

Experiment or Die: A Conversation with Mike McCormack

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Abstract: Mike McCormack is the author of *Getting it in the Head* (1996), a book of stories awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1996 and voted a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. He has also published two novels, *Crowe's Requiem* (1998) and *Notes From a Coma* (2005). The latter was shortlisted for *The Sunday Independent*/Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year award and recently hailed by *The Irish Times* as “the greatest Irish novel of the decade just ended.” In this interview, McCormack discusses the influences and experiences which led him to writing, the ubiquity of technology, and the fragility of identity in twenty-first century Ireland, along with the vital, experimental ethos which he believes contemporary Irish fiction must reclaim if it is to maintain relevance in a globalized age.

Born in 1965 and raised in Louisburgh, County Mayo in the west of Ireland, Mike McCormack is the author of *Getting It in the Head* (1996), a book of stories awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1996 and voted a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Former Writer in Residence at National University of Ireland, Galway, McCormack has since published the novels *Crowe's Requiem* (1998) and *Notes From a Coma* (2005). The latter was shortlisted for *The Sunday Independent*/Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year award and recently hailed by *The Irish Times* as “the greatest Irish novel of the decade just ended” (Waters 14). *Forensic Songs*, a new collection of stories, has just been published by Lilliput Press.

McCormack's fiction is cerebral and often surreal, depicting a west of Ireland that moves beyond narrow, realistic interpretations and into

spaces that exist “outside of government and history” (*Crowe’s Requiem* 54). In this interview he discusses the influences and experiences which led him to writing, his fictional explorations of technology’s ubiquity in our lives, and the fragility of identity in twenty-first century Ireland, along with the vital, experimental ethos which he believes contemporary fiction in the country must reclaim if it is to maintain relevance in a globalized era.

What drew you to fiction initially?

One of the passions I had growing up was the reading of books. I always thought it was an extraordinary thing to be sitting in Louisburgh with nothing but green fields outside and to be reading Isaac Asimov, to have myself totally and completely transported to another world. When I grew up, being a writer was as probable as being a spaceman. I was just an ordinary farmer’s son and lived in a place with small fields and stone walls outside a small village. We called it ‘The Town’ but there’re less than 200 people in it. I thought it was an extraordinary achievement and trick, a writer being able to fully convince you with worlds convincingly deployed in the imagination.

In the same breath and instance I was reading Asimov I could have picked up, say, John McGahern’s first book of short stories, a big influence on me. In many ways, I’ve never read anything as shocking as some of the pieces in that. I recognised those dogs in “Why We’re Here,” one of the great stories of spiritual rot and malaise. I recognised those apples lying on the ground, the shady country characters you’d always be kept away from. I recognised all those things. It wasn’t any desire to escape from it; it was that the world around me was complemented by the world of books. I didn’t really see any difference between standing in Louisburgh and having my head in the Mojave Desert or my head on Mars. It was all the one to me. West Mayo provided solid ground under my feet, and once I was planted on that it was absolutely no problem to be anywhere else.

That powerful Irish foundation for your work manifests as a potent nexus of social and historical identities around which the lives of your characters rotate. I think Notes From a Coma is a good example.

One of my favourite moments in book is the little fellow defining himself. What does he say? “J.J. O’Malley, Cahir, Louisburgh, Ireland, Europe, the World . . .” Scrolling all the way out into the widest reaches of the universe.

It’s putting the west of Ireland at the centre of the universe, isn’t it?

It is. And it still thrills me to get the Google Map of the world and scroll down on my house in Louisburgh from outer space. That’s the kind of spatial and temporal extension, the kind of metaphysical extension which was always there in the reading of books.

Do you think things like Google Maps or Wikipedia or the new technological life we’re living has influenced the way you see the world?

Definitely. One of my great preoccupations, and it comes out in *Notes From a Coma*, is technology. I’ve worked in two or three really interesting topographies which fed that interest; one was a chemical plant in America which was green with acidic rot. This was a plant which made hydrochloric acid and had lost countless environmental lawsuits. It went to court, lost, paid the fine, and kept going because it was cheaper to do rather than upgrade the plant. I was enthralled by the place, all rusting pipes, all corroding metal and concrete. It’s biographical stuff you can see in my story “Angel of Ruin.”

Later I got a job at a pharmaceutical company in Westport as a gardener, probably the best job I ever had. It gave me access to a pristine research environment where people went around in lab coats. You can see it in the research institutes which recur in my work. It was real twenty-first century stuff in contrast to the chemical plant. That was pure nineteenth century black dirt while, in the pharmaceutical company, people were walking around in white gloves and biodegradable suits. One of the things we don’t get to do as writers is have access to those environments. I remember for instance, and you can see it in the middle part of *Crowe’s Requiem*, I went on a drug trial in Germany because I needed the money. I went to a place called the Institute of Clinical Pharmacology in Grünstadt. Again, that was a kind of walled off institute where people’s bodies acquired economic and political

value. I've always found that interesting, how people's bodies become an arena or a prize in themselves.

The other thing that fed my interest in those years was that I read high up and low down indiscriminately. I used to come to Galway City and buy piles of books for £25. That's where I encountered the Flann O'Briens, the Thomas Pynchons, Borges, Marquez, Calvino, all of those postmodern, experimental boyos. Though a few pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* put paid to any notions I ever had of wanting to be a writer. I thought, "I'll never be able to do this, *never!*" Of course then I got a copy of *Slow Learner*. The introduction to *Slow Learner* is just brilliant, the way he 'fesses up to all the things he copped and stole, all the insecurities and bashfulness he had. I recognised all of that and I thought, "This is me he's talking about." That was hugely liberating and so I started writing.

Could one trace the strain of postmodernism in your work to this early reading so?

Yes, you could. I'm beholden to the investigative, ludic element of postmodernism. I like its self-conscious braininess. Having said that, I feel James Woods' criticism of postmodernism is a serious and fatal charge if it ever sticks: "Yes, you're great at information and you're great at putting us abreast of the genetic composition of a peach, or something like that, but [you] can't convince me of what it's like to be sad." Woods picked his enemies very carefully, though I'm not so sure he's right. I think for all its manic loony tunes, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is heartbreaking. I find the predicament of Oedipa Maas at the end of that book really, really moving. That book is a cartoon, and it's one of the few humanly involving cartoons I know, so I think Woods misses that. I think the story of Leni Pokler in *Gravity's Rainbow* is extraordinarily moving when he goes to meet his daughter. I also think the rebuke to Woods' criticism is the work of Richard Powers, which is utterly compelling and utterly convincing. Some of his most moving writing is the story in *Gain* of the soccer mom who contracts cervical cancer from her beloved garden where she's been using a sort of weed-killer which Powers traces back through the corporate history of America, right to the moment where it

arrives from Ireland as a recipe for soap brought across by a man called John Ennis who washes up on Boston docks. This little frail woman dies at the centre of that, and it's one of the great death scenes in literature. We see this flesh and blood woman, a decent woman with kids, dying at the heart of this extraordinary complex of media, machines, and legal concerns. I think it's incredibly moving *because* of those things, not in spite of them.

In some sense that's how I saw J.J. O'Malley's predicament in *Notes From a Coma*, this flesh and blood character at the centre of this legal, political, technological, and familial complex of forces. They pull and drag at him, and they define him.

Between the multiple narrative perspectives and the book's philosophical implications, Notes is a very nuanced text. It's a definite development from the smash-bang-wallop of Getting It in the Head, which, even in the title, is a violent, extreme, physical book of stories.

I think *Getting it in the Head* is a dynamic book and a lot of things happen in it. It's a pity that a lot of the things tend to be bloody and destructive, but that's of an age and a time. I wrote that in my twenties, and it comes from the exuberance of that age. There's a lot of smart, postmodern self-reflexiveness in that book and a lot of regard for storytelling in that book, people consciously telling stories. I look back now, and I think the experiments in it are very schematic, bound into an irreversible logic, but that served me well. I studied philosophy for four years and, though I was a poor philosopher, it taught me progression and structural rigour which stood me well in that collection. There is a continual, formal sense of awareness, a sense of experiment: "Can I say this some way different? If I say it different will it illuminate something about that?" My fondness for that sort of thing had been formed by J.G. Ballard, particularly *Myths of the Near Future* and *War Fever*. Those are still totemic pieces for me. They're where that kind of concern was formed. The collection is kinetic, but it's of the head as well. There're so many people in it who are obsessed, who are monomaniacs: a lad growing breasts, a woman eating a window, a man carving himself up. I like obses-

sives, though they have a very narrow view of the world. They're really manageable for a writer starting out because they're only going to be concerned with one thing, something of the head or of the mind or of the imagination.

I think Joyce's definition of the short story as a quiet moment where our soul is turned a degree and we gain epiphanic insight is a very powerful and very legitimate idea which is done hopelessly badly by ninety-nine percent of writers. Too often I put down a short story and I say, "I'm not convinced." In contrast to that I wanted my stories to be quite vivid and dynamic without being crude, and to attain some kind of structural, thematic, and intellectual elegance. Structure is very important to me. *Getting It in the Head* was very structurally self-conscious but *Crowe's Requiem* was more symmetric, built with more balance. I always think of my books visually as architecture, as constructs, as pieces of engineering.

That's very clear in Notes From a Coma. The story of J.J. comprises everybody else's stories about him. They all contribute an element of him.

He's actually never in it. He's the absent vacancy at the heart of the book. It's part of the idea that these people talk him into being. When I was doing research for that novel I did a lot of reading on the moment of death and how the definition of death has been pushed out further and further since the nineteenth century. Comas only gradually came into recognition in the last hundred years, and I'm sure many people with fainting fits and comas were just buried in the nineteenth century. One of the other things that occurred to me, and it's really obvious, is that when we die our biological, existential existence ends but our identity lives on in the minds of those who love us. We are safeguarded by those people. That was the central idea of *Notes From a Coma*; these people keep J.J. alive by talking about him. One of the themes is community or family, and one of the things I was trying to do was redress some of the bad things I've said about rural Ireland.

Because rural Ireland comes off poorly enough in Crowe's Requiem where it's depicted as a "wound in creation" (Crowe's Requiem 11).

If anything, it comes off poorer in *Getting It in the Head*. There's a sloppy vision of rural Ireland in that book, a place full of amadáns or psychos.¹ It's either Killinaskully or we're all clouting each other on the back of the head with loys.² Either of those things are a gross misrepresentation. Sure, every rural community has its *Twin Peaks* moods and moments, but by and large rural Ireland is a place where decent people live decent lives. That's the most original idea in the book really. That's why there's a dwelling on funerals and christenings in it, on things like the sing-song. These are things that occur out of the neighbourliness which J.J. lies at the heart of.

Do you know what an event horizon is? It's the furthest of which we can talk about, which we can stand outside and look in but which we can't go inside of and hope to come out again. This is the way I envisioned the book. Here's our little boat at the centre of it with our little men in it, J.J. being one of them. That boat is called *Le Soleil Noir*, The Black Sun. Basically it's a black hole around which you have these rings of influence which radiate from it, these various horizons: father, lover, neighbour, teacher, politician. But way outside of that there was this kind of circumambient, broken horizon. The event horizon. Not scholarship, not deferring to any other books or any privileged research or documentation. Not like *The Third Policeman*, even though the scholarship in that was spoof; it doesn't defer like that. Basically it's a circumambient written in four or five different languages: Fantasy, Journalese, Philosophical Argument, Hectoring, and what Desmond Fennell called—which I really liked—Mandarin Scientific. That's the event horizon, a hopeless attempt to inscribe someone as widely as possible in the universe. It was occasioned by the ruminations of these characters. I sometimes call these notes "contingent riffs" in that they're contingent on whatever the person is talking about. They illuminate some distant aspect of the universe. They were called marginalia; they were called voiceovers in various drafts. I go mad when people call them footnotes, when people say that it's an academic book or that it's about footnotes. They're not footnotes; they don't do what footnotes do. They don't refer to anything. I don't bother entering into the argument anymore, though my wife tells me I'll go to my grave roaring *they're not fucking footnotes!*

And is there a reason this circumambient horizon is a broken line?

It's because it'll never be comprehensive enough. One of the things you should remember is that the book is called *Notes From a Coma*. It's not called *Long Continuous Narrative From a Coma*. It was always going to be fragmented, bitty. It was always going to be excursive. In some ways the book is trying to be a mirror for J.J.'s consciousness in that it's full of fragments and shards, a multi-vocal kind of thing. That was the experiment. Took me a long time to grab my courage and publish it the way I did.

The book was also called "an allegory for the future collapse of self and state sovereignty."³ Would that have factored into your original intent?

Yes, the book is about the sovereignty and integrity of the individual and how it is maintained by the self and by other people, about how we are the constructs of ourselves and our interaction with others. Also our interaction with machines and technology. That's a huge concern of mine. Ever since I read *Gravity's Rainbow* and Ballard's *Crash*, I've been utterly convinced that technology is one of the most immediately defining things about what it is to be human. I'm utterly convinced that we make our machines, and our machines turn around and remake us. It's a continual loop. This is a really interesting time for that, a lot of talk about being posthuman. Do you know Katherine Hayles? Her *How We Became Posthuman* is a brilliant book. She talks about some of the work of Richard Powers but also *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Terminator*. It's strange, she says, how the robots became good guys and the people became evil. This is a transitional moment where we could step out of flesh-and-blood selves completely and become disembodied consciousness.

The most recent piece I read by you was the story "Prophet X," and there's that astonishing line in it where one of the characters says, "Ten percent of the people in America now meet the definition of a cyborg."

I found that in Hayles. A cyborg is a technologically enhanced human. You and me wearing glasses, we meet the definition of it right away.

The fillings in our teeth. Buttons. You wouldn't believe how important buttons are. You'd think they're an obvious idea, but they're not. China never had them, smart and all as they were, they never got around to inventing them. There's a continuum in that sort of thing that leads right up to cyborgs. And one of the things which governed my idea of *Coma* was that the book itself was a cyborg. It's a warm pulsing heart overlaid with a metal chassis, overlaid with a synthetic skin. The book is also a hybrid. It's a hybrid of science fiction and Irish domestic realism. It's John McGahern meets Philip K. Dick. Imagine they were commissioned to collaborate on an episode of *The X-Files*. It's not a crowded shelf, is it? But that was the book. It got lots of good reviews but people can be very incurious. Look at the types of writing which governed the Celtic Tiger.⁴ Look back and see how many historical novels were published, how many memoirs and autobiographies were published. At a time when we could have been curious we became curatorial. Instead of looking forward we chose to look backwards. *Coma* was at variance with what was happening. That book was set two years in the future when it was published.

Is there any possibility then of speculative fiction in an Irish context?

I think there's definitely a mood of it. First of all we have an experimental tradition here. For me there are three Olympian figures, our Holy Trinity: Joyce, Beckett, and Flann.⁵ Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. There's no other literature in the world which is so dominated by an experimental ethos. In America you have great writers up at the peak, people like Saul Bellow and Mark Twain. You can talk about their greatness, but you can't talk about them being great experimental writers. Our three Olympians were great writers *and* great experimental writers. There's a categorical difference between those writers, those great writers, and our very good writers. For me there is anyway.

Flann in particular was a big thing for my generation. I'll always remember finishing *The Third Policeman* and the world being different afterwards, the world of books was different. There were so many more things possible after I read that book. Yet we've lowered our sights and aspirations to O'Connor, O'Faolain, McGahern . . . I'm not going to

win any friends with that argument, but have Joyce and Beckett and Flann become unapproachable? I think it's really interesting: Why have we so decisively turned our back on our experimental tradition? It's so strange.

Certainly I see myself as part of the speculative and conjectural tradition that informs Irish writing. You see it in the mystical poetry of Yeats, you see it in Berkeley's idealism, you see it in Flann O'Brien . . . *Notes From a Coma* is on the curriculum in Heidelberg. I know it's on the curriculum, quite properly, in Charles University in Prague, Karel Čapek's city of robots and dolls. It has a half-life ticking away out there. I'd also like to think I was part of the comic tradition of Irish writing. I think I am a comic writer. Sometimes I think I'm at my most profound when I'm writing comedy. People wouldn't normally see my work as comic, but I do.

So what's next?

I've just finished a new book of short stories. It's called *Forensic Songs*, and an amended version of "Prophet X" will appear in that. It's built on a real incident, that story, on the Steorn company above in Dublin. They claim to have a machine that confounds the Second Law of Thermodynamics. I've met people who have engineering friends who went to the demo ready to snigger and to laugh and came back not one bit happy with their own conclusions. I was stalking the story for years. The head of that company had to know what he was doing. He put together a panel of twelve. He speaks of it as a proposition. He talks about a thing called "Over-unity." I didn't have to reach very far to see that this was the old Millenarian argument as technology. They don't as yet have a machine coughing out over a hundred percent of what's put into it, but that would stand the world in its head, wouldn't it?

I take a satirical swipe in that story, but I wouldn't like to be seen as a satirical writer, because I always thought there was something overbearing about satirical writing: "I'd do it better myself but I've other things for doing." If you want to look at a story which is continually misunderstood, it's "Thomas Crumlesh." People think that's a satire about the art world, but that's actually a story of friendship; it's about one man's

unquestioning devotion to what he sees as another man's genius. I could be no more bothered satirising the art world because so much that goes on in it is beyond satire.

If satire is not the way, then how do you think Irish writing will react to the contemporary crisis?

Sometimes I think it's so huge that it's going to take a while to digest it, to metabolise it. The question is always asked, "Where is the great novel of social overview?" That's the wrong question. The right question is whatever happened to our experimental tradition? Why did we abandon it? The great novel of social overview is *Ulysses*, and that's the great experimental novel. When we reclaim our experimental instincts then a work of social overview will be the manifestation of that. People are putting the cart before the horse, people like Damien Kiberd continually asking, where is the novel of social overview? Where is the socially engaged novel? They're just asking for the nineteenth century, just asking us to read George Elliot or something like that. Not that it can't be done. It's just that it can't be done any way new. Joyce, Flann, and those lads have shown us the lead. Experiment is the way to go. Until we reclaim those instincts we won't find a novel of social overview.

I've been reading about the video gaming industry, and the greatest limitation there is the audience's expectations. The majority just want to be clubbing zombies with lengths of lead piping. So if that's what your constituency wants, there isn't a great onus on you to produce experimental games or cognitively challenging games. There's something like that in writing. We want to read books that affirm us. We want to read books that mirror us. That's why I find that question about "Where is the novel of social insight?" to be disturbing. People wanting us to hold a mirror up to nature? It's anti-intellectual, it flies in the face of what is our grandest instinct, which is to experiment. It also belittles what fiction can do. Fiction can be speculative, can conjecture; it's a place for bold ideas and that. The simple act of mimesis is the least of what it can do. Why would we want to confine it just to that?

And of course a novel like Notes From a Coma is experimental and, you're right, manages to hold up a mirror through all of it. It is the Ireland which we're living in.

That's what I would have thought. Is one of the most vivid novels of contemporary Ireland an experimental science fiction novel? That's the question. One of the things that's recognisable about Ireland in the last fifteen or twenty years is our trafficking on this notion that we're great storytellers. Now, recent history shows that, not only are we not good storytellers, we have a vested interest in *not* telling stories, we will do our damndest not to tell stories. This whole era from about 1990 on won't be known as the Celtic Tiger. Long term history will refer to this as the Age of Tribunals. We've had to resort to this extraordinary, cumbersome, complex state apparatus in order to tell stories that should have been the job of documentary makers and journalists. We always hear journalists talking about institutional failures in this country, but the biggest institutional failure is journalism itself. It failed to come up with a credible first draft of history and, if they don't do it, it's impossible for fiction writers to run with it afterwards. I've never thought we were storytellers. I was never convinced of it. It's arguable whether Joyce was a storyteller; it's arguable whether Beckett was a storyteller.

We like to think of ourselves as storytellers, the world likes to think of us as storytellers, and we like the world to think of us as storytellers. There's this act of complicity. Everyone has a vested interest in Paddy being a storyteller and we think we have this gift to a degree that the Brits don't have it, the German[s] or the Americans don't have it. We have a special, privileged access to storytelling. But it's not true. The evidence is in the last twenty years. We couldn't tell our own story to ourselves. We had to resort to things like the Beef Tribunal or, the one that really gets me, the Hepatitis Tribunal. Sixty or seventy people died at the hands of government incompetence. So I don't believe it. It's one of those inherited idiocies, that we're great storytellers. We have to find some way of telling a story, but . . . ah, look: Experiment. Experiment or die.

Notes

- 1 “Amadán” is an Irish Gaelic word meaning “fool” or “idiot.” It is often used colloquially in Irish-English.
- 2 *Killinaskully* is an Irish television comedy revolving around ridiculous exaggerations of rural stereotypes. McCormack’s comment about “clouting each other on the back of the head with loys” is a reference to J.M. Synge’s 1907 play *The Playboy of the Western World*.
- 3 Liam Harte, “A Sedation of the Soul,” *The Irish Times*, 14 May 2005, Weekend, 13.
- 4 “Celtic Tiger” is a term used to describe the period of rapid economic growth in the Republic of Ireland between 1995 and 2007.
- 5 Flann O’Brien (1911–1966) is often referred to fondly as “Flann” by Irish readers.