



Dublin's Burning

An Interview with Rob Doyle by Susan Tomaselli

Rob Doyle is an Irish-born short story writer and essayist. His novel, *Here Are the Young Men* (Lilliput Press), is a visceral coming of age story depicting the darker side of Dublin. It is incendiary stuff, steeped in the literary nihilism of Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq, the boredom of J.G. Ballard. Heads turned by images of violence on television news, and in computer games, Matthew, Rez, Kearney and Cocker set out to expose 'our nation's corrupted soul to the ravages of the moral plague that has assailed us, and to our collective horror and incomprehension in the face of it,' by staging their 'own 9-11.' Susan Tomaselli met Rob Doyle in the bustling Library Bar. The conversation ran for one hour with the recorder on, then continued for a few hours more, ending in an exhibition of Wally Cassidy's street photography in Temple Bar.

Photographs by Matthew Thompson, and used with kind permission. Thanks also to Antony Farrell, Kitty Lydon and all at Lilliput Press.

- ST** If you could begin by perhaps saying a little about *Here Are The Young Men*. Including where the title comes from?
- RD** The title comes from a Joy Division song called 'Decades', which I've always liked. *Here Are the Young Men* is a novel set in Dublin in 2003, which is about a bunch of hard-drinking, drug-abusing, fairly disturbed youngsters, who have finished school, have finished their Leaving Cert, and fall under the malign sway of their psychopathic friend Joseph Kearney, who urges them on to begin committing transgressive acts, which become more extreme and more disturbing as their first summer of freedom goes on. And everything goes to hell, more or less.
- ST** How did *Here Are the Young Men* begin? Did it begin as a novel? As something else? Or did you start with a character and extrapolate from there? Or did it come from a particular situation, or an abstract idea?
- RD** I was living in Sicily at the time and I had decided that I really had to start going at writing, not just writing for myself, but to try to give form to the experiences I'd had. I remember one afternoon I was in a fairly low kind of mood and it was very hot and sunny and I was teaching English, I had just taken a bus to some dismal, little Sicilian, economically depressed town and I called a friend back in Ireland on my mobile, and I was talking to him for a few minutes and he was telling me he that was going out with some friends to the beach at Killiney to get drunk, and the image just kind of stayed with me, these guys just getting wasted on a beach. And I just had an urge

to write about this. It's almost a cliché to invoke Nabokov's idea that a novel almost comes from a throb or a pulse, but it's true: that was the throb, that was the pulse that made me think 'this is what I need to be writing about.' I abandoned, or set aside, the novel which I had been writing, then I moved to London in kind of August 2009 and as soon I got there, it was a sharp contrast to Sicily, everything was grey and dismal and rainy, and kind of dystopian, and so more or less immediately I started to write about this image of these youngsters on a beach getting wasted. It was all Dublin and I had never even tried to write about Dublin before. I spent months and months just pouring out scene after scene after scene after scene, some of it based on things I had half seen or remembered or even experienced myself in some cases, or had heard about, of all these years I had spent growing up in Dublin and out of this surge of writing certain characters began to emerge. I had a narrator called Matthew and I had his profoundly disturbed friend Kearney who is the demonic side of the whole book, and then their friend Rez who is a very agitated and alienated young man, with a very analytical and overactive mind. I just continued to write and the characters, and eventually the narrative grew out of this milieu that I had been writing.

It starts with a confession, which is quite Dostoevskyan. It is a very philosophical novel: on a surface level you have an epigram from *Zibaldone* and you also have this character of Scag, drug-dealer poet who runs around in a 'Wittgenstein!' t-shirt. But it's what's going on under the surface: there's a line in your novel which encapsulates this best, on all the things that Rez is obsessed by: 'The end of reality, the impossibility

ST

of love, the brutal and pitiless character of existence.' The most sympathetic character, Rez, is staring into a void, isn't he?

RD Yes, he is. I suppose all the characters are staring into a void. It's a philosophical novel? Yeah, I suppose it is a philosophical novel, although I would hope that phrase wouldn't turn people off. That could be quite a disastrous phrase, if taken the wrong way: it's like saying 'I've written an experimental novel,' people's eyes kind of glaze over if you were to say that. And philosophical novel might have the same connotations, but I think it's a novel which happens to address philosophical themes, and in fact the characters in it are overtly interested in philosophical questions, which gives you license to write about these things which obsess me, which fascinate me, philosophical questions, ultimate questions, about being alive, about human life, about particularly human life in the 21st century. And I think there are a great many people like Rez, the character you referred to in the book, who are very disturbed by these questions, by these dilemmas they face on a day-to-day basis. As you said, the end of love, the impossibility of love, the end of reality, these very apocalyptic atmospheres and sentiments and realities which pertain in the modern world.

ST In your essay for *gorse*, on Houellebecq, this chimes very much with your novel. You say that 'the void would seem to have the stronger arguments stacked on its side. The great question and challenge of our age—the supreme elephant in the room—is that of nihilism.' Could you say a little on that? What attracts you to the void? And Houellebecq's nihilism is

pretty terrifying, isn't it?

Nice question. I think it's the elephant in the room in the sense that you can't really bring it up in polite company: 'Hello, so how do you feel about the nihilistic void that our civilisation confronts today?' **RD**

Teetering on the brink. **ST**

People tend to leave the room and get a bit weird. But it's there, it's facing you everyday. And I try to be a bit more relaxed about it, but at times in my life I've wondered why everybody isn't going along talking about this all of the time, pulling their hair out. The fact is, probably for the first time in human history, we are living in an age where there's no overarching system of values or metaphysical structures or systems or even a moral structure or outlook which people can abide by, which people have faith in. It goes back...it doesn't only go back to Nietzsche, but Nietzsche was the great prophet and the great explorer of this, the question of nihilism facing Europe, facing western civilisation, facing the world. When you have deconstructed the religious, the theological, the metaphysical, the spiritual foundations of your civilisation then where does that leave human beings? There are lots of sociological and socioeconomic reasons for this as well, but underlying it all there's this major question of how people can get by, how can people get by in an age where a given meaning isn't part of life anymore, where there isn't really anything you can believe in wholeheartedly. **RD**

ST Television in the novel helps with this. All your characters very much live mediated lives. That scene especially, where Rez is watching *Big Brother* and can't tell the difference between 'telly and non-telly, as if the TV-reality was leaking out of the screen, submerging the sitting-room. Or perhaps the telly was a black hole, slowly sucking in all of real reality, annihilating any difference between itself and the world it glowed out at.' Rez and Kearney, to me, are almost like two sides of the same coin, but whereas the scales have fallen from Rez's eyes, Kearney embraces this immersion to a degree? I'm thinking of Rez waxing lyrical on Quentin Tarantino, where he says that Tarantino has basically given up on reality, that he doesn't pretend there's a real world out there for his films to show anymore, that it's redundant.

RD Rez was a great character to write. I would like to think, and I would hope he's successful as a classical character, a rounded character in the classical sense, a real character but at the same time he is an embodiment of a certain modern predicament: the mediation of reality. These aren't particularly new ideas: philosophers, social theorists like Jean Baudrillard and the rest of them have been talking about these things since the 60s or the 70s, but they're still very pertinent questions and people suffer under these new realities, these new structures. It's funny, though, talking about, in this novel, television, talking about television almost seems retro now, almost seems old fashioned...

ST Because we watch everything in streams.

Bear in mind, of course, it is set 11 years ago, it's set in 2003. **RD** Who watches TV now? It's quaint, watching television is quaint. The assault on reality is coming from other sources now, the online kind of reality that we all live in these days. But at the same time, it's part of the same...it's going along in the same trajectory, this media reality we're all living in and sometimes it gets very hard to separate authentic experience from mediated experience, particularly if, like the characters in this book, you're getting stoned 24 hours a day and if you have a tendency towards unreality or paranoid thoughts the modern world can be a very, very distressing place to live in because of this problem of authenticity and the maddening sense that you can never, never really know if an experience is your own or if it's just something you have been coaxed into doing or prodded into doing by mediated images.

Like the violence in the novel as well. You give Kearney great **ST** lines, I have to say. 'Violence is my bread and butter' being one of them. You describe him as, 'Lost to reveries of carnage and fucking. None of this shit is real for him; it is an alien world impinging on his reality, which is infinitely sexier. He perceives the official world through a kind of fog, dimly, and it nauseates him. He understands little of it and cares for less.' You also write about him that he sees 'everything [as] porno, everyone a victim.' I've read one other interview with you where you described, rather you've talked about 'atrocities porn' in the novel. Could you maybe explain what you mean by that? And in relation to Kearney in particular?

RD Kearney, even more so than Rez, was an absolute joy to write because he is a monster, he's a teenage abomination. He's utterly cruel and psychopathic and deranged and he's vile, but at the same time I love Kearney, I love his character despite his monstrous nature. He was absolutely delirious fun to write cause you could just pour depravity and every sadism you could think of, every mad impulse and primal urge into this character. He's pure id, like the Freudian id. There's no superego there, only impulse and gratification and egoism. But at the same time and I suppose you're saying, rightly saying, he's the flipside of Rez because Rez has a human soul, he has a sense of compassion, he has a sense of empathy. Kearney doesn't, but he's suffering too because of his sheer alienation from reality. He's sitting in school, reading these 19th century novels which mean less than nothing to him, which he cannot relate to in any way. More or less everything in the 'official world', as he calls it, bores him to tears and he cannot connect in any way. The only way he can feel alive is by indulging in his primal fantasies and, of course, in the book they don't stay as fantasies, they become all too real. That's where the book's infernal momentum comes from, when he starts to find fantasy life dissatisfying and decides to take it to the streets.

ST And you see that in the more experimental parts of the novel as well, that you've written to very startling effect. It's an intense, immersive experience and it gets you really inside the characters' heads. Maybe you could talk a little about the composition of those scenes? Did you add those later or where they written in tandem...

There's one chapter that's comprised solely of the tag lines, the captions from hardcore porn websites, which is a Kearney chapter. There is a chapter of the list of video games which he wants to invent someday... There are lots of Kearney fantasy chapters I wrote them all in a very early draft, in the very first draft and, in fact, I had maybe hundreds of pages of this stuff, sheer madness and insanity from Kearney. Some of it was fairly disgraceful. [laughs] **RD**

It is fairly disgraceful, but it is a little bit funny as well. **ST**

I find it hilarious. Some people say it's a bleak book, it's a dark book and, yeah, sure it is in a sense. But it's hilarious too to me, so I really enjoy it when people who've read it tell me it cracked them up or they found it funny. Because I had a hell of a lot of fun and laughter writing the book, particularly the Kearney sections because you can just let go. It's like a Nick Cave song, like 'Deanna' or 'Stagger Lee' or something like that. When I was writing this book in London, I was cycling around the city listening to a lot of music, stuff like Nick Cave and really wanting to kind of emulate that, to write erotically about violence, to completely let go, to write in a very uninhibited way about carnage, violence, sex, cruelty, cruel sex, pornography, the id: unleash the id...and... Remind me, what was the question. **RD**

It was on the more experimental scenes. But can I just ask you, how do you write? Do you write in longhand? Or on a laptop? And do you have any kind of regime? **ST**

RD I don't really have a regime, no. A lot of that book was written in longhand, a lot of that book was also written on the laptop—and I was still experimenting with lots of different ways. In a way I still am, I haven't decided finally which is the correct way to write. It took a long time to write the book, for one thing. The first draft only took a few months but it was very raw, it was sheer chaos, so it took years to bring that to a state of refinement and cohesion. But it was written under fairly chaotic conditions when I was living in London, a fairly impoverished kind of living, living on instant coffee, instant noodles, gin, and it was written...

ST How much of yourself do you write in to your work? It's just London made me think of your short story 'On Nietzsche' in the *Dublin Review*. Is that a hazard?

RD That story is by far and away the most bluntly autobiographical thing I've ever written. It's a story that is quite dear to me, because I mean fiction is fiction, fiction is freedom, you can do whatever you want, but that doesn't mean you can't base it somehow on personal experiences. That story on Nietzsche I wrote this time last year when I was living in a flat in Hampstead and I genuinely wanted to write a book about Nietzsche, but I kind of realised that this was a hilarious aspiration because my life was kind of collapsing around my ears. I was coming through the bitter end of a long term relationship and everything was kind of turning to hell. So I realised the only, the best thing I could do would be to write a story about an attempt to write a book about Nietzsche. But the novel... I really like writing which is autobiographical but at the same time, if you were

just to replicate your own experience and not sex anything up or not fantasise about it or something, it would be fairly boring. So this novel has all sorts of elements, excruciating or disturbing or questionable, which were somehow at least partly based on a true-life experience. Other things were lurid rumours I'd heard about from my 23 years living in Dublin and then decided I could replicate, reimagine them in fiction. But a lot of the stuff I have written takes its inspiration from something autobiographical but then I just run with it and then it could go anywhere.

One of the other great characters is of course Dublin itself. **ST** Matthew says, 'This was a very Georgian part of Dublin I had been led to believe, though I had no real idea of what that meant, nor did I care.' The Dublin you portray in *Here Are the Young Men* is the 'grimy fringes of the city,' the 'vomit-splattered streets of Temple Bar,' a Dublin of industrial estates. It's almost an invisible city, isn't it? Certainly one that isn't portrayed much in Irish literature. What drew you to this side of the city? Is that the reality?

I'm really glad you asked that question because I think that is **RD** one of the things that right from the first draft I was proud of in the novel was that it does give reality, it gives literary form to this part of Dublin which was always extremely real and relevant to me but, as you say, doesn't really get represented in the fiction, or even in the cinema or anything like that, or the art that comes out of Ireland or comes out of Dublin. I'm sure there are a couple of exceptions but I never really knew about them. But I've always been drawn to, as you say, the kind

of grimy fringes, the industrial estates. I'm from Crumlin, a very dreary kind of suburb in the south of Dublin. And when I was a teenager and older I had worked in a series of jobs in Ballymount industrial estate, if you know where that is, and the surroundings. It's an amazing place, it's a sprawl of kind of desolate waste land, it's like something from Tarkovsky. And I think I always knew, getting stoned in these places and looking around them, and the deserted beaches of Dublin, I always knew I'd be wanting to write about these kind of places someday. I spent so much of my youth attracted to places like that, and I still am. I've lived in all sorts of cities at this stage and all sorts of towns. Invariably when I go there I spend hours and hours just walking, drifting through the city. I'm always drawn to these derelict, overgrown industrial or blank spaces and overpasses and stuff. I mean, J.G. Ballard made his artistic life in aestheticising and mythologising all of these places so there are precursors.

There's a great story I remember reading, if you know Blixa Bargeld who was the guitarist in the Bad Seeds and he had his own band [Einstürzende] Neubauten: when he was a young, angry punk living in Berlin he went into a library one day and listened to a record on headphones of African field recordings some researcher had gone out and recorded, and he said he had a kind of crisis: 'What's my field music? What's my folk music?' So the next day he took a crappy tape recorder and walked out onto the Autobahn on the fringes of the city and he walked up under a underpass, the cars zooming below, and he began to bang a brick against the side of the underpass and he was screaming his head off and recording this. And that became the first Einstürzende Neubauten track. It's such a

beautiful story, because if it's all you've got you may as well try to imbue your landscape with some kind of mythic grandeur, some kind of mythological dimension, even if it's industrial estates of South Dublin, even if it's Bluebell's abandoned pitch and putt courses, or whatever places, the canal down by where we used to get drunk when we were teenagers. I think one of the functions, or one of values I should say, of writing for me is that it gives you the possibility to imbue the most overlooked places with mythic resonance. I like to think that the novel and some of the other fictions I have written are an attempt in that direction.

Which takes me into my next question. Your characters seem to be in conflict with the City, at odds with Dublin. They describe Trinity College as 'all stern and proud like some hostile alien fortress.' It's not the a Dublin they know. They're exiled in their own country almost. Outsiders. Rez says: 'Well, ye can be an exile in your own body, or in your own family, or in your own fuckin' century, so why can't ye be an exile in your own country where ye were born?' Most of your characters want to leave. That's something that you've talked about already, that you've lived elsewhere. Could you have written *Here Are the Young Men* if you'd stayed in Dublin? **ST**

No way. I wouldn't be alive if I'd stayed in Dublin, out of sheer rage, frustration and boredom. Whereas now, now I love being in Dublin. But when I was younger, I mean talk about autobiographical elements, again while it's important to keep fiction and life stories separate, nonetheless those characters' experience of Dublin very much reflects the sense of the city **RD**

when I was younger and a lot of people I know, my friends, had the same thing. This idea of exile in your own country, what better definition could you have of alienation, it's a novel about alienation. Alienation from your culture, alienation from the country around you, from the national narratives, from Trinity College like this line you quoted.

When I really got into serious heavy reading and ideas when I was younger, I was drawn to a European literature and philosophy because it spoke directly to me, to this question of alienation. Camus and Sartre and existentialism. I certainly had it bad. I think I had it worse than most when I was younger, a sense of extreme boredom with more or less everything, which began to manifest as a kind of terroristic rage, a very unhealthy way to be. When you read now about these jihadi homegrown fanatics in Britain, it's frightening, but I can really understand in the logic and the external trajectory that leads to those kind of decisions, of becoming radicalised out of boredom and hatred. That's an extreme case, of course. In my case it really began to manifest itself in destructive drinking, lots of pointless drug use when it wasn't even particularly fun anymore, and you reach a point where you realise, 'okay, I've got to get out.' I couldn't, for various reasons I couldn't leave the country quite as soon as I wanted. I just poured all that insane energy into academic life, and into bookishness and philosophy. And when I was 23 I'd finally saved up a lot of money and left Ireland and spent years wandering, which is the best thing I ever did. Of course, these characters in the book are at an age where they haven't had that opportunity yet, where they're still very disgusted by everything around them, by a culture which is very vapid and materialistic and which



isn't nourishing their deeper selves. Or they can't find enough meaning in the culture around them, in the authority figures around them, in the State, in the government, in the culture around them.

ST It's not a particularly Irish culture either. They say, what does it mean to be Irish. This is something you've talked about yourself, the idea of a national literature. You've said that it's 'receding in importance' because 'experience itself becoming so globalised and virtual.' And we're living immersed lives ourselves, like your characters, and there's this new online life that feels post-national and ahistoric. That's something you're working out too, with your characters. But this notion of what it means to be Irish, one of them says, 'I mean like, growin' up in the suburbs, which may as well be anywhere, and watchin' American films and English telly and English football [...] Jesus.' Would you agree that though *Here Are the Young Men* has Dublin as a backdrop, it's a very European novel? And a Houellebecqian Europe at that?

RD I'm flattered to think that you would think of it as a European novel, because I suppose that's the background I'm coming from in terms of literary inspirations and influences, far more than Irish literature. It is one of the questions the novel explores, this sense of nostalgia, of the obsolescence of national identity. I think national identity, increasingly, is just something you put on for the tourists, when your foreign friends come over to visit and you show them this is what it is to be Irish, or at least this is what it used to be, but it's not really something that has an authenticity anymore. Like this kind of hyperreal version of

Irishness that you get in Temple Bar. There's now a leprechaun museum of Ireland. That's true. If that were a satirical line...

You couldn't make it up.

ST

It's beyond satire. You couldn't make it up, people wouldn't believe it. You're almost tempted to take it one step further and say, 'yeah, that is the real Ireland,' the leprechaun museum, the hyperreal Temple Bar experience of Irishness is the real Ireland, or else the rest of it is not really Irish anymore. We all know what's going on, it's the laws of the market, it's globalisation, it's the new technologies that are erasing national differences, erasing cultural differences.

RD

And here you are with *Here Are the Young Men* with its pornography, its drugs, it's eroticism of violence, the hyperreality, the nihilism of a youth culture. It's a fair attempt to ruin the Irish novel, wouldn't you say?

ST

[laughs] It's lovely. It feels great to be accepted into the Irish publishing world because it's more or less an assault, or least it's supposed to be a nail bomb going off against a conception of Irish literature. It's not that I have any kind of problem with particular Irish writers. Part of it was all this alienation, this sense of frustration and hunger and lack and lust that I felt growing up and a lot of people feel and that the characters in this book feel. Part of it is not feeling that you're being represented in a way, that your experience of reality is not being given a voice in the literature that you're reading, in the art that gets produced in the country. It's why all these characters are

RD

looking elsewhere for their nourishment, to European sources, American, wherever it is.

ST Exactly. I see elements of Ballard, Bret Easton Ellis as well, *A Clockwork Orange*, Roberto Bolaño, as well as Houellebecq. Are any of these influences on you? Would you see your writing as being part of a linear collective of those writers? Is Houellebecq a guiding star for you? Or was he a guiding star for you?

RD I wouldn't say a guiding star. As you know from that essay I wrote for *gorse*, I love his books. But, yes, all of those authors. I'd like to think that this is more in that kind of lineage. It's funny, I mean literary influences and inspirations change.

ST And so they should.

RD And so they should. But I suppose the influences that were brought to bear on the writing of this novel, they're not even necessarily authors I'd be reading so avidly anymore. But still, when I had first written the early dears of this book I probably hadn't read more than one or two books by Bolaño yet, so when I read over this novel I don't really see his influence so much. Although he's a huge author for me now. But, yeah, Houellebecq... These are people who I first read when I was very young and I think that's the stuff that goes in. Like somebody like Bret Easton Ellis, I don't think he has much going on now these days. I don't think it's a bit too harsh to say that his best stuff is far behind him. And it's easy to kind of

mock and to discard an author like that these days. But at the same time some of those early books were ferocious, a book like *American Psycho*, particularly if you read when you are 17 or 18, there's kind of a perverse integrity to it, it's such a pure expression of hatred, almost a metaphysical hatred, it's so intense, it's so black and pure it has a kind of dark radiance. Ballard fascinates me but I struggle to finish any of his novels. I can read his interviews all day, I could read essays about him all day, and could listen to him talk but his novels are a bit long-winded. But on the level of ideas...

A little like Will Self.

ST

Will Self, *exactly*. Will Self is an odd one and I always had the sense that he missed his calling. I'm not sure what his calling should have been. I love Will Self, but I don't love him as a writer, I love him as a thinker. I'd say he's a lot of fun to know. I met Will Self once in a café in London and I worked out that I'm taller than him [laughs]. He's a famously lanky author. I had a Nietzsche book I was going to get him to sign it, but then I lost the nerve when I was paying for my espresso. There's a non-story for you [laughs].

RD

As you say, though, he's a great ideas man but it doesn't necessarily follow through in the writing.

ST

And he believes that he is a novelist, he believes that that is his vocation, but I don't believe it is. I think he could have chosen to be a wonderful professor or something like that but...

RD

ST Like Žižek [laughs].

RD Yeah, some kind of pop philosophy entertainer or something like that. Provocateur-at-large. But, yeah, I do like to think that this novel is in all of that lineage. To talk about Irish literature again, this novel is like a Trojan horse in a sense. It's a novel about Dublin, the texture is about Dublin, and it's a realist novel, more or less, but at the same time it's an attempt to sabotage all of that, to throw a spanner into the works. It all comes from a sense of alienation from traditional literature, particularly in Ireland. I know that in the creative writing masters that they teach in Trinity, which I'm sure is good, and I know a lot of good writers come out from it, but I also heard that they teach a course, and I think it's a course you have to take, in the literature of the Big House. When I heard that I thought, 'Oh god, I'm glad I didn't take that course.' It sounds so out of date and I've never even been to a Big House so...

ST Well if they included Aidan Higgins' in that, *Langrishe Go Down*, fair enough.

RD There are plenty of Big House novels, it is part of the Irish tradition, and some of the novels, I'm sure, are excellent. All I'm saying is, I wonder if I had done that course would I be now trying to write a Big House novel, because that's what Irish literature is. Sometimes it's a good idea to leave your country, even to do so in a state of disgust and boredom, so you can be promiscuous, so you can read around and you can take in different influences from everywhere. And then you can come back to your own tradition and try to add something new to

it. Hopefully there's a value in that. It all sounds a bit arrogant, but... [laughs]

The last thing you said there takes me back to your essay in *gorse*, where you say that 'literature is in danger of becoming [...] a museum experience for hangers-on to a vanished past, of scant relevance to a stark and addled hypermodernity. Perhaps the only way for writing, for novels, for literature to connect with new humans is to enact a vigorous, radicalised contempt for itself.' Is *Here Are the Young Men* your reaction, your answer to this? What response do you expect to elicit from your novel? **ST**

I think I probably have a tendency to say these brash, punky, apocalyptic things about writing and about the novel. And they're necessary, you need to keep provoking yourself and to keep provoking the form. That's how things move on, that's how things progress. But, of course, you only write the novels you can write and everybody is all in the same, we're all in it together, anyone who's writing or trying to do that kind of thing. But I would say... [pauses] **RD**

Do you write with readers, or critics, in mind? Do you have a notion of who your perfect reader is? **ST**

No, I don't write with readers or critics in mind. I think that would be disastrous, really. You just have to write from an honest place, and you just have to put out the most honest thing you can. I think honesty is an important word for me when it comes to writing for me. To use a cliché, that you're **RD**

being true to yourself. Frankly, I think I have a depressive tendency—I'm not a depressed person as such—but at the moment I'm living down in Wexford, in Rosslare, in solitary confinement down there, and I have been for the last six months and that was great, I was perfectly happy with it until I realised quite recently that I wasn't happy at all, it's no way to live, that you just sink into a kind of despondency...

ST It's also probably as far as you can go in Ireland without being in Europe, as well.

RD Exactly. I took the ferry over to France from Rosslare a week or two ago, it was great. I kind of realised that you sink into a sense of despondency without even realising it. But anyway, my point is that when I think about books, when I think about novels, when it think of writing in general I tend to... Sometimes I have a depressive sense of things and it makes it all... All my doubts coming bursting to the surface: 'What's the point?' It happens in everything I engage in in life, the sense of the futility of it. Let's face it, if you think anything through to its logical conclusion it will start to seem futile. That's the impasse that philosophy is at, hence these metaphysical questions we were talking about earlier. When I come to think about the novel, when I think about writing books, I start to wonder, 'Well, what's the point? Who's reading? Is anybody even reading books?' But that can be useful too, you have to listen to your doubts, you just don't want to be completely consumed by them because then you become paralysed, which has absolutely happened to me before. I suppose somebody like Houellebecq is interesting and valuable to me because he's

somebody who also listens to his doubts about everything, and about the novel and about a 'what's the point anymore?' kind of novel. 'Does it speak to anyone, does anyone even care is anyone reading, is anyone buying books?' But at the same time, he gets on and he writes the novels he can write. And so *Here Are the Young Men* is the novel that I can write and as far how it goes down, for how people will respond to it, I really haven't got a clue. I expect as with any book, it will be loved by some and hated by others, and others will be more or less indifferent to it. But what I do think, if I'm optimistic about it, is that people will respond to the honesty of it. It was a joyous and fun book to write, and I had a lot of laughter, but it was also a very painful book to write and, frankly, I think it's a painful book to read and not just for the snuff movies, and the brutality, and the cruel sex and all of that, but for the pain that these characters are in.

The disintegration, the unravelling.

ST

The spiritual and psychic disintegration. I like to think people will respond to that. This is real, this is real life and this is what Ireland is these days. People are killing themselves in record numbers with depression, they're selling out of Prozac and diazepam and all the rest of it.

RD

Last question. What are you interested in writing next? I'd heard you had a collection of short stories almost ready?

ST

I do, yes. I would say all the stories are more or less there. Actually, I would say some of my very best stuff is in the

RD

collection of short stories which I have been working on, on and off for a good few years. The stories started to come about in between drafts of a *Here Are the Young Men*, when I needed a break from it or when I had to take a break cause I was waiting for an editor to tell me what to do next, so I started to write short stories. I think a lot of the newer influences of authors I've become fascinated by since then are more apparent in those stories. I feel that the stories, there's a lot of humour in them, and a lot of formal inventions that I'm really happy about. I want to put it out as a book. I want to call it *Autobiography: A Collection of Fictions* just to confuse people, to throw them off the scent.

ST And confuse booksellers.

RD Yeah, just for the sheer hell of it. I'm addicted to doing things like that and it will be the death of me. Since coming back to Ireland I've met a lot other writers. It can make you a bit anxious being around writers because you always feel that you're not doing enough and so I've been kind of thinking, 'God, I should already be at work on the next novel instead of just writing short stories.' But then I try to tell myself calm down a bit, back off. You can be quite depleted after writing something for years and years it takes a lot out of you, so I think it's wise to be a bit gentle with yourself and let the forces rebuild and let the field lie fallow for a little bit. So that's what I'm doing at the moment, so that I can launch into something else. I will say, though, the next book I write, touch wood, will be something very different. The writers I love, not all of them but many of them, like Geoff Dyer or Milan Kundera, people

like this, they tend not to work out ‘Okay, this is how you write a novel and now I’m going to do the same thing over again and just change the content and do that for the rest of my life.’ I would just be bored. I really admire writers who probably dwell in state of permanent anxiety because they force themselves to reimagine the form every time. Even the word novel seems to me like a prison cell and I mean, yes, I’ve written a novel now but I’d like to think of the next book as a book. Cause if it’s a novel—even the word novel sounds a bit archaic, a bit old-fashioned, jaded, stale—but a book can be anything. All the books that really, really fascinate me these days tend to be neither here nor there. There are lots of examples, but you don’t know if it’s a novel or an autobiographical thing or if it’s some bizarre new form or if it’s nonfiction or what, and that’s the kind of writing that really turns me on at the moment so I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the thing that I write next...

Is a hybrid.

ST

Yes, is a hybrid. It’s weird, though, I say that but then again, almost all of the most successful attempts, all of the most successful works of fiction I have written, be they the novel I’ve written or short stories, almost invariably come out of a very earnest attempt to write something true, something strictly autobiographical, something strictly nonfiction, but then they get mangled, the imagination takes over and before you know it the story has run away with itself and it’s become fiction. And maybe that’s okay, maybe that’s the necessary alchemy because when you filter something through your imagination it can take on a life of its own and become alive on the page.

RD