



# The Process of Writing Fiction

## AN INTERVIEW TO EIBHEAR WALSHE

by María Verónica Repetti\*

**Dr Eibhear Walshe** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Modern English at University College Cork. His biography *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* was published by Irish Academic Press in 2006 and he edited *Elizabeth Bowen: Visions and Revisions* for Irish Academic Press in 2008. He was a section editor for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, volume 4 (Cork University Press, 2002); a contributor to the *New Dictionary of Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and guest edited *The Irish Review* in 2000. His other publications include the edited collections: *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork University Press, 1993); *Sex, Nation and Dissent* (Cork University Press, 1997); *Elizabeth Bowen Remembered* (Four Courts Press, 1999) and *The Plays of Teresa Deevy* (Mellen Press, 2003). He co-edited with Brian Cliff *Representing the Troubles* (Four Courts: 2004) and *Molly Keane: Centenary Essays* (Four Courts, 2006) with Gwenda Young. His memoir, *Cissie's Abattoir* was published by Collins Press in 2009 and he edited *Elizabeth Bowen's Selected Irish Writings* for Cork University Press in 2011 and *Oscar's Shadow: Wilde, Homosexuality and Modern Ireland* was published in 2012. His first novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*, was based on a libel case which took place in Dublin in 1864 involving Oscar Wilde's parents. This novel was published in June 2014 by the Somerville Press and was shortlisted for the Kerry fiction Prize in 2015 and then long-listed for the Impac Literary Award in 2016.

**After your vast experience and renown in academic literary criticism, what prompted you to try fiction?**

I began by writing memoir, which was itself a writing exercise. I was

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working a biography and I wanted to see if I was good at writing the portrait of a person, a pen portrait. So I wrote a short description of my grandmother, just to describe her, to see if I could describe a human being to somebody else, then gave it to somebody who had never met her and they said, "You should write more of this. She sounds like the kind of person it would be interesting to meet in literature." So I continued to write my memoir and published it. It gave me the confidence to think, "Well, what about fiction? Can I give it a try?" And my attitude always was, "If it doesn't work, so what?"

**What authors, both from Ireland and from abroad, have influenced your style in any way?**

The writer that has influenced me very much in the writing of *The Diary of Mary Travers* is Colm Tóibín, with his historical novel, *The Master*, which is a Victorian novel about the American writer Henry James. For me, it was about finding a way of writing about the nineteenth century that was accessible so that we could relate to, perhaps, the personalities and the dilemmas of those characters, make them modern make them feel like they are part of our lives.

**Have you had any contact with Argentine writers?**

Yes, I have been very fortunate, this is my fourth visit here. Obviously, like everybody else, when I was a student I read Borges and admired him very much. And luckily, I have met Juan José Delaney, who has introduced me to the Irish Argentine writers, on account of his own work on them, his own writing. I have been reading the stories and the tales of the Irish in Argentine literature, so that has been very interesting.

**Do you think there is a promising situation in Ireland today for Irish authors? Is Irish literature booming nowadays?**

It could not be better. It is one of our most exciting industries, one of our best exports. Within Ireland, before I arrived here, I was at the Listowel Writers' Week, and when I go back, I am going to the Bantry Arts Festival. I have been invited also to Carlow, to a little festival there, to teach memoir. I could spend my life going from festival to festival in Ireland. And many people do, and it is wonderful. There is great demand everywhere.

**It actually shows, because they are very well-known writers not only in Ireland but also abroad, for example, here in Argentina.**

Exactly, you have John Banville, who was just here, and I believe in August you will have the writer Colum McCann.

**Going back to your own writing, you have already mentioned the strategies you used to recreate the Victorian atmosphere of the novel *The Diary of Mary Travers*. What special consideration did you take regarding the language that you used?**

I was particularly careful about the spoken word. I wanted it to be the spoken language of the nineteenth century, of people who were middle class, literate, educated people, with much of their education in classical literature. In the novel, people quote Byron, Shakespeare... because people at that time they had that education. They were middle-class people with money. But I wanted them to sound like people and not like something from the past. So I tried to be very careful to make the language accessible, because my main wish is to draw in my readers. A friend of mine who is a writer says, "Never bore your reader." And you can be very bored reading something like that.

**As regards the structure of the novel, why a diary? What led you to that choice?**

I was thinking of all the choices and I wanted to tell the story from the first-person point of view. I set to myself a task that was, "I'm a man living in the twenty-first century and I want to write listening to the voice of a woman living in the nineteenth century." That took some imagination. But I wanted her voice, because her voice was absent from the history of the time. She was for a while a famous figure, but she was a figure that people laughed at. So I thought, "Well... how can I do it through her voice?" I was thinking about doing it through letters, but they can be a little bit static. So then I thought, "A diary". And then a friend of mine said, "When you write in diary form for a novel, the reader doesn't care whether it's realistic. So if you're writing a diary that takes three hours to write that section, nobody cares. The readers just want to hear the rest of the story."

**In fact, you have succeeded in including different types of genres, for example, the epistolary; then you included press clippings, excerpts from the trial, it was all allowed by the diary form. Anyone keeping a diary**

**might include the letters, the clippings they have just cut down; that was very resourceful.**

There was one section, which I had written all just as letters and newspaper reports and my agent said, "It's very boring. We've lost her voice." So I had the idea then that she was actually putting and copying them into her diary, pasting them in, taking some glue and putting them in.

**Is *The Diary of Mary Travers* a historical novel? How would you define the boundaries between what is real and what is fictional?**

At the end of the novel I give a historical note. And I had one or two e-mails from people in Ireland saying, "Why did you change the facts?" And I did. So, for example, a number of things that happened have been changed. I took at the beginning a historical event, which was Mary Travers's trial, but I changed some of the details, I changed some of the happenings to make the story better. I make no apology as a historian, because the novelist must come first. A friend of mine who writes historical fiction says, "When you begin a novel, a historical novel, you're three people: you're a detective, you're a researcher, and you're a novelist. When you sit down to write it, you say goodbye to the detective, you say goodbye to the historian, and only the novelist is in the room."

**Your previous work was mainly in the academic field. In what way are the processes of writing fiction and writing academically different?**

Writing academically is very difficult. Writing fiction, in my opinion, is easy. When writing academic work you need a lot of research, to check everything –it is very scientific. When writing fiction, you have a quiet room, your laptop, your pen and paper, and your imagination. You can go the way you want, you can travel the world, and live in other cities. You can experience anything you want. For me, they are different. So I write fiction first, and then I write critical work.

**As regards your experience as a biographer, what has been your most rewarding work?**

Oscar Wilde. Everybody wants to know about him. I can go around the world, always somebody will ask me to come and speak. And the novel now is becoming the same. People are very into the fiction, and they want to know about it. It is a very interesting way.

**What are you currently working in?**

My current novel is on the German composer Handel, who came to Dublin in 1742. The first performance of his oratorio “Messiah” is about his visit to Dublin, and I am imagining all of that world. It is very exciting.

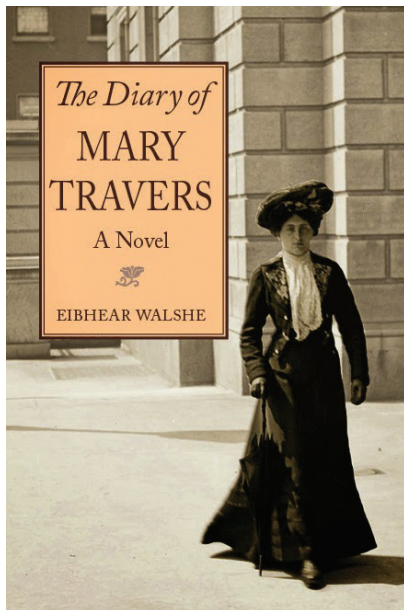
**Thank you very much.**

My pleasure.

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2009	<i>Cissie’s Abattoir</i> . Cork, Collins Press.
2011	<i>Oscar’s Shadow: Wilde, Homosexuality and Modern Ireland</i> . Cork, Cork University Press.
2013	<i>A Different Story: The Fictions of Colm Tóibín</i> . Dublin, Irish Academic Press.
2014	<i>The Diary of Mary Travers: A Novel</i> . Cork, Somerville Press.

**About The Diary of Mary Travers**

It is April 1895 and Oscar Wilde is on trial in London at the Old Bailey, following his libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry, and faces ruin, public disgrace and imprisonment. In County Cork, a woman called Mary Travers is following the Wilde Trials in the newspapers, increasingly troubled by the growing public outcry. Mary Travers has her own secret, her hidden connection with Oscar Wilde and his parents, William and Jane, and dreads discovery and exposure. Unknown to those around her, in 1864, as a young woman, she had been the key figure in a notorious court case in Dublin, in which she sued Jane Wilde for libel,



and the resulting scandal filled the newspapers for weeks. In this new novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*, this controversial case is re-imagined for the first time through the eyes of the central figure, Mary Travers, and in her diary she reveals her own part in this scandal, her unhappy home life and her intimate connection with two of the most celebrated writers of her time, William and Jane Wilde. Shortlisted for the Kerry Group Novel of the Year Award 2015.