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‘LITERAL FEELING’: RORY GLEESON’S TOUCH IN WRITING THE LIFE



Rory Gleeson

novelist, playwright and screenwriter (London, UK).

Anush Akopyan

Senior lecturer, Southern Federal University, simultaneous interpreter (Rostov-on-Don, Russia)
e-mail: agakopyan@sfedu.ru

Abstract. Rory Gleeson is a novelist, screenwriter and playwright. His novel *Rockadown Shore* was published in 2017 by John Murray Press. His short film *Psychic* debuted at The Galway Film Fleadh in 2018 before its showing on SkyArts. His play *Blood in the Dirt* premiered at The New Theatre in Dublin in 2019. He was the 2019 Burgess Fellow for Fiction at the University of Manchester. His latest piece of non-fiction will be published by *Granta* in 2021. This interview was taken in 2020, after Rory Gleeson was asked to be the contributing author to the Art and Craft of Translation Contest annually held at the Institute of Philology, Journalism and Cross-cultural Communication (Southern Federal University). Interview by Anush Akopyan.

Key words: Rory Gleeson, creative writing, contemporary Irish literature, writer's interview.

Your play *Blood in the Dirt* was staged in 2019 in Dublin in New Theatre and it was highly acclaimed. It is a one-man show inspired by a true story of an Irish family moving to Ontario, Canada to pursue a better life but instead ending up facing all sorts of injustice and death. How indicative do you think your play is in terms of its application to the Irish history as such?

I mean it's not so much something that can represent Irish history as it is Irish history itself. The Donnellys, on whom the play is based, were a real Irish family who went to Canada. What wasn't so typical was them single-handedly terrorizing an entire Ontarian town, before eventually being slaughtered in the most famous vigilante murder spree in Canadian history. But yes, their story immediately seemed to be something that could represent the Irish experience in going to the New World. I wanted to undermine more popular or easy ways of telling that story, by seriously addressing the violence that took place in those contexts. Most of the firsthand accounts I read of that time were terrifying, full of fear and pain, while most of the contemporary stories about it now are sort of fun, paddywhackery tales. Mad Irish beating the heads off each other in the snow, working till night and drinking till morning. As someone who's been in fights, and done a bit of physical labour, it bothered me that the actual

physical and emotional impact of those things were completely glossed over. *Blood in the Dirt* addressed land rights and unfairness and the moral hypocrisy of our governing institutions, but for me it was always about the physical toll violence takes upon our bodies, and the emotional and spiritual wounds that poverty, cold and inequality inflict. The 'Irish story' abroad is seen as a successful one, so it's easy to romanticize it or say it was all worth it, especially when you never had to experience it yourself. I would hope that refocusing on the cost of that success story would make people more sympathetic to people currently undergoing that type of suffering now.

When creating characters and providing them with certain personalities and distinguishing features, it's always easier when they are relatable at least to some extent. This is the case with the characters in your novel *Rockadon Shore*. However, in your short stories 'Space Mountain' and 'Night Creatures' the characters (a bereaved police officer with a troubled son and a female taxi driver respectively) seem to stem from somewhat different backgrounds. What do you do in situations when you can't relate to your characters? How do you make sure you get the voice right? Do you do any research before writing about something that's outside your life experience?

Research shmesmerch. Ah no, a lot of different writers fall on separate sides of the research debate, but usually it ends up being ‘whatever works for you.’ I tell myself I avoid research because oftentimes research becomes the job rather than being something that facilitates the job, but I also have to recognize that I’m lazy and somewhat shy and don’t want to go asking people questions or reading through loads of procedural manuals. As I’m progressing though, I’m learning that experiences, and going places, and seeing things, and being shown things are great spurs for creativity and research will come naturally afterwards. I wrote up a non-fiction piece just recently that required a huge amount of research, and though it was a head-wreck, I did it very willingly because I already had the story, I had the passion for the narrative, and then I just needed to build up enough technical data and sources to support it. I think if you can, get someone to show you something, it’s always better. And as always, writers need to get out more.

I know that you do not really like when your writing is put down to or defined by any specific literary categories. However, you once determined your style in writing as belonging to that of psychological realism. Can you dwell on that and say what you meant by it? When asked about her style, another contemporary Irish writer Sally Rooney

said in one of her interviews in The Irish Times: “It’s so difficult to be conscious of a development of a style and the analysis of how you came to it can only ever be applied retroactively”. To what degree do you agree with her?

The Roonster speaks true. I think generally the question often comes down to what kind a writer you are, and how much you’re led by form. Unfortunately, I also think a lot of the time it comes down to much you have your head up your own arse. Everyone has their own rules or ways of getting into a good story or good characters down on the page, or of expressing what their concerns are or what bothers them or what they think is important in fiction and in general. If I’m ever pushed on the question, I just respond ‘psychological realism’ because whoever is asking the question is looking for some form of certainty and I can’t give them that. I don’t know what ‘psychological realism’ actually is, but it sounds right to me. I like to mess about in peoples’ heads, and see their thinking, but then we’re getting to a whole thing of ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ and you couldn’t possibly call it realism. Writers get credit for formal aspects of their writing that were either unconscious or generated by the the reader themselves making connections between themes and images and words in the story and drawing their own theories, which is usually quite fun. I’ll take credit as a writer for writing something with enough ideas and depth in it to aid those

interpretations and connections, but you can't take credit for them all. Usually what I hope for is to leave the reader with something, a feeling, or an experience, sometimes literally just that, the feeling of something, whether it be cold, or loss, or hope, or the feeling of being in a sweaty nightclub, desperate to find your friend but also loving the music while hoping to see that girl you've a crush on but also aware there's another there with a crush on you, and your beer has gone flat but you're young and you want a cigarette and you want to dance and do everything at the same time. That feels valuable to me, as a feeling, more than questions about syntax or post-structuralism. When I'm editing, I think a lot about meaning and language and form and what the words on the page are doing, but I'm not usually concerned with that the first few drafts. Being theory-led just never seemed to work for me.

Then were there any writers you looked up to and admired so much that you wanted to defy them by excelling them at writing? You once mentioned John Steinbeck in this respect. Do you fear influence in writing? Given the family you come from (especially your exceptionally talented father Brendan Gleeson), do you seek recognition and approval?

Man, take a number. I have favourite writers and I have writers who influence me

either directly in my style or inspire me with their imagination or creativity or any of the rest. Usually that works just by showing you something is possible. There are certain writers I'll always come back to, and who I'm waiting for to publish their next thing. Out of the living ones, Roddy Doyle and Eimear McBride sit me up. Generally, the writers you want to beat day to day are your peers, because you see yourself as on a similar trajectory to them, and it feels like *Baby This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us*. It's not true but it's how it feels. In any case that kind of competitiveness curdles your passion and turns you into a sour old bag, so it's best to treat that part of yourself as a long-standing poor character trait. Writers and artists in general are far more needy than they'll ever admit. They're constantly seeking recognition and approval, but the minute they get it, they're fast in scorning it or throwing it away. Desire's always more potent than having. With regards my family, I'm lucky I'm in a similar but adjacent field to them, so the milestones are different. I don't need to kill my father, metaphorically or otherwise.

As a writer-in-residence at the university of Manchester you had to teach Master students sharing your experience and expertise in writing and giving them some advice on how to improve their skills, where to begin, what to take into consideration, how to develop compelling characters and give

them voice, etc. When you started your path was there anyone you could turn to when in doubt and confused?

The students in Manchester already had their own established teachers and mentors within the department. I was brought in as an extra resource for them, to give them an outside or a different view. This meant that generally I could be less formal with students or give them advice that had nothing to do with marking schemes or examinations. I was very keen to offer this because I understand how important it is to have someone who's ahead of you on the road to tell you it's alright. Creative writing programs are incredibly competitive, disorienting environments. You'll hear a lot of opinions about your work, many right, or rightish, and many laughably wrong or unkind, and it's your job to sort out the true from false and the true-but-hard-to-take from the just-plain-wrong. Imposter syndrome burrows in for a lot of people as well, so having someone established tell you, 'Don't worry, you're on the right path, keep going', can mean a huge amount. Your writing will improve with time, especially your technical competence, so for the most part it's just a confidence game in keeping your foot on the pedal, and learning to discern valuable criticism from hokum. Writers need to discover for themselves what works and doesn't work. Even if someone tells you outright, gives you that shortcut, you kind of need to discover it for yourself in order for it to sink in.

This country is still perceived through the prism of the Soviet legacy. It may come across as grim, grey, severe, underdeveloped, unsmiling... What were your impressions when you visited Russia in 2019 for the first time? Did it live up to your expectations and fit the stereotypes?

I was dying to get over. There are any number of stereotypes out there about Russia itself, as there are for any country. I've travelled enough during my life that I'm aware that whatever stereotypes I hold about different countries and areas will be almost immediately subverted when I arrive, which is one of the things I love about travelling. People were welcoming and enthusiastic and kind. Having said that, when I arrived I did allow myself to indulge in certain fantasies stemming from Cold War fiction: about spying and the KGB and dead drops and cyanide capsules. I walked around Moscow for five hours before I came to Rostov, and the entire time I had great fun checking my six in shop windows, car wing mirrors and sunglasses stands, just really hoping someone was following me. But that says absolutely nothing about what Russians are like, just me. I dunno. One thing that struck me about the Russians I met was how concerned they were with what I, and others abroad, thought of them. I don't know anyone who thinks Russia is somehow lacking in culture and history, but it seemed a big concern when I visited. I was happy

to let people teach me as it meant I got showed around a lot of different places, was given food and drink to try, and got to meet a lot of cool people. Feigning ignorance often has its positives. I would say that I was warned by other writers before I came over that Russians, and especially Russian students, hold writers and literature in exceptionally high regard. They listen to and respect writers, but they also expect thorough, well thought out opinions from them. I was told answering questions at literary events feels like you're being examined, like you're taking your viva. This certainly held true for me. In Ireland, writers have long been acknowledged to be messy people one way or the other, so there's a bit more leeway given for bad public performances.

Speaking of uneasy feelings... What does the writing procedure constitute for you? Aren't you running a risk to get stuck and trapped in a never-ending circle of editing in pursuit of perfection?

There's something I always tell new writers: Stop apologizing. I mean this for your work, not for your life. In your life you probably should be apologizing to people all the time. You've most likely done something wrong. But if you don't take your work seriously, why should anyone else? I go to readings all the time where someone goes up with their phone, says 'I wrote this on the bus here, sorry', and spends a lot of time explaining why it's bad. People will apologize

for their work because they're afraid of exposing themselves, being vulnerable. Nah. Go up there and say, 'I worked really hard on this, I hope you like it.' Your writing is never done, and it's never perfect, but if you're going to show it to people and ask them to read it, you have to believe in it and feel like it's worthwhile. I'm not saying have an inflated sense of ego or think of yourself as full and complete and a once in a generation artist who has a perfect piece of writing. Self-criticism is fully needed for this profession. But for God's sake stop apologizing. Put yourself out there and be willing to take the hit if people don't like it. As for knowing when writing is done, never. But deadlines help. If you have to actually hand it over to someone that puts a final point on it. The edit feedback loop is real.

We all live in different countries and we are all exposed to different experiences. There is one thing, however, that has been uniting the entire world for quite some time now that is the coronavirus Pandemic. Do you think that with all the tragic events and the trials of 2020 people started to turn to books in order to get lost in them, find comfort, forget, sink into oblivion?

I'm certain a lot of people did. I didn't. Books aren't a source of comfort for me, not really, not like a good 90s thriller or a YouTube fails compilation. I read for a lot of reasons. To discover

something or someone, to be impressed, to try something new. Out of curiosity or jealousy or it was a recommendation, to research something or learn, or because I'm in the mood, because I like it. But it's rarely a comfort-comfort. When it looked like the world was going to hell, and I was worried about my friends and family and bored stiff staying inside, all I wanted to do, and did, was watch cartoons and action movies and bad comedies and things I'd seen before. I took utter comfort in the familiar and unchallenging. After a couple of months, when my anxiety went down, I started to read again, and I'd missed it. But no, I took no comfort from fiction during the bad times. You do whatever you have to do to get through.

And what is it that you usually look for in a book? What books have you been reading during the recent outbreak?

I don't know what I'm looking for until I find it. Usually within the first few pages of something you know. Others require a bit of warming to and that's fine. I started reading Garth Greenwell's '*Cleanness*' over the summer, and within the first few sentences it was just, 'Yep. Yeah, this is

it.' Mary Gaitskill as well. Caoilinn Hughes' '*The Wild Laughter*' was brilliant, and again that was a first-pager win. I'll try and finish most books I start, but some are just begging to be left down. Others will make you miss your bus stop. I always appreciate a good slash of humour, a level of self-awareness, joy in language, in image, strength in form, something that knows what it is. But I'll take messy novels or dour novels or utterly depressing novels if they just work for me. Hard to explain. Let's just say this, I was in Venice, it was summer, hot, beautiful out. I'd spent months inside. I bought '*All The Pretty Horses*' and sat in the shade facing a wall, reading dense prose about a 17 year old fighting for his life in a Mexican prison. Why? It was good.

There is a quote that goes: "The world is a book you can read". What genre do you think the world as a book belongs to?

I'm not entirely certain on that metaphor. I think if the world is a book, there's got to be a lot of fuff in it. That's why we have writers, to cut out all the boring stuff and keep the good bits.

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