

“MY LOYALTIES WOULD ALWAYS
BE WITH THE LOCAL”:
A CONVERSATION WITH DEIRDRE MADDEN

MARISOL MORALES LADRÓN
UNIVERSITY OF ALCALÁ

Deirdre Madden was born in County Antrim, in Northern Ireland in 1960. She holds a B.A. from Trinity College Dublin, and an M.A. from the University of East Anglia. She currently teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Trinity College Dublin. She has been writer-in-residence at University College Cork (1994), and Writer Fellow at Trinity College Dublin (1996-97). She is a member of Aosdána. She is the author of seven novels and two children's novels. Her work has been awarded with many prizes, among which we could include the *Hennessy Award for Short Fiction* (1980), the *Rooney Prize for Irish Literature* (1987), the *Somerset Maugham Award* (1989), and the *Kerry Book of the Year Award* (1997). She has also been nominated twice for the *Orange Prize for Fiction*. For her children's fiction, she has received the *Eilis Dillon Award* (2006).

Madden's first novel, *Hidden Symptoms* (1986), dealt with the effects of the Troubles in the lives of three young people living in Belfast and brought her much acclaim. This was followed by *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), which explored the function of the burden of the past in the preservation of a family secret, and was set in the countryside, in an unnamed farming village. Her third novel, *Remembering Light and Stone* (1992), placed Irish culture at the periphery of Europe through the vital experiences of its protagonist, an Irish woman who had spent large periods of her life in France and Italy, and had an American lover. *Nothing is Black* (1994) was set in a remote village in Donegal, where three women found themselves sharing fragments of their solitary and unhappy existences, which brought positive effects in each other's future. *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) focused again on the different choices made by three sisters in Northern Ireland, and on the effects of the Troubles in their family. Madden's sixth novel, *Authenticity* (2002), developed the theme of the function of art in a modern and globalising society. And,

finally, *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008) retook the theme of art and applied it both to acting and to playwriting in contemporary times. Madden has also published two novels for children: *Snakes' Elbows* (2005) and *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* (2007).

Madden's literary production is extremely wide and diverse, although the main aspects that characterise her fiction could be summarised in the following: the psychological exploration of the minds of her characters, mainly female, who reflect on the dynamics of a changing world; the introduction of different perspectives in the narration that contribute to offer a myriad of realities; the confrontation of characters by past events and their final resolutions, which usually involve a reorientation in their lives; the effect of Northern Irish politics on the troubled lives of many characters, even in those novels that do not deal directly with the conflict; and, finally, the exploration of the role of the artist, and the function of art and creativity in a global and all-too modern society.

On May 28th, 2009, during the VIII International Conference for Irish Studies (AEDEI) that took place at the University of Alcalá, we had the honor to receive Deirdre Madden as a guest speaker. She read some fragments from her two most recent novels, *Authenticity* and *Molly Fox's Birthday*, and the following interview was conducted publicly.¹

Q. My first question is about identity. You were born in Northern Ireland, and some of your novels, especially the early ones, are set in the North and deal with the effects of the Troubles on the people living there, especially on female characters. Although this theme has kept reappearing in your later novels in a less central position, I wonder whether you feel more comfortable with the label "Northern Irish Writer" or whether you would rather be called an "Irish Writer".

A. I would always call myself an "Irish writer" and I would be quite resistant to the definition of "Northern Irish writer" because, I suppose, I don't like or respect the concept of Northern Ireland. Having said that, I grew in that part of the country during the 1960s and 70s, and it was a very significant, unhappy and important part of my life. The whole memory of living through that, seeing the marches when I was a child and experiencing the atmosphere and the tension of that period was something that is absolutely a part of me, and it comes back into my life and my thoughts, and into my work, I suppose, whether I like it or not. Certainly there is an element of it in my most recent book, *Molly Fox*, but it wasn't sort of consciously chosen. But I think even if I were realising that it is just something that it is there, it is part of my make-up, having lived in that place at that time.

Q. I suppose that is also why you cannot avoid the subject because, even though *Molly Fox* has nothing to do with the Troubles, one of the characters is really marked by the violent death of his brother during that stage in history. But now, let's focus on form. Along your production, you seem to have tried to avoid straightforward narratives. And my question is: are you deliberately attempting at moving away from the more realist tradition that has defined Irish women writing in the last decades? Are you consciously aiming at creating something more sophisticated or does it just come that way?

A. Well, I am very interested in the novel as a vehicle for exploring ideas as much or possibly more than simply telling stories. I always think of what E. M. Forster says in *Aspects of The Novel* (1927): "Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story". I understand the kind of resignation he is expressing in that. What he is saying is that in the novel we need to have the story to make the whole thing work, but he is making it clear that as a writer he wants to do much more than just that, to just tell a story. And that's a view with which I would identify. I like reading novels that have ideas in them, be those political ideas, or ideas about religion, or society or whatever; but to try to interweave the story and the ideas can sometimes make it very difficult. The story helps provide the structure and context for the ideas. To try to get the balance right is very important. If the ideas and the story aren't in harmony the novel will be too abstract and it won't be engaging to readers.

I might add in relation to this that I have recently written a few books for children. That was a real surprise to me, because how I have gone about that is so completely different to how I have written for adults. If you asked me what *Molly Fox* is about, I would say, well it is about acting, *Authenticity* about painting and about what it is to be like to be an artist, and so on. But if you asked me about the children book *Thanks for Telling Me, Emily* I would tell you the story of the novel. I would talk to you about the characters, but I would certainly be focused mainly on the narrative. The writing for children is extremely interesting in that sense, because it was as if I had got into a part of my brain I didn't know that I had, and I see that I can do things I didn't know I could do, and it has also helped me to think about the adult work differently, to see it in a new way.

The other thing that is funny about the work for children is that it is quite sort of wacky and silly, and to my surprise my closest friends told me that they could see more of me, more of the person they knew, in the work for children. I mean the adult work tends to be sort of dark and serious. But they can see more of me in the children's work rather than in the adult's work and I find that quite funny.

Q. Nature has a pervasive presence in your novels, either in the form of flowers, vegetation, birds, or even through the symbols of light and darkness, which also noticeably reappear in the titles of your novels. Why are you so interested in nature, especially in gardening? Even in the passages where you are dealing with the Troubles there is always someone interested in watering the plants or just in admiring nature.

A. I have always liked animals, plants, trees and nature but I think I see consciously more and more the importance of these things as life goes on. One of the things that I love about this city² is the storks on top of the buildings, these huge nests, these absolutely enormous nests and these huge birds that suddenly fly out of their nests. It's like something out of a fairy tale. That's one of the things I very much take from here. Things like that, or going somewhere and seeing some lemons growing on a tree, or seeing orchids growing in the wild. Those sorts of things can really light up your life in a way, because there is so much darkness and so much suffering in the world. These things, like just seeing a wild animal or seeing the birds this morning... There is something incredibly redemptive and beautiful about that. I have always valued it but I value it even more consciously as time goes on, so yes, it is very much a part of my imaginative world as well.

Q. There is something else I am curious about. I have noticed that in all your novels the reader is confronted with the lives of three characters who are friends, siblings, acquaintances, lovers... and their relationship develops in a very special way. Why three? Does number three have some kind of magic for you? Are you also interested in different kinds of triangular relationships?

A. I think what you say is true but I didn't realise that for a very long time. A strange thing about *Molly Fox's Birthday* is that when I was writing it I think I was going against the current of the book the whole time. I found it really hard to write and I think that I made a lot of problems for myself. As regards the numbers thing—if you have only two main characters, everything becomes either/or. But if you have three characters it's different. They can interact with each other, all three together, and then the first with the second, the second with the third, and the third with the first and so on. And so there are a lot more possibilities if you have three characters rather than just two. It makes for more complexity and even more subtlety.

There's a lot in this novel about siblings. It's a subject that interests me greatly and I've written a lot about it over the years. When I was in the early stages of writing this novel two of the characters had brothers who

were important to them. But as I wrote I realised that the third main character also needed, or rather had a sibling who was important to them too. And once I discovered all that, it helped the whole story and the structure, it made it easier to write. It also gave it a nice sort of balance, because you had three main characters and then you had these three less important characters, who were the brothers of the main characters.

It's like a painting. Sometimes if you look at a good painting you see that the composition is harmonious and pleasing without perhaps understanding why, until maybe somebody says: "Well it is because these two figures are here, and that angel is up in the sky and the whole thing forms a triangle". There's a balance and shape to how things are positioned. You can do something similar in a novel; there can be a balance and harmony in the structure that the reader can feel without perhaps being consciously aware of it.

Q. Now that you mention that you compare literature with painting, I would like to ask you about the relevant presence of art in your writing. Your two most recent novels deal with art in the theatrical form or in the visual arts. But painting has always been in your writing, either directly, as it is the case with *Nothing is Black* (1994), an early novel about the difficulty of finding enough inspiration to paint, or through passing references to paintings and painters in a more general way. What is that most interests you in art?

A. I like looking at paintings very much. I don't paint. I studied art at school but I definitely have no aptitude for it although I absolutely love looking at paintings and I always try when I am away to go to galleries and see some things. Maybe it is a good balance because there is no language involved and you can become supersaturated with words and, again, just to engage with the beauty of some paintings as well is marvelous. I mean, I think that we live in an age when there is so much ugliness, and to look at the remarkable beauty of some of the paintings of the past, in an age when it was really valued.... There are still marvelous paintings obviously nowadays as well. I do not mean that it is all finished. I do like a lot of contemporary art, for me it's something I love. It's a bit like what I said about animals, and that it's something redemptive, something I feel I need in my life and it helps me imaginatively to open up.

Q. In recent years, not only your fiction has turned to more universal subjects, but also the action takes places outside Ireland. Yet, your last novel neatly plays with the significance of the local and the global for the

three internationally acclaimed characters while it underlines issues related to the individual consequences of the Troubles. Since the main theme of this conference is “From Local Ireland to Global Ireland: The Reality Beyond”, how do you see yourself in relation to this movement that encompasses the tension between the two?

A. It’s not something I was thinking about at all when I was writing the book. My loyalties would always be with the local. Overall I am more than a bit suspicious of globalisation. I know it has brought certain benefits but I think it has also done a great deal of harm. And think about it this way—you can put a satellite dish on the roof and pick up TV channels from all over the world, and you can go to places like Thailand or Vietnam for a fortnight’s holiday, but do we really understand and empathise with the people of these countries more as a result? I’m not convinced.

Q. To me, *Molly Fox’s Birthday* fits into the same narrative the two main themes that have informed your production, mainly the function of art and the inescapable presence of the Troubles. Do you consider this your most complete novel, meaning by this that that it retakes subjects that had already been explored before? Did you deliberately want to embed all your interests in one single narrative or did it just come out this way?

A. I certainly didn’t have that in mind when I was writing it. I wasn’t trying to incorporate those two themes consciously. Of all my work I think the novels I like best are *Authenticity* and *Molly Fox’s Birthday*, although they are very different in many ways. *Authenticity* is a much bigger, longer book, with a larger cast of characters, a wider range of settings and a bigger scope. *Molly Fox* is more small scale and yet I found it much more difficult to write. I think I’d say *Authenticity* is my favourite of all my novels, but that’s possibly at least in part because I have happy memories of writing it! Writers have a very different view of their own work compared to everyone else because their relationship to it is different. They’re concerned with the whole complex of ideas and emotions that went into a text, including the ideas that didn’t make the final cut, all the blind alleys you went down when you were writing it. Everyone else is only concerned with the final text, which to the writer is the tip of the iceberg. Of course the final text is what counts, but as a writer you’re aware of the genesis of the book, the memory of its creation.

Q. Female characters are always the protagonists of your work, yet your novels try to escape both from the restrictions of a patriarchal society and from the confines of certain feminisms. What is your position

regarding gender issues? For instance, in *Molly Fox*, Molly wants to call herself “actor” rather than actress. Why?

A. Because I think that’s pretty standard practice now. If she’s an actor and her name’s Molly it’s self evident that she’s a woman! You wouldn’t make that distinction in other careers, would you? There isn’t a special term to denote a female surgeon or female engineer, so why should the stage be different? It seems to me wholly reasonable for a woman who acts to want to be called an actor. It’s interesting that a lot of people have commented on this point. As regards gender overall in my work, there’s a really strange thing at work—people talk as if my writing is wholly female, as if I write only about women, but that isn’t the case at all. If you think about it, there are far more men than women in *Molly Fox’s Birthday*. Similarly in *Authenticity*, two of the three main characters are men. Indeed the most important character is Roderic, the painter, and his brother is also significant, and Julia is very close to her father, and so on. It’s a bit odd that people don’t seem to notice all these male characters in the novels. They are there!

Q. Religion is very present in your novels. In *Hidden Symptoms* and also in *Molly Fox* there is an exploration of the nature of faith and its function in society. How important is this subject for you as a writer?

A. It is important to me. I still feel I have something to say about it. I imagine that this is a subject that I might write about again in the future. I’m more interested in faith than in the social aspects of religion, but for now I don’t have much more to say about this subject.

Q. Also, death or loss is present in most of your novels. Characters seem to be unable to come to terms with their losses and the problems of delayed grieving become significant. Is this an unavoidable subject for you? Does this have anything to do with having grown up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland?

A. I think it has a great deal to do with growing up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It had an enormous effect on me and I look back on the great sorrow and darkness that was the general atmosphere at that time and it fills me with horror to think that we could ever possibly go back to that situation again. I spoke earlier of how things such as animals and plants, how art, for example painting, can be redemptive. I think what I would like above all is for people to find a redemptive quality in my work, and that even if I am writing about subjects such as loss or death that they would find them treated in such a way as to help people make sense of or even just endure these things. That’s one of the most important things art

can do, address suffering in a way that can help people to endure; to take something terrible and make something moving and beautiful from it. So then people know that they're not alone, they're not the only person who has had this hard experience or has suffered this pain, and that in itself can be a comfort. That's what I would hope, anyway.

Notes

¹ Although, due to limits of time, I was not able to pose all the questions that appear along this interview, the author very kindly accepted to answer some of these through the e-mail. I would like to express my personal gratitude to Deirdre Madden for her generous disposition and kind assistance in this matter.

² She is referring to Alcalá de Henares, commonly known as the "stork city", for the amount of storks that build their nests on top of high roofs and belfries.