

## “Under the Skin of the Story”: An Interview with Lia Mills

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**Lia Mills** is an Irish novelist, short-story writer and essayist born in Dublin. She has lived in London and in the USA, but in 1990 returned to her native city to stay and pursue a writing life. Her debut novel, *Another Alice* (Poolbeg, 1996), was an immediate success. Nominated for *The Irish Times* literary award, it develops, as Gerry Smyth has pointed out, “central concerns” of Irish fiction, such as “the family, madness, dreams, gender and nation – pulling them together into an ultimately enabling vision of the role of women in modern Ireland” (Smyth 1997: 93). Her diasporic experience somehow impinges on her second novel, *Nothing Simple* (Penguin Ireland, 2005), about the difficulties encountered by an Irish family on their arrival in North America and which was shortlisted for the “Irish Novel of the Year” at the inaugural Irish Book Awards. In 2006 Lia Mills was diagnosed with oral cancer. Her experiences during the treatment of this threatening illness are collected in her memoir, *In Your Face* (Penguin Ireland, 2007), critically acclaimed and described by Anne Enright as a life-changing book.

Lia Mills is currently working on a historical novel and has published numerous short-stories and essays in literary journals like *The Stinging Fly* and *The Dublin Review*. She has lectured in University College Dublin and often facilitates creative writing workshops. Lia Mills’ varied literary production is a good example of the strength and energies of modern Irish fiction.

**Key Words.** Lia Mills, Irish fiction, exile, immigration, sexual abuse, illness, memoir, creative processes.

**Lia Mills**, escritora nacida en Dublín, es autora de novelas, cuentos y ensayos. Tras vivir en Londres y en los Estados Unidos, regresó a su ciudad natal en 1990 para quedarse e iniciar una carrera literaria. Su primera novela, *Another Alice* (Poolbeg, 1996), resultó un éxito inmediato. Fue nominada para el premio literario *The Irish Times* y Gerry Smyth la destacó como una obra que desarrolla las principales preocupaciones temáticas de la narrativa irlandesa – la familia, los sueños, el género y la nación – para ofrecer una interesante perspectiva sobre la mujer de la Irlanda del momento (Smyth 1997: 93). Su experiencia diaspórica se muestra, de algún modo, en su segunda novela, *Nothing Simple* (Penguin Ireland, 2005), finalista como novela del año en los *Irish Book Awards*. Le diagnosticaron un cáncer oral en 2006, una experiencia que recoge en sus memorias, *In Your Face* (Penguin Ireland, 2007), libro nuevamente aclamado por la crítica y descrito por Anne Enright como un texto que cambió su vida.

Lia Mills es autora de numerosas narraciones cortas y ensayos que han aparecido en revistas literarias como *The Stinging Fly* y *The Dublin Review*. Fue profesora en *University College Dublin* y con frecuencia ofrece talleres de escritura creativa. Actualmente trabaja en una novela histórica.

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1. I wish to acknowledge my participation in the Research Projects FFI2009-08475/FILO and INCITE09 204127PR for the study of contemporary Irish and Galician women writers.

Su variada producción literaria es un ejemplo claro de la fuerza creativa de la ficción irlandesa actual.

**Palabras clave.** Lia Mills, narrativa irlandesa, exilio, inmigración, abusos sexuales, enfermedad, memorias, proceso creativo.

**Your literary output is striking in its variety. Your first two novels, *Another Alice* and *Nothing Simple*, are very different in subject matter and in style. I believe the novel you are currently working on is, again, of a very different nature. With *In Your Face* you moved into the genre of the memoir. You have also explored the essay and the short story. This variety adds to the attractiveness of your work. We can't easily say that a given piece is a signature Lia Mills. Does this reflect a passion for change and experimentation in your career?**

Well, no one wants to write the same thing twice – what would be the point? A novel, by definition, should be new. When I was writing *In Your Face*, the memoir, one of my daughter's friends asked me a great question: "Has there ever been a book like it before?" I didn't think there had been and that spurred me on, feeling that I had a real contribution to make to the existing literature on cancer.

Having said that, I don't consciously have a passion for change or experiment. I'm a bit wary of writing that is too experimental. It can lose the run of itself altogether, disappear into its own self-importance – and that just gets in the way, in the end. It seems to be more about the writer than about what is written.

**In spite of your heterogeneous production, we can pinpoint three themes as particularly pervasive in your short fiction: Old age, problematic adolescence, and the displaced Irish in America, this last subject also explored in *Nothing Simple*. Do these thematic interests respond to biographical concerns or to the need to cover areas not sufficiently explored in Irish literature?**

The question makes writing seem so clinical! It's hard to answer. I was definitely a problematic adolescent, but I haven't been an old woman (yet). But that's not completely honest, either. My mother had Alzheimer's disease for 15 cruel years. Spending time with her in her last years inevitably meant witnessing the deterioration of other elderly

people too. At the same time, I was lucky enough to know a remarkable man, my godfather, who lived a vigorous, independent and intellectually curious and active life well into his 80s, a wonderful role model. I had lost touch with him, and met him again when I was working in UCD and he was collecting a Ph.D. I think it was his third. He'd have been in his 70s then. Basically, after he retired from the career he'd worked at all his life, he began a new life, of study and travel. The contrast set me thinking. How people age makes a fascinating subject. People say "not me" and "never" when you mention nursing homes or the extreme dependence and vulnerabilities of old age – but all of those elderly people who *are* dependent, through no fault of their own, were young once. They thought and said those same things too.

As for the experience of displacement, and questions of identity and belonging – these are concerns for everyone – aren't they? Is it just me?

Wait. That's what I want to say, and I do assume it's true, that these questions are an integral part of human understanding, common to all of us. What probably began as a need to find our way back to the right cave before darkness fell and the wolves showed up seems to have evolved into an interest in locating ourselves on every conceivable axis, spatial and otherwise. Maybe that's why "place" is such an obsession with so many writers. But, if I'm completely honest, I can trace some of the cracks in my own experience of place and displacement, identity and belonging. Here's an example: This will probably sound strange to any sane, twenty-first century European, but when I was growing up I had a minor chip on my shoulder about my name – it wasn't Irish enough, and I felt defensive about it. The irony is that my grandfathers' names, i.e. the surnames I knew, are names commonly seen as English (Mills, Hart), but my grandmothers' names are as Irish as a long, wet summer: Kelly, Dunne, Kavanagh. I didn't discover that until I was in my forties and went looking for the grandmothers.

I came from a "whatever you say, say nothing" sort of background, and there were many things we weren't supposed to talk about. Including, for example, the fact that my father joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) when the Second World War broke out. Ireland was

officially neutral during that war; we didn't even refer to it as a war, it was the "Emergency". It didn't do to advertise, once it was over, that you'd been wearing a British uniform. Both of my parents were born in significant years: My mother in 1914, my father in 1916, the year of the Rising. They were very young Dublin children during the First World War, the War of Independence and the Civil War. They must have seen a lot. They certainly learned to keep their mouths shut. There were vexed questions to do with religion and class. All this was thick in the air when I was growing up, even though none of it was ever talked about. My father died in 1964 and soon afterwards my brother followed his earlier footsteps, into the RAF. It was nearly 50 years ago. He was just a kid. A lot of young Irish men still went into the British army then, for the opportunities it offered in terms of work and training. Maybe they still do. A few years later, Northern Ireland erupted and my sisters and I had our own reasons to keep our mouths shut. Well. You can make too much of these things. But they do make the swamps of adolescence difficult to cross.

As for the thematic concerns, it's not that I look around for subjects that haven't been covered. If only it was that easy! It's more that your stories and subjects choose you. They come at you out of nowhere and bowl you over and there's nowhere to go but down.

**Going back to how different your three published books are ... Do you remember what triggered them or what challenges you wanted to face at the time?**

I'm interested in layers of identity, how we construct our selves, how stories are told. In *Another Alice*, for example, the challenge of the novel, for me, was about how to bring together the various layers of Alice's understanding of who she is. How would she discover and tell her story when it was only available to her in fragments, the most urgent of which had always been denied? And how could she live her life until she gathered the different layers together and accepted them? *Nothing Simple* was an exploration of how to make a new self in a bewildering new context, the "new" there being both marriage and life in a new environment. I've written quite a lot about different forms of violence – which can be subtle (denial of self, for example) – and a lot about relationships, especially friendship,

and relations between men and women, mothers and children. A lot about the confusions of young mothers.

With any story, there's the question what's it about? And immediately after that comes, what's it *really* about? – which is often more interesting, if less obvious.

*In Your Face*, for example, is about one woman's experience of the diagnosis of and treatment for mouth cancer, but it's really about how to pay attention to the life you have while you're lucky enough to have it. It's about discovering the will to live. And learning how to lighten up about it – I think it's quite a funny book. It might sound frightening, but there are some hilarious moments in it.

***Another Alice* was very well received by the critics. Also, the subject matter was urgent at the time it was written. I suppose that, in a way, the novel came out of your need to add to the heated debates about women's bodies and rights that were taking place in Ireland in the nineties?**

I remember the moment when I knew I would write *Another Alice* – although I didn't know exactly what it would be yet. It's a bit like finding out you're pregnant. You haven't a clue what's ahead of you, you've no idea who's going to emerge at the end of it all, but you do know that you're pregnant, and you'd better get used to the idea, because the whole process is going to take awhile.

**Which reminds me of your description of pregnancy in *Another Alice*, when Alice realises she is expecting and there is no escape from that feeling: "When Alice conceived Holly, she knew it at once. She felt a deep shock of fusion, electric. ... Of course, when the vibrations stopped and she came back to herself and her surroundings and breathed normally again, she told herself this was all nonsense. But she knew, all the same" (1996: 151).**

Yes, that's right. So, I was sitting in a friend's kitchen one morning, reading the paper. We were staying there for the weekend. The sun was pouring into the room, there were gallons of tea in the pot and people were chatting, the way you do over the papers at the weekend. It was 1992 – not a good year to be a woman in Ireland. We had a series of high-profile sexual abuse and rape cases, a number of women were murdered; it was the year of the X-case. There

was so much opinion flying around they practically had to divert air-traffic away from the country, to avoid disaster. Personal opinion, private opinion, loud public opinion and professional, judicial and legislative opinion. It was everywhere. And this one morning, I was reading an account of a rape trial. The defence counsel made a statement where he referred to “the mere question of consent”.

The mere question of consent.

Well.

Here’s the thing. In Ireland, if a woman is raped and the case goes to court, she is not entitled to legal representation. She goes to court as a witness. Now, I’m not a lawyer, but it seems to me that in that instance, a woman who has brought a charge of rape is put in a witness box to face questions from a person defending the accused, a person who is highly educated, highly trained, extremely well-paid, and whose job it is to make her sound like a liar.

The mere question of consent.

In that one instant, everything stopped. Reading that phrase and thinking about the education, the training, the power and the privilege, and not forgetting the money, I thought: It’s impossible for anyone to hear what’s really happened to this woman. There’s too much noise, too many pronouncements like this one, actually *designed*, and I mean *calculated*, to stop us thinking about the crime behind the headlines. And I thought – someone needs to tell the story from the point of view of the person who has been hurt. It needs to be told in such a way that people will set their prejudices and their pre-conceived ideas aside and enter the story with that person, go to the places she has to go, see what she sees and feel what she feels. To really get under the skin of the experience. And it seemed to me that only fiction could achieve that. I’ve always thought of reading as a magical process, like osmosis. A reader is drawn in behind the lines of a story to worlds they may never visit in their own lives – or ever want to. They can enter a character’s experience through an extraordinary process of empathy. If a novel works, it might reveal things a reader never dreamed of before – or it might show familiar, everyday things in a new light that changes how the reader thinks about them.

**When *Another Alice* came out, Irish women writers were determined to clear a space for their creativity. The label “Irish woman writer” had a role to play and was very useful then. Would you say that the label is outdated in this time and age? Does it bother you?**

The thing is: I’m Irish, I’m a woman, I’m a writer. There’s not much to get exercised about. Except: How often do you hear Joseph O’Connor or Sebastian Barry or Colm Tóibín described as an “Irish man writer”? *That* is the problem. The qualifier. What does “woman” mean in that description? Does it mean that a person writes fiction that will only appeal to women? Be read by women? Does it make it less interesting? The suggestion seems to be that everyone on the planet will be interested in what’s written by a man, but the same doesn’t apply to women. I’m not sure why. I have my theories, mind.

I do think some writers (of all genders) restrict themselves to addressing subject matter that is familiar and relates to their experience only. I’m not sure if it’s confidence, or courage or energy that’s lacking – on the other hand, people write what they write, and that’s based on whatever questions they have to ask, of themselves and of the world. It’s based on interest and curiosity – and once the thing is written, it requires a reader’s curiosity and imagination to take it further.

I think the real problem comes at the reception end of the scale. When I write, I’m not thinking “I’m an Irish woman, writing”. I just do it – although, obviously, what I know of the world is filtered by my experience as an Irish woman. I would hope that what I write is of interest to both men and women and certainly to people outside of Ireland. Writing is about what it means to be human, to be alive, and should have resonance far beyond the chair you sit in while you do it. I don’t write only for an Irish audience, or only for women. And I read whatever catches my interest, not just what comes to hand from my own shelves – where’s the challenge in that?

But there’s a larger conversation that happens about books, a level beyond the individual reader-writer encounter, and that’s where critics – reviewers and academics – take up the conversation and amplify it and suggest that it has interest and value to other people

who might not otherwise be aware of it. That's where the tags of nationality and gender can come in to play, that's where the faultlines are – they can work for or against you, depending on the context – but it's outside your control. It doesn't bother me. It used to, when I worked in that field and felt I had a contribution to make to the discussion, and could raise the profile of other women writers. Now I just want to do the writing. Let the arguments happen elsewhere.

**Your short story “Flight”, recently published in *The Stinging Fly*, is a contemporary re-working of an old Irish myth: “The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne”. The Ireland you have written that story from is a place of political turmoil, social unrest and economic downturn. There is the contention that old myths are mostly revisited at times of instability because they can help people recover some sense of identity. Do you think this is a particularly appropriate time for recovering old Irish traditions? Can they be of any help in the midst of the general crisis that is permeating Irish identity right now?**

I love conversations about tradition, because there is this whole other subversive meaning that percolates underneath it, which is about surrender and betrayal – and that's what I like to listen out for. The counterpoint. The root of the word “tradition” is *tradere*, to hand over or deliver. A *traditor* is a traitor. Did you know that? But in the sense of your question ... It can be a risky business, to dust off and revive old traditions. Victorious chieftains used to wear the heads of their enemies slung from a belt around their waist. I'd be wary of reintroducing that one right at the minute; people are pretty angry about what's going on!

Seriously, that story was written for a very specific purpose<sup>2</sup> – I grew up on the old stories and loved them. In my brief, deluded, pursuit of an academic career I came across them again, like old friends turning up in a new setting where friends were badly needed. My area of research was turn of the (last) century Irish women writers, and I focused on their use of and re-interpretations of the mythology with

specific reference to the representation of Ireland as a woman. That meant I spent a lot of time thinking about the stories, and reading different versions. I had my own ideas about them – and as the level of crime and corruption in politics has risen through the early years of the 21st century, the parallels kept nudging me. The Fianna were a law unto themselves; they had their own lethal codes, took what they wanted, killed who they willed, went where they would. They treated the whole island like their playground. Not a million miles away from certain criminal gangs – and politicians, come to think of it. Crime and politics – well. Anyone can make their own connections. I'd often thought that I'd like to rewrite the *Tóraíocht Dhiarmuid agus Gráinne*, or “The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne”, from Grainne's point of view. Not to make her a feminist mouthpiece, but just to put her at the centre of her own story and let rip. What would it sound like told in her voice? So when the opportunity arose, I took it. I am not the first person to re-write a myth or a fairytale; I certainly won't be the last – but it was a lot of fun to do, a complete romp to write, exhilarating ... Now I'm working on another one. It's interesting, though, that “Flight”, the story you mention, is written from the point of view of the problematic adolescent; the one I'm writing now is from the point of view of – guess – an old woman. When the stories have moved on without her.

Sorry, I'm wandering off the point again ... If you're asking can the old stories help, the answer is yes, and no. They won't help much if you're waiting for the banks to put you out of your house, or if you're wondering if there's enough food to get your family through to the next paycheck. But it does help if we can re-enter familiar territory, territory we call home, and see that there's life there, and hope, and that new meanings can still be found from old material. Because we're in the process of looking for new ways to live, and there's a lot of negative press about “Ireland”, both at home and abroad. So if we can use “Irish” material and make it fresh and vibrant, infuse it with new energy, that's a good thing, yes. It's interesting that at the turn of the last century (i.e. c. 1900) there was a huge interest in these stories, at a time when people were busy claiming and inventing an “Irish” identity – and that was all about valuing Ireland too, bringing people to a point where they could be

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2. Lia Mills wrote “Flight” for a reading in aid of OneInFour, a charity which helps victims of sexual violence – according to the statistics, one in four people in Ireland.

proud of an identity that had been generally ignored, overlooked, denied – even despised. But I wasn't thinking "Ireland" when I wrote the story. I was thinking about Aisling – the girl-with-attitude – (and heart) – in the story. Not the icon, who is much more problematic, for me.

**Point of view is clearly one of your artistic concerns. In a recent posting in your blog you have commented on the opening line of "Flight" and its intertextual connections with Herman Melville's iconic opening line "Call me Ishmael".<sup>3</sup> When critically assessing a work of literature, we tend to trace connections between texts, some of which may be deliberate on the part of the writer but many of which may never have crossed the author's mind. In a way, this may have something to do with the author's literary preferences and tradition/s. I am aware this is too big a question but ... I am wondering if there are any writers that have been major influences for you over the years? Would they be mostly Irish or would your literary taste be more international?**

Oh, the anxiety of influence. There's quicksand in it, and radioactive metals – if I say I've been influenced by X or Y, does that mean I'm claiming an association? Is there arrogance at work there? How do I even know who's left traces in my work, who's busy in my dreams? And if I did know, would that mean I set out to imitate or steal from them? Sometimes I think this question is a bit like a Rorschach test, and it's more the business of a critic to trace or suggest (or imagine?) the influences. As a reader, I'm like blotting paper. I soak everything up until it blurs, loses its original shape. Memorable characters, scenes and lines become part of my inner landscape, like people I've known ... but when I write, I'm thinking about how to find my own way under the skin of *this* story, the one I want to tell, and how best to tell it. I've no interest in how someone else would do it, and if I thought that someone already had, in a way that satisfied my own curiosity, I wouldn't waste my time on it, I'd go and read it instead.

I see the whole of literary and artistic culture as one long – no, several, unending conversations,

where someone here might pick up an echo of a phrase or image written by someone there, and spin it into something new, or put it to fresh use, as Jean Rhys did, say, or Angela Carter. You can enter this conversation anywhere and hang around to listen for a while, maybe make a contribution, then move on. I don't feel indebted to any one writer in particular, but to all of them, to everyone I've ever read and admired or envied, and that's a pretty long list. I'm a "love the one you're with" kind of reader. I may be promiscuous, but I'm attentive to the book-of-the-moment. And I'll read anything, once.

But I could talk about individual books and writers who opened doors in my mind, the "I didn't know you could do that!" effect. For example, when I was a teenager, three writers came my way in quick succession. All three happened to be Irish, and novelists, but in the previous years, I'd gone through periods of immersion in other literatures: Russian, French, German, English; and other forms: Poetry, plays, essays. Thinking about it now, it might have been the effect of coming home to strangeness that blew my mind open. First came Flann O'Brien. I found him thrilling, hilarious and irresistible. For years, *The Third Policeman* was my once-a-year read. I brought it with me when I moved to London, aged 17, and later to the States. It was my touchstone, my "home" book. Next came Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and John McGahern's *The Dark*. The truth that broke through in those two novels electrified me. They were both banned, of course. And both writers suffered terrible consequences in Ireland as a result of what they wrote. Edna O'Brien was read from the pulpit, her books were burned. So far as I know, she has never lived in Ireland since. She visits, but doesn't live here. McGahern lost his job as a teacher – but he didn't leave. He became a farmer, and continued to write. The fact that he chose to stay, and continue to write, marked a really profound moment of change for Irish writers. It showed extraordinary courage, really. It's hard for young people now to understand how extremely repressive and bleak the country was, then – even as recently as the 70s, which was when I first read these people.

***Nothing Simple* has been read as a literary exploration of the displaced Irish woman, confronted with a new – at times even**

3. *Moby Dick*. Comment in *Libran Writer*. 29 January. <http://libranwriter.wordpress.com/> [retrieved 29/01/2011].

**hostile – environment in the United States. However, the novel was published in 2005, a time when debates around “othering” and migration were paramount due to the unprecedented arrival of migrant communities in Ireland. I have contended elsewhere that *Nothing Simple* goes beyond the Irish-in-America theme to raise questions that have to do with migration and with the treatment Irish people, previously “othered” in the States or in the UK, were giving to the newcomers during the Celtic Tiger years. For me the novel invokes the “racialised” past of the Irish in order to help readers empathise with those who were arriving in Ireland at the time to get better living conditions.<sup>4</sup> Was there any conscious decision on your part to participate in such debates with this, your second novel?**

It wasn't so much a decision as a response. At the time, the airwaves were humming with opinion about immigration. Racist graffiti bloomed, an ugly rash, on city walls. I was intrigued by the things people were saying – the way they talked about “economic migrants”. When I was growing up, I don't think there was a single family in Ireland who didn't have someone, at least one person, living and working in another country – probably illegally. It was so pervasive, I don't know that we even thought of it consciously as “emigration” – it was just what we did. We left in search of work. In my own family, 4 out of 6 of us left. I'm the only one who came back. And now here we were, going on about economic migrants as if those were dirty words. Was the whole country suffering amnesia?

Up until the nineties, I don't think it would ever have dawned on us, in Ireland, that anyone would be foolish enough to migrate in our direction, or not for long – what would they come for? Not jobs. Not money or comfort, certainly not the weather. And when my husband, and daughters and I were living in America, and dealing with Immigration and Naturalization Services there, I used to think:

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4. For an assessment of *Nothing Simple* along these lines, see González-Arias' “A Taxonomy of New Modes of Writing in Ireland” (158-165) in González-Arias, et al. (2010: 157-181).

We'd never treat people like this, at home, with such utter contempt. Come to find out, we took to it as though we'd invented it, and added a few refinements of our own. People were forced to queue in the street, rain or shine, when applying for asylum or to have their documents processed. It was a scandal. Nowhere to sit, no facilities, women with young children waiting for hours on end, abusive tirades on phone-in radio shows, cheap headlines – the whole nine yards.

So I wrote all that into the novel, but backwards. *Nothing Simple* is about how people make families and communities from scratch in a new world, away from the more glamorous centres like Boston or New York. I had fun doing it. It felt like working from behind a mirror. I wrote scenes where, for example, a pregnant Irish woman is viewed with suspicious contempt by INS officers on arrival in America ... when at the time, the chat here was all about “non nationals” having babies in Ireland in order to get passports.

In fact, the rhetoric cooled quite quickly as Ireland adjusted to its new, multicultural persona. I think this was probably helped to a great extent by the return of so many people who had lived abroad, but also the whole world seemed to soften and become more permeable at that time, thanks to cheap travel and the Internet and the illusion of easy credit. Ireland became an open country in so many ways. Wide, wide open. It still had its dark side, though. Because we had near-full employment, migration in any direction was less of an issue, but there was some residual muttering about social welfare benefits and passports. Shameful, shaming deportation flights took place in the middle of the night. People are reluctant to talk about these, although there was one great case where schoolchildren protested against the imminent deportation of their classmate and friend, and made such a fuss that they won a stay of execution for him. He was allowed to stay and finish his secondary education – (he had less than a year to go, when the Minister for Education, in his infinite wisdom, decided to turn him out). But that case happened years after *Nothing Simple* came out.

Of course no one picked up on any of these issues when the novel first appeared. I hadn't written it as polemic. I'm a great believer in Sam Goldwyn's advice, “if you have a message, send a telegram”. I'd deliberately

taken a light hand to the subject, so I can hardly complain if no one noticed what I was at. *Nothing Simple* was read (and dismissed) as an Irish answer to *Desperate Housewives* (the American TV series). I thought its moment, its relevance had come and gone. Now look, it's relevant again, as the whole sorry cycle of forced economic migration cranks into action again, and people leave the country in droves.

But for me, the novel wasn't just about emigration/immigration. For a lot of women, the experiences of marriage and/or motherhood are not a million miles away from that of moving to another country. You find yourself in a world where things can look the same, but feel entirely different. A familiar object may suddenly turn out to have a whole new function or meaning. It's a little surreal: Objects lie askew, the ground shifts underfoot, those walls have a tilt, a lean, you didn't see before. The vocabulary might be familiar but the syntax is alarming ... I know that's how those experiences were for me. I wanted to play with that idea in the novel as well.

Also, I wanted to write a novel that would be completely different from *Another Alice*. Right or wrong, I felt there were expectations about the type of second novel I would write, and I felt stubborn about not complying with those expectations. Now I look back and think: What planet was I on? But there you go, that's how I was thinking at the time. I wanted to take my fiction out of Ireland for a change of scene.

### **What were those expectations?**

I don't know how real they were, or to what extent they were projections of my own circumstances – I was working in a Women's Studies department, my doctoral research was an attempt to rediscover the work of forgotten Irish women writers, a lot of my teaching was about the work of women writers, both Irish and international, as well as theorising issues like sexual violence. I didn't want to become an 'issues' writer. I didn't want to conform to an ideology or write to an agenda.

### **Did the fact that *Another Alice* had been so well received critically put a load on your shoulders when you were writing your second novel? Did you feel that you had to prove to your readers that you could do it again?**

Yes, and that can be crippling. Because if you sit there thinking, "this has to be good", you'll never write a word.

### **You are experienced in workshop dynamics, both as a participant and as a facilitator. What can a workshop do for a writer? Is there a danger of "workshopping" a text too much and killing it?**

Of course there is. This is a tricky question for me, because I've worked for years as a workshop facilitator, and have been a fan and proponent of workshops for a long time. But they only have value up to a point.

The thing about writing (fiction and non-fiction), the thing that makes it difficult but is also the source of its strongest potential, is that one person does it. No matter how many influences, ideas and distractions are filtered into a piece of work, it is the product of one imagination – an imagination which may be splintered, fragmented, plural, distracted, even bi-polar, but is contained within and filtered through a single consciousness. It can be a risky business inviting others in to have their say. You have to choose wisely. Obviously, there are some kinds of writing that can work in a more collaborative framework (television, for example) but that's not what we're talking about here.

When a writer is starting out, there comes a point where you need informed feedback, and by that I don't mean an opinion from your lover, next-door neighbour or grandmother, no matter how well-intentioned those people are. These days there's a lot of talk about how difficult it is to find a good editor, or an editor who has time to spend with a single manuscript, let alone concern him or herself with a writer's entire career, as editors are rumoured to have done in the past. Writers have to edit themselves, to a point, and that's a skill you learn through practice. When you're starting out, it's easier to apply an objective eye to other people's work than your own. So the real value of workshops is that they teach people to read critically, and how to acquire and apply basic editing principles, how to figure out what works on the page and what doesn't. Every piece of writing evolves through a series of drafts towards a finished version, and the more aware a writer is of what they want to achieve and what gets in the way, the more effective that process is.

This is what workshops are for: to practice exposing your work to the acid test of a public airing; to hear what it really says (rather than what you want it to say or what you think it

says); to learn to separate yourself from the work that's so exposed (it's not you they're taking home to read in the bath or wrap their chips in); to learn how to read other people's work critically; and finally, to apply the principles you learn to your own work. If people question an element of your story you sit back and think about it. If it doesn't work for them, is that because they're not paying attention? Or because you haven't been as clear on the page as you are in your own mind. Sometimes people give advice you choose to ignore. It's your work, after all.

Once a thing is published, you can't take it back. If there are flaws, it's far better to have them pointed out when there's still time to fix them. But timing is everything. You have to know when to stop, take the thing home and finish it yourself.

**Anne Enright has written that *In Your Face* was a life-changing book for her. What did it mean for you?**

It was a life-changing book for me too, maybe because it was written about a life-changing experience. It wasn't so much that the experience (of a life-threatening illness and radical treatment) changed me, as that it changed my understanding of what it is to be alive and to be human. Since writing is basically an attempt to get to grips with those questions, it had to change my writing too. Writing was a fundamental part of my experience of the illness, it was my lifeline, the thread I was afraid to lose in the dark. When I was on the ward, there was a woman who called out a single name, over and over again. In the book, I imagine that name (which could have been her own) is the rock she clings to as she drowns. In fact, the notebooks I kept while I was ill, and later, the task of writing the book itself, were my rock. Writing it was a stripped down, intense experience, with absolute focus. I'm quite lonely for it now.

Having a life-threatening illness is like that cliché of having a veil ripped from your eyes. Or someone switching on a light in a dusky room: Suddenly you see where you're sitting, and all that's in there with you – the dust, the clutter, the out-of-date papers you'll never read or even want to, along with the one or two precious icons. And here comes the wrecking ball. What do you reach for? For me, apart from the people I care about, what I reached for was all about writing, and wanting to write

well, about things that matter. Mortality sharpens the mind like no other deadline I know – death is the ultimate deadline! A good question to ask yourself about any piece of work is: If this is the last thing you do, will you be satisfied?

I think some wistful part of us always imagines that there'll be time to do the things we want to do, say what we want to say. But that's not true at all. So the biggest lesson for me was about not wasting time doing things because they are expected, or because other people want me to do them – I've always had a hard time saying "no". I still find it hard. In the immediate aftermath of the illness it was clear that I was busy recovering and writing a book and that's what I did, the two things were intensely bound up in each other. Once I was strong again, other demands began to creep in – well, that's what life does. But I try really hard to maintain my focus on writing – I slipped badly there, for a year or so, while I worked on a mouth cancer awareness campaign. But I'm back, now, where I belong. Working on a novel.

It's about how you write, too. Not holding back. Going all out and taking risks – even if you're going to fall flat on your face, it's worth trying. There's no point in being cautious or half-hearted, playing it safe or saving your good ideas for later – that chance may never come. This is your chance, right now. Life is not a trial run and we shouldn't treat it as though it is, even though it might be more comforting and comfortable to see it that way – until you stare down the barrel of an ending and realise what you've wasted.

Being so ill woke me up. *In Your Face* is a very conscious book, I think – I was hyper-conscious when I wrote it – but it's also half immersed in the more subterranean territory of fear and longing and desire. I like that about it, the combination of the two. If I look back at the two novels, I'd say *Another Alice* was subterranean, while *Nothing Simple* was entirely conscious and above-ground – which could have a lot to do with the circumstances in which they were written.

**This is really interesting because the three books are, as already mentioned, very different in subject matter and style. How important would your personal circumstances and context be in the artistic choices you had to make for each of them?**

*Another Alice* was written when my kids were little. I'd go to the desk when they were asleep and write through the night – I think that after-midnight atmosphere prevails in its darker passages. We were living in a basement when I wrote it, so even in broad daylight, things were dim and often gloomy ... Also its questions were urgent. *Nothing Simple* was more lighthearted. As I've said, I wanted to play with ideas about emigration and immigration in an Ireland where immigration was a new phenomenon and we didn't handle it particularly well at first – not being used to it. Up until then, all the traffic had gone the other way. As it does now, unfortunately. But when I wrote it, the kids were older; I'd given up the day job, so I'd get them off to school and come back to the desk, work from 9 until 4, go and pick them up. It's a daylight novel, and it's set in places where heat and light predominate, so it's much more out-in-the-open. We'd moved house by then, too. I wrote it in an upstairs bedroom, looking out over Dublin Bay – so the two novels are opposites, in almost every way.

*In Your Face* worked in and between those modes and brought them together – I think. But enough said – It doesn't do to get too earnest or introspective about books you've already written. You could be tempted to look back forever, and that's not going to get the bills paid or the books written. Just look what happened to Lot's wife. I bet she had some good novels in her ...

**I am intrigued by your description of *Nothing Simple* as a “daylit novel”. Do you firmly believe that light and physical space can influence thematic choices and style significantly? I know you have spent time in Paris with a writing residency: Did that affect your writing? Have you ever considered moving to another country for a few months only for creative purposes?**

I don't know about “firmly”, but yes, I think the world you write from is bound to affect the world you write. I love the idea of residencies, and every second of the residency in the *Centre Culturel Irlandais* in Paris was valuable to me. Being there caused a strong shift in the way I thought about what I was writing at the time. That novel is still in progress – ask me about this when it's finished!

I would like to do something like that again, yes. I think it makes new subjects possible, and offers fresh perspective and inspiration on the

familiar. It throws everything up in the air, and there's that wonderful excitement: How will the pieces fall this time? What new shape will they make?

**I love the line “mortality sharpens the mind like no other deadline I know”. The word “deadline” is in itself connoted with mortality, isn't it? I was wondering if the consciousness of mortality, I mean, being confronted with an illness as serious as cancer, can have an impact on the creative process. I wonder if both the rhythm of writing and the process of revising, and editing, are affected under the pressure of illness. Did you find that was the case for you? *In Your Face* came out fairly quickly.**

There are two questions here. I'll answer the second part first, because it's easier: The publishers wanted *In Your Face* to come out quickly, so that the story would be fresh and relevant. This suited me – I didn't know how much time I would have. It seems strange to say that now, but it was true – none of us know how much time we have, but it was a keen awareness for me at that time. It worked really well for me to have a tight timeframe to work in. Brendan (Barrington, my editor) was brilliant, he really stayed close to it throughout the time of writing – which was really a time of editing; the writing had been done as things happened, while I was in hospital and in recovery at home. I took a very methodical approach to it. I drew up workplans for every month, set myself goals and interim deadlines and made it a point of honour to keep them. Brendan, in turn, came back to me really quickly with feedback, and the momentum kept building. I wish I could write every book like that. The focus was immediate and intense and that worked well, I think. But at that stage it really was about editing – the raw material was already there, it had been written during the illness and treatment. And since the writing was *about* that confrontation with mortality, and sickness, of course it had to be affected by those concerns – which is the first part of your question and may be harder to answer.

How was my creative process affected by illness? First, I was awake. I was staring down the barrel of time, knowing the trigger would be pulled, but not when. So the time for bullshit was over. No more faffing around, or excuses, or evasion, or prevarication. Whatever I wrote – whether it would see the light of day

or not – had to be real. That wasn't a decision, or even conscious, it's just what happened. I figured it out later, when things calmed down a bit. It took energy, so it had to matter.

Later, when the fuss had died down and I could look a little further ahead than the immediate second, it seemed to be about choice, what you choose to write, what you choose to do with your life. There's no point in postponing what you want to write about until later, because "later" is a whole other category of fiction. I realised that there'd been an amount of holding back in everything I'd ever done, and what was the point of that?

And finally, there's that enormous question I have already mentioned elsewhere in this interview: If this was to be the last thing you ever do, would you be satisfied? If this is to be the last thing I make, my last contribution to the world, will it be enough?

That's not just about dying, by the way. The first lesson of a serious diagnosis is that none of us is getting out of here alive – which isn't exactly news, but it's like seeing your name on the list for the first time and knowing you could be next. The second lesson is that you can lose your life before you actually leave it. You lose it to appointments and waiting rooms and queues; to traffic and empty conversations; to worry and grief, and to other people's grief and worry. There's an amount of posturing and observing the conventions which is inevitable; periods of being sick as a dog, exhausted, not able to lift your head or care about anything; pain that will twist your mind into shapes you don't recognize; periods of terror and dread. But there are other things in the regular progress of a life that might interfere with your ability to do the work you want to do – changes in circumstance, illness or need in someone else, someone you care about, changes in ability or energy (or memory!) as you get older.

So, if this is to be the last thing ... I'd better say what I mean.

You tend to waste less time, get to the point, say what (you think) you mean. That was a change for me. I didn't know I was wasting time before, or being evasive, or holding back – but I was.

Of course, it's not easy to change. It's not as simple as choosing priorities. Life gets in the way. The threat recedes, although it's still there, shaping the edges of my field of vision and erupting from time to time to remind me:

What matters? Why? I've allowed myself to be distracted and pulled away from the novel I'm writing now by other writing projects and involvement with a mouth cancer awareness campaign – all worthwhile things in their way, but I have to face the possibility that I've blown it (the novel), through inattention. The worst kind of infidelity.

### **Is your creative process very different when writing fiction and when writing essays, blogging or writing autobiographical pieces?**

Here's the thing: I don't know what my "creative process" is. I know enough to be able to say there is the creative phase, where things get written, and the editing phase, when things are fixed and (hopefully) improved. I turn up at the desk thinking about what needs to be done on any given day and when I'm lucky, what emerges is not quite what I planned. But I'm wary about saying that, because I'm suspicious of the "out of control" school of writing. Sometimes people come to workshops full of ideas about their muse and their creative process and they wouldn't dream of interfering with either; once they've been inspired to write something, that's good enough for them and should be good enough for the rest of us. To which the only answer is, then why are you here? Some aspects of writing are unconscious, but not all of them. You have to unhook your imagination and let it go where it will, but at some stage you have to bring it back to the page, put manners on it. I think there's a lifetime's work trying to figure out which is which and how to balance them. You have to own your work, take responsibility for it.

No matter what form you're working in, you're using language as your medium. You choose the form that is best suited to telling the story you want to tell. The level of thought required might be different, the strategy and tone might be different, but the tools and the medium are the same. I've written academic essays and journalism that would choke me now. Sometimes you write something for a specific outlet and what comes out might fit their design and purpose but it doesn't sound or feel like you; it's like waking up after a really late and raucous night full of dread: Did I really say/do that? And your skin crawls with regret. There's nothing to be done about it, except resolve not to make *that* mistake again and move on to the next thing. There are some

stories, outlets, editors, that bring out the best in you. But even when you write something you're really happy with, the glow doesn't last long. It's always about what you're writing *now*. Which, by definition, is going to be giving you grief and causing you sleepless nights.

**You have mentioned in the course of this interview that “being so ill woke [you] up”. This is an interesting perspective, to find the strength and the clarity of vision that a taken-for-granted healthy body may obliterate. However, I suppose you are also familiar with discourses that take this kind of statement a bit too far and claim that being so ill is what people need as an eye opener. There is a real danger of mystification in some websites that threaten to turn the world of cancer into a universe of pink merchandise.**

Oh God, don't get me started. The “Cancer made me a happier person” school of thought? It's not new, though, that world view. I remember when I was writing *Another Alice* I was aware of a whole field of pop-psychology that viewed rape as some sort of cosmic dance, where the “rapee” had as much to “learn” as the rapist. I mean, please. Don't leave me alone in a room with these people, I wouldn't be responsible for what I might do to them.

And by the way, I think the key word in your question is “merchandise”. It's unbelievable how cynical some of those websites can be manipulating people who are incredibly vulnerable, exploiting fear, distorting hope, all in a bid to extort money. It's horrible.

I don't mean to detract from people who feel they've gained something valuable from their experience of cancer, but please let's remember that it's not like that for everyone. Some people say they learn urgent, valuable lessons from it, that they gain insights which allow them to change their lives for the better. I know I did. But I wouldn't dream of suggesting to anyone that they should get with the “happy-clappy” programme. Cancer is a treatable illness now, it's not what it used to

be. But the treatment can be severe. Like any other serious illness, it is raw, frightening, painful, messy, smelly and humiliating. It makes you dependent, in ways you'd never have imagined and would never choose. There's a high price to be paid for the lessons: Some people have to pay with their lives. (Barbara Ehrenreich is great on all this in *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America & the World*).

#### **What did you learn?**

I learned that I wanted to live, and how badly. I learned, at a cellular, inescapable level, that I will die, and that death is not something you can talk your way out of, or negotiate. That woke me up, to the value of life right here-and-now, and to the need to choose, actively, what to do with the time you do have. That particular lesson can fade, with the demands of day-to-day living, but it can be re-activated – sometimes suddenly, when you wake up in the midnight dreads, as we all do. I'm working on it, all the time. I discovered, and it came as a bit of a shock, that I'm an optimist at heart. I've great belief in that saying, it's better to light a candle than curse the darkness; but I don't pretend the darkness isn't there.

There's a paradox at work in the experience of an illness like mine: People will rally around and surprise you, you might never have felt so loved – but you have never been quite so alone. The stark extent of human loneliness is a big lesson, but so is the sustaining power of love.

**Although I know writers are not really keen on talking about their work-in-progress, can you tell us something about the novel you are currently working on?**

Oh, dear. It's historical. It's Irish. It's (mostly) set in Dublin. All of which means that it's destined for near-universal derision and absolute obscurity – but don't tell anyone I said that.

Dublin-Oviedo, 2010-2011

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