

**Lawrence Cleary - Joseph O'Connor audio**

**Duration: 72.21 Minutes.**

**Sarah.**

Welcome, everybody, on this very sunny afternoon to what I know is going to be a really wonderful event. I first of all want to remind you all that this is a Writing Centre initiative that started some time ago. And it's one of the examples of, one of the reasons why I'm so proud of our Writing Centre because there's something terribly connected about the work that they do. And it's connected to almost all of our work here within the university, but also beyond. And it's about, I mean, the focus on writing is so creative and so connected and so engaged. And it was the Writing Centre's idea to run a series that is entitled How I Write.

So, this has been up and running for quite a long time, and we've spoken to lots of different types of writers, academic writers and researchers and poets and people from a whole range of different backgrounds. And it was based on the Writing Centre's very wise insight that many accomplished writers tend, not for deliberate reasons, but they tended to be deathly silent about their writing process. And it can lead to this idea that beautiful writing emerges fully, kind of gleaming from, directly from the head of the genius and on to the page. And we know that...

**Joseph O'Connor.**

It's not.

(laughter).

**Sarah.**

...that, perhaps, that is the case in Joe's case, but we'll, at least, we'll explore that a little bit more today.

(laughter).

**Joseph O'Connor**

Fishing for compliments.

**Sarah.**

So I think that it's really, because we are a learning entity, it's really important that we talk about our process. When we talk about that grandiose notion of metacognition and meta-learning, it's thinking about how we think, and it's learning about how we learn, and it's reflecting on our processes. And what better way to do that than to pick the brains of a really accomplished writer who we are able, I am delighted to say, to call one of our own now because Joseph O'Connor is the Frank McCourt Chair in Creative Writing. He's now a teacher here at the University of Limerick, and he brings all of his achievements and his know how and his approaches to writing to bear on the learning of other people. And that's what today is about, or at least, part of it is.

So, I'm going to spend a little bit of time introducing Joe, who has been described by many people in all sorts of positive ways. An astonishingly accomplished writer, he's the winner of a very wide range of awards for literary achievement. He holds Ireland's pen award for outstanding contribution to Irish literature. He's been described as a writer of great skill, depth, complexity and courage, and many of you here are readers of his beautiful writing. And so I think you will probably all be really curious for me, just to get on with it and start asking him questions about how he does it.

So Joe you are really welcome, thank you for being here and thank you for agreeing to share some of your insights about the writing process.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Thank you Sarah for agreeing to be here to introduce me, again. I'm the most introduced person in UL at the moment. But no it's lovely to be here, on this lovely sunny day, talking about writing.

**Sarah.**

So I think a good place to start, because this is the beginning of the interview, is perhaps to ask you about getting started and about how, what are the triggers and the things that prompt you to write, and the things that bring you to the beginning of a story. Is there anything that you can particularly identify?

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I go down to the post in the morning and I open the gas bill and I find that makes me want to write, you know immediately, very powerful incentive. No, I mean, I think every writer is at some level writing the book or the story that they want to read. I think the two activities are absolutely connected, you sense that there's a space in that wonderful body of literature that you are, that your vain enough I suppose to think that you might be able to fill.

So it starts with a question, for me, it's why is that book not there and, you know, are there very good reasons for that, should that book not be there. And then you start very tentatively wondering if you've stumbled across something that might have ...[gap in recording]... year or the 18 months that it's going to take you to write it.

And then, you know, you connect with the kind of mystery, and a play. I mean, again, I think writing and reading, they're the same thing, and part of writing goes back to that experience in childhood of being read to and just being entranced. So, I think writers should analyse what they do. And obviously as somebody who teaches creative writing, I believe in the craft of it. You know, I think it's an art, but it's very much, it's a craft and there are things that can be learned about it.

But at the heart of it, it's just a game, it's just a process of being entranced with that beautiful notion of what fiction is and what fiction gives us, and, the fact that we seem to have a need for it. It goes back to me, or with me anyway, to my early teens. I grew up in a house where there were a lot of books. Both of my parents were great readers, they both were from Francis Street in the Liberties of Dublin. They left school when they were thirteen, so they didn't have much in the way of formal education, but they did have a notion that this kind of rainy little country, where we didn't do many things very well, was the country of Yeats and Lady Gregory and Synge and Brendan Behan and Kate O'Brien and all of those people, and so their books were in the house and my parents opened the doors of that world to us.

And, a very important writer to me as a young teenager was John McGahern, and his books were in the house, and I remember being particularly fixated when I was fifteen, or sixteen, with a story of his called; *Sierra Leone*, which is in his collection; *Getting Through*. And, it's a short story about a complicated love affair; two lovers, who really shouldn't be together, meet in a Dublin pub once a week, and they agonise about their relationship and whether it should continue or not. And, I was fifteen at the time, as I say I was probably interested in complicated relationships.

But, I kind of got to love that story, and to know it as well as I knew any one in my life. I mean, I read it time and again, and again, and I knew every, I probably could have had a fair stab at reciting the story by heart. And, my love for it came at the same time as the desire to write. And, I can remember just being full of that desire, but at the same time full of the knowledge that there was nothing to write about. I couldn't see anything in my life that was worth putting on paper.

And, so I remember sitting down one night in abject frustration and just copying out this John McGahern short story, word for word. I mean, I just got a school jotter and wrote it out; just to sort of feel the thrill of what it was like to write these beautiful sentence. And, then the next night I wrote it out again, but I kind of starting changing the punctuation. And, the next night I wrote it again and I changed the names of the couple so they became my parents' names. You can tell I had a lot of fun as a young teenager, my very sad life.

(laughter)

### **Joseph O'Connor.**

And so, you know, as I say, I grew up in a home where books were kind of sacrosanct. And even to, kind of, dog ear the pages of a book would have been seen as a terrible thing to do, let alone to interfere with something that had been written by John McGahern, but under his spell I began this process, whereby over the space of eighteen months or so I rewrote it, and rewrote it, and rewrote it, and then gradually at some point the balance tilted and the story became mine. And this beautiful cathedral that had once been the John McGahern story became, you know, struck by the wrecking ball of my teenage ambition, and was destroyed. But somewhere in the ruins of it was the beginning of my writing career.

And in fact, the title story of my first book of short stories, *True Believers*, which was published when I was twenty-eight, is the story that I began to write when I was fourteen, and, if you put these two texts side by side you would see almost no similarity at all, but I still know where the similarity is, and it's a story that I feel I'm still writing. I mean, there's another version of it in my most recent book of short stories called *Where Have You Been*, which came out just two years ago.

And, I think secretly it's the story that's at the heart of all of my novels. You know, I sometimes think writers are condemned, or liberated, into having to write the same story in some guise over and over again. So, John McGahern was a very important writer to me in terms of getting going. I met him six or seven years ago, not long before he died, and I felt I should make this confession to him. And, he looked at me very gravely and said; I think you owe me a pint, which I certainly did, and a lot more than that, but that was a hugely important moment for me.

**Sarah.**

I think that's so interesting, in fact if you hadn't mentioned the story about transcribing the words of John McGahern I was going to ask you about it anyway, because I think this is a really interesting part of the process. We are all outlaw; our plagiarism is kind of outlawed in academic environments, and yet the best ways we learn is through appropriating voices and acquiring a way of researching things.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Yeah, I mean, I think it's trying them on rather than appropriating.

**Sarah.**

Yeah that's a good way, that's a better way of putting it, obviously, yeah.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

It's like trying to walk around the block in John McGahern's shoes, then you might try it in Anne Enright's shoes, or Colm Tóibín's, or, you know that I think you need just to

experience what it's like to begin something, and then have the middle, and then the end, and just to feel, you know, physically almost what it's like to write out a story before you begin any notion of trying to find your own voice.

But it all comes back to reading, you know, the secret for me was reading. I think that what was going on over the space of that eighteen months, or two years, was that McGahern was doing what the great writers do; which is teaching me to read, you know, teaching me to look at the nuances between the words, the silences between the words, teaching me to look at what he does not say in a short story, which is always such a powerful thing. And, we've talked often in the creative writing group here at UL, in the course of the year, about how powerful absence is. Absence becomes a kind of presence in a story. And, to realise that out of the experience of reading, when you're young, is a very useful and enriching thing for a writer, to begin to play with. You know, all of my novels, I suppose, are about absence, they all have somebody who isn't there, who should be, and I think it goes back to then.

**Sarah.**

When I think about the kinds of things that you've written Joe, I mean, it's really, your versatility is what really strikes me. So, you have written lyrics to songs, you've written radio diaries, book reviews, you've written academic work, you have a masters in screen writing and a masters in literature, so, you've done entertaining, funny, non-fiction. And, then you took this great leap from a certain type of writing, I think the biggest change, as I understand it, you might feel it's different, but the biggest change, in terms of your written, was the moment you wrote *Star of the Sea*. Perhaps you could tell us a bit about that change and about that leap.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Well, *Star of the Sea* is my fifth novel, but I think of it as my first novel because it was the book that taught me how to write a novel. I have an affection for my early books, but I kind of read them like that, you know, through the grid of my fingers, but just, I know it isn't possible to die of shame, because if it were *Cowboys and Indians*, my first book, would have killed me, but, I suppose because I knew that *Star of the Sea* would be a very difficult book to write and it had been in my head for a long time.

And, I spoke recently, at my inaugural lecture, about how the story of *Synge and Molly Allgood* had been in my head since childhood, and the story, or stories, around the Irish famine had been in my life since I was eight or ten, since we used to go to Connemara as children, and, we used to stay with the family in Connemara that my father had stayed with when he was a child, and, my father is now seventy-five and he still goes to stay with this family. So, we felt probably quite spuriously that we had a connection with this family and with this place.

But I think I was aware, even as a young writer, that the whole subject of the famine is so difficult, and is still so contested, and is so full of silences, that it would be a hard book to write. So, I knew it would have a lot of characters and I knew that it would be long, so I hate long books, just as a reader, they don't do it for me, and so I knew that I would have to learn to write the book in a way that would be full of energy, that it would have to be a page turner in order for it to succeed, at all.

So then I started looking around at, you know, it's set in the 1840's, a very interesting time in the history of the English novel, so I wondered could I play with that, I mean, *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847, the year in which *Star of the Sea* is largely set. In fact *Wuthering Heights* kind of appears as a character in the book, in some ways, and it's the era of Dickens; it's not long after *Oliver Twist*.

And, if you look at those great nineteenth century English novels, many of which were written as serials, I mean, they were kind of the soap operas of their day I suppose. And, we know that Dickens being a great business man as well as a very skilled writer wanted people to come back next month and read the next chapter, so his chapters often end with a cliff-hanger, or something to get you to come back to them, with the result that his books when we read them now, bound together, they seem kind of hyper energetic, they almost have too much energy for a modern reader to be able to cope with.

But, I thought, maybe, I could use that and turn it to my advantage, and *Star of the Sea* uses many different narrative registers; it's set in different time zones, it uses ballads and newspaper articles and songs, the captain who is on the ship of the title, the *Star of the Sea* is writing a diary which is being written in a very jagged immediate way. He's the captain of this very troubled ship, he doesn't have time to kind of think about his sentences, so he's just giving you kind of very hard information day after day, and then the central voice of the narrator Grantley Dickson. You realise about a third into the book that he's actually a very

old man. He's writing from a remove of almost fifty years, so he has had time to kind of obliterate the facts of what happened with the fiction that we call style.

So, I wanted it to just be a big noisy energetic book, that would have arguments with itself, and that would be capacious, and would be noisy and problematic. And, a bit like, you know, the image that was often in my head was, you know, you pack the suitcase at the end of the holidays and you try and close the lid on it, and it won't close. And, I wanted the book to be like that, that the voices in the book would keep kind of blowing the cover back up, you know, that it would just be full of all of that energy and that that would provide a way of honouring all of the different perspectives on the famine.

But, the silence at the heart of that story was really what attracted me to it. It's a fascinating thing that the great Irish famine, such a central event, some would say the watershed event in our nineteenth century history, that there's so little of, what we would call, creative writing or imaginative fiction about it. Joyce hardly mentions the famine. And, Yeats, when he does, like many other Irish poets, seems to see it as a metaphor for something else. We only have one novel written from within the famine itself; William Carlton's book, the *Black Prophet*. Dickens, who is such an interesting man, who had known poverty himself as a child, and who was genuinely committed to radical social change, and here's this ground zero event taking place in what is, after all, Britain, you know, Ireland is as British as Surrey is. But, it turns out at the moment of the crisis that Irish people who are British are actually not British in the same way that the Queen is, and so just why is that.

And, when you look at it, when you research it, it becomes obvious why. I mean, the language of wordlessness is all over the Irish famine. You see, it's an interesting event in so many ways, but one of them is in the history of journalism, because it's really one of the first moments when the newspapers in London and New York begin to send people into the field. I mean, that person we see on the RTE or the BBC news every night now, you know, the reporter who goes to actually comment on what he or she can see, their ancestor is the person who was sent into Connemara and Wicklow and Kerry in the 1840's.

And, time and again you see in their work; I can't describe this, I have no words for this, I have never seen anything like this, there aren't the adjectives; you're talking about the world before mass media. Nobody has ever seen images of people starving in Africa or mass graves. And so, there's just the experience of language coming up against something which it seems can't be described. So, there's this massive kind of hole in the middle of the story.

And I suppose, I began to think when I wrote *Star of the Sea*, I began to wonder, because it was kind of a new time in Ireland and a wealthy time and Mary Robinson was president and we were beginning to get our act together and all of that, and I began to wonder is that story just going to disappear, is there now our new version of ourselves so kind of cosmopolitan and hip and trendy and we're in all the colour supplements all over Europe; that this history means nothing at all.

And, I really at one level, wrote it because I didn't want it to disappear, I wanted to say something about it, and to use the techniques and the skills that I had, and to learn more of the in order to be able to get that sorry down. And, I knew that I would have to be, you know a better writer than I am in order to write that book, and I put everything that I possibly had into it, and I'm very proud of the book, but I certainly didn't think that it would be a commercial success, and that's not the reason I wrote it. I just wrote it in order to do justice to a story that had been in my head since I was eight.

It's really just, you know on another level, *Star of the Sea* is really just, you know, it's a love story, it's a story about a fella who you know is a song maker from Connemara, who gets into trouble and he runs away. And, if people read it on that level that's absolutely fine by me, but if you want to see other things in it they're all there too.

You know I think a novel should be beautiful, I think the first duty of a book is to be beautiful. You know, there's enough ugliness in the world, there's enough shit in the world already and I think it's our job as writers to put just a tiny drop of beauty back into it, and if you do that then the job is done, and anything you have to say about politics or society or Irish history or feminism or any of the rest of it, I think you know that readers will allow you to do that if you've made it a pleasurable reading experience first.

It should always be about the reader, you know, writing isn't about the writer, it shouldn't be. It's about the dynamic between us, it's not about me expressing myself, it's about me saying; well, look what can I set up in this space called the book that might say something to you about your life. And those are the novels that I'm attracted to, and if a novel doesn't say something to me about my life pretty quickly, I'm not going to bother.

**Sarah.**

You mentioned techniques, using your techniques and your skills and, I guess, I have two questions in my head, and one is very prosaic and the other one is more about the heart and soul of how you write.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Right well let's start with the prosaic one.

**Sarah.**

Ok, and that is the kind of, the mechanics of writing, like I think, I look at something like *Star of the Sea* and I think in my head, as somebody who aspires to be a writer and who likes to write, I wonder how long did it take you, did you write every day, what kind of discipline did you have to set up in order to get to the end of this, really this kind of giant of a novel, and how much. And, I suppose the second piece is the heart and soul piece because I think in order to set that discipline up you need courage and you need self-belief, and you need to believe that this is going to come to something, and I just wanted to ask you about those two things.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

It's very kind of you to say so, but I mean, I think what you actually need in order to work very hard as a writer is more fear than courage. You know, I found as soon as I started to write as a young man, I wrote every day, I just became part of my practice to write every day. I tried to treat it as much like a job as I could, and about ten years in I had writers block. Just suddenly I went to work one morning and I just couldn't do it and I didn't have any ideas, and I didn't have any confidence in it, and I kind of made a deal with Providence that if you get me through this, if you give me back my ability to write ever again, then I won't stop, I'll do it, you know obsessively, every day.

So, like a lot of workaholics, I think at heart I'm extremely lazy, and that if I only ever wrote when the muse struck me I would write about twice a year and I'd spend the rest of the time in bed with a bottle of vodka. So the only, yes so the only way I can do anything at all is to write every day.

And then with the planning of *Star of the Sea*, I mean, it was a very complicated book architecturally, and maybe you know, we can talk about that, or we can talk about that in the questions afterwards. I think the architecture and the engineering of a novel are really important, I mean, it's where most novels fall down. A lot of writers in Ireland can write a beautiful sentence, or a line of beautiful dialogue, or a fascinating character, but we're not as strong on story as the American tradition of Steinbeck and Hemmingway, and all of that, the great sort of American notion that's there in Fitzgerald as well, that a brilliant novel should be brilliant on all of those levels, and it should be capable of being read by anyone. If you said to Hemmingway that only literature graduates should be able to appreciate his novels, he just wouldn't know what you were talking about.

My dad was an engineer, a structural engineer, and I was very bad at maths and science in school, but I sometimes wonder if this is how it's come out in me. So, I thought about the planning of *Star of the Sea*, probably for a couple of years, and I have graphs and lines and images and drawings of how it would work, and only when I had some notion of how that complicated architecture could be made to click together, did I start to write it.

So, I'd say to plan, it took two years and then I wrote it quite quickly. I wrote it in a quick burst of about nine months because of a completely ludicrous belief I have that prose tends to pick up the energy with which it was written. So I mean, this makes no sense at all, but I genuinely believe that if you write something quickly the readers will find it energetic and if you take a long time over it, they won't.

So I had, you know, drawings and photographs, I had the ships chart, you know, the 1847 maps of the Atlantic Ocean up on the wall of my office at home, which are not the same as the 2015 maps because of coastal erosion and stuff, then I had charted out, I knew at every moment of every day on that voyage where the ship would be.

And then, as an overall kind of framing device, I used a scheme which we've talked about in the class, a lot, that they use in Hollywood movies. It's pioneered or written about by a man named Field, Sid Field, and, it's the Field paradigm, a three act paradigm. And, he says that, I mean, there's nothing new in it, it goes all the way back to Aeschylus, but he says, you know, most stories, most novels, most movies that really work have three acts and that very early on in act one there'll be what's called the inciting incident; the incident that kicks off the story, and towards the end of act one there'll be the first plot point; which is something that spins the story around in a new direction, and half way through there'll be a point of no return;

which is what it sounds like where the characters are now committed and can't possibly come back etc. And, he says there are seven or eight of these points along the line of a story, and only when you have every one of them is the story going to work.

So I mean I use that scheme, I think I've used it in all of my books. It's very clear, I just realised yesterday, in *The Thrill of it All*, the scheme is particularly visible there. It's a 400 page book, its 404 pages but let's say its 400 pages. The narrator, Robby Goulding, meets the central character, Fran Mulvey, in the first line of the book. He says; let me tell you about somebody I met when I was seventeen, so that's the inciting incident.

On page 100, which is exactly the end of the first act, the fledgling band realise that they can't, there isn't a drummer, there isn't a drummer to be had anywhere in Luton. So, what are we going to do. And, they end up, you know, acquiring the drummer that they do get. Half way through the book, almost on page 200, they decide nothing is happening for us here and they go off to New York. So, it's the point of no return. Page 300, which is the end of act two, the band break up and then the last sort of act, act three of the book moves up to present day. So it's, whatever else it is, it's an example of the Field paradigm works.

And, I suppose ,I always do that with a novel. If I don't have all of those aspects of the engineering sorted out, I feel that there's something wrong with the book. And you can use it as a kind of diagnostic tool as well. If you run what you do have, what you think you have through this process it will often reveal to you what you need to find in order to develop the bones or the shape of the story further. I'm probably drifting around here.

### **Sarah.**

No, it's really interesting to hear you talk. I'm sure there's lots of people who are really dying to ask questions, but I do have a couple of things that I have been longing to ask you, and one of them is when you were that boy, and you were longing to be a writer, and aspiring to be a writer and reading John McGahern, and being dazzled and adoring books and reading, is there a piece of advice that you wish somebody had given you, now that you are where you are now, and now that you've achieved the things you have.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Well it's the piece of advice that I give myself still, all the time, which is, you know, you need to decide do you love this, you know, are you really into doing this with your life, because, it's very hard, you know, writing is tough. I have a sister who is a painter and, I mean, I envy her so much because paint just seems to be a far more fluid medium than the rather brittle medium that we all work in, in this room. It's so hard to say what you mean, you know, and we feel this every single day with your children and our spouses and our colleagues, you know, you feel the force every day of the week of Prufrock's great refrain, that is not what I meant at all, you know, every day with my fifteen year old son I feel that is not what I meant at all.

So, the moments as a writer when you get a sentence to be eighty percent of what you meant are brilliant, you know that as a writer, other people here in the room know it, but it's tough and, you know, it isn't for everybody. I just decided when I was young, I mean we know each other a long time and you know that this is true, when I was a teenager I decided to just do this with my life, and that's it, and I just decided for better or worse. And, I kind of think that is what you need to do, writing is so difficult, that you know, I say to people it is more like a marriage than its like falling in love; you know falling in love is great, it's delicious, flirtatious, fantastic, and every single moment of a marriage is not, necessarily.

So, you have little moments when you quarrel with writing and you fall out with writing, and writing is angry with you because you did something that you shouldn't have done, and you wonder should you and writing have ever got together at all in the first place, but you're hoping that, over the long term, that you and writing will have a fantastic time together, and you'll look back when your old and you'll say darling wasn't that just great.

But I think that's the metaphor, you know, there are moments that every novelist has felt; I can't stand any single sentence that I have ever written and this book or this short story that I'm working on now is just utter rubbish, but you just have to, you have to persevere, and you have to love the language; you have to actually believe that the language is the most wonderful thing we've ever made, and that we've made this fantastic thing for no other reason at heart than to communicate with each other, and that there's something in telling stories that is liberating, and that is ennobling, and that's healing to people and to you.

I meant, here's a fantastic moment, which we've talked about sometimes in the class at the start of Brian Friel's play *Faith Healer*, which is a really interesting play, and also can be

read as a novella and a wonderful piece about story making and storytelling. It's the same series of incidents, narrated by three people, and, of course, they're not the same, and Friel said very shortly after the play was first performed about published, that the faith healer in the book is really a writer; it's a play about, it's a metaphor about what it is that a writer does.

But, there's a fantastic bit at the beginning, where Francis Hardy, the faith healer is talking about his life on the road and going through all little horrible church halls in England and Scotland, trying to heal people. And, I haven't got it by heart, but he says something like, you know, most nights it doesn't work, you know, nineteen times out of twenty, you know that it's not going to work, and the person who comes to you who is sick is going to be sent home, you know, and they're still going to be sick, but occasionally, he says it works and to put your hands on another person and to feel them become whole in your presence is to become whole yourself, he says, a beautiful phrase, to become in a manner of speaking, if you don't mind my using the phrase, an aristocrat, you know.

And so, if you want to write you need to be honouring that, because if you don't there are just far more enjoyable things to do with your life, you know. Being a great reader is a fantastic thing to be, a much better thing to be, maybe, than a great writer, you knowy Ireland has enough great writers already, I sometimes think we need more great readers.

So you need to be very serious about it, you need to love the possibilities of the language and then you need to keep going, and our wonderful writer in residence, Donal Ryan is the greatest example of that, isn't he. I mean, this is somebody who was told time and time again, nobody wants this novel, *The Spinning Heart*. And, I don't know how Donal did it, I wouldn't have been able to do it. After publisher ten and publisher twenty and publisher thirty tell you that you're not wanted, and he still kept going and look what he came up with.

So, you need to have that curious mix of the sensitivity that's required in order to do it and then a thick skin, or a kind of stupidity I guess. I mean, Flannery O'Connor, the great southern states US write,r said the best quality for a writer to have is a grain of stupidity. She said the quality of not quite getting the point of things at once, and that's what makes you look again, you know, I said in my inaugural lecture last week about Synge, and this is based on reading Synge's letters and his note books and stuff ,which is in Trinity College Library, he just had that remarkable ability that if he saw a hat on the floor of a café, that was a story to him. Most people would pass it by, but Synge would go home on the tram to Kingstown

saying; I wonder who left that hat there's and I wonder what was the conversation that led up to it, and I wonder was that a couple having a row, you know etc.

So, you need to have, yeah, Flannery O'Connor's grain of stupidity, and just look at, not quite get the point at once, I think is a very useful flaw for a writer to have.

**Sarah.**

I've heard you talk about that, the magic piece before, and I always think that that's a real motivation for committed writers is those moments, when the writing process offers something up to you that you didn't expect, that you were kind of despairing you'd ever see again, can you remember moments like that when you were writing?

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Moments of magic.

**Sarah.**

Yeah.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I can yeah, I mean, I suppose they're quite personal but yes I do. I mean, I have had moments where, I hate talking about writing in a mystifying way because one of the great things about writing is that it's done by flawed fallible human beings, but yeah I mean I think I've had moments where I'm better than I am. I think all writers, my writers, my students would recognise that, just sometimes you write something where you go Jesus I couldn't have written that, that was written by somebody much better than me.

And, even though they're few and far between, or maybe because they're few and far between, you go in search of those, and, you know, you keep your little game with the muse going. Yeah so, it's worth it for those moments when you do something that you didn't think you were capable of doing. I mean, if writing teaches you nothing else it teaches you that, you know we can do more than we think.

**Sarah.**

That's part of the quest I guess, there's also, I think, I've always found it really encouraging to focus on people who I think are just enormously accomplished and ask them about their gigantic failures, as a way of reassuring myself and comforting myself. I'm just wondering if you have a failure story.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I was hoping you wouldn't ask. Oh Jesus yeah, so many, so many yeah.

**Sarah.**

Or, one giant one that you want to talk about, or one particular one that you want to talk about and share with us.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I'll tell you about a few if you like, in the comfort of this room. My first play, which was called *The Weeping of Angels*, was on at the Gate theatre in Dublin about fifteen or sixteen years ago, now, and it wasn't a happy production and it wasn't a very good play, and we didn't have enough time to rehearse it. And, I got the worst review that I've ever got for anything, for this play, among the universally bad reviews was one that I still wake up and think about sometimes at three o'clock in the morning.

Where there's a moment in the play where somebody turns around to somebody else and says you should go fuck yourself, and the penultimate sentence of this review in the Sunday Times was; there's a moment in this play when a character turns around to another character and says you should go fuck yourself, that is what Michael Colgan, director of the Gate theatre should have said to Joseph O'Connor.

(laughter).

## **Joseph O'Connor.**

So that was, I think that qualifies as a failure, and another huge one which I pass on to you and which is a useful thing to learn about, it's very good to know the end of a story, you know and whether it's a short story, or an essay, or a novel, or a screen play, whatever it is, to have some, for obvious reasons right, it's good to know the ending, every journey has to have a destination. We could all go outside now and agree that at seven o'clock tonight we're going to go to Dublin. But like we could drive to Dublin or we could walk or we could go to Dublin via Cork or you could go to Dublin in a basket balloon. The main thing is we have to know we're going to go to Dublin, otherwise there's no point to the journey. So that's why you need to know the end.

So, when I was a young writer, my first ever novel, I was living over in London and it was getting longer and longer and longer. It was about 120,000 words and I was writing loads. The words were just kind of flowing out of me, but it wasn't moving anywhere towards the end, so there's a wonderful place in county Monaghan called Annaghmakerrig in Newbliss, I think its Monaghan isn't it, it's not Cavan, it's up that end of the country, and it's a great place; the former summer house of a wonderful man, Sir Tyrone Guthrie theatre director, and when he died he left it to us, to you guys, the artiest and writers of Ireland, and you can go and stay in this house and work on your novel, or your screen play, or whatever it is, and they look after you and they feed you and it's great.

So I wrote to Bernard Loughlin who then ran the Tyrone Guthrie centre and I said can I come over from London. He said yeah come for three weeks. So I go and on day one I have this big 120,000 word monster, which is very long. I mean *Star of the Sea* is only about 140,000 words, so it's already almost as long as *Star of the Sea*. And the first few days in Annaghmakerrig there's loads of interesting people staying there. So you know you chat with them. And you go to the pub and you go for a walk and then it's the end of the first week and all you've done is written more and more and more but no ending. And the second week worse and the third week it's nearly time to go home and it's now like 160,000 words and there's still no ending.

So there's a lake in Annaghmakerrig and, in those more relaxed times in terms of health and safety, they used to allow the artists and writers to row out into the middle of the lake in the little row boat, so the day before I go home to London I say I'm going to row out to the middle of the lake and I'm not coming in till I have an ending for this book.

So, I row out to the middle of the lake and I lift up the oars, and I remember the boat kind of turning slowly in the water, and, I smoked a lot in those days, I had two packets of fags, I smoked, you know, all of them one after the other, forty cigarettes, and at the very end of the fortieth cigarette I realised, I had a kind of epiphany, because I realised there is no ending to this book, and what you actually have to do is row back up and walk to the house and get the 160 or 70,000 words that you've worked on for two years and throw them into the bin and forget about them and go home. And, that's what I did, and you know within a couple of days of going back to London I wrote the opening pages of what would turn out to be my debut novel, *Star of the Sea*, but it was a painful, slow, appalling failure.

And even that wasn't the first; I mean the novel that went in the trash was kind of my fourth or fifth attempt at a first novel, and I still have those buried in the filing cabinet. I get them out occasionally when I'm stuck, you know from thirty years ago. I hope that time will have improved them, you know like fine wine, but it's vinegar I'm afraid. So yeah, I mean, like a lot of writers I've had the very painful failures of wasted time, but then, you know, it isn't wasted time because I wouldn't have been able to write *Star of the Sea*, or *Redemption Falls*, or *Ghost Light*, or any of the books of mine that I'm actually proud of, if I hadn't written books that I'm deeply ashamed of.

**Sarah.**

Nothing wasted at all, all part of the experience I would imagine.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Yeah painful part of the experience.

**Sarah.**

Or, that's what us educators would love to believe anyway, that nothing is a waste, that it's all practice, even if it doesn't come out as, and I think that's it, just because the project you're working on now is not necessarily going to go somewhere, it doesn't mean it's a waste.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

But, you have to not think about it, you know, I mean, in one sense, almost every book is a failure, you know, I mean, I've written eight novels and I would have loved them all to be *Star of the Sea*, but only one of them has been, so far, you know, and sometimes a book that you think is going to set the world on fire, you know, is actually the one that's subjected to the slow grinding mill of indifference, which is actually worse than that review in the Sunday Times. It's actually nobody has bothered; nobody has noticed your book.

That's why you need the long term thing, that's where you need to get a bit marital with it, because if you're involved in writing for what you're going to get out of it on a regular basis, you're going to be very disappointed and crushed.

**Sarah.**

God forbid, does anybody have any questions, if you do have a question will you say your name and where you're from and then have the question, and I'll have to repeat the question as well so that we pick it up.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Where you're from.

**Sarah.**

Yeah.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Right.

**Sarah.**

Ok.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I'm from Glenageary.

**Sarah.**

If you're on the MA in creative writing or if you're working on a novel or something about yourself.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I know all the MA in creative writing people will have lots of very intelligent, focused contributions to the discussion.

**Sarah.**

Does anybody have a question?

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Yes Pat, I'm sure you have one.

**Pat.**

Joyce is the world's greatest writing, how do you place Joyce, is he the world's greatest writer.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

The world's greatest writer, oh god well I don't know if. I mean I love *Dubliners*, I think *Dubliners* is wonderful and perfect, and to me, because it's his most accessible book, I would always go into bat for it being his best book, because I think that a work of literature should be accessible.

At the same time, I've had a kind of adventure with *Ulysses* that's lasted since I began to read, and I have actually come to love it. I mean, the first time that I tried to read *Ulysses* as a

young man, as a student, I really hated it and resented it and wrote a lot of bloody stupid things about it, which I'll come back to. Then, I read it again in my thirties and I began to appreciate it and admire it and to understand it, and when I read it again in my forties I came to love it, I could actually see suddenly what's going on here.

I think it might be that *Ulysses* should come with a government health warning, but it really shouldn't be allowed be read by anyone under the age of about twenty-five, and I think the reason is that the student character in it is so awful. Stephen Dedalus is so hard to like and he's so joyless and he wouldn't even knell down at his mother's bedside when she was dying, Jesus it's just awful, everything about him you just want to slap him.

And, when you're a little bit older and you encounter once again Leopold Bloom and his generosity and his great curiosity about people, I mean, I sometimes think of Bloom as, I think somebody says about him in one of the scenes in *Ulysses*, my colleagues would know better than me perhaps, doesn't somebody say he's a bit of an artist, that Bloom is a bit of an artist, or maybe I've made that up, maybe that's the sentence Joyce should have said, but he has that kind of, he wanders through that day going; god I wonder what it's like to be a child, look at that blind person there crossing the road, I wonder what it's like to be a blind person, I wonder what it's like to be a woman, you know, he just has this fantastic kind of curiosity and openness about the world, and to me I guess that's what the book is about. So, I've come to love it.

Whether he's the greatest writer in the whole history of everything or not, sure does it matter. I mean, I think that about every writer I read who I love. I mean Colm Barrett was here a few months ago and I thought he was the greatest writer in the history of the universe ever, and Claire Keegan was here, I think she, I think she thinks she's the greatest, as she is, she is.

(laughter).

**Pat.**

What about experimentation and that type of thing, he hasn't been thought as such, I don't know, just with respect to anybody...[inaudible]

**Joseph O'Connor.**

No, I mean that said, I suppose it would be hard to imagine that entire kind of school of Latin American writers, the magical realist writers, Borges and Marquez and people like that without Joyce. I mean, I remember as a young man again going to the Blooms day celebrations, when I was a student in UCD, and I just remember it was 1982 because I was in first year in UCD, and the great Argentinian novelist Borges was there, and he was blind by then, and I was so touched by his speech, because he said it was the first time he'd ever been to Dublin, but he felt that he could walk around Dublin because of his love of *Ulysses*, and feeling kind of an immense pride, Jesus we don't actually live in a kip, you know, we live in a city where one of us actually did this beautiful thing.

So I think to all of those, I mean *Love in a Time of Cholera*, you know the Marquez novel, I think there are shades of Joyce in that alright, so I think he was a very important writer to that whole school of novelists.

**Patrick**

I'm Patrick Donnelly, from creative writing MA, and can I ask you a question about the importance of writing generally. You mentioned about it being an important form of communication, and that doesn't just mean obviously creative writing, but all kinds of writing; whether it be academic writing, journalism and so on. Do you think there's an influence, a way that creative writing can influence those other kinds of writing?

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Yeah.

**Patrick.**

To make sure that people communicate better or more honestly; or in a better way.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Well yes I do, I mean I very passionately feel that. I mean, I think to teach people how to write is to, it's to teach them how to have rights that actually mean something. I mean if you can actually say what it is that you want, you've taken the first step towards achieving it, I mean, the status quo or power all the way through history, the powerful have always been interested in keeping people as uneducated as it's possible for them to be, because, I mean, on a very literal level, if you're able to fill out a job description, if you're able to write a letter, if you're able to say to the tribunal I was abused, people did this to me and they shouldn't have done it, if you're able to say to another human being using the best means we have, the language; I'd like this or I offer you that, you're giving people a means of living their life in colour, you know, if you're not able to write you're living in monochrome.

And, you know, a lot of the time throughout history those rights and those abilities have been taken away from you for a very good reason, you know. The status quo doesn't want you to be able to express yourself too much, because they would like not to have to bother with you, that's why immigrants are treated the way they are here, that's why asylum seekers are belittled, and as far as I'm concerned abused here, because the status quo would not like them to have more power. And, you can always tell, I mean, all governments treat asylum seekers the way they would like to treat the rest of us, if they could get away with it, I mean that's the barometer, that's what we should be very concerned about.

People from among, you know, the very poorest people in the whole world who come to our country with the history that we have, the famine and everything else, we put them in unsuitable accommodation and tell them when they're allowed to wash, when they're allowed to cook, tell parents when they're allowed to parent, you know, and we absolutely, let us say the education of these people or their children or the ability for them to become informed and expressive in the language is way down the list, and you know I think we should be really worried about that, yeah.

And, that's why I think organisations like Roddy Doyle's Fighting Words, are so important, because that is actually going to change people's lives, you know, if you take a young teenager from the Dublin One post code and say look here's a set of things you could learn that might be fun and interesting and will actually give you rights, will give you a way to actually express yourself, you've changed that kid's life, you know, I know this because of my own family experience, you know, as I said my parents are from the Liberties of Dublin,

which was then a very tough place and my father who, you know, who went to the local Francis Street Christian brothers school, fifty-two kids in the class, and ,you know, he wouldn't be a great fan of the Catholic Church but he says the reason that he achieved some kind of happiness in his life was because of a young Christian brother, who was twenty-one, who decided all fifty-two of you are going to get the junior cert, and like I'm going to give you that. I can't give you, like I'm not saying you know, it won't be any more than that but your all going to be able to read and write. And you're all going to get that.

So, you know, that is the medium through which you change people's live, and all of us need to remember it, I need to remember it and everybody who works here and in any education establishment of any kind, what you're actually doing is giving people a means to express their rights, you know it's hugely important.

### **Pat Griffin.**

Pat Griffin, MA in creative writing, to get back specifically to your own work again, you mentioned both here and to our own class, the complexity of *Star of the Sea*, the whole planning of it, and you've also mentioned the fact that it's good to know at least in general terms the ending of a story so that you can at least aim towards it, within a lot of your own writing, and this may not be correctly connected with *Star of the Sea* because obviously a huge amount of planning had to go into that because of its complexity, but from the majority of your work you know roughly the ending and you know the high points and the low points based on we'll say Sid Field's paradigm, the three act structure. But, how much of the story surprises you and reveals itself to you in so far as that the characters, as much as you as the writer are controlling them, tell you things or move in a direction that you hadn't expected.

### **Joseph O'Connor.**

I do think that happens sometimes and, I mean there are no universal rules about this because what I've also said in the class is that there are other writers, I mean the very fine contemporary Irish novelist Dermot Bolger would say that that approach is completely wrong, that what you do is you sit down with the diary, or the notebook, or the computer and you just see where it goes, see where it leads you. He says it's like checking into a hotel and waiting to see; you open the windows and you wait to see, you know, what birds are flying past, and you know if that works for you great, but for me I need some notion of where it's

going to go. Sorry Pat just remind me, I'm losing my train of thought a bit because it's the end of a long day, just what was the end of your question.

**Pat Griffin.**

Do your characters.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Oh yes do they surprise, yeah, they do and you as a writer know that, that happens and every writer knows that that happens, and it's wonderful that it does, because you're the first reader and if the characters surprise you then they will surprise the reader and that's what we want. I mean, we go to fiction at some level in order to be a bit surprised and to be alerted to the contradictions of, you know, a human personality, so I think it's good when it happens, but I do sometimes wonder when I read interviews with writers who say oh you know the character just took over the whole book and dictated it to me, because I wish they'd feckin' dictate one to me, because it feels much more like hard work to me.

Writers have different views about it, Nabokov said, you know, my characters are puppets, they do exactly what I tell them to do and then other writers say the total opposite. I think for most of us it's something in between. I mean, I did have a notion, having talked probably a bit too much about the engineering and the architecture of *Star of the Sea*, what got me going with it was something more like what you're talking about, like I was trying at the time to write a much more contemporary book; a kind of skinny, lean, mean kind of Celtic tiger police thriller, you know, because I thought that would be hugely, remember the Celtic tiger, you know.

(Laughter)

**Joseph O'Connor.**

And, I found that at night, when I was taking a rest from that book, that this other fella was in my head, this 19<sup>th</sup> century man on the deck of a ship, and, you know, there's nothing strange about this, you often get ideas for books while you're writing a book, because your mind is open and your imagination is kind of trawling around in the depths and you're in, you know, what Yeats calls the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, you know, and you wouldn't know what you're going to find down there, often you know getting going with a book you'd have dreams about other books.

But, I did find that this nineteenth century guy, that he just wouldn't leave me alone, you know, usually when that happens to me the character goes away after a couple of days, but a few weeks into writing my police thriller he was still there, kind of annoying me and nagging at me and saying you know why don't you write about me, and, you know, you're wasting your time with this fecking book, nobody is going to want to read that, why don't you write what you really want to write and here I am. And, finally three or four weeks down the road of that process I kind of, almost to make him go away, or in the hope that he would go away, I got out a notebook and began to just kind of scribble down around him, what he looked like and what his name might be, and if he's on a ship, and it's the nineteenth century, and it's from my part of the world, maybe he's a famine refugee, and he sleeps during the day while the other passengers are on deck, and at night he walks the decks, so he's got a secret, so what would that be, and so Pius Mulvey did kind of reveal himself to me. And, the opening chapter of *Star of the Sea* is pretty much how he did, I didn't do much to it apart from just describe him as he appeared to me.

So, it sometimes happens and I think, you know, you should give into when it does, or you should play with it when it does, because a book about a person will always have a chance, a book about a theme, a novel about a theme will always die, I think, if you set out to write a 450 page novel about the great Irish famine, I mean I'm interested in that subject and I wouldn't read it, you know, to me that just sounds like another great big windswept slab of Irish misery, you know, but if you say no this is a book about a guy who makes up songs, and he meets this young woman and, you know, a book about a person ,or people, or a human situation will always have a chance.

**Sarah.**

I'm conscious of one of the things Joe said and that was that it's the end of a long day and I've promised Íde that I'll stick to some semblance of time keeping, but there are two people who have indicated they want questions and one of them is a woman and this is really important because half the people in the room are women and I'd like a woman's question please.

**No name.**

I've had the luck of being able to take a creative writing course with Alistair McCloud's son and in my writing experience, I have been told that I am very unconventional with my writing; that I start with characters, and I bring them up and they become almost like real people to me, and then based on that I move to, well, where is this taking place, where are these people, then the plot, then the modus and then it's the telling process, and then once I have all that then, I go back and remove the telling and put in the show, but I'm not going to tell you, you're going to get that through the dialogue between the characters.

But, I'm just wondering for you how do you go through the mechanics when you're writing, how do you go through this process, to structure the story. Do you dream up your characters or do you say like I know this is what I want and then I'm going to make these characters around that, or.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

No, as I said to Patrick, if I feel that it's a story about a person then I give it some time. I stop what else I'm doing and I'll work on that for a couple of weeks and write 3,000 or 4,000 words every day, and just see if I can see that person a bit more clearly and hear how they speak, and I ask myself questions about them, it's one of the things that we do in the class. I have a list of kind of sixty or seventy questions that I've shared with the students, that you would ask; who are the people who love this person, what's their secret, what are they running away from, if they were here in our world now who would they vote for, what would they think about this.

It's Graham Green's notion originally that you should know everything about your character, you know you reveal very little, and we reveal very little to each other in life, but you as the author need to know everything about the character.

So, when I feel that that's beginning to happen then I stop. I think my way down towards the end of the story if I can, and when I have some rough notion of a three act structure, a set-up, a conflict and a resolution, then I'll begin to plan that in more detail.

And, then the end of the process, after the eighteen months, or the two years that it takes to write a novel, we were just talking about this in the class last week. I would number my re-drafts. I think it's a really important thing, that writing is rewriting, you know, you know that, all of the creative writers here know that, but not to try and fix everything in one go. You know, so, I do six and I've shared what they are; the first re-draft, I suppose, is just for kind of understandability, it's just does this story actually make sense, is it clear what's going on. Then, I would do a re-draft that's just for characterisation. I would do a re-draft that's just for dialogue, because I think it's just a powerful part of the book. I would do one for the style or what I would prefer to think of as the music of the book, I mean, I think every one of the lovely things I learned from writing *Star of the Sea* is that every novel has kind of music, and you need to find that, and it's something we really respond to, I think particularly in Ireland, we feel that prose should have musicality and it doesn't have to be the great operatic symphonic music of Joyce. William Trevor has his music and Anne Enright has her music, and every writer needs to have that, almost as if that if you were to stand up and read from it to audience of people who didn't speak English, that they would have some sense of what the story is about just from the sound of the words, so I would work very hard on that re-draft.

**No name.**

Like the tone of the character.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Just the actual sentences, the tone of the sentences themselves, you know, do they actually go, like my current book, *The Thrill of it All*, it's about a 1980's rock band, it absolutely has its music and so I hope the *Star of the Sea*, but they're not the same. So always at some point early on in the creation of a novel, I find it a useful thing to ask, what's it going to sound like, you know when, I stand up and give a reading from this, how are the vowel sound going to convey what the book is about, and to learn to use your ear, you know as a writer is a really important thing.

So, if you structure your drafts in that way you'll actually be able to finish a book, or polish a book, or bring it to a level that you're not going to get it to if you just try to fix everything in ten drafts, you do it more quickly this way.

**Sarah.**

I'm going to allow for one more question over here.

**Ben Panther**

Ben, journalism and new media, you talked about your own creative process, but now you teach creating writing, does it kind of surprise you, is it twelve people you've got on the course, is it a very different process with everybody or is it kind of a similar thing, does it vary the way that people tackle their writing.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

Yes it does, yeah, of course it does, yeah. I suppose there's like a Venn diagram, you know, there's a core at the centre where you know people have something in common. I've said before, and I don't mind saying again, I really salute the great trust they have in each other, and they develop very quickly in the course of the year, because it's not always easy to do that, they're a very honest group, they actually have found a way of critiquing each other's work, and being quite tough, quite straightforward, but in a way that's respectful, which is, you know a wonderful thing, but they're very, very different, I mean, I have people who are writing historical novels, Amber who is here is writing I suppose what would be, where is

Amber, oh she's gone, kind of fantasy novel. Patrick is writing a novel set in 1960's Belfast and now and Iva, there, is writing a novel inspired by the folklore and myths around Áine, the goodness, and, who else have we got, there's Mary, I don't know just yet what she's going to do but really, really talented writer and short story accepted for the Ogham Stone, which is coming out soon, and there's V. J, who has written some fantastic stuff and is working on screen plays now, and is going to do a set of linked short stories as her dissertation. Is that everybody, Patrick I've said, oh Patrick yes, I don't know fully just yet because we haven't had a chance to discuss what he's going to do. But short stories and very powerful first person narratives.

So, different aims, different backgrounds, some people have done a lot of writing before. Helena Close who is not here today, I don't think, has published 4 novels, and then we have some people in the group who haven't published at all yet really. So, you know, there's a great range of age. The incoming class next September, we have one person who is 71 and we have one person who is 20, so it's a fantastic range. We've people who, you know, have worked, and have run businesses, and people who are just graduating from college. We have people from different parts of the world.

So, it's been a great experience, a great learning experience. I've learned a lot from these wonderful writers and they are the stars of the show because you know to get creative writing going off the ground at UL so quickly has really been because of them and their level of work. Their level of commitment, the seriousness that they've brought to it and the great respect for each other's work that they've brought to it, so, I can only hope that next year will be the same, so, yeah a great bunch.

### **Sarah.**

I always hate it when a conversation with Joe O'Connor comes to an end, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to wrap up or Íde will definitely kill me if we don't, and I'm also conscious that some people have to go. But, I think that it's really important for me to thank the Writing Centre for their foresight and insight, in continuing this really important series. It always strikes me about how insightful it is, and how much I learn, and I hope everybody here has learned.

I'd like to thank all of you for coming and for participating in this really wonderful conversation. I think we've heard about architecture and structure and lyricism and the

construction of sentences and full plots. We've heard about self-belief and courage and that notion which I find very appealing about having to be kind of a bit stupid; that shred of stupidity that encourages people to just get on with it regardless of the challenges.

**Joseph O'Connor.**

I have an honorary degree, a doctorate in that actually.

(laughter).

**Sarah.**

The planning and the drafting experiences and insights, I think I'd like particularly to thank, although all of you are, I thank all of you for being here, but I particularly thank the masters in creative writing students as Joe has mentioned, because with Joe you've all taken this magnificent leap of faith and as the inaugural class, I think you've proved things to all of us, and we've learned so much from you and with you, and it's just a source of great pride to us at the University of Limerick that you're here, and that Joe has been working with you to uncover your stories, and to help them get told.

The thing that I'm going to go home with though is that a book about a person will always have a chance, and I think that speaks to the narrative imagination and to that human need to connect, and to get inside each other's heads, and to provide us with all that empathy and humanity that good story telling has the capacity to do.

So thanks to all of you, thanks a million Joe and let's finish the coffee if there's some there and enjoy the rest of the evening, thanks a million.

**End.**