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"I Have Always Been a Writer": An Interview with Evelyn Conlon

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Irish novelist and short story writer Evelyn Conlon was born in Co. Monaghan and lives in Dublin[1]. She is an elected member of Aosdána, the Irish artists' association. Conlon has been writer in residence at University College Dublin and in colleges around the world and has a deep interest in Australia, where she lived in the early 1970s. There she held a variety of jobs and became besotted by the landscapes of rural Australia.

Conlon has published three collections of short stories, *My Head is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993) and *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2000), and four novels. The short stories are widely anthologized and translated. Conlon's novels deal with social and political dilemmas. *Stars in the Daytime* (1989) and *A Glassful of Letters* (1998) related the lives, loves and hates of women and girls of the Irish diaspora. *Skin of Dreams* (2003), shortlisted for Irish novel of the year, dealt with the story of Harry Gleeson, who was sentenced to death row for the murder of a woman, a crime he did not commit. Gleeson recently received a posthumous pardon. Conlon is currently working on a new collection of short stories, but her most recent publication was a novel, *Not the Same Sky* (2013), which focuses on Irish Famine orphans of the 1840s and earned her the title of Australia's newest Irish novelist. The diary-like *Not the Same Sky* draws on her Australian experience and narrates the moving story of over 4,000 Irish girls aged between fourteen and twenty, victims of the famine, who were shipped to Sydney to work as domestic servants. Conlon's work, whether short story or novel, is suffused with originality and humour and she is brilliant at deploying many of the rhetorical strategies of the satirical apparatus, namely, irony and wit.

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The following interview took place on October 13, 2014, at her home in Dublin, during my visit as a Scholar at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway), where I was researching Irish Literature and Culture.

Melania Terrazas: *Evelyn, thank you very much for meeting me. I'd like to start with some general questions before I focus on your literary production. I have read that you moved from job to job and place to place between 1972 and 1975 before dedicating yourself to writing full-time.*[2] *When and how did your writing adventure start? And how have your experiences affected your writing?*

Evelyn Conlon: I went to Australia in 1972 by ship and over a period of three years did a lot of travelling around the country. I did all sorts of jobs, learned some things about life. But before I left I had already had a short story published in *New Irish Writing*, one of the main Irish newspapers. Funny I cannot remember sending it in. Then I had another one published there. It is an interesting question. I have always been a writer. I think that when I was about nine, I decided that that was what I wanted to be. But, of course, I didn't know what it meant. It was a gradual thing from then, a difficult thing, because I certainly didn't come from a background in which there were people who were writers. But then, who does? I do think that there are extra difficulties for writers who are women. After returning from Australia, I took part in a National Writers Workshop in the early eighties with Eavan Boland. She said an interesting thing; that the young man will say, "I want to be a writer, I am going to be a writer," but it often takes the young woman much longer for her to say "that is what I am." And so it was with me. I *was* a writer before I would say that I wanted to be one. Even when I was doing all sorts of odd jobs, I was really just working to live and longing to get back to writing about what I felt was going on around me, about what I was seeing. After I had those short stories published, before I was twenty, I really wanted to tackle things about women in Ireland. And I felt that I couldn't do it, I didn't have the nerve. So what I did was I wrote poetry or, what I should say is, attempted poetry. And this was absolutely not good enough because what was happening was that I was using poetry to pretend that I was not saying something that I was in fact saying. So it was not truthful. When I came back to Ireland I had my first child, at twenty-three. I wanted to go back to university, having been out of my depth, making a mess of it, the first time and leaving to go to Australia. I went back to Maynooth College, which was also the place where priests were trained. It had recently been opened to lay people. It seemed an impossible task but I got a crèche going there. And that is what led to that introduction: "This is the only woman you will ever meet who has started a crèche in a Seminary." I had my second child in the second year and separated from my ex-husband in the third year. Pretty hectic arts degree. Separation was quite unusual in Ireland at the time and

[2] See, for instance, Devlin-Glass (2013, 1-2).

my life became extremely difficult, not just financially but because attitudes were distressing. There was no divorce. But it was not just that there was no divorce. It was that antagonisms could be quite strong. However, when I look back on it now, I can see that, obviously, such enormous turmoil in my personal life affected what I wrote about. But then, in a way, I don't regret all that, because it gave me an opportunity to see a world that I would never have seen otherwise, to understand what hypocrisy means. If everything had gone nice and smoothly, there are a lot of things that I would not know about life. And, you know, I had the energy to survive it at the time.

MT: *You were involved in the radical end of the* Irish Women's Liberation Movement—Irish Women United*. Now, looking at that stage in your life, what do you think you have achieved?*

EC: You mean, what *we* have achieved, all of us who were there. I've just been to the opening of an exhibition of posters and photographs from that era. One of the organizers came to go through my collection and it was astonishing to look at some of the things they were looking for. Listen, we have achieved amazing things, amazing things. Contraception was not legal in Ireland then; divorce was not legal. The one thing we have not achieved is abortion rights. By that, I mean, we have not achieved a situation in which the dignity of women who are pregnant can be dealt with in the way that it needs to be, which essentially to me is that it is between the woman, the medical person involved in her life and the man involved in her life, if there is a man involved in her life.[3] And it should not be up to any of the rest of us. I do, however, believe that we will see that sorted —sooner, in fact, than we think. That's the optimist in me. Now for a bit of work on it.

MT: *Would you agree with the interpretation of many of your short stories as non-moral works that embody a transgressive act of imagination of a kind that necessarily precedes the formulation of specific political demands whose purpose is to give insights into moral problems, not providing solutions to them, and which are enacted in the public sphere?*

EC: The answer to that is that you are right and it is interesting that you would see it, because I certainly would not be aware of it as I work. Quite often stories begin with an idea of something that wasn't there yesterday, but must have been in a subconscious way and I think: "Gosh, I really want to write that." Now, that is day one. Day two, I want to write it this way. Day three, it's different again. Day fifteen it does not work. So, back to the beginning. But, quite often, what happens is that what is left is the original idea that moved me towards writing the thing in the first place. With new clothes on. And I can't examine it like a reader does, but I'm delighted that you have seen what you have.

[3] For further reference on this idea, see Pelan (2000).

MT: *How do you decide which form is more suitable for your writing aims and which literary form do you prefer?*

EC: I think that whatever form I'm working in at a given moment is the best one. My fourth novel has just come out and I am working on my fourth collection of short stories. So, at the moment, I am thinking, "Oh, there is nothing like the short story," and "I'll never do a novel again." But I do feel that the short story is great in many ways, because you have to pare it down all the time. It's a more exact art form. It's a bit like dancing. You can't go all over the place with it. There are other dancers to be taken into consideration. But also, the story is not good if you don't discipline it, just like the dance suffers if you throw yourself all over the place.

MT: *Do you still write by hand?*

EC: Yes, I do, although I have noticed recently that I'm beginning to write a bit on the machine if I am doing radio essays. These are short pieces—they should last the length of time that somebody is making a cup of tea on a Sunday morning. The program goes out at 9.10 am and is known among some as "The atheist's Mass." I have always worked by hand even though I am a fast typist. The process of what is going on in my head needs pen and paper. And also a kind of silence, it is a better silence. When I am at a machine, that is a different thing. It feels like a thing of distance… functional. Although the mechanics are available on the computer, it feels like there is more capacity for the work to change with pen and paper.

MT: *Could you say something about your next collection? What makes it different from the previous ones?*

EC: Gosh! I must have a look at what stories are in it. Well, they are set in different places: New York, one in Australia, of course, Paris, Jakarta and one in Hiroshima. But you know, despite the specific locations, I don't know if they are that different, except that, naturally, the things that interest you change, as you move on. Although the funny thing is that one of them is actually a story that began in my head when I was in my twenties. Years later, I discovered a story about somebody who pretended that they were going to Australia—because they were going to South Africa and we weren't supposed to go to South Africa at that time, we were supposed to be boycotting it. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was very strong here. Another thing: when apartheid as a law was ended, I heard people talk about having worked in South Africa and I would be looking at them and thinking: "You went to South Africa when apartheid was there." Never felt the same about those people again. So the story is about telling lies. It is called "The Lie of the Land" and it was recently translated into Chinese. It begins with two people telling a lie. The couple lie about going to South Africa and in an ironic twist they dislike the place intensely. However, as a result of the lie they become destined to travel endlessly. And then, finally, one of

them says one night, "But lots of us have told lies here." So we discover that there are lots of people around a table who are running away. Like the person who was involved with the forged Hitler diaries. And others. Yes, the stories are different and yet some of them go back to things that happened about thirty years ago.

MT: *Many critics describe your style as clear-sighted and witty. You also make frequent use of irony. Do you consider yourself a satirical author?*

EC: See, I don't think about it like that. Then, sometimes, when I read out loud at an event, I suddenly see what they mean, but I wouldn't have set out to do that. That would not have been how I began. But the voice might run away with it.

MT: *What do you think about the social value of literature?*

EC: As I would have said this morning in the National Gallery, here we are in the cave and the minute we have enough to eat and to drink, somebody over in the corner starts to make a painting or somebody decides to make a play.[4] I think that is an essential part of our lives, how we understand things—an essential part of our social life as well—but I do recognize that some writers go writing for themselves and it would appear that that poem or story has nothing to do with the outside world. The individual reader must take exactly what they want from it, even if it seems very private. The woman in *Skin of Dreams* keeps secret the story of her relative who has been executed. But it is all within her head, the discussions are going on within herself, yet they do have a relationship to what is happening in the outside world. So, I suppose I don't write deliberately in this manner but if a story eventually relates to history and the political view of our lives then that is what it does, regardless of the intention of the original idea.

MT: *Do you think you are a political writer?*

EC: What is political? Everything is political. Love is political. So, in a way, I am political because it means being bigger than the self, even though the self is at the centre of us. I am a citizen as well as a writer. We stood at the top of Grafton Street selling condoms, not because we had nothing better to do on a Saturday morning, but because we felt we had to. I know some people didn't feel that, but they were glad we were out doing it.

[4] Conlon was interviewed by Brendan Rooney at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin on 12 October 2014 and I attended it. The interview took place because Conlon's short story "What Happens at Night" is included in *Lines of Vision: Irish Writers on Art* (McLean 2014), a beautifully illustrated anthology of new poems, essays and short stories by a wide range of Irish writers—fifty-six in total, including John Banville, Roddy Doyle, Seamus Heaney and Jennifer Johnston—inspired by pieces in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, to mark its 150th anniversary. *Lines of Vision: Irish Writers on Art* was edited by Janet McLean, Curator of European Art 1850-1950 at the National Gallery of Ireland, who also set up the accompanying exhibition, which was formally opened by President Michael D. Higgins, himself a poet, on 7 October 2014.

MT: *What made you go to Australia in the 1970s?*

EC: Okay, I probably won't answer properly because I am trying to figure it out myself for a nonfiction book that I may be beginning. And how much of my childhood do I actually ever divulge? But there is no doubt that going to Australia was me running away. At some stage, I may examine what I was running away from and maybe I won't. In many ways I had a strange childhood and part of that strangeness meant that I lived a lot imaginatively. One of the places that had always been in my head was Australia. A completely ludicrous notion of what Australia was and I just wanted to go there. I was going out with a man at the time and he decided to come with me, then changed his mind. But when I asked him to be a referee for me going myself he changed his mind again. We got married in order to emigrate, which was a very silly thing to do. You don't realize that marriage actually follows you. But he convinced me that it didn't make a hoot of a difference, he didn't believe in it anyway, so that was fine. And I was nineteen so could not see the danger. So, Australia was there in my head. I suppose it was there in a romantic sort of way but its main attraction was it was the furthest place I could think of. It certainly was then. And when I came back to Ireland, I have to tell you, I never intended to stay. But I had two children and when I separated from this man I realized what marriage meant. I was not free to leave Ireland with my children. I of course wanted to make it as easy as possible to facilitate my ex's relationship with the children but forcing me to stay in Ireland was the worst thing that could have been done to me. I certainly wanted to be anywhere other than Ireland. Then, several years into this experience, I thought, maybe, gosh this may have been an unintended favour to me, because Ireland is a good place in which to bring up children. A good place, but it was a fighting place for me, which I could have done without. Somewhere else would have given me a different life, but my work would not have been as it is if I had not remained in Ireland.

MT: *Did you feel like an outsider in your own country?*

EC: Yes. Still do sometimes, but not so much now. But I really did, as a separated woman in 1979 with two children, both under three years old. Did I feel like an outsider? You bet! And that experience never leaves. But, you know, becoming an outsider taught me a lot.

MT: *How would you describe Australians' attitude to newcomers?*

EC: When I went there in the 1970s, they were very welcoming to a young Irish woman, but that is not necessarily the attitude that they would have had towards everybody. The problem of refugees today is an entirely different matter. I know Australians who are in despair about how this issue is being handled. But about me going there, I have dealt with this in a long story or novella, which may be published with the collection of short stories. In it I've written about how the emigrant into any country has to keep finding things they have in common, because they can't keep saying that such and such is different. The native will eventually become annoyed by this continuous comparison.

MT: *I would like to focus now on your latest novel,* Not the Same Sky. *What motivated you to write a historical novel?*

EC: And is it a historical novel? There is a moment, when tossing around an idea when you suddenly say, "Oh my God, this is a novel." It is not a short story and you think, "Oh, no!" and that happened with this one. I certainly remember the moment when that happened with the previous one, *Skin of Dreams*, and look where that brought me. I had a memory from visiting Gundagai [in New South Wales] in the 1970s, a strange sort of feeling. It stayed with me. And when I first heard about these girls it seemed to explain it. But the book was originally written with a link in the 1970s. Eventually, with the disappearance of that link, it became more about them.

MT: *Millions of Irish emigrated to America and Britain and many writers have dealt with this Irish diaspora. Not many have written about the perhaps 5% who migrated to Australia and I do believe that it is important that you have done so in* Not the Same Sky.

EC: There was a huge level of emigration in my family, to England, Canada and the US. And I have dealt with that in the novel *A Glassful of Letters*, but this time I was interested in the Australian story, because I had been there and I found the notion of these young women going from Ireland to that place so far away completely astounding. I was also interested in how few people knew anything about them. In the novel, one person says to a barman: "You'd think that they would have noticed? All these weddings suddenly going on." There is this small place, Yass, where some of these girls were brought, less than one hundred out of the 4,400. So there has been one wedding in five years and the next thing there are ten in a week. Nobody says, "Gosh, how did that happen?" It is only now that historians are beginning to look at these times. So they fascinated me for two reasons: one, the thought of them and their journey, and two, that so few people had examined it. And I began to think to myself, "Did they not examine it because they were girls?" But I now think it's more than that. I think that when the girls got to a certain point, where they could organize their lives in some way, they had to leave their pasts absolutely behind, because there was no possibility of them ever being able to recollect at ease. How they got to where they were was way too crazy for gentle reminiscing. That is why I got into the whole thing about memory because I feel that they dug a hole and put their memories in it.

MT: *Why did you choose that title?*

EC: The novel began its life as *Getting to Gundagai*, then it was *Records on Globe Street*, which I still rather like. The notion of people's records, the notion of the world, Globe Street, but also—and this is a ridiculous coincidence, which I found out after I had begun to use the title—the Records Office in Sydney was until recently situated on Globe Street. Anyway, that had to go because too many people felt that it did not read like the title of a novel. I had about twenty titles and had great fun with them, but in the end, the notion that the sky changes is about as shocking as it can get. You look up and you do not recognize the stars. That is far away.

MT: *In the novel, Julia says that they had "some choice" in their decision about going to Australia. What is your position about this issue?*

EC: She said "some choice" as in sarcastic. Charles Strutt says "you choose to come here" or "I think you had a choice in it" and she says "SOME choice" as in "do you call that a choice?" You can stay and die or you can go to Australia. She is the one person in a way, I think, who was being political, because she is saying: this was forced upon us, you are the person who is English. We are Irish. This issue of course came up when the book came out in Australia, and when I was doing readings there were some arguments about it. Apparently, they did have a choice about going. In other words, they could have said "I am not going," but my feeling is with Julia's "SOME choice." Also I believe that if you have a sixteen-year-old girl in a workhouse in Ireland after famine, she probably does not know where Australia is. The concept of Australia. How would she know? So, again, I don't believe that was choice. Now, some of the people are trying to say: "Oh, no, but they chose to come freely." What they are saying is that they were not prisoners. They are differentiating between them and convicts, so they say they came with free choice. But I do not consider that a free choice. Nevertheless, I do talk about them opting to gamble on life. In one chapter of the book I throw all those difficult problems into the mix and there is no answer really, because in one way, they did have a choice, and in another way absolutely not, because how could they have chosen when they would not have known what they were choosing? *You* know what I mean. So you have to be really careful about how you say it, and then of course there is the extra wonder of setting Australia up as a colony by penal labour. Can you imagine? I mean, it is an extraordinary thing. We will make this colony and we will set it up by taking prisoners, who will build the place. And then we might need to get female labour later.

MT: *As the story evolves, the reader discovers that these girls were better looked after than most other immigrants, yet when settled in Australia, marriage or prostitution were perhaps the only options. Could you expand on this issue?*

EC: I don't think it was as harsh as that. Because they were brought out on a very specific scheme, they were looked after insofar as they were employed. They were settled. Yes, they would have continued working, unless they got married. All the research that I have looked at suggests that the majority of them married and had children. Lots of them.

MT: *Do you think these girls had less choice and fewer rights in Australia than in Ireland?*

EC: That is a very hard question, isn't it? Firstly, there is the issue of whether they would have lived if they had remained in Ireland. Once in Australia the tenor of their lives would have been decided by how good their employer was. You can imagine the difference between a benign human being who fed them well and an abusive slave driver. I tried to deal with that when I talked about the young woman who isn't hired. She goes back upstairs and wonders if she has been lucky. It is her employer who will decide what her fate looks like.

MT: *Did your own memory of landing in Australia by boat affect your narrative description of these orphan girls' arrival?*

EC: I took that memory and tried to hold it up to what it would have been like, at that time, for those young women. I think that one real fear would have been about losing the others who had been on the ship with them for months. And also Charles Strutt, their Surgeon-Superintendent, whom they had learned to trust.

MT: *Are the girls inspired by actual women?*

EC: No. The character Charles Strutt is based on a real man; I've read his log in the library in Melbourne, and imagined him out of the functional but informative entries. But the girls, the young women, are completely fictional characters. I tried to imagine what, as human beings, any of us would be in those circumstances. I think we would be bits of all those four characters, including Bridget, who pines for death really. They represent what I believe human beings in that situation would be.

MT: *Who is your favourite female character in* Not the Same Sky *and why?*

EC: I couldn't choose. No, it is the four of them. I like the four of them. But, Julia, yes, of course. But then, in a way, Honora is the one who intellectualizes what memory is, in the end. So, I have to like her too. She saddens me more, though. She saddens me much more, whereas Julia has that great instinct for survival, and would be fun to be with. Maybe.

MT: *These orphan girls manage to adapt themselves to a new land, to forget their harsh past and, as a result, to survive.*[5] *However, the last sentence of the novel reads: "*We should all know where they came from." *Is your account of their lives a tribute to memory, to their lives and experience in Ireland and Australia?*[6]

EC: I hope it is all of that.

MT: *In the last paragraph of* Not the Same Sky *there is an outpouring of thoughts about people migrating in the same way as birds. What is the significance of this extended metaphor?*

EC: That is how the world is. The importance of it has to be decided by the reader. Some people might read it quickly, whereas I think it is deeply important, because of the silence of those girls. It is essential to see them in the context of the entire movement of peoples around the world. There are birds right through the book, you know. Using them as metaphor prevents the novel descending into sentimentality.

MT: *The contemporary fascination with sites of memory raises the important question of the politics of place. In the prologue of* Not the Same Sky*, Irish sculptor Joy Kennedy receives a letter from Australia asking for help in creating a memorial to the 4,414 famine orphan girls in Sydney, situating them in history. She questions the significance of a memorial to the*

[5] Klaassen also views these girls as survivors (2013, 2).

[6] Pelan dwells upon the issue of memory and journeys in her work (2013, 193).

girls. Do you think that the building of a memorial in Australia potentially raises its own political problem of an evasion of history, especially in connection with Ireland?

EC: I wanted to approach the building of the memorial to show a modern person hearing about the story and what they might do with it. The request comes to Joy because she is a woman and a stonemason. The big problem is that she has never heard of the girls before so she wonders how they should be remembered. And are they now Australians? Is there any point? Which is an odd thing for her because this is what she actually does for a living, she writes down on stone how to remember people. Then she has the question, "Should they be remembered only in Australia?" On returning from there to Ireland, she thinks that the only thing that matters is their names. That is the only part of them that is still in Ireland, their names, because the people left behind would have named children for them. The novel asks why we memorialize some things and not others. But there is always a problem about that, isn't there?

MT: *Your novel is important in Ireland and Australia, it gives us the story of these lives that have until recently been silenced. Would you consider yourself a spokesperson of these silent realities?*

EC: In a way, but you know it is important to acknowledge the nonfictional work that I read or listened to, and I have done so in the novel. I also don't think they were silenced, although one could say that by being removed to Australia their voices were taken from them. But I think they were silent themselves. Partly because their pasts were so traumatic. And then the question of choice rears its head again. I can see the difficulties. It depends on how you want to view the past. And you can see why: there you are, sitting in your house overlooking the beach, the grand expanse of sunburnt bush, or wherever. You are having a lovely life in Australia and you don't actually want to believe that, four or five generations ago, your ancestors came in such and such circumstances. There's a lot of forgetting done in Australia, partly because of the penal past. Part of the whole process of becoming a non-convict was to forget your history. And even those who were not convicts got into the swing of it.

MT: *Evelyn, your rhetoric of inquiry in* Not the Same Sky *unmasks, anatomizes and exposes the unpalatable truth about these orphans' journey. That is, it uncovers the social and political implications of their migration. Did the rhetorical nature of* Not the Same Sky *emerge organically from the difficulty of tackling trauma or did you want to write a novel that was innovative in terms of form?*

EC: I think when I began the book, it was not going to be at all like it is now. I had the modern-day sculptor, I had the girls and I had a 1970s person in between, but that person is now gone and is perhaps becoming a novella. My big concern was that it not be a sentimental novel. I did not want it to be *those poor girls*, although I did want us to look at what a terrible thing befell them. But I also wanted to show their survival. I had a discussion with a London editor who was very interested but who quite cynically said:

"You know, it should be really bad, really tough, getting better and then amazing." And I said: "You must be joking!" I had no interest whatsoever in that way of looking at them. I wanted the novel to leave us with no answers, because how could we round off the notion of these lives? They are much too complicated for that. You can't round off the famine, you cannot round off the fact that somebody thought that this would be a good idea. And yet you cannot decide if it was or not because, as I said, they lived. But also you could have fed them in their own country and they could have lived there. But no matter what you bring up, this is what happened. So, therefore, you have to just throw all those things into the mix and leave it without resolution.

MT: *Evelyn, you use many letters in your novel. Do they serve a specific purpose?*

EC: I love letters. And here I think of them as a way of giving the women a voice. And yet the really important long letter is never sent, nor addressed. It is found when Honora is dead. So, it is an anti-letter.

MT: *Could you expand on your interest in having the girls confront the settings of Ireland and Australia?*

EC: Yes, well, I had to do that. Because we have no words from the girls themselves. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to be a girl living in Ireland in the 1840s. We see Honora with all her family, we see them all in that lovely bed. You know, they are poor and the boys are in one bed and the girls are in another, all in the one room, but nevertheless they are content. Their house was a happy house. And then, that is gone. And I deliberately say: the mother died, the father died and then, there you go. I do not want to go into the details. The shocking thing is that you could do it in one sentence, you can say: the mother died, the father died, so and so died. So there they are and then they end up in Australia. In a way, you know, it is a good thing that it took a hundred days for them to get there. That they could see so many changes over the days, that they could see the changes in the sky, that the sea was absolutely terrible. The hundred days are the distance between the lives they had had and the lives they are now going to have. The slow journey allows thought and a recognition of what the difference is.[7]

MT: *Despite the fact that it was men who put these girls in this situation, the notable male characters are positively portrayed?*

EC: Well, the first male character that we meet is Matt Dwyer. I don't think he is benign. I think he just has no nerve and what can he do? He is merely a civil servant. Possibly you want me to talk about this Charles Strutt. Of course, again, this could cause problems, because some people would say that not every Surgeon-Superintendent was like him. But I believe that, from what I have read, he was a moral man. And I also wanted the

[7] For further reference on this idea of the girls' inner and outer journey, see Kildea (2013, 1).

novel to be about the girls and their thoughts. It's not that I deliberately made the men okay. In many ways, it is just that they are not there. That includes the ones who controlled this venture. The novel is about the women, how they managed with their lives afterwards.

MT: *You focus on women's lives, but not exclusively. Has your focus on gender changed?*

EC: Gosh! I don't think about those things at all. I'm not aiming for a particular statement. I don't get into that at all, because if I did, I would stop myself. It would be like putting the brakes on. So, it is interesting if that is coming through because, now that I think about it, *Skin of Dreams* is about an innocent man found guilty of murdering a woman. That book is about him and about other men on death row. But it is also about how women see this. Reviewers have talked about me writing about women, but that is also because I give different kinds of women a bit of the page. Maybe I don't examine men's lives as closely. It is difficult, I think, as a woman writer today, to take seriously some of the issues which have been dealt with in fiction before, the notions about what women think. So that is why many of my women have tended to be a bit sceptical. Women are as diverse as men. But you wouldn't know it always from what is written about them. You define her as a mother, or a non-mother, and then she is a certain way. You define her as single and then she is immediately many other things, whereas we wouldn't do that for a man. We would say, he is x… and he is also whatever. We would give him a personality. In fact, now that you ask me about it, I think there are three stories in the next collection of short stories in which the narrator could be either male or female. I do not specify, it is up to the reader to decide.

MT: *Now, post-Celtic Tiger, how would you describe the situation of women in Ireland?*

EC: I think that the big battle at the moment for everybody in Europe is holding on to their level of income. It is about the global economy, it is about money being taken from ordinary human beings in order to pay gamblers and banks. And the issues are the same for all of us, whether we are women or men. Now, there are the extra issues, specifically female, abortion being the principle one. That battle is being fought again and we will have a campaign to get rid of the Eighth Amendment which was stupidly put into the Constitution. And, unfortunately, I will be involved in it because I will not be able to say that I can't. It is the most awful fight. And there will be this underlying notion that somehow or another you cannot trust women with their own bodies. It is about control. No woman makes a decision lightly to have an abortion. No, that's not true, of course, the odd woman does. The human race is rather funny, but in general, I would like to trust women a hell of a lot more than the so-called pro-life people. And in the meantime, Irish women go to England to have abortions. Why should the English have to do this for us? We need to grow up, face this thing here. It is a question for women, their partners sometimes, and their doctors.

MT: *Thank you so much, Evelyn.*

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