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"Resistance art is nourishment when we are in dark times. And we are in dark times" Interview with Irish writer Emer Martin*

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Emer Martin is an Irish author, artist and teacher who lives between the depths of Silicon Valley, California, and the jungles of Co. Meath, Ireland. She has produced a strikingly diverse range of work: novels, poems, literary journalism, paintings, and short films. She is also an active writer for newspapers and on social media. Her first novel, *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995), won Book of the Year 1996 at the prestigious Listowel Writers' Week in her native Ireland. This novel and her next, *More Bread Or I'll Appear* (1999), were published internationally and widely acclaimed. A year later, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her third novel, *Baby Zero* (2014a), was published in the UK and Ireland in March 2007 by Dingle, and released in the US in 2014 by Rawmeash, an artist-led publishing cooperative run by artists for artists and based between California, New York and Ireland. Rawmeash was founded by Emer Martin in 2012 and through it she has published three children's books (2014b, 2016, 2017), completed her third short film (2006) and produced Irvine Welsh's directorial début (Welsh 2007).

Emer Martin is an extremely political and expressive artist. What makes her multi-faceted work unique is that she likes taking control of her own ideas, breaking down an old-established array of barriers, tearing up traditional structures and flipping the hierarchies. In this interview, she discusses an array of social, political, economic and cultural issues from the past and the present as they occur in Europe, the Middle East and in a variety of places in the United States. She shares her views on such cultural matters as Ireland's former insularity and the idea of art as resistance; or contemporary concerns, such as the politics of capitalism, Brexit, the COVID-19 crisis, Donald Trump's administration and how George Floyd's killing has inflamed people worldwide. There is an extensive discussion of her latest, and arguably most important novel, *The Cruelty Men* (2018), which in 2019 was nominated for the Kerry Group

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Irish Novel and shortlisted for best Irish novel the same year. The following interview started in March 2020, immediately after the COVID-19 crisis broke out, and was continued via e-mail.

Fig. 1 – *Martin's portrait*. Courtesy of Emer Martin

MT: Emer, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I would like to start with a few general questions based on your website[1]*. Here, you claim that you "fled Ireland at age 17, finding it to be insular and oppressive, and began to wander through Europe." Did your upbringing become a specific reference point within your work?*

EM: *Breakfast in Babylon* was my most autobiographical work, which is probably typical for a first novel. It really was a composite of fact and fiction. So many of the characters are straight out of my experience in Paris and London. I was desperately trying to shed off Ireland when I was young. Growing up in the 1980s, I saw Ireland as very uncool and uninteresting. I felt like I was trapped indoors. It was a poor undeveloped country that was dominated by the Catholic Church and I stomped around as a teenager punk rocker full of resentment and longing, dreaming of cultural centres like Paris, London, New York, San Francisco, all fantasy places in my head that were vibrant and full of art and experimentation.

MT: When and how did your literary and artistic adventure start? Did any writer or artist play a part?

EM: I wanted to be a writer all my life, from when I was about 8 and so I pored over Ellmann's biography of Joyce and looked to people who self-created and experimented, like Genet, Jarry, Artaud, Burroughs, Kerouac, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Hemingway – all male writers who lived their work and sacrificed their lives for art. It was a romantic notion and I did not

[1] See <www.emermartin.com> (03/2021).

have the sophistication to understand that they were all men and anointed as the greats, and there were many others, struggling people who were broke, or female, or ignored and slipped away into poverty and obscurity. I thought I would go to Paris and find the cafés full of writers and dreamers and artists. In fact, I ended up in squats with refugees from empire and capitalism, burning themselves up with drugs and alcohol, and survival was not even guaranteed. I left Paris to explore London. My glamorous ideas of creating myself as a writer living on the fringes of the world with like-minded creative thinkers and adventurers soon ended up being a twilight shelf-filler in Sainsbury's on East Street in London. The way I was treated as a poor, Irish immigrant and a young girl was a shock. The Irish were the poor of Europe at that point, and we were in London as cleaners and bricklayers and English people were very surprised if we had read a book or had an opinion. We were also viewed as dangerous terrorists.

The London of punk rock and experimentation was what I was dreaming of: The Clash, The Sex Pistols. I went immediately to Carnaby Street and all I saw were generic high street shops and drab capitalism. I felt I was too late for the *zeitgeist* or the revolution. Without realizing it or understanding it, I had also internalized the romantic view of the anarchist artist as a young male from the Surrealists, to the Beats, to the punk rock movement. It was hard to find women role models who were not just muses or mad, or killed themselves. I was in thrall to the notion of the rebel genius young man, and there were a few of those about but they would not have listened to a word I said. Years later, when I read more widely and encountered works by feminist and anticolonial thinkers, and watched how they rummaged through the rubbish heap of history in order to fish out the few women or people of colour, and allowed them to have a voice and dust them off, only then did I realize how capitalism, racism, and patriarchy work hand in hand to silence the majority. At the time, I floundered and lost confidence in myself, internalizing all the hate, yet something in me still burned to add my voice to the chorus.

MT: You are a multifaceted artist: you write poems, novels, flash-fiction or short works of journalism, you direct and produce short films, and you are a painter and a very active intellectual in newspapers and social media. Which is the best genre for you to produce portraits and why?

EM: I am a visual thinker and so I am attracted to film and painting in a visceral immediate way. I envy musicians for how they can twist the core of your gut and reach that depth wordlessly. Last night I re-watched Kurosawa's *Ran* for the fourth time in my life just to show it to my teenage daughter. It is based on *King Lear* and speaks to power, and ego, and the violence of men and the destruction of war driven by the male ego. The film's ultimate depiction of evil is a woman, of course, and she is controlling them all in order to destroy everyone around her in vengeance for her family. But it is the last image that is seared in my brain. The blind man on the edge of the cliff utterly alone, helpless and unable to see the great abyss opened up in front of him. He fumbles with his cane and realizes there is an edge and danger, but he cannot grasp the enormity of what humans have wrought and the unthinking hostility of the empty plains that gape in front of him. The camera pulls out and leaves him there as the last statement. It takes my breath away every time. That image could not be written. I would have loved to do more film but it was so hard to raise money and I did a Master's and made a few shorts but had two small children that I was raising as a single parent at the time, so I had to use painting as my visual outlet. For that which is ineffable. But then writing is probably what I'm best at, as I have been writing obsessively since I was a child, so my books are my attempts to touch the centre of the mystery. And all great art is mysterious and can't be fully explained.

MT: What are you trying to achieve with your art?

EM: The mystery. Getting close to it. If we try to chase it any other way, through materialism, or even spirituality, we keep just creating more illusions. That is what organized religion keeps failing to do. It is always looking for the whole story but instead all the human flaws are magnified and it creates vicious power structures and meaningless rules and regulations and relies on casting out non-believers. But through art we can come close to some kind of truth that can never be linear or logical, can only be felt, not fully understood. In contrast to religion, there is no whole story. That is why we need a multitude of voices.

I used to buy the notion of the lone genius, but that is nonsense. That is empty ego and only gets in the way of creating. The reader is as important to the book as the writer, just as the audience is to the theater. The painter needs other eyes or the painting is dead. We are a collective species and we create as a group. Art is communal. The artist is not a sacred beast; their individual works are but threads in a fantastic web. Capitalism has distorted creativity. Every ancient or indigenous artist who worked and works to honour the world and never signs his or her name has known this. We need artists because we need art. But we are just vessels through whom the art comes, the spider is the *numen*, the mystery, the holy generator, the big bang that's still expanding the universe by every work of art, every word written, every poem, essay, book, every stroke of paint, every scene shot, every note played.

I just want to be part of this dance as an artist, but also as a reader, as a listener, as a witness, as analyser, as thinker and as dreamer. I learned that much at least.

MT: Regarding your poetry, what subject matter do you mostly focus on?

EM: Recently I am watching the human world being cannibalized by a very fraudulent economic system that has created mass displacement and destruction. Much of my poetry is my attempt at understanding that. I have written about refugees as the ultimate twenty-first century exemplar of what it is to be cast out by nature and economy and vicious politics and war. The Irish spent so long fleeing their own land as a result of colonialism and its impact that I identify strongly with those displaced. We are lulled into a false sense of security in the industrialized world, but as climate change alters everything we will all be on the move again as a species in order to survive. If we cannot have compassion for those who are our future then who will have compassion for our children when they have to pack up and leave?

I often envy poets who can write about leaves on the trees and actually be writing about leaves on the trees. They see the world in a much purer way. But I can only use those leaves as metaphors because it is the human beings that have my attention.

MT: In your poem "Resistance", you talk about rage, resistance and a rejection of resignation. What effects were you seeking with this poem when you first wrote it, and what effects were you aiming at when you posted it on Facebook a few months ago?

EM: I wrote that poem when Trump got into power and he was the personification of the demon ruler, he was King Ubu: his strutting, grunting, he was the ego devouring the world. I had been used to more slick versions of the patriarchal capitalistic ruler, where elite colleges spawn these patrician men to look obscenely plausible as leaders while they looted the world. However, here was Trump. It was stunning. The gloves were off. I wrote it as his first act in power was to bring in a Muslim ban into law in the U.S. He was stopping people from nine

different Muslim countries from even visiting the country or coming through the airports. My husband is Iranian and so my own family were affected. I went with my neighbour Valerie, who is a black American and highly aware of the racist nature of power in the U.S. and she actually recorded me in the airport performing that poem as a protest. It was a moment. And the poem is a practical thing, a form of resistance. When I feel exhausted I read Brecht's "To Those Who Follow in Our Wake". In a way, I wanted to put it all together like that. Resistance art is nourishment when we are in dark times. And we are in dark times.

MT: Regarding the racist nature of power in the U.S., you wrote an insightful article on this issue for The Irish Times *recently (Martin 2020b). Could you expand on how you are experiencing the current unrest after George Floyd's death as an American citizen? What impact do massive protests against black people and Floyd murals from Syria to Belfast have on you as an Irish writer living in America?*

EM: There is a global plague and a national uprising. This has been quite a few weeks. When COVID-19 hit everyone was doing Zoom cocktail hour, and then sharing sourdough starters and, all of a sudden, people are rising up against an intolerably racist society and demanding to abolish the police. All this in 10 weeks. No wonder they would prefer us exhausted by working all the time.

Racism is a constant in the U.S. In my article, I was pointing out that the country is not broken, it was built this way. The United States began as a capitalist enterprise when the Virginia Company set up the first English colony on the land of the Paspahegh people in 1610. This correlates with a similar group of venture companies known as The Irish Society that was set up to colonize Ulster at the very same time. In these parallels, we see the raw beginnings of capitalism and how it was interwoven with violent colonialism. These companies were investing in ethnic cleansing of the native people in both Ulster and the Americas, and demanding profit in return.

I am an Irish writer living in California which was until very recently part of Mexico and before that the home of multiple indigenous people. I am on Ohlone land where I live and always conscious of this. As a white immigrant, I am aware of my privilege. We were raised in Ireland to cluelessly boast that we were the "blacks of Europe". Admittedly, we share a colonial history of oppression and proud struggle. Although poor Irish immigrants were reviled when they first came to America, their descendants were able to integrate into mainstream society due to their whiteness. Predictably, we took full advantage and established ourselves in police forces, and took part in stealing land from the native people. Ideally, we should have used our privilege to recognize the struggle of our fellow victims of colonialism, but we rarely did. Most shamefully, in 1863, Irish people rioted through New York, lynching 120 black people to protest being drafted into the army during the civil war. Impoverished Europeans were eager to climb up the ladder of whiteness and become part of the establishment.

I do not know what this means for me as a writer, but I know what it means for me as a human. A new generation is finally seeing the repercussions of this web of white supremacy, violence, and capitalism that has been entrenched for 500 years. Black people have always been made to suffer, as their "otherness" is the basis for the entire spurious notion of whiteness. Without their pain, whiteness has no meaning. We are in an endgame here: there is a plague, the Amazon is burning, and the oceans are rising. Humans are on the brink of losing our habitat, as white billionaires talk of colonizing Mars. The revolution is not going to help us be forgiven. It will untangle our guts and pull us inside out. It will peel the thin layer of tissue

from our eyes. If any of us are to survive the next 500 years, we must now realize that all of us, as a multiracial international coalition, have to follow through with this pivotal moment. Just because the revolution is necessary, does not mean it is inevitable.

MT: Emer, you are Irish and so you are labelled as a writer of Irish literature, but your characters, I quote, "are part of an array of losers trapped in capitalism's sticky global web" (Martin 2020a, 247). Do you think that today there are other Irish writers whose work goes against a monolithic globalized corporate consumer society? If so, which ones? How about American writers?

EM: For many years, Irish women were just meant to write chick lit. When *Baby Zero* came out, every single review talked about how it was not chick lit as if that was all we could produce. I see writers like Mary O'Donnell get deserved recognition now. In my day, Jennifer Johnston was overlooked and undervalued. I hate doing this on the fly as I will leave out so many, but look at the whole wonderful gallery of writers writing about capitalism's dark side and the empty dread of consumer culture. Helena Mulkearns wrote a book about foreign aid workers in a postcolonial world called Ferenji that had some treasures that really struck me. But Irish writing slaps right now: June Caldwell, Wendy Erskine, Elaine Feeney, Alan McMonagle, Anna Burns, Oisín Fagan, Melatu Uche Okorie, Kevin Barry, of course. There is way more and they will come to me later, but the Rock of Doom, as my friends and I affectionately call it, is popping right now with talent that addresses these issues and have scope way beyond place and time.

And as for poets writing on this theme of the empty neoliberal globalized mess we've found ourselves in there is the extraordinary Michael O'Loughlin who in my view is one of the most talented poets in the English language at the moment, just revel in these few lines that sum up gentrification of cities. His book written from the point of view of a Latvian poet who finds himself as a migrant worker in Dublin is devastatingly and imaginatively accurate:

"A Latvian Poet Climbs Killiney Hill"

This city has dyed her hair blonde
And had her breasts remodelled
To look like the whore
In the hotel foyer
Anywhere in the world. (O'Loughlin 2010, 38)

That would have taken me a whole chapter to do what he did in five lines. Wow, just wow. As usual, the novelist kisses the poet's feet.

MT: Your first novel, Breakfast in Babylon*, "explores addiction and the use of drugs to both alleviate poverty and to have fun in an otherwise drab environment" (Martin 2020a, 247). The main character is the young Irish immigrant Isolt who lives in Paris, where she meets many drug addicts, alcoholics, refugees, immigrants, and exiles – modern society's losers. You show sympathy for all these figures relegated to the category of "the Other" and their desperate desire to belong. Could you tell me about that?*

EM: The world of history may belong to the lions, but it is the lowly scavengers and scraggy hyenas that move me to write outside of history and memory. The forgotten whom I

want to place in a protective pocket of history by chronicling what it was like to be always at the arse end of the economy. To be relegated as a nothing, as fringe, marginal, to be left out. Nietzsche, I think, said, fear is the feeling of absence of power, and I was drawn to that, how to live without power in a monolithic materialistic world not of your making. People like me do not make history and we barely survive in its grinding machinery but we are alive and often we can see more clearly how the machine works when it is not operating for our benefit. To me, the poor and the powerless – and I am that – are always the ones that know what is going on.

Outwardly, I am a published author and have got a profession as a teacher but the reality is that I live one pay check away from homelessness in the most unfettered capitalist country on the planet. I am in perpetual debt for daring to pursue an education; I am getting in more debt for the audacity of trying to educate my daughters. I work to cover rent, health care and pay back student loans. I am told I live in the greatest democracy on earth but they never give me a candidate that will work in my interests; so I vote for the sake of it but my vote is empty. I live in the richest country that has ever existed in history, we are told our leader is the leader of the free world, but the prisons are privatized and full, and there are for-profit detention camps that have incarcerated innocent migrants and separated them from their children. These prisons and detention camps are acceptable because racism is normalized. I am fully aware of how the system works because I have lost. Myself and my friends and those people in prisons and camps in the free world will be conveniently written out. I am trying to write them back in. That is resistance. As Isolt said in the book: "Which one of us will be so brave as to fight the world with cardboard limbs?" I am not brave, but I am cunning enough to try.

MT: At the end of Breakfast in Babylon*, Isolt seems to escape from drug addiction and recover from trauma. Bearing in mind the situation of many homeless in Ireland today, whose substance consumption is so pervasive, do you think that, 23 years after the novel's publication, they still suffer collectively from trauma?*

EM: I think Ireland is rife with trauma and its consequences. In many ways, modern Ireland is a very liveable place and people are connected in ways that they are not in most of the industrial world. Yet we have a very high addiction and suicide rate that does not come from nowhere. The history of colonialism is one of cultural and bodily annihilation and no country that has experienced that has survived unscathed. Ireland had the advantage of being brought into Europe and thus gaining some advantages from Europe's previous violent imperial supremacy, but we have been battling decimating imperialism for centuries and the only way to recover is to face that. White privilege softened the blow for Irish people who were able to emigrate and merge into the dominant culture, and after a few generations reap the benefits; however, those are unearned privileges and they do not sit well with me. Being from a white postcolonial culture only makes me more aware of my responsibility to dismantle the racist systems that are in place throughout the Western world that created these divisions in order to justify exploitation. I find myself often as the only white person in the room in my classroom and spend much of my time not only talking about literature but also using it as a lens to unpack the racism and disadvantage I see at work in my new community. As always awareness of how it works is the first step to finding out if there is an off switch to this machine.

MT: In More Bread or I'll Appear*, you use dark comedy and examine the idea that the links between relatives can be greater than the frontiers between countries. Do you think dark laughter can facilitate new truths in your work by going against the status quo?*

EM: *More Bread or I'll Appear* was a book set in so many regions and continents that some people complained it was too much. Maybe it was, but it was a family drama removed from the kitchen and sent out into the globe. It reflected my life at the time, where I was incessantly travelling and learning and discovering. Yet still again my characters were not part of the status quo and were struggling like the dirt birds trying to find a steady log to land on in a stormy polluted ocean.

MT: On your personal website, you claim that "Rawmeash is an idea that I have longed to make into reality. A nonsense fiction". Literary nonsense aims at subverting language conventions or logical reasoning. The excess of meaning and the humour that appear in your fiction are derived from its nonsensical nature. Many years ago, The Sunday Tribune *chose you as a cult writer and your books were said to be so different that you could not be pigeonholed. What are the effects of such methods and devices in your work?*

EM: Honestly, Derek O'Connor was the journalist who wrote that and he hit the nail on the head. I had been knocking at the door trying to get into the literary world for so long but he opened my eyes that you have to keep writing the same book because that is what people want and feel safe with. I could not do that. My books are how my brain works or does not work. Sometimes I long to write a clear clean narrative with one main character but it is not how I move within the world. My books are funny, messy and full of characters that interact to sustain each other or tear each other down. That is like my life.

MT: In your third novel, Baby Zero*, to help her carry on, a young woman tells the story of her family to her unborn child. The novel deals with refugees, it is an example of the absurd, with witty and playful dialogue, and represents its characters' behaviour and relationships in a distorted manner. What is it in the satirical mode that fits into your view of the world and its aesthetic representation?*

EM: The absurd is the truth, life is absurd, and it is short and shocking, as we try to grasp for meaning as the years whizz by and we are subjected to the tyranny of the quotidian. This is a very strange time to be alive as our whole human habitat is in rapid decline. I watch current politics unfold and it's hard to tell what is satire and parody, as everything has merged.

MT: Let us talk about your latest novel, The Cruelty Men. *This is the first in a trilogy on migration and feelings of separation within the island of Ireland seen through multiple narrators, all of them members of two interconnected families across three generations. Storytelling helps them to connect not only to each other, but also with their ancestors and Irish identity. This world of fantasy and myth is closely intertwined with another one, that of the "Cruelty Men", which is haunting and very real because it conditions their daily lives and future in tragic ways. Why* The Cruelty Men *and not "The Cruel Men"?*

EM: "The Cruelty Men" were men, often retired police, who were tasked with finding children in impoverished circumstances and ostensibly putting them in industrial schools for their own protection. However, we know now that those schools were notorious and the children were put to work and abused physically, sexually and emotionally. When I was interviewed by Pat Kenny he said: "I've never heard of this term" (see Kenny 2018). And I encountered that a lot from middle class people. That was because the state would never take the children of the middle class and exploit and abuse them in this manner. The poor knew exactly who they were.

Many people told me that they would have a child keep a look out in the fields and notify the family if the Cruelty Men came around. There are two parallel Irelands and the two families in the book, the Ó Conaills and the Lyons, represent this. In a way, they represent my mother's family and my father's family.

MT: In this novel, your poor characters' lack of resources, love and education from an early age, and their experience of abuse of power, violence, psychological manipulation, extreme poverty and discrimination due to ethnicity, class and gender provoke an ongoing sense of inferiority in the youngest, whose self-loathing affects their ability to love and be beloved in very tragic ways. Here, you show sympathy for Irish children and for outsiders. Did you feel that you needed to talk about this again because so little has changed in other countries after a century?

EM: We have not eradicated poverty, we do not even try. We pretend we offer equal access to health and education and housing, but we do not. The world is moving in a very sinister way as the need for a working class is disappearing, as we will have automation doing many jobs. So now there are huge populations who were once factory workers and now are spare and relegated to a life of perpetual unemployment, and they are considered surplus. Yes, we all have a desire to belong, but in this new economy, many do not. If the wealthy think they can run off to gated communities on Mars and ignore everyone else I don't think they've read the history books very closely. The huge wealth disparities that exist now are creating very unstable societies.

MT: Today, more and more people are talking about women suffering from machismo, the phallocracy, sexual aggression and feminicide. The Cruelty Men *illustrates, in detail, the roots of trauma and reflects the incredible resilience of women at home, as servants of other families and in institutional centres. What were you seeking to say by addressing these issues in your fiction? Having been raised in a rigidly Catholic society, that you left behind, has your view on gender changed over the years?*

EM: I was raised as a feminist by a feminist mother and father. My mother was an activist and started an organization to get rid of discrimination for women in sports clubs. Women weren't even allowed to be members of any golf club, and many tennis clubs in Ireland, until she campaigned and organized and got the laws changed. Even my father would sit in front of the TV and point out sexism in advertisements. I know this was not the norm. We have made many advances but there is still huge sexism and misogyny in our culture. I know on a gut level that if I had been a male writer my career would have had a different trajectory. Nobody knew what to do with a woman writing in the way I did. They just could not fathom it. When I first published *Breakfast in Babylon*, a very well-known radio host asked me, what my parents thought? I was 26 years old. Can you imagine asking a male writer that? I was also told recently, after submitting *The Cruelty Men* to many places and having it rejected, that they were already publishing a big literary book by a woman writer that year. As if there is always only room for one. Many men have just told me outright that they do not read female writers. I asked one why, and he said, I just know they will be too self-absorbed. Could you imagine if (Karl Ove) Knausgård had been a woman writing such a detailed brilliant narrative focusing on the minutiae of ordinary life like that? He would have been dismissed. Ultimately, people just do not think women are as important or quite as human as men are. Hopefully, now that men have run the world into the ground with their wars and their profits above all else the younger generations will see that all voices need to be heard in a culture.

MT: Some of your most significant female narrators like Maeve, or male narrators like Ignatius, not only describe their sexual likes and impulses openly, but also have a gift for discerning homosexual and repressed desires in other characters, like Patsey and Seán. On many occasions, you use the rhetoric of inquiry to question sexuality as a reproductive measure or as a source of priests' lack of self-realization, frustrations and cruel attitudes. What is your intention with this discussion of sexuality in the novel?

EM: That is spot on and all were considerations when I was writing. I was looking on Amazon reviews and one person said, "great book but I am only giving it four stars because of the gratuitous sex scenes". I never lost a star for sex before. I think I should put that on the back of the next edition. Also, I was struck when a class by Professor Barry Devine in Heidelberg University were reading *The Cruelty Men* and one of the male students objected to the sex scenes. They made him very uncomfortable and he asked me were they necessary. Is sex necessary? Do they ask male writers why their characters have sex? I have no answers to that one.

MT: Your book shows a superb literary treatment of the characters' psychology and personal growth. The Cruelty Men *reveals an encyclopaedic knowledge of Irish history, culture and folklore, yet it is also a very powerful indictment of the dynamics of power in social constructions based on gender, race and class issues under patriarchal systems of thought and Irish Catholic institutions. Do you believe that the writer has a mediating role in society? If so, could you tell me about the critique that you carry out in* The Cruelty Men *and how this might relate to such a mediating role?*

EM: The writer and all artists have a mediating role. If we open history books we just get a litany of dates and battles and kings and rulers and treaties. But the people who had to live through the history are missing. Books give a voice to those people. The stories bring the history alive.

MT: The idea of Mother Ireland pervades all your female characters, but also the chapters where the poor characters of your novel die, something that you figure as going underground. After so many traumatic life episodes provoked by unfair, wrong or absurd decisions made by selfish parents like Seamus and despotic religious representatives in the name of taming the so-called illiterate, poor, savage or sinful Irish race, these people are swallowed by the Irish land. Are you just talking about Ireland or are you referring to the coloniser and the colonised in the world today?

EM: The book is set in Ireland, yet I was hoping it has resonance elsewhere as all people have been on the downside of power and the poor have been exploited and thrown away in every part of the world. The underground is universal. Regarding the coloniser and the colonised, you are right, as a character in *Baby Zero* pointed out that for hundreds of years we are dealing with the same cowboy and Indian story over and over again. Different places, same narrative. Just ask people in various parts of Spain that have independence movements and resent being controlled by a centralized power in Madrid.

MT: This is a book about personal and cultural trauma and a tribute to the Mother Ireland/ Virgin Mary figure personified in the character of the same name. Here this figure is praised over Jesus, who is "always very busy", like most men in Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mary makes some of the most basic rural activities, which have traditionally been associated with Irish women, and mothering into important things to share with others so that they grow into good

people. The Cruelty Men *does not end with the character of Mary, but with her "Baby", as she helps her old friend Ignatius, now a beggar in Dublin and a scapegoat for capitalist society's lack of empathy. Does Mary represent your idealised view of the Mother Ireland figure of the past? Does Baby personify your idealised view of Mother Ireland in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, with all its current problems of homelessness, migration, social exclusion and excessive consumerism?*

EM: I go down to Mexico once a year and it always strikes me that it feels very much like home; I once heard Ireland described as a "sunless Mexico". One thing that always strikes me is the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe and that resonates with Irish Catholicism. I think it was an attempt to reinstall the femininity in the Godhead. A return to Isis, the impulse to honour the feminine. This is not present in Protestant cultures though they have been more accepting of the notion of women ministers of the faith. That is an interesting point about Mary and Baby. Yes, Mary could be the ideal. She is based on my dad's housekeeper Pattie, who very much embodied all that Mary is in the book. She had one of the "old minds" in which everything was sacred. She knew the land and talked about the fairies as if she could see them right in front of her. Hers was the old indigenous Ireland that had just about escaped the very heavy hand of colonialization by the English and by the Roman Catholic church. She was a devoted Catholic but her faith was more pagan. Mary is one of the last links to the knowledge of the ancient world. She instinctively knows that the land is alive and sentient and that awareness will be necessary if we are to survive what is about to come with climate change. We need to start listening again. Baby has been raised by her; and if you notice, the story runs through the generations not by blood lines, but by story lines. Those who can carry the stories and pass them down are the narrators.

MT: Your novel ends with Ignatius's answer to Baby's enquiry about why he never looked for his relatives after he left school. His answer is: "When have the well fed ever understood the hungry?" Is this happening with European and American governments today? If so, why do you think that is so?

EM: When have the well fed ever understood the hungry? – That could be the mantra for all of human history. When you have power and privilege, you are blind to it and you will not give it up easily. We have a system globally that has put wealth and resources into very few hands. This creates injustice and instability and we are subject to the paranoia of the very rich that this system will change. The world is run by people with money, for people with money, in order for them to make more money. They will not allow us to vote to change the system that benefits them. Democracy is the best system we have but with the wealth disparity so extreme then we can see that we do not have anyone to vote for who will really shift the wealth. We need to tax the wealthy so they cannot accumulate so much at our expense. No one needs to be a billionaire. If you have billionaires then your economic system is not working.

MT: We are now living through COVID-19 and observing its worst effects on the poor. You are an extremely involved citizen and teacher, and your school feeds these children twice a day because they might not eat otherwise. Emer, have we learned nothing in almost 50 years?

EM: My school feeds the kids twice a day. They are on a school lunch program. The poverty here in the richest country on earth is stunning. When the kids are on break, they often do not get to eat. School is their food source and their stability. Many are suffering terribly now that the schools are closed. We have had teachers set up a fund for families in dire need and we

contributed and they distributed cash. Some of our families are facing homelessness because of this crisis and they were unstable to begin with, as rents keep rising. I have students whose parents have been deported to Mexico and they are living in homeless shelters, trying to take care of younger siblings, working from 4-10pm in fast food places after school. Meanwhile our leaders are saying, "build a wall, shove migrants and refugees in detention centres, separate families". They are being told that they are thieves, rapists, spongers, and *bad hombres*; in reality they are the backbone of the country. They pick all our food, they work hard in low paying jobs. They are kept undocumented on purpose so they are always vulnerable and cannot vote. They still have to pay tax though. And this tax is funnelled to the uber-wealthy corporations who get massive Government pay-outs. This is socialism for the rich and vampire capitalism for the rest of us. It is one of the biggest scams since the Russian Tzars had the serfs enslaved in the fields. How can this system be sustainable? We are losing our planet for short-term profits for the uber-wealthy.

MT: A few months ago, one of Spain's most renowned film directors, Fernando Trueba, described a hypothetical or dystopic scenario: most Europeans are infected with COVID-19 and people have to migrate to Africa to escape death and misery. The Trump administration and its support for private medical companies will show us the worst effects of COVID-19 in the following months, because many Americans have very low or no income, and no healthcare, and many Latin American migrants will not be able to pay for medical treatment. What do these two very real dystopic scenarios inspire in you?

EM: They do not inspire me, they terrify me. The powerful are looking at this crisis to use it to further their own agenda. They will claim more power as a result, we have seen this happen in Turkey and Hungary and I am sure Trump is concocting a plan for the next election to ensure he keeps power. Naomi Klein has laid all of this out in her Shock Doctrine theory, where capitalism uses recurring crisis to erode democracy. We are living in very dangerous times. We must stay aware and united to counter their fascism.

The misery of the animals in the wet markets has just changed our world. And it is proof that you cannot keep inflicting pain and consuming pain without becoming a wretched beast yourself. Covid-19 has put us all in lockdown. There was a sense of terror that gripped everyone in the first couple of weeks. Going outside felt like stepping into the middle of the plague. Existence was stripped to a basic form. Now people are adjusting and forgetting what they have learned from it.

So-called normalcy is a thinly veiled form of random chaos. Accepted by conventions and agreements. When things like the lockdown and pandemic happened, all that was thrown out and the bare essence of things and life became apparent, especially in the first few weeks. The people we loved and food and a home was all we could focus on. Our fragile bodies as part of a system that viruses could penetrate. The entire human race was interconnected in fear and hope and concern. It was amazing.

We could see things such as the stock market, which plummeted at first as it was subjected to reality. Is the stock market a real thing? It is just a totally imaginary concept but we pretend it's a solid logical thing directing the efforts of most people and the economy. The fact that the stock market is going back up to where it was before shows it is totally becoming detached from anything but gambling. If it is supposed to predict the future earning potential of companies, how could it be at the same place as before the pandemic? Unemployment is at 30% in the U.S. alone yet the stock market casino has returned to insane normalcy and illogical reason. At first in Covid, people were terrified and humble and listening to scientists. Within a month, there is

a fog of nonsense about the virus being fake, new drugs that could cure it which are just special interests for big pharma, politicising a virus that does not know politics, ignoring experts. The nonsense fog has filled in those spaces of truth that we had at the beginning. Maybe it will take an asteroid hurtling towards us to focus us and centre us again. We have climate change which will probably shake us off the earth finally, but that is too incremental and abstract for us to understand in these terms.

I would like to see a world where people work and pay taxes and those taxes are used to fund free day care, free health care, free education through college, secure housing, food security – and to take care of the planet first and foremost. The earth will be fine without us, that much is clear. But, if we want to stay, we need to start listening.

MT: What is it about short film as a genre that allows you to achieve your creative goals?

EM: I love short films because they are like poems. Everything has to count. I would like to do a feature but the money-raising is hell. I wrote the script for *Baby Zero* and we got close but it fell apart at the last minute. The money makes film agonizing.

MT: In one of these short films, Unaccompanied *(2006; featuring Irvine Welsh, author of* Trainspotting*), a social worker finds a traumatized young boy from Africa on the streets of Dublin. You show the suffering of others. Through constructing personal trauma in this short film, viewers might recognize human pain and its sources and become receptive to the idea of taking significant and responsible measures to remedy it. Was this your intention with this short film?*

EM: Yes it was. When I returned to Ireland during the boom times of the Celtic Tiger, I found a country that was vastly unequal. For the first time we had new immigrants. Before it was always Irish people leaving, such as myself. That fascinated me as it has changed Ireland forever and I wanted to investigate that. I was struck by the most vulnerable among us, the unaccompanied minors. My father Eamonn Martin was working with the homeless in Sophia Housing, the organization he co-founded to help alleviate some of the suffering. There were many old convents that were no longer in use and this transition from the old monolithic religious structures into places for the most vulnerable was very interesting. Especially as Ireland had a notorious past with industrial schools and laundries. I am not sure what art can do to help but I feel telling the story gives a voice to those who do not have a voice. What struck me when all the stories of abuse in institutions came out was that the people kept saying, "It wasn't the abuse that was the most damaging, it was the fact no one believed us or even cared". I heard that over and over again from survivors. It moved me to write *The Cruelty Men*.

MT: You also produced Irvine Welsh's directorial debut Nuts *in 2007, together with Niall McKay. Here, Welsh tackles "the issue of testicular cancer, and the closeted racism among Ireland's middle-class professionals" (Welsh 2007).In the dark humour applied to the character's psyche and troubled inner life, were you holding a mirror up to politics?*

EM: Irvine Welsh and I became very close friends during that time and I was delighted to produce his first film. He was also struck by the liberal middle-class attitude to the new immigrants and their blatant hypocrisy. His work, like mine, uses humour to expose the real horror that would otherwise be unpalatable.

MT: Regarding your paintings, how do you navigate the art world? Which current art trends are you following?

EM: I do not even attempt to navigate the art world, I am not very good at networking and schmoozing which is a luxury for the well-funded. I spent years as a single parent raising two daughters and soon realized that the arts networking took place at night in cities and I was putting my kids to bed when everyone was out drinking free wine and eating brie and crackers and making contacts. I paint because I love it. I was very lucky to connect with The Origin Gallery in Dublin and Noelle Campbell Sharpe. She sent me to Cill Rialaig to paint the folktales of Seán Ó Conaill and a bomb went off in my head. That shifted everything for me. *The Cruelty Men* came out of there and all my paintings.

MT: Emer, you are a very active user of your Facebook fan page and Twitter, but you keep saying that Facebook "is a vile racist white supremacist site masquerading as a news outlet". Quite recently, you quoted Sacha Baron Cohen's keynote address at the Anti-Defamation League as "best speech of the year calling out Facebook, Twitter, and Google for allowing fascism to rise again under the spurious guise of free speech". Do you feel that your stance on Facebook is shared by other Irish intellectuals and artists today?

EM: I think we are all uncomfortable with the way social media is used to gather our data. Our desire to communicate manipulates us into giving out information so we can be targeted by advertising. Social media had such a utopian potential for us all. I love it, great discussions, political arguments, meeting new people, free flow of ideas, keeping in contact with so many people. However, now we see the dark underbelly of our mania for communicating with each other. We have become data. Nothing was free. And we are so easily manipulated by bots and trolls who control our so-called intellectual discourse. It is disappointing but maybe just indicative of the human quagmire.

MT: One of your most recent posts on Facebook was about Brexit. In your view, "England has chosen to screw over the majority of its people and the environment and keep that bozo Boris at its helm to dismantle their healthcare and educational system US style". For you, this is profoundly depressing and you support an independence referendum. What role do you think Facebook played in encouraging Brexit?

EM: I think it is pretty clear now that Facebook profited off targeting people with propaganda ads, especially ones tapping into Islamophobia, the idea that Turkey will be part of the E.U. and Sharia law will be in England before they knew it. Truth is that England became a rich country though imperialism and exploitation of other countries. They were happy enough to go change other cultures forever, but less happy when immigrants from those former colonies show up. My English friends are a sophisticated, worldly, multi-cultural bunch and they were caught by surprise with Brexit. They definitely did not vote for it, nor did they expect it to pass. Now they find themselves looking at their passports and realizing how much they lose out on being part of the European network. I feel for them.

MT: How do you see the future of Ireland and Northern Ireland after Brexit?

EM: I am hoping it will eventually lead to a united Ireland. However, that has to come peacefully and democratically with respect for all communities. When I was growing up and

the Unionists were saying that Ireland was an oppressive country controlled by Rome, they were not wrong. But this is a very different Ireland now from the one I grew up in. Are they really going to build a wall through Ireland? The last thing the world needs is more walls, more fences, more borders.

MT: You have compared the Trump Republican administration to a feudal system, described Michael Bloomberg as a polite authoritarian, Bernie Sanders as the Democratic establishment, Nancy Pelosi as a purveyor of contrived PR stunts that do not resist Trump, but block and undermine any progressive anti-capitalist candidate in her own party. Has your brave stance caused you any trouble in the past? What are your hopes for the future of America?

EM: I am a naturally political person, was raised talking politics. Bernie Sanders was my hope for this election as he was the only one talking about substantial change that the system needed. But the Democratic establishment were more afraid of Bernie than they are of Trump. They are a big money organization who protect the interests of the uber-wealthy . There is no left party in America, there is no party that represents the rights of workers or even the middle class. It is a bleak landscape politically. They expect people like me to vote for whatever candidate they give us. Biden is a corporate Wall St. candidate with a neoliberal agenda. I live in California, which will vote Democrat anyway so I can vote for whom I want. The Democratic party can do without my vote. Though Trump is a robber baron, looting everything is sight and stuffing the courts with ultra-right wing judges. He needs to go. Frankly, I am once again stuck politically and that is what they count on. Clever system for the rich. They have me trapped.

MT: Responding to an article by Lynn Steger Strong in the Guardian *titled "A dirty secret: you can only be a writer if you can afford it", you posted the following on Facebook: "Over the years I have been engaged in a massive struggle between trying to keep writing and creating while paying the rent and raising a family. To survive I need a full-time job". I know you are loved by your students. Is teaching just a job that pays the bills or is there something more to it?*

EM: I am very lucky that I get to wake up in the morning and go teach literature. It is a job that pays the bills, but it is the best job in the world so I am not complaining. Schools are their own planets; baffling in their complexity to those outside their gates. Teachers, students, admin, counsellors, cafeteria staff and custodians. We are a tribe, and we thrive on our interactions. Nothing can replace the classroom, in a way that nothing has ever replaced theatre. To be gathered together at a singular moment, to learn, to dream, to struggle – and that magic when something is understood as a class in that very room, just among ourselves, in real time. It does not happen every day but when it does you can feel that moment, it is visceral and irreplaceable and profound.

MT: Many of your posts on social matters are fierce critiques of capitalism, which you define as a "pernicious economic system that is unsustainable in the long run". You frequently talk about the devastating effects of Western capitalism and imperialism at the hands of corrupt leaders like Trump, Netanyahu and to places like Saudi Arabia. You care about human rights and today people from Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine and Syria, many of whom are refugees now, the latter even in Europe, are going through the terror of metamorphosis, as you show in the story and paintings of your latest short film We Build Fences. *You are against war and say that we need to focus on the climate. In other words, you touch on the notion of "the bigger picture", among other themes, in your art. To what effect do you tackle this issue? Are you looking for a way to solve the world's bigger societal issues?*

EM: Art can bring awareness and deepen understanding but it does not solve anything. The solving is done by people far more dedicated to activism than I am. However, I think all activism is linked to art movements in some way. They are inextricable. I went to see [*Soul of a Nation:*] *Art in the Age of Black Power* in both the Tate London, and when the show came to San Francisco. Activists need imagination as a tool and they use it very well.

MT: Regarding all the cruelty and abuse that is being carried out in the Mexican border, you have donated to charities helping migrants. You have also asked people to vote for candidates who will stop this madness – children in camps for example. Your concern for the future of children is related to your concern for climate change, fuelled by another child, Greta Thunberg, whose views you support fully. What advice would you give these youngsters campaigning for climate justice? And your younger self?

EM: Greta is the tiny prophet of the new generation. As she said, we love our children but we stole their future. They need to take it back. As long as there is activism there is hope. Hopefully, this new generation is much more aware and conscious than we were at their age. So many are questioning all systems. How they eat, how they travel, how they interact with each other, the ridiculousness of gender binaries. All of these things were standards of the hippie movement but got lost in the heavy drug culture that wreaked havoc. This generation seem to be starting ahead of the last few. They will need all they can get. The struggle will be gargantuan. But they have no choice if we have any interest in the species making it through the next century.

MT: Could you say something about your next book, Headwreck*? How does it relate to the previous ones? When will it be out? What are you going to do next?*

EM: *Headwreck* will be released in the summer of 2021. It is a kind of sequel to *The Cruelty Men*, yet I want both to stand alone. It takes the next generation through to the present moment. Again, my books reflect how I see the world. They have multiple interacting characters weaving their lives around each other in a big mysterious tapestry that you have to back away from to see patterns. After this, I will write a short book. That is my goal.

MT: Thank you for this interview, Emer. I wish you all the best for your future work.

EM: Many thanks, Melania.

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