

so
close to tiny things

A Conversation with

Colm Tóibín

*Irish novelist and journalist Colm Tóibín is The 2008 Isaac and Madeline Stein Visiting Writer and a visiting professor at Stanford. He is the author of five novels, including *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and *The Master* (2004), both of which were short-listed for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction.*



LELAND QUARTERLY: How did you start work as a novelist?

COLM TÓIBÍN: I think a lot of writers are actually failed musicians, and I'm a failed poet. I would be a failed musician if I could even play an instrument, but I can't really do

that – I can't even sing. So I started to write poetry when I was about twelve, and I actually published quite a bit of poetry when I was a teenager in various magazines that were for teenagers – I would send them off and they'd say that they would take

two and send some back, and then later the magazine would arrive, and then the check would arrive, but it was so interesting to rest from other studies that I was supposed to be doing. It was kind of a private life – you couldn't share it with anybody

because if you said you were writing poetry they wouldn't know what that meant.

After I graduated, I worked as an editor every other weekend, and the weekends I didn't work I would go back to where I came from, which is the south of Ireland. When I was around twenty-five, maybe, an idea for a novel occurred to me. This was strange, because there was no one around me writing a novel. I mean, I was reading novels. I was reviewing. But this was Dublin – London was where publishing was done, or New York. It was all very remote. I didn't know anyone who was a publisher. I had an idea that you might write a novel and send it to the publisher and publish it, but things are never actually like that. It's a cutting world! So eventually, because my job as an editor was so intense (it was mainly political work, and all of it was so public), the novel became a way of almost leisure time, one I would go home to in the evenings. I didn't have a TV, so whenever I had some time that was free, I would write a bit of my novel. I would always joke among friends, Oh, I have to go write my novel. I can't see you. But actually after a certain time I showed some of it to someone, a friend who was very encouraging about it, so I started to work on it seriously after that. I remember I took two weeks holiday and I went to Portugal on my own and I just worked on my novel. And then I had a good stretch of it done.

Eventually, I got fired from my job. The novel was done, but no one would publish it. My agent didn't find a publisher for it until 1988, and they didn't publish it until the middle of 1990. But in between that

time I had started a second novel, and I had also gotten a commission for a proposal to write a book about Barcelona, so that meant in 1990 I had two books out – a book about Barcelona and my first novel – but no one paid any attention to those books. It wasn't really until Penguin – or Viking-Penguin – bought it in New York and I won a prize – that anybody read my first novel.

By the time all that had happened, I had written my second book. And my second novel was better than my first – which is really unusual. It might be that the excitement of publishing is so great that you're like a bottle of soda water, and it's hard to settle down to write properly in the way that you can if you've been defeated constantly. Constant defeat is good, because it gives you much less to think about. So I had the second book done. And just a funny thing happened to it. I got a new editor, and he went around London handing the book to people – literally handing the book to people – and I woke up one morning and there was a review in the Sunday Times, which was the biggest thing at the time, and there was a photograph on the front page, and the last sentence of the review read, "If you read only one book this year out of a sense of grim duty, make it this one." (The book was very depressing). The writer of the review was Nick Hornby; it was an incredibly nice review, and you just don't expect that. And so that changed my life, because foreign publishers saw it, and then my books began to be published in France and Germany, and I settled out to make a life of it. Then it kept going. What else can you do then?

The form I'm most comfortable

with is the novel. If I have a shape, it's the novel shape. Depends on the person, really.

I'm curious as to whether you think there's something a novel can do that you can't do in other forms of writing.

I didn't mean that as a theory or as an idea. I'm interested in history. I'm interested in the long business of what something looks like. My inclination might also be something about nerves, not being secure enough that I could get something right in five pages. I really would not know how to start. If you told me "you've got five pages," I'd start and I'd get it all wrong. I'd tell too much in the opening paragraph, I'd tell too little, and it would just be all over the place. But if somebody said "you've got to write a novel," then I'm free. I can write what's next, and next, and next, and next, instead of relying on a moment that sums up everything. But for other people, it's different: maybe the short story form is much easier. But I don't think you can do it on the basis of: I think this is a better way. I think you have to find your preferences organically and naturally.

What does your novel *The Master* capture about Henry James that a straight biography couldn't?

I read the opening chapter of J.M. Coetzee's novel, *The Master of Petersburg*, which is about Dostoevsky, and I realized that it was the most astonishing level of emotion attached to it. How he had done that I didn't know, but I knew that he was using a real set of facts, but also that he was managing to do something that had you absolutely astounded. I wasn't

interested in writing a historical novel – I wasn't interested in what the past looked like or smelled like, and I didn't do much research about it. I didn't want to be anachronistic – I didn't want to have James getting into a *taxi* (he would be getting into a *cab*) – but at the same time I didn't want to over-describe it. That's all period stuff. I was interested in the portrait of a psychology, the dramatization of a psychology.

Also, I had written a novel called *The Blackwater Lightship* which is set over seven days, and which has only about six characters. I was really finished with the subject of that. I didn't think there was another word to say about it. It's a funny feeling when a book is finished – it's not a pleasant feeling, really, or relief – just “Shit, I don't want to go through that again.” Also, there was a lot of pain in the book, and I didn't want to go through that again. So the James idea – it came very gradually – I was reading an essay, and an idea kept coming back to me – James as a character – the set of arguments I could make or the ideas I could propose – so then I started working on the project. I visited America and Italy and read a lot of letters from the period, but I was trying not to write a period novel, or a parody of his voice, or an imitation of his voice, or a historical novel. I just wanted to be in the head of this man, and that the novel be based on real things (although some of it was made up.)

What do you think is the relationship between Irish literature and American literature?

American institutions have a special role for Irish writers: if things get

bad, you just fuck off to America, where no one will notice you much, where no one pays much attention to writers. That way you can get on with your work, and you can see the drama of Ireland more freely.

American country music is very popular in Ireland, and I think it's because of the similarities in the language. When Jim Shepherd came to Stanford and read a story, about family and brothers and parents and melancholy, I started feeling that his writing belonged to a tradition that I was part of, too, that there was no difference between us. And similarly when Lorrie Moore came, there were things she was doing, the way she was playing with sentences and using words – and I felt ‘I *know* what she's describing, and also the language that she's using. I can make sense of that; it belongs to me. It doesn't seem like a foreign country when you read the literature.

What do you see as the political role of literature?

As Yeats said, after the fall of Parnell in 1890, Ireland was like hot wax. The young people became more interested in culture and politics. This doesn't mean that more people were getting involved in culture and politics in order to have a revolution, but nonetheless the movements were culture and sporting and the founding of the Irish theater, although something like “The Playboy of the Western World,” might seem anti-national, in creating a new language for the theater, and allowing Irish speech or a version of it, you're offering images of Ireland on the stage. The audience was almost making it politics.

Seamus Heaney did not write directly about Irish troubles, but merely by writing at all, by the mere fact a voice is coming from this community about the death of a father or the death of a mother gave a sort of importance and a weight to that place, which I think affected things and mattered a lot. And also the way that Roddy Doyle wrote about Dublin, for example, changed the way people view the city, gave the city more importance in the country.

The problem is that there's no Wall Street or Hollywood in Ireland. Writers in America are not important because you have Wall Street and Hollywood. And in Britain, you have the royal family and aristocracy, and old land and old money are important. But in Ireland there's nothing, so that utterance – just a poet writing a poem – has an importance. It's kind of frightening, actually – you almost want a lyric poem to land uneasily on the ground, and no one pay much attention to it. But Patrick Kavanagh's poem ‘In Memory of My Mother’ has a huge importance in Ireland. It all somehow matters enormously, although it's not about the country's tensions, or relationships in society. Because it gives words. Words have remained more important than images, simply because we the Irish cannot afford to make many images. It could change. But it hasn't changed.

That's nice for you now.

It's not, actually, because it's nice to work in obscurity with no one paying much attention. Feeling that what you're doing is important, I think, is death for a writer.

I think that the purpose of fiction is to imagine others, which makes it a strangely political act. It's hard to find writers who are members of the Republican Party of the United States. The Republican ideal tends to not be interested in imagining the Other, but it's very good at exerting the Self, or putting self-interest forward as a form of patriotism. On the other hand, the Democratic party – the language of Bobby Kennedy, or the words Barack Obama is using now, or even Hillary Clinton, when she listed manual workers who were supporting her, trade by trade – that's a sense of wanting people on board who are not like you, that it's actually an aspect of the creative act and the political act. So writers tend to be lefties. It's almost part of your job to imagine someone who is not you. To some extent all of the characters are slight projections of yourself, but the less obviously so, the happier everyone will be.

But the way in which Raymond Carver and Toby Wolff have changed the way we view losers in American society – people who are drunks, or who are getting over being drunk, or people who are in recovery for something – I think how we view that has changed because of their work, that they've been extremely influential. Some of that goes for Dickens as well – the novel took its beginnings in trying to dramatize the lives of people who were not about to be ennobled by the king or the queen. It's slightly hard to write a novel about a duke.

You say that writing is important in Ireland because of deprivation, the deprivation of the image. How do you think the upper class of Silicon

Valley – who are pretty comfortable in their lives – what role does writing play in their lives?

I think that what we are learning in this election campaign, which I am following very closely, is this business of gender. We know what the racial problems are but the gender one comes to us as slightly puzzling. The strong objection about a middle-aged woman standing up in public and declaring she wants to run the country – I didn't understand that those objections would be so strong. You can talk about wealth and Silicon Valley all you like, but the people who are reading my book in Silicon Valley are the women. The men would open a novel if it bit them – you're on an airplane, and the guys are sitting there while the women are reading.

And you are alert to the fact that there's a hidden deprivation within gender here (and everywhere else) but here in a way that's so hidden that it's unspoken. It's emerging now, but it'll be put back in its cage very quickly, people will forget of the very strong objections that middle-aged men of all races had to Hillary Clinton's voice, which is a really interesting idea. I don't know that people are complaining in a same way about, for instance, Huckabee's voice, or McCain's voice, or whether they dislike McCain or not. But *that woman – that dreadful woman*. And so the women in America read the novels. There is some sense of loss – not just loss of power – but there is spiritual loss within marriages that a novel fills a lot of space that's empty. It's a different sort of politic. I have no prejudices – if Google engineers want to read my novel they're very welcome to. But this is a very funny

business -- it isn't quite the same in Ireland, but it's very noticeable here. The book club becomes a way for the woman to breathe.

How do you feel about your obligations towards an Irish national literature?

I don't think you have any obligations. I think your obligation is to the next sentence. You have to be very careful with that. You can get very high-falutin' about your obligations to the gay community, or to Ireland, or to any tradition that you're in, but your only real obligation is to see that the next sentence is doing something that works. And your head's down. And if your head's not down, thinking about your next sentence and only that – if you've got notions that you're doing something much more important than that, then what happens is – that would show in the next sentence. A novel is a thousand or two thousand details, and what you're doing is to try to make those details as truthful as possible to something. In other words, it's not exactly life. It's not *it happened, therefore it's valuable and I'm writing it down*, but you're inventing a fictional universe and within that fictional universe you've invented a rhythm, and your sentences are in that rhythm, but each sentence contains a detail, and you need to concentrate on “Is that right?” Do you need this moment of time? Are there two cups or one? Do you need the detail that the line was too long so he came back without buying his coffee? You are working so close to tiny things that if you think of large things you ruin everything.