

“On the brink of the absolutely forbidden”: In Conversation with Mary Morrissy

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Abstract:

Mary Morrissy (Dublin, 1957) belongs to the generation of women writers excluded from the *Field Day Anthology* in the 1990s, only to be included in a dedicated volume in 2003. By then she had become a distinguished literary voice in Ireland (having published a collection of short stories, and two novels). After *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013), Morrissy returned to the short story in the form of an adaptation of Joyce's "An Encounter" (2014), and a collection of short stories entitled *Prosperity Drive* (2016). Situated where history, biography and fiction intersect, her works deal with Ireland's recent cultural developments and situations of marginality risking social exclusion, gender inequality, an indelible past and the dominance of religion. Standing "on the brink of the absolutely forbidden", her protagonists, like her writing, yearn to break taboos and liberate the imagination, and they do so in a daringly powerful way.

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When a story and its characters stand on the brink of the absolutely forbidden there is little doubt as to their power to seize a reader's fantasy and win his/her heart. Page after page, this is what Mary Morrissy achieves with her audacious writing, skilfully crafted, wisely daring and bewitching. Today, this award-winner who received a Hennessy Award for short fiction in 1984, and the prestigious US Lannan Literary Foundation Award in 1995, is among the most authoritative literary voices from Ireland. Over the years Morrissy has refined her art and experimented with different genres and styles, allowing her creative impulse to find expression on the page, while also carrying out extensive reading and research work. Her literary debut dates back to 1993, when she published a collection of short stories entitled *A Lazy Eye*. In 1995 she pub-

lished her first novel *Mother of Pearl*, based on a true story she read about in a local newspaper. Set in the 1950s, the novel tells of a baby who is stolen from a hospital in Dublin and recovered by chance four years later, with terrible consequences for both the child and the child's two mothers. In 2000, Morrissy's *The Pretender* recounted the fictional biography of a woman, a Polish factory worker who led the world to believe that she was the Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanova, the last surviving daughter of Tsar Nicholas. Similarly, her subsequent novel dealt with a biographical reconstruction. *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013) recounts the troubled life story of the eponymous character, the sister of Irish playwright Séan O'Casey. A year later, Morrissy accepted an invitation to adapt James Joyce's "An Encounter" for the *Dubliners 100* tribute volume (Morris 2014), and in March 2016 her second collection of short-stories was published by Jonathan Cape. So far, reviews of the latter have been enthusiastic (so much so that she has been compared to Anton Čechov and Hilary Mantel), and the public too have been showing significant appreciation of her new work. Morrissy's readership, to-date, is almost exclusively Anglophone, with the exception of Danish, Dutch, French, German, Persian and Polish readers, who can access most of her work in translation (a French translation of *The Rising of Bella Casey* was published earlier this year, on St. Patrick's Day). As far as Italy goes, no translations of her work are available as yet, but there seem to be good hopes as Morrissy gains higher popularity on this side of the Alps. She visited Trieste, Florence and Sassari in 2015 as part of the "Irish Itinerary", a cultural trail promoted by EFACIS, the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies, and it was during her stay in Sardinia, in October, when she visited the Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche e Sociali, Università di Sassari and gave a reading at the literary festival "Ottobre in Poesia", that the following interview took place. This was Mary's second official visit to the Island (in 2013 she had been a guest speaker at the University of Sassari), and I felt it was a good time to acknowledge her literary merit and introduce her to a wider audience. The interview was conceived as an informal, thought provoking conversation with the writer. It replicates Morrissy's peculiar use of chronology, therefore beginning from the end and going back to where it started. The first question, in other words, is about Mary's most recent work, *Prosperity Drive*, which had not been published yet at the time, but which she presented at a reading night in a public library near Sassari. For the occasion, she read from a story entitled "Diaspora", and when she spoke the words that give this interview its title, her world, characters and stories came under a new light, simply yet superbly so. The questions go back in time to revisit the different stages of Mary's literary career, to investigate her depiction of women and gender issues as well as her fascination with history and "the grey area between fact and fiction". Readers will hopefully know and appreciate the energy, passion and sweet obsession of the artisan who plays with words, masters them beautifully and lets them flow, seduced by what she terms "the alchemy of writing".

L: Let us begin from the end, and from your most recent literary effort – a collection of short stories entitled Prosperity Drive – that is where I came across that wonderful line, “on the brink of the absolutely forbidden”, which seems to be a perfect description of where your writing and your characters are.

M: Yes, I’d agree that the territory I’m exploring in *Prosperity Drive* is close to the transgressive, particularly the sexually transgressive. The characters to whom this line refers – a teenage couple overcome by lust – draw back from the forbidden but many of the characters in these stories – the mother of the boy of this couple, for example, in the story “Assisted Passage”, or the character Gabe in “Lot’s Wife”, go into the area of taboo.

L: Indeed, your characters often and deliberately challenge and break taboos. It has to do with curiosity and courage, and with being true to one’s self too. I wonder whether this also applies to you as a creative writer?

M: I don’t know about that big word, courage. I think the rather down-beat nature of a lot of my fiction is being true to my view of the world, although off the page I’m more cheery. When I look back over my work I see a curiosity about form, about playing with form. The linked short stories in *Prosperity Drive* are about seeing how you can push the boundaries of the short story form while the novels, inspired by real people and events, play with fictional biography or biographical fiction.

L: The line – “on the brink of the absolutely forbidden” – is taken from a short story entitled “Diaspora”. I remember when we first met – in 2013 – you were already working on “something about diaspora”. Would you say something about the genesis of your forthcoming collection?

M: Well, the stories started as separate, discrete entities and then as I was writing them, several of the characters reappeared and so I thought I’d make a short story cycle out of them i.e. a collection where all the stories could stand on their own but that when read together, they would have a cumulative effect. The stories spring from a fictional suburban street in Dublin but, of course, it’s impossible to write about Ireland without coming up against the theme of emigration. And some of the stories are set during the Celtic Tiger, so you have the experience of immigration as well, mostly from Eastern Europe. Not exactly a new phenomenon – in my childhood in the 60s there were refugees from Hungary, followed by the Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s – though people tend to forget that now. So the ‘diaspora’ theme is built into the content, and also reflects the form of the stories which is like a scattering from a fixed point.

*L: That is a delicate issue, especially now, across the European continent. And yes, we seem to have forgotten what it used to be like in the past. History repeats itself, but... What strikes me in your description of the new stories is that somehow the architecture of the narrative has changed: in *The Rising of Bella Casey* the form of the story is cyclical – it ends where it begins. Now the stories ‘scatter’ from the centre. How does this reflect your own experience with writing? Your first published work was a collection of short stories (*A Lazy Eye*, 1993) and now you go back to that same genre.*

M: After writing three novels, returning to the short story was a great relief. There is the relatively instant gratification of working in the short form, though the main difference between the stories in *A Lazy Eye* and *Prosperity Drive* is that my stories have got much longer. Also I suppose with a short story cycle I was trying to stretch the form, see how elastic it could be, how it might mimic the characteristics of the novel in some respects.

L: And the result was?

M: Well, my editor at Jonathan Cape called the result an “exploded novel” – I quite like that. It implies the shattering of both forms.

*L: That makes me think of Joyce – the stretching and shattering of narrative forms, especially of the short story. Recently you have been asked to rework Joyce’s “An Encounter”, for the collection *Dubliners 100*. Did you choose that particular story? How influential is Joyce to you as a writer?*

M: As an Irish writer, it’s impossible to escape Joyce’s influence and his stories really impressed me when I read them as a teenager, particularly “Araby”. That’s the story I would have chosen, but it was gone by the time I was invited to join the project. I’m delighted it was because it gave me a chance to read “An Encounter” closely – as a reader and as a writer – and it has now replaced “Araby” in my affections.

L: Speaking of literary influences, who else, apart from Joyce and perhaps also Shakespeare, inspires you? What book tells you something different, each time you read it anew?

M: I always think it’s for others to cite influences on a writer’s work. I can tell you the writers who most impressed me. In my teens – a time when I think you’re wide open to influences – I devoured the work of Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers, both purveyors of the Southern gothic, and some of that influence must have crept into my work. I really admire the short fiction of Alice Munro and I return to it again and again – not only be-

cause her work repays attention but because she has developed and stretched the short story form in deep and resonant ways. The work of Hilary Mantel – all of it, not just the historical fiction – is another source of inspiration, in that Mantel never writes the same novel twice.

L: Dubliners 100 celebrates a century of Irish culture through a rewriting of Joyce's 15 stories from a contemporary perspective. The experiment comes to terms with change and the past in a globalized New Ireland while also trying to keep alive the dialogue between then and now.

M: For me, *Dubliners 100* was an act of homage; trying (and failing) to match what Joyce called “the scrupulous meanness” of the original. Where I feel the story does succeed is in its rather melancholy evocation of place, of Dublin in particular, which was part of Joyce’s intent in *Dubliners*.

L: In your version of “An Encounter” Joyce’s protagonist becomes a young girl, also called Jo Dillon. It is often the case that female characters are central to your stories. In this particular instance, would you say that Ireland has become a less patriarchal country where women have gained equal rights (socially as well as culturally)?

M: I write about women because I’m a woman and know the inside of that condition. Things have improved hugely for women in Ireland since I was young in terms of social and labour legislation. I remember a job interview in 1980 – for a copy editor’s job on a national newspaper, an all-male preserve then – where I was asked had I a boyfriend, was I thinking of getting married and did I intend to have children? It would be illegal – and unthinkable – for a female interviewee to be asked those questions today.

Divorce has been introduced here, but abortion is still forbidden except in very limited and medically dictated circumstances. I have nieces involved in the latest campaign to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution on abortion – so that’s a battle that I’m hoping their generation of feminists will win.

L: That is hard to believe, especially considering the outcome of the recent “Yes campaign” for marriage equality in Ireland (in Italy we seem to have the opposite issue: abortion was legalised almost forty years ago but same-sex matrimony and adoption rights are still a huge matter!). Speaking of abortion and unwanted pregnancies, I can’t help but think of Isabella Casey. Would she ever have opted for termination of her first pregnancy, do you think?

M: Well, I think this is impossible to say. In fact, I doubt very much Bella Casey would have even considered the idea of an abortion, given her religious and cultural background and the period in which she lived. At least in this

day and age, women have access to information even if they have to travel to the UK to get an abortion. But abortion is an exclusively female issue, unlike marriage equality reform, and female equality has always been lower down the political agenda here. The campaign to change abortion legislation has been going on since the 1970s and we've already had three constitutional referendums on the issue (1983, 1992 and 2002); compare that to the swiftness with which the marriage equality act was campaigned for and passed.

L: The idea of giving women visibility lies at the heart of your reconstruction of Bella's life in The Rising of Bella Casey. Your writing about her seems to be an act of just retribution: you rescue her from the murderous hands of her brother Séan, and yet your insight into O'Casey's troubled conscience makes him, in the eyes of the reader, a disturbing but also a captivating presence in the novel.

M: Sean O'Casey wrote harshly about his sister Bella in his autobiography and then killed her off ten years before her time. This literary sororicide was what prompted me to write *The Rising of Bella Casey*. I felt his was a failure of the imagination; he couldn't understand what had prompted her downfall and he hadn't the capacity to see beyond appearances. That disappointed me but in the writing of the novel I realised that O'Casey was also writing out of disappointment – the disappointment of his very elevated and unrealistic expectations of his bright, clever sister. He'd placed her on a pedestal and couldn't bear to witness her fall, so he opted for silence.

L: He was also very disappointed at himself, though. I am thinking at that wonderful scene at the end of chapter 10 where he gets very frustrated with his work, but then he starts all over again. Writing must have been extenuating for him, painstaking even, almost as much as being Bella's brother.

M: The way I depict O'Casey's writing process is pure fiction. I think, in reality, he probably found writing a great release of pent-up feeling and conviction. Certainly the autobiographies – all six volumes of them – appear on the page as an unstoppable outpouring of exuberant language. The point I was making in the novel was that contrary to the rest of his work, writing about Bella might have been a real difficulty for him.

L: The Rising of Bella Casey is a contemporary historical novel set between fact and fiction. How do you combine the two, what inspires the encounter of real and imaginary worlds?

M: I think of *The Rising of Bella Casey* – and my other novels, *Mother of Pearl* and *The Pretender* – as inhabiting the grey area between biography and fiction. So though I write about real people, there are inevitably gaps in

the narrative, and in those gaps, the fiction happens. I often think I must be very unimaginative because in my novel-writing I'm generally working with ready-made plots and a laid-down story. The 'real' story is a blueprint from which I depart when one of these gaps in the narrative appears. The trouble with a lot of historical characters – like Bella Casey or Anna Anderson, the fraudulent Anastasia Romanov whom I wrote about in my second novel *The Pretender* – is that they often appear unknowable. We have external evidence of them, of course, but sometimes it's hard to imagine their interior lives.

The key word here is imagine. I see that as what I do, imagining myself beyond the official record, and into the interior of these characters' lives. With historical figures, particularly those pre-20th century, that requires two willed acts – an imaginative leap into a pre-modern world and a creative kind of forgetting – forgetting about Freud and Jung etc., whose psychology has become part of the mainstream, part of everyday thinking.

On a practical level and to aid that imaginative process, I generally write the story first and then do the research so that the research doesn't swamp the imaginative process. Also I'm lazy about research; I only do as much as I need to. I'm not one of those authors who gets distracted by the minutiae of history. A lot of the time research is a chore; something in service to the narrative, the story, which is primary for me.

L: I find this particular aspect interesting, Mary. You use gaps – spaces in between, empty areas – creatively. Beaver, for instance. His GPI (Joyce again?) causes him a fatal loss of memory and he eventually is “lost, somewhere, in the folds of time”. That line is absolutely marvellous, powerful in its capacity to define Bella's condition too, before you “rise” her and rescue her from oblivion.

M: One of the things about writing about real people is that I feel I owe it to them to be true to the facts of their lives, as they are known. So, in real life, Bella's husband, Nicholas Beaver, contracted syphilis and died of GPI, so all of this is true, rather than a novelistic trope. Of course, the novelist can invest emotional and symbolic resonance in the facts. People lost in the folds in time; yes that's a good description of my creative territory – women caught in the shadow of history.

L: The shadow of History, a place where untold and forgotten stories are found. And The Rising is also about stories located “in the underneath of History”, to use Nancy Cunard's words. The private and the public intertwine in your novel. “The Easter Rising”, for instance, is seen from the perspective of ordinary Dubliners, and of women belonging to the Protestant minority whose children went fighting in the Great War abroad. Is that past an open wound, too painful to be remembered? And is this part of the reason why it is so prominent in the novel?

M: For many years, this was, not so much a wound as a silence. At the time, Irish soldiers who survived the Great War and came home were treated as traitors and outcasts in nationalist communities because they were seen as having supported an Empire that was oppressing their countrymen. (It's important to note, however, that thousands of Irishmen from both sides of the divide – nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant – fought and died together in the trenches).

In the past decade there has been huge healing around the Irish contribution to the Great War. In 2011, for example, Queen Elizabeth made an official visit to Ireland – itself an historic occasion – and visited the National War Monument in Islandbridge in Dublin (which for many years, tellingly, was left abandoned and derelict) which commemorates the Irish fallen in the First World War. On the same visit she also paid her respects at the Garden of Remembrance which honours the Republican men and women who fought to end British rule in Ireland.

This was one of the most important public gestures of recent times that recognized the wound of divided loyalties that has lain at the heart of historical Irish identity. So I suppose all of this was in the ether as I was writing the novel.

The depiction of the Rising in the novel from the view of Bella and her family – Protestant, working class, loyal to the Crown – who don't support the revolution and don't understand it, is unusual, and deliberate. The Rising was a glorious failure, mismanaged and favoured by only a small minority of the population; what turned it into a success was the fact that the leaders were executed by the British – and it was this act that turned popular opinion. But even at that stage, it's unlikely that Bella Casey would have changed her loyalties. For her, the Rising would still have been an illegal challenge to what she would have considered legitimate British rule. (Unlike Sean O'Casey, her brother, who absolutely supported the break with Britain so you could say the Casey family is a microcosm for all the political divisions of the country at that time).

L: To what extent, would you say, does that past experience – thirty years' work for The Irish Times – influence your work as a creative writer?

M: My experience as a journalist has mostly been in the production side of newspapers but I started my career as a reporter and feature writer so I learned early the discipline of working to a deadline and got used to the notion of writing daily. When I started writing fiction, I switched to being a copy editor because it was too difficult to spend all day writing as a journalist and then going home to put on my fiction writer's hat. That said, I'd always had an interest in editing. The precision of editing, of choosing the right word, of not using several words when one will do, is enormously helpful when redrafting my own work. With my short fiction, I will often do 8 – 10 drafts, and most of the redrafting is cutting and honing; being an editor by trade has meant I've learnt to be

ruthless with my own writing. My editing experience has also made me a better teacher, I think. Given me a cold eye, maybe – but often that’s what young and new writers need and want when their work is being reviewed – a cold eye.

L: I suspect that you are equally demanding of your own writing, which explains how, sometimes, the artifice of writing is at its best with made-up characters. Reverend Leeper, for instance, who’s another case of Divine Justice in that novel. Is there any intentional reference to the scandal of Irish paedophile priests?

M: Yes and no. First of all, although the Reverend Leeper is my creation, he does spring from a reference O’Casey makes in his autobiography about a clergyman at Bella’s school who was very demanding. His demands were not specified, but it provided an opening for me to speculate and to invent. There are echoes of church sexual scandals in this element of the plot, I suppose, though it’s important to note that Leeper is a Protestant minister whereas the child abuse scandals that have dominated in Ireland for the past 20 years have, for the most part, involved Catholic clergy. And to be fair to him, Leeper is not a paedophile; in fact, as with a lot of sexual predation, he is abusing his position of power and authority.

L: We are back to the question of equality and gender, and also to that area where fact and fiction intersect. Your early work, Mother of Pearl, is also based on a true story.

M: I’ve always been interested in re-envisioning real stories or using them as a leaping off point for fiction. In fact I came across the story that inspired *Mother of Pearl* in a newspaper so I suppose you could say I’ve used my journalistic training as a resource, or maybe it’s just a paucity of imagination. I like to take a story as given and look at it from a different angle. Engage in the ‘what ifs’.

L: You teach Creative Writing to MA students: are those young writers also prompted to play with and engage with the ‘what ifs’? Does your academic experience somehow contribute to the workings of your imagination? In other words, would you say that your work lies between fact, fiction and the artifice of writing?

M: Teaching creative writing keeps you in touch with what’s happening now in writing. You get to learn what enthuses young writers and you see new styles and genres opening up. You see students bursting with ideas and some of that energy brushes off on the teacher. As to where my own stories lie – maybe that’s for others to decide. For me they’re a mix of truth and lies. Emotionally true, factually suspect. Isn’t that the alchemy of writing? Unlike my novels, my short fiction often starts with something very small – an image, something witnessed, even a first line. In that sense the short story

is much closer to the poem in conception. Then it's a process of following your nose, so to speak. Seeing where the narrative takes you. In that sense it's a lot freer as a process than the novels, where the trajectory of the narrative is often laid out. For the most part, my stories are contemporary, rather than historical, although I have been tinkering of late with some historical short stories. But even those concern fictional characters, not real people. I want to maintain that freedom to be absolutely fictional in the short form.

L: Since you mention "what is happening now in writing", I'd like to know your view on how Irish literature has changed in recent years from when you started writing fiction.

M: There are many more women writing and being published – exciting and ground-breaking new voices like Eimear McBride, Belinda McKeon, Sara Baume, Danielle McLaughlin. Daring, thoughtful, savage and unashamedly female. The breaking open of this female voice is very exciting to witness as when I started out, you were often singled out as being a 'woman writer' as if it was a special category apart from the mainstream. (I'm of the generation of Irish women writers who were famously excluded from the Field Day Anthology in the 1990s, only to be afterwards included in the extra 'women's' volume published in 2003). And for women themselves, there was a lot of hand-wringing about what it meant to be a 'woman writer' as if it bore special responsibilities because we were so few. So by sheer numbers, those gender distinctions and that identity anxiety has been swept away.

L: To conclude, what's in store for you, after Prosperity Drive? Are you doing any specific research work at the moment?

M: I'm working on a novel – I'm in the early stages so am superstitious about saying too much about it. I think of it as being a contemporary novel, but of course it's set in the 1990s so that's nearly historical by now!

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