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# The Joy of Writing after 20 years. In conversation with Cónal Creedon

*Conci Mazzullo*
Università di Catania (<concimazzullocm@gmail.com>)

Interviewing Cónal Creedon[1] has been a thrilling and intriguing experience, but at the same time demanding. In fact having known him since 2000 and having shared lots of events connected with *Passion Play*[2] (1999) and the *Second City Trilogy*[3] (2007), it was my intention not to infringe on his privacy.

[1] This is the link to Cónal Creedon's website illustrating his biography and works, <http://conalcreedon.com/conal-creedon-biography-books-theatre-tv-documentary-radio.pdf> (05/2020).

[2] "*Passion Play* is set on Good Friday. It is thematically styled and structured on the gospels of the New Testament. The novel works on various levels. At its most fundamental, *Passion Play* tells the story of a 33 year old man, whose various paths through life have led him to his current situation – alone, lonely, isolated, living in a kip of a bed-sit, facing eviction. With only two hits of LSD and a bottle of whiskey for comfort. His head becomes filled with the sounds of footsteps on the ceiling and a cacophony of voices from another life. Caught in the slipstream of the past, he takes off on a kaleidoscopic odyssey of Marx Brothers' proportions – where the insanity of life is reconciled with the taste of freshly boiled pig's head. In the end, Pluto realises that death is the gateway to eternal life and "sometimes the need ta die is stronger than the will to live". *Passion Play* is inspired by two events that have become engrained in the Irish psyche – the Passion of Jesus and the Easter Rising of 1916. Both of these events occurred at Easter time and culminate in a blood sacrifice – followed by redemption. The plight of our anti-hero, Pluto, reflects the Passion of Jesus and his ultimate ascension into heaven. The recurring theme of Easter 1916 and vignettes from the gospels weave seamlessly in and out of the gritty magic realism of the narrative. Ultimately, Pluto's blood sacrifice leads him to a most beautiful redemption", see Cónal Creedon's website (05/2020).

[3] "*Second City Trilogy* was commissioned by the European Capital of Culture 2005. The trilogy is comprised of three short plays: *The Cure, When I Was God, After Luke*, and is structured in such a way that a cast of three actors can perform the trilogy in repertory. It is conceived as a tragicomic exploration of various father-son relationships, set against the social, historical, and topographical background of Cork City. The Second City Trilogy was first performed on 27 June 2005 at the Halfmoon Theatre, Cork Opera House. Due to public demand, the initial proposed production run of two weeks was extended to 6 months – eventually transferring to the main stage of the Cork Opera House. In 2007, the text of *Second City Trilogy* was published by Irishtown Press to celebrate the acquisition by the Crawford Gallery of a portrait of Cónal Creedon by artist Eileen Healy. The portrait features on the cover of the book", see Cónal Creedon's website (05/2020).

From initial reserve, where it felt I was talking more to the writer than to a friend, our dialogue has developed into freer space and spontaneity. It all started after I went to Cork last Easter and I listened to Cónal's reading of *Begotten not Made*[4] (2018), which sharpened my curiosity to learn about what had led him to write it 20 years after *Passion Play*. In the meantime I had been pestering him about writing his next novel. So, after the publication of *Begotten not Made*, we finally got to the interview.

I had planned to meet Cónal at Easter, but Covid-19 made it impossible. We opted to engage online over a protracted period of time to carry out our project. And suspended time, I would say, expanded time into a relentless pursuit.

Figure 1 – *Cónal's portrait*. Courtesy of John Minihan

[4] "*Begotten Not Made*, with illustrations by the author, is a fairy tale for the 21st century, where the mystery of blind faith is explored and the magic of belief is restored. Brother Scully met Sister Claire only once. It was back in 1970 – the night Dana won the Eurovision Song Contest. Every single morning since their first and only encounter, with a flicker of a light bulb, Sr. Claire has sent a coded message of love to Br. Scully. This Christmas Eve morn, for the first time in almost fifty years, no light shines out from Sr. Claire's bedroom window. And so begins this magical tale of a very real, yet unrealised love" ("Dublin Literary Award", 2020). *Begotten Not Made* was awarded the "Eric Hoffer Award USA", 2020 for Commercial Literary Fiction, and the "Bronze Award for Indie Next Generation Book Award USA", 2020. It was one of five finalists of "The Most thought provoking Book of Year Montaigne Book Awards USA", 2020 and nominated for the "2020 Dublin International Book Award". It has been cited as "Book Of The Year 2020" in the *Irish Examiner,* and "Selection of Top Books of The Year 2019" by Theo Dorgan on "Liveline", RTÉ.

*CM: As you have published* Begotten Not Made *I thought that I would like to interview you about the novel in this period of lockdown.*

CC: I'd be absolutely delighted, this is such a confusing time. Hopefully we'll all come out the far side intact.

*CM: Yes we'll get through this dystopian story we are living in.*

CC: We're telepathic. This very moment I wrote the word "dystopian". Isn't that bizarre? I've been invited by the Shanghai Writers' Association to include a piece in their next publication, and I was just making a list of words that might work well together, and this very minute I scribbled "dystopian". I would hazard a guess it is a word I have never actually typed before and it probably won't make it into the piece I'm writing – but it's an interesting coincidence.

*CM: Let's begin by asking you where you get your inspiration. I would be interested to hear about what inspires you and who inspires you?*

CC: I've always been drawn to culture with a small "c" rather than culture with a capital "C". I am fascinated by people I meet. I am intrigued by life as I encounter it. Certainly, at this stage in my life, I could name-check every inspirational writer, artist and musician, from the classics to the cutting-edge avant-garde, but that would be superimposing a retrospective inspiration.

It would be misleading to attribute the inspiration of my youth to the inspiration I found through my later-life's experience. I have always been inspired by real people in real-life situations rather than literary interpretations or artistic impressions of real life.

*CM: Your work seems to focus on Cork City, Ireland, and more specifically on the streets in which you grew up. Could you share with me some aspects of your childhood?*

CC: I grew up into what I describe as a "Spaghetti Bowl of Streets" on the Northside of Cork City. My family has lived on this street for generations, well over a hundred years, back to the time of great-aunt Julia.

We had a shop, a very small shop, the front room of a regular street house had been converted into a shop maybe a hundred and fifty years ago. We weren't wealthy, but we had financial stability of sorts, at a time when many others had nothing.

I grew up surrounded by a big family - 12 children, my parents, 2 aunts lived with us and many others who happened to visit and stay. Seldom a night went by without as many as 20 hearts beating under our roof. Our kitchen was like a cross between a 24-hour canteen and a railway station; there seemed to be people coming and going, and food on the go morning, noon and night. My mother used to say "It's like Piccadilly Circus". At the time I didn't know that Piccadilly Circus was a massive busy intersection in the centre of London. I assumed, she was talking about a circus with clowns, performing animals and acrobats, and that sort of made sense, because there was a circus atmosphere in our house. It was a circus without a Ringmaster, nobody seemed to be in charge.

I was blessed to have eight older sisters and ten aunts. My mother once said that I was five years of age before my feet touched the ground. She was referring to me being held in arms and passed from one sister to another. I believe my personality has been profoundly shaped by

this massive female influence. I sometimes wonder if the gender imbalance of my childhood had been the other way around? I sometimes wonder, how I would have turned out had I been born into a family with eight older brothers and ten uncles. I'd have probably ended up in politics or prison or both.

My mother had 10 sisters, and my father's brother had 14 children. This meant that there was always a sense of extended family, always a sense of occasion in the house regardless of how small the occasion. Every week brought its own occasion: a birthday, a first holy communion, a confirmation, a first girlfriend, a first boyfriend, a first day at school, a first tooth, a first job, a first haircut, a marriage, a birth or a death.

*CM: Clearly the street on which you grew up had a very big influence and impact on you, I'd like to know more about your life growing up?*

CC: Well, I still live on the very same street my family lived and traded on for over a hundred years.

It has always been a working class area. As a child, aspects of the nineteenth century continued to cast a shadow down our street. Our neighbourhood still had traces of those large multi-occupier houses, where the tenants shared communal outdoor toilets. Neighbours socialised on the street, and on summer evenings some would gather around the yellow fluorescent glow of our shop window.

Our neighbourhood was a melting pot of old Cork and those newly arrived to the city. Our shop counter was a meeting place. It was pre-internet, pre-computer, most households didn't have a telephone, and those lucky enough to have television were limited to a single channel, broadcast in black and white a few hours a day. More often than not you'd find yourself staring at a notice on the screen: "Is Dona linn An Briseadh Seo", which means "We Apologise For The Breakdown".

And late at night, when The Hilton Night Club across the street closed their doors, the musicians from the showbands would gather at our shop counter for a slice of Chester cake and a bottle of milk, elbow to elbow with off-duty cops, villains and vagabonds, before the long road home to Mullingar or wherever they came from.

*CM: It is true to say your work is inspired by growing up in this area.*

CC: I guess it's true to say that my Gods have always been local. My heroes ate Chester cakes and supped pints of milk at our shop counter. I am inspired by newspaper and fruit-sellers, shopkeepers, hawkers, shawlies, pigeon fanciers, dog-walkers, republicans, Christian Brothers, villains, vagabonds, heroes, activists, revolutionaries, revisionists, peacekeepers, troublemakers, lawbreakers, lawmakers, prostitutes, nuns, priests, saints and sinners, junkies, alcoholics, vegetarians and vegans.

This is not leafy suburbia. This is where the urban poor collide full on with the merchant princes. The people on both sides of that divide are my neighbours and neighbours become like extended family. This is home and there's no place like it.

*CM: And this colourful childhood inspired you to write?*

CC: Ah well, it's not as if specific experiences from my childhood inspired my writing. It's not as if there is a bubble of childhood stories that I dip into for inspiration. It is far more complex than that. It was a headspace, a state of mind, a set of values.

Our shop counter was a focal point for the neighbourhood. My life, my experience, my expression has been informed by the oral tradition of story and song of my childhood, and if that qualifies as inspiration well, I guess that's where I got my inspiration.

The unfolding life and drama often drifted from the street into our shop and wound its way around our counter right into the little kitchen behind. The neighbours gathered there to entertain and be entertained.

It would be nothing out of the ordinary for a song to break out in our shop – then total silence, as all those seated on coal bags and leaning on counters listened intently, hanging on every word to some unfolding epic saga about, the day a swan from the river waddled into number 8 down the street just as the cat was having kittens, or how The Scarlet Pimpernel up the street planted the bomb in Coventry and later escaped the hangman and climbed the prison wall not once but twice …

*CM: And has your neighbourhood changed much over the years?*

CC: My neighborhood has changed totally and my neighbourhood has not changed at all. It is a living entity. Like nature itself, it is never-ending and always changing. As sure as all the small shops on our street, including our family shop, closed in the late 1990s, they are now re-opened and trading. The new shopkeepers on our street are Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshis, Brazilian, Chinese, Russian and Eastern European, so nothing has changed. The only change is that these days I can get a better selection of vegetables and spices.

I embrace change. And like my father and his father and his great-aunt Aunt Julia before him, I continue to engage with the people on my street.

*CM: And what about your teenage years?*

CC: When Punk Rock erupted it presented the perfect catalyst for the chemical reaction of youth, mind and energy. Ever since then, I've always been drawn to the true originals: such as John Lydon, Poly Styrene, Ian Dury, John Cooper Clarke and without doubt, Cork's own: Finbarr Donnelly.

The local music scene was bristling with energy, attitude and originality. I was definitely incredibly inspired to see schoolmates exuding originality and doing their own thing on stage down the Arcadia Ballroom, a big old hulking dancehall where punk bands gathered in the late 1970s. The message I received was loud and clear: whatever I wanted to achieve in life, I would have to do it for myself.

The last job I've had, when I say "job" I mean full-time employment with a wage packet at the end of the week, was with Cork Gas Company back in the early 1980s. Since then, I've been doing it for myself. I just followed the dream – sometimes the dream can be an absolute nightmare. This notion of doing it for myself was reinforced by the endless recession of the 1980s: all opportunity just ceased to exist. And without opportunity, you just got to make it up yourself as you go along. I've been more or less making it up as I go along ever since. I wouldn't recommend it as a career path, but it beats working for a living (*Sarcastically*).

My play, *The Cure*, deals with an individual who was so beaten down during the recession of the '80s and was not mentally or educationally competent to capitalise on the opportunities of our Celtic Tiger economy of the '90s. My play, *After Luke,* also deals with the same topic, that sense of internal culture clash, internal inertia. I guess Pluto in my novel *Passion Play* had similar symptoms. He was from the generation of lost opportunity.

*CM: So you have always lived on your street?*

CC: By the early '80s, Cork was sinking fast and vanishing down the plughole into the deepest recession. Everyone was leaving for places like Boston, New York, London, Berlin. I went to Canada, at one point seven of my siblings were in North America, in Canada and USA. I stayed there for maybe four or five years. I think those years were so very important.

First of all, it broke that link with the street at that very pivotal age, in my late teens, when I could have gone down a road that might have brought my life's journey to a very different place. Secondly, being in Canada at such a young age, gave me a powerful perspective of my own place. I believe a writer needs to be slightly removed and my time abroad gave me that distance. It offered me an insight into my own life, an attention to detail of my own sense of place.

My place is a place that accommodates everyone from hoteliers to homeless. That's my street. It is a very magical place, maybe not to everyone's taste, but I love it and I live it.

In a way, I find the past a very boring place compared to what is going on in the present. You might enjoy this short piece about my sense of place. It was recorded by RTÉ television (Creedon 2014). There's also a radio interview, extensively about my play, *The Cure*, but it does give an insight to my street (Creedon 2013).

*CM: Did you begin writing when you returned to Cork from Canada?*

CC: No. Not at all. When I came home I opened a Launderette right next door to my family home. But I began writing while in the Launderette. I began writing a radio drama series *Under The Goldie Fish*, and my short stories started to gain a bit of recognition: the George A Birmingham Award, Francis McManus Awards, PJ O'Connor Awards, BBC One Voice Monologue Award.

Back in the 1980s/1990s, people/artists/friends from the flats and bedsits would drop in to my Launderette for the company and truthfully, for the warmth during the winter months.

I was certainly influenced by the artists and art students hanging out in my Launderette. There was no employment in Ireland in the 1980s so, it was a great time for self-expression. Even though working in the Launderette was humdrum, by the early '90s it was a place where a lot of young people hung out. We'd often re-group back in the Launderette after the pubs. I had a cassette player there. Had some fairly raucous, late night "poetry readings". Must be one of the few launderettes in the world that was raided/visited by the police to break up a rowdy poetry reading. It would be nice to say we talked about art, but in truth I was in my late 20's and it was a rolling party: art exhibitions and book launches and poetry readings were just the kick-off to a good party.

Unemployment was so high in Cork that for the want of something to do, everyone seemed to be a musician or an artist. Art was at the centre of everything. And the realisation that self-expression could be considered as work was a huge eye-opener for me.

Like my parents before me, my house became an open house. I would say there are probably close to 20 artists, stall owners and shopkeepers around the town who lived in my house at one time or another between the years 1988 to 1999. My house was very much a come and stay, sort of place.

The living conditions weren't great; electric cables running all over the house and no proper heating, water taps not working, rattling windows etc., but that's the sort of house it was. It was a big downtown, rattling, leaky old house. Back then the bed-sits were often in a worse condition – Pluto in *Passion Play* lived in a bed-sit house. Comparatively, my place was comfortable I had space and there was always a party. In a way, people staying in my place was just a continuation of the way things were during my parents' time.

Even to this present day my house is still very much an open house. Located downtown, it's the sort of house where people drop in to chat, some stay. Some evenings I cook for guests, even though I may not have invited anyone, people just seem to turn up.


Figure 2 – *The Launderette*. Courtesy of Cónal Creedon

*CM: Getting back to your inspiration, clearly your narrative is inspired by the streets on which you live, but how about the influence of other artists?*

CC: With regard to other writers and artists? Well, I'm totally impressed by human endeavour and am very lucky to have met so many of my heroes and found them to be just as impressive in real life. When it boils down to it, I'm impressed by people and how they interact with people.

Truthfully, I'm inspired by the private person more than the public aspect of their work. So, in the context of art and literature, I'm inspired by the artist not the art. Many of the artists who really inspired me you may have not heard of, people such as Ciarán Langford, Kevin Holland, Eilís Ní Fhaoláin, Alice Maher, Finbar Donnelly, Ben Reilly, Dimitri Broe, Paddy Galvin, Desmond O'Grady, Theo Dorgan, Maud Cotter, James Scanlon, Sean McCarthy, John Spillane, Martin Wedge, Martin Finnin, Irene Murphy, Mick O'Shea and so many others.

You most probably will not have heard of these people. Some have gone on to achieve national and international acclaim at this point, others are still in their studios just producing

great art for art's sake. But they were extremely active in the art scene in Cork in the late '80s early '90s. A group of maybe 20 or more artists moved into a big old semi-derelict warehouse at the end of my street, they called themselves "The Backwater Artists". Their arrival into my neighbourhood became a massive turning point in my life.

That generation of artists opened my eyes to the fact that self-expression could be a way of life. I'm ever grateful that I was inspired by those artists to follow my dream and close my launderette. The Backwater Artists' Group have gone from strength to strength and are now located in a new state of the art facility of workshops, galleries, print facilities over on the Southside. And though I'm not a visual artist, I still consider myself as one of the Backwater Artists and thankfully, they still invite me along to openings and parties. Life can sometimes deal a funny hand of cards, well the day the Backwater Artists' Group moved into my street it was like getting four aces and a joker up my sleeve.

But for the most part the people who inspired me and my work don't work in the arts at all. In order of importance I would list Fiona, my parents, my uncle Jack and auntie Kit, after that it spreads out into my siblings, extended family, friends and neighbours and that has remained fairly intact over the decades.

*CM: Well, as you said I don't know those artists. I know that Patrick Galvin wrote poetry?*

CC: Ah well in fairness, I wouldn't expect you to know the people who inspired me, inspiration is a very personal experience. At very pivotal points in my life, I have been blessed that there were always certain individuals standing in the wings offering encouragement and lifting my spirits. Paddy Galvin would have been one of those people.

*CM: When did you meet Patrick Galvin?*

CC: I think it's true to say that people loved Paddy Galvin. And I'm privileged to be able to say we were great friends. It seems like Paddy has always been connected to my adult life, so I really have no idea how we met.

He was a very sweet and kind man. Obviously, there was a generation of age between us, but we enjoyed each other's company.

I am not specifically inspired by artists or writers or their work. I am inspired by people. Our friendship was not based on his writing or my writing, we were just good friends, nothing academic about it, just friendship for friendship's sake. We had a lot in common. As you may know, Paddy grew up on Margaret Street in the South inner city, which is almost identical to my neighbourhood on the North inner city. Neither of us had attended UCC but both of us were appointed writer-in-residence at UCC, incidentally both of us were writer-in-residence in Cork Prison also. We ploughed a similar furrow we both found our inspiration in the streets, we both were multi-disciplinary, we both wrote novels, stage plays, poetry, film scripts, radio plays, he composed and recorded songs and of late I too have drifted into working with musicians such as Claire Sands and John Spillane (Sands 2019; Spillane, Creedon 2020).

I often performed with Paddy and we conducted workshops for visiting groups. He was a very humble man and such great company.

I remember, I think it was Christmas 1996, Paddy asked me to meet him. And eventually, he took two sheets of paper out of his little bag. He had handwritten two versions of "The Mad Woman Of Cork". One was presented on the page like a standard poem, the other had the stanzas scattered all over the page. He asked me which one I though was best? I said, in my opinion the one that's all over the place was the nicest. And with that, he tore up the version

that was like a standard poem and handed me the copy that was all over the page. "There, that's for you for Christmas", he said.

Seemingly, I had mentioned to him that I liked that poem. Although, I think my favourite poem by Paddy is "Plaisir d'amour". A very kind man, and we had a lot of fun together.

I was also very fond of his wife Mary Johnson and their daughter Grainne and son Macdara. Mary and Paddy were regular visitors to my house, and I to theirs. So, I have many happy memories in their company. They became friendly with my family, and were regular visitors to my cousin, Joe Creedon, in Inchigeela creating, once again, that all-important sense of extended family.

When he got ill, I used to visit him at home and even though he wasn't able to communicate because he was recovering from a stroke, I used to hang out with him. We might watch a match on the telly. Sometimes I'd read to him, other times I'd play a recording of my radio plays, or TV documentaries. To be honest, I'm not sure how much he comprehended, but Mary used to say my visits brightened him up, and that was a good enough reason for me to visit him. I loved them both. Mary was also an incredible woman. If ever there was a statue to be erected in this town I would suggest it be dedicated to Mary Johnson. A tireless, worker for the arts and artists. She fought our corner, endlessly in the wars, she achieved so much on behalf of others.

Of course, there was the added connection of the Spanish Civil War. For some reason, Paddy and Mary had a big interest in the Spanish Civil War, and my father's cousin, Mick Riordan, was one of the last surviving members of the Connolly Column who went to fight the fascists in Spain. As you probably know, the Spanish Civil War manifested itself like a Civil War in Ireland, where the Irish Blue Shirts supported by the Catholic Church, went to fight for Franco, while the International Brigade fought against Franco. My father's cousin, Mick Riordan, had been in the IRA and went on to set up the Communist Party in Ireland. He was ultimately excommunicated by the Catholic Church – which would have made life extremely difficult for him and his family back in the days of Holy Catholic Ireland – when the Catholic Church ruled the roost.

But in later life, after Mick Riordan was re-accepted back into Irish life, there were a number of celebrations and of course Paddy and Mary would always come along and play a very active part.

Actually Conci, I introduced you to Mick Riordan, that day you, Piera and I went to Dublin. Mick used to run the Communist book shop in Temple Bar, Connolly Books. I think you may have bought books there, perhaps a copy of his book *The Connolly Column*, or maybe it was out of print at the time?

(*And here Cónal Creedon shares a link to a song [Moore 2011], "Viva la V Brigada" by Christy Moore – inspired by, Michael Riordan*).

Christy Moore wrote this song. He says he was inspired to write "Viva la V Brigada" following a meeting with Mick Riordan. Before Mick died Christy Moore came along to sing it at his bedside.

*CM: It's interesting that your cousin was excommunicated by the Catholic Church. You seem to write a lot about religion, particularly in* Begotten Not Made*. Were your parents very religious people?*

CC: No we wouldn't have been a particularly religious family. Culturally we were Catholic. And back then Ireland was extremely Catholic, but as a family we only engaged with religion as

an extension of our culture and our history, rather than any sense of blind religious devotion. So, like everyone else we took the Catholic sacraments: Baptism, Holy Communion, Confession, Confirmation, Marriage …

I don't have a memory of our family going to Mass as a family unit, even at Christmas or other church holidays. So, no, we weren't what one would describe as a devout family. Having said that, because we grew up in a small shop, our shop counter would have been a social hub in our neighbourhood, our front door was always open. Clerics and priests and nuns were regular visitors to our house, but their visits were social not religious. The bishop of Cork has been a lifelong regular visitor ever since he was a student in the seminary in the late 1950's. He came from Inchigeela, the same village as my father, so he became like extended family. Though retired now, he is 80, he is still considered extended family.

*Begotten Not Made* is about a seismic shift that happened in Ireland sometime around the end of the 1970s. Dana winning the Eurovision identifies the moment when everything changed, and Ireland ceased being insular. Ireland was ready to step forward and join Europe as an equal. Meanwhile, Brother Scully viewing the rising sun at the "Changing of the Guard", identifies the time when the old guard of the Catholic Church became redundant as keepers of Irish morality.

If one looks at the numbers of new vocations to the Catholic Church, right up to the late '60s young people were still flocking to join religious orders. Brother Scully was one of that last generation. But then by 1970 it stopped. It stopped suddenly like a tap being turned off.

The heartbreak of the two unrequited love stories is made all the more palpable because the main characters are oblivious to the massive vortex of change coming down the tracks. Deputy Head Brother Lynch seems to be the least compassionate character and yet he seems to be the only one who is aware of the impending disaster of change.

*Begotten Not Made* is set against the last generational wave of young Irish people who flocked to join religious orders, and then suddenly were left high and dry by an Irish culture that had moved on. I have visited our local monastery and there are no young Brothers there at all, just a handful of very elderly Brothers, like dinosaurs – the last of a species near extinction. When I was a kid that monastery was like a beehive, full of fit, sporting young men who held huge influence in this city. I often think those elderly clerics must feel short changed by the way current Irish culture has forgotten them, life in Ireland has changed so dramatically around them. That really is what the book is about. It's about how our "belief" – not just religious belief, but our cultural belief, changed dramatically at that moment in time.

I consciously stayed away from the many scandals that have rocked the Church: sex abuse, mother and baby homes, etc., that would have been another book. This novel is very much the story of the view of the world from inside the head of one man. A young man who realises he is devoting his life to a great lie, but due to the entrenched cultural morality of the time, he is unable to do anything about it. The tragedy is, when the cracks became apparent, he finds himself trapped on the wrong side of a shift in culture.

*CM: Your previous novel* Passion Play *was published twenty years ago in 1999. When did you first think of* Begotten Not Made*? While you were assembling* Passion Play*? Or just after it?*

CC: I think I may have first told you about *Begotten Not Made* back in early 2000s. Basically, *Passion Play* is set on Good Friday with many biblical references and a strong Jesus theme running through it. Then I wrote the play *The Prodigal Man,* commissioned by RTÉ Radio 2001, which was a re-working of the Prodigal Son parable, that brought me back to the Bible and Christian thinking again. I had written two other stage plays, *When I Was God* (1999),

followed by *The Trial of Jesus* (2000) which was a reenactment of the crucifixion of Jesus played out on the streets of Cork on Good Friday 2000, two thousand years since Jesus' death, and it was part of the Irish National Millennium celebrations.

I plunged deep into biblical research for the *The Trial of Jesus*, and I think it may have occurred to me at that time that there was a strong case to be made for King Herod being Jesus' father. In 2001 I had a column in the *Irish Times* – "Video Paradiso" – writing about my fictionalised life that centred around watching a film every week. Well, that Easter I wrote about the biblical film, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and in the column I put out the theory of Herod being Jesus' father. It just so happened, that the *Irish Times* decided to defer my column for a week, by which time Easter had passed and that particular seasonal film had lost its currency, so I wrote a different piece for the following week.

I had begun working on the novel *Glory Be To The Father.* It had fatherhood as a main theme, so I decided I'd weave the theory about Herod being Jesus' father into the novel. I had great plans to finish that novel that year, but then as often happens, the writing took me in a different direction, and I started writing stage plays and radio drama. I think *Glory Be To The Father* will be my next book … we'll see…

*CM: What did you write next?*

CC: I had written a mountain of radio plays throughout the '90s maybe forty hours of radio drama, so I continued writing radio plays in the early 2000s – *This Old Man, The Battle of Kinsale 1601, Guests of The Nation, The Tailor and Ansty* – for RTÉ and *No. 1, Devonshire Street* was commissioned by BBC Radio4 and BBC World Service. I then wrote five stage plays between 2000 and 2005: *Trial of Jesus, Glory Be To The Father, The Cure, When I Was God, After Luke*.

Between 2005 and 2009 I made five film documentaries, all inspired by life in my own neighbourhood. I guess you could say, the documentaries are an extension of my writing.

Then between 2009 and 2015 I began touring my stage plays abroad, I toured three of my plays and conducted maybe four subsequent reading tours to China. I have had six productions of my plays in New York, picking up awards for Best Actor, Best Director and Nominated for Best Playwright at the "New York Theatre Awards". I also had a few productions at home in Ireland. In the meantime, I was commissioned to write *The Immortal Deed of Michael O'Leary*, published in November 2015 to coincide with the centenary of World War I. In the context of everything I've produced or written - *The Immortal Deed of Michael O'Leary* is by far the most personal and detailed self-exploration. I had been researching the story of Michael O'Leary, a man from my father's home village, Inchigeela since I was a teenager. A man who has been totally lost to history due to an unfortunate twist of fate. It's a fascinating story.

Meanwhile, all the time since 1999, I have been writing my current book in progress, *Glory Be To The Father* which included *Begotten Not Made* as a sub-strand narrative. Along the way I busied myself doing other bits and pieces, writing radio plays, reading tours and taking on roles such as Writer-in-Residence at UCC. That brings me exactly to where I am right now: just about to pull together and finish my next novel, *Glory Be To the Father*.

*CM: Can you tell me about your fascinating experience as Writer-in-Residence at UCC?*

CC: My appointment as Writer-in-Residence at UCC came just at a right time. The previous 10 years had been extremely busy. In 2005 my *Second City Trilogy* of plays premiered and I subsequently set up Irishtown Press Ltd with a view to touring and publishing the scripts. Then

between 2005 and 2010, I started making my film documentaries, basically one every year for five years, which is a fairly hectic schedule. My production company, Irishtown Productions Ltd, then started touring my plays. I have been in China on 5 or 6 occasions and had maybe 6 productions in New York and two productions in Ireland. That decade was extremely fullon, I was fortunate to have been invited to present a number of reading tours in Europe, the USA and China. It was such great fun. Great fun.

So in 2016, when I was appointed Writer-in-Residence at UCC, the notion of receiving a regular stipend was very appealing. I decided I would take the year off to engage with the job, the process and the interaction. Initially, I was concerned that I might not rise to the challenge, as I had not attended UCC. I had very seldom ventured inside the gates of UCC. Interestingly enough, as someone who prides myself in being very engaged with the city, UCC was a strand of Cork life I knew nothing about.

But from the first day I arrived into UCC, I knew I had landed on my feet. I had an absolute ball. It was so enjoyable. Every aspect of my time there was just brilliant. I had forgotten the luxury and the privilege of having work colleagues. My role was twofold. Firstly, I was to set up and teach a module for MA students, and secondly, I was to engage with the student body in general.

My first week in UCC, I put the word out that I'd like to address all the students, and so the various profs and tutors invited me along. I introduced myself and let the students know that I would like to be involved in a workshop, and so it began. It was just so much fun. From day one, I insisted that we were all writers, I wasn't a teacher, truthfully, I had more learning to do than the students. Our room was an open forum at all times, and we talked a lot about everything and anything and nothing at all, most of all we laughed a lot. It was magical, my God, I learned so much. I guess I just wanted to soak up the whole essence of Campus life, so I engaged with students from the various societies and departments across campus, German, Italian, History, Music, Theatre, Digital Humanities etc. I had an absolute ball.

You'll laugh, but true to form, I regularly brought my students for walks around the town instead of classroom work, it was great just to wander around, everyone throwing in their two-ha'pence worth, talking about details of architecture, street features, shopkeepers, history, geography, myths, stories, folklore and a whole host of characters we'd meet on our travels round the town. I guess my primary input was to convince them to put away their phones, and leave Professor Google up in UCC. It was all about hazarding a guess. The answer was never that important and certainly the correct answer wasn't that important, the magic was to be found in the conversation, the human engagement, the quest of seeking the answer. My line was: "I'd rather have a conversation with someone who had a question mark, rather than an exclamation mark in their speech bubble". They were an extremely bright and engaged group, and I was so encouraged at the end of that year, content in the realisation that our future is in very safe hands. A number of that particular group of students are now graduated and have gone on to become writers. A few of them have picked up awards, such a brilliant endorsement of what we were at. I also managed to publish an anthology with my students, *Cornerstone*. It was really a very special time for me. And that time with the students kicked off a need in me to write prose again. And so it was during my time as Writer-in-Residence that I finally began putting *Begotten Not Made* together.

Even though that was 4 years ago, I'm still in contact with the students, staff and faculty, and I am delighted that I'm still invited to the Christmas gathering. I think the English Department were happy with my time as Writer-in-Residence, and I was so honoured when they invited me to maintain contact with the department by appointing me as Adjunct Professor

of Creative Writing. My year at UCC was so memorable. I made great friends among the department, the staff and the students. I really don't have an ambition to be a teacher, it is a huge responsibility, and I don't think I'd ever be able to take on such a serious responsibility over a protracted period of time. I guess it's like the difference between being a parent or a fun uncle/aunt. I'm happiest to be in the wings, and if every now and again I can help with a little levity and encouragement that is perfect. Every now and then, once or twice a term, the English Department invites me to present a talk to the students, and now and again students working on a specific project call to my house, and that's perfect.

*CM: So your time in UCC as Writer-in-Residence gave you the time to finally finish* Begotten Not Made.

CC: Yes, I was given time by the very fact that I had a regular income. But most of all I was given the inspiration and the encouragement by the students. It was a highly charged and creative environment.

*CM: Where did you get the idea of Jesus son of Herod?*

CC: The theory of Herod being the father of Jesus seems very credible if not blatantly obvious from the four Gospels of the New Testament as they are presented to us by the four evangelists. It's all in the interpretation. Despite the constant recurring mantra that Jesus is the Son of God/Son of Man, the Herod narrative seems fairly clear. *Begotten Not Made* totally demystifies any ambiguity and makes a very strong case for the notion that Herod was Jesus' father.

That aside, there are many theories regarding the paternity of Jesus, the most popular obviously attaches him to a deity or a God, while other theories are more secular, including the Roman soldier Tiberius Julius Abdela Panthera[5], who was supposed to have had an affair with Mary, as the Greek Philosopher Celsus reports, and of course the finger of suspicion always points to Joseph himself as the father. Obviously, I have my own theories regarding the paternity of Jesus, but the detail of who the father was or wasn't is unimportant. What matters is that a young Christian Brother became so consumed by his faith, that his obsession with "belief" effectively destroyed his vocation and ultimately his life.

*CM: But is* Begotten Not Made *a story centred on faith and hypocrisy in monasteries and convents in Cork?*

CC: Monastic life in this novel is simply presented as another aspect of life. Life and relationships within a monastic setting is no more than any other slice of life, with its internal jealousy, greed, power struggles, ambitions, loves and heartbreaks. The Christian belief is just the backdrop from which a religious community operates. I guess the real thesis of *Begotten Not Made* is: if we scratch the surface of any fundamental belief system of any community, religious or secular organisation, then we may find that the very basic cornerstone belief is not as solid as it appears to be. Maybe the survival of such a community depends on the core

[5] "In the II century, Celsus a Greek philosopher declared that Jesus' father was Panthera a Roman soldier. But Origen who considered he was referring a fake story replied: "Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where "the mother of Jesus' is described as having been "turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera" (Origen 1980, 3).

belief remaining intact, unchallenged, entrenched and in the realm of the unproven. Belief only works if people can be convinced that such a belief is a special magical mystery of life and remains beyond question.

*CM: How did you develop the idea of belief throughout the novel?*

CC: Attempting to reveal the true fundamentals of any organisation or social communal gathering can reveal more complicating questions than definitive answers. In short, the whole book is about belief – the "grand" Herod story is more or less a smoke screen from which I present and explore a plethora of other "belief stories" within the narrative. A measure of good fiction is the ability to stretch the limits of plausibility to the limits of credibility. The core of this novel is effectively about two extremely unlikely unrequited love stories that develop within enclosed religious settings – the lifelong love affairs between Brother Scully and Sister Claire – and the apparent love that is shared by Sister Francesca and Mossie the Gardener.

By including a number of incredible stories in the narrative it makes the surreal love stories at the core more acceptable. By questioning the fundamental belief of Christianity, Jesus the son of God in heaven, born of a virgin, crucified and raised from the dead, this in some way, makes all the other fairy tales in the narrative, heroic pigeons, flashing lights, saintly apparitions, miraculous cures etc., seem more plausible.

In the context of *Begotten Not Made,* by holding the big belief – the paternity of Jesus – up to scrutiny it allowed me to tell what I believe to be the real story of the book, a very magical fairy tale of two unrequited love stories of four individuals trapped in religious life. Two love stories trapped by belief. I am aware of many clerics, male and female, who lived this life of self-denial because of their commitment to a religious belief and a vocation to what ostensibly could be described as the greatest fairy tale ever told. So, the Herod story is really not that important as a narrative, it is a strong hook. It is a hook that has attracted interest among readers.

*CM: Beyond the "belief stories" explored in the narrative, did you wish to highlight the process of secularization in monasteries and convents in Cork?*

CC: Yes. But not so much to highlight it, I am more interested in identifying this huge cultural shift that happened in my lifetime. The last time you were in Cork we went to the Nano Nagle Centre, housed in the renovated eighteenth-century South Presentation Convent. Well, Nano Nagle is currently in the process of being conferred to sainthood, meanwhile the convent she set up is in the process of being secularized. This is basically the backbone of one of the primary narratives in *Begotten Not Made*, the beatification of Sister Francesca of the Birds at a time when St. Joseph's convent is in decline.

When I was writing *Begotten Not Made* back in 1999, I could not have envisioned such a thing would really happen in the South Presentation Convent. A short twenty years ago, it would have been unheard of, that such a prestigious Catholic Convent would be repurposed as a public space, rebranded as an arts centre/café, public gardens, even the nuns' chapel is now a concert venue. Up until recently, this community of religious Sisters lived behind large stone walls, but now the walls are removed. It has become a visitors' centre, a place where tourists go for a coffee and are lounging around, taking the sun in what used to be the nuns' private garden. The nuns are more or less all gone now from the South Presentation Convent. In *Begotten Not Made*, Sister Francesca has a vision of these changes ahead, she is somewhat cynical about it – but she is also a realist, the convent is in decline and needs must (see Creedon 2018, 299).

The Ireland I grew up in was extremely Catholic, like Italy, the Mass was presented in Latin, reading the Bible was not encouraged. It was this ownership of the "belief" by a men's organisation that gave these men of the Church so much power, and of course by the time I was growing up in the early '70s all that was about to change dramatically. The world I knew and my parents knew had changed, and changed forever.

*CM: Was Brother Scully's hysterical laughter a way to show his/your disillusion with the triviality of certain miracles which served Christianity to attract "primitive minds", as you say in* Begotten Not Made*?*

CC: No. His hysterical laughter is far less contrived than a response to the incredulity of the miracles. Basically, Brother Scully is an emotional mess. His manic laughter is a symptom of his mental instability, partly due to the effects of the cocktail of heavy medication and treatments he has received over the previous 50 years. Brother Scully's incessant giggling and laughter and repetition of words is no more than a symptom of his psychiatric condition. And ever since he was instructed by Deputy Head Brother (see Creedon 2018, 166) that the monastery was no place for expressions of emotion, insisting that "denial" is the greatest evolutionary development of the human race, Brother Scully has sublimated all his emotions into expressions of laughter. He has learned that laughter is more socially acceptable than crying, so all his emotions are expressed through laughter. Brother Scully's laughter is not seditious. Brother Scully's laughter is psychologically deep-rooted, it is in fact an expression of his isolation, his loneliness and emotional disconnect.

*CM: While rereading it I felt that the text moves through different blocks that could be seen as different "short stories". The first one about Brother Scully's "doubts" about Christian dogmas with the theory of Jesus, son of Herod, the second about the so-called miracles told by the other narrator Sister Claire, stories-within-stories …*

CC: Oh yes, that? Well, here's the thing, that device is purely technical. If I were to write and present the theory of the paternity of Jesus in one block it would read like an academic thesis. It would be extremely information-dense with facts and chronological dates. It would not read like fiction. It would require the full backstory and exposition of secondary biblical characters, John The Baptist, Elizabeth, Zacharias and the various members of the Herod Royal family, also an analysis of the political situation that was unfolding in Jerusalem at that time, including the workings of Roman rule and methods of maintaining law and order in Judea.

I decided it would be better to present the story three times. By doing this, the reader becomes complicit in the conspiracy that is unfolding in Brother Scully's mind. The first telling is a very simplistic naive exploration by Brother Scully while in the seminary, when he questions the Theology Master, Brother Ambrose, about details of scriptures and in the process he exposes some minor anomalies in the biblical story. In doing this I establish the main players of the story that is about to unfold in the minds of the readers and I put forward the idea that there are narrative flaws in the New Testament.

Once the reader is familiar with the main characters, the goodies and the baddies established, the story is told a second time. This time Brother Scully expands his theory to Sister Claire. This second retelling presents the Bible story as a real flesh and blood family, the saga unfolds like a soap opera.

The third bite of the cherry is at the end when Brother Scully has a long and intense late-night discussion with Brother Ambrose. This intense scrutiny of the theory informs the reader that there is, in fact, a good solid scriptural basis behind the theory of Jesus' paternity.

It would not have been possible to present this intense debate without having first informed the reader of the historical context and background, and the personalities, the frailties and fallibilities of the key characters.

*CM: And you introduce stories within the stories, is this the device you use to lighten the narration? Was the theory of Jesus' paternity meant to be structurally framed by the different narrative blocks of stories within stories?*

CC: This is a book of stories. Multiple interlocking stories untangle inside one man's tormented mind over one day. That's *Begotten Not Made*. The basis of all good storytelling is to convince your audience to suspend disbelief. I use the various fairy tales within the narrative, heroic pigeons, love stories, saintly apparitions, miraculous cures etc. to give space to the reader, to help the reader become comfortable with the challenges of the biblical and theological narrative. And conversely, I use the biblical exploration as a grounding counterbalance to the fairy-tale aspect of the stories.

And yes, I did actively structure the biblical theory in an episodic way to help familiarize the reader with the main characters. There's also a certain amount of repetition in each retelling. This gives the reader ownership of the theory rather than me presenting the readers with a long list of facts. It was important for me that the reader would engage with Jesus' extended family as a real-life family with its own internal conflicts, struggles and complications in a narrative storyline rather than present it as an academic theological theory.

*CM: Your books and plays regularly feature the characters going for a walk around the city of Cork. Do Pluto's walks in* Passion Play *cover a similar route in* The Cure *and in* Begotten Not Made*?*

CC: (*Laughing here*) You'll find I do bring my characters on walks around the town all the time, or maybe it's the case that my characters bring me on walks around the town. Going for a walk around town is one of my own personal, favourite past times. To tell you the truth, I enjoy bringing my characters and my readers for a walk. It gets me away from my desk without leaving my desk.

My walks usually take a very specific route in my head, but the details on the page never exactly fit any map. In *The Cure* there are two walks. One walk is very specific and unchanging. It is the walk taken by the protagonist's father and grandfather so many times that he can mentally namecheck every scent and industry, and shop front from the grotto in Blackpool all the way to my street, including namechecking the shop in which I grew up on Devonshire Street. This walk is revisited four times in the text and it can appear like a druidic chant, getting faster and faster and less descriptive as we get closer to the end of his journey: Patrick's Bridge, the gateway to the downtown. Meanwhile there is also a second walk in *The Cure*, the protagonist in real time is also walking through the streets of Cork in search of an early morning pub. It's Christmas time, and on his journey he meets his past. These encounters with his past force him to re-examine the present.

Meanwhile, the walks in *Passion Play* are of a different nature. The first one begins outside the Donkey's Ears pub when Pluto meets the young Mags and he takes the drug Ecstasy for the first time. It is fuelled by the drug which has the effect of spiraling energy and Pluto

gets extremely talkative and it ends in an explosion of sex with Mags. This walk begins on the Southside by City Hall and follows the river circumnavigating the "old town" and eventually he finds himself in the heart of the Northside at Shandon steeple. Along the journey, some of the episodes he talks about are tinged with autobiographical and historical detail. You might find it interesting, that Pluto, though wired on drugs when they get to Dalton's Avenue on the Coal Quay, makes the comment that there should be a bridge built across the river there. The book was published in 1999, and many years later Cork City Council actually built a bridge at that very spot on the river.

Pluto's second walk is fueled by LSD. At this point in the novel he is dead and his soul heads off in a chaotic multi-episodic, frantic walk that becomes distracted in a trippy sort of way. Due to the LSD influence he gets sidetracked by a pigeon in the river, then there's the toilet bowel episode, then the DVD to be returned, then he meets Tony Tabs. It's a very trippy, rolling snowball of a journey – obviously the energy is driven by the LSD, but what you might find interesting is that both walks in *Passion Play* end up bringing him to the same place, in the Shandon Area, *Under the Goldie Fish*.

In the first walk he ends up having mad, wild passionate sex with Mags in Shandon graveyard. In the second walk he's back in the Shandon area for his son Paulo's Holy Communion. Incidentally, Paulo was conceived during a sex session in Shandon graveyard in the previous walk, his Ecstasy-fueled first walk with Mags.

Ultimately, he travels through time and space to Sherkin Island, and finds himself in Bell's Field on top of Patrick's Hill, spellbound looking at the grand vista of the Northside. It dawns on him that the Northside, "the city of pain", is actually his vision of heaven.

There are a number of walks in *Begotten Not Made*. When Brother Scully goes for a walk on the beam of light across the sky from Monastery to Convent, this is obviously a virtual walk where the young Brother's demented mind presents him with an overview, a grand vista of the world he left behind, the world outside the monastery wall. The people mentioned are real people, familiar on the Northside of Cork City: Michael Crane and Gerry Dalton both are pigeon fanciers.

Another walk in *Begotten Not Made,* is when the word filters out of the Convent that Sister Francesca cured a pigeon, that word is carried in a very specific journey. Beginning in the heart of the Northside in the pubs of Shandon Street, down to the North Gate Bridge, along the North Main Street and South Main Street. Then filtering out across the island of downtown Cork, and over the South Gate Bridge up into the heart of the Southside and into the snug of Tom Barry's Pub. Basically the story of the miracle goes from shop counter to shop counter, from pub to pub and travels across the city.

Bringing my characters on a walk is very much part of establishing the world of the book, or the play, in my head. And though audiences and readers might recognise the walks, and some might even say they have walked those walks, the fact of the matter is that the walks are not precise topographical maps. So the walks are mental and emotional walks. For example, there is no Church on French Church Street, the church is on the next lane, Carey's Lane. In *The Cure*, Brother Keenan is seen outside Murray's Gun shop window, but it is impossible to see Murray's Gun Shop window from that location. I insert these anomalies into the narrative because I don't want to be trapped by the exact detail of a map. At the end of the day, it is a world of make belief which offers a mirror to the reality.

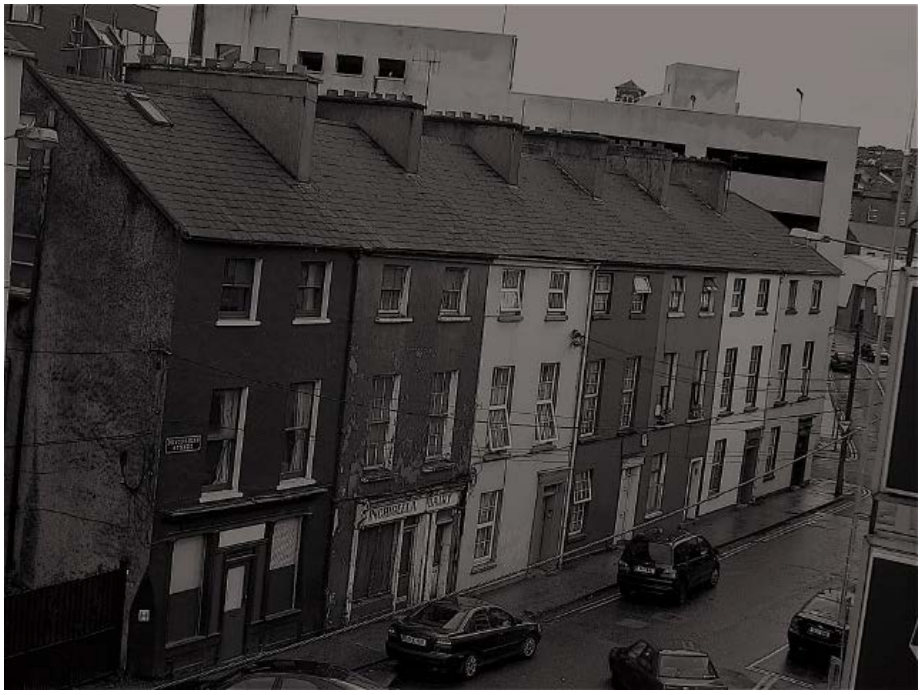

Figure 3 – *Devonshire Street*. Photo by Conci Mazzullo

*CM: I've been rereading Brother Scully's confession and it sounds like the Inquisition Trial of people already found terribly guilty, who had to admit that Satan misguided them!*

CC: Well, first of all it wasn't a confession as an official Catholic rite. It was a trial conducted by Deputy Head Brother Lynch and Bossman. Christian Brothers don't have the authority to hear confession, only priests are qualified to hear Confession. And that explains why, later that night when Bossman slept soundly he had a very vivid and surreal dream about the Bishop coming to him to tell his confession.

The whole notion of Satan is introduced by the Head Brother seeking cheap thrills. He wanted to hear about the young nun's body and the sexual details of the act that occurred between the young Brother Scully and the young nun, so he introduced the notion of confession and Satan and the temptation of Adam by Eve to legitimize his probing questions about the sexual act. There is a sense in the text, that Bossman becomes more and more sexually aroused by the details, and leading to sexual orgasm. The scene where he sits in the darkness and lights a cigarette in the calmness is very much a postcoital scene.

*CM: Why was Confession so intimidating in the Christian Brothers' when you generally know the penance was three Hail Mary's?*

CC: Confession! Don't start me on Confession! The basis of Confession is that we are all guilty of something. Even before birth we are guilty of Original Sin, save me please! Personally, Confession is one of my biggest issues with the Catholic Religion. Particularly, in a place such

as Cork up until the 1970s. Basically, when I was a child Cork was more or less 100% Catholic. And in general we were an extremely poor society.

In retrospect, I find the fact that every man, woman and child went to their local parish church to tell another man, albeit a "man of God', exactly what they had done "wrong' is a total abuse of power. The KGB, the Stasi or Maoist China did not have such a level of information gathering from the general population that the Catholic Church had.

The secrecy of the confessional also creates the perfect "safe' environment for devout individuals to reveal information about their neighbours, employers, their families, etc. Basically, the Church through the system of Confession gained insight into every single household right across the community. At its most insidious, should someone in Cork refer to a wrongdoing by someone in the far side of the country, the details could be easily cross-referenced via parish priests, it's a bizarre idea but the potential of such cross-referencing put the Church in an incredibly powerful position. It also elevates the priests, these pampered men, to a position of almost demi-god in the community. Personally, I find it infuriating when I think of my mother's generation, those saintly, abstemious, morally devout women of her time, going on their knees, with their heads covered, in a darkened confession box to confess their "sins' to some fucking eejit, pardon my English. Even the notion of men entering a church bareheaded, while bishops and cardinals are parading around the alter wearing the most outrageous head gear is so outrageous, elitist and fundamentally un-Christian.

I remember when I was a kid, it crossed my mind that it didn't matter if you committed murder or robbed a penny lollypop, the penance would always be the same: Three Hail Marys. So, even back then I felt the whole idea of repenting and absolution of sins was just a smoke screen for information gathering. If the local priests know who is robbing from their bosses, or who is having an extra-marital affair, or involved in other more "devious un-godly' practices such as homosexuality, or involved in illegal organisations etc., and this information can be gathered and cross-referenced through "Confession", that gives that organisation a frightening amount of power over the powerful and weakest individuals of society. Yes, I think Confession is so frighteningly insidious, particularly when you have kids as young as 7 years of age inside in a darkened confessional sharing their innermost thoughts and experiences with a strange man who claims to be in regular communication with the God of creation. Frightening! I agree with most of Jesus Christ's message, but I don't see Christianity in any of that.

*CM: Brother Scully's spontaneity and belief in the just Bossman's line of enquiry, not by chance Bossman, entrapped him inside a net of hypocritical behavior condemning him before even starting to listen to his Confession. As you say "Frighteningly insidious"! Did you have any personal experience which led you to refuse Confession and what you rightly thought the morally wrong listening to people's weak sides of their souls?*

CC: Confession was certainly the first of the sacraments I gave up. I'd say I was maybe 9 or 10 years of age. At a very young age we instinctively knew it was a load of nonsense. I remember as kids, at the end of our Confession we used to tag on one extra sin: "… and I told lies, Father".

By doing this we felt it sort of exonerated us from telling the truth to the priest in Confession. For example, you could make up a few innocent sins, such as "I didn't do my homework, I didn't bring the dog for a walk …" and leave out the more serious sins. And if at the end of your Confession you just say "... and I told lies, Father". In that way you were confessing that the Confession you had just told was a pack of lies.

I remember not having been to Confession for a number of years, for some reason, I found myself in a confession box with a priest at the far side of the grill. I would guess it was around

the time of my Confirmation. At the part when the priest invited me to say the Confiteor. I just couldn't remember the words of the prayer. It had been so long since my previous confession, for the life of me, I just couldn't remember the words of the prayer. All I could do was to repeat the opening words again and again, "Oh, my God ... Oh, my God ... Oh, my God ..." and I remember thinking this is ridiculous and farcical. Eventually the priest recited the prayer line for line and I repeated it back to him, and even at that young age I realized "this is just a load of nonsense". I do believe that was my last time actually going to Confession. As you know Frank O'Connor wrote a very famous short story, "My First Confession", actually set in my local parish church. Well maybe I should write a sequel: "My Last Confession" (*Laughing here*).

*CM: I think that in Italy, after the II Vatican Council, things started to be more lenient. We were much freer than in other countries where the Catholics had to prove their fidelity to the Catholic religion.*

CC: Absolutely, Vatican II was the beginning of the end, but I think Pope John had seen the writing on the wall and was trying to steer the church towards a modern age.

Certainly an Irish Catholic is not the same as a Roman Catholic. Devout Irish Catholics are still very connected to local pre-Christian deities. Irish Catholicism has been integral to the 800 years of struggle against the oppression of our English colonists. I don't mean Irish Catholic as a type of ritualistic practice but more as a cultural identification tag.

The line of demarcation was simple: the "native' Irish were Catholic and the English invaders/colonialists were "Anglican/Protestant' ever since Henry VIII, in the 1530's, and more particularly after the Desmond Wars of 1570's. This Catholic/Protestant divide always caused a certain amount of conflicting issues regarding our spiritual belief and our political aspirations. And certainly, Catholicism was the flag of the Irish rebel.

The 1798 Rebellion did complicate this theory as so many Protestants were the leaders of the United Irishmen. But for the most part, we did place the Catholic Church at the head and the centre of how "native' Irish culture expressed ourselves and defined ourselves. That is probably the main reason why Irish Catholicism became the state religion. Catholicism was handed the responsibility for Irish morality, education, and health since the 1921 War of Independence. It also explains the culture that allowed many recent scandals, sexual scandals, mother and baby homes, the abuse of power in education, and so many other aspects of Irish life to happen.

In very simplistic terms, the arrival of television gave the ordinary people of Ireland a world view, hence the Eurovision Song Contest being pivotal to the liberation of Brother Scully. You might find it interesting that in *Begotten Not Made*, the arch-conservative Deputy Head Brother Lynch's, stark warning that television would be the end of Catholic control in Ireland (see Creedon 2018, 58). Television, as he saw it, the great educator of the masses, was in fact the Antichrist.

*CM: In Italy we were very lucky, because my generation attended higher secondary school after 1968; this meant we were much freer than the previous generation which had gone through World War II. Young people radically contested political, social, cultural, economic structures, refused capitalism through the students' movement in Europe and USA and somehow, then, culturally influenced society.*

CC: Well, very similarly Ireland underwent dramatic change from late 1960's through the 1970's, and that's the backbone of *Begotten Not Made*. Deputy Head Brother Lynch in one of his rants gives out about students rioting all across Europe in 1968 (see Creedon 2018, 58).

*CM: What about Brother Ambrose, who was definitely gay, why did he commit suicide? While talking to Brother Scully he finally emerged as a freethinking man who knew things as they were and appeared easy-going and critical of the Brothers' system.*

CC: Brother Ambrose explains why he took his own life. Basically, he had long come to terms with the hypocrisy of the Church, he may even have lost his faith in the existence of a God, but was still happy to function within the church. But it was the realization that the Christian God was a God of conditional love that pushed him over the edge. He realized God's love came with conditions, so he had come to the conclusion that religious life was no longer an option for him. I'm not even sure if Ambrose would have classified himself as "gay", he knew he was clearly attracted to young males, but may not have fully understood that this was the "dreaded sin of homosexuality'. His sexuality was a complication for him. I believe he struggled with his feelings and may not have fully understood them. Of course there is a massive contradiction and irony in Brother Ambrose, he is a Theologian, and yet his natural instinct is to refute the sexual rules imposed by Church Theology. And, as a Theology Master his position was to encourage younger Brothers when they were experiencing conflicts of faith, meanwhile his obvious sexual orientation meant he was continually in conflict with his own faith. There is also something interesting in that, his role in the Monastery, places him in charge of the young, idealistic, newly arrived seminarians. Was this a role he manufactured for himself?

In 50's Ireland, sex was considered as a male/female interaction. We have as a saying "There was no sex in Ireland before *The Late Late*". *The Late Late Show* was a talk show that started in the 1960's and aired relatively innocent topics by today's standards, but back then they shocked the nation.

So, Ambrose realized he had devoted his life to a God of conditional love, a God who did not accept people like him. In the course of his discussion with Brother Scully he caught a glimpse of how farcical his own belief system had been and he realized that maybe he had devoted his life to something he no longer believed in. If Brother Ambrose was a younger man he would have left the Monastery, but at this stage in his life he had nowhere to go. His family farm was gone to his older brother. His sister was living with his brother and that wasn't working out very well. So he was trapped, nowhere to go, and it most likely had been like that for decades. His only way out was to take his own life rather than live a life of hypocrisy.

It's important to remember that Ambrose had recently been accused of having sexual late night encounters with the young seminarian Brother Crowley, so realistically, his secret life within the monastery was over, his suicide may have had more to do with that and very little to do with his conversation with Brother Scully.

*CM: So how were you inspired for Brother Scully's love for the novice? Did you know of brothers and sisters who took their life?*

CC: I don't know of any Brothers or Nuns who took their own life. But the reality is that back then suicide was a mortal sin, so a death by suicide would not be generally reported or talked about or admitted.

Regarding clerics falling in love and leaving the religious order, I knew many. I'm not sure which came first, the inspiration or the experience. A Christian Brother, who was in the school I went to, left the monastery and married a nun. A number of years ago, long after I had written the bulk of this book, I asked if I could meet with him, not so much to find out about leaving the Monastery, but to learn details of day-to-day life as it unfolded inside a monastery.

For example, I asked him how they would address the Head Brother, would they call him Head Brother? and he laughed and said: "No, we used to call him the Bossman". In a way, such a simple answer was a breakthrough moment for me. It really opened my mind to the notion that religious orders were just a functioning community within the community.

Another was a young priest. I went to London with my father back in the early 1970s. We stayed in this young priest's flat, but it was a shock to me at the time when I realized that he was married to a nun. And there was a sense that we shouldn't talk about it when we returned to Ireland.

But there are many, many, many cases of young lads of my vintage who went off to join religious orders, many of whom quit and ended up getting married and having kids.

The big change of the 1970's was the ability to reject the church and its power.

*CM: I noticed that the so well-rounded characters inhabiting the pages of* Passion Play *are definitely related to the time you wrote the novel – '80-'90s –, whereas those of* Begotten Not Made *are connected with the '70's and develop through other 50 years. Did Brother Scully feel nostalgia of his past, of his unrequited love, his lost innocence? When he repetitively recites like a mantra "whereditallgowrongwhere …" what does it refer to?*

CC: *Passion Play* is very much set in its own present '80-'90s. But large pivotal extracts of *Passion Play* are also set in the '60s and '70s, when Pluto, Pinko, Tragic Ted, Fatfuka were kids growing up on McSwiney Street.

Similarly, Brother Scully is very much in the present, but just like Pluto in *Passion Play*, Brother Scully's past informs and haunts his present. It's a bit like Tir Na Nóg, when Oisín falls from his horse, he realizes he is old and his whole life has just passed him by. It's like an awakening. Suddenly, the present for Brother Scully becomes very real. He realises that he is surrounded by the elderly and infirm, even the eternally youthful Brother O'Connell is now very elderly and requires a walking frame and his old nemesis, Deputy Head Brother Lynch is struck immobile because of a stroke. The youthful energy and zest in the monastery is all gone, and that very realization is probably one of the reasons that motivates the elderly Brother Scully to do something now. Hence his mantra: "*whereditallgowrongwhere …*". He is asking himself: how did I end up where I ended up, where did all the years go?

I don't really think his view of the past is nostalgic. It's the exact opposite. His view of his past is oppressive, painful, devoid of fun, devoid of free will. One particular night of his tragic past is lodged in his mind. He realises, that if he had made the correct decision that night of Dana's Eurovision win, all those years ago, his life would have been so different. So, realistically, there is very little space for nostalgia in his heart. His past is a past of total regret, no rose-tinted glasses at all.

*CM: The only outstanding female role is that of the novice Sister Claire who determines a seismic quake in Brother Scully's life, why is she pivotal?*

CC: Yes, sister Claire is the important female character and Brother Scully is the important male. It is a two-person show, if you don't count the pigeon. All the other characters really only have walk-on parts. I wanted to keep the bulk of the book in Brother Scully's head. So the narrative is confined to an internal journey. If the novel engaged too much with other events and characters around the Monastery, the power and intensity of the isolation of his mind would be lost.

Brother Scully's life from childhood was fast-tracked to join religious orders. I believe this was the case with most clerics of that time. And maybe Brother Scully's life/career as a religious

Brother would have been a great success, had everything gone according to plan. Who knows, he may have even gone on to be the head of the monastery. It was even suggested while in the seminary, that he might go on be the youngest Superior General of the Order. He certainly had the energy, the drive, the enthusiasm, and all was going to plan.

But for one minor complication. On the special night Dana won the Eurovision he was presented with a new narrative for his life, the very notion of physical love with Sister Claire, and suddenly his whole life plan became derailed. For the first time he realised that up to this point in his life he had expressed very little free will. But if he was to follow his free will and desires, and run away with Sister Claire, it would have been totally counterproductive to how he had lived his life. Of course Sister Claire vanishes that night and we don't see her again until 50 years later, at which point she is an elderly nun.

But there is another second female character in the narrative. The reader is also presented with the lifelong narrative of Sister Francesca. Hers is a very complicated love story with Mossie the Gardener, which is ultimately resolved at the very moment when death did them part.

Incidentally, when I chose the character names for Sister Francesca and Sister Claire, they were to be two sides of the same coin, I had St. Francis of Assisi and St. Claire in mind.

Figure 4 – *Begotten*. Courtesy of Cónal Creedon

*CM: Yes I had thought so when juxtaposing the names you chose for the two nuns. But Sister Claire is finally contributing to the beatification of Sister Francesca, thus carrying out the convent's strategies and beliefs.*

CC: You ask about Sister Claire taking on the role of a nun and contriving to create the sainthood of Sister Francesca. Well, that is realistically often the case with individuals who come to a crisis of faith.

Sister Claire did falter when she met Brother Scully that night. She appeared much more overt about expressing her sexuality than Brother Scully, but yet she hesitated because she required him to express commitment. Realistically, it would have been a huge leap of faith for a Brother or a nun to leave religious orders, so that notion of two going together would make a lot of sense. You must remember these two young people were qualified teachers, but most schools in the country were Catholic run, and of course their families would most probably reject them.

But Sister Claire's behaviour in the kitchen that night implies that she is more mature mentally and emotionally secure than Brother Scully, but in the absence of Brother Scully's commitment, she came to terms with her crisis of faith and decided her life would be better within the convent. As often happens following a crisis of faith, she lost some of her naivety and innocence of a young novice, but maybe it is that loss of naivety that refocused her to go on to eventually become the Reverend Mother. It's obvious towards the end of the book that she is very cynical about the sainthood of Sister Francesca, but she decides to comply with the ambitions of the enthusiastic young bishop. It's a compromise, her life has been full of compromise, she fully understands the state of her depleted elderly community of Sisters, she is aware of the financial security her community requires for their old age.

*CM: Did you give importance to all the names chosen for your characters as I presume you chose Scully coming from Irish Ó Scolaidhe?*

CC: I picked Scully for many reasons. His name changed many times over many drafts, but I stuck with Scully, because it sounded like Skull and a sense of foreboding. Also the whole narrative happens within his skull. Well obviously, Scully would have implications of "Scoil', the Irish word for "school'. I selected the name of Brother O'Connell, after one of my personal favourite Christian Brothers called Brother O'Connell: He taught me in 6th class. Always very enthusiastic, always dashing around, always engaging and caring, and was in charge of the choir. While Brother Crowley is actually Fatfuka in *Passion Play*. In *Passion Play*, Fatfuka went to join the Christian Brothers and left under a cloud. You might remember he had a brief gay affair with Pinko before he married his wife and had children, and then of course he got cancer. Brother Crowley offers a glimpse into what had happened to Fatfuka while he was in the Brothers. It's implied in *Begotten Not Made* that Brother Crowley and Brother Ambrose may have had a brief relationship before Brother Crowley walked out of the Monastery. Christy, the child in *Begotten Not Made,* is the protagonist in my next book, *Glory Be To The Father*.

*CM*: *So we have got characters moving inside your macro text, interestingly, from* Passion Play *to* Begotten.

CC: … and further afield, some of them will move on into *Glory Be To The Father*. Yes, like Mossie the Gardener also turns up in my next book as a fairly pivotal character.

*CM: What about Ambrose?*

CC: Ambrose was a name I battled with, but ultimately went with it because St. Ambrose was a big doctrinal leader of the early church in Milan. Also, Ambrosia is a brand name for creamed rice, and creamed rice is considered soothing, often given to children. Ambrose's role in the monastery was to sooth anxiety and worry among the young seminarians.

*CM: Getting back to* Begotten Not Made, *I wonder, could Brother Scully see the Southside of Cork, i.e. the Nano Nagle Centre from his window?*

CC: I believe you might be getting two Presentation Convents confused. Nano Nagle is a former Presentation Convent located on the Southside of the city. North Presentation Convent is located on the Northside.

Brother Scully is in a Monastery on the Northside of the city. In real terms, he wouldn't be in a position to see a convent on the Southside of the city. But, having said that, it's best not to get bogged down on a the detail of topography. Brother Scully's world is not identified as Cork. Cork as a location is not mentioned anywhere in the text. So it would be very misleading to identify what he can or can't see in Cork city; even though the book is immersed in Cork, the topography is imaginary and intentionally not detailed enough to identify what he can or can't see. Although, in my mind's eye, Brother Scully is on the Northside and the Monastery would be the North Monastery, and Sister Claire's convent would be the North Presentation Convent which is adjacent to the North Monastery, but I don't reference them by name. Yet many of the references are very much Northside: Murphy's Brewery, the stacks of houses of Goldsmiths, Audley Place, Patrick's Hill, Shandon, and of course the pigeon fanciers named in the book. Michael Crane and Dalton are totally real Northside Cork people. Whereas the Nano Nagle Centre is very much on the Southside of the city, but it is fascinating that the recent repurposing and proposal of Sainthood for Nano Nagle (in real life) is a mirror of what is happening in the Convent in *Begotten Not Made*.

*CM: But what was the Nano Nagle area like in the '50s? Always the Northside against the Southside*? *Would it be different from the Northside Christian Brothers? I mean less well off ? Was it the same in the 1950s-1970s*?

CC: Cork City Northside and Southside are carbon copy images of each other. In the past, the old walled city of Cork was located on an island in the middle of the river Lee. The English colonists restricted indigenous native Irish access to the old city of Cork. This old city is still identifiable to Cork people, it is the street between the North Gate Bridge and the South Gate Bridge. The Gate Bridges were in place to keep the native Irish out. Over time, two separate communities of indigenous native Irish established either side of the river, separated by the old walled city. Effectively, you had two independent indigenous native communities established on either sides of the river, viewing each other from opposing hillsides, but with very little social contact or interaction. I believe this is the root of the palpable competition and rivalry that traditionally existed between the Northside and the Southside of Cork City.

So in effect, the Northside and the Southside are carbon copies of each other. Shandon steeple on the Northside reflects the tower on Tower Street over on the Southside; The North Cathedral reflects the South Cathedral; the North Monastery Christian Brothers reflects the South Monastery Christian Brothers; The Northside Presentation Convent reflect the Southside "Nano Nagle" Presentation Convent; The Northside Murphy's Brewery is reflected by the Southside Beamish Brewery; the Northside O'Connor's Funeral Home is reflected by the Southside Forde's Funeral Home. Even the streetscape, the hill of Shandon Street is reflected by the hill Barrack Street, and the respective off shoots of Blarney Street and Evergreen Street are almost identical. If you fold the map of Cork using Washington Street as the axis – which bisects the old city – well all those buildings and industries and streets on both sides of the river align almost perfectly. Yet both communities are separated and isolated by this "old town' in the centre of the river.

I believe it is this separation and yet similarity of two communities that has nurtured what was traditionally such an entrenched and sometimes bitter Northside/Southside rivalry in Cork, a rivalry probably not so evident in recent years.

That sense of the Northside and the Southside being carbon copies of each other is identified in *Begotten Not Made* (see Creedon 2018, 189-190). I describe the opposing hills of the Northside and the Southside as the "Butterfly wings" in the passage where Mossie the Gardner gossips about Sister Francesca's miracle in a pub on the Northside, and the news travels from one pub, "The Shandon Arms" in the Shandon area on the Northside to the corresponding pub, "Tom Barry's", in Greenmount area on the Southside:

It's a miracle, whispered Mossie the Gardener.
No, not a miracle, said Sister Francesca.
She was annoyed that Mossie would suggest that God the Father, creator of heaven and earth, would concern himself with something as trivial as curing a small bird's broken wing. She was adamant that no miracle had been procured, and insisted that the bird's recovery had been nothing more than a combination of care and the power of prayer.
Gardening can be thirsty work, and sometimes gardeners drink more than they should. That evening on his way home from work, young Mossie The Gardener dropped into the Shandon Arms for a pint or two. Word of the robin's miraculous recovery spread along the bar counter like ink on a blotter, through the snug, past the card players in the corner and out into the lanes around Dominick Street and Eason's Hill, then right across the city from the northern tip to the southern tip of the butterfly wings, from the laneways at the top of Shandon Street, all the way down into the bowels of the town, across two rivers, past mirror images of breweries, bridges and undertakers. Then shopkeepers and shawlies contrived to whisper and gossip from the North Gate Bridge, the full length of the North Main Street, and down along the South Main Street, all the way to the South Gate Bridge. The word travelled cheek by jowl up the steep climb of Barrack Street and swept into the maze of little houses that is Greenmount. Later that evening, when Johnny the Echo-boy poked his head into Tom Barry's snug and said,
Ladies? Did ye hear about the young nun up in the Northside?
The news was there before him. They turned from their jugs and spoke as one.
About the miracle, is it? (Creedon 2018, 68)

The irony of the piece is that the news traveled from North to South before the newspaper man arrived with the evening newspaper. Indicating that these two separate and isolated working class communities were totally in sync and almost subversively connected to each other.

Johnny the Echo-boy is a real person, he has sold *The Echo* newspaper on the streets for decades. I am fascinated by the idea of a street newspaper vendor carrying spoken news. It is fascinating and so very real.

*CM: As for the story-within-the-story, i.e. the miracle of St. Joseph, did you hear about anything similar, visions among nuns in your "extended neighborhood"?*

CC: There are/were so many whisperings of spiritual events in Ireland. "Our Lady appearing in Ireland' became a huge phenomenon back in the mid 1980s, 35 years ago. It all began in Cork, in a place called Ballinspittle, a village near Kinsale. Within weeks it started happening everywhere up and down the country, including in my father's home village of Inchigeela. This wasn't a case of one or two children seeing an apparition of the Blessed Virgin, this was a case of literally tens of thousands of people witnessing what became known as "moving statues'. Night after night people gathered to see the "moving statues'. I myself witnessed the moving statues, I didn't believe it was miraculous but I certainly witnessed the phenomenon. It was interesting

that it happened a few years after a similar phenomenon in Medjugorje. At that time there was a huge devotion to Medjugorje in Ireland. Back then foreign holidays or sun holidays were not the norm for Irish people, yet tens of thousands of faithful Irish flew to Medjugorje.

In the context of *Begotten Not Made*, it struck me that people could be so accepting of miraculous interventions by Our Lady, yet the notion of St. Joseph appearing from heaven sounds incredible, farcical if not outrageous.

*CM: Very interesting, indeed. St. Joseph appearing to the nun is outlandish.*

CC: I mean it was outrageous in the context of the characters in the book who had devoted their lives to beliefs including, rising from the dead, walking on water, virgin births, miraculous cures, apparitions of saints, devils transforming into snakes, yet in the context of the book the young Brother Scully's faith will only stretch so far, and the notion of St. Joseph appearing to a dying nun was just a belief too far. "Really, Who ever heard of St. Joseph ever appearing to anyone?!" (Creedon 2018, 105).

*CM: Ok. I've been rereading the passages linking Brother Scully with Ambrose. And this is where Herod's theory is resumed again. I found the theological debate here much more vibrant and liberating I felt the two were discussing on the same level, on a friendly level, despite their different opinions. It was therefore really frustrating to realise that Ambrose had already decided to take his life.*

CC: Well I don't know. As I'm only reading the book too. But I don't think Ambrose had decided to take his own life until after his talk with Brother Scully in the library. I believe he went to the library to talk sense into the young Brother Scully, but as the discussion deepened late into the night it was Ambrose who felt the need to rethink his own beliefs and his own life choices. And, at the end of it all, having lived his life in denial of being gay and in denial of his vocation, it obviously became apparent to him that he had to leave monastic life - and he chose to hang himself.

And yes, I do think Brother Ambrose and Brother Scully totally enjoyed the heated discussion, despite the seriousness of it. It was a debate that had been on the cards since Brother Scully was in the seminary, but it took a number of years before he would be informed enough to challenge the Master of Theology. In boxing parlance, it was a Title Fight and Scully took the Title on the thirteenth round.

*CM: I don't understand why the Brothers were considered inferior to priests, as it is hinted at by Brother Ambrose.*

CC: It's more than hinted. It's understood that Brothers and Nuns are at the bottom of the pyramid of power. Certainly here in Cork, there was a massive distinction between Christian Brothers and priests. The Christian Brothers were fundamentally established to educate underprivileged children. They were a strict religious order but had none of the social perks we associate with priests. Christian Brothers were more or less secular, they didn't have the authority to say mass or hear confession or administer other Catholic rites. They lived under a strict vow of communal poverty. Whereas, many priests lived comparatively privileged lives, with housekeepers, freedom to travel, access to cars etc. Christian Brothers were recruited from Christian Brother schools, so for the most part Christian Brothers traditionally came from impoverished working-class backgrounds.

As always, there is an exception to that rule. Following Catholic Emancipation of the 1830's and the Famine of the 1840s, Catholics gradually began to accumulate wealth. In-time wealthy Catholics wanted to send their children to "a better class' of Catholic school. In response to this demand the Christian Brothers opened a fee-paying school also called Christian Brothers, but it served a totally different social demographic.

But in general, Christian Brothers schools, such as the North Monastery, are located in large sprawling working-class areas, to serve the needs of underprivileged children. There are a number of social class indicators. For example, one identifying factor is: rugby-playing schools are considered to be well-to-do schools, whereas Gaelic games-playing school, such as hurling and Gaelic football would indicate a working-class school. The lines of demarcation are not as defined these days as they were in my day, but in general Christian Brothers schools were established to service the needs of the working class and under-privileged. And Christian Brothers did not have the same liberty or religious power as priests. Yet, in an odd way, the Christian Brothers as an organisation did have greater social and political power than any individual priest, probably due to the fact that many Christian Brothers students went on to hold high-powered positions in the Civil Service and politics, and of course right across the country the Order of Christian Brothers were a substantial voting bloc, so politicians would attempt to keep them on-side.

I went to the North Monastery Christian Brothers and I guess, in my mind's eye, the topography of *Begotten Not Made* suggests that Brother Scully was in the North Monastery and Sister Claire was in the adjacent North Presentation Convent. You know the North Monastery, Conci.

*CM: Yes, I know it very well. Very clear distinction.*

CC: I guess the process of this interview has made me stop and try to process my process and inspiration, and maybe that's what I find most difficult. It's a bit like attempting to figure out the mechanics of riding a bicycle while you are actually cycling a bike. It seems to me the fundamental drive behind my writing is self-exploration. I'm not really that interested in telling a story. The more I write the more forensic my exploration becomes.

I was born and continue to live *Under The Goldie Fish*, which incidentally is the title of my first radio drama. I chose the title *Under The Goldie Fish* because it identifies my inspiration as coming from the people who live beneath the golden fish weather vane on top of Shandon steeple. Shandon is an old tower, built in the 1700s, located in the heart of what is a working-class area of the city. Realistically, I have been writing about this neighbourhood, this warren of twisted streets with its publicans, shopkeepers, sweet factories, brass bands, characters, shawlies and culture and traditions ever since.

I do take a certain amount of pride in the fact that the title of my radio drama has now become the popular name for the Shandon area. Last year the Crawford National Gallery mounted an exhibition entitled, *Under The Goldie Fish*, an art exhibition of images and landscapes portraying many aspects of Cork down through the centuries, and if pride is a sin, well I'm damned to an eternity roaring in the flames of hell, because I was proud that my little radio drama of 25 years ago had made its mark in the collective memory.

Figure 5 – *Shandon with the Salmon*. Photo by Conci Mazzullo

As I mentioned earlier in this interview, my Gods have always been local and my heroes ate Chester Cake and supped milk at our shop counter. I am inspired by newspaper sellers, the fruit sellers, the shawlies, the pigeon fanciers, dog walkers, republicans, Christian Brothers, villains and vagabonds. This is the world I come from. It's the world I know, the world I understand, the world that inspires me.

My film documentaries cover the same ground, but the emphasis is on presenting real stories of real people accurately. My documentary-making informs my fiction. My documentary projects usually come out of endless researching of a person, an institution, an organization, an event in history which has specific implications for my neighbourhood. It gets to the point when my research becomes overwhelming and at that point I feel the need to record it. The need to record becomes almost obsessive. I encounter some fascinating individuals in the course of my research and I realise if I don't record these individuals they will be lost to history, lost to local memory. Michael Crane, the pigeon fancier (Creedon 2007a, *The Boys of Fair Hill*) is one of those individuals. Claire Ormond O'Driscoll (Creedon 2007b, *If It's Spiced Beef, It Must Be Christmas*) is another; John O'Shea (*The Boys of Fairhill*); Anna Grace (Creedon 2008, *Flynnie, the Man Who Walked Like Shakespeare*); Arthur Dowling (Creedon 2006, *Why The Guns Remained Silent in Rebel Cork*); Máire MacSwiney Brugha (Creedon 2005, *The Burning of Cork*). Truth be told, I feel that everyone who features in my documentaries are very special people and have a very original and individual story to tell. It is often the case that the people I interview become more important to me than the subject of the documentary.

Meanwhile, the subjects of the documentary are obviously my primary focus. The now legendary figure of Father O' Flynn and his work in the Shandon area may have slipped by unnoticed unless his story was recorded while his peers were still alive. Similarly, *The Burning of Cork* is now recognised as an event of national importance, and this year (pre-covid-19) there were many plans for centenary celebrations, including screenings in New York, Belfast, Dublin, Cork among other places. But back in 2005, when I was researching this story, the event was relatively unknown even here in Cork. It certainly was not given any real space in the history books. I remember coming across a one-line mention of the Burning of Cork in a school history book, but even in that the substantial details were incorrect, including the year it happened. There was little or no collective memory, information or record of this event, even City Hall had no mention of it on the City website. It is so satisfying, now fifteen years later, to encounter the many books and television programs on the subject, and the way the city has embraced it as a cornerstone moment on our history timeline.

This might sound like a stupid thing to say, but I only want to make documentaries about stories I want to tell. I am regularly invited to make documentaries, but invariably I turn them down. I guess I really have no interest in making television programmes, I just want to tell my stories.

If I can tell a story I want to tell, and if that elevates some aspect of my neighbourhood to national or international significance, well that's all the better. *The Boys of Fairhill* is my attempt at shedding a light on a very working-class past times from my part of town. You will notice even the dogs and the pigeons take on epic status. Michael Crane and his favourite pigeon, Josie Boy, is the inspiration for Dowcha Boy in *Begotten Not Made*.

I love when school kids call to the house to ask me about the documentaries for some school project or other, it does give me a great sense of accomplishment and validates the research.

*CM: You are basically a researcher inside the texture of life in Cork.*

CC: Researcher might be too strong a word. I am fascinated by people and the stories they tell. But then there's a huge part of me that just loves writing pure fiction for fiction's sake, I love that sense of trawling through my own brain and imagining bizarre situations and characters. But I do like to record aspects of life, and acknowledge the cultural significance of what is often sidelined and considered to be marginal by more mainstream culture.

Personally, I often find the less obvious is the most significant and the backbone of indigenous Irish culture. And I suppose what is most important for me, is that I am not just recounting nostalgia. It's important that the items I cover – the sports, the traditions, the shops, the key figures – are still operational and engaged. I really have no interest in nostalgia; my aim is to bring these hidden histories and hidden but living traditions to the attention of the general public. Father O' Flynn's Theatre Company is still producing Shakespeare, the shops are still trading, the bands are still playing, the harrier hounds are still running, the pigeons are still racing and the various Republican families still hold dear their Republican traditions.

*CM: You have reached a significant reason for your quest, both within the text and as a general idea.*

CC: Ah, well I wouldn't say it was a quest, it's just me trying to put some logical answer or explanation to your questions regarding why I do what I seem to instinctively do ...

Conci, you have probably seen *If It's Spiced Beef, It Must Be Christmas*, my documentary about the traders who live and work in my part of town. The people featured in it are friends and

neighbours of mine. I guess we were talking about inspiration … I'm not sure if inspiration is the right word, but those shops and shopkeepers are ingrained in my life as being ultra-important.

For example, Tony Linehan's Sweet Factory is referenced in the final passage of *Passion Play* as part of Pluto's vision of heaven, it's mentioned a few times in my play *The Cure*, a scene in my play *When I Was God* is set in Linehan's Sweet Factory where the character is talking to Danny Linehan, Tony's dad. Linehan's also features in my documentary about Father O' Flynn, *Flynnie, The Man Who Walked Like Shakespeare*, it is a major feature in my documentary, *If It's Spiced Beef, It Must Be Christmas*, and it crops up again and again in various place of my writing, it may even be mentioned in *Begotten Not Made*. As I say, I'm not sure if inspiration is the correct word, but I often think the Paddy Kavanagh's poem "Epic" totally captures where my head is. Though I am aware of globally significant individuals and events and history and culture, I am most inspired by the unfolding events and characters who inhabit my own personal, almost private local globe. Paddy Kavanagh refers to the lead up to World War II as "that Munich bother" and dismisses it, in the context of the importance of a local land dispute between two subsistence farmers, McCabe and Duffy. And I guess that's where I am: my world is my street, and I believe even if I could live for two lifetimes, I still won't have time to discover or understand every facet of my world.

"Epic"

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided; who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting "Damn your soul!"
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel –
"Here is the march along these iron stones"
That was the year of the Munich bother.
Which was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to
my mind.
He said: I made the Iliad from such A local row.
Gods make their own
importance. (Kavanagh 1960, 23)

*CM: Talking about the fairy tales Dowcha-Boy and the story of Mossie and Sister Francesca, why did you use so many funny comments, so much irony? I particularly liked when he "decided to walk with his wings folded behind his back chirping a tune like a Local French pigeon from Picardia" (Creedon 2018, 94).*

CC: The Dowcha Boy story appears relatively early in the text, and I really don't know why it's in the book at all, but it seemed like it would be the type of story that would interest a young seminarian from the Northside of Cork City. It also was a major leap away from the world of convent and monastic life and I thought it would be good to bring the readers out over the walls for a little jaunt. But most of all, it's in there because I really enjoyed writing it, it made me laugh. And believe it or not, I often laugh as I'm writing, it's as if I've heard something funny for the first time. And conversely I've been known to shed a tear. In, *Begotten not Made* I find the scene where

Mossie the Gardner insists on time alone with the dying love of his life to be very moving. I also find the moment when Brother Scully eventually meets Sister Claire after fifty years gets me every time.

Speaking of birds? We have a story here in Cork. As you know the River Lee splits in two so there's the North Channel and the South Channel, well there's a story of a man from the Northside who worked in Beamish's Brewery, located on the South Gate Bridge, on the South Channel. Every day after his lunch he walks the full length of the South Main Street and the full length of the North Main Street and shakes the crumbs from his sandwich wrapper into the river at the North Gate Bridge. He then walks all the back down the North Main Street the South Main Street to the South Gate Bridge and goes back to work. One day a workmate asked him why he didn't just empty his crumbs in over the South Gate Bridge like all his other workmates. And the Northsider replied that he'd rather feed the Northside swans than the Southside swans. The joke being that the man assumed that the wild animals like birds, swans, ducks, had the same sense of place and deep local loyalty as he had.

Likewise, I wanted to put that sense of cleverness in the pigeon or in the storytelling about the pigeon, so the pigeon pretended he was a local pigeon by whistling a song about a local area in France. It's just stressing that sense of place many humans have but in this case imposing it on a pigeon – a homing pigeon.

*CM: I was delighted when I discovered the front covers gallery of pictures of your books and in particular of* Begotten Not Made *from all over the world (*Books by Cónal Creedon*) and I immediately joined in. Now you've collected quite a few, it could become a publication of its own! It would easily capture your readers' attention! I'm delighted to be part of it!*

CC: The photographs of the book arriving in from around the world just took off spontaneously. People, many of whom I don't know personally and I will never meet in my life, saw the fun in it and just joined in.

It all began maybe a year and a half ago when a young couple, Morgan and Nora, took a photo in the back of a camper van of a sunset in New Zealand, and by chance *Passion Play* happened to be on the table in front of them. Then maybe two weeks later they were on a train in Siberia, and they took a photo of a few Russian beer cans on the table, but the book also happened to be in that photo.

I think when people saw those two photographs posted on social media, it somehow inspired people to start sending photos of my books from wherever they were in the world. Some really mad ones arrived. My favourite include the photo of Elvis Presley holding the book in Las Vegas, and another one is taken underwater in the Sea of Cortez, and there was a Cork City Council delegation to Colombia who took a photo of my book *The Immortal Deed Of Michael O' Leary* in Colombia and sent it back. People just seemed to get into the spirit of it. And then a guy on Twitter decided to gather as many of the images as possible from social media and put them on a Google Map. People are very kind. Another guy, who is an ambulance driver, decided to go through *Passion Play* and make a full music tracklist of all the songs as they appear in the text and put it up on Spotify ("*Passion Play* the book; Pluto's musical journey").

Really, I get such joy out of that sort of thing. When people do such kind things for no reason other than they just like what I'm doing. I feel the same about you, Fiorenzo and Piera who just decided to pick up my little bookeen and give it all the time you give it. I'm so appreciative of people's support and encouragement. Sometimes I'm walking down town and a taxi driver rolls down the window and shouts out something like: "Dowcha, Cónal boy! One of our own!". And that's all it takes to keep me on track. I mean who else in this world gets that sort of personalized encouragement. It's a very privileged place to be.

*CM: Is there a similar structure in* Passion Play *and* Begotten not Made*?*

CC: In one way the two books are totally different. *Passion Play* is chaotically episodic, while *Begotten Not Made* is story-based and extremely linear. But now that I'm forced to think about it, I realize the two books are incredibly similar. To begin with, the two books take place over one full day. And the day is the eve of a very important celebration in the Christian calendar, the death and birth of Jesus Christ respectively.

The two main protagonists spend that full day confined to a room, the room in both books is cell-like, both characters are afraid to leave their respective rooms, both characters have serious emotional and psychiatric problems, both protagonists are living with a sense of love lost. Jesus! Maybe they are totally autobiographical! (*Laughing out loud here*).

So they create a whole life within the room. But eventually both Brother Scully and Pluto realize they must leave the room in order to find some sort of internal calm and put the world right. I'm laughing here, when I say, I must read those books again and find out something about myself.

*CM: In the video interview where did you read the pages from* Passion Play, *from the North Monastery hill? So the places Pluto is describing as his view of heaven are actually in the background. I walked up there last Easter. It was stunning! I did it very slowly taking pictures while I was going up. Yes from there you have an immense wonder magic view.*

CC: With regard to the reading of the extract from *Passion Play* in the film clip - this is the final page of *Passion Play* and I read it in a location from where the last scene in *Passion Play* actually unfolds, Bell's Field, at the top of Patrick's Hill. And absolutely, this is Pluto's view of heaven as described in the text. The point being made that this place, this "city of pain' that drove Pluto to take his own life, is also his heaven. Heaven and Hell are two sides of the same coin. By the way, this location, Bell's Field is also the location of the crucifixion scene in my millennium pageant, *The Trial of Jesus* (see Creedon 2014).

*CM: In these 20 years, while you were creating other works, plays, videos, documentaries, giving readings, producing and directing your plays in China, New York and Ireland and working on the new publication, you were already planning a follow up to* Begotten Not Made*, how much have you produced so far?*

CC: I have a lot of my next novel written. As I told you its working title is *Glory Be To The Father*, I've been working on it since the publication of *Passion Play* in 1999. It's like *Passion Play* in structure, which is extremely episodic, not a linear narrative and trusts that the reader will take the leap of faith and follow. *Begotten Not Made* is very much a linear narrative. It started out as one of the narrative strands of *Glory Be To The Father*, but it all became far too big and unwieldy. I'm still not sure exactly how to finish *Glory Be To The Father*. There are two obvious options at the moment, I'm sort of confident that in the act of bringing it all together, the ending will write itself.

*CM: Getting back to the structural narrative points I saw in* Begotten Not Made*, here's my point Pluto's/Scully's drone survey of Cork is like Joyce's last page of "The Dead", a peacefully and pacifying blanket of words as the blanket of snow underneath which lies the whole of Ireland. In your case, from microcosm to macrocosm, the whole of Cork as the whole of your universal world. Do you agree?*

CC: It's very nice that you draw similarities between my structures and the mighty Mr Joyce. To be totally honest with you, I'm not very comfortable about the work being compared to other writers really. I suppose, finding similarities could be a bit like making the predictions of Nostradamus fit a narrative. And of course, Joyce casts such a large shadow in the context of Irish writing that the very notion that a similarity is identified can become a bit of an albatross slung around my neck, it certainly could make a writer self-conscious of style rather than letting it flow and seeing where it leads. And because every missing comma of Joyce has been analysed and re-analysed, there's always the concern that writers might be subconsciously using Joyce as a template.

Having said that, I think your analysis of *Begotten Not Made* and *Passion Play* is correct. Not that I had thought about it before, as it turns out, using that structure was totally unplanned. But you are right, it's as if both characters Brother Scully in *Begotten Not Made* and Pluto in *Passion Play* go through a massive internal mental maelstrom in the body of the text, a total meltdown, and then when it's all over there is a moment of clarity followed by total calm. I find it interesting that you identify this, because my next book also seems to be heading the same direction. If I consider it truthfully, it more or less sums up my personal natural disposition fairly accurately.

Whenever I either witness or experience or engage with traumatic or challenging situations, I'm inclined to drive headlong into such situations knowing it's not going to end well. I invariably confront complications head-on without an exit strategy or a Plan B. Sometimes it works out, sometimes not. But eventually, when I'm out the far side and the dust has settled I always find it reassuring to remind myself that there's a great big world out there. I seem to confront my fiction the same way. I've been writing a book for almost twenty years and I don't know how it's going to end, but when the time comes – and I'll know when the time is right – I will sit down and drive it straight at the wall, confident that the resolution will become apparent.

Similarly in real life, having confronted the complication without an exit strategy, eventually it all becomes resolved for better or for worse. And it's as if I restore the calm by envisioning the family unit tucked up in bed asleep, or sitting by the warmth of a glowing fire, with a gale-force winter storm howling outside. Regardless of how bad things might be in a personal sense there is always that blanket of calm that wraps up the world and keeps those close to me safe. I have the capacity to switch from the intensity of a microscopic chaos to the calmness that the big picture offers.

Exactly as you say, switching "cosmos' to bring calm. Interesting you mention that, because that is how I really feel about life. It's not the end of the world until the end of the world and even then we might be going to a better place.

*CM: Your work seems to be character-driven rather than narrative-driven, is that a conscious decision on your part?*

CC: To tell you the truth, Conci, my writing is basically about me trying to figure out my observations of a lifetime. Writing for me is all about the process. Realistically, publication is not that important to me, except there comes a time when I have developed a world and characters on paper, and obviously I then publish the book or have the play produced. Even my film documentaries are really a self-exploration.

My fiction is totally driven by characterization. Similarly my documentaries are all about developing characters, and if a character is strong enough the narrative only gets in the way. A really well defined character will expose/explore a narrative even if he/she is only going to buy a bottle of milk. I feel if the narrative is too strong, in other words if it's all about the "story', well then the writing can become like painting by numbers and filling in the narrative blanks.

*CM: But I don't think it's only characterization. You often convey poetry to your texts. Remember first and last pages in* Passion Play*?*

CC: Those "poetic' sections you mentioned sometimes come very late in the writing process, and find space to develop during the re-drafting. Sometimes those sections come in very early in the process, like a theatre director creating a set from which the actors can come alive. If you examine those sections, they usually establish a strong background from which the character can step, fully-formed. Those descriptive passages invariably are set dressing and not narrative-driven.

*CM: But don't you have a general idea to develop while going on?*

CC: Not really. There always is a very simple overarching A to B narrative. But I get to know characters by writing about them, and eventually when I do get to know them they write themselves and that's when narrative begins to be formed. So, for example, with the novel I am currently writing, I have no idea in the wide earthly world how it's going to end, but that will become apparent when the time comes to finally sit down and write a few final drafts. The basic story line – or, as I describe it, the A to B – is very simple. A: A man walks out on his pregnant girlfriend on Christmas Eve; B: I'm not sure, he either returns home, or keeps going. But that is the full total narrative arc. In between the A and the B the reader is brought on a most fantastical roller-coaster ride of characters. It could all be nonsense, but that's what I'm writing and that's what I'm enjoying writing and publication is so far from my mind at the moment. It's just writing for the pure joy of writing.

At the moment I'm thinking that the main character is actually going to his own birth, but it may end up much simpler than that. We'll see.

*CM: Yes they are manifested by the characters mental labyrinthine wanderings …*

CC: Apologies if my answers to your questions seem defensive, prevaricating or evasive, but I find it difficult to process why I write, how I write or why I write in a certain way. I don't ever really think about those things while I write, it's all very organic. Each day a new me sits at my desk and writes. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't have an overview of my work. I don't have a sense that I'm writing or working to a plan. I don't have a strategy. I guess, as a writer, I'm not disciplined but I'm highly motivated.

I could very easily decide to sell my house and open a B&B in the morning, or move away to live in a warm climate, drive a taxi. I actually do play with that idea. I suppose what I'm saying about character is that I'm not really interested in narrative. It's why I don't write detective stories or mysteries, with big convoluted storylines.

Obviously my work has a narrative, but I like to keep the narrative very simple, and I usually present the conundrum of the narrative at the beginning of the tale and finish it at the end, and that gives me the freedom to go anywhere I want to go for the other 300 pages between the covers.

So, for example, *Passion Play*: A) a man contemplates suicide; B) man commits suicide. Those are the two bookends of the book. That is the narrative. But in between I have the ability to go all over the place. Likewise, in *Begotten Not Made*: A) a lonely old man thinks about a love encounter in his youth; B) a lonely old man decides to seek out and reconcile the love of his youth.

In between that opening and closing I have the opportunity to travel wherever I wish within the mind of the character. Basically for me the more simple the overall story A to B, the more complicated I can become within the exploration of the character. I sort of feel that if I satisfy the reader with a strong and simple beginning and a strong and clear end, the reader will be more inclined to invest in the spiraling, offshoot, sidetrack characters.

*CM: Could* Passion Play *and* Begotten Not Made *be seen as two* Bildungsroman*?*

CC: I guess you could say that. Both novels explore the profound effect the formative years have on the final years of the protagonist as he nears death. But the novels are not nostalgia for the sake of nostalgia. In fact, I'd say the very opposite to it, they are very current and hold a mirror up to the complicated, challenging and sometimes ridiculous ways of the past. I guess you put your finger on it when you noted that there was a profound shift in the western world in the late 1960s-1970s, a dramatic change fueled by young people. As it turns out, both of my protagonists' formative years straddle that specific window of time, when change was so dramatic.

In *Begotten Not Made,* the conservative Deputy Head Brother Lynch identifies this change. He sees it coming down the tracks and blames it on television. He blames it on modern ways and the spoiled children of the Baby Boomer generation. And that more or less sets up the counterpoint; the moment of change in the world and how the protagonist deals with it.

Brother Scully's formative years were just at the wrong side of that change, so he didn't have the courage to leave religious orders, he stayed in the monastery. Whereas, Brother Crowley, who was only a year or two younger than Brother Scully, was born into the generation of change, so, he had enough confidence to walk out of the monastery. It's obvious that there is a certain amount of unspoken respect and pride in Brother Crowley's courage to walk away from God. I guess one of the big explorations of the text is that the last generation of religious orders did not get the life they had expected to have in old age, they didn't get the respect that their predecessors received.

When I was a kid, every family had a few members in religious orders and they were a huge source of pride, but then within two decades they were vilified because of the various church scandals. That must have been very difficult to accept for that last generation of clerics to join religious orders in the 1960's.

*CM: Just wondering, have you ever written by hand?*

CC: You'll laugh, but I write almost everything by hand. I find it flows better on the page than on the screen because the screen shows all the incidental, superfluous imperfections, tabs, spacings, spelling, punctuation etc., that get in the way when I'm in a flow, and I continually find I'm correcting things on screen rather than just going with the flow of where the pen is bringing me.

Also, when I'm working on a screen and the manuscript has stretched to a few hundred pages I really find it difficult to gauge where I am in a script, despite page numbers etc., unless I'm working off hard copy. And there's nothing like the accuracy of making edits and margin notes with a pen.

A few years ago my sister found a mountain of my handwritten stuff, about 30 or 40 hours of hand-written radio drama.

Every year, I'm invited to give a radio drama master class in University College Cork. I usually bring the scripts in to the students and spend an hour telling them about the correct technical way to present radio drama scripts, including sample templates from the BBC. Believe

it or not, but radio drama scripts are extremely specific in their layout, probably more detailed than film scripts. It's amazing how engaged with detail students become. But having spent an hour explaining the detail of the layout, inevitably, the students ask a lot of questions about margin widths, and page numbering, and font, and type size.

But, just before the end of the hour, I lift up this big garbage bag full of hand-written scripts, written in different colour pens and markers with doodles on the page and drawings and notes to myself etc., these scripts have no structure at all and are just pure chaos on the page, and I tell the students: "Now that I've told you the academic expectation of how a script should look, I will tell you to totally ignore and forget everything I've told you and just write from the heart". And you know what? They absolutely get it! It's like they realise that part of the function in education is to reflect on what the course details demand. Meanwhile internally they know their heart and their emotional connection with the work is somewhere else. And then we spend the second hour in deep immersion, digging into the nitty-gritty, meat and potatoes of radio writing, character forming, voice modulation, nailing multi-character dialogue, sound effects, timing, music, narration, monologue versus dialogue … and that's when the notebooks are put away and the sparks fly.

So, yes! The short answer is, I write most things longhand, and then type it up and then work off the screen after the 1st draft. Then at a certain stage I print it out and work on the typed page with a pen every now and again, I input the changes on screen and reprint and make more changes by pen. I am currently on maybe draft number 20 with *Glory Be To The Father.*

*CM: Oh my God! 20th draft, unbelievable, it's like painting and repainting till you get the perfect refined finish to it. At this stage is it language that you are refining*?

CC: To tell you the truth it changes. Mostly it's about making it flow better, especially for the spoken word. But sometimes it could be something as simple as changing a character's name. Other times it can be weaving a new overlay, a new theme, and often when I'm writing I leave big tracts unwritten, just with a note to myself in the margin to go back and write stuff. And when I say 20th draft that doesn't mean re-writing draft after draft. I've been enjoying this process since 1999, so it's more like a guy who makes model aircrafts or puts ships into bottles. I go back to this script again and again when I'm not doing anything else. I have a few such projects on the go, and must say it's what I love most about writing: the very nature of writing with no other requirement than to just write for the sake of writing; this stuff might never be published.

*CM: I'm sure that it's going to be impressive and successful! I think that readers who are unaware of the microcosm of Cork, like me at the very beginning, will be delighted to cross the border of* The Undiscovered Country *to quote Bernard Benstock's famous book about Joyce's* Ulysses*, led by your realistic/unrealistic walks through the Second City.*

CC: Not so sure if the finished product will be impressive or not, but I'm having a ball writing it. And my best hope is that microcosm of Cork will fit any microcosm crossroads, village, town or city in the world.

*CM: If you deeply enjoy what you are doing, it will certainly surface through your text. And following your works since* Passion Play *through* The Cure *to* Begotten Not Made *it has made me a literary "flaneur" as Walter Benjamin's words report: "Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in*

*the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley" (Benjamin 2006 [1950], 53). And one does not get lost, but loses oneself, wants to yield through "topographical" wanderings. I've always loved "losing" myself in cities or places, it was a matter of discovering something new any moment, but being a photographer I've developed it to a greater extent, enjoying every step as we did when we traced back Pluto's life throughout Cork.*

CC: On the subject of cities and streets and street names and losing oneself … Malachy McCourt, Irish-American actor/writer, happened to be at my play *The Cure* in New York a few months ago and he invited me to his radio program at WBAI Radio the following day, and gave this very kind review of my play: "I saw it yesterday. Good writing knows no ethnicity. Good writing knows no nationality. Good writing is good writing – not alone is this good writing it's excellent writing. Very personal writing. Very humorous writing. They say if Dublin was burnt down it could be rebuilt again by reading the work of James Joyce, well the same could be said about Creedon's work: Cork city could be rebuilt from his words".

*CM: But it is Joyce himself who says it when referring to* Ulysses

CC: Well maybe Malachy was quoting Joyce? Bless him.

*CM: " 'I want', said Joyce, as we were walking down the Universitätsträsse, 'to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book' " (Joyce qtd. in Budgen 1972, 69). Yes he was definitely doing it! You must be flattered.*

CC: It was my first time meeting Malachy. Obviously I've known of him for a long time, but was absolutely delighted when he turned up at the play. Malachy is a very lively 88 year-old, he's got his finger on the pulse. The venue where the play was on is a really dark cellar down a very steep, winding stairs and it was very crowded there. It's a rock music venue, "Arlene's Grocery" on the Lower East Side. The Ramones Lady Gaga and Blondie and the New York Dolls all played there over the years. It holds about 200 people at a crush. So I was very flattered that Malachy would seek it out and came along. He came along and stuck around to keep me company for a good while after. Well honoured I was. It was a fairly fab afternoon, the Irish Consul General, Ciaran Madden also turned up. And the greatest surprise of all was that my nephew, Edmund, turned up. He didn't know I was in New York, he just turned up to see the show. I was well surprised to see him and his wife there.

Back in 2009, when my other two plays were premiered in New York at the Irish Repertory Theatre, Frank McCourt, Malachy's brother, was my guest of honour, and the poor man died a week before the play opened, but his widow, Ellen was there, and that was very sweet of her. I had not met Frank or Malachy before, so it was very nice that they supported what I'm doing.

*CM:* The Cure *(2005) is my favourite play, I felt I could follow the grandfather's nose up through Cork. Once I thought that it could be interpreted by a dancer while somebody was reading this part of the play!*

CC: The mad thing is … my favourite play of the *Second City Trilogy* is *After Luke*, and audiences seem to like *When I was God* more. Then again, *The Cure* is the most personal of the three. The character actually walks past my house in the play, twice – how mad is that! *The Cure*, picked up two awards at New York Theatre Awards in 2013, Best Actor Award & Best Director

Award, and I was nominated for Best Playwright Award. *The Cure* is the play of the Trilogy that has been produced most often, probably it has got to do with the logistics of putting on a one-person play. It's had maybe four productions in New York and a production in China.

*CM: China has been an important haven an important haven for your literary career. Can you tell us about your experience there?*

CC: I was in China in 2009 for a three-month Writer-In-Residence, with the Shanghai Writers' Association. I had been there the previous year as a guest of the Shanghai International Literary Festival. I went back the following year with two of my plays, *When I Was God* and *After Luke* performed at the Shanghai World Expo. I returned in 2011 for the Shanghai JUE Festival with another one of my plays, *The Cure*. I performed a series of concerts with John Spillane in 2013 and the Chinese Writers' Association invited me back as guest of honour in 2018.

Coming from Cork, China was such an immense culture clash. It absolutely woke me up. Even the simplest of tasks such as buying a bottle of milk is an experience. I've come to know many Chinese writers and performers at this point and it has always been a positive and enhancing experience. I am very grateful for the series of events and twists of fate that brought me to China's shore. Having toured plays, presented concerts and screened my documentaries in Shanghai, you'll appreciate I could write a book about my experiences in China. But simply put, China has thought me so much about myself, it has offered me an incredible perspective on my life in Cork, and working in Cork. It's very liberating to know that there is a whole world out there, and the realization that a few city blocks in Shanghai would represent a population larger than the total population of Cork, really gives perspective to the pettiness of small town life.

Long before I ever had any idea or interest in going to China, a decade earlier, back in 1999, the International Community in Beijing produced a very nice publication to celebrate the Millennium. They requested a story from me which I forwarded to them, and some months later when the publication arrived in the post from China, I was well honoured to realize that they only included two writers. I was one – the other was Seamus Heaney.

*CM: Was there any significant event while you've been touring around to read from* Begotten Not Made*?*

CC: Ah sur' listen, every reading is a potential pantomime, there is an aspect of every single live performance that is a learning curve. I've been at readings where scuffles have broken out. I love giving readings, I do suffer from extreme nerves right up to the moment I open my mouth and then it's like an alter ego kicks in and I just roll with it and it's liable to end up anywhere.

But speaking of Seamus Heaney. A few years back, I was doing a reading in Bantry Library, and lo and behold who turned up at the reading only, Seamus Heaney. Totally unexpected. Seamus is from the far north of Ireland and Bantry is on the furthermost south coast of Ireland. It just so happened he was in Bantry that day so he dropped in to the reading. It was like having Elvis in the building. I decided to cut my reading short and invite him up to read. Of course, everyone wanted him to read, but he didn't have any of his own books with him. I think he was just being a gentleman and not wanting to steal my limelight. But I pointed out that we were in a library, and they had all his books on the shelf, so up he came and read from his work. Really, it was such a brilliant, fun afternoon. For me, it was like being the warm-up act for the Rolling Stones. I like when readings take an unexpected turn, keeps it a little bit rock "n" roll. It was fun, off the cuff and unexpected, and I like that.

*CM: A very happy coincidence together in the Chinese Millennium celebration and together at the reading in Bantry, pure coincidence and such sweet memories.*

CC: Isn't that what life's all about, making sweet memories … More sweet memories and less bitter memories is the way forward!

*CM: Have you employed different language registers, Cork Hibernian English, according to the various characters both in* Passion Play *and in* Begotten Not Made?

CC: Not sure of your question, but if you are wondering if I use different styles of language, micro-dialects, I do. Maybe it's because I have written so much radio, but I'm subconsciously extremely conscious of having different voice modulations. I can look at a page of dialogue and tell who's speaking, not by the words, but by the very length of the sentences. We all speak in very individualistic ways, and if I can tune into that enough it means I can dispense with much of the: he said, she said, and worst of all, he said wistfully. Let the language flow.

I find that there is a whole genre of fiction portraying working-class characters in a dark world of drug taking, prostitution, crime, speaking with coarse language, so I decided to do a total flip on that and explore a working class that is universally more educated.

Christian Brothers are recruited from working-class families. So basically, I was presenting a character with a working-class morality, culture, background, values, but with the added bonus of being educated, his intellect and terms of reference would have been a little broader, his language would have been less coarse, his expression slightly more informed. So it was presenting working-class values, but with a more educated understanding.

*CM: I think that in* Passion Play*, Pinko, Pluto, Fatfuka, all have a different idiolect, a kind of personal language whereas in* Begotten Not Made *they are all educated so they speak the same way, is that true?*

CC: Not really. In *Passion Play*, Pinko, Pluto and Fatfuka all have the same accent and speak the same micro-dialect, because they all come from the same place. But the voices and accents of the various characters who live in the bedsits in Pluto's house speak in very identifiably different voices for many reasons, not least it presents a reference point to a character's past life. The tonal differences are acute and obvious: Monk is an Irishman returned from UK and he speaks with a UK-"oirish" accent with constant use of words like, "mate" and "over" referring to his years in the UK, Herman is German so he has a German accent, Brenda whose use of the word "Love" at the end of a sentence is consistent etc. That diversity of language is not the case for the characters in *Begotten Not Made*. I guess the feature of *Begotten Not Made* is that they all speak with the same accent. It's a monastery. And broadly speaking they're all from the same background. And even if they don't come from the same place, there is a type of Christian Brother/Religious Educator tonal quality they seem to pick up in the seminary. It's as if they are continually talking down to a student, they have the tendency to be patronizing, they ask a question and then answer their own question, representing a culture of authority, very typical of the stereotypical Christian Brother. The voice and style and modulation in *Begotten Not Made* is consistent among clerics. It is very different, more informed, more confident than you'll find among Pluto's friends in *Passion Play*. But, by the same token, Pluto's friends of his youth all speak with their own similar micro-dialect.

*CM: As Walter Benjamin said: "Work on good prose has three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven" (1996 [1972], 460). I find that your novel has got a rhythmic scaffolding, at times its text runs very fast, especially in roller coaster dialogues, then it takes a breath, especially in contemplative views from Brother Scully's window, what can you tell me about the musicality of your novel?*

CC: To tell you the truth, no less than any other writer, I do like to include an aural rhythm, metre and even sometimes I'll dip into a slight rhyme, or the feedback I can achieve by slipping in an echo of repetition and alliteration. The truth of the matter is that it's very easy to over indulge the flowery nature of words on a page and for me that can kill dead the spontaneity of the prose. So I also work at not making it appear too apparent or contrived on the page. The idea is that it should read lyrically when read out loud. I guess some would call it the "work" of being a writer. I'm inclined to call it the joy of being a writer.

*CM: Cónal, I feel I must thank you for giving me this precious opportunity to interview you online, we probably invented a new method! It has added value to my lockdown. I feel I have been able to go "Beyond visible, beyond your visible world".*

CC: Thank you, Conci, for taking the time to unravel my contorted thoughts and for putting them into a logical order. I look forward to seeing you next time you are in Cork. We'll go for a walk!

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