

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MCGAHERN

Rosa González

Rosa González- In 1965, following the banning of your second novel, *The Dark*, you lost your job as a national schoolteacher and as a result you had to leave Ireland. Did this period of enforced exile affect your writing?

John McGahern- I don't know. I didn't write very much, but then, I had no money, I was living in London, and I was doing mostly a thing called relief teaching. It was very hard, and I used to feel too tired to write. But, whether I would have written or not I don't know, for there are times when I haven't written at all in my life. Although I don't think it has ever gone as long as that, for I didn't write a thing for five or six years.

R.G.- Benedict Kiely, who had three novels banned in the 50s, has said that although being banned annoyed him in one way, he also took it as an honour, he felt he was with the right people. Was this also your reaction to the banning?

J.McG.- No, I don't think so, but then, I was much younger than Mr Kiely. I really had nothing but contempt for the banning. The small society of intellectuals that I would have belonged to in Dublin could get any books we wanted, you know, as English newspapers were also published in Dublin. Most of the books banned, like most books published, aren't worth reading anyway, and those that were worth reading could be easily got whether they were banned or not. Actually I didn't like when I was banned because all that mattered to us was whether a book was well written or not, and we would have argued that an obscene book, if it was well written, could not be immoral. So, I actually thought it was like bringing something in that had nothing to do with writing.

In fact, when the book was unbanned, a woman called Carmen Callil, she is head of Chatto & Windus now, but she worked for my agency then, sent me a telegram: "BOOK UNBANNED. TV, RADIO, NEWSPAPERS WANT YOU." I was in Paris at that time, and I stayed where I was, because I thought it would be quite disgraceful to have anything to do with the unbanning, as it was to have had anything to do with the banning either. Indeed, I went to Spain when the book was banned, and I only gave a couple of interviews —over the sacking especially.

R.G.- In the stories "Peaches" and "The Beginning of an Idea" the protagonists go to Spain in order to write, but they are unable to do so, and they eventually return home. Was this also your case?

J.McG.- I didn't really go to Spain to write, as much as to get away from the publicity about the banning of *The Dark*. I didn't want to be involved, because actually

one became very famous overnight because of the banning, and on the street people would be pointing at you, and this was unpleasant. I would have seen many people that have changed their life in order to write, and it doesn't work. It always seems to me that, like that Robert Frost poem "Earth is the best place for love", and where you are is the best place for writing, and if you can't write here and now, probably you won't be able to write abroad, because the trouble with ideas as with travel is that you have to take yourself along, and the writing comes out of oneself and not out of the place.

"The Beginning of an Idea" is very much about this, and the same idea is in *The Pornographer*, because in a way you can't write what happens to us and you can't write about sex. I see pornography as a device, as the opposite of real sexuality, it's artificial, it's heightened, it's unreal, but it's the old literary trick that you look at the floor in order to see the sun, rather than looking up at the sun. And "The Beginning of an Idea" is the same idea about writing of somebody who actually goes to Spain, but you almost know from the beginning that she won't be able to write no matter where she goes, you know the trouble is with herself and various sorts of distractions. And also to a certain extent, since writing is such a horrible business, one will do almost anything to escape it: I find looking out of the window absolutely wonderful...(Laughs)

R.G.- Before leaving Ireland, the character-narrator of *The Leavetaking*, says: "As I grow older I feel great cities give more freedom than ever the mountains did". One tends to read here your own feelings at that time. However, in a interview (*The Sunday Times* 29 April 1990) you said that when you lived abroad you never felt real there.

J.McG.- That's true.

R.G.- Is this what made you return to your native Co Leitrim?

J.McG.- Well, partly because of that. Then I married an American woman and she liked it here. If she hadn't liked it we wouldn't have lived here, and part of that was accident, like being born here in the first place. One of the nice things of living in America, and France and Spain is that it is not real. You know, one is much more detached, one doesn't feel one knows it or belongs to it, while here always looks real to me. It's probably an illusion, like the other thing. But I think it was probably good for me to go away, because in a way it's almost like a person, one has to lose them to see them in perspective.

R.G.- In *The Leavetaking*, the sentence that the teacher asks the students to copy out on his last day is "The child is father to the man". Do you believe that childhood represents a great formative experience in one's life?

J.McG.- Yes. It comes from Wordsworth, of course: "The child is father to the man, and I would wish my years to be bound each to each by natural piety". Of course, the word piety isn't like the religious use of the word, the use of the word is *pietas*, which is faithfulness to the sources of one's being, "bound each to each by natural piety."

I think that a writer writes out of his private world, and that is more or less shaped by the time one is twenty, twenty—one or twenty—two. Everything that happens to you, changes you, but I mean, that private world is essentially shaped and one always works on that. I think that the other kind of writing is journalism.

R.G.- The exploration of one's past within the somehow claustrophobic context of the family constitutes one of the most recurrent themes in contemporary Irish fiction. Is this a consequence of the importance of the family bond in Irish society?

J.McG.- Part of that, but also part of the narrow development of proper society. There is no system of manners in this country. I mean, America is very similar like that as well. You get some people with very beautiful manners and you get some people with very bad manners here. So, everything is a sort of individualism and there is no system of manners, which can actually be a waste —difficult sometimes. The family is the closest we have and sometimes one gets an impression of the whole country as like thousands of families going along, making up their own rules as they go along. And I see the family as a sort of interesting half-way house between the individual on one side and a larger society on the other hand, and one is not alone, and one is in a society but it's not a true society, since certain things will be tolerated within a family that won't be tolerated in a larger society. And of course we all come out of families, and belong to families.

R.G.- Gloom, futility, disillusionment are probably the words most commonly applied to your fictional world. Do you consider this a fair assessment?

J.McG.- I don't think so. I got stuck with that because of *The Barracks* and *The Dark*. Somebody has said rather recently that John McGahern seems to be the only writer that has got his life the wrong way round, that the early novels begin in gloom when he should really be getting gloomy when he is getting old. It's that his novels are getting quite optimistic. But I actually see optimism and pessimism, and those things as irrelevant. The writer has to get at the facts, and all that's interesting is the facts, and then you can make anything out of it that you want. You know the joke about the man who jumped off the Empire State building, do you? It's one of my favourite optimistic jokes. Well he jumped off the Empire State building, you know it's in New York, and the window cleaners heard him as he passed the forty-second floor on the way down, they heard him say "so far, so good".

R.G.- Many of the father figures in your fiction channel the frustrated revolutionary energies of their youth into patriarchal authoritarianism. Do you see a connection between political frustration and domestic tyranny?

J.McG.- I think that in a way that generation, that is the generation before mine, a lot of them were revolutionaries, and of course, in a way the revolution never happened. You know, a revolution did happen, they walked free from England, but nothing changed and these people were very disillusioned. But then it was a very paternalistic

society, and then when the British moved out still the Catholic Church got control, and the Catholic Church was by nature paternalistic. In a way that is one of the main themes in *Amongst Women*, you know, how Moran, who's head of the family uses the Church as a form of bullying; while it's pretending to be goodness it's not that at all. Fortunately many people bought it here. It's a very subversive novel but thank God nobody noticed that. (Laughs)

Amongst Women is also a novel about power. You know, people like myself in Dublin, that belonged to a tight intellectual society that didn't care much about Church or State we were all right, but I think it was very difficult for a woman to be in that society then, and I think women were very badly off in that society. And *Amongst Women* is also about how women in a paternalistic society create room and power for themselves, and in a way they take over the world of Moran, it's the women rather than the men, what they'll do with it we don't know, but they have the power now. Actually *The Canard* in France had a very interesting review of *Amongst Women*. They said that one of Moran's daughters might be now Mrs Robinson —that would drive the old man crazy.

R.G.- The recent cases of massive raping in Bosnia seem to confirm that authority often manifests itself through sexual violence. Now, this is a subject you have explored in your two short stories set in fascist Spain, where the figures of authority — the civil guards and a magistrate— represent brutal sexuality, is that right?

J.McG.- I think that after the need to live, the need for food, sex is one of the most powerful instincts. I think that's why it is always feared by society, and it's wonderfully channelled in the classics by, say, Jane Austen, you know, it's controlled and ordered in that ordered, middle-class world. But I think that civilisation is a lot more frail than people imagine it is, and when it breaks down, all these brutal instincts break out. But they are there all the time, they are just barely under the rule of law.

R.G.- In *The Pornographer* the distinction, even opposition, between sexuality and love is established even at the level of language. But in fact, the healing, the redeeming power of love, and the violence of sexuality without love is a recurrent subject in your work, isn't it?

J.McG.- Yes, you almost can't write about sex, like you can't write about happiness, because in a way it's private and it's mechanical. I'd never read pornography until I wanted to write *The Pornographer*. Most of it is very badly written. I see pornography as the opposite of sexuality, because it's a violent fantasy, and I see sentimentality and violence closely connected because they are both excesses and they are both really escaping from the facts of the truth, you know, that we live in ourselves and we live in other people. Pornography is everything that sexuality is not: it's a fantasy, it's cruel, it's not real, and the other thing is frail, it's vulnerable, it's awkward, it's difficult, and actually, by putting a backdrop of pornography, is to see can one have a look at sexuality. That was the idea behind *The Pornographer*. It's like trying to follow the sun in the dusk rather than looking up at the sky.

R.G.- Even though your fiction seems to draw extensively on autobiographical experiences, the narrator's repeated references, in *The Leavetaking*, to the withdrawing tide of memory becoming imagination seem to imply that rather than merely incorporating autobiographical material, you use it as a kind of springboard for your imagination. Is this so?

J.McG.- I think that all autobiographical writing is by definition bad writing unless it's strictly an autobiography. Writing, especially fiction, is life written to an order or vision, while life itself is a series of accidents. It would be very nice if life gave us fiction, but it never does. Also, I don't think it is difficult enough; for some reason, in order to have true emotion, one has to reinvent everything, and there is this strange contradiction that the more artificial the language becomes, actually the more true the emotion is, because in a way the language is being refined through the artificial to receive the emotion, and I think that instant words that come out of life are almost superficial emotion. So that actually, what's easy in writing is nearly always bad and what is difficult is nearly always likely to be true.

Comparing writing to painting or drawing, I've noticed that I've always made my worst drawing mistakes when I've kept too close to realism. It has to be re-invented or re-imagined, and I think that's because it has to conform to an idea. That's why the short story is called "The Beginning of an Idea".

R.G.- Your fictional world is fairly reduced and self-contained: though the angle of focus changes, characters and situations reappear again and again. Have you considered breaking into new fictional territory? Say, the more cosmopolitan aspects of Irish society, or even setting your novels outside Ireland altogether?

J.McG.- No, that doesn't interest me. In other writers depth has always interested me much more than variety. And one has no choice anyhow, because generally something is in one's head for years before one writes it down. Sometimes when one writes it down it disappears, and then other times when one writes it down, it starts to grow. Also, one is always writing for a certain time before one knows whether it is going to be a novel or a short story, and if it is a novel one is in big trouble because that means the next three or four years has gone.

I'm writing again now, I think it's going to be a very long short story, I'm not sure yet, it might be about fifteen thousand words, it's very long. I don't seem to be able to write short short-stories any more. I did in the beginning, but I don't seem to any more. The last story I wrote was "The Country Funeral" and is at the end of *The Collected Stories*, and this one seems to be longer. And then I want to go to a novel after that.

R.G. - You have written that whereas the "novel has to stand or fall alone", "any single story in a collection of stories can lean on the variety and difference of the others, receiving as well as casting light."

J.McG.- That's true.

R.G.- So, do you conceive your books of short stories as a whole?

J.McG.- Yes, very much so. People say *The Collected Stories* reads much more like a single book than a collection of separate stories, and that's the way I see it too. *The Collected Stories* is getting wonderful reviews in the States. It did here too. Actually it had to be reprinted four times here, which is very unusual for stories.

The writers that interest me basically write about the same things all the time: Evelyn Waugh, Proust, Flaubert. I also love a Portuguese novelist called Eça de Queiroz, especially one novel called *Cousin Basilio*; I think it's a great novel, it's like *Madame Bovary* set in Lisbon.

R.G.- Of all your novels, would you say the last one is the best?

J.McG.- The writer never knows. I didn't think *Amongst Women* would become such an enormous success, but apparently people who don't read often can't put it down. I meet people that have read it for four, five and six times, which is very strange, isn't it, for a novel. *Amongst Women* was very popular in France too, they seemed to identify with it.

Then I think a lot of people like *The Pornographer* very much now, although when it came out first people didn't like it. If I had to write *The Pornographer* again I would write it as a comedy, as a comedy of manners, that's what the film script is like, but I can't write it again. And then the short stories have always been liked.

R.G.- On the contrary, your first play, *The Power of Darkness*, wasn't very well reviewed in Dublin.

J.McG.- It got terrible reviews, (Laughs). I was teaching in America at that time and I had to go back the next day. The first night audience—you know, the Abbey is a big theatre—and the first night audience was so hostile that one knew the reviews were going to be bad. This very nice actor, Mick Lally, he is a big star here, especially because he is on a soap, but he is a very very fine stage actor, I met him when I went to the theatre the next evening and he said to me "Did you read the reviews John?", I said "No, I suppose they were bad" and he said "Oh, they were much worse than that." But he said that a television person called Andy O'Mahoney was in at the theatre and he wanted me on a religious affairs TV programme. "God" he says "there's a taxi coming for you in half an hour. Will you go out to the television session and see if you can keep the doors open." So, I was in a kind of a mess, and I was a bit worried coming back, because I thought the actors would be playing to an empty house, but then they started fighting about the play.

People either liked it very much or they hated it, but in the last two weeks it played to full houses and Mick told me that they got five standing ovations the last week. Actually, I didn't know that until I came home, because I had assumed it was going to be a flop, but in fact it was a commercial success. There was a lot of aggression: two English critics were over for the festival, and they gave it extraordinary notices, then it got the worst review in *The Irish Times*, and then Garry Hynes, the director of the Abbey,

took the notice from the *London Observer* and she printed it in *The Irish Times* so that an enormous fighting started and it became social death not to have seen the play. I was very surprised, I think it had something like seventy five percent of an audience from beginning to end, you know, with the bad nights, and you couldn't get into it by the time it closed. But some journalists are very sore about it still, people are quite annoyed. Now, amateur companies are beginning to do it over the country, so it'll be quite interesting what they do with it. But the director and myself didn't agree about the play anyhow, the way she did it wasn't the way I saw it, but one had to patch one's differences before the first night, it's like being on a football team.

R.G.- In your novels there is very little narrative suspense. Not only is the plot element considerably thin, but the main event is usually foreshadowed from the very beginning. Consequently, to hold the reader's attention you depend almost exclusively on the intensive treatment of the characters' emotional life. Don't you think that by dispensing with a strong storyline, you are imposing a very hard task on yourself?

J.McG.- I don't know, I mean, that's the way I work. I write about what interests me, and in a way the story plot doesn't interest me. Always the ordinary, or the boring, always interests me much more than the exciting or the spectacular, so in a way I would want to cut all excitement or suspense out of the novel in order to deal with what interests me.

R.G.- But that is much harder, isn't it?

J.McG.- Well, I think it's much more true. I mean, there isn't much suspense in *Waiting for Godot*, is there. I think that serious modern fiction has moved away from the plot. It's very interesting writing for the movies or television, where dialogue has a completely different function because the pictures, the image is central. But in television and the movies dialogue doesn't have any function unless it takes the pictures from A to B, it's almost like mathematics. If you can't know that a piece of dialogue is taking the pictures on the screen from here to there, it's no use.

When I wrote the screenplay for *The Pornographer*, I realised how difficult it is to get people out of bed, because there is so much sex, so, it's quite a technical thing to get at. So, one would be much more sparing in putting people into bed ... (Laughs)

R.G.- Your prose is very terse, precise, and without rhetorical flourishes, and at the same time very lyrical and evocative. Does this involve much revising and pruning?

J.McG.- Yes, sometimes one gets it right the first time, but very rarely. For instance *Amongst Women* when it was finished was six hundred and fifty pages and when the manuscript went in it was two hundred and forty pages, so a lot was cut out. For instance, there was a good deal in the novel about the eldest son, and all that was cut out. And sometimes what one is writing about, it often is quite good, and generally if you are fond of it you should always get rid of it, it's almost like a rule. A lot of stuff that one does write disappears, never sees print.

I find that I have to write less often now, that I can write quicker now, but I find that I have less energy, you know, that I can't work as many hours as I could when I was young, but I find that I think a lot more about what I'm going to do. For instance, if I stop writing today—and I generally don't write after one or two o'clock now—I spend the rest of the day thinking what I'm going to do the next morning.

R.G.- Do you compose at the typewriter?

J.McG.- No, I write by long-hand, and then I type it out at a certain stage. I used to be always looking for one pencil but I knew it was a trick.

R.G.- ?

J.McG.- Well, I have to have a special type of pencil, so I would go round looking for it. So now what I do is I buy five hundred at a time, and therefore I have no excuse...

R.G.- This week you start lecturing in University College Galway. Doesn't this type of activity interfere with your writing?

J.McG.- Very seldom I do that now, and anyway, I'm only going to teach a day a week. I taught in America, which is a lot harder than teaching in Europe. I like teaching, I don't like teaching writing, because I don't think it can be taught. But I like reading, and if I have to give somebody a vision of a book I'm happy. And then I pick books I like myself.

R.G.- So, you don't believe in courses on Creative Writing?

J.McG.- No, I don't think you can teach anybody to write. Sometimes in America you see people who can write fairly well, and it's almost worse, because their work is no good and it's well written. The fact that it's no good and well written is almost worse than if it were badly written and no good.

R.G.- But can't technique be taught?

J.McG.- Of course, you have to rely on technique, only a fool would do without technique. But technique on its own is just useless, because there has to be technique and there has to be emotion, there has to be something to say. It's like having a travel ticket and nowhere to go, isn't it?

R.G.- What writers are you going to discuss in the course?

J.McG.- A writer I like very much in Gaelic called O'Crohan. His *The Islandman*, I think is a great classic, and I've translated some of that myself. And then a little book of Synge's, of the Aran Islands, and it is really to show the students how society seems when written from inside it and written from outside it. And then the best book that came

out of the War of Independence, it's a marvellous book called *On Another Man's Wound* by Ernie O'Malley, it's about 1918, 1919 and 1920, it's autobiography. And then I'm doing two modern writers, Alice Munroe and Richard Ford.

R.G.- Do you ever lecture on your own work?

J.McG.- No, because I think that would be wrong. It's a very nice thing that Chekov said: "When a writer takes a pen into his hand he accuses himself of unanswerable egotism and all you can do with any decency after that is to bow."



John Magahern on the day of the interview with Rosa González