

Readings & Conversations  
John McGahern  
with  
Hermione Lee  
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**CONVERSATION**

**Lee:** I feel I've been not only sitting "by the lake" but watching a whole stage full of people. I can hardly believe it was just the one man. [Laughs] One of the pieces you read was about happiness. John Rutledge says that happiness is something that should pass unnoticed. Why does he say that? Why do you think, or why do you have him say in the novel that you think happiness is something you shouldn't look at or shouldn't quite put your eye on?

**McGahern:** Well, I think there are just a couple of things there. They say that happiness 'writes white'. The French writer Montherlant said that. I suppose happiness is also its own completion but it's the most interesting thing in life. When I set out to write *By the Lake* my ambition was to write about ordinary life, the kind of life that ordinarily 'writes white'. Of course, the problem is how do you dramatize in earth material?

**Lee:** So happiness is in friendship or in nature or in just the everyday things of cutting a loaf of bread or having a conversation?

**McGahern:** Looking out the window; watching somebody combing their hair. They are often unregarded things.

**Lee:** Yes. And happiness is also, isn't it, as we saw so wonderfully in the reading, happiness is news, having news and being able to give it out. Why is news so important for these people?

**McGahern:** [Laughs] I think news is important for everybody. We'd be lost if we didn't have other people. In fact, I think that the only true journey to the self, the only true knowledge of the self, is through others and the knowledge of the world. Otherwise one is looking at the pool of Narcissus.

**Lee:** So the news that you really want is not about yourself?

**McGahern:** Not about ourselves. I had a great friend in Leitrim who is no longer there and when we used to go together to the markets and things like that, he used to often look out the window in amazement and, he said, 'John,' he says, 'You see nothing at home.' [Laughs]

**Lee:** One of the things that happens in.....

**McGahern:** Well, I actually think that you can see everything at home.

**Lee:** Yes. Quite. But one of the things that happens at home and one of the things that happens very much in *By the Lake* and also in some of the stories, is that people don't tell each other things that are new. They also tell each other things that they already know. There's a kind of almost ritual re-telling

of stories. Why does that happen? Why is that so important in these worlds that you describe?

**McGahern:** I don't know. In the world that I grew up in, news was considered something like money. It was to be doled out sparingly. [Laughter] And I remember meeting a very dear friend of mine in town one day and he was supposed to come to our house for dinner that evening and we had....it was a surprise to meet him in the town and ordinarily I wouldn't have any drinks but we had two pints of stout. And since I was expecting, we had a chat, and since I was expecting to see him again that evening, I said, I won't say goodbye to you because I'll see you again this evening. And he said, You won't. And I said, Why? Is there something wrong? And he said, No. He says, but you'll have no more news this evening. [Laughs] So I'd spent all my own news and wasted the evening.

**Lee:** But on the other hand there is a way people will come into the room and they'll say, Let's hear that again, or We want to hear it again, It's a good thing to hear things again. There's something almost reassuring or conciliatory to have those stories going around again. Isn't that the case?

**McGahern:** It is. But I also think that repetition is one of the most important things in life. I mean, each day repeats itself and yet doesn't repeat itself. Everything happens the same but always slightly differently. I think that that repetition is very close to happiness and it's the dear, precious life.

**Lee:** And that repetition and happiness also has to do with staying in the same place to an extent, with, as you say, with being at home. These novels and stories, these are very, very local. They are very much rooted in a highly specific place and the place keeps coming back. You know, you recognize the graveyard on the hill or the evergreens that were cut down around the church. There's a landscape that you build up through your work. But you yourself have not always lived in the same place. You've kind of gone away and come back. Do you want to be thought of as a local writer and does it offend you if someone describes you as that ?

**McGahern:** No, I would actually consider it a great honor to be described as a local writer because I think that the local is the universal but with the walls removed.

**Lee:** Hmm. Do you want to say a bit more? [Laughs]

**McGahern:** Well, all news, going back to the original question, all news is local news. That's universal. Then, when the hatreds and strife and prejudices that are local are removed, you get to the thought and feeling that is in everywhere. You get the same feeling, say, in John Donne where he said 'Lovers, let us make one room an everywhere'. And I would consider that a great local line.

**Lee:** But doesn't that mean then that in your writing you're looking to a kind of Ireland that is in way passed or passing? Where the people can live in a small world, in a kind of small, contained world? Isn't it the case that what

you're doing partly is a kind of elegiac description of something that's going even as we look at it in your books? Or is that not true?

**McGahern:** Well, actually I think that that's true and it's untrue. I think that everything is passing and there's actually nothing more out-of-date than the most highly fashionable [laughs] because it's almost gone out of existence before it comes into existence. I love the sentence, because it's very Euclidian, that the great French writer Proust says, where he says, 'Fashion which is begotten from the desire for change is quick to change itself.' That's a deadly sentence.

**Lee:** It is. It is. But are you not reproached ever for this? Are you not reproached for writing about an Ireland that is no longer in existence?

**McGahern:** But I don't think that present day Ireland is in existence either. [Laughter]

**Lee:** That's a hostage to fortune.

**McGahern:** No. You should tell that to the government though. [Laughs]

**Lee:** But it's true that you're keeping stuff out; that you've chosen to write about a particular kind of landscape, particular types. There's a story called "Old Fashioned" where the boy grows up and he comes back to make a film about the darker side of Irish life....

**McGahern:** That's true.

**Lee:** ... and he says all the people that interested him were dead. That it's kind of passed.

**McGahern:** Ireland is a very strange country. It's a very, very old country in one sense and it's a very new.... I referred to that in "Gold Watch". In fact it's almost....I mean the country is only... it came into being in 1921 and I was the first generation that got freely, education. And in that sense of "Gold Watch", people in my class, one of them became an Ambassador to America and they became the meritocracy that ran the country; that is running the country. Then it came out of a very old culture. For instance, in the village I grew up in we had a very bad football team. We always played out of defence. And whenever a high-relieving clearance went on the wind, out of defence in Charlie's field, a big great roar from the sidelines used to go up, and the word was *Salamanca*. It was only later that I discovered that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the Penal Laws, boys went from our part of the country to study for the priesthood - by foot and horseback and fishing boat - to study for the priesthood in Salamanca. I've always thought of Salamanca as about the outer reaches of the North Roscommon imagination. It has always interested me that sometimes words, like people, have to go underground and live for a couple of centuries in disguise. I said that word Salamanca, having lived for most of a century, 'as a mighty ball booted on the wind out of defence in Charlie's field grew sails again on an open sea, became a walled city with spires in the sun.'

**Lee:** Wonderful. I almost hesitate to say this because it's been such a ravishingly funny thing to listen to tonight, but there is a tremendous amount of darkness and savagery in your work. These are not kind books very often. There's a kind of violence and darkness which partly has to do with the politics of Ireland, the history of Ireland.... which partly has to do with these terrible family lives that you describe. Is this darkness in you? Or is this an Irish darkness?

**McGahern:** Well, somebody said about me recently in Ireland that I had everything wrong. That when I should have been enjoying myself, I was full of violence and darkness, and now when I should be saying my prayers, I'm beginning to enjoy myself. [Laughter]

**Lee:** That's a very indirect response. [Laughter]

**McGahern:** Well, it wasn't meant to be, but it's a discomfoting question because it actually leads you into very deep waters and I'm not sure if they're not too deep for fathoming. Ireland was a very hidden country. It was completely, in my childhood, dominated by the Catholic church. And Heaven and Hell and Purgatory, in my childhood, was much closer than Australia or America. I think that the Catholic church....I'm very grateful in many ways to my upbringing in the church. It taught me a great deal about ceremony and mystery and sacrament and the equality of all men and women under the sun. But I think it did enormous amount of harm in sexual matters. It was a very puritanical church. It was a Romanesque church; a kind of fortress church. I think that what should be a holy sacrament between people, sexuality, they turned into something dark and sinful. I said, when I was young, it was sort of witty but it was meant to be funny but it was kind of true as well – I said in Ireland it was a lesser sin to kill somebody than it was to kiss them. And I think that's completely wrong myself.

**Lee:** But these characters, there are characters in your books, particularly Moran, and Moran comes in other guises too, who are almost possessed with a kind of rage against the world and against their own lives. There is a terrible sense of futility that possesses some of your characters, perhaps particularly in the earlier works. There's a real anger that goes through. And is that to do with this kind of repression and system of repression? Or is it something else?

**McGahern:** I think that it's very complicated and that's why maybe I try to avoid it in the first place. People say.... like my father and uncles would have fought in the War of Independence and the Civil War and they actually dreamed of a new, democratic Ireland and they saw that a kind of fairly disgusting middle class allied to the Church, took over the country who had no imagination, whose function was to keep people down. And it can never be forgotten that in the 1950's and '60's when I was in my twenties, that over 600,000 people emigrated from the country when there were only 3 million people (in Ireland) some 600,000 people emigrated to England and America. Some of those felt betrayed by their own country and rightly betrayed and were full of anger. When I worked as a student on building sites in London, I heard that kind of anger expressed marvelously by a young building worker. Sometimes, in that local sense, these people in England read their own local newspapers like the Connacht Champion or the Roscommon Herald or the

Leitrim Observer - that was with their local news, and they passed these newspapers around. One of them was reading out that there was another wet summer in Ireland, [laughs] which is no surprise for anybody that knows the country, and that prayers were being offered in all the churches for the rains to cease. [Laughter] And this young fellow, listening to this news said, 'May it never stop,' he says. 'May it rise higher than it did for fucking Noah. [Laughter] May they all have to climb trees.' [Laughter] And I think that attitude to the country was widespread. Of course the country is a far better place now - people have more sexual freedom, they have more money and instead of people having to emigrate actually there are all sorts of people, black people, yellow people, white people, coming into Ireland which causes a new kind of problem.

**Lee:** I see that I'm not going to get a serious answer out of you.

**McGahern:** [Laughs] I did my best.

**Lee:** But that actually does usefully take me onto something else that I want to ask you about which is speech. We've heard so many voices tonight and the light is always coming into these different voices and people speak to each other through your novels and stories but quite often there are things that they can't or won't say to each other. There's a wonderful episode in *By the Lake* where the son who's gone away and is working on the Ford production line in London is thinking he's going to have to come back and live with his parents and although they love and cherish him they cannot abide the thought that they might actually have to live with them forever. But they can't find a way of saying no. Is this a characteristic of people you know?

**McGahern:** Yes. 'Round where...the people that I grew up with, they were marvelous people and they came out of a long tradition of inter-dependence and they were very gentle but they were people who would never give you a direct answer. [Laughter and applause] I describe it...'It was a language that had no easy way of saying no.' And of course it can be very frustrating for outsiders. And of course the Gaelic speech comes into it as well. Nobody in Ireland will ask you, Are you going to town? They'll say, You wouldn't by any chance be going to town now, would you? [Laughter]

**Lee:** Does the Gaelic which you speak, yes?

**McGahern:** Yes.

**Lee:** Does the Gaelic run under your own prose, do you think? Do you think that the kind of rhythm which is your style, which is your voice that lies under these other voices, do you think there's a kind of ghost of Gaelic in there?

**McGahern:** Yes. I think that there is an extraordinary thing happening. English is such a world language now; that there are many languages in English with almost their own separate literatures. There's a writer I admire, Alistair MacLeod, who was here recently, and he and Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant are almost creating a new Canadian voice. And same in Ireland and the same in India and there's a literature in Australia and New Zealand and I suppose in America it's the dominant literature now, and it's all different.

**Lee:** But go back to your own voice. Is your own voice, do you think, a particular kind of inflected English that couldn't be the way it is without the Gaelic running underneath it?

**McGahern:** Well, Beckett.....a lot of the things that are thought existential in Beckett is just local speech. [Laughter] I mean, for instance, that sentence that is completely rampant in my part of the country, 'Are you there?' And the answer is, 'Am I?' [Laughter] And of course, the next question is, 'Are you all there?'

**Lee:** There's a phrase that was used in the title of the English and the Irish edition of *By the Lake*, you mentioned it in passing when you were reading, which is the phrase 'that they may face the rising sun' and that is a very important phrase in the novel and I want you to explain it, but I also note that it co-exists with a number of people in the book, particularly Kate actually, saying, This world is all there is. This life is what we have. This world is it. There isn't anything else. And yet this phrase, 'That they may face the rising sun', perhaps suggests something else. Could you explain the phrase?

**McGahern:** Well, the phrase is that in the Christian tradition the people are always buried in Ireland – if they know what they're doing, which isn't always true, no more than anywhere else – that they are buried so that when they rise up on the mythical last day they will face the rising sun. So they're buried with their heads in the West. There's a very interesting dialogue at the end of *By the Lake* where there is a frustrated academic saying that they got it all wrong, that they had to make the grave wider. Actually, in the nineteenth century the priests tried to get the people to bury their dead facing the church, the church being the symbol of truth, but they always thought that the sun was a better bet than the church. [Laughter and applause]

**Lee:** So it's a kind of pagan...there's a sort of pagan undertow, a sort of almost mythic pagan feeling in the book that underlies this Christianity you've been talking about.

**McGahern:** Yes. A friend of mine, the man that wouldn't come to the house because I had spent all my news in the town, said that once – he was referring to the priests – he says, which is a kind of historical imagination although he'd be surprised to hear that it was – he said, There was a time we had the old Druids on our back and now we have this crowd. [Laughter]

**Lee:** But this idea that the old Druids might have given you some sense that there was some hope of resurrection, that you might wake up and face the rising sun. Does that coexist in your imagination with the sense that this world is all there is? Do you have some slight sense that.....

**McGahern:** That's kind of teased out at the end of *By the Lake* where Jamesie and Rutledge is talking and they had buried Jamesie's brother and Rutledge refers to... Jamesie refers to - in the sense of that local, he says, 'I haven't traveled far but I've known the whole world.' And Rutledge says, 'And you are my sweet guide.' Then Jamesie asks, 'Do you think there is an afterlife?' And Rutledge answers, 'I don't think there is but I don't know. And surely it's not unreasonable to think that you will go back into whatever

meaning we came from.' But Jamesie isn't too convinced about this. He says, 'Still,' he says, 'you wouldn't want to leave yourself too caught out, in case you did find there was something there when you crossed over.' So you should hedge your bets and that.

**Lee:** So there's a kind of hedging of bets going on. Do you think that your work has become more tender and appeased and less bleak and grim?

**McGahern:** [Laughs] Well, I would hope so. But I always like to think that...Chekhov said that when a writer takes a pen into his or her hand they accuse themselves of unanswerable egotism and all they can do with decency after that is to bow. I believe that there's too much emphasis placed on the artist and it comes out of a sense of romanticism. I think that each of us inhabits a private world which other people cannot see and it's that world that we read out of and the only difference between the writer and the reader is that the writer has the talent or the misfortune to need to dramatize that world. I think Joyce described the piano as 'a coffin of music' and I think that a book is just a coffin of words and it doesn't live again until it finds readers and it will emerge in as many different versions as the readers it's honored enough to find.

[Applause]

**Lee:** It's partly that you are saying that you keep yourself hidden as the artist in the fiction, that you don't write the kind of fiction - and we could all name the sort of people who do - that is all about yourself. Yet, is it not the case that you are now writing your autobiography?

**McGahern:** That's true. [Laughs]

**Lee:** So how does that feel? What is the difference between writing fiction where many things that happen in your novels are to do with your own life and people that you know? What is the difference between doing that and now writing the real thing as it happened to you?

**McGahern:** Well, I love a thing that Flaubert said, that the writer should be 'present everywhere, like God in nature, but nowhere visible.' I don't think...it is profoundly different, like the new day is the same day but it's a completely different day. I deal with that in the memoir. I suppose it's more a memoir than an autobiography. Somehow I've always made my writing mistakes when I've dealt too closely with the life that I knew and somehow....I mean there's a phrase of Yeats where he says, 'Let our difficulty be our plow', and I think that for some reason is that for the tension in fiction to live that the material has to be reinvented or re-imagined or dislocated in some way, almost the same as being re-invented in order to be true. It's very complicated but is very simple. I mean, one of the reasons is that fiction has to be always believable. Life has never to be believable and a great deal of it isn't. [Laughter] So this time, a lot of the stuff that I'm writing hasn't to be believable. I'm actually drawing directly from my life, and also, you also know how untrustworthy memory is, and the writing I have finished and am revising now would be very bad writing if it sailed out under the guise of fiction which is profoundly different.

**Lee:** So you are making yourself up?

**McGahern:** I'd say I was making myself down. [Laughs, applause]

**Lee:** Well, I think [applause] that's a good moment at which to say my thanks to the unbelievable John McGahern for a truly and wonderful and extraordinarily playful, complicated, and also I think, candid interview. I very much like that phrase of Jamesie's which I quoted in my introduction, where he comes in and says, 'It's going to be Spring and everything going to be very interesting.' And when I came here tonight I knew that is was going to be very interesting. Thank you very much.

**McGahern:** And can I say [applause] I want to thank everybody as well, but I want to say before I leave that I admire all Hermione Lee's work, but I think that her book on Virginia Wolff is one of the great biographies of all time.

[Applause]