



The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 3

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art, etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?



Season 3, Episode 2. Jan Carson reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Jan says: ‘We all have a primary storytelling language whether it's, you know Greek mythology or Celtic myths, or, how your uncle, your drunk uncle tells stories and anecdotes, but we learn from somewhere how to tell a story’ (page 7). Does that resonate with you? What do you think your primary storytelling language is, or was?
2. Jan says that magical realism is ‘not about escapism. [It’s] grounded in the actuality of real-world stuff with the grittiness and the problems and the beauty as well’ (page 7). Why do you think magical realism has emerged from places with a colonial history? What do you think it offers as a genre?
3. Jan says: ‘As a child, I never wanted to escape into Narnia, it was too fluffy, for me. I wanted to go into Judith Kerr’s *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, about the magic and the weird infringing upon the domestic, that seemed much more interesting to me as a kid’ (page 7). Can you remember what kind of fiction you enjoyed as a child, either in literature, film, or TV? Do your interests still reflect that?
4. ‘Encounters with stories that were different from mine changed the kind of smallness, the inward lookingness of my life to a much bigger picture. So, I love that, like poetry changes nothing, you know, it can take the smallness, the lack, and make something big of it’ (page 9). Can you think of a time when you experienced art as something expansive?
5. What do you make of Jan’s view that: ‘we put an awful lot of weight on our young people...it’s ludicrous to expect our young people to fix a problem that they didn’t actually make themselves...I wanted to kind of interrogate that, like, how do you expect our kids to fix this mess here when it’s, like, reconciliation hasn’t been modelled to them. What’s been modeled to them is segregation’ (page 11)?

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts facilitator based in Belfast. She has written three novels, two collections of short stories, and two flash fiction anthologies; her work has also appeared in a number of journals and on BBC Radio 3 and 4. Her second novel, *The Fire Starters* (Transworld, 2019), won the EU Prize for Literature and was shortlisted for the Dalkey Novel of the Year Award. Her latest short story collection, *Quickly, While They Still Have Horses* was published by Penguin in April 2024. Jan is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and with me today is the writer Jan Carson. Jan's second novel, The Fire Starters, won the EU Prize for Literature in 2019, and her most recent novel, The Raptures was released by Doubleday in 2022. Quickly, While We Still Have Horses will be released later on in 2024. Jan is prolific in other genres too, having published collections of short stories and written for radio, as well as having worked as a community arts facilitator. So Jan Carson, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Jan Carson:

Thank you for having me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Pleasure. Jan, I want to start off by asking you, was there a particular experience or friendship in your childhood that you think prepared you for the work you do now? And I know you do lots of different kinds of work but, I'm curious if there's something that comes to your mind as you think about that.

Jan Carson:

I think not so much with people. So I grew up in a household that didn't really have an awful lot of art in it. Erm, you know, I came from quite a fundamentalist Presbyterian background, and so people, real people were not as important to me as fictional people. And I had a really, really wonderful relationship with the library. So, my mum used to leave me there sometimes while she was getting the groceries, which I think you could do back in the 80s, in a weird way you probably shouldn't do with children now! Some of the people that I encountered in the books that I delved into there really transformed my life, and I probably was reading crime fiction far too young, so I was eight when I encountered Agatha Christie for the first time!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well, my god, I wondered how long it would be before Agatha Christie got mentioned, and here we are, right at the start! Welcome Agatha also, to this interview.

Jan Carson:

Yeah, Agatha became a very important person for me, but more so that idea that erm, language, art lifted you or could make you feel something that was outside of yourself or extra to yourself, you know, with Christie, a lot of it is fear and, and suspense and mystery, but that books could do that; so very early on, there was something in those fictional characters that really brought out a part of me that I don't think had been acknowledged anywhere else in my life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And did you know that, did you know that this is what's happening, or were you just kind of following along with that, and kind of being in the energy of that and only with reflection as an adult you realise that the library played such an important part?

Jan Carson:

I think it's probably a reflection as an adult and being able to go honestly, go back and go, you know, when were my happiest times? And I think sometimes our idea of when you're happy is dictated by all of the kind of external stimuli around you, you know: you're supposed to be really happy when you're with loads of friends and, you know, doing exciting things, and you're popular and all of that, and actually, my happiest times I came to realise were, you know, when I'm curled up with something like- I have a very strong memory of reading *Rebecca* for the first time, and just being absolutely lost in du Maurier, and thinking: I don't think I want to be anywhere else in the world right now than right here in bed with this book.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You grew up in Ballymena.

Jan Carson:

I did, for my sins! Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's a nice place! You know, having had a childhood that was so influenced by literature, were you from a kind of a mindset at school or at home or in culture where the idea of being a writer was a possibility for yer?

Jan Carson:

Absolutely not, erm, I got punished in about third year for- I'd read everything in the third year book box and everything in the fourth year book box, and I was made to sit in the corner and read slower, which is a wonderful way to come at teaching, I think! But, erm, just this idea of like, intellectualism, or thinking, or ideas, or art was, you know, getting a bit above yourself. That, you know, it wasn't for the kind of folks that I grew up with, and I didn't, I'm not from a working-class background; I'm from a very staunch middle-class background, but even there, that idea of: don't get above your station was very implanted very early on. I think, you know, looking back now I can see there's a gap there. Particularly in Northern Ireland, I think it came later in Northern Ireland than in other places, where my generation was often the first in the family to go off to university. And there was an expectation we'd go off and learn and we'd come back and pretty much do the same things that our parents did, you know, have the same kind of jobs and think similarly. And it wasn't like that, you know we came back having thought and experimented and met people and had experiences and, we weren't the same, and there's, I see that in a lot of my peers that I grew up with, this idea of how to reconcile what you've learned and experienced with where you came from.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well it's like something has been enacted on yer, a conversion, to use a religious term, but not necessarily a religious conversion. That introduces profound conflict into that experience, then.

Jan Carson:

Yeah, absolutely. I think also, maybe in the North at that period- I went off to university in '98, but I still came home every weekend, as did most of the folks in Ballymena I grew up with- they went to UU or Queen's or somewhere that was within a stone's throw of home. And so it doesn't have that kind of leaving and cleaving to a new culture and community and experience that most university students have, you're constantly coming back and being reminded of where you've come from. And I don't know looking back if that's the healthiest way to get on.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We'll talk a bit about this later on maybe, but I'm curious- given all of these in a certain sense, impediments, to the artistic vocation, what was it that drove you to writing, 'cause like, you are prolific and have been for years. Your publishing record, your, your output, your

engagement in the arts scene, I mean, that, that shows a very deep determination as well as other things: I'm curious about how it was that you made space for that.

Jan Carson:

Erm, so I didn't actually come to writing 'til really late - I mean, not late in terms of someone like Annie Proulx or something, I think she didn't start writing til her 50s - I was 25 when I first started to write. I'd always been a prolific reader, I'd been a facilitator of the arts, you know, very involved in community work from, oh, gosh, from 1998 onwards, but I never wanted to have a go for myself, and I think some of that was tied up in the upbringing of, you know: don't get above your station, this is for other people, and particularly as a woman, you know, it's not a woman's place to be at the front reading and thinking and provoking other people to think. So, I moved to the States when I was 25, and I got my first laptop. And it just felt like the kind of stars aligned: I landed in a city called Portland in Oregon, which- I'm a big fan of No Alibis in Belfast but I think Portland does have the best independent bookstore in the world! I was able to go to readings every night and hear my heroes read and meet other people who were writing and thinking, and, very quickly I started writing myself. And, just there was this thing of like: oh my goodness, this is free and this is legal and you can feel this good, and nobody can really stop you?! Erm, and I still think back fondly those first three years of writing before I got anything published, were the freest and the most...I don't know, uninhibited I've ever been as a writer, because there were no expectations and I was just falling in love with it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Wow... A few years ago, Jan, you spoke at Corrymeela, in fact, you've spoken at Corrymeela based events, you know, both in Belfast and up at the centre in Ballycastle, and I can't remember which place it was at, but you spoke about magic realism. And I have never forgotten what you said that, you know, in magic realism, something magic is happening, but also, alongside the magic, all kinds of other very real everyday events occur. I mean you give an example of a story that you had written about a Belfast woman in London who, after her boyfriend goes to work every morning, this woman goes upstairs with a pot of tea and two cups and shares a cup of tea with her dead granny who lives in the wardrobe. And you just at the end of that said: 'but don't most of us talk to our dead relatives?' Um, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about magic realism and what it is as a literary genre that interests you so much.

Jan Carson:

I guess that this is, was one of the gifts that lockdown gave me, there's a lot of things lockdown took away from us, but for me, obviously it gave us space and time to think and to reflect and I spent that time learning about magical realism, which is the genre that I stumbled into. I guess I always say I think the Bible is a magical realist text: it's set in the real world and weird shit happens all the time. And, that was my primary storytelling language, like, we all have a primary storytelling language whether it's, you know Greek mythology or Celtic myths, or, how your uncle, your drunk uncle tells stories and anecdotes, but we learn from somewhere how to tell a story, and I learnt from the Bible, so magical realism tends to be my default.

I think it's super interesting for me in terms of, it's not about escapism. Magical realism is grounded in the actuality of real-world stuff with the grittiness and the problems and the beauty as well, and then it shows you these kind of little glimpses of the kind of super mundane, what's beneath the surface, what, where the potential could be, and I really love that. I'm drawn to- as a child, I never wanted to escape into Narnia, it was too fluffy, for me. I wanted to go in - and I'm working a lot on this at the minute - I wanted to go into Judith Kerr's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, about the magic and the weird infringing upon the domestic, that seemed much more interesting to me as a kid.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

How interesting.

Jan Carson:

And I think now as I grow kind of more as a magical realist, and I have had the great privilege of working with magical realists from places like Latin America, and Africa, and Eastern Europe, where, you know, postcolonial places where magical realism really flourished. I began to see kind of a gap here in Ireland, you know, magical realism tends to come from places with a colonial history where it's, it's rubbing up against what would be seen as kind of- colonial literature tends to be white, heteronormative, realist, erm, you know, middle-class, and with no kind of magic in it. And so this wave of magical realist literature that emerged, mostly from Latin America, it's, it's, you know, kind of running contrary to that, and it's saying there's, there's more to life than that, and I think what I most enjoyed about meeting these other writers is just the matter-of-factness with which they treat the magical element. You know, you said: 'don't people all talk to their dead grandmothers?' when you're talking to an Argentine writer

you're not asking why the dead come back, what does that symbolise? You're just- the dead come back, that's what happens.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Yeah, they're always there.

Jan Carson:

Yeah. I find that really refreshing and I'd like to see more of it in the literature that's coming out of this neck of the woods.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, how do you, how do you reckon with the ongoing impact of, of tension and conflict and: is Northern Ireland British or Irish, and the legacy of, of land and border in the context of what influenced you towards magic realism?

Jan Carson:

I think those are all, they're rich territories to work from, like, I always say, never gonna run out of things to write about in this part of the world, and I also think that they lend themselves to symbolism and extended allegory and metaphor, you know, a lot of these things if, you know if you were just keeping a blow by blow account of everything that happens in Northern Ireland, it would be really dull, and it would also be deeply frustrating and hard to see the wood for the trees, sometimes, but a metaphor allows you to approach that kind of bigger picture or come at it from a fresh angle or see things with new eyes. My favourite quote in the whole world, and I overuse, it but Flannery O'Connor, who is my favourite writer of all time, she was asked: why do you use the grotesque in your writing? And she said: 'To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures'. And I, I think there's a real element of that, that magical realism or absurdism - something like Beckett's work, or Flann O'Brien - they, they bring a freshness to a story that can feel very kind of overtold, that causes the, the listener or the reader to like wake up and pay attention. And that's what I hope my work does. Yeah, I'm often looking for the metaphor that opens up the kind of story I want to tell.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you see that reading is a way of seeing, then?

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I mean it definitely is for me, I'm a big believer in, that you know, reading changes people, you know, there's that quote about 'poetry changes nothing'. I can't remember was it Auden, who said it? Erm, you're a poet, you should be able to say that, Pádraig! But I heard in the summers, Africa Neil, who's a brilliant contemporary poet, who says we put the emphasis on like, poetry changes nothing- it doesn't have any impact in the world, but maybe it's poetry changes nothing- that it brings something into the world that nothing becomes something when you approach it with language.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, Emily Dickinson said, er: 'Nothing is the force that renovates the world'.

Jan Carson:

Yeah. I mean, we're, what, 15 minutes in and I've got Agatha Christie in and you've squeezed in Emily Dickinson?! There's nothing more to say, at this point!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah! Interview over. Done!

Jan Carson:

I see that in my own life, like, I came from a world that was incredibly cloistered and inward looking and, you know, I write about it in *The Raptures*, this idea that a child raised in that fundamentalist, rural, religious kind of upbringing in the North in the 90s, was not aware of anything else that was going on in the world, and didn't know her experience wasn't the only experience out there. And the only reason that I'm not there now is because of two things: one, books and the other is the QFT cinema.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

The independent cinema in Belfast, for anybody who isn't familiar with it.

Jan Carson:

The best cinema in the world, basically! I can honestly say when I'm in the country, I've been there three times a week pretty much since 1998! Those encounters with stories that were different from mine changed the kind of smallness, the inward lookingness of my life to a much

bigger picture. So, I love that, like poetry changes nothing, you know, it can take the smallness, the lack, and make something big of it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama, with me today is the writer Jan Carson. Jan, you have just mentioned your most recent novel *The Raptures*. And I wonder, I'd like to talk to you about that. I have done my attempt at a non spoiler summary, but you'll do it much better than I, so I wonder if you would be able to give a non spoiler summary or introduction, so that folks who haven't read it yet - and I hope everybody does - would be able to follow along as we talk about it.

Jan Carson:

So *The Raptures* is set in a - you can't see me doing air quotes 'cause it's a podcast - but it's a 'fictional' village called Ballylack, outside Ballymena in 1993. And it follows Hannah Adger, who's an 11 year old girl who's been brought up in a very fundamentalist Protestant household, over that summer as a mysterious illness kind of sweeps through the classmates in her school, and each of them dies one by one, and comes back to her as a kind of ghostly presence. Erm, and, erm, Hannah is the only one who doesn't succumb to this illness, so it causes her to have huge questions about the, you know, religious teaching she's been brought up with, what the world is, like, you know, the division between reality and what's not, what's erm, what's below the surface. And I'm always meant to say that it is quite a dark book - 11 children die - but it's also pretty funny, as well.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yes, it is. Yeah. I mean, that's kind of consistent in every review of your book, people kind of go: it's funny, and kind of local and macabre! You know, so those, those phrases pop up a lot in the reviews of your work. One of the things that I found so interesting in the book is how when these other children come back, they're slightly modified, um, and there's this way within which they represent a kind of an imagination of saying: you can do what you wish here in this realm, where they are now. That feels very real in the midst of the magic of, you know, being visited by a ghost, the fantasy about a life where you can do a little bit more of what you want is very powerful.

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I guess, two things probably to say about that- not many people have picked up on this, but the novel was actually kind of written in response to the Pied Piper of Hamelin story, which was always my favourite fairytale as a kid, and I wanted to imagine what happened to the children after the Pied Piper comes back and takes the kids away for not having paid- the village hasn't paid its dues. And, I imagine that, you know, maybe it wasn't a horrific thing that was happening to them in the next place, maybe they were having the time of their lives; so there's a little bit of that, but more so I wanted to think about those kids. They're called the- they're in a gang called the Dead Kids in the book, that the Dead Kids have a chance to kind of start Northern Ireland again, you know, a second chance at it, and lo and behold, they can do anything they want, and they make all the same mistakes and arguments that their parents' generation did. And, you know the point behind that is, I think we put an awful lot of weight on our young people. You know, the, the book begins with a writing competition where the kids have to imagine what it means to be the future of Northern Ireland and what they would do to improve Northern Ireland, and, that's not made up: that's what Obama asked of our school kids when he came here in 2016. And that's ludicrous- it's ludicrous to expect our young people to fix a problem that they didn't actually make themselves, just as it's ludicrous to expect young people to fix the climate crisis that they've inherited. I wanted to kind of interrogate that, like, how do you expect our kids to fix this mess here when it's, like, reconciliation hasn't been modelled to them. You know, what's been modelled is segregation.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, and profound opposition to those things as well.

Jan Carson:

I think the miraculous part is that quite often our kids do surprise us and they do amazing, wonderful things. Erm, just, and that constantly surprises me and gives me hope. But it's often not modelled to them.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I remember hearing you talk about this book while you were writing it, and you were talking about how close some aspects culturally were to some of the culture that you grew up in - obviously, it's not an autobiographical book, but there are some adjacencies culturally - I'm curious about that, what that was like for you.

Jan Carson:

Och yeah, I think to be honest, the more I get on with this, the more I say: yeah it is an autobiographical book!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

OK! ...I was tryna be very careful!

Jan Carson:

It depends- if I'm talking about it in Ballymena it's not an autobiographical book, but elsewhere, it's fine. There is a tradition of writers like Jeanette Winterson, like Barbara Comyns, people I really love who maybe went through difficult things and fictionalised it first before they became comfortable saying: right, actually, I'm gonna own this, this is my story. And I think that's OK. I mean, from a narrative perspective, it allows me to change things and put in ghosts, and you know, that bit is not autobiographical, there was none of that knocking about Ballymena in the 90s, as far as I know, anyway! Erm, but yeah, I think the main thing for me when I was writing *The Raptures* is that I didn't wanna write an angry book. And it took a good decade from first incarnation to that end product, which I think - I hope - is a gracious look at what it was like to grow up in fundamentalism. And I, you know, I very much drew on books like Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*, and Naomi Alderman's *Disobedience*, which I think do a really wonderful job of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater in terms of religion. They're, for me they're not books that are anti- they're books that are anti-religion, but not anti-faith, they look at what's beautiful about those communities to be preserved and to be celebrated and what needs to be binned.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. You said earlier on that, you know, some of the literature of the Bible is literature where 'lots of strange shit happens'. And, um, there's a line in *The Raptures* of people 'drinking in the apocalypse like a wee sponge'. Um, there's a way within which the imaginative literature of, of the Bible, particularly perhaps some of the more fantastical elements of the Bible, is both frightening, frightening even though it's claimed to be comforting. And that, that mild theme of threat is present in so much of your work, that mild theme of: you don't know what's happening, you don't know what might happen, and what are you supposed to do now. Um, did you drink in the apocalypse like a wee sponge, do you think, and has that influenced the way that you write?

Jan Carson:

My first two years of sitting in what we would have called 'big church' - not going to children's church but sitting in through the sermon - was a two-year sermon series on the book of Revelation.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Wow.

Jan Carson:

I always say, you know, there's no point asking why I'm a magical realist if you know that. Yeah, I think I'm a real thinky- I was a real thinky child, I'm a real thinky adult, I spend most of my time in my own head. And those images of, kind of the apocalypse and the end of the world and prophecy and stuff: it didn't just go in one ear and out the other ear, they really made me fearful and distrustful and I think putting that against the backdrop of Northern Ireland. You know, we're very- I'm very thankful that the Troubles didn't directly impact my family, but there was that kind of mild threat always in the air like the bomb scares that you had to get up and run away from quickly; the news of turning it on and recognising places that were close to you. So I think, I think it's there and then I also think I've always been drawn to literature like that, you know, it's no surprise that, you know, Christie has played such a big role in shaping me as a writer, like mild threat, not even mild threats, like-

Pádraig Ó Tuama

Murderous threat!

Jan Carson:

Like, multiple murders is everywhere in Christie and, as I get older, people like Shirley Jackson became really influential. Erm, the first text I remember loving in school was *Wuthering Heights*. And it- *Wuthering Heights* is a dark, gloomy, you know, the end of the world is everywhere in *Wuthering Heights*. And I just think it's wonderful.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Much of your writing gives voice to the Irish Protestant experience, particularly the Northern Irish Protestant experience. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, and your, your

particular commitment to it and to doing it, you know, on the platform of Irish writing, and to be one of the - I mean, there's many people doing this - but be one of the foremost people presenting narratives that are not about recruiting, but they're definitely not about ridiculing, either. I'm curious to hear you talk about it.

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I mean, first of all, I write about the Protestant experience 'cause it's the only one that I know. And it's a deeply unsexy experience! So there hasn't been a massive rush to write particularly about that kind of evangelical Protestant thing. And yet it has had a massive influence on the political structure here, the culture of how we do things, everything really, so I began to, to write about that world because it wasn't a world I saw well enough reflected in the literature and art that was coming out of Ireland. I think more and more, I've just felt a real sense of graciousness around the conversations that it's opened up. So, my novel *The Fire Starters*, it was the 2018 EU Prize for Literature winner for Ireland, which- the Irish judging committee picked a book about loyalism in East Belfast as best representative of Ireland. I find that deeply, deeply humbling, and also forward thinking. And there's been a space that's been opened up with literature and art for me to be able to come in and have conversations about: well, this was what it was like growing up in Ballymena under Paisley in the 80s. And I have to be open to listening to what it's like to grow up in a Gaeltacht, or be someone who's moved to Northern Ireland from Poland, or- and all those experiences and stories are important and rich and varied and need to be taken into conversation, into consideration- there's no better way to do that than the arts.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm curious, how does the tension between art for the purpose of, kind of, in learning about what's happening in a society as well as then art for the purpose of art: how do you hold those tensions together in you? If indeed that is the way- I mean, it, it mightn't be the way you describe it.

Jan Carson:

I don't, I don't honestly think about it until it's, after it's done. So a lot of the seemingly wise things that I'm saying today were retrospective! I absolutely love the academics that work on our work, because they turn up and say these very interesting intellectual things that you're trying to do with your story. And you're like: yes, yes...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

...That's what I was doing!

Jan Carson:

Erm, I just- so, you know, my first duty is to the story, whether that's a novel or a piece of microfiction, and what I find is that if you immerse yourself in the world that that story is coming from, all of these themes and, the politics, the culture, the big questions, they emerge quite naturally. And I- that's always been the way that I write, unless it's a weird commission about: write about the border, which I think we all paid the mortgage off for about two years, back there. You just start with a character and you tell a story about them and then afterwards, you think: what's going on beneath the surface of that story?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama, with me today is the writer Jan Carson. Jan, you have worked for many years in community arts, working with people at stages of dementia regarding the arts, and then facilitating and leading literary and other arts festivals. I'm really interested in the broader aspect about what it is that you know about the importance of the arts in a society. So first of all, just in general, how did you get into the work of the arts at the start?

Jan Carson:

Erm, to me, it's always been about community, so I guess I can see this with hindsight, now. The last, oh my goodness, 25 years, for me has been a slow process of moving away, I guess, from like, kind of organised religion and a church community and trying to find viable kind of diverse, inclusive community somewhere else. And that was art for me and community art, so I've been a wee searcher for a very long time, erm and I've found a home there. So yeah, I mean, I'm not quite there and I, I still would say I have a faith, but I've definitely moved away from the fundamentalism and found much more of a home in the arts community.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Is the arts community, then, some kind of, erm, fluid congregation for you?

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I guess so, congregation is a nice word and it's a- I guess, for me, a community is always an outward looking thing. You know, it has a nucleus, but it's always looking for who else can be included and what else can be added in, and the community for me started small in Belfast and it has grown to embrace the wider Irish literary community. It's been such a joy, particularly the last five years since the EU prize, to be in conversation and friendship with writers from around the world. So my community feels like it's got bigger and bigger kind of thing, I think it's gorgeous.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. And your books have been translated into so many different languages as well, so your community of readers has expanded.

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I think community of readers, also community of dialogue, in terms of, when you're grew up in a place like Northern Ireland, festival programmers and things tend to put you in conversation with writers from other difficult places, or complex places. So my friendships have formed with writers from kind of complicated places that are questioning identity and have a lot in common with us. And that's, that's just been really gorgeous to, to have those conversations, 'cause they're important for me as an artist, but also important for me as a person who's from here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, I know that you probably get asked often what your process is for writing. I'm curious when it is- and I know that you're much more focused on writing now than you are in community arts practice, but in the years when you were doing community arts practice, facilitating festivals or doing work with people through Belfast City Council, or wherever, what's your process for that? What informs that process for you?

Jan Carson:

Erm, a lot of it is routine. And that doesn't sound very sexy or interesting but, I'm a big believer, as Agatha Christie was, in, you know writing is an art but it's also a craft. So carving out time to just put your bum in the seat of a chair and sit at your desk, for two hours every day. And, I'm quite faithful to that, and like some days you're tired and nothing comes out, but, I still turn

up most days. So, yeah, when I was working full time, there was a lot of very early mornings in coffee shops. And, I think also that, you know, what you're getting at with the community arts stuff was it really informed the subjects that I was interested in thinking about. I never ever took someone's story whole and put it into a text, but you'd be living closely and working closely with people and the issues that impacted them and what they were worried about and their experiences, it would weave its way into what you were interested in writing about. I never want to become one of those writers who just writes books about being a writer. To me, that's always the alarm bells of like you've lost contact with the real world when all your books are set at book festivals and in the publishing system and things like that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What do you think that the arts offers, in particular to Northern Ireland?

Jan Carson:

Er, nuance.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That's such an immediate answer, Jan, I'm fascinated by the depth of the immediacy of the answer. Nuance.

Jan Carson:

Well, I've written about this so many times in the last wee while: like, we are brought up here with binary ways of thinking, you know a school system that's still 91% segregated, we're brought up with, you know, even when you meet people, you initially look at them and look for signifiers to decide whether they're the same as you or not, whether you want to or not, you're looking at, you know for their name and where they grew up, and, that's a psychological process to decide whether you're othering them or not. And art is not about binaryisms, art's about perceptions, and responses and, you can take two people into a room and they can look at the same painting and one person can think it's the most beautiful thing they've ever seen and the other can think it's a disaster, and both those responses are equally valid. Young people don't know how to do that, they're not brought up with the skills to understand nuance. So as soon as you begin to, to expose folks to art, to understand that that story that you're watching on screen is different from your own story, but it's valid, it's a valid way to see the world, you're

giving them a range of tools that they can approach politics, and religion, and philosophy, and all the stuff that kind of tends to cripple Northern Ireland in a much more mature way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. There's a line you wrote: 'art also teaches us nuance', that's echoing what you just said, but there's a little bit at the end of that line where you said that there can be multiple meanings to a text. I was fascinated by the word text there: it felt, you know, maybe speaking theologically, as well as politically- questions to do with constitution and language and religion and claim about space, and words used to define one side or the other of a border. Um, do you think that art has the possibility of having a political influence within the context of how these things are arising in the possibility of a border poll about Ireland, north and south, at some point in the next 10 years?

Jan Carson:

Yeah, absolutely, like I talked earlier about that, you know, idea of using art to share multiple stories from different backgrounds, but it's the piece before that; you know when you're watching a movie, and there's an awful, villainous character on screen that's doing something terrible, but because the, the writing is so good, you begin to understand the motivation why that person has done that, how did they end up like that, and, they're no longer kind of flat character, they're somebody you can empathise with, maybe see part of yourself in- we need that. You know, I have no idea what it was like to grow up in Limerick in the 80s, but, I need to be able to, you know, not other that experience or think it's like, less than my experience if we're going to make informed decisions about the future.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. You've also been public in speaking about funding of the arts and there's a line from you here where you say: 'there's a willful bias against the sector, I believe that many of our key politicians are actually afraid of the arts, seeing art as little more than another wing of political expression. They apply the same sectarian pressure towards silencing artists with different political outlooks as they do to their political adversaries'. Um, I wonder if you could share a little bit more about that.

Jan Carson:

Erm, I think there's two things going on there. First of all, there's like the idea that, you know, all artists are coming from a kind of activist point where they're out to critique and to pull apart and to use their art in that kind of way, and I think there are those artists who are doing that, and it's completely legit, we need more of that. But a lot of artists are just trying to give people a glimpse into the world as they see it, or the world as, you know, their community sees things. So, there's a misunderstanding of the art, of art. But I think what's more important is the first comment that you made there, about people who fear art, like, and I was brought up with that, and I understand it, this idea that art is, it's the ability to let things get out of control. To, you know, to not have rules and didactic ways of teaching and thinking about things and it's more difficult to control people, and to control perceptions and how we see each other whenever people are allowed to come up with their own ideas about things and express themselves in their own way. And I really think a lot of our politicians who've been brought up in fundamentalist churches and communities, they're afraid of what happens when we let people think for themselves and express things themselves, and: 'where's the end of that, it could be anarchy!'

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Another area of your work in the arts is working with people with dementia. I wonder if you could say a little bit about some of those projects and then there's a particular question I have to ask you about, about reminiscence and your critique of that.

Jan Carson:

Yeah. So, um, for about 10 years, I worked in actual physical projects with people who were elderly, and a lot of them would have been in the early stages of dementia, so, writing projects; um, I ran a wonderful singing for the brain group for the Alzheimer's society for about three years. Thankfully I didn't do much singing myself, but I facilitated it. Um, I looked after the QFT's dementia friendly cinema programme, and I absolutely adored that; I had, erm, several of my own grandparents had dementia, um, you know at the points they had it those kinds of access to the arts and expression and community weren't available to them. So it was lovely to be able to give that back. I guess, since my own writing has taken off, it's been harder to give time and particular, particularly kind of being able to go to something every single week and have that like dependable connection with people, so I've not been doing many hands-on projects. What I did do was take part in a wonderful AHRC funded study at Queen's, looking

at how dementia's depicted in contemporary fiction. And that looked at, I read about a hundred fiction texts: theatre, poetry, novels, where there was an exploration of the dementia experience. And then we, we worked with people who have dementia and carers and writers and social workers to see how realistic those depictions were and to put together a kind of framework that we could pass on to writers so they can write the dementia experience in an ethical and accurate way, because often towards the end of someone's journey with dementia, they can't write their own story, so it's important that we as artists are as ethical as possible when we're appropriating their story for them.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. You wrote: 'ethically as a practitioner, I don't really like reminiscence work because I feel for a lot of my older people it situates their worth in the past'. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that: I was fascinated by that critique of what is often the kind of go-to artistic storytelling engagement with people living with dementia.

Jan Carson:

I guess, I'm gonna be honest to say I think I wrote that a little while ago, and I probably wouldn't be as judgmental now about reminiscence work, because I've seen it done really, really well, and memory from the past can often be a really fantastic springboard to create something new, or to develop an experience in the here and now. What I'm against is this kind of very lazy, let's all go back and sing songs from the war. And, you know, kind of situate your best days in the past. I had amazing experiences with folks who have dementia, where they're actually learning something new, you know, dancing together, wee drum circles for some reason, the folks I worked with loved a drum circle and none of them had drummed in their entire life! But that idea that, you know, once you hit a certain age, you're not gonna pick up any new skills, you're not gonna remain curious and engaged and you'll not be able to contribute anything to society- that I find really deeply troubling. Erm, we had a wonderful lady who's passed away now, but she was nonverbal towards the end of her journey with dementia. But she loved to be around people and she gave amazing hugs. And she used to come with her carer to arts events and just sit by the door and smile at people as they came in and sometimes offer a hug to them. And to think that that person wasn't contributing to the community and the events that were going on is ludicrous. She was setting the tone for the whole, whatever it was we were doing. And I love that, there's value in people, not just in the past, but in the here and now as well.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Jan Carson, as we move to an end, I'm interested to hear about your latest release, which is coming out later in 2024. *Quickly While We Still Have Horses*, it's coming out in the UK and the US. And it's a short story collection um, short stories and microfiction, which you've also mentioned, that's been a genre that you've worked in also. Could you say a little bit broadly about short stories or microfiction, and then tell us a little bit about this project?

Jan Carson:

Yeah, I think short stories are the most difficult thing in the world to get right. I mean, I know you're a poet, but I think short stories are even harder and, particularly in Ireland where there's such a huge tradition of people doing it right, so, you know, you're standing in the shadow of John McGahern and Kevin Barry and all of these amazing writers. I love them though, because I feel like they're a space to park a smaller idea. You know, I often have, like these moments, these glimpses, encounters, and think, that would- I wanna about that, but I don't wanna write 100,000 words about it. So that for me is what the short story is, and I, I've thought also a lot recently, I think, you know, a defining characteristic of the short story for me is disappointment. A lot of my favourite short stories, things like *Eveline* in *Dubliners* and Carver's *So Much Water So Close to Home*, they're about disappointment, erm, disappointment in, you know, what we as humans expect of each other, disappointment about what we wanted from life and didn't achieve. And I think there's something about the form, the brevity of the format lends itself to that exploration of disappointment. It's not long enough to be fully satisfying, it always leaves you wanting more.

And so then all of that in mind quickly feels very much, they're short stories about disappointment, and tend to lower expectations, and that again, sounds like it wouldn't be a particularly fun read, but they're quite funny stories, in places. So the title story, to give you an example of this, is about, the Tories have got rid of horses, because they're, they're not useful. And because Northern Ireland's shit, and we get everything after everyone else, the last horse in the UK is in Belfast. And the narrator is bringing his Spanish girlfriend home quickly while they still have horses to see this last horse, in the hope that this will be the thing that actually impresses her for the first time about Northern Ireland. And lo and behold, when they get to Botanic Gardens, the last horse is this tiny little Shetland pony. And it's just an attempt to like explore: we love this place, I grew up here and I, I love being from here, I'm desperately proud

of being Northern Irish, but I'm also incredibly aware of the problems and the frustrations of being from here as well, and I wanted to write about that, like that tension between: how do you praise a place but also show all of its kind of worst sides up at the same time.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Quickly while they still have ponies! *Quickly While We Still Have Horses* - when is it out, Jan?

Jan Carson:

It's out first week of April in the UK, and then it's the, I think the second week of July in the States- just in time for the 12th!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Jan Carson, thank you very much for your time and what you've shared with us.

Jan Carson:

Thank you so much for the chat.

The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace Studios, and presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.