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"WRITING IS A STATE OF MIND NOT AN ACHIEVEMENT": AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD MAC LAVERTY

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Bernard Mac Laverty was born in Belfast in 1942. He worked for ten years as a medical laboratory technician in the Anatomy Department at Queen's University, Belfast. When he was 28, he entered Queen's University, Belfast, where he received an Honours degree in English and also gained a teaching qualification. He then moved to Scotland (1975-1978), where he taught English in Edinburgh. From 1978 to 1981 he taught English on the Isle of Islay, when he gave up teaching in order to write full time. He is married with four children.

Mac Laverty has written four novels: *Lamb* (1980), *Cal* (1983), *Grace Notes* (1997) and *The Anatomy School* (2001); and four collections of short stories: *Secrets* (1977), *A Time to Dance* (1982), *The Great Profundo* (1987) and *Walking the Dog* (1994). He has also illustrated some children's stories, has adapted works for both the television and the radio and is the author of various screenplays. He has been awarded a number of prizes, including "The Scottish Arts Council Book Award", "The Pharic McLaren Award", or the "RTÉ Jacob's Award", among many others.

Mac Laverty visited Spain on a cultural tour in 1999 sponsored by the British Council and gave a series of lectures at different academic institutions, including the University of Alcalá, where I had the privilege of introducing his life and works to the audience. The present interview took place in Madrid, 18 April 1999. The text below is an excerpt of a much longer talk and intends to synthesise in a few pages the most salient characteristics of Mac Laverty's literary production.

I reckon that we could start off with an expected question. If I asked you which are your main literary influences, what names would come first to your mind?

I suppose that if I go right back to the beginning, the things that intrigued me at school were, in the first instance, *Macbeth*. The way that *Macbeth* was put together with that imagery, the images of birds, of ill-fitting clothing, of darkness and light,

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of blood. The imagery holds *Macbeth* together as tightly as threads hold a woven carpet. I love that. And then there would be somebody like Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poems I read when at school: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame", and "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day".... But I was just somebody beginning to read. Then I read the short stories of my namesake Michael MacLaverty. If I ever tried to copy anyone, he would have been the template. And after that, at the beginning of my reading, after I left school, Hemingway. The first time I thought: "this is a charlatan and a trickster". I did not understand them. Then I went back and read them again and thought: "but these are smashing stories, these are great". That kind of attention to cutting away material was very important. Everything that you read and like influences you at some level. [*He laughs*]. It seems ludicrous to say that Shakespeare influenced you.

On the other hand, at some points in Grace Notes, *Catherine MacKenna is called "Lady Macbeth".*

Yes, that's true. My main discovery of reading was through Dostoyevsky, I think. The first book I ever read, which I was not forced to read, was *The Brothers Karamazov*. Then suddenly that led to everything and I read *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment*. Then I started reading Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, James Joyce..., it just went like that.

This means that you did not look for your influences "at home", in Irish or even British literature. Is that the way you feel?

No, my devotion began first with the Irish writer Michael MacLaverty and the realisation that James Joyce was great –through reading *Dubliners*, more than anything else, and *A Portrait*. And then much later, coming across writers like Flannery O'Connor. In the beginning I thought this was another male Irish writer; but she is an American from the deep South, although there must be Irish origins in her somewhere to be called O'Connor. Her short stories are superb and they must be read, together with her writings on the short stories. She has a book called *Mystery and Manners* I would give to anybody who wanted to write short stories. After that, Raymond Carver. In Scotland reading James Kelman and Alasdair Gray had an effect on me. They are not influences in the sense that I write like them –I don't. They are just good people. Good writers.

So far, your literary career has oscillated between prose fiction and short story writing. Will you keep moving back and forth in the two genres or is this not consciously premeditated?

I never know. Normally I think I'm on a novel only because it gets very long. As you are writing something the possibility always exists that you can throw it away or not publish it. So I don't particularly want to talk about what I am working on at the moment.

Have you ever written poetry or drama?

Yes, in the beginning I wrote poetry, which causes me still great embarrassment, enormous embarrassment.

As you know, James Joyce started as a poet as well and he never went too far in that genre.

I have a notebook at home with some in it, but they are truly dreadful.

Have you given them to any publisher or is it just your own opinion?

No, they are just writings of a sixteen-year old, seventeen-year old. I think one of them was published in a school magazine but it was my brother who stole it from me and he published it under his name.

And drama? Have you ever made any incursion in this genre?

No, except television and screenplays. One short story that seemed to transfer easily to the stage was "Phonefun Limited".[1] The Tron Theatre in Glasgow had just opened. They were looking for very cheap plays to put on at lunchtime. And I gave them this very cheap play. It was about ex-prostitutes making dirty phone calls.

I would like to ask you about the silence of fourteen years between your second novel, Cal, *and your third. My feeling is that had you not published* Grace Notes, *most people and literary critics would associate you with short story writing rather than with the novel. But* Grace Notes *is very different from everything you had done before, not only in its extension, but especially in its richness and complexity in the development of narrative techniques that you had not employed before.*

I never know what I am trying to develop. The character in *Grace Notes* started off as someone who was a prisoner, then the prison fell away and there was a mental prisoner. But also, I knew I was writing about a female. I had two unpublished stories, both about females. Then I realised they were the same person: one of them was having a baby, and the other one was someone who had the courage to break a relationship. She is sitting among the T-chests of her possessions ready to move out the next day. She is living on an island. I began to evolve a structure. "I've got it, I've got it". It's a scallop shell. It is two halves –except that the later one comes first. Then you go back to the earlier one. It gives you chance to rhyme and chime things. I actually thought I might rhyme the whole book. Not all of it, just Parts one and two. Part one ends with "Credo" and part two was going to end with "Bravo". But "Bravo" got shifted a couple of lines because the last line of the book is "she rose", and the first words in the book are "she went down".

In a music piece there is often a part that is called "Coda". When I was finishing the reading of the book I realised that it was a novel with two endings, with two voices, and that at the end you had to go back to the beginning. So that the ending was like a kind of "coda" that sent you back to the start. So, were you actually planning two endings in such a way that the last one would lead to the re-reading of the beginning of the novel, trying to fix a circular structure?

[1] This story belongs to his collection *A Time to Dance*.

Oh, yes, yes, and also the kind of a climax of both pieces, both parts, which would be in a musical composition. There are games you play as a writer. At the hinge of the book, between part one and part two. "Credo" becomes "Day Crow". The book is turned. Day Crow is the cock, the rooster crowing at day break. These are games, games...

And also, both endings run parallel courses towards the celebration of both creation and life. The first part ends with her daughter Anna uttering her first words and the second finishes with the performance of the musical symphony that she has composed. Also, the major turning point in this second part deals with the recovery of both herself and her music. Her strength comes back when her daughter begins to walk for the first time in the beach and she is suddenly able to find a motive to leave her boyfriend and resume her composing career. So I think there is a parallelism between the creation of music and the raising of her daughter.

They are all very close; those things are not separable. One ends with the joy, of the music and the other ends with the joy of the daughter.

The Spanish translation of the title of the novel, Solo a dos voces, *also alludes to the two endings and the two voices in the story: Catherine in her depression and Catherine trying to come to terms with her own life. Also, your latest collection of short stories,* Walking the Dog, *could be said to be written in two voices, the narrator of the actual stories and that of the vignettes. Are you playing with two ways of looking at things?*

The thing that interested me there was, again, Hemingway; his collection of stories *In Our Time*. He had a serious purpose for these small italicised inter chapters, between the stories, about the nature of violence, just about a soldier having been shot and somebody climbing over the wall. In *Walking the Dog* I thought I could maybe have a go and do something comic in between my bleak stories. The in-between stories are all to do with writing, the life of a writer, or the technique of a writer. They are all about writing in some shape or form. The longest one is in the voice of the oral tradition: "This fella I knew". There is one called "*By train*".[2] The Victorians, in things like the Strand Magazine could never begin a story. They always had to have a narrator begin by saying: "I was having lunch at the strand club the other day and, as I was walking out from the shadows, a gentleman stepped up and touched me on the arm 'you'll never believe the story I am going to tell you'". So I wrote a whole lot of these encounters one inside the other. But nobody gets to tell their story. They are all in inverted commas –speech within speech within speech. There are a couple of the in-between stories about looking out the window, not being able to work, not being able to write. Or taking such ridiculous, infinite care with writing like the man who watches the rubbish piling outside his window. He writes some notices and, then, worries about whether it should be a semicolon or a colon. And he is writing for the critics the next day to comment, whether he is a good notice writer or not. The first one is about the art of

[2] This is one of the italicised ones.

the short story: "'This is a story with a trick beginning.' Your man put down his pen and considered the possibility that if he left this as the only sentence then his story would also have a trick ending".[3] It is just playing about with technique and the life of a writer, like going to Norway and going through customs and, each wee vignette has something quite light to say. I hope they are not pretentious.

No, not at all. I thought it was brilliant that all of the italicised stories started with the phrase "your man...". They are very enjoyable.

They probably grew out of going around Scotland doing readings. Poets can stand up and do very short things. But once I stand up as a storywriter, people sort of groan and say: "Oh, we're here for at least twenty minutes." And then I thought, why don't I put together some short things. I did and put them in *Walking the Dog.*

Why the expression "your man"?

It is an Irish phrase. To translate it would be very difficult. It would be somewhere in between "our hero walked into the bar" or "that bastard walked into the bar". So, it is very vague but, generally, there is admiration in it, but it could be scurrilous as well. It depends on the tone of voice. "Your man was in here earlier" could be dismissive. As Heaney said, "whatever you say, say nothing".[4] And "your man" is to name somebody but not actually to put a name on him or her.

But it is also "your man" and not "your woman" or your "human being". I thought Walking the Dog *was exceptional because of the final twists or tricks of the stories and the confusion at the end. I think the reader feels confused in a very pleasant way, confused by curiosity, impelling you to read the story again.*

Again, without making direct comparisons at all, I liked Hemingway's "Indian Camp", a story with amazing things happening in it that ends with the boy and his father in a boat. The boy is trailing his hand in the water feeling certain he will never die. Why does he say that? This immediately reflects you back into the story again, to read it again. So it is not a trick ending although it adds a dimension to the stories to intrigue the reader further.

But this idea of confusion, which I find very interesting, is related also to the way you feel about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, isn't it? You mentioned it today in your speech when you quoted from Brian Friel's play Translations.

Yes, "If you are not confused you don't fully understand the situation".[5]

So, is confusion a way of experiencing the reality of life in Northern Ireland or does it have nothing to do with that?

Well, it has, it is an absurd situation –except that people die; absurd in an existentialist way. So it is just a way of scratching your head reading literature. My

[3] It corresponds to the first story, "*On the Art of the Short Story*" (1998: 1).
[4] He is referring to Heaney's poem of the same title, included in his collection of poems *North* (1975: 57-60).
[5] See the commentary of the hedge schoolmaster, Hugh, when he affirms that "confusion is not an ignoble condition" (Friel 1981: 67).

God, what are people trying to do to each other? Chekhov, at one point, was asked by friends: "What do you really mean to say in a play like that?" And he shrugged and said: "Gentlemen, we can't go on living like this", and that's sometimes what literature is saying. We've got to change, we've got to do things differently, we can't go on killing each other.

Do you think, in that sense, that writers have a role to play in Northern Ireland?

Writers have a role to play anywhere.

Yes, but I mean in a socially or politically committed way.

Not overtly political in that way. Not to join a political party or anything. Although you can, if you enjoy that kind of thing. But all writing, I think, is political, even writing that which pretends not to be. It takes certain stands and certain issues and presents them.

Coming back to Grace Notes, *I find the novel very autobiographical, which is most interesting since the dominating voice is female. Was that difficult for you?*

I think there is a level of shared humanity between the genders. We are all fifty per cent our sex and may be fifty per cent human, so there is an overlap. Those aspects of creativity, making things up and music would have come out of me. I have researched the other aspects, but I did not want just to create a handbag female; somebody described with lipstick and tampons.

It still intrigues me why would you want to conceive a book of a female voice in which male characters are either both marginal and negative or absent. I am sure you found that difficult.

Not really, it was a device I tried to use. I said to myself that I would not really use any male characters. Some people helped me inadvertently because I remember giving the birth section to a neighbour who was a midwife. In earlier drafts there was a male doctor in it and she said: "Well, actually there are no male doctors. They are all midwives in the hospital, they are qualified female midwives". So I was able to take the male doctors out.

Your novels Lamb *and* Cal *depict a very realistic North of Ireland and end dramatically, whereas* Grace Notes *is much more positive. How do you explain this change of tone. Does it have to do with your own feelings about the Troubles or with the distance in time between the writing of your first and third novel?*

Well, in the first two novels I felt that to end the book on a happy note, with the main characters going off whistling into the sunset would give the wrong feeling to what I was trying to write. Therefore both *Lamb* and *Cal* reflect the negativity, the disappointment, the gloom of the situation in Northern Ireland. But *Grace Notes* came to be written during the cease-fire and I'm not a gloomy person. I felt that this might be an opportunity to end the book with hope although it doesn't end on a kind

of an unreasonable level of hope; it is a very attenuated hope. You would think at the end of part two there was a triumphant note.

Do you mean when she goes to the funeral at the beginning of the novel?

It is not so much the funeral as that she slips back to her depression again; she is still taking the tablets. In those opening sections there is confusion between the crying for her dead father and her own absolutely negative desperation. She arrives home to the funeral wearing navy and brown and her mother says: "Can you not go and get your hair done?" So, she is not in a great state. But by the end of part one the drama is in her desire to get home to see that baby or hers, whereas six months before she would not have wanted that. There is hope there, if you know the kind of nature of her depression. It is possible with help to grow out of it.

But she also says that she takes one step forward and three steps back. It is significant that this part finishes with her daughter uttering her first words. However, she mentions that she pronounced her first words when she was not there, to her friend. On top of this, her initial reaction when seeing Anna is to think that she's been changed. She can't recognise her daughter. I think this is a great scene because she fears that Anna is not hers.

That was something I experienced myself when we had our first child. We went on holiday. It was supposedly for ten days but then my wife Madelaine could not stick it, because of the baby –we had left her with my mother. After about five or six days we went home. I did not recognise the baby, so changed was she. In such a short period of time the bone structure of her head and her features had changed.

The pace and the rhythm of the novel are also quite musical. Are you really into music or did you just employ this device as a way to play with literature and creativity.

I cannot read music but I think this was an advantage. Had I a competent technique in music I would have wanted to overload the text. So, I kept it to the important issues of what it does to your heart and soul.

Do you agree with your own protagonist, Catherine, when she says that Glasgow is like Belfast without the killing?

Yes, I think I have said that myself in the past. Glasgow is a good city, with friendly people, good drinking and energetic arguments. It just seems like Belfast except that they don't kill each other.

Do you feel that it is because you live in Glasgow that you can approach the Troubles from the outside? Did this allow you, in Grace Notes, *to join the orange drums with the catholic upbringing of Catherine in a very peaceful and hopeful outcome?*

I think that what happened there sprung directly out of the cease-fire, the reconciliation or peace. So this was a symbolic way to do it, because she is a musician and can use the power of the drums musically once the bigotry is being

subtracted from them. There were several lines of imagery that I was trying to use. One of the principal things in the book is religion and the search for spirituality, and for health as well. But the rejection of religion runs throughout. The final concert is in a church, which is converted to a concert hall. Religion has been extracted from it. Catherine still loves religious trappings like stained glass, Gregorian chants, the structure of the mass and its music. Also, on the island, she loves to collect shells. And what is a shell but a beautiful structure whose life has been removed? It still looks beautiful and architectural. So, with the drums, once they have lost their bigotry they are magnificent, beautiful and vibrant things with regard to music. All those lines of imagery operate right to the end of the book. There are also private jokes as well. Once the Orangemen have gone from the stage everything is OK.

Now, going back to your first novel, Lamb *is based on an actual story, isn't it?. Apparently you left out the sexual overtones between the man who had taken the boy from a Brothers' school. Why did it interest you?*

There were no sexual overtones in the actual story. The way it happened was this. I had just published *Secrets*, my first book of stories, and I thought that I might actually attempt to write a novel. I had just started teaching at Edinburgh and one day I opened the morning paper, *The Scotsman*, and read this tragic case of a man who had run away with a boy. The whole thing had ended in tragedy and the judge said that it was one of the most tragic cases he had ever had to preside over. The paper was thrown out, but the question still nagged me. Why would somebody do that? The whole impression given by the judge was that there was a father and son relationship, and that it was done in some way for love. Right from the beginning, my thinking was that it was an image of what was happening in Ireland, that there were certain violent organisations and people who claimed to love Ireland but, in fact, were destroying it. This man says he loves the boy and yet he kills him. There were other elements that I wanted to examine as well, like the idea of the church and again loss of faith, which is the reason why Michael runs away. There was nothing of this researched from the original. I can't stress this enough. My story was the destruction of a boy by someone who claimed to love him. I saw a parallel in the Irish situation with violent republicans.

What I also enjoyed in this story was your own version of the myth of Icarus. The way Michael read the story to the boy. I thought that you were offering a revision of the myth. In it the father advises his son not to fly near the sun and it is only the son's disobedience what causes his eventual death. But in your novel, it is the father who kills the son.

Abraham and Isaac.

Now, turning to your second novel. Why is the ending of the novel Cal *so different from that of the film version?*

I think films and novels are two different things. It's an apple and an orange; they are both fruit but they are very different objects. I stand by the novel. A screenplay is a production by maybe ten different people. The director gets his say

and he generally tries to make the film work as a film. "There would be far more tension if this was in an enclosed space". So you shift the scene from a house to the back of car, for instance; or, "we can save maybe three or four scenes if the bomb was in the bookshop instead of in the library, so that we can combine Christmas shopping and ...". And then you try that and it works. That is why there are differences. It would have been difficult to finish the film in the way the book finishes. You just can't do that. I found in writing a screenplay that everything that is word based has to disappear. You can't rely on words at all in a screenplay. The last scene in the book is something like: "he stood in a dead man's Y-fronts, grateful that at last someone was going to beat him to within an inch of his life". This is guilt and suffering inside Cal's head. That doesn't work in a film, so you have to come up with something else that works, and that was the solution I came up with.

You mentioned the bomb planted in the library. Why did you choose Middlemarch *as the book in which it was placed? Is it because it is Victorian fiction and is very bourgeois? Were you trying to do away with Victorian fiction or with bourgeois society, as it represents old values and traditions?*

No, I thought of it as a Republican hatred for English culture. It is such a comprehensive book. Also it has to be a huge volume big enough to put a bomb into.

Why all the characters of your novels, and most of your short stories, are either motherless or fatherless? Does it have to do with the loss of your father when you were only twelve?

I suppose it must be. The consciousness that I was writing father and son stories, again, led me into why not try and write a mother and daughter story. And that was probably *Grace Notes*.

I have also found that there are barely any happy relationships in your writing. Why is that?, since it doesn't seem to be reflection on your personal life.

I suppose this goes back to Milton. The difference between God and Satan. It is so much easier to create something defective than to create something good. For the same reason failure is more interesting than success. Those things that are flawed are easier to create somehow than a relationship that is calm, good and fulfilling in which nothing happens, it just goes along. That's not the stuff that makes for compulsive reading. So relationships that end up throwing plates at each other, screaming and forming passionate relationships are always more interesting and easier to do. A real problem for a writer is to take a big important relationship like that and build it up out of tiny bricks, tiny mosaic tiles, to make a huge and important picture or statement. If there is no conflict it seems to be more difficult to do.

Now, I would like to ask you something else about exile. Did you become a writer after you moved out of Belfast or do you identify with the image of the exiled Irish writer?

No, I was a writer in Belfast from about the age of eighteen. That was the beginning of it. I did not go away until I was thirty. I was moving to a different country as a writer although I had not actually published a book at that stage. Writing is a state of mind, not an achievement. I settled in Scotland, looked back at Ireland and felt it was good that I wasn't there witnessing the fear, the hate and the threats... Sometimes you would like to be there to support and be close to people who feel threatened. But I do not regret leaving at all and, at no time did I ever feel like a stereotype of an exile, sitting with my chin in my hand thinking: "Oh I would love to be back". I missed my friends, yes. I didn't realise how important they were until I went away. Being in another country gives me a sense of perspective. There are more important issues in the world than the orange and the green.

Could you mention something about the so-called "Belfast Group" that gathered in the sixties? How did it affect your development as a writer?

I was in a laboratory working with a student who was producing a magazine for the medical students called "Snakes Alive" and he asked me to help him out. At that stage I was writing stories. So we put the magazine together. I wrote a story, the art criticism and I drew some cartoons. He wrote the political column and the cinema reviews. Then Philip Hobsbaum saw the story and invited me to come along to the Group, which was very nice for me, as a non-academic. The Group met from the early sixties for about the next ten years. I found it valuable because it gave you a forum. Hobsbaum would say: "I've got a gap here in three weeks. Have you got a story?" I would say "yes". Even if it was a lie. Then I'd go away and write one. It was an incentive. It was good to be criticised and to have your work examined by other people, especially people who were quality writers: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Stuart Parker, Frank Ormsby... There were academics as well but they had to be the right kind of academics. There was Michael Allen, Judith Hutchinson and Edna Longley. I think it was a good and valuable thing for me.

And also for the others, I suppose, because the gathering grew as a real Group.

I think there were about thirty or forty people who would have got the sheets. They met on a Monday night. One writer would be there to be criticised and, then, the next Monday night there would be another one, so you would examine a piece of work that was posted out to you a week beforehand. The sheets would come, you would read the poems, or the story, or whatever it was and then you would turn on the Monday night. The author would read and people would criticise and advise. Then we had coffee.

So, did you read to them your short stories before you published them?

No, I did not read my published stories. I hadn't written them at that stage. This was the mid sixties. I didn't publish *Secrets* until 1977.

I am interested in something else. You have also written some children's stories. How do they fit in your work?

I wrote one children's book, called *Man in Search of a Pet*, and later *Andrew McAndrew*. They were radio stories for children under five. What happened was that I had my own children. I started telling them stories and they always wanted a new story. Then somebody from a publisher gave me a blank hardback book –these were the days when you didn't get blank books even in shops. So I said to the children: "Why don't I write down the stories we told and make drawings?" I would draw and write a page in the blank book every night instead of telling them a new story. When I filled this book there were about thirteen stories altogether. I have the book at home. Only one of them was published, *A Man in Search of a Pet*. With the early ones I did not know what I was doing –too many words. It is very hard to get a technique together, and especially hard to get an illustrator's technique together. Some drawings are of crayon, some are watercolours and some of felt pen. So it was nothing more or less than a parent telling his children stories and writing them down. *A Man in Search of a Pet* was remaindered. I bought thousands of them and put them in my roof space to reduce my heating bills. Eventually I gave them all away. Now we are freezing.

I think this is it. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

No, I think that's fine. I said earlier that I don't particularly want to talk about what I'm working on at the moment. That's not strictly true. It's a novel called *The Anatomy School*. I hope it's a more comic novel than any of the others –but that may not be so.

And *I suppose that, apart from writing, your other artistic interests could be said to be music and art. Isn't it?*

Yes, and also cinema and photography.

Thank you very much.

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