

Dermot Bolger in Conversation with Irene De Angelis

Irene De Angelis

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Dermot Bolger is an acclaimed Irish writer, whose novels *The Journey Home* and *The Family on Paradise Pier* were both published in Italian by Fazi (*Verso casa*, 1997; *Figli del passato*, 2007 – translation by Lucia Olivieri). His numerous plays include *The Ballymun Trilogy* (2010), charting forty years of life in a Dublin working-class suburb, and a stage adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which has toured China. He is also a poet: his *New and Selected Poems* appeared in 2015. As an 18-year-old factory hand, he founded the radical Raven Arts Press which first published many of his contemporaries. He closed this press in 1992 to co-found New Island Books, one of Ireland's leading publishers. A former Writer Fellow at Trinity College, Dublin and Playwright in Association with the Abbey Theatre, Bolger writes for most of Ireland's leading newspapers and in 2012 was named Commentator of the Year at the Irish Newspaper Awards. He was invited to give a lecture at the University of Turin, as part of the EFACIS Irish Itinerary 2017. This interview took place on 27th March 2017 in the Luxemburg International Bookshop in Turin.

IRENE DE ANGELIS You were born and raised in Finglas, North Dublin. When did you feel you would become a writer?

DERMOT BOLGER That is an impossible question to answer really. My mother died when I was ten, and as I was not mature enough to cope with the emotional enormity of it, I did for a short time invent my first alternative parallel imaginative universe, where I imagined that she was actually still alive, that there had been a mix up at the hospital and we would soon be reunited. Maybe this is where the instinct to create imaginative worlds to help explain the complex narrative of the real world took root and it came out again, years later, in novels and plays. But this is speculation, nothing is ever black and white, I am always wary of easy answers and maybe, without any of this, I would have become a writer anyway, although perhaps a different type of one.

I.D.A. Your work, which combines lyrical images with brutal realism, is often concerned with the articulation of the experiences of working-

class characters who, for various reasons, feel alienated from society. Do you feel the need to preserve the memories, hopes and dreams of those living on the margins?

D.B. I just simply write to try and explain the world for myself and hopefully, in the process of doing so, I may throw light on it also for a small number of readers. Because I came from a working-class urban Irish background and because I found that, at the time I began to write, nothing, or very little, of this world was reflected in contemporary Irish writing, I think that I felt the need to explore this world for myself and hopefully for any readers willing to go on that imaginative journey with me. I always think that the margins are more interesting than the centre and I wanted to write about a marginalised world. But that does not make me a spokesperson for the world or the people I grew up with or worked with – I can only write what feels true to me and realise that every other person from that same background may have a different but equally valid perspective on it.

I.D.A. In your first novel, *The Night Shift* (1985), you introduce many of the themes that will resurface in your later writing. Could it be considered as an autobiographical meditation on what it meant to be Irish in the latter part of the 20th century?

D.B. When I write books, I put my heart and soul into them, and then move on, leaving the interpretation and judgement of them to others. *The Night Shift* is set in the welding rod making factory where I worked after leaving school. When writing it, I wanted to write about my experience as someone in their late teens, suddenly thrust with a world of tough but friendly workmen, in the midst of industrial and trade union unrest. I write it thinking that here was a world that – in Irish terms – had never been written about and a novel that I fully expected never to be published. Writers learn to disguise the people they are writing about by inserting filters and changing details in the later drafts of a book, but – not expecting it to be published – I changed very little about my co-workers with the result that, when I returned to the factory a decade later, with a film crew making a documentary about me, they were all still working there, all instantly recognisable, and in many cases they had immediately recognised themselves, although they were all fine and amused by the notion of the book. I always see that factory as my university, where I had to grow up fast.

I.D.A. *The Journey Home* (1990) was a controversial Irish bestseller. It was originally published by Penguin and later re-issued by Harper Collins. Why did it take eighteen years to be published in the United States?

D.B. It was indeed – and perhaps even still is – a controversial book in Ireland, which had achieved its purpose in dividing opinion and making

certain types of people feel very uncomfortable with it. I have always been delighted that Fazi had the courage to publish it in Italian. It is an angry book, about a generation disenfranchised and disconnected from the ruling ethos of the society in which they were born, and is a young man's book, more polemic in parts than I would write it now. Eighteen years after being turned down by all the big American publishers, a small university Press in the United States published it in a series devoted to classic European novels that had never appeared in the US, and to their amazement (as I do not think they had ever even had any type of review in the *New York Times Review of Books*) it would get a lead review on the front cover. In music terms, it would be like a singer songwriter getting the front cover of *Rolling Stone* for an album released eighteen years before, except of course that the musician would have more hair and less dandruff than me. It showed that the book still had the power to move and to shock. What was interesting, however, is that – despite the major exposure of this lead review – all the same big US publishers turned down the chance to publish it in softback yet again. But books find their way out there regardless, and I still get letters from young readers who rediscover the book and feel that it represents, in some way, their own feelings and experiences.

- I.D.A. The three teenage protagonists of *The Journey Home* are supposed to embody the future (“We are the young Europeans”): they have freedoms their elders never enjoyed, or at least the illusion of them, the range of choices that come from not being bound to the land. Hano and Shay earn a living in deadening office jobs, and their opportunities abroad are no longer limited to the UK or the US. And sex and drugs liven their nights that follow bad days. Yet they are afflicted by a nostalgia, which seems as general as the snow over Ireland in *The Dead*. They veer between wanting everything to change and wanting everything to stay the same forever. Is this why you call them “the children of limbo”?
- D.B. While Katie (the girl who is part of the romantic triangle in the book), may have some nostalgia for the countryside, in that she was born there and lived there until the death of her parents, she is also well aware of the harsh realities of life there. So she is homesick for a personal childhood that she knows she cannot return to. But this notion that Hano possesses some nostalgia for the countryside that his parents left, out of economic necessity, to seek work in the city, is, I think, due to a lazy reading of the book by one academic whose misinterpretation gained currency. When Hano flees Dublin he is simply fleeing Dublin, and the countryside he finds himself fleeing through is as alien to him, as a city person, as the landscape of Poland or Sardinia would be. It is most definitely home, and his journey home is not a

journey back into the past or into the countryside, but as he realises in the final pages, a journey to a place within himself, where he can step out of the shadow of Shay – his more confident old friend – and stop trying to be the different versions of himself that other characters in the book are trying to shape him into being and he learns to simply be himself. He carries his own home inside him or wherever he is – be in Dublin, Mayo or New York. If he got that far, home would essentially be that new place and new life that he would make with Katie, whom he slowly grows to love. The landscape they traverse while he comes to this realisation is actually incidental.

- I.D.A. The novel tackles the taboo of sexual perversity, which is strictly linked to political corruption and embodied by the Plunkett brothers, Pascal the politician and Patrick the businessman. They are grandsons of a working-class socialist hero from Mayo, deployed as evidence of their supposed republican credentials. Could one say that they personify the Freudian ‘return of the repressed’ in the twisted, violent and bizarre details of their sexual lives? And your writing has been compared to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s, especially his *Ragazzi di vita* and *Una vita violenta*. Were you somehow influenced by the Italian writer and director?
- D.B. I knew and loved Pasolini first and foremost as a poet, but when I read these two Roman novels I felt for the first time that I was reading a book about Finglas (where I am from in Dublin). Obviously the landscapes were utterly different and the time period different, but there were people creating a new world on the margins of the city that chimed with me, so those novels were important pointers for me. Years later, a man came up to me at a reading in Canada, and said that my debut *Night Shift* had captured the essence of his childhood. I asked him what part of Dublin he was from, and he replied that he was from Chicago, and I was delighted because what he meant was that he recognised the essence of his childhood world as existing within *Night Shift* (despite the obvious physical differences). Years before I had possessed the same feeling about Pasolini’s novels. When I wrote *Night Shift* I had never seen Pasolini’s film *Salò* and indeed have never seen it since. But I had published a small edition of his *Lutheran Letters* with my tiny publishing house, Raven Arts Press, in Dublin and put on the cover a quote from him in that book: “To forget at once the great successes and to continue, unafraid, obstinate, eternally contrary; to demand, to will, to identify yourself with all that is different – to scandalise and to blaspheme.” That probably sums up *The Journey Home* and also explains why it is still awaiting a mainstream US release a quarter century later. But I knew the essence of *Salò* and so I stole the notion of sexual perversion as a metaphor for political corruption. I wanted to explore the theme of political cor-

ruption within the book, but in Ireland the corruption was so subtle and insidious that if I just presented it, half the audience would not even recognise it as corruption. So, instead, it comes out within the Plunkett's – the political family in the book – as a form of sexual perversion, but in reality they are more like vampires trying to literally suck the blood from the younger characters they prey on. Like I say, it was a young and angry book. I actually needed to correct the proofs again when it came out in hardback with that US University Press ten years ago, and there were loads of things I wanted to change and modify and just improve the writing, but I realised that I had no right to do so: this was the testament of my younger self, and my older self had no right to change a word of it.

I.D.A. The only time when Hano seems at home is with the old woman in a caravan. Is she based on a real life figure?

D.B. People always see the old woman living in a caravan, who gives refuge to Hano and Katie, as a metaphor or a mystical figure, but in truth she was based on a real life woman, Sheila Fitzgerald, who grew up in what would be called 'a big house' in Ireland, i.e. from the ascendancy class, but who in reality was a free spirit who had rejected her background and class and spent her life in search for the essential core of happiness which is simplicity. Her simple caravan only had one clock in it, with the hands removed and the word NOW written across the clock face. I met her when I was eighteen and hitchhiking across Ireland, and she was seventy-three. She taught me a huge amount about life and about how to cope with tragedy and still keeping a flame of happiness and openness alive. Her caravan was called The Ark and was in a field near a small village, just like in the book, and she gave refuge to me when I was young and to many other wanderers of all ages whom she befriended. She just wove her way into the book.

I.D.A. Is there a link between *The Journey Home* and the saga *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005)? And is not the latter novel about how a family and a class can find themselves displaced and considered foreigners within their own land?

D.B. Sheila Fitzgerald, whom I just mentioned, actually lived into her late '90s and I made some tapes about her life in the years before her death, with the idea of trying to write about her remarkable family. She was one of five Gould Verschoyle children – physically striking, headstrong, and raised in Donegal amid a freethinking babble of debate, where no viewpoint was taboo. Sheila was second born, with one older sister, and three younger brothers. She was closest in age to Neil, the heir apparent, her special friend, confidant and minder. Neil was set to inherit the family property as the eldest son of the

eldest son, under a strict legal indenture that could never be broken. Neil Gould Verschoyle would reject his inheritance and become a vehement communist, move to Moscow and be forced to leave a wife and child behind during Stalin's 1930s purges, living and working and proselytising amid Dublin's worst slums, and suffering incarceration in Irish jails for communist agitation. He renounced his privileged Protestant upbringing and isolated himself from the family he loved. Few Irish communists renounced more for that cause, yet his name rarely appears in histories of communism.

Neil was an earnest, handsome youth in Sheila's childhood memories. So indeed is her youngest brother Brian. Brian wore comical hats and seemed dwarfed by his older brothers. Nothing prepares you for the fate he would suffer as a volunteer working with the Russians in the Spanish Civil War. Growing disillusioned, he was tricked onto a Soviet ship in Barcelona and disappeared. Imprisoned in Soviet Gulags, while his mother desperately sought his whereabouts, he died in the hellhole of a Soviet Gulag. Brian's name also never occurs in histories of the Irish left.

In later life, although Sheila did not become as entangled as her brothers in politics, she too campaigned tirelessly for causes she believed in. The artist Pauline Bewick remembers her in 1950s Dublin as a tiny crusader covered in flour hurled by an outraged citizen after Sheila took part in a protest. The poet Paul Durcan attended her utterly innovative art classes for children, which started his passion for painting. Other young artists like Camille Souter found lodgings in her home in Frankfurt Avenue, with walls covered in paintings by children – sometimes on whitewashed sheets of newspaper when Sheila could not afford blank sheets.

Sheila's quest was spiritual, to strip away the veneer of complexity and strive – despite tragedies and setbacks – to grasp the joy at the core of life. As I say, she was still a bohemian alternative thinker when I met her first in 1977. At seventy-three, her caravan in Mayo was an ark for stray animals and people. She taught me to believe in my dreams, and my life was never the same again. Her father – a pacifist who supported Home Rule – treated every local person equally. A utopian barrister, who often defended locals up on petty charges without seeking payment, his passion was composing music. Household decisions often fell to her eldest daughter, who, when the IRA stole the family car, visited the cottage where she heard the local IRA were based to plead for its return. Startled volunteers played her protestant hymns on a gramophone until their commander returned and handed back the car. It helped that the family was related to the rebel Countess Markievicz, although Northern Irish cousins were Orangemen. Sheila recalled writing poems in support of the IRA, and

her autograph book suggests similar Nationalist sympathies by other siblings. The family looked forward to playing their role in a new Ireland, not realising how the new Catholics who controlled Ireland would allow no role for them. It seems a long way from *Night Shift* or *The Journey Home*, but to me they were another family marginalised by the realities of the new state.

I always wanted to know more about Sheila's life in the decades before I met her. About her struggles as a newlywed in Mayo, her return to a dilapidated woodland house there with two children during the war, her estrangement from the husband who accused her of living 'in the ether', and her quest for freedom as a separated woman and then a widow. I wondered what motivated her brothers in Moscow and Spain, how her family was splintered by Neil's entrenched renunciation of the family property, which he inherited, and how they coped with the mystery of Brian's disappearance and never knowing if he was alive or dead.

Sheila often talked of writing her life story. Yet I never realised how seriously she wanted to be a writer until I discovered her passport from 1968, listing her occupation as 'writer'. Beside it, a tattered page listed stories she had written, and the helpful comments of editors who rejected them. She was sixty-five when applying for that passport, travelling to cheap parts of Spain and Morocco, trying to write and live a full spiritual life, engaging with new ideas and people. *The Family on Paradise Pier* originated in taped conversations about her life that I made in 1992 when Sheila, then almost ninety years old, still enjoyed her alternative life-style in her caravan. We discussed the idea of my writing a novel based on her life one day, and Sheila preferred a form of inter-linking vignettes, with some name changes and blurring of facts.

For years I hesitated to write this novel, knowing that I could never capture her unique essence or tell the essential truth of her story, like Sheila would have done had she been able to write it down. There was also the problem of what was the 'essential truth', in that siblings all remember things differently. Whose truth could I tell? If Sheila's impressionist memories were inaccurate on one level, a strict historian's logic might create a reality that Sheila could not identify with, having experienced events on a different emotional level. I struggled with these dilemmas and with discovering facts – even from MI5 files – that contradicted Sheila's memories. There is the further contradiction between fiction and reality. Novels have an eventual logic and make sense, whereas our lives rarely do. After two years of work I had to start again, this time first and foremost as a novelist.

I took courage from a line by Sheila about admiring artists with the courage to create something new. *The Family on Paradise Pier* deliberately plays with aspects of reality. I changed the first names

to show that the siblings were recreations shaped by my own imagination, but retained the family name because the Goold Verschoyle children were too unique to be any other family. Fiction can never tell the full truth, but perhaps it tells different, equally important truths. Biographies may not tell the full truth either, because our experience is funnelled through whatever version of truth we decide to construct from selected memories.

Sheila died in 2000 in Wexford. At her request, her body was taken to Dublin by young friends not in a hearse or conventional coffin, but in a plain wooden box lovingly painted in bright colours. In Glasnevin crematorium no clergyman spoke, but Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* was recited before the body she had outgrown entered the flames to the joyous final chorus of Beethoven's *9th Symphony*. Sheila's hand-made coffin looked like a small boat that would cause only the barest ripple. Only afterwards did her friends realise how that ripple had spread out across her lifetime to touch distant shores, and how it still keeps moving on its own course, long after many of the seemingly great waves of her time have died away. My book was my tribute to her.

I.D.A. How was your experience devising the collaborative novels *Finbar's Hotel* and its sequel, to which some of Ireland's best known writers anonymously contributed chapters?

D.B. In 1997 after I finished my large novel called *Father's Music*, I thought a lot about Mark Twain and certainly about Tom Sawyer and especially about how Tom managed to get his aunt's fence whitewashed. I had written *Father's Music* in a 19th century cell in a Dublin seminary where it stretched from 70,000 words to 140,000 words. Unfortunately my deadline did not stretch and I lost two stones in weight and was hospitalised for heart tests afterwards. As I rested up, I realised that there had to be an easier way to write novels and, while walking my dog one night, Tom Sawyer's answer to his paint job dilemma came back to me. Of course. Get your friends to write it for you. Thus began the extraordinary adventure of *Finbar's Hotel* for seven Irish friends and writers. I invented a hotel in Dublin - once the hub of political intrigue and late-night haunt of priests, politicians and prostitutes, but now fallen on hard times. I gave it a history, filled out the public events of one night in its life and then gave each writer a room number. They could mix with my imaginary staff, drink in the bars, eat in the restaurant, but once they closed their own doors they were on their own.

For me, as editor, the process was fascinating, watching how seven writers can take the same starting point and go in utterly different directions, while sharing the integrity of the location. Then, in rewrites, they began to share characters, so that somebody invented by Roddy Doyle, Joseph O'Connor or Colm Toibin could pop up in a chapter by

Hugo Hamilton, Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright or myself. It became such an egoless project that I then nudged them a little further. "You know how some critics never say a good word about certain writers, yet can never bring themselves to criticise other writers. Let's frighten the wits out of them by taking our names off the stories. We'll have seven writers and seven chapters but leave it to discerning readers to decide who wrote what." Between reviews and competitions, several hundred readers have tried. None have guessed all seven identities and only one got five correct.

Indeed my friends laughed so much at the prospect of 'reviewing the reviewers', that I even coaxed all seven into bed together for the cover photo. I'm not saying who wrote what story, but in the old days I used to say that the Pope had the third secret of Fatima and I had the first secret of Finglas (the identity of who wrote what chapter of *Finbar's Hotel*) and that I was perfectly happy to meet him half-way, say in Paris, and swap secrets. It never happened, alas.

I.D.A. You adapted Joyce's *Ulysses* for the stage: how was it received in Ireland and abroad?

D.B. In 1993 the highly respected English theatre director, Greg Doran of the Royal Shakespeare Company, phoned to say that he had recently staged Derek Walcott's acclaimed version of *The Odyssey* and wanted to follow it with a stage version of James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses*. I told him why I would never attempt this nearly impossible task. I explained my reasons again over lunch, after he flew into Dublin to see me. I was still explaining why I would not consider it, when - in one of those metamorphoses that occur between the main course and coffee - I started drawing diagrams on my napkins to show how it might be staged. As Greg departed for London, I stood outside the restaurant, feeling palpable terror, because in explaining how it could not be done, I had somehow agreed to transpose Joyce's masterpiece of 265,000 words - in eighteen episodes, alternating through a dazzling array of linguistic styles - into a play, due to have a staged reading in a 1,300 seat Philadelphia theatre the following Bloomsday.

Then I realised that my terror at approaching it as a playwright reflected the terror many readers feel at approaching it as a book. *Ulysses* has a deserved mystique. Nobody could call it an easy read. Joyce joked about wanting to keep critics busy for centuries. Ninety years on, he remains on track, with an industry surrounding the book. Much of what is written laudably attempts to open up the book's myriad meanings. But some criticism is so abstruse as to place barriers around it being simply enjoyed as a novel.

Therefore I took as my starting point a complaint by Nora Barnacle - Joyce's great love - that he kept her awake at night, laughing so

much as he wrote it. Starting my adaptation, I quickly realised why Joyce laughed at subtly getting under the skin and prejudices of the claustrophobic city Stephen knows he must escape from. The writing teems with brilliance and virtuosity, but also with deep humanity and insights into the human condition that remain as true today as in 1904. What impressed me most as a reader was what scared me most as a playwright. Joyce not only creates remarkable characters in all their contradictions, but his book expands to encompass the physical and psychological backdrop of an entire city. *Ulysses* could be said to be devoid of minor characters, because Joyce brilliantly conjures entire lives for people who appear only fleetingly.

Such expansiveness is the privilege of fiction: secondary worlds can be explored that are not pivotal to the narrative, but inform it by being the common bedrock from which the characters spring. However, a play cannot sit down and digress too overtly from its central preoccupations. Playwrights enter into an unspoken pact with their audience, but also a silent duel. An audience will follow a playwright anywhere, once they are being propelled forward by the engine of curiosity. If they get ahead of the playwright, the spell is punctured. The taut string precariously holding a play afloat loses its tension and all drama dies. One difficulty for a playwright is that *Ulysses* could expand into fifty plays. Gut-wrenching dramas could be conjured from something as minor as the disastrous marriage of Bloom's former belle, Josie Breen or the entangled, delusional life of Bloom's clandestine erotic correspondent, Martha Clifford.

I needed to stick to the dynamic of the two journeys, that eventually bring together a cuckolded and ridiculed older man (who has lost his son but never loses his humanity and intellectual curiosity) and a young man estranged from his own father, intent on true independence by refusing to let any boundary limit his intellectual freedom. No playwright could ever match the expanse of Joyce's vision. I could only go where my curiosity led me, hoping that the relationships that most fascinated me might intrigue other people.

After the Philadelphia performance, the book went back into copyright. It had initially lapsed fifty years after the author's death, but the EU - with its love of harmonisation - then standardised copyright law, making it seventy years from the author's death. So my version was forgotten about by everyone including myself, until I met a great director, Andy Arnold, from the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, who wanted to do a stage version of *Ulysses* and I told him that, as they say on cookery programmes, I had one already made in the oven. The Tron toured it to several venues and then took it on tour to China, which was extraordinary, and in October 2017 - 23 years after it was written - the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, are staging it

on their main stage in the Dublin Theatre Festival. So essentially the secret - as Leonard Cohen showed - is just to live long enough for your work to be seen in its own light.

I.D.A. Who are the emerging writers, both in Ireland and abroad, that you follow with greater interest?

D.B. I admire anyone who tries to make a living with just the thin sliver of their imagination, in whatever field or genre.

I.D.A. What advice would you give to somebody wishing to become a writer?

D.B. I would refer them to the quote by Pasolini above and also to the knowledge gleamed (as can be seen by my other answers) from the fact that it took *The Journey Home* eighteen years to reach America and my adaption of *Ulysses* twenty-three years to reach the Abbey stage, that while you need to live and write in the here and now, with your antenna tuned into the hidden fault lines in your society, you also need to take a long term view and realise that writing is not a sprint but a marathon and so not get over phased either by immediate success or failure. The big victories you will achieve will not be awards or prizes, but the feeling that comes on a slow Tuesday afternoon when you sit in a room for hours, unable to write a word but then the slow miracle happens and you emerge that evening with a 1,000 good words, realising that you have won today's skirmish with language. Success and publication and all those things are nice and economically important, but a writer's real battle is with themselves, and any day when you can conjure a 1,000 good words from nowhere is a good day when you can walk away satisfied, and then let time take its own course.

