

## “TO ME, THE POOR AND THE POWERLESS – AND I AM THAT – ARE ALWAYS THE ONES THAT KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON”

Interview with Irish writer Emer Martin

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### INFORMAÇÕES SOBRE OS AUTORES

Melania Terrazas is Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of La Rioja (Spain). She is the author of *Relational Structures in Wyndham Lewis's Fiction: Complexity and Value* (Lincom Europa, 2005) and helped set up the Wyndham Lewis Project website. She has published on Applied Linguistics (vocabulary knowledge and motivation) and extensively on a number of British and Irish authors and film directors. She is on the Executive Board of AEDEI (The Spanish Association for Irish Studies) and Head of the Centre of Irish Studies BANNA/BOND (EFACIS) at the University of La Rioja. She was the editor of *Journal of English Studies*, guest edited a Special Issue on *Gender Issues in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Vol. 13:2, 2018) for *Estudios Irlandeses* Journal and edited *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* for Peter Lang, 2020. E-mail: [melania.terrazas@unirioja.es](mailto:melania.terrazas@unirioja.es)

### ABSTRACT

Emer Martin is an Irish author, artist and teacher who lives in California. She has produced a strikingly diverse range of work: novels, poems, literary journalism, paintings, and short films. She is also an active writer for newspapers and on social media. Her first novel, *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995), won Book of the Year 1996 at the prestigious Listowel Writers' Week in her native Ireland. This novel and her next, *More Bread Or I'll Appear* (1999), were published internationally and widely acclaimed. Her third novel, *Baby Zero*, was published in the UK and Ireland in March 2007 by Dingle, and released in the US in 2014 by Rawmeash, an artist-led publishing cooperative run by artists for artists and based between USA and Ireland. Rawmeash was founded by Emer Martin in 2012. Emer Martin is an extremely political and expressive artist. In this interview, she shares her views on such cultural matters and the idea of art as resistance; or contemporary concerns, such as the politics of capitalism, the COVID-19 crisis or climate change. She also argues about her latest novel, *The Cruelty Men*, which in 2019 was shortlisted for best Irish novel the same year.

### RESUMO

Emer Martin é uma autora, artista e professora irlandesa que vive na Califórnia. Ela produziu uma gama surpreendentemente diversa de trabalhos: romances, poemas, jornalismo literário, pinturas e curtas-metragens. Ela também é redatora ativa de jornais e redes sociais. Seu primeiro romance, *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995), ganhou o prêmio Livro do Ano de 1996 na prestigiosa Listowel Writers' Week na sua terra natal Irlanda. Esse romance e o seu seguinte, *More Bread Or I'll Appear* (1999), foram publicados internacionalmente e amplamente aclamados. Seu terceiro romance, *Baby Zero*, foi publicado no Reino Unido e na Irlanda em março de 2007 pela Dingle, e lançado nos Estados Unidos em 2014 pela Rawmeash, uma cooperativa de publicação liderada e dirigida por artistas para artistas e com sede entre os EUA e a Irlanda. Rawmeash foi fundada por Emer Martin em 2012. Emer Martin é uma artista extremamente política e expressiva. Nesta entrevista, ela compartilha suas opiniões sobre questões culturais e a ideia da arte como resistência; ou preocupações contemporâneas, como a política do capitalismo, a crise do COVID-19 ou as mudanças climáticas. Ela também discute sobre seu último romance, *The Cruelty Men*, que em 2019 foi selecionado para melhor romance irlandês no mesmo ano.

### KEY-WORDS

Emer Martin; Irish culture and art; Politics; Social issues.

### KEY-WORDS PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Emer Marti; Cultura e arte irlandesas; Política; Questões sociais.

## INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1. Emer Martin

## INTERVIEW

**Melania Terrazas:** Emer, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I would like to start with a few general questions based on your website. Did your upbringing become a specific reference point within your work?

Emer Martin (EM): *Breakfast in Babylon* was my most autobiographical work, which is probably typical for a first novel. It really was a composite of fact and fiction. So many of the characters are straight out of my experience in Paris and London. I was desperately trying to shed off Ireland when I was young. Growing up in the 1980s, I saw Ireland as very uncool and uninteresting. I felt like I was trapped indoors. It was a poor undeveloped country that was dominated by the Catholic Church and I stomped around as a teenager punk rocker full of resentment and longing, dreaming of cultural centres like Paris, London, New York, San Francisco, all fantasy places in my head that were vibrant and full of art and experimentation.

MT: In your article “Hungry Ghosts” you said that your first novel, *Breakfast in Babylon*, “explores addiction and the use of drugs to both alleviate poverty and to have fun in an otherwise drab environment” (TERRAZAS, 2020, p. 147) The main character is the young Irish immigrant Isolt who lives in Paris, where she meets many drug addicts, alcoholics, refugees, immigrants, and exiles – modern society’s losers. You show sympathy for all these figures relegated to the category of “the Other” and their desperate desire to belong. Could you tell me about that?

EM: The world of history may belong to the lions, but it is the lowly scavengers and scraggy hyenas that move me to write outside of history and memory. The forgotten whom I want to place in a protective pocket of history by chronicling what it was like to be always at the arse end of the economy. To be relegated as a nothing, as fringe, marginal, to be left out. Nietzsche, I think, said, fear is the feeling of absence of power, and I was drawn to that, how to live without power in a monolithic materialistic world not of your making. People like me do not make history and we barely survive in its grinding machinery but we are alive and often we can see more clearly how the machine works when it is not operating for our benefit. To me, the poor and the powerless – and I am that – are always the ones that know what is going on.

Outwardly, I am a published author and have got a profession as a teacher but the reality is that I live one pay check away from homelessness in the most unfettered capitalist country on the planet. I am in perpetual debt for daring to pursue an education; I am getting in more debt for the audacity of trying to educate my daughters. I work to cover rent, health care and pay back student loans. I am told I live in the greatest democracy on earth but they never give me a candidate that will work in my interests; so I vote for the sake of it but my vote is empty. I live in the richest country that has ever existed in history, we are told our leader is the leader of the free world, but the prisons are privatized and full, and there are for-profit detention camps that have incarcerated innocent migrants and separated them from their children. These prisons and detention camps are acceptable because racism is normalized. I am fully aware of how the system



works because I have lost. Myself and my friends and those people in prisons and camps in the free world will be conveniently written out. I am trying to write them back in. That is resistance. As Isolt said in the book: “Which one of us will be so brave as to fight the world with cardboard limbs?” I am not brave, but I am cunning enough to try.

**MT: At the end of *Breakfast in Babylon*, Isolt, who is a very self-reflective character, seems to escape from drug addiction and recover from trauma. Bearing in mind the situation of many homeless in Ireland today, whose substance consumption is so pervasive, do you think that, 23 years after the novel’s publication, they still suffer collectively from trauma?**

EM: I think Ireland is rife with trauma and its consequences. In many ways, modern Ireland is a very liveable place and people are connected in ways that they are not in most of the industrial world. Yet we have a very high addiction and suicide rate that does not come from nowhere. The history of colonialism is one of cultural and bodily annihilation and no country that has experienced that has survived unscathed. Ireland had the advantage of being brought into Europe and thus gaining some advantages from Europe’s previous violent imperial supremacy, but we have been battling decimating imperialism for centuries and the only way to recover is to face that. White privilege softened the blow for Irish people who were able to emigrate and merge into the dominant culture, and after a few generations reap the benefits; however, those are unearned privileges and they do not sit well with me. Being from a white postcolonial culture only makes me more aware of my responsibility to dismantle the racist systems that are in place throughout the Western world that created these divisions in order to justify exploitation. I find myself often as the only white person in the room in my classroom and spend much of my time not only talking about literature but also using it as a lens to unpack the racism and disadvantage I see at work in my new community. As always awareness of how it works is the first step to finding out if there is an off switch to this machine.

**I: In *More Bread or I’ll Appear*, you use dark comedy and examine the idea that the**

**links between relatives can be greater than the frontiers between countries. Do you think dark laughter can facilitate new truths in your work by going against the status quo?**

EM: *More Bread or I'll Appear* was a book set in so many regions and continents that some people complained it was too much. Maybe it was, but it was a family drama removed from the kitchen and sent out into the globe. It reflected my life at the time, where I was incessantly travelling and learning and discovering. Yet still again my characters were not part of the status quo and were struggling like the dirt birds trying to find a steady log to land on in a stormy polluted ocean.

**MT: You also produced Irvine Welsh's directorial debut *Nuts* in 2007, together with Niall McKay. In this short film, Welsh tackles "the issue of testicular cancer, and the closeted racism among Ireland's middle-class professionals." In the dark humour applied to the character's psyche and troubled inner life, were you holding a mirror up to politics?**

EM: Irvine Welsh and I became very close friends during that time and I was delighted to produce his first film. He was also struck by the liberal middle-class attitude to the new immigrants and their blatant hypocrisy. His work, like mine, uses humour to expose the real horror that would otherwise be unpalatable.

**MT: Let's talk about your children's books *Pooka*, a funny Halloween book, and *Why is the Moon Following Me?*, a series of fun, short poems about the early history of astronomy. What drives you to write books for children?**

EM: I write children's books for relief from my longer adult works. I love rhyming and playing with words, so they allow me to do that. Working with illustrators very closely – such as Magdalena Zuljevic – was a delight and collaboration made everything better and joyful. They are pure fun for me, a delight.

**MT: In your first children's book, *The Pig who Danced*, you deal with issues such as acceptance and inclusion. How do you approach difficult topics like these in your work while being sensitive to a young audience?**



EM: Nina Khashchina was the illustrator on that book. We are both immigrants in the U.S. She is from Ukraine, and there was an anti-immigration rhetoric in the media fed by Trump and his wall. We wanted to do something playful that did not hammer you on the head but left kids to work it out for themselves. Bullies are bullies the world over yet the pig kept dancing her own dance and making her own space in the world.

**MT: Let us talk about your latest novel, *The Cruelty Men*. This is the first in a trilogy on migration and feelings of separation within the island of Ireland seen through multiple narrators, all of them members of two interconnected families across three generations. Storytelling helps them to connect not only to each other, but also with their ancestors and Irish identity. This world of fantasy and myth is closely intertwined with another one, that of the Cruelty Men, which is pervasive, haunting and, above all, very real because it conditions their daily lives and future in very tragic ways. Why *The Cruelty Men* and not *The Cruel Men*?**

EM: The Cruelty Men were men, often retired police, who were tasked with finding children in impoverished circumstances and ostensibly putting them in industrial schools for their own protection. However, we know now that those schools were notorious and the children were put to work and abused physically, sexually and emotionally. When I was interviewed by Pat Kenny (2018) he said: "I've never heard of this term." And I encountered that a lot from middle class people. That was because the state would never take the children of the middle class and exploit and abuse them in this manner. The poor knew exactly who they were. Many people told me that they would have a child keep a look out in the fields and notify the family if the Cruelty Men came around. There are two parallel Irelands and the two families in the book, the Ó Conaills and the Lyons, represent this. In a way, they represent my mother's family and my father's family.

**MT: We are now living through COVID-19 and observing its worst effects on the poor. How you see the situation of many American school kids in California, where some schools refuse to close to help halt spread of the virus? You are an extremely involved citizen and teacher, and your school feeds these children twice a day because they**



**might not eat otherwise. Emer, have we learned nothing from the past?**

EM: My school feeds the kids twice a day. They are on a school lunch program. The poverty here in the richest country on earth is stunning. When the kids are on break, they often do not get to eat. School is their food source and their stability. Many are suffering terribly now that the schools are closed. We have had teachers set up a fund for families in dire need and we contributed and they distributed cash. Some of our families are facing homelessness because of this crisis and they were unstable to begin with, as rents keep rising. I have students whose parents have been deported to Mexico and they are living in homeless shelters, trying to take care of younger siblings, working from 4-10pm in fast food places after school. Meanwhile our leaders are saying, build a wall, shove migrants and refugees in detention centres, separate families. They are being told that they are thieves, rapists, spongers, and 'bad hombres'; in reality they are the backbone of the country. They pick all our food, they work hard in low paying jobs. They are kept undocumented on purpose so they are always vulnerable and cannot vote. They still have to pay tax though. And this tax is funnelled to the über-wealthy corporations who get massive Government pay-outs. This is socialism for the rich and vampire capitalism for the rest of us. It is one of the biggest scams since the Russian Tzars had the serfs enslaved in the fields. How can this system be sustainable? We are losing our planet for short-term profits for the über-wealthy.

**MT: To my mind, people working in Irish studies should take *The Cruelty Men* as a reference book, because tradition, culture, history, folklore and all the contextual factors that have affected Irish culture and identity from ancient times are there. Did you expect the reception that your massive novel has had?**

EM: Sometimes publishing is like throwing a leaf in a canyon. I fling it in and await for some noise to indicate impact. Often the silence is deafening. I hope people read *The Cruelty Men*, and get to see the richness of the culture, history and folklore that make us a people. Every country, just as every individual, has their own unique history and I hope they start to think about their own richness and how important it is not to lose the stories



from the past. They are the history of our dreams.

**MT: In one of your short essays, “An Artist in Silicon Valley”, you claim: “Fiction is the most efficient way to get to the truth. I don’t tell them. (Tech people living in Palo Alto.)” What do you aim to say in your short works? Do you set out to say something different than with your novels?**

EM: The novels are so long and arduous and they are my big ambitious projects. But things happen in between that I want to respond to in a more immediate fashion, and the shorter pieces work like that.

**MT: Many examples of your art, short work, short films and publications by Rawmeash are the product of collaborative forces from all over the world joined together in one single project or challenge. Some of my favourites are your paintings of the “Shifting Borders” collection, your short story “Border Crossing”, your short film *As Long as I Live* and your children’s book *Pooka*. Do you think these collaborations tell us something useful about working together? If so, what is it?**

EM: I was told in film school by a professional director that the secret to being a success in the arts is to always find people more talented and more famous than you and try to work with them. Collaborations always elevate me because I am lucky to find those talented people to work with.

**MT: Emer, you are against war and say that we need to focus on the climate. In other words, you touch on the notion of “the bigger picture”, among other themes, in your art. To what effect do you tackle this issue?**

EM: Art can bring awareness and deepen understanding but it does not solve anything. The solving is done by people far more dedicated to activism than I am. However, I think all activism is linked to art movements in some way. Activists need imagination as a tool and they use it very well.

**MT: After leaving Ireland so long ago, how would you define your Irish identity now – or should I say Irish identities?**

EM: I am Irish. I cannot imagine not being Irish. I have seen all the world through a lens





of my Irishness. Born on the rock of doom, with its strange dreamtime of warriors and saints, the island has always been strange. It once was the Tibet of Europe. People came from all over to study and learn, and the woods were full of healing sacred wells and mad mystic monks. Then colonialism happened. The Vikings, the Normans, the English, the modern American disposable, chain restaurant, tidal wave of consumer culture. All of it has made me and unmade me. However, sometimes I wish I were Spanish though, because the food would be better and you have the sun.

**MT: Could you say something about your next book, *Headwreck*? How does it relate to the previous ones? When will it be out? What are you going to do next?**

EM: *Headwreck* will be released summer of 2021. It is a kind of sequel to *The Cruelty Men*, yet I want both to stand alone. It takes the next generation through to the present moment. Again, my books reflect how I see the world. They have multiple interacting characters weaving their lives around each other in a big mysterious tapestry that you have to back away from to see patterns. After this, I will write a short book. That is my goal.

**MT: Thank you so much for this interview, Emer. I wish you all the best for your future work.**

EM: Many thanks, Melania.



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