

## An Interview With Colm Tóibín

By Annie Galvin

On the morning of Friday, April 3rd, the highly decorated Irish author Colm Tóibín found himself in a rather unusual position: seated in front of a class of twelfth graders at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School on Euclid Street. The school visit was part of Tóibín's participation in the PEN/Faulkner Foundation's Writers in Schools program, which brings writers who participate in the non-profit's Reading Series into D.C. public high school classes to discuss their work.

Tóibín's work as a novelist, journalist, non-fiction writer, and playwright has garnered him much acclaim. His novel *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, as was *The Master* (2004), which also won the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year.

At Banneker, Tóibín fielded questions about his latest novel, *Brooklyn*, which will be released in America on May 5th. I sat down with him after the class to discuss various topics, including his writing style, his coming-of-age as a gay writer in Ireland and the persistence of overly phallic writing at a certain American M.F.A. program.

So how did you enjoy the visit to Banneker High School this morning?

I dread schools. I don't do them much, because I find the gap between what you do and the kids' perception of that is too great. Though you might often get one kid who is absolutely interested, it's a cross between a freak show and time off, you know. So I really wasn't looking forward to it. I remember I awoke this morning thinking, "This is just awful," and I would do anything just to spend the morning doing anything else—stay in bed, read the paper, or get on with my work. It was very strange, because you know the book hasn't appeared. I actually didn't know the students were being sent the book—nobody tells me anything. So the idea that these are really the book's first readers, you know, and while people might think the book's first readers might be reviewers, it's a very beautiful thing to have happen—it's a very unusual thing to have happen, where you get open-minded people who aren't reviewing it and don't even quite have a language for how they would discuss it. They're just looking at you, like, "You wrote this book, and we read it, you're here," and then they all started talking about things they wanted to know about it. One of them liked one character, and, "How do you pronounce a name?" or, "How did you get that bit?" I was really inspired by it, and I thought it was an amazing encounter. It's actually the best time I've ever had with students. It wasn't just that they were intelligent, but there was an openness in the way they would look at you. It was very inspiring; they were much better than reviewers.

In terms of being reviewed, whose opinion tends to matter most to you?

I think you've got to protect yourself from two things, which would be getting really depressed by people attacking you, and the other would be really getting a big head by people saying you're really great. You're almost better not to read anything. People love saying, "Oh, I never read reviews," but then you discover they do. But it doesn't really work like that, in the sense that, I suppose, if everyone said you should go home and give it up, you would wonder, had you either been completely misunderstood, or done something very wrong. But I don't think that there is any particular individual now reviewing who I think any writer would say, "Oh, this is the critic whose view I would respect." I don't think in the English-speaking world there is any figure of that sort around. I mean, there might have been in the past, but there isn't now.

Your grandfather and great-uncle were in the IRA, and your father was politically active as well. What was it like growing up in a family like that, and did that background motivate you to want to concentrate on a particular type of writing?

I suppose that actually more important than that was that I was a teacher's son, and so books and going to study were very important. Our relationship to the foundation of the state was a very close one, but sometimes that made its way into things you heard in the background and didn't pay much attention to, that might have seemed more important later on. The fact that my father was a teacher was probably more important—you know, when I was in the junior school, he was teaching in the higher school, and I could sort of see him, and there was a sense of his importance. Also, he was writing a lot, and correcting things—he was constantly busy with that.

Did you feel like your father's presence amounted to a sort of pressure, or did it motivate you as a student and writer?

Yes, there was a pressure in families like mine to study and go to university, and all that wasn't easy in the '60s and '70s. Things weren't free, and it was difficult to get scholarships. Certainly in my family, as in all the families around us, there would have been a view from quite early on that the parents would have had that school and studying was important, and that getting a job at the end of it was going to be a struggle for everyone. Therefore, you had to put a lot of work into that, or else you wouldn't fall into a job.

Given that, was it difficult for you to make the decision to be a writer by trade?

Well it wasn't a decision, in the sense that I was a journalist, and then when my first novel [The South, in 1990] came out I kept on being a journalist. Probably when my second novel [The Heather Blazing, in 1992] came out, I was still making a living as a journalist. But I was freelance, so I was just snatching time between the two. With the third novel, I think somebody paid me some money in advance, so I could take some time just to do this. But there was never a decision made, like, "Wow, I'm here." It was a gradual thing.

If you're in the practice of writing journalism, how does an idea for a novel form in your head?

Often you start with a single image, and you don't know what it is, so quite often it's hard to remember exactly where it began. But it's often very small. I don't take notes; I don't have a diary. If it is important enough, it will stay in your mind. Then what happens is stranger. Suddenly, that idea, or that image—not idea as much as image—becomes an idea, and this can happen in a second. You just glance at the sky, or you can be walking down the street, or you're just looking down into your coffee, and suddenly you realize, “Oh my god, that is where that is going.” It can be quite overwhelming, in that something so small can suddenly become a plan for a book. I mean, I've abandoned books, but that is how all the books that were finished happened. That is also how some of the ones that were abandoned happened. And then the problem is, at what point to abandon them. Because sometimes, out of what you're working on comes something entirely different from it. You've got to be ready for that. This novel *Brooklyn* came out of another book that I thought I was working on. Suddenly one night I realized, “Oh, look at this. It's a tiny story in the book,” at which point I stopped working on the book.

Were you having a difficult time with the other book?

It was actually going fine. It was a novel about something else entirely, in which the mother of Eilis [the protagonist of *Brooklyn*] visits somebody and tells the story. So I had that there, and I was reading it over just to go on working, and soon I just realized, “That story is enough. Just let me do that first.” So I just left the other thing aside, which I probably will go back to.

There are autobiographical elements to *Brooklyn*: Eilis is from Enniscorthy, your home town, and she, like you, emigrated from Ireland in her early twenties. Given the similarities between your own life and your protagonist's, why did you decide to cast a woman rather than a man in that role?

I think if I had made her one of her brothers, for example, she wouldn't have been as open. In other words, her weekends would have been much more about going out with guys, drinking, having confidence. The missing things would have been different. I was trying to draw a really sensitive girl who is open to things, who is unsure of herself in a very female way, in a way in which girls from my town were brought up. Whereas guys could swagger around in groups, girls were never given a sense of entitlement to do anything and didn't even seek entitlement. So that, in the silence of an instant—because the story is told from her point of view—can be much more dramatic. There can be much more going on beneath all the time, an inwardness going on all the time in her. If you have her as her brother, it isn't the same. The last novel [*The Master*, 2004] was about Henry James. I've written a good number of novels from male and female points of view, but for this one I wanted to get the experience of someone who was totally sensitive to [her environment], even damaged by it, affected by it, and would always keep things to herself. It never occurred to me to make her a man.

Do you think that a woman in Brooklyn in the 1940s would have been more subject to the culture, more passive?

Yes, she's more subject to everything that comes to her. She could be brought along on every wind. And everyone wanted her. Two girls wanted to go to the dance with her; two others want her to go with them. She's a very passive character, every so often she acts out of character, which can actually be quite aggressive, but it happens very seldom. But she's mainly very passive. So I wanted to get that, without trying to have her too exasperating to the reader. She's not somebody who feels entitled.

As a novelist, you tend to craft your stories within a fairly conventional form rather than experimenting with different forms. Do you ever consider trying to write a more experimental novel?

I've been trying to write about them; I've been writing a lot recently about Donald Barthelme in the New York Times, and I've written a piece on Flan O'Brien, on Pessoa, Borges, and all that. In my own work, what I do is just get a tone and stick with it. The tone, as you say, is ostensibly quite traditional, but what I'm trying to work with are levels of secrecy and silence that go beneath words. So a sentence which might seem quite simple actually is concealing a lot. It's really quite difficult to do because you really have to concentrate on not getting it wrong. But you're absolutely right that the novels are formally conventional, and that's done because I really couldn't do the other type. I'd love to write a big, strange, sprawling book.

So it sounds like you write in a very deliberate, sentence-by-sentence way, rather than writing effusively and going back to edit.

Yes, it's done very much in long hand, sentence after sentence after sentence. But I love to know where I'm going. I know what the scene is, what has to happen in it. But I have to concentrate very hard on the detail, with this novel in particular but even with the Henry James book [The Master]. And every detail has to do some work, and the work can't be obvious. You can't be clunkily giving out detail. In that sense, it is deliberate. I have friends who are writers who just blindly begin without knowing where they're going. I never do that. I do a lot of controlling.

You are an openly gay writer living in Ireland, a country whose culture is known for having been less than progressive when it comes to gay rights. I'd like to ask you a question about the following passage from your nonfiction work *Love in a Dark Time, and Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature*:

“Some of the greatest writers of the age [between the Victorian era and 1993, when laws against homosexuality in Ireland were rescinded] were fully alert to their own homosexuality. In their work, they sought to write in code...”

You published *The Story of the Night*, a novel that deals openly with homosexual sex and relationships, in 1996, just three years after homosexuality was legalized. Before that book, did you ever feel like you were “writing in code”?

I suppose I did worry before *The Story of the Night*, and certainly because I was dealing with London editors. There was one editor, Marcia Rowe, an editor at *Spare Rib*, and for her being gay was a ‘60s thing. In other words, the idea that someone was still in Ireland—Ireland seemed so strange. We could talk about everything, except that, almost. I was talking to her one day about the possibility of writing a number of novels, and I told her one of them. She said, why don’t you write that? But I have to say that although the law was changed in ’93, the attitudes changed much earlier. The law was delayed by ten or fifteen years, so that I probably should have written the book earlier. It is possible in the first novel *The South*, that [homosexuality] is there somewhere in that book, if you read that book a certain way. It’s not in [the second novel] *The Heather Blazing*, which is really about my father, and liberal Ireland, and the decay of an old, conservative Ireland. It’s something I’ve had to be careful with, I suppose I learned to say, “I’m Irish and I’m gay, and male,” and at times those things don’t interest me. At times a character doing something else would interest me more, and I’ll want just to escape from it slightly in a book. There’s a slight lesbian scene in [Brooklyn], but since I’ve written the novel I’ve written a few very explicitly gay stories. It moves back and forth; it’s almost like playing different instruments. And I think gay people have a right to be many other things besides gay. And I think it’s a funny right, that you have to assert sometimes, such as, “I’m gay but I also really love baseball,” you know what I mean? So in other words, it comes and goes in the fiction the same way that Ireland comes and goes, the same way that Enniscorthy comes and goes. I hope it will always be like that. It would be nice to somehow integrate them all into some book—I think they probably are integrated in some sense in *The Blackwater Lightship*.

When you were writing *The Blackwater Lightship*, which is not only about a gay character but about a gay character with AIDS, were you ever aware of the possibility that your novel might be interpreted as an attempt to push a social agenda or effect social change?

I never wanted to write that book. I was desperate not to write the book, but it kept coming to me. But it was also a book about the three women. Once the story came to me, as how it could be done, it wasn’t pushing a social agenda as much as dramatizing the social agenda. So at the end of the book, you’re as sorry for the mother as you are for anybody. I was dramatizing a social situation rather than preaching.

It seemed to me that your style of writing was most tightly controlled in *The Blackwater Lightship*, in the sense that the sentences were so simple, so short.

Yes, the sentences in that book are almost like stage directions, and the actors, then, talk. Every time they open their mouths they say something funny, or dark, or interesting. So the dialogue does all the flavoring, and that is where the sort of staple diet—the

dullness—had to be, in the actual description. Except for a few bits of the book. “She went in, she came out...”—almost so that the voices can emerge as color.

You went to Barcelona immediately after graduating from University College Dublin, in 1975. What were you doing there in Barcelona?

I was teaching English as a foreign language and was involved in everything that was going on. Franco had just died, and there were demonstrations. I was making friends, listening to a lot of classical music, I was reading a lot. I was out at night a lot, and I was drinking a lot. I mean, it was wild. It was a wild, wild time after the dictator died. The streets were wild, and the night was wild. I didn't work often until the afternoon—we didn't start work until 4—so I'd stay out late. I'd work from 4 to 10 and then go out to late supper and then go to bars again. I was talking rubbish a lot of the time with friends of mine. But I wasn't writing. I wrote a few letters home. I remember once or twice taking out paper and starting to write something, but I didn't even persevere the way kids can. I thought a paragraph was a lot of work, you know, but I didn't know you had to put a day into it. That came later.

I read your interview in *The Manchester Review*, [in which Tóibín was quoted as having said that his favorite thing about writing is the money]. I don't want to ask you about the money, don't worry.

Oh Jesus, just imagine. I mean, I said it ruefully, as a sort of jokey thing. But God, they made such a fuss of it.

Anyways, my favorite part of that interview was when the interviewer asked you about teaching in M.F.A. programs, and you said, “I'm against a whole grain in American writing which is male, macho, so I don't encourage any guys to write about penises.” Can you tell me to whom you were referring?

Yeah, in Texas I found, at Austin, in the first class that everybody was doing it, and all the girls were sitting there while the guys were describing it. And I said, “If you want to write about your prostate operation, go ahead.” But one guy was going, “He was rock-hard all night”—give me a break here. Give me, you know, erectile dysfunction—that would be interesting, but this is not. Why don't we forget about it all semester? Next semester, all you guys can get back to it, but I'm not having any more of it. I'm retiring it. So it became a big joke, because when I went downstairs to the secretary, she said, “Did you just ban something?” And I said, “I did!”

Which contemporary American writers interest you?

Jeffrey Eugenides has only written two books, but they're both amazing. I read Toby Wolff, Richard Ford—that sort of school—Raymond Carver. But there's also another school who, I suppose, are much more difficult: a line going from someone like Donald Barthelme to David Foster Wallace.

Every so often, there is one writer that, like a lot of writers and readers, I go back to, and that is Alice Munro. You just go across the room, and you get Alice Munro, and you just go, “Oh, oh.” Twisting the story, and the plainness of some of the writing. I even met her in Toronto, and I was so happy to meet her. She was so glamorous, and I love the way she was giving nothing away. Like all the wisdom, all the sensibility, all of it was within. And she was very charming to everybody all evening, but then, tomorrow she’d go back to her desk. She didn’t look like a writer; she looked like a very glamorous person, from TV or something. She was sitting beside Margaret Atwood, and the two of them were in cahoots all evening, falling around laughing and talking.

I have to ask what you think of this line, from a story by Alice Munro called “Material.” In the story, the narrator addresses the process by which her ex-husband, a writer, has learned to transform a person from his real life into a fictional character. The narrator calls this “an act of unsparing, unsentimental love.”

It’s also an act of unsparing, unsentimental treachery. I know no one who’s ever not done it. Once it occurs to you to do it, you go there. Sometimes it’s very wrong, and you know it’s wrong. In other words, you’re taking something that isn’t yours. Not only are you writing it, but you’re changing it. Elizabeth Bishop describes it, and the term she uses for it is “infinite mischief.” But it’s also, perhaps, an act of love in the sense that for some reason something that you know matters so much to you, even though it belongs to somebody else, that you want to write it down. It’s a very complicated business. I have to say with [Brooklyn], it’s the book where I’ve used it least. But I’ve used a lot of myself. The seasickness is pure me.

Have you ever had an experience like that, where someone you know has reacted to a character that resembles him or her?

Yes I have, and it’s very difficult to deal with because you—well, what are you going to say, I’m sorry? Well, if you’re sorry, take it out! But I suppose the defense would be, that I’ve used things that have been very very important to me that have implicated other people, but they’ve been mine as well. There is no easy solution to it. It goes on. My friend, Fintan O’Toole, said, “The biggest nightmare for a parent would be to have a novelist child.”