

Joseph O'Connor and Colum McCann

Redemption Falls

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South Court Auditorium

Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers

New York Public Library

JEAN STROUSE: (introduction inaudible)

(applause)

COLUM MCCANN: Thank you so much, Jean. It's nice to be back, huh? Shall we say? He brought his tent, I have sleeping bags, and we're just going to stay the whole time anyway. And some idiot wrote this about *Redemption Falls* about a year ago. This is what we're going to talk about tonight, we're going to talk about this book, *Redemption Falls*, because I've already talked about *Zoli* here, and I think that this is like appropriate to talk about this enormous book. "*Redemption Falls* is a gem; it's a glorious book, enormous, virtuoso, brave. Its scope is wide—love, death, war, belonging. Its gaze is intimate. At its heart is a story of a woman who wants to return to the only country she has—her family. The language is at turns bawdy, ancient, poetic, grand, and funny. One can't dismiss the genius that's involved in being able to tell such necessary stories in a time of war and still be able to beat back all the clichés. The minute I finished the book, I wanted to start reading it all over again."

That was me, **(laughter)** and I still—I went back to it again yesterday and today. I think the mark of truly great book is the echoes it brings back into your life, and you remember actually where you were, physically, when you read particular passages and how they come back. And so it's an honor to present Joe; we're going to talk and talk and talk and talk; try to shut us up after an hour, that'll be fun. But he's going to read for five minutes and then we're going to sit down and have a conversation and then we're going to open it up for questions, too. Thank you for inviting me back to the Library, and it's a pleasure to be here with Joe O'Connor.

(applause)

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, thank you very much. It's lovely to be back here at the Library again. I feel—I feel as relaxed as though I was in my front room at home. We have two young kids, so that isn't always very relaxed, but you know what I mean. I spoke to James today, and he was kind enough to mention that he's very sad not to be here and drinking these sodas, but he told me while I've been away on the book tour, they had a little exercise in school; they had to fill out a questionnaire as part of a reading project, and one of the questions was, "Where is your favorite place to read books?" And he wrote, of course, The New York Public Library. **(laughter)** So—I thank Jean and Betsy and everybody, Pamela and Adriana at the Center and of course our friends from Ireland House, my publishers at Free Press, from Simon and Schuster, who are here tonight, and I thank them deeply for publishing the book and I thank—I see lots of

friends here tonight. You all clean up very well, I have to say, so thank you for being here.

So this is from the opening of *Redemption Falls*, and I won't explain it, I'll just read it. It's the opening few pages. "Chapter One: Motherless Child: A year in the life of Eliza Duane Mooney, her leave-taking, the strangeness of time, a fat man, Little Rock, John Corey and his family, the lustful preacher." The quarter light was rising as she hurried out from Baton Rouge, through the criminal districts of town, then the black section, the Irish, past the clustered Union sentries on the Telegraph Road, the maws of Federal cannons ranked and aimed toward the North. Then onward over the viaduct into barricaded swampland where once, not long ago, the slaves had toiled. It was January the 17th of 1865; the end of the war was coming. Walking away from a scalloping shack, the grits of the road on road-skinned soles, grind at the shingles into lacerated arches, dazzle of pain, the cramps through the hamstrings, and the hopeless prayers for shoes. It took her almost a month to slog across Louisiana, fifteen miles a day, twenty-six thousand paces. A soldier, vitted and booted, might have deserted at such a burden. Eliza Duane Mooney did not. She had not been long walking when it started to happen. Everything was coming to merit attention, a rice field, two flies, a dead chicken hawk in a gully, the eyes of hungry alligators, resentful in the slime. All of it seemed equal, which is one definition of madness—the weight of the world had lost proportion.

"There were days when she hobbled until the world began to shimmer. The sky billowed around her like the foals of apocalypse, and the white-hot egg of pain in her breast

threatened to crack with the seepage of venom. She would lie wherever she fell, gaping up at the crows, would crawl from the road if she was able. Whatever burned to hatch must be palliated by stillness; she came to believe it could hear her. Riders went by, or wagons full of men. Nobody stopped; perhaps they did not see her. This is what she would tell herself as she shivered in the ditches. 'I am becoming invisible now.' April comes in. Time is moving strangely. The tenses grow confused.

"In her bundle, a storybook, dilapidated, spine cracked, and canister of medicinal foot powder and a crumpled letter. The powder proved a waste of her last four cents. She suspects it is nothing but pestled-down chalk. She may as well rub in the cinders of the road for all the alleviation it brings. The redeemer had never wrote, only once in the dust, never put nothing on paper. Walked fifteen hundred mile out of Palestine, Texas, howled many a field holler on the way. He was hipshot at Gettysburg, blinded in the Wilderness, torched alive at Shiloh, gutted at Manassas, and he shrieked the rebel yell as they diced for his uniform. 'Mother, why have you forsaken me?'

"Sometimes by moonlight, or when she pauses to rest, she takes out the storybook and riffles its pages. The feel of the flimsies Eliza finds comforting more than the words stained onto them. 'Thou shalt not kill.' 'I shall cause them to fall.' 'Their carcasses will I give to be meat for the fowls.' If you counted all the words in that thick rustling book, they would be fewer than the dead of the war. Some of those who died were Ephesians or Jerusalems, Maccabees and Canaanites, Golgothas and Samaritans, but most were only 'and's and 'if's and 'ye's, small and unmemorable, devoid of authority, only significant

for the matters they linked, never worth quoting or immortalizing in a place name, because those are the ones who will always do the dying when it comes a time of war, and you wouldn't really miss them until you tried to speak, at which point you would find yourself struck by the absence that is felt between those who love or hate, or sensed in the oceans of the self. The wanted word is somehow not here, it was murdered, edited out of the inheritance. What you say instead is what you know how to say and not what you would like to, the truth.

“When it rained she was drenched; on hot days she burned. Time continued moving in ways she did not understand. A minute takes an hour on hardscrabble road, but a morning skitters by if you're resting. Often she thinks of a story her mother used to tell. The fiddler inveigled by a fairy woman on the road into Connemara who enters her wrath, plays for her a single night, but when he stumbles out at dawn, blinking, love-drunk, he finds ten years have passed. You can lose your life in a single night. Mama's stories were facts, not fancies.

“Blinkings in the distance. What can they be? Are stars raining down on the land like frogs? As she nears to the flickers, she sees what is happening, a sight she must be imagining. Carters heft sheets of glass from a wagon, roughly, hurriedly. The odd pane falls and breaks. The overseers shrieks that they are not to be broken; they cost the master a dollar a dozen. They are passed hand-to-hand along a chain of men, who are spackling them into the ribs of a greenhouse. She stops, she watches. Plates of shining glass and each bears the face of a soldier. They must be the ones who did not come back, who

never returned to pay the photographer—farmers, husbands, old men, boys. The sun burned hard through their reticent smiles. In a year they will be all burned away.”

(applause)

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: We might read a few other bits and pieces.

COLUM MCCANN: As we go along. Got some ballads to do and things like that. I’d like to get right to the heart of the matter. You quote Walt Whitman, and he says that the real war will never get in the books. Then I found a quote by Natalia Ginzburg, and she says that, “As soon as one writes, one miraculously ignores the current circumstances of one’s life. Yet our happiness or misery leads us to write in a certain way. When we’re happy, our imagination’s more dominant, and when we’re miserable, the power of memory takes over.” Now, it seems to me that there’s a sort of interweaving between those two quotes that sort of gets into this novel, because in many ways, the real war does get into these books, and it’s you looking back and having that distance.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Well, people sometimes forget the second part of that quote; you know, Whitman said “the real war will never get in the books,” but he added, “perhaps it would be better if it didn’t.” Because he felt that, you know, America had been so traumatized by this terrible thing that it had done to itself, you know, it was such a young, beautiful country. Whitman had worked as a nurse in the war, he had seen the sufferings of soldiers close up, and he almost kind of seemed to advocate a kind of

collective amnesia as a sort of healing, which I think in some ways, you know, certainly when you're Irish, that has moments when it becomes attractive. Because of course what we did in Ireland with our history, with our Civil War, which we had in the 1920s, was remembered so ardently that our entire political culture up until very recently was based on it, and the two conservative parties who take it in turns to be in government in Ireland pretty much replicate the Civil War divisions, although it is changing now. So I was interested in that. I was also interested the kind of formal implications that the Whitman quote would lead you to, because of course what that means is you can't tell the story of war, I think, in one voice. It can't be about one character, it can't be even in one tense, you've got to find all sorts of points from which to shine the light.

COLUM MCCANN: Multifaceted, noisy, jostling with facts, dancing around.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I hope so, yeah, and that's so that it's in some sense—And that's a risky thing to do. You know, to say that you're going to make the opening chapters of your book deliberately confusing. You know, it's a very risky strategy, and you have to trust that readers will trust you to know what you're doing. My hope is that fifty or a hundred pages into the book, the reader has begun to see what is going on. I mean, this book is basically—it's a scrapbook. You realize in the course of it that it's a collection of documents being put together by somebody. You're not sure at first but it becomes obvious who *that* is. So this is a collection of documents compiled by a man who has an obsessive interest in the four or five characters who form the action of the book.

COLUM MCCANN: And you only reveal that—I mean, we’re not going to give too much away to reveal that you only *really* reveal that at the end.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Well, you only reveal *exactly* who he is at the end. But I mean, I hope there’s a sense that a different person would put the documents together in a different way, and that that’s saying something about history, how much we can know about it, if anything. So, you know, but as I say, it’s a risky thing to do. So I’ve been relieved that, you know, readers have understood what the project was.

COLUM MCCANN: And then did it get to the war, now, because wherever we are now is where we were then, and so were, you know, the political circumstances of today—did they influence how you chose to write about the then?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Well, I think so. I don’t really like the kind of historical fiction that is just a kind of chronicling of things. You know, I think that is what belongs in a museum. And there is a certain kind of historical fiction that’s sort of very carefully researched, and you know, you suddenly come across a passage where, you know, author has discovered somewhere in his researches, probably in the New York Public Library, a really fascinating article about the kind of *shoes* that people wore in 1861 and feels that he has to tell you all about it, so the action kind of slows down, and we have a PowerPoint presentation, **(laughter)** and then, you know, when that’s done we go back to it. There’s often a lot about inadequate dentistry in historical novels **(laughter)** and awful

surgical procedures that were ghastly. And you know, so I think you have to be really tough on yourself, and you have to do all the research and you have to try and get—if you're making reference to a historical background, you have to try and get it right. But I think there does come a point when you have to sort of throw your notes away and just trust your imagination to filter in and out what is actually useful for a fictional experience, which is a *different* experience, and it works in a different space. So, you know, you have to try and get it right, but not worry about it too much.

I mean, I had an example of the danger, I suppose, in my last book, *Star of the Sea*, where I used some of the same techniques. And one of the things that a historical novelist has to watch out for always is anachronisms, you know, making people say things or think things or know things that they couldn't have known. And I have a scene in the opening chapter of *Star of the Sea*, where Pius Mulvey, the central character in that book, a poor man emigrating from Connemara in 1847, and he's standing on the ship, and it's the last of Ireland, he's looking at the last little islands disappearing into the night and it's awful, so I thought just to sort of sophisticate the scene a bit emotionally, I would give him one sort of nice warm memory, so I decided that when Pious was a little lad, there was a kindly schoolmaster in Connemara who taught them a little mnemonic device for remembering the sequence of the planets from the sun. And the device was "Mary's violet eyes make John sit up nights praying." And that was, you know, my nice little moment.

So the book came out, a fellow wrote to me from the Irish, you know, Astrological Society, **(laughter)** “We have a problem, because P, praying, is Pluto, and Pluto was discovered in 1920.” **(laughter)** So this guy, you know. In fact, I read over the summer that they’re still not absolutely sure that Pluto exists at all.

COLUM MCCANN: May be not a planet.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: So the book became successful, so it was reprinted, so I took it out. **(laughter)** “Mary’s violet eyes make John sit up nights.” And then the same guy very cruelly, he could have told me this the first time, **(laughter)** but then he wrote back to me. “Well, we still have a problem, because N is Neptune, and Neptune is discovered *in* 1847. So you have this poor illiterate man standing on the ship—is he reading the scientific journal?” So it seemed with every reprint of the book, the solar system is getting smaller.” **(laughter)**

There is another one—it’s a very poignant scene I shouldn’t be laughing at of a poor fellow again dying on a mountainside in Connemara and there’s a wolf howling in the distance. And a guy seriously wrote to me from kind of the Irish Wolf Appreciation Society. And he said, “that couldn’t have happened, because it’s a matter of record that the last wolf in Ireland was shot in 1802,” **(laughter)** and here’s a drawing of the wolf and here’s an account of who shot him.” At my father’s instigation I wrote back to that man and said, “Well, that must have been the second-last wolf, because the last one is there in the book.” So, you know, you have to be very careful with all of those things,

because they're out there waiting for you. And on the subject of the American Civil War, I suspect they're out there waiting in great numbers, battalions indeed.

COLUM MCCANN: Things do—they can get diseased with research, you know, like you get into a novel and then suddenly like somebody wants to say, “Well, they’re wearing Homburg hats in Harlem in 1923, and I have to put in the fact that . . .” Whereas really writers of fiction are more interested in texture than fact. And see, facts, it strikes me are mercenary things. You can pack them up wherever the hell you want them to go. And you know, they can be shipped off, and they can create wars, as we’ve seen this even over the last five years, you know, facts can be manipulated, but the job of the novelist is to create texture. And it seems to me that what you do most extraordinarily is that you create this wild, fantastic, kaleidoscopic texture, with songs. I’d love for you to do one of the ballads actually now, from the book.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: I’m not going to sing it.

COLUM MCCANN: Don’t sing it. My wife says to me, “you do sing, but you can’t.”

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Well, James, who is quickly becoming the star of this evening, if he hears me singing in the shower, he comes and closes the bathroom door, that’s how well I can sing. But, no, I’ll read one of the ballads in a minute.

COLUM MCCANN: But it seems to me that really what you get at is an absolute—it seems to me to be an entirely honest texture, and whether or not you're true to the facts. I'd like to talk about that, and the research at the New York Public Library, and, you know, what is factual and what is not and how you choose—are you a magpie in relation to that?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I mean What I think is that you know at the heart of the fictional experience, that's the sort of the very privileged relationship that exists between writer and reader is something very old in us, which is play—it's a game. You are saying to the reader, "Come with me on this journey." And you know that it's make-believe. You know, people aren't idiots. You know, they know that if they want to research correct textbook facts they will look elsewhere. But there is something about fiction. There is something about temporarily knowing what it's like to be somebody else that helps us to know what it's like to be *us*. So if you go on that—if you offer that make-believe journey, then people will sometimes come on it with you. And one of the ways you do it is the texture and the music. I mean, it's a thing I didn't like about my own early books, and perhaps one of the reasons that I tried to change the way I was writing, is that I was—I felt I was kind of missing a treat—you know, I don't think it's enough to tell a story, it's not enough to have engaging characters. The prose itself needs to be readable. And when you're writing about *dark* subject matter, which I did, with the Irish Famine and now with the American Civil War, you know that your book better have music, it had better have light in it somehow. And one of the ways that you do that is by setting up, you know, the idea that each character has their own music and there's a wonderful stuff

if you're writing about the 1860s about different forms of American English. Precisely at this moment when the country is tearing itself to pieces, immigrants are arriving and enriching the American language with their own words, so it seemed like a no-brainer, in fact. That, you know, part of this book is going to have to be written using those forms and that had wonderful kind of symphonic, approach. So that it's just beautiful. You know, I think your *first* duty is to be beautiful, and after that it can be political or, you know, I mean being beautiful is itself is quite a political thing to do, I think. So, you know, you have to try and use every strategy that you possibly can.

COLUM MCCANN: So being beautiful is a political strategy—that's the first—Write that one down!

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, I think it is, yeah. There's enough ugliness in the world. To try and create something beautiful is to change the world.

COLUM MCCANN: So you're talking about the way words bump up against each other on the page as the creation of a piece of beauty that is then read and musicked by the reader.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Yeah, well, I think, Anthony Cronin, you know, the Irish writer who I like very much.

COLUM MCCANN: *Dead As A Doornail.*

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: *Dead As Doornails*, yeah. He says in one of his pieces of journalism somewhere that every young writer, in particular, you should want to change the world. It should come as a slow disappointment to you, **(laughter)** but maybe it hadn't ought to, but that should be the aim. And in a way, when I think about my own life, and I'm somebody who's interested in politics, I've been active in politics, and I still am. But some of the most radical and fundamental changes come in that sort of very private, intimate space of the reader and the book. You know, you need to be aware of that when you're writing fiction.

And the thing about the ballads. I think Irish ballads are a very interesting form, because they appear to be so economical. People will know, you know, the opening line of an Irish ballad is often an invitation to come and gather 'round. You know, come all ye, and I'm going to tell you the story. That's verse 1, Verse 2 and 3 and 4 is the story, Verse 5 is the conclusion and usually it's "the English are terrible." **(laughter)** And it seems to be a remarkably efficient storytelling strategy, which it is, but of course, you know, it doesn't leave much room for the **(inaudible)**, you know, its very efficiency is sometimes the problem. So I have a section in the book which, I mean, there's a lot of music all through the book, but there's a one section of the book which is almost—it's told in ballads and it's looking at how Irish and Scottish and English ballads entered the American tradition, became Appalachian songs, became cowboy hero songs, and that's a very interesting process, you know, that, depending on who's writing the song, the subject of it is either

hero or villain. You know, there actually works of propaganda often, rather than—they're certainly works of art, rather than unmediated experience.

COLUM MCCANN: I remember reading them and thinking, these are so bawdy and fantastic—did you really make them up yourself?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: They're all mine—I'm not going to read a bawdy one just because I'm a man of—I'll do that in the pub later at around midnight. I'll read one, there's a character in the book called Cole McLaurenson, he was an Irish Confederate, and at the end of the war he becomes a bandit, he becomes an outlaw. He has many pseudonyms and one of them is Johnny Thunders and he becomes a sort of folk hero to some and yet a terrorist to others. And there are many songs like that in the Western American tradition and I'll read one—the song that was in the back of my mind when I was writing this was a very, very old Irish poem, *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*. Well, Dermot Bolger's version is *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*, which is written I think in the 1980s. This very, very old lament form is still very much part of the culture, and it's a woman lamenting for her dead lover.

So I'll just read this, it's called "A Creole's Lament for Johnny Thunders." You have to imagine that I'm singing it, because one of the problems with reading these things is that they have a singsong rhythm that isn't very sophisticated, but I'll read it to you anyway. "A Creole's Lament for Johnny Thunders": "Out early I rode in the groves of Dakota, out early I rode in the dawn of the day, when I heard a dark lady tenderly weeping, oh

whither my Johnny so gallant and gay? And handsome and hopeful, my Johnny so tender, and valiant and strong as the sun in the west, a false-hearted lawman that chased him to Kansas, and merciless marshal put the lead in his breast. Come all you brave cowboys that rides in the mountain, come bold bandolero and motherless son. The hope of the widow, the scourge of the landlord, he lived by his lights and he died by the gun. All hopeful and handsome, my Johnny so tender, and gallant and gay as a star of the night. He stole from the rich and he gave to the hungry, and never a lady received any slight. A dagger of silver he wore on his buckle. He rode with a chain all the many miles long. And every link held a heart that was broken, of a girl he had spurned for the love of his own. He said he would wed me in Galveston, Texas. Through Galveston, Texas, now lonely I search. He said he would buy me a bunch of green ribbons for to tie in my tresses by St. Mary's Church. Out early I rode in the groves of Dakota. The innocent birds whistled hymns to the day. And I'll never forget her, that vision of sorrows, who wept for her outlaw, turned weeping away. Weeping away, weeping away, who wept for her outlaw, turned weeping away. Then ghostly she vanished, that ebony phantom, as thoughts of old loves at the dawn of the day." **(applause)** We'll all be singing that later.

COLUM MCCANN: Something we wouldn't be talking about if we were—or maybe we would if we were sitting down in the pub later tonight. What are we up to with the Irish novel? I mean, It seems to me, I get asked, you know, “Why are you writing about Slovak gypsies who are like walking across Europe, or, you know, Russian ballet dancers, and you know—” and I think, well, it's been my charge to try to expand the boundaries of the Irish novels. You certainly have done that and it seems to me that

there's something going on. There's two parts to this question: What's going on with the Irish novel? Why are we abroad? Or why are so many of us abroad right now? And how do we get back—how *will* we get back to that Irish novel and talk about what's really important and what's going on in the country right now? In many ways—some of you know, some of you don't know—there are some terrible things happening in Ireland, including roads going through very sacred places and environmental disasters, a disregard for the past. So like you can you take on the first part of that question, and maybe we'll move and try to segue into the second part?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I think what's going on with the Irish novel is that there's no “the Irish novel” anymore, you know, which seems to me to be a profoundly healthy thing. I think the generation of novelists to which you and I belong is, when you take all of us, which you can't, really, because it isn't a school or a movement, but I think it's a big clamorous bunch of people who don't seem to be very influenced by each other, which I think is a very new thing in Ireland—if you look at all the people who wrote at the same time as Joyce, you know, they were really all trying to do the same kind of thing, and they don't seem to be particularly influenced by the previous generations of great Irish novelists, either, which is also—

COLUM MCCANN: Ghosts on the shoulder.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, I think it must have been really hard, you know, to be writing a novel in the 1940s in Ireland with the kind of Easter Island figure of Joyce, you

know, behind you, it must have been absolutely terrible, and you can see why—you can see the tragedy, I often think, of a figure like Flann O'Brien, like a brilliant writer, but he got so caught up with kind of fireworks and tactical experimentation. I often think that if he had raised his iris from Ireland he would have written something really important rather than just the cult figure that he is. So that I think that people are very interested in Australian writing, Indian writing, far more influence now by modern American writers, far more of an awareness of what's actually going on in American fiction than there ever would have been in the past. The influence by cinema, the influence by television, rock music, and I think as a generation, it's probably the most interesting generation of Irish novelists ever, which is not to say that they're all very good, or that they're all *any* good, but as a group, it's hard to think of a more fascinating group of writers. When you look at people of the skill and the accomplishment of, you know, Colm Tóibín, Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, who won the Booker Prize last month, Dermot Bolger, who you mentioned, Hugo Hamilton's book *The Speckled People*, which really single-handedly reinvented how Irish memoirs are told. You know, they seem to be breaking rules without even, without that being a project anymore.

COLUM MCCANN: Which is an interesting metaphor for where we are—let's talk about breaking rules, let's talk about the country, Ireland, where it is right now.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, I don't know where it is right now, because, you know, when I left it two weeks ago it was at a certain place and when I go home on Monday—

COLUM MCCANN: It'll be a completely different place.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I think Ireland, you know, Ireland is changing incredibly quickly. I mean, it is absolutely no longer the place in which you and I grew up, which I thought was a very—Nuala O'Faolain said that you know, her memories of growing up in Dublin in an earlier time, the 1950s, are all in monochrome, they're like the black-and-white movies, so it wasn't without its glamour, but it was a black-and-white glamour, and the rain just seemed to come down all the time, and you knew that you were being brought up in order to emigrate, and that's all that we ever talked about. It's the only reason people ever went to university, as far as I could see, was to postpone emigration by a few years. And then you got your plane ticket on the same day that you got your degree, you know, one in each hand. And off you went. And I had a strange experience—I remember it very well, I was living in London in those years, in the 1980s, feeling the intense loneliness immigrants usually feel when I came back to Dublin for the weekend, because I didn't know anybody there anymore—they were all in New York or London.

So it is a huge change, we have more or less unemployment, we have I think a far more materialistic society than we used to have, but there have been great advances. One of the by-products of the economic boom has been the beginning of immigration, there's, as people will know. It was one of the things in the back of my mind, I suppose, when I wrote *Star of the Sea*. If anybody had told me, that this extraordinary thing would ever happen, that people would willingly want to *come* to Ireland, I would have been amazed. And then, my next thought would have been that they would all be welcomed with open

arms, precisely because of this common history of emigration, this history that we never stop singing about and telling stories about and putting up statues about, and that *didn't* happen. You know, and I don't think the Irish are a nation of racists, and I don't think they're particularly xenophobic, but the stigmas, as far as we can see, are pretty similar as they would have been in other countries with a colonial past, so that's kind of interesting.

So Ireland's becoming a multicultural very, very rapidly. The census figures which came out a few weeks ago revealed 10 percent of the people living in the country now were born somewhere else. And interestingly, just the day I came over, the workforce figures were released, and it was 17 percent, so, you know, more of them are working, and you know, you hear new languages, you see new cultures, new belief systems, I think certainly by the time my children are my age, the preoccupations of the Ireland in which I grew up, some of which were very good, will have disappeared and there will be new things that people worry about. There will be new languages. There's a certain—I mean, I have close friends who are interested in the Irish language. I don't know whether it's a good time for the Irish language or not. But there will certainly be many new languages, many new cultures, and many new belief systems, and it's already happening, so we'd better just get used to it, you know. I think it's a very good thing, but even people who don't had better get used to it.

COLUM MCCANN: It strikes me that either consciously or unconsciously Irish novelists and Irish poets have been concentrating on moving towards the other in— exactly to reflect what is happening in Irish society at this particular moment, so that the

movement outside of the borders is reflective of the movement into one's borders. It used to be that when we grew up, like, half our classes—we grew up both in Dublin at the exact same time, half our classes would emigrate. And a big problem was leaving—people would be crying at the airport and everything. And nobody cries at the airport anymore, not at all. And it strikes me that the quote for now is the Brodsky quote, “you can't go back to the country that doesn't exist anymore.” And so we must react against some of the nostalgia that establishes, you know, Ireland as it is, and then look for new stories.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, for me it's easily done. I mean, there is a certain kind of nostalgia that sometimes does make its way into literary endeavor and I think it should be resisted and that overall I think generally for most people, Ireland now is a much healthier, more confident, more interesting, more outward-looking place than it has ever been. There is peace in the North of Ireland which, you know, when we were children really was fantasyland, that was never going to happen, that was just one of those problems that would always be there. And you know, people have jobs, people have options. You know, I mean, I think the materialism that there is, you know, which is definitely there, it's just something that happens when people have been poor for a long time, they get a few quid, they go crazy and they want to go to the toyshop. I do think that we've had ten years of it now, so it's now time to you know, party should be over, and we need to decide are we going to have a health system, for example, and, you know, interesting Scandinavian things like that.

COLUM MCCANN: Can I ask you a weird question? Completely—maybe it goes back to this. What were you like when you were nine years old?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: I don’t remember.

COLUM MCCANN: Was there a fridge full of rich things?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: I can’t remember seeing a fridge full of anything in Ireland in those days. I was a very bookish little fellow, you know. I liked books and reading and I think one of the clichés of Irish life that’s true is that, you know, in most Irish homes, certainly at the time and I think still, there was some notion that to be an authentic human being, you should have some interest in the arts, you know. And my parents, who were both Dublin working-class people and left school at the age of thirteen, and not much formal education at that time, but, you know, there were books in the house and they took us to the theater, and there was nothing sort of odd about it. And I’ve often had the conversation with an English colleagues who write, or with people from other countries, about the dreadful day when they went home and told Mum and Dad that, “Guess what? I want to be a novelist.” And the smelling salts had to be—and, you know, I think most Irish families would not regard that as a particularly strange thing to want to do.

I can remember John McGahern’s books being in the house, Benedict Kiely, who I know you admire very much, you know, a great interest in his work. I mean, it’s kind of how I started writing. I can remember—slightly older than nine, when I was thirteen or

fourteen, really wanting to write, you know. There was a John McGahern book that came out in 1975 called *Getting Through*, it's a collection of short stories, and there was a story in that book that I really loved, called "Sierra Leone," and it was a story about a troubled couple who meet in a Dublin pub once a week to discuss their relationship.

So I was twelve or thirteen, and I was very interested in troubled relationships, you know.

(laughter) So I remember sitting in my bedroom one night, with like my school copybook and my pencil, the school copybook with the map of Ireland at the front of it, you know. I'm thinking "What can I write? Here I am living in Dun Laoghaire, a suburb of Dublin, and nothing ever happens. John McGahern has all this interesting stuff to write about. Old bachelors who used to be in the IRA, old maids on their bicycles, and nothing ever happens here. Somebody gets out the lawnmower here on a Saturday afternoon, and that's it, we all gather around to watch.

So I thought, "What I'll do is I'll actually write out Sierra Leone word for word." So I did that in my school copybook, just to feel what that was like, to write these beautiful sentences. It was a bit like, I suppose, the wannabe pop star playing a tennis racket in the mirror, you know. So I did that, and that was great. And then a couple nights later I did again but this time I changed the name of one the characters, I gave him my father's name, Sean. And another I time I remember I had a crush on Debbie Harry, the punk singer at the time. So Debbie was one of the women in the story. And then a few nights later—you can see I had a very sad adolescence **(laughter)**—I'd do this again. So that every kind of week or so over a couple years I would rewrite the story until I had sort of

married this couple and moved them to the suburbs in a house very like mine and they had a lawnmower on a Saturday afternoon. And at some point the balance of it tilted, and it became 51 percent my story. And I told John McGahern this once, and he said, “You know, you really owe me a few pints.” **(laughter)** So, you know, I ruined this perfectly beautiful story.

COLUM MCCANN: But that story didn’t make it into your first collection.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: My second book, which is a collection of short stories called *True Believers*, the title story in that book is the story I began to write—

COLUM MCCANN: Is that the one with the guy with the Mohawk on the front?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Yeah. When you place these texts side by side, you can’t see how one of them could possibly have grown out from the other, but it did.

COLUM MCCANN: But we get our voice from the voices of others. And I’d like to ask you about that. You talk about McGahern. Who else?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Well, I suppose the Irish writer in the generation immediately before ours who meant the most to me was Brian Moore. He was somebody who I just loved. McGahern’s work was fantastic. He was a genius. And he never published anything that wasn’t a masterpiece. Brian Moore was a different kind of writer, in that he

was somebody who just believed in the craft, and he just kept going. And, you know, he got out of Ireland when he was a young men, got out of Belfast, went to live in Canada. Lived in Malibu for a while, which I thought was a fantastic thing. I mean, far more Irish writers should go and live in Malibu. **(laughter)** And he wrote a novel every two years or every three years. And, you know, some of them were fantastic and were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Some of them not quite so good, but you knew there was always another one coming. He wasn't afraid of genres, he wasn't afraid of love stories, thrillers, historical fiction. I had the great honor of interviewing him for the *Sunday Tribune* in Ireland not long before he died. I just thought he was in some ways—

COLUM MCCANN: He said the most amazing thing in an interview: he said, “You know where you're from when you know where you want to be buried.”

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Malibu.

COLUM MCCANN: No, he was in Canada, he was in California—

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: No, I'm talking about me.

(laughter)

COLUM MCCANN: You're from Malibu, you're a California boy. But Brian Moore, Brian Moore had decided that he wanted to be buried on the headland back in Northern

Ireland. Hadn't been back to Northern Ireland in years and years and years. But he said, "you know where you're from when you know where you want to finally rest."

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Yeah, well for me it's either Malibu or the Cullman Center.

(laughter) I'd like my ashes to be placed in office number 13.

COLUM MCCANN: Yeah, we'll just through them out the window.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: So I loved Brian Moore, and then I suppose we all have, you know, the book that made us want to write, and in my case that was, like probably many other people's cases, it was *The Catcher in the Rye*, you know, Salinger's great novel, which somebody gave me when I was sixteen. And I can remember the moment of turning over the last page and just thinking, "that's it. I'd love to do *that*." And, you know, when you read a book and you're that age, you know, the fantastic, sarcastic tone of the narrator Holden Caulfield, if I can paraphrase the opening paragraph, where he talks about, you know, "I suppose you want to know who I am and where I'm from and what my parents did for a living and all that other Charles Dickens crap." You know, you're in a school in Ireland and the only novels on the course are Charles Dickens crap. And you think, "like, wow"—

COLUM MCCANN: You taught Charles Dickens's crap for many years, right?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: I have a love/hate relationship with Dickens, do you want me to tell you about it?

COLUM MCCANN: No, I know a bit about it because you can feel it actually in the books, you can feel it happening in *Star of the Sea*, and there’s even the torn page of *Great Expectations* in this book. It seems to me—I can see the *love* of Dickens, but I’m much rather interested in the hate—just talk about the hate.

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Just the hate. Well, okay. All right, well I have to—to contextualize that I have to have fifteen seconds of love. Dickens is, you know, the greatest storyteller ever. He is brilliant at moving his characters around like chess pieces on a board. He can get them into any situation that you want. He creates extremely vivid characters who are kind of etched on our consciousness. Even people who don’t read know who Fagin is, and who Oliver Twist is. Probably because of the movies, but even that, you know, it tells you something. His characters are just so alive. They don’t make any psychological sense at all. There isn’t a credible woman in the entire canon of Dickens, **(laughter)** and the way that you can illustrate it most economically is if you look at *Oliver Twist*, and here is a novel about a boy who is born in a workhouse, his mother dies giving birth to him. He is in this workhouse, beaten, starved, spat upon—it’s the classic abusive childhood. If he was around now, he’d be on Oprah, you know, with his memoir about it. He escapes and then he runs off to London, where he’s brought up by prostitutes and thieves and he becomes a burglar and a thief and these terrible experiences. And all the way through the book, he talks like a little member of the British

royal family. **(laughter)** He never swears, he never blasphemes, he never has an unmanly thought, and you're reading this, thinking, "Jesus, what is this child?"

COLUM MCCANN: Because he's an aristocrat at heart.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, that's it. You realize it at the end, that Oliver's revealed to be the child of an aristocrat, but Dickens just can't bear that the child of an aristocrat would talk in the way as the oiks, so that the book *embodies* the very snobbery that it's very energetically railing against. So I think that's true, always, with Dickens. But if you're looking for a writer who believed in language, who can make the French Revolution happen on the page, and the extraordinary energy that the writers of that era had. You know, they—it's almost like a *punk* thing—the rules of the novel hadn't been set in stone yet, and there's a capaciousness and an ambition for language that wasn't there, I think, when the writers who were around when I started writing, brilliant writers though they were, people like Raymond Carver and the American sort of dirty realists, but there was a stage when we were all writing our short stories where nothing ever happened. And if a reviewer said, "nothing happens in this story," that would be seen as a good thing.

COLUM MCCANN: Or "nothing is said," even, which is even worse.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I think Dickens would have been horrified by that.

COLUM MCCANN: How would Dickens have dealt with the Cullman Center?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: By staying in his office a lot.

COLUM MCCANN: Which you did, apparently. Tell us about that experience.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, I said to some people earlier that I walked past the building today and I considered dropping in, but I couldn't, because I just think that it would be embarrassing if I wept and knelt down and kissed the ground. I mean, I had a fantastic time at the Cullman Center. It's a wonderful place. It was very difficult to leave Jean and for many months afterwards I felt—like the way we do when a very passionate love affair has ended, you've been dumped. I would often find late at night that I wanted to drink half a bottle of vodka and call the Cullman Center **(laughter)** and say, "Please would you take me back? You know, I can change," so, you know, it was just an absolute. As you know, because you were there yourself. It was a year of just the most extraordinary privileges, and, you know, it was a fantastic place to work. It's the ideal way for a out-of-towner, you know, to be here in New York because, you know, there are fifteen fellows and it provides you with fourteen other people to talk to. You know, there were some amazing people in the fellowship with me. Some of them are here tonight. You know, so you have these fourteen very diverse and interesting personalities to deal with on a Monday morning, and that's just Edmund White, actually, all by himself. **(laughter)** So it was just absolutely great.

I mean, I have to say, I can't allow the evening to pass without saying what we all know, that the wonderful treasures of this place are nothing compared to, you know, the ultimate resource here, which is the librarians, and their knowledge and their generosity and the love—you know, it's the only word for it—that they bring to what they do. I mean, I found, you know, when I was dealing with people here, once they knew what I was working on, the stuff would just appear on my desk. I mean, it got to the point where I didn't even need to ask. People would come and suggest, you know, “why don't you look at this, why don't you look at that?” I remember having a conversation with a young man who worked in the map department. And part of this book is set in Montana in 1867. So I said to him “I wonder would it be possible—do you possibly have somewhere in the basement a map of Montana in 1867?” And when I came in the next day it's on my desk, you know? And just, the absolute commitment, you know, to what they do.

COLUM MCCANN: I dedicated *Zoli* to two librarians, and the librarians in general, because it seems to me that they're heroic, and they don't get properly acknowledged. Thank you for acknowledging them. Translators, too, don't get properly acknowledged.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Neither do we, of course.

COLUM MCCANN: Of course, we get too much acknowledgment.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: By one who's not been acknowledged. Don't know if anyone else feels unacknowledged, but tonight's your night.

COLUM MCCANN: Talk about translation and movement and things. Ian McEwan talks about adapting his books as a sort of hooliganism. That, you know, if he adapts his books to film, he feels like he just gets in there with a scalpel, and chops away, chops away, chops away, and he can never come out with something that's quite as powerful in the cinematic version as he has done in his literary version. And you write in quite a profound cinematographic way, it strikes me. You create photographs, you create moving pictures into which the reader walks and walks around. That's as a literary technique. But I also know that you're adapting this particular book for the films, right?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, I'm not going to write the screenplay myself. I have no interest in doing that, and I'm not adapting the screenplay of the *Star of the Sea*.

COLUM MCCANN: Even though you've done three or four screenplays?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Yeah, I have and I like writing screenplays. I'm working on a few other things. I'm adapting a very interesting Somerset Maugham novel called *The Magician* for a screenplay. But I'm with them, I'm with Ian McEwan, really, you know, and I suppose I have a sort of secret feeling that a really good book can't be adapted, because the novelist chose for it to be a novel, and used *those* strategies and *those* rules and if he or she wanted to write a screenplay, you know, I think they *would* have. And I think you can always see when a novel is a screenplay waiting to happen, you know, and it's often not a very good book. So although my bank manager and my mortgage

company would love *Redemption Falls* to be a successful movie, and so would I, I need to add, because I'm aware that this is being filmed and maybe podcast sometime. So I'd like it to happen, but I wouldn't like to be involved in it myself, really. I think learning to be a good novelist is enough of a challenge for one life, you know, and I don't mind doing original screenplays and adaptations of other people's books, but I don't really want to do mine.

COLUM MCCANN: We were talking earlier today and talking about, you know, how how a novelist, you know, actually gets by and I was saying to Joe that Jim Harrison, the poet from Montana and now living in New Mexico and says, "Children pry up our rotting bodies with cries of 'Earn! Earn! Earn.'" And the fact of the matter is we do have to make a living as novelists. Now I'm aware that I want to open it up to the audience here in just a minute. Joe, this is the second part of a trilogy.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Yes, it is.

COLUM MCCANN: Can you tell us a little bit.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I'll tell a sixty-second version of the third part. In the last years of his life, the great Irish playwright J. M. Synge had a love affair with a much younger woman called Molly Allgood, who was an actress at the Abbey Theatre, which Synge had of course helped to found with Yeats and Lady Gregory. It was largely a secret affair. Their families didn't—they knew about it, but they weren't crazy about the idea. Synge

was from, you know, an Anglo-Irish ascendancy, landowning background. Molly Allgood was from a Dublin working-class background, was Catholic. So there was all of that. So they conducted this affair in secret. Even Yeats and Lady Gregory were not that crazy about it. Which I found very interesting, in that they liked plays in which poor Irish people were appearing on the stage in a very noble light, but it's just the idea that you might be sleeping with one of them, you know, wasn't so good. So they conducted this affair in great secrecy, Synge constantly waiting for his mother to die, and hoping that when his mother had died, with his mother out of the way, and also he would inherit her money and they would get a little house in the suburbs and live together. And like a lot of people waiting for their mother to die, Synge died.

So Molly lived to be a ripe old age, until about 1955, I think. So it's the era of rock and roll, space travel is just around the corner. She had an amazing life here in America. She appeared in Hitchcock's second film, which was an adaptation of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. She died in a basement of the BBC in London recording the radio version of a play written by Synge, so she never strayed from this man. And I think I want to make it a very short novel with one voice, so different from these big symphonic books, and a novel really about her, but also about how America dealt with Ireland in the end, which is by putting it on the stage. And I suppose if Ireland joins the sort of circus of stereotypes, and we're all bouncing away with the green wigs on, then the *Star of the Sea* stories never happened, and the *Redemption Falls* stories never happened and, you know, a new myth is put in its place. So I'd like that to be the third part of this trilogy, and then I'd like to write a novel written in 2007 in Dublin and no more historical research for a while.

COLUM MCCANN: I'd like to see all three of them all together, like carrying around *War and Peace*.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Well, that's why the third one is going to be so short. Because just the idea of binding together three of these, it'd just be a terrible thing to drop on your foot.

COLUM MCCANN: Well, you know, they're beautiful novels. They're really great. I'd love to see all three of them together at some stage. I'd really like to open it up to you guys. We have a microphone here. The first question is always the bravest one.

Q: (inaudible)

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Sure, well, I mean, the American Civil War is interesting for so many reasons, we could have the whole evening and the whole series of evenings just on that subject. But one of the things that's very interesting about it is the enormous number of immigrants who fought in the war and perhaps 200,000 on the Northern side; as you know, there were all-Irish brigades organized by people like Thomas Francis Meagher and you have people, even more interesting in some ways, perhaps 80,000 fighting for the South—this is the proslavery side. So in the case of someone like John Mitchell, you know, back home in Ireland, he's revolutionary, democratic, influenced by the French revolutionary ideas and so on, then in the South it appears to me—and there are very far

more learned historians here than myself—but appears to me to be what we would now call a white supremacist, so how those journeys happened are very interesting. And I also think that the American Civil War is a hugely important event in terms of the story of Irish assimilation into mainstream American life. That up until the war, you had quite an amount of anti-Irish prejudice, and the Irish poor suffer similar forms of prejudice as other immigrant groups do, as African American slaves do, although it's obviously not quite the same. This is really the short-time version now. And after the war in which they participated in such enormous numbers, I think they feel, "Well, look, we fought in your war, we can't be regarded as outsiders anymore. You know, we have tens of thousands of Irish people dying." Sometimes fighting each other. There were remarkable stories for example of the battle of Fredericksburg, where the front-line troops at one engagement of that battle, at Mary's Heights, the front-line troops on both sides are Irish, from New York for the North and I think from Georgia for the South.

COLUM MCCANN: Do you remember the Rolf Harris song, "Two Little Boys Had Two Little Toys," it was an American Civil War song.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: So and they're—you know, they're fighting each other on this battlefield in Virginia in a war that wasn't of their making and you know it's just hugely interesting and fascinating and why they would want to and there's the poignancy of that. And, you know, some of the research I did here at the library about that is very interesting. When you read the soldiers' letters, all the different reasons that people had for joining up. Some, you know, out of a great loyalty to the new country, the country

that they thought had given them freedom, and others for the money, and others for all sorts of reasons.

A particularly poignant thing that I saw in some of their letters, particularly among younger men, was the idea of wanting to see some of America. You know, they're often people who have come from one little town land in Ireland, might never have left it for the first fifteen years of their life. And they undergo the terrible voyage, you know, that I wrote about in *Star of the Sea* and then they get to New York or Boston, and then they keep hearing about this huge country, you know, that goes all the way down to, you know, the South and over to California and, you know, "Let's go and have a look at it. And we'll go down to the Virginia and we'll kick the Rebels' asses, and we'll be home by Christmas," and they don't realize, this is the pre-mass media age, they have no idea, really, of the horrors of war. As some of the generals themselves don't, I mean, as I don't think Thomas Francis Meagher did, I think he was absolutely harrowed by what happened in the war. So you see that kind of note again and again. So it's a huge part of *your* story but it's a huge part of *our* story, too, and while there have been one or two novels about it before, I just wanted to have a crack at it myself, you know.

COLUM MCCANN: Another question? I know we had one over here somewhere. Is there a question over here?

Q: (inaudible)

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: I absolutely know what you’re talking about. Sounds like a great book. No, I was, I suppose when I was structuring the book, I was trying to think that each character should have their own music. So the way that Eliza Mooney thinks is not the same as the very scientific cartographer Allen Winterton thinks, I don’t know if you’ve got as far as that yet. But about a third from the end, we have this new character arrive, who’s very measured, he’s a man of science, he prides himself in writing in an extremely specific way. And Eliza’s brother Jeddo, who’s been brought up in Baton Rouge, his head is kind of a jumble of Irish words, bits of folklore, bits of blues and gospel, language that he’s heard from the slaves, you know, so, then O’Keefe is, you know, is very much a public man, he’s an orator, and thinks very carefully about how he presents himself. So I wanted each character to have their own kind of music. So that every moment that you meet Eliza, the sort of tone like that, like it is in the opening pages, so keep going would be my advice.

COLUM MCCANN: Any other questions here? So I wanted to ask you—you said yourself that the novel “records the indefatigable grace of human compassion.”

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: Quite a mouthful.

COLUM MCCANN: It is a mouthful. Are you a sentimentalist?

JOSEPH O’CONNOR: No, I hope not. But, I mean, I think you do see that people are sometimes capable of extraordinary acts of generosity. And Eliza is. I think that’s what

ties the book together. And that she goes on this enormous journey to find this child who she doesn't even particularly like. You know, Jeddo, her brother, is described as being a very difficult little fellow indeed. But she just is motivated by some kind of morality that has somehow survived despite all of the abuses that she's been through, and I think there should be more novels about that.

COLUM MCCANN: Sure, and that grace comes through. That grace absolutely comes through. And do you see yourself as a social novelist?

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: I don't see really myself as anything really, to be honest. I see myself as a much thinner novelist than I used to be. Here's where it all went, you know? No, I mean, I just I don't think in those sort of terms. I think that's the language of the critic and the academic. And I, you know, I respect the people who do that. But I see myself as a storyteller, and that's really, you know, first and last.

COLUM MCCANN: And this is part of the human democracy, that everybody has a deep need to tell a story and it crosses boundaries, genders. I mean, you're going across all sorts of thing, you're going into a woman's voice. You're going into voices from different—

JOSEPH O'CONNOR: Jean wants us to stop.

COLUM MCCANN: Oh, she wants us to stop. So we have to stop, unfortunately. Thank you so much, you're fantastic, and we'll sign your books.

(applause)