

ON WRITING AND LIVING:
A CONVERSATION WITH
COLUM MCCANN

PHILLIP SAPIORA

Colum McCann is the author of six novels, including Dancer (2003), and the National Book Award-winning Let the Great World Spin (2009), and has also published three short story collections, including Thirteen Ways of Looking (2015). A recent book is Letters to a Young Writer (2017). He was born in Dublin, and now lives in New York, where he teaches at Hunter College. He has written for many major publications and he teaches in the MFA program at Hunter College and has been the recipient of numerous other awards and honors for his fiction, including the Pushcart Prize, the Rooney Prize, and the Irish Novel of the Year Award. McCann is co-founder of Narrative 4, a nonprofit organization of writers, educators, and social activists dedicated to encouraging creativity and storytelling among young people worldwide. McCann has traveled extensively and his work has been published in over forty languages. His latest novel, Apeirogon, will be published in early 2020 by Random House. This interview took place on October 28 at the 2017 Norman Mailer Society Conference, which was held in Sarasota, Florida.

Phillip Sapiora: I'd like to thank you very much, Colum, for doing this interview.

Colum McCann: Thank you.

PS: I would like to begin by asking about your connections to Norman Mailer. What got you interested in Mailer?

CM: My father was a journalist in Dublin. I was raised in the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland. My father was also a literary editor of *The Evening Press*. He surrounded himself with good books. There was always a Mailer hanging around the house growing up in Dublin, whether it was *The Armies of the Night* or *The Executioner's Song*. He also had a love for muscular, creative journalism. He encouraged an Irish writer by the name of Con Houlihan to really experiment. I grew up with Capote, Mailer, Wolfe, and others always around the house and in the realm. There was another journalist he liked by the name of Cassandra, which was a pen name for an English journalist who was around at the time. I remember having the opportunity to dip in and out of those books. I know they informed "my America," if you will.

PS: That's interesting. Mailer loved Brendan Behan and there's some history there.

CM: My father actually published Behan and knew him, as well. Another book that was around was Brendan Behan's *New York*. For me, Mailer later becomes the real model of the writer in terms of his social engagement, his agility, his ability to understand what it means to be other, and to push himself in different directions. In terms of bravery, of risking oneself, of putting oneself at the edge, Mailer was probably first and foremost.

PS: I knew him, too and he was surely a towering figure. How old were you when you started to write? When did you know that you had a calling? When was the drive so intense that you could not not write?

CM: There's a couple of things here. The drive probably became properly intense when I was about 15 or 16. I do remember that at the age of nine I had been taken by my father to London to meet my estranged grandfather. I spent a few hours in a London nursing home with my grandfather. It's a long complicated (and fun) story. But to make a long story short, when I came back to Dublin after the weekend, I was given an essay to write by my teacher, Mr. Kells, at Saint Brigid's National School. The title of the essay was "The Person I Most Admire." I went to my father's writing shed. I was tapping away on his old typewriter, and I said, "Do you mind if I write about Grandad?" So, I wrote this essay about my grandad, who wasn't really a per-

son to admire all that much. He had gone, he had left Ireland, and he was a big drinker. But there was something really romantically fantastic about him. I wrote this essay about how he had been involved in the Irish Civil War, had gone to England, and had done all these things.

At the end of the week, Mr. Kells read out the essay to the class. I thought, wow, there's a really peculiar power here in all of this—making this public, this thing that comes from my private imagination. I don't think that I was necessarily conscious of that at the time, but at nine years old, there was a thrill in that. I thought—it's interesting to write a piece and to have it shared!

The other thing that was happening around about the time was my father was writing football books, soccer books. My father had been a professional soccer player. The teacher would read them to the class on a Friday afternoon, if we had behaved ourselves during the week. I remember how those books sent a frisson through the class. But that's my dad, going out into his writing shed, typing away, and suddenly this whole world has been built up out of it. I began to recognize, at a fairly early age, the power of writing.

Also, there were a lot of writers calling to our house looking for money. Many journalists would come and they would tap my money up for a bit of drinking money. We could hear the taxi sloshing away from the house. I was around writers a lot, books all over the house, and then important teachers, both in primary and secondary school. And knowing about the age of fifteen or sixteen that I wanted to become a journalist.

PS: So you were smitten early on, and you had the right contexts to promote your development.

CM: Yeah.

PS: I'm really interested in the way that you interconnect things. I'm thinking of *Let the Great World Spin*, but your other works, too. Part One of my question is: did the emphasis on interconnections evolve? I know you've commented elsewhere about how important it is that writers have an explicit plan.

And your use of metaphor as a structuring device is really fertile. I'm thinking particularly of the opening trope of *The Tighrope Walker* in 1974: Philippe Petit and the tension that the image creates. It seems to me that it represents and foreshadows a productive tension, inter and intrapersonal tensions that breathe powerful life into your work. Digging into that

metaphor, I was thinking of how it reflects spectral thinking, in that the tightrope walker has to find the right balance. If the rope is too taut, he's going down. If it's too loose, he's going down. It has to be somewhere at the right point in the spectrum. I can relate this use of tension very much to your work, in finding the right balance of physical forces, in the case of the metaphor, as being a mechanism for maintaining equilibrium. Part Two of my question is, aren't many of your characters tightrope walking, and presumably readers, too?

CM: Well, I would hope so. It's a good question. A day or two after 9/11, I remember reading Paul Oster's essay on Philippe Petit. I knew almost immediately that it would be the metaphor that I would employ. At the time, I was working on something else, and I waited five years. I'm glad I waited five years to actually embark on writing the novel. I needed time away from 9/11, but I knew that the tightrope walk was the perfect counter-metaphor for 9/11. This act of creation, act of art, act of grace, and act of beauty stood in perfect opposition to this act of evil genius that brought the towers down. And then, being aware while writing that novel that, yes, I was walking a tightrope, and I want the reader to walk the tightrope. Sometimes you want to shoot their comfortable balance to hell. Knock them off their feet, knock them off the wire, only to get back up there again. I think that's the only way we really waken ourselves. We get lulled to sleep with the wrong series of words, and the last thing I want is for anybody to go to sleep.

That said, however, I generally don't have a full plan. A lot of writers I know, admire, and respect have plans on notecards.

PS: Reminiscent of Joyce, perhaps, with his elaborate matrix of *Ulysses*.

CM: Generally, I see myself more as an explorer. I know I want to get somewhere, but I do not know how I'm going to get there. I will not follow an index card in order to get there. I will generally cast myself out to sea, capsize several times, until eventually I find a little island of some sort. Then I begin to explore that island a bit: a character, etc. It would be disingenuous to say there's not a general plan lurking behind all this.

PS: But perhaps not too tight? The Tightrope Walker is unnamed, which I love, because it's an experience of terror, but it can't be named or identified. In the early days of psychoanalysis, Freud warned his colleagues not to define or describe this discipline too tightly as it needs room to grow. Keep it

open, as you suggest. Keep it in the exploratory stage, so new ideas will come forth, rather than rigidly compressing things; if I'm reading you correctly.

CM: You're absolutely reading that correctly. I think that mystery joins these things together, in the best possible way. The most uninteresting thing is for a writer to tell a reader what it is that they should think. The most interesting thing that a writer can do is allow the reader to feel. I'm always conscious that I want them to experience, but also question: what's going on here now? To be in the present moment, rather than removed from the events that are happening in the book. So it's tactile and real. As you go through as a reader, it's unfolding in front of your eyes.

PS: I've felt that experience most intensely in your works. I can't anticipate your words. I read a sentence or a paragraph and I don't know where you're going, which is a very good thing for me.

CM: Good. I'm glad, thank you.

PS: It keeps me with you, climbing a mountain. We're exploring together, whereas in a lot of fiction so many turns can be easily anticipated.

CM: Yeah, you don't want to be logical. You don't want to be correct. So much fiction is mannered and acutely conscious of itself. I think Dostoevsky says that if you're too acutely conscious, you're diseased: you bring an illness to your work. The writers whom I adore, people like Michael Ondaatje and John Berger, oftentimes Norman Mailer as well, are willing to go to an entirely new place.

PS: Is Hemingway on your list?

CM: Hemingway was on my early list. I wouldn't say no, but he's not a writer I bring up. I haven't read him in about thirty years. I read him in my late teens. He was absolutely, incredibly important to me, and probably should be on my list. I need to go back in and rediscover Hemingway.

PS: Hemingway was important to Mailer, as you know of course. Mailer wrote to him and we published the letter a few years ago. They had an intriguing psychological relationship.

I'd like to ask you about time. I find it really interesting and informative the way you structure your works using time, because you work with chronology, as do all writers. But you intertwine chronological narration

with periodic uses of special time, or as the Ancient Greeks called it, *kairos*. I think of the ways in *Let the Great World Spin* that the narrator and Corri-gan seem to be catalyzed as characters because of timely circumstances, the women they encounter, the scenes of interaction. What really struck me are the scenes in which memories of their parents come to life to respond to exigent times and circumstances—their parents are always and already with them. I'm wondering how you see time in your fiction. Do you think consciously of it, or does it unravel according to the necessities of the developing narrative?

CM: Eduardo Galeano says, "The time that was continues to tick inside the time that is." It's really extraordinary. Everywhere we have been is everywhere we are now. The present moment often makes these wonderful shotgun leaps or backspins. There's a great backspin to memory and time. We never know when it is that a memory is going to interrupt us from the past. The notion is that time is inexorably moving forward but continually moving backward and making itself bigger all the time.

PS: Haunting all of us? Characters, writers, readers?

CM: Absolutely.

PS: I sometimes think of something that I did or said that was really dumb. I'm always reaching back in time, but time is simultaneously reaching out to me.

CM: It's a fascinating subject, particularly because, as Galeano says, we're unfolding in this time, but we're very conscious and aware of what time has done to us. Getting older is a fascinating subject, too—one of the things that writers are dealing with all the time.

PS: Let me turn to a person topic, which caught my attention. Someone told me that you recently took a long bicycle trip.

CM: Well, not recently . . . thirty years ago.

PS: That's even better yet. Last year my son, who was 25, rode his bicycle 4,000 miles across the country, from San Francisco to Washington DC. It took him three months. It was a charity event and it totally changed his life. I saw it instantly. He was a very different person because of what he had experienced. How did your long ride across the country change you?

CM: Oh, it was the greatest single factor in shaping me that I can point to. I was twenty-one years old. I was a journalist in Dublin. I'd started doing journalism at the age of twelve and became a full-time journalist, more or less, when I was seventeen. I had my own page in the national newspaper at the age of twenty. In every measure, I suppose I was a "success." But all I wanted to do was to go away and write. I knew I wasn't going to write being in Ireland, so I went to Cape Cod and spent a couple of months there. I got a job as a taxi driver . . . gave everything up, and tried to write. But I had nothing to write about. It really shocked me. I thought, I'm going to sit here, and I'm going to write a big novel now. I bought typewriter, and I bought a roll of paper, a la Kerouac. It struck me that I had nothing to write about. I was kind of shocked, and I had to make some decisions.

I ended up taking a bicycle journey for the next year and a half. I did 8,000 miles. I went from Boston, down to Florida, across to New Orleans, into Texas, down into Mexico, around Mexico, back up through New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, finished coming across the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco a year and a half later, I was a totally changed person. A person who had learned the absolute value of storytelling. I'd go through these towns, and people would come up and always say the same thing: "What you doing, man? How many punctures did you get? How many flats did you get?" But really what they wanted to do was talk to me and tell me a story. In a way, they recognized their own novelistic intent in that they knew I was passing through and I would take their story into me and bring it down the road. Their story would start to move again. People would tell me the most extraordinary things. They'd invite me back to their house, and I'd pitch my tent in their back yard. Then they'd invite me in for dinner, and I'd end up staying a couple of days. I met Amish people. I met wealthy people in Colorado, poor people in Mississippi, Native Americans in New Mexico, people who'd been in and out of prison, different jobs, different lives. Just this vast democracy that we happen to be part of, which is a democracy of storytelling.

I learned how to listen, which is very important. I learned the transaction between listening and telling. It was a thing that didn't really compute for my friends: what's McCann doing? He's given up a nice job. He's got a cushy number in Dublin. He can go to all the parties, and he's out on a bicycle? And sometimes I felt that same way myself. There were days when I'd be out in the wind and the rain and thinking, why aren't I just back in

Dublin, getting myself a job and insurance? In the end, it turned out to be one of the best and most revolutionary things that I could do. In the end, it turned out to be, like your son, one of the best and most revolutionary things that I could do.

PS: So, would it be fair to say that like Hemingway—who surely sought war for both experience *and* inspirational material—your version of that was your transcontinental bike trip?

CM: Yes. And I think that Mailer talked about it a lot, too—the need to get out, be engaged, and live your life. I’ve walked across Ireland, from Dublin to Galway, and from Belfast down to Kerry. I took a bicycle across the United States. I challenge myself now and say, why are you not doing these things anymore? But I feel like I am. I do them through my fiction. I feel like I’m going on imaginative journeys. I present myself the biggest possible problem that I can at that particular stage to write about and see if I can take it on. I adore Hemingway for having the cojones to say, my life is not big enough.

PS: At nineteen.

CM: At nineteen. My life is not big enough, my heart is not yet big enough, I know that there’s something that I want and need to say, but I don’t know what it is yet. Let me go and find it. It’s excellent, difficult, rare, and it’s scary. I have an eighteen-year-old now who wants to do these things, but I worry for him.

PS: I, too, worried about my son.

CM: But was he going on his own?

PS: No, he was with a group of thirty. But, open highway. One kid was hit by a car. It was rough.

CM: Oh yeah, it’s rough. It really is. But I hope to do something at some stage. Maybe in about ten years, I hope to do another big journey, maybe a walking journey somewhere.

PS: So your bike rides with you forever.

CM: Absolutely.

PS: We're back to time and an ever-present past. Didn't Faulkner say in his Nobel commentary, that "The past is never passed." So, your trek is never passed. When you're sixty-six, your trek will still be with you.

CM: So here's the deal. I wrote about it in journalism, but I've never written a book about it. The reason is that I'm still contemplating writing about it, and if I write down about that whole experience, it might leave me, in a way. It belongs to others. For all these characters, secretly I'm still drawing on the experience.

PS: So it then remains unmined. It's not used and exhausted. It's always there, if you haven't written specifically about it. Is that fair?

CM: That's very fair.

PS: Anyone who talks to Colum McCann about writing cannot ignore James Joyce. I see you connected to him in many ways, particularly in your attention to uncertainty and the constant struggle we all face dealing with our own devolution, entropy, or whatever you want to call it. Our need to stave off those systematic breakdowns in our lives, which come and come and come, whether physical, psychological, social, or whatever. On the one hand, Joyce is often obscure, but you're not obscure. Your clarity is stunning. Do you see yourself connected to Joyce, beyond ethnicity, beyond Dublin, beyond certain stylistics, like not using quotation marks for dialogue, which I find refreshing. How do you feel about you and Joyce?

CM: I had a relatively complicated relationship with Joyce. Joyce was in the house, too, but I never read him.

PS: Really? In your family house? Well, his books were.

CM: Well, I wish Joyce were! In school, we didn't study Joyce.

PS: That's shocking. In Dublin.

CM: Amazing. In fact in Dublin, in the 1970s and even in the early 1980s, there wasn't a single statue of Joyce. They tore down Eccles Street. No pubs were named after Joyce. Nobody really talked about him. There were a few hearty people who got together and did their Bloomsday breakfasts and walks. In general, Joyce wasn't much of a presence in the 1970s. You have to remember, we were still dominated by the Catholic Church, and Joyce was certainly not going to be on your parish priest's reading list at any time. I

don't know why my father didn't encourage me in that direction, except that I don't think that my father had read him, either.

It wasn't until I had finished my bicycle journey, when I went back to Texas, worked with juvenile delinquents for a couple of years, and then went to University of Texas, that I started with *Portrait* and then went to *Ulysses*. That was when I entirely opened to him. Even then, it wasn't until twelve or thirteen years ago that I actually read *Ulysses* all the way through from beginning to end. I had read it in snatches and jumped through. But I got ill, was at hospital, and got a chance to read it from beginning to end. Maybe the morphine helped with it. But now Joyce is an extraordinary signpost for me. If there were one book that I would come back to again and again, it has to be *Ulysses*. I organize a Bloomsday reading every year in New York and I think the book is extraordinary. It's a vast compendium of human experience. Yet, the way it manages to fool with time—it all takes place in twenty-four hours, and yet everything takes place there.

So, yes, beyond the ethnicity and the usual things like “he’s Irish” and “comes from Dublin” and “writes books,” I adore Joyce. I would want to achieve something vaguely ten percent of what *Ulysses* is. I’m working on a novel right now which is my most experimental, but it’s nothing like *Ulysses*. I don’t think I’d be good in that direction. I am interested in principles of uncertainty, as you say, but I do wish for a certain amount of clarity. Some writers are five or six pages ahead of their readers. I’m at most one page ahead of my readers or even only a few sentences ahead. Writers who are behind their readers are the ones you don’t want to read at all—they’re telling you everything. I like my readers to be alive in the present moment, to recreate life out of life, as Joyce said. That’s what he does so perfectly. The life that I create out of life is closer to the present moment. I think Joyce is both close to the present moment when he’s, say, walking with Bloom down the street and gets a biscuit tin thrown at his head, or when he’s in a pub. But he’s also removed intellectually. I wish that I could achieve both. Maybe one day I will. But I stand in awe of what Joyce did and his project. I stand in awe of *Finnegan’s Wake*, too, which is something that I haven’t read all the way, but I dip into. I find it to be one of the great jazz novels of our time.

PS: You mention uncertainty. In 1927, Heisenberg won the Nobel Prize for his principle of uncertainty, of course, and he was only 31! It has clarity. Lay people understand it. I’m anticipating that that is what you’re driving at—

a kind of uncertainty, but not terrorizing, unknowable uncertainty. Just the fierce presence of something that terrorizes and haunts our lives, but also engages within us a new shape of embraceable identify.

CM: It's interesting that you bring up Heisenberg and Joyce and how these things are all connected. Gell-Mann, when he was postulating the idea of three quarks, was reading *Finnegan's Wake*, found the line "three quarks" from Mr. Mark, and named these things quarks (there are now nine of them). Then he attributed all of these properties to them—spin, charm, beauty. In an age when science had become uncertain of itself and was no longer naming things from the Greek and the Roman but began to delve into poetry and literature.

PS: And a continuous string of more and more tropes. Astrophysicists commonly seem to describe their work in understandable metaphorical terms.

CM: But then they went for spin and charm. It's very fitting that Gell-Mann fell upon the word quark and used it in that sense.

PS: Joyce seems to me to be always about a journey motif, whether it's Bloom or Stephen or Gabriel. I also see the journey motif as being a strategic calculus in your work. Not just in the general sense of journey, but also sub-journeys embedded within larger journeys. In *How the Great World Spins*, your characters seem to meander through Manhattan's diurnal experiences—not unlike Bloom meandering through Dublin.

CM: In *Let the Great World Spin*, I was very conscious of the motifs it was taking from *Ulysses*, like the number of characters. There are loads of references inside: "Throw away the horse," and so on. Lots of references there. They have penetrated my work. The idea of the journey is incredibly important to me in containing a novel in a journey. When I embark on a novel, I know that I'm embarking on a journey. I know where I want to get, but I don't know how I'm going to get there. This is the journey that I undertake, whether it be over 24 hours, or over the course of months and months. The journey in *Let the Great World Spin* really belongs to the tightrope walk, going back and forth in miniscule. But then it goes elsewhere. It stretches out and manipulates the idea of time. With *Transatlantic*, I take three historic incidents: Frederick Douglass coming to Ireland, the first transatlantic journey, and then Mitchell. But I mix them up. I start with the transatlantic jour-

ney, which is 1919. Then I have Douglass in the 1840s, and then I leap forward to 1998 with Mitchell. A lot of that is about trying to find the music of time. It would have been too logical for me to start with Douglass, then have the transatlantic journey, and then have Mitchell.

PS: Too methodical?

CM: Yeah, too obvious, too methodical, too contained. I wanted to land the reader with a BUMP! Come on this plane journey and land with me, then suddenly BUMP! Go back in time to the 1840s, then BUMP! Come back in time. Then you realize that these are all very specific, transatlantic journeys, and something is revealed to the characters each time. Then I take all the fictional characters that I create and move *them* chronologically through. I love these ideas of journeys and time. The novel that I'm writing now is all over the place, quite literally all over the place. Different centuries, different times, different formats, yet mostly taking place in Israel and Palestine. But I have two very specific journeys around which it is helixed: one motorbike journey and one car journey. That's it.

PS: My metaphor describing your work to my students is Colum McCann as boxer. What I mean by that is, in your boxing repertoire, you have strategies, jabs, punches, defenses, and counterpunches. These tools, in a strategic way, destabilize readers—in a positive, energizing way. You breathe a special kind of life into your fiction because you have taken out the predictable. You have infused unpredictability and, most important, you have invited the reader to *experience* a narrative rather anticipate its trajectory and then inscribe himself or herself in it. I see your deliberate destabilization as a powerful blend of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional forces. You render people and things off balance. Balance, unless I'm totally misreading you, is not comfortable for you.

CM: Balance is not comfortable. But there is that moment between the rounds when your trainer comes along and holds the smelling salts to your nose and says, "Are you sure you want go on with this? Can you come back differently?" I actually wrote an essay about boxing and language. What you try to do is aim a punch so far behind the person's brain that it wakes them up, like one of those dolphin punches when suddenly new things erupt in the air around you.

But I'm also increasingly thinking of it as music. The writer is going in and has this orchestra at her or his fingertips. You go into this orchestra pit and there's no sound there whatsoever, or there's clanking. Then you say—go, cello! Give me the piano! Give me the flute! And then you try to create an orchestra of the human experience. But you have to do it over and over again till you get it right. You don't know what sound it is that you're going to create. But you don't write a masterpiece before breakfast. You have to work and work and work, and then you create periods of ease. You look at your orchestra, which could be your time, your past, your history, elements of your own time. And you say "Come, bicycle journey. Come, walking journey. Come, Father. Come, Mother. Come, person I met yesterday. Make a music for me, now, with this new sentence." That's why the writer has to be constantly pushing himself to make new music. If you play the same music over and over again, it gets boring.

PS: Wow. It seems to me that you weave your music into an ensemble of powerful performances. You have the orchestra, but you also have cadence, syncopation, and solo performances. Surely much more than Carnegie Hall and Benny Goodman. You grew up Catholic, correct?

CM: I grew up Catholic, yeah.

PS: As did I. I was trained by the Dominicans until I was seventeen and it never left me—cultural Catholicism. Always the constant exposure to priests, to nuns, to the discipline, to the fear that was embedded in us. We were scared to death as kids. Stephen and the Jesuits had a very special meaning for us Catholic high schoolers.

CM: I had a more benevolent experience with the church. I do remember my father, when my priests would talk about the media and criticize the newspapers as he stood up and walked out of the church. It was a big deal. I stopped going to Mass at around the age of eleven or twelve.

PS: So you left permanently, like Stephen?

CM: I'd go every now and then. But I'd tell my parents, yeah, I'm going to Mass on my bicycle. But I'd go to a local park and read. I never made a big deal about it. I did go to a Christian Brothers school, and I did like them in general. I didn't suffer any abuse. One of the things that I recognize about the church, and I think it's important to point out, is that, yes, they must be

chastised and criticized and torn apart in order to build them up again. However, there were a number of characters there who truly believed in what they were doing and gave up their lives, especially those who were involved in liberation theology. That's one of things that I tried to do with *Let the Great World Spin* with the character of Carian. I tried to make him a flawed beauty, but a man who truly believed in the proper amount of God and the proper destruction of the bureaucracy of the church.

PS: God as an affirmative, positive force?

CM: Absolutely.

PS: You mention the Christian Brothers. In Chicago, where I grew up, the Dominicans were strict disciplinarians at my school, but the Christian Brothers, who ran several high schools, were not quite the same. I am guessing that it may be quite different from Ireland at the time, since America wasn't infused with Catholics everywhere, unlike Ireland at the time.

CM: We were church ridden at that stage. There was a great piece in today's *New York Times* by Dan Barry about the babies entombed and the exploitation of the young mothers who had these children out of wedlock. The babies got buried in this mass graveyard. Things that were going on under our noses.

PS: Perhaps related to some things here.

CM: Well, it was worse in Ireland, because we were completely dominated.

PS: There were fewer controls?

CM: It was a Catholic country.

PS: You weave together so many intriguing threads in your work. In your use of Rilke, for example, you engage the complex relationship between description and evaluation. It seems to me that, in your narrative consciousness, you step outside of yourself. I find bravery in your work and there are no tired tropes. I would like to know your thoughts about how you engage new terrain. And I want to emphasize how intellectually stimulating your work is for me.

CM: Thank you so much. That's one of those accidental books that come along. I started embarking on this new novel, and I know it's going to take

me a long time. At the same time, my publishers asked me to do something on the internet. Also at the same time, story.org came to me and said, can you give me your philosophy on storytelling? So I did half a page, and I said, hmm, I kind of like this. I've been teaching for years. I love teaching, absolutely adore teaching. The best teachers don't teach. They allow. I've learned a lot about this stuff. Why don't I do one a week for the next 52 weeks, post them on the internet?

Then I began to get some reaction to them. Not a whole lot. Then something happened. I have a student who was messing up at a party one night, and I dragged him outside and put him up against the wall. I gave him a piece of advice he said he would never, ever, ever forget for the rest of his life. Simple enough: don't be a dick! Then when I put that on the internet, it went viral. Who knows why?

PS: For all kinds of reasons, I am guessing.

CM: Yeah. Then I began to realize, I should collect them all together in a book. I suppose these are the things that I've learned along the way. I want to maybe save a few weeks of people's writing life: read about your first line; read about your last line. I enjoyed writing it. It was fun and actually came quite easily. I'm glad that you like it.

PS: I love it. And it is not a manual. Or maybe it's a metaphysical manual. It's how to deal with yourself. When you talk about going inside, I had not thought of the phrase, "Lighting the fire." I'll bet when you're teaching, you envision yourself as being a student in your own class.

CM: I do.

PS: I just knew that. That changes everything.

CM: I'm a very tough teacher. But I'm only as tough on them as I am upon myself. I teach MFA, Hunter College. My workshops are tough because I don't hold back. If I don't like something, I'll not tear someone asunder for the wrong reasons, but I want to build them up again. I really think that I don't teach anything at all except fire. That's it. The thing that my students are best at when they finish a year or two with me is that they won't give up. They really won't give up. They will have such an intense fire about them and a desire. I talk about desire, stamina, and perseverance.

PS: You're teaching life, it would seem. Fundamental principles, whether they become accountants, writers, janitors, whatever. You're giving lessons in living, like the very best teachers in Antiquity.

There are two other areas I'd like to ask you about. Do you feel that literature's being radically defined, intrinsically morphed into forms that are unrecognizable as traditional literary expressions? How do you feel about that? And then, my last question would be about technology.

CM: First question. I hope so! I'm still waiting for the student to come along to write me the novel that sits on my desk and on my coffee table as a novel as a physical book that I can go through, but can also use all forms of the internet and technology in it. I love the idea that we morph and change and split this language up. It hasn't all yet been said, even though we've had Shakespeare, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. There are still things that are yet to be said. Now, if somebody can come along and revolutionize the form, whether it be by using photographs, using voice-driven technology... this should be an exciting time for a young novelist to come along and say: Oh, I'm going to rip this one open. I'm going to tear open its ribcage, reach in, grab its heart, and twist it backwards somehow to create something new out of all this. Look. You can talk about the death of the novel. Maybe you're right. Maybe it will become a rarefied thing like opera. The one thing that they can never kill is storytelling. It is our life and breath. It is our very oxygen.

PS: Tweets, interactive messaging, phone calls—all storytelling.

CM: All storytelling. Jim Harrison says death takes away all things, but it cannot take away our stories. There will be new ways and new forms of engaging with these stores. I think, then, we will go back to traditional storytelling again and again. But I welcome it; I'm dying for someone to come along. I'm open.

PS: I'm a little more reserved, and here's why. In my film course, for example, I can edit *The Godfather* and make myself a character. I can literally change a film. In some poetry classes, as part of digital experimentation, students take out lines and they rewrite poems, making a new artifact. But what does that say about authorship and agency? If you take an Emily Dickinson poem and you're rewritten the last four lines...

CM: And you put your own name on it?

PS: Or even leave their name on it.

CM: The problem is putting your own name on it. It'll never get away from the original genius. The original genius will always be there. The person who comes along and says it in a new and powerful way, and he/she will be the one who will have invented. None of it scares me. Good work should create new work. If you're really honest with yourself and you've made something powerful, then that is enough. If people start to imitate it, great. Fantastic. Let them do so. That's what all good art opens up to.

PS: I see. Keep it open, present new opportunities, etc. There are three areas that really concern me because they've infiltrated film technology, and literature isn't far behind, at least in my view. And it's probably a non-question question. The areas that interest me are artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and nanotechnology. And now all three areas are synching. It is possible to make drones the size of mosquitoes—and they have functionality. They may have cameras on them, and we'll think it's only fly or something. Artificial intelligence creating literature, which has already been done. Augmented reality. It is already present in primitive ways, but I think/fear that is going to change radically.

I was talking to Michael Mailer, who's a film producer and director, as you know. He's really worried, because, what does this mean for acting, for example? Actors will be synthetically influence them to cry, show emotions, do all sorts of things. It's not like the Stanislavsky method acting school, where they bring back memories of Mom to help them cry. Now they might take a pill to cry or laugh. He's very concerned for the reasons I am, because in film it goes back to agency. In literature, it touches authorship.

CM: That's really interesting. I haven't thought about it enough, and you're provoking me to think about it. My original instinct is to say, so what? They can access my bank account, my phone, my whereabouts. They can put mosquito drones up on the air. They can know where I am, where I've eaten, what I want to buy. The only thing that they can't access on me, at this particular stage, is my imagination. I don't know if they can. Maybe that's where God lies, in some way. They can't anticipate what it is that my imagination might create. So it doesn't yet scare me. It scares me on a social level, but not in terms of literature and creation. It's sort of unstoppable, in a way, so we

have to learn to manipulate it and hold onto the charm, grace, and beauty of the original forms of storytelling. The great genius will always be that human that tears your heart open. The only thing that's worth doing is that thing that breaks your heart. Someone will always come along and do something so astounding that it takes your breath away.

That sounds optimistic, but I'm deeply cynical, too. I'm as cynical as any cynic. I don't shout about how wonderful these new technologies happen to be. I'm not naïve about how dark and tormented the world happens to be. But that's no great revelation to say how dark the world is. The great revelations come in to say, it's fucking dark, but let's extract something out of that darkness to make something new. That's not sentimental; it's anti-sentimental. I find the cynics to be sentimental. They live in a limited cloud of their understanding.

PS: Cynics need cynicism, too, I think. It's essential. What I fear is taking a manuscript to an editor in five or ten years and having them use artificial intelligence or augmented reality to reshape the manuscript. The days may be gone where authorial control is as powerful as it is today. But maybe I'm too cynical.

CM: I don't think anybody can be too cynical. As I said, I love to be a cynic. But cynic is just not good enough for me.

PS: Skeptic, maybe? Cynicism combined with skepticism. And some optimism?

CM: Healthy skepticism. And some optimism. You have to have some optimism in the end. Mailer was an optimist. I was going to talk about that today, I hope. I think he was an optimist.

PS: He was an optimist, I hope, until the day he died. Indeed, he was working on a nurse's manuscript to help her out when he his life ended.

Thank you so much, Colum, for an inspiring interview. I learned some things today that will stay with me.