

## INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD MAC LAVERTY: “THERE IS NO HARM IN BEING BLEAK IF YOU ARE REFLECTING THE WORLD AS YOU SEE IT”<sup>1</sup>

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Bernard Mac Laverty was born in Belfast, in 1942. He worked as a Medical Laboratory Technician for ten years at Queen’s University, Belfast. He then became a mature student of English and received an honours degree and a diploma in education. In 1975, Mac Laverty moved with his family to Scotland where he has lived since then. He was a teacher of English in Edinburgh and the Isle of Islay and, for several years, a writer-in-residence at the University of Aberdeen. He gave up teaching to become a full time writer and nowadays, he lives in Glasgow, is married and has three daughters and a son.

Mac Laverty is the author of four novels – *Lamb* (1980), *Cal* (1983), *Grace Notes* (1997) and *The Anatomy School* (2001) - and of four collections of short stories – *Secrets* (1977), *A Time to Dance* (1982), *The Great Profundo* (1987) and *Walking the Dog* (1994). He has also written versions of his own fiction for other media: radio, television and cinema. Over the years he has won several awards and prizes which include “The Northern Ireland Arts Council Award”, “The Jacobs Award” or “The Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award”, among some others.

*Bernard, to start off with, is there any particular writer who has influenced you?*

Yes, I suppose in the beginning those people who make you want to write. In Belfast, there was a writer called Michael McLaverty, a short story writer, and I admired his work a lot. I thought it was great – some short stories like “The poteen maker” and “The wild duck’s nest”<sup>2</sup> and his own novel, *Call My Brother Back*; they make you want to write. I heard him give a talk on the short story, which is very important to me. And then, when I started to write, someone like Hemingway – who helped me try to improve my writing. He was very important – the way he cuts back, he pares back his work to a minimum and yet that minimum

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<sup>2</sup> These two stories are included in the collection *The Road to the Shore* (1976).

has a maximum effect. Also, the first novel by Brian Moore, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, influenced me. I consider it a truly great piece of writing. Then, after that, almost everybody you read has a tiny influence, Dostoyevsky... everybody.

*In the mid seventies you moved to Scotland. Do you think that living there has helped your career as a writer? Do you write from a different perspective from that of someone who lived in Belfast?*

Yes, I do. When you are in Ireland, you have a very childlike or simplified view of politics, in that it is only about orange and green or unionist and nationalist. But then, when you go away to a place such as Scotland, you see that the view is much more complex and that the struggle is between, say, socialism and capitalism, and you meet other writers who are thinking about these things. There is a kind of cross-fertilisation in style and content. So yes, I think it is been good for me to be away.

*Would you say that your work is more objective for being away from Northern Ireland or, on the contrary, you feel it is more subjective?*

Oh, I could not analyse it in that way. I think I am a better writer for having gone away.

*In which of your first three novels can we find more about your own background, about your own life experiences?*

I could not say, I suppose they would be about equal. None of them are autobiographical but there are elements of autobiography in all of them. The school that I went to appears in bits in *Lamb*; Cal is a boy, maybe, a bit like me; and Catherine McKenna is also a bit like me. There was a girl I taught in class who said that fiction is 'made-up truth'. You just hope that your 'making-up' results in the truth. Another way of saying it – it may not be necessarily true, but it has to be capable of being true.

*In Cal Marcella compares herself with Rapunzel and you also refer to The Sleeping Beauty. This reminds me of the fact that you wrote Andrew McAndrew and A Man in Search of a Pet which are children's books. Are you interested in fairy tales?*

Yes, I would be interested in fairy tales. I think it is part of the mental furniture you have. I loved fairy tales as a child and I wrote stories for my own children. I assume everybody has got this kind of literary furniture in their heads and fairy tales or ballads are great to use in a story; they have significance over and above just being named.

*Your novels deal with themes like depression, the breaking down of relationships or the lack of communication. Do you consider yourself a pessimistic writer or is your sense of life tragic, dramatic?*

When you come from a community that is ripping itself apart, that is self-inflicting pain, the way Northern Ireland has done, you cannot possibly come out of that with anything less than a bleak view. And the bleakness of my view began to change in *Grace Notes* when the possibility of peace and reconciliation appeared.

*What would you say about your short stories?*

In some of them, there are comic moments. The early stories in *Secrets and Other Stories*, have, I hope, some amusing incidents and were written before the Troubles ever started. There are some bleak stories as well, but then there is no harm in being bleak if you are reflecting the world as you see it.

*You have written both novels and short narratives. Do you decide what to write when you start a new work?*

Flannery O'Connor, whom I admire tremendously, talked about 'fictions of a certain length'. I mean, some fiction will require half a page, some three pages and others three hundred pages. I would try and write a novel with the same care as I write a short story.

*In your novels, you mention places you know well such as Belfast, Glasgow or the Isle of Islay. Could you write a novel about a place where you had not been?*

I would think it unlikely. It would be a different place, a place of my imagination. So I set the novels in places I know and have experienced. I like making the stories believable through the use of significant detail. If the detail is not relevant, the story is boring. But if the details have any kind of significance to the story, then, it is worth including them.

*Have you considered writing poetry or drama?*

I wrote poetry in the beginning when I was about seventeen. It was incredibly awful. But then I stopped, thank God. And drama, I have written just one stage play out of a short story called "Phonefun limited".<sup>3</sup> It was a one act play and it was staged in Glasgow at the Tron Theatre. But no, I have not written specifically for the stage. I have created drama for TV and for radio, all of them out of short stories.

*Now, I would like to ask you about the relationship between fiction and film. Lamb and Cal have been made into films and you have written the script of both of them. Do you consider that films communicate the same as novels do?*

No, I do not think they communicate in the same way. They tell the story in different ways but both modes can be effective. Comparing a novel to a film is like comparing an apple and an orange. They are different approaches but you can be telling the same story. You have to give up everything that is based on words and start dealing with pictures. Maybe the film has images which are different to the images in the book.

*Sure, we can find examples of that in both films.*

Yes. In *Cal*, for instance, there is a scene where Cal, after Marcella has been nice to him, stubs out a cigarette between his hands. Now, that is not in the book. I was wondering how to show the audience the intensity of Cal's Catholic guilt. I wanted to show him deliberately hurting himself because he was feeling guilty. After all, he has helped murder Marcella's husband. The reason for adding this scene is to gain that intensity of feeling. In *Lamb*, the film begins with a mass production of crucifixes that does not appear in the novel. The crucifying of the Christ figure to the cross by one of the boys is a funny and sad image in that it presages the end of the novel in some way. All these visual images work at different levels, and I think it is interesting when you see them on the screen. In both forms, movie and novel, there is a kind of mystery to try and keep the viewer watching and the reader reading.

*So the mystery comes from the beginning of both films, doesn't it?*

Yes. The film *Cal* begins with the murder. In the novel you do not know of the murder until half way through. However, in the film, you see a murder but you do not know who is involved in it, so when the audience see this scene, they will then say to themselves: "What

<sup>3</sup> This story belongs to *A Time to Dance*.

was that? Who and why?”. In the film of *Cal*, you can keep that mystery running even longer. Until the moment they go to bed together and they are making love. Love making requires truthful eye contact and at that point there is a flashback to show how deeply Cal has been involved in the death of Marcella’s husband. The same kind of mysterious image happens in *Lamb*. There is an image at the beginning of *Lamb* of Michael bursting up out of the sea wearing this T-shirt with an image of the boy on it. Again the audience should think: “What is that? What is going on?” And then, when they see that image the second time, in real time, they should say: “Ah, all right, what we are watching is a kind of flashback from his moment of maximum pain; what we are seeing on the screen now is Michael Lamb in terrible distress”. The film is a different way of telling the story that was first seen inside the reader’s head when they read the words of the novel.

*Where is the original conception then?*

It would probably be inside the author’s head. I do not know if it is the best, but the original conception is in words.

*Why did you change the ending in Cal when it was made into a film?*

These are things that happen in the act of film making and editing. If the original does not work... I mean, the book ends with a Christ like image of Cal standing in a dead man’s Y-fronts thankful that he is going to be beaten up. That is very difficult to convey on film. Pat O’Connor<sup>4</sup> came up with a different emphasis at the end – Marcella with that shawl around her, almost like an archetype of an Irish woman. Someone said that she looked like the woman on the Irish punt [laughs].

*Are you happy with the actors’ performance? Do you think they achieved what you meant in the novels?*

Yes. But it is not my job to work with the actors, that is up to the director. I write the script and if the actors are interested in asking me any questions then I will answer them. I think the man who steers the film is the director. I can be a kind of adviser. I let him get on with his interpretation and I suppose it was slightly different from the novel. I believe the film cut out most of the comedy, or the wit or the way people talk.

*In Grace Notes the composer Catherine calls her main symphony “Vernicle”. Why did you choose that term when that name has clear religious connotations and the aim of the composition was to unite two different religious communities, Protestants and Catholics? Is there anything behind that name?*

Well, yes. Vernicle is a badge to show that you have been in a certain place, it is a pilgrim’s badge. I first came across it in Chaucer where the pardoner had been to the Holy Land and he had a vernicle in his cap to prove it. The same thing happens in Santiago de Compostela. It was to prevent, in the middle ages, people saying: “Oh, I have been to such and such a shrine” and maybe they went ten miles down the road, they hid for two years and came back without any proof saying: “I have been to the Holy Land”. So Vernicle, then, becomes the proof that you have been in a certain place and in the case of Catherine that certain place is the severe post-natal depression she has suffered. She has come back out of

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<sup>4</sup> The director of *Cal*.

a deep blackness and, as a result of her journey, she has made a symphonic work. Vernicle is then the proof of having suffered a deep depression.

*The meaning of the title Grace Notes is explained in the novel, "notes which were neither one thing nor the other", and it connects with the breaking down of the traditional opposition between the two communities, Catholics and Protestants. Is that what you were trying to express with them? According to a dictionary, the exact definition is: "notes which are not essential to the harmony or melody". My question is then: does the title refer to the women who have been silenced throughout history and to the need to give voice to them in a male dominated world?*

I had not thought of it in those terms. What I did or what I was trying to do, I think, was to show that grace notes are ornamentation. Catherine likes the ornamentation of things. She likes churches and stained-glass windows and the music of Gregorian chant. All of these are ornamental things within the Catholic Church, even though she does not believe in the Catholic Church. Catherine also collects shells and a shell is an object which has had the living creature at its centre removed. It is the same as a church without faith, as a church without a centre. A shell is an empty beautiful architectural thing. And I wanted to do the same with the description of the drums. If you withdraw the bigotry from them, then they become pure sound, they become like a church without faith or a shell without a creature in it, and you are left with this magnificent sound. It has musicality no matter where it comes from.

*Are you interested in the relationship between writing and other arts like painting or music?*

Yes, I am. I have written stories which involve painting, music, writing and the most recent novel *The Anatomy School* has an aspiring photographer at its centre. Ways of seeing and reflecting the world are what make us human now. It is a method of self examination which was previously done by religion. But now we write about it, we paint it, we compose it and photograph it. It is an exercise in holding ourselves up to look at ourselves.

*In relation to your second novel, the protagonist, Cal, is a young man who appears to be a victim of society as well as a victim of his own friends in the IRA. Would you consider him a coward?*

Someone who is motivated by fear like Cal is... A coward is a very strange word. I like cowards [laughs], I like people who run away, I like these people. I dislike maybe aggressive people or people who admire violence, you know. There was an American actor – Elisha Cook Junior - who always played cowards and he always had sweat on his upper lip [laughs] and I thought he was great. He appeared the opposite of John Wayne, the man with the rifle, the man who can kill [laughs]. I believe that most people sometimes feel fearful of something and this fear is what keeps things safe.

*I find a clear allusion to religious oppression in your first novel, Lamb. Was it difficult to write about the dark side of religion?*

From the borstal institution I thought yes. The Catholic Church in Ireland has not always been a force for good, many times it has been the opposite. Since I wrote *Lamb*, it has

become even more so. Things have been discovered and things have been rebuilt. Some members of the Church have been awful in their dealings with children and to other less fortunate people. An example of this attitude can be found in the Magdalen laundries.<sup>5</sup> It was an institution run by the Church where girls, if they were out of control of their families or had any kind of sexual trouble, were put into it by the parish priest or someone else with power in the community. The unfortunate girls worked there all their lives for little or no money until they were released. And it was not even a legal thing, it had to do with the Church and it was absolutely awful. Again, a situation where the Church set out to be “good” ended up being the opposite.

*The image of Christ suffering is a pervasive image in your work. In Cal, for instance, we find the painting by Grünewald; in Lamb, in the film, when Michael Lamb is in class, the students are making crucifixes; and, in Grace Notes, when the narrator explains the meaning of Vernicle he refers to Jesus Christ's suffering with his face impressed on Veronica's handkerchief. Is it all a symbol of human suffering?*

No, it is again mental furniture. I grew up as a Catholic with this incredible strong imagery. I felt the Grünewald painting was such a strong painting, such a master piece of pain that it was something that I felt I could pinch, steal – the hands, like starfish, are just wonderful. It is like a quotation. You can quote and make it part of your work. The mental furniture is still there. When you are a child, you learn stuff. Also when you are an altar boy you become aware of the imagery. Black vestments signify death. When red vestments are worn it signifies blood, and that means martyrdom; white means purity; baptism is a symbolic washing of body and soul... So you are growing up with symbolism like that, and then when you become a writer, you sit down to write, you instinctively try to layer and deepen the significance of the imagery.

*And also animal imagery permeates the whole novel.*

All right, yes. I think I go back to the first scene I wrote in *Lamb*. It was where Michael and the boy were on the boat. I knew that Michael would run away with the boy so I decided to start at Belfast when they were on the boat. The boy was feeding bread to the seagulls and Michael said to him that they must not draw attention to themselves in any way; they must be quiet so that they went unnoticed. And then, a bird snatches the bread from the boy's hand and he creates a whole fuss. When I went back and re-read that scene, I thought I really liked it. I wondered what would happen if, for the purposes of just this novel, birds were seen to be creatures of aggression and threat. For instance, when a lamb gets born the crows come down and pick the eyes out of it. The air was a different element to the earth – another element was the sea and the fish moving in it, representing their desired object of freedom. As well as the elements you have the inhabitants of all three – birds and fish and animals and they all behave differently and signify other things. But

<sup>5</sup> Workhouses run by Catholic nuns where young Irish women were sent to pay for their sins which included being pregnant or sexually active. The name comes from Mary Magdalen, the prostitute who washed Jesus's feet with her hair at the foot of the cross. In the same vein, the women cleaned their sins through the hard work. Magdalen women consisted of orphans, prostitutes, unmarried women and, sometimes, their daughters. They worked without pay until they died. They used to be buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of the convents. The practice started around the 1820s and continued up to the early 1970s. In 1993, 133 graves of Magdalen women were destroyed provoking a big scandal. Daughters of these Magdalen women went there in order to try to find their mother's graves. (From Commire, Anne, ed. 1999. *Women in World History*. Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications. 527).

above all, creatures at the interface between the elements were the things that got damaged, like Michael and Owen. They were running from authority to freedom but they were in neither place, they were in-between. For example, there is a scene in London when the boy got into the aquarium and asks: "Have you got any flying fish?", and the answer is: "No, we do not have it, they bang themselves off the glass and kill themselves". Hence, a flying fish would be half way between both the elements of air and water. Similarly Michael's father remembers rod fishing once when a seagull took his bait and he had to reel the bird in from the sky. So all the creatures between authority and freedom for the purposes of this novel were in danger.

*Were you somehow revealing what was going to happen at the end of the book?*

Yes, it was one of the ways I was trying to prepare the reader for the awful end of the book. All the details point to the tragedy that is to come. Even something like playing a pinball machine – no matter how long you think you can keep the ball moving you know eventually the ball is going to fall, is going to tumble into the black hole of the machine. So all these details were ways of indicating that the novel was not going to have a happy ending.

*And also, maybe the title, Lamb, seems to take its reference from the Bible, from the sacrifice of Abraham.*

Yes, Abraham and his sacrifice are referred to in the book. I thought maybe the imagery was overdone in the first novel and I drew back a bit for the second, *Cal*. It could have been called "Cow" [laughs]. I say that because in *Cal* some cows get damaged [laughs]. Cal is just a name and it is a careless pronunciation of the Irish name Cahal. But more significantly he was from a world that is full of organisations whose names are made up of three letters – like RUC and UDA and UVF and IRA, you know, UFF, RUC.<sup>6</sup> I thought it would be nice to have an individual with three letters CAL. And I suppose that was the reason for naming the character in that way.

*I reckon I could not finish without mentioning your recently published novel, The Anatomy School, a novel about identity and growing up. It is a very comic novel and is, in that sense, in opposition to the other three. Why is it that change?*

Because you do not want to write the same thing over again. Comedy is about things continuing whereas tragedy is about things ending – and I wanted to write a book about a boy starting out in life. I wanted to write a book which began in a time of peace in Northern Ireland and continued into a time of war. I see it as a book of talk – or rather hear it as a book of talk. The schoolboy conversations mixed with the ludicrous conversations of their elders.

*Despite its funny elements, the novel questions the validity of religion and exposes the conflict in Northern Ireland, serious matters you had already dealt with in your previous work. Again, is there a new approach to religion and "The Troubles" that might be concerned with the changing of their role in Northern Irish society?*

I suppose it is a matter of mood – the writing reflects what is happening politically in the North of Ireland. In the beginning when the war was at its worst the books were depressing.

<sup>6</sup> RUC stands for Royal Ulster Constabulary, the local police in Northern Ireland. In November 2001 it was replaced by the PSNI, the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The UDA, Ulster Defence Association, the UVF, Ulster Volunteer Force, the UFF, Ulster Freedom Fighters and the IRA, Irish Republican Army are paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland.

Now with the improved situation the fiction seems to be more optimistic. Although it would be a total mistake to think that the hatred and bitterness has gone away – it is just that it is being controlled by the people in power – mostly. The IRA have now decommissioned some weapons and there is a power-sharing government in place so progress looks possible. But the Northern Ireland situation has a record of self inflicted wounds and peace may still remain at the horizon.

*Thank you very much*