, though sometimes I don't get any words that sound so good but it doesn't really matter. One does not have to become bleak and depressed about it. I know lots of much more important things to become bleak and depressed about. You know, it's like painting a picture. You just do it. I used to be a sculptor and, in a way, it's a very similar activity. It doesn't have an academic side, it doesn't have a side in which I work everything out beforehand and then sit down and write a novel or a short story. I write a novel or a short story without knowing where on earth it is going. All I've got is possibly a couple of characters – sometimes not even that in the case of a short story, but just half a character – and just see where it takes me. It's a mixture then, but it's such an untidy mixture that it's very difficult to discuss. What I say to young writers if they ask me is: "Don't mistake the raw material of a novel or short story for the actual novel or short story". You, first of all, begin with the raw material, as if it were a piece of life, and then you have a huge job to transform that into a shape, a form, a composition which your reader will understand. So, you are talking all the time directly to a reader. You should have that relationship in mind all the time. If you lose touch with it, you have to stop and put your typewriter away for the day.

Is goodness always a greater mystery than evil, as Felicia muses at the end of the novel (1994: 213)?

It's true, that's the idea. Goodness is much less interesting to write about but it is a much more interesting quality in a person. Evil – a little bit in inverted commas that word evil – is much more fun. You really have to get inside, not only the person you're writing about. You are a kind of ham actor, a bad actor, but you do act out the characters so that you imagine anyway that you really know that person very well and that you become that person as you're writing about him or her. And, somehow or other, you also have to imagine the reader reading this. Again, I would say to young writers: "Be very careful not to underestimate the reader". The reader is a highly important person and you have to simply realise that it is a relationship which is half on the writer's side and half on the reader's, and I stress the word half. One cannot exist without the other.

Do you have any kind of special reader in mind?

Any old reader will do.

You also seem to value intimacy and respect for other people's breathing spaces. There are many stories, like "The Hotel of the Idle Moon" (1992) – a story I found really unsettling – or "Broken Homes" (1992) – about an old woman, Mrs Malby, who has these unruly youngsters getting into her house and painting her kitchen yellow and blue without her wanting it – where we find figures that erupt in one's life suddenly with awfully harmful consequences.

I think in all the writing of fiction there is a little bit of anger sometimes, but again it's something which you mustn't really let get out of control. If you write very angrily, it's not going to work, because you have to balance the good bit of a person and the bad bit of a person. You can't really take sides there. You are a reporter and it's very important I think to ... It's very difficult for me to talk about this because, now at my age it's something I've been doing for such a long time. It's a very natural process and I'm not aware of any rules. There are no laws or rules in writing fiction. Only the rules you make yourself, but there are no general rules. That's why I don't particularly think that creative writing works. I mean, the teaching of creative writing.

Yet these courses and schools of creative writing have become very popular and fashionable. They have spread like mushrooms everywhere.

Yes. There's a huge number of them, which means also that there's a lot of moneymaking. They may be there for someone whose manuscripts have been returned over and over again by the publishers and the last resort is that of going to a creative writing school to see if they can put your work right. But they can't put it right. It can't be done. It can only be done by the writer. The person who must be the judge of his own stuff is the actual person who writes about things.

There are no rules in fiction and it seems that there are no rules in life as well. The question of truth seems to be complex in your work. Is truth always necessary or desirable, or could living in error and self-deception prove to be a better option?

The most important thing in living is the truth, but, of course, in writing about people you

don't just make that statement over and over again. What you do is that you just wonder what happens to people who never tell the truth at all, who are great liars and see the word differently. All that is very interesting and again it's difficult to discuss at random and in an abstract way. I'm very careful not to make statements so as not to find that maybe I'm actually contradicting what I've written. When I write a story, I don't particularly do anything but try to make a point. You don't have to have a plot in a short story but you do have to have a point. There must be a point to the story. And that's all I set out to do. And I will use anything in order to do that – that's the professional short story writer talking. I will use all the tricks of the trade I have at my command in order to get to that point. I don't particularly mind how much mendacity or anything else happens on the way. I believe that my point is a true point and I'm aiming at that truth all the time. You may've noticed that at the end of my short stories, always in the last couple of lines, there's actually something that might well be the point of that particular story. That's the way I think as I'm writing. But I often don't know what that point is until I get to the last couple of lines. And often I have quite a job worrying that out and I put the story away maybe for a year and come back to it and then I find it. And all that is the excitement of writing, which I'm very fond of.

Are you working now on a new novel or collection of short stories?

I really write individual short stories and publish them first in the *New Yorker*. So, what I do is that I write them and when I've got about fifteen or sixteen I choose twelve – there's always twelve in my collections. The twelve ones are not necessarily the best ones, but the ones that balance best, that go together best. Short stories tend to be full or repetition, rather like a Renaissance painter who will endlessly paint Mother and Child. The same picture over and over again. But of course, one hopes to disguise it.

Yes, sometimes it seems that you are concerned with a similar issue but you see it from different angles, so it's not exactly the same. It's more like a variation.

That's right. Exactly, it is a variation. At the same time, if you have twelve variations and they sort of touch one another and you see that they don't work too well in the collection, at

least the stories should work individually. I do that, and as well as that I am a very lucky person because if I get tired of the short form I just then turn to the novel and do some more on the novel. So, I always really have two things going.

So now you are working on a new novel as well?

Yes, although as I get older I think there will be fewer novels, if any more, after this one, because they are very hard to write after a certain age. You simply can carry a short story much better in your mind than you can a lengthy novel. V. S. Pritchett, who was a very good short story writer, pointed this out to me years ago before he died, and he was quite right.

One last thing, out of curiosity on my part. I've seen that you pay a lot of attention to food in your work.

Yes, I do. Don't I?

Are you a good cook?

I used to do a bit of cooking, but I don't really do it any more.

But you appreciate food, don't you?

I don't like nasty food and it seems to me that if you are going to eat you might as well eat something nice. But also, the other thing about food is that the food a person eats, or the food you describe that person eating, can establish that person. It tells you something about that person, in the same way as the decoration of a room does.

And you pay a lot of attention to those details.

It's true, and I used to pay even more attention than I do now, but I still do it, to the actual trade names of ordinary articles, like packets of cigarettes or beer. I think that the choice of wine is important, for example. It might tell you something immediately. And I like all those very quick things. They're rather like snapshots, like photographs. You've got them flashing on in you mind and you know exactly what two people are going to order. Again, boringly, I have to say that it all comes naturally now.

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