
“When writing, I see myself as a drone”. An Interview with Jan Carson

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Abstract. Northern Irish author Jan Carson was invited writer at the 20th International Conference of the Spanish Association for Irish Studies (AEDEI), organized by the Universidad de Burgos in 2022. There, she kindly talked about herself as a writer, about the intricacies of her creative work, and about the sensitive issues underlying the plot of *The Raptures*, her last novel. Violence, religion, rurality and death, are filtered through Hannah’s eyes, a young girl for whom reality and magic mingle inextricably.

Key Words. Jan Carson; Northern Ireland; Magic realism; *The Raptures*; Religion.

Resumen. La escritora norirlandesa Jan Carson asistió como invitada al XX Congreso de la Asociación Española de Estudios Irlandeses (AEDEI) que tuvo lugar en 2022 en la Universidad de Burgos. Allí habló de su trabajo como escritora, de la complejidad de su actividad creativa y de los temas controvertidos que subyacen en *The Raptures*, su última novela. Violencia, religión, ruralidad y muerte se presentan a través de los ojos de Hanna, una niña para quien realidad y magia son todo uno.

Palabras clave. Jan Carson; Irlanda del Norte; Realismo mágico; *The Raptures*; Religión.

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts facilitator based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She is the author of two short story collections, *Children’s Children*, (Liberties Press, 2016) and *The Last Resort* (Doubleday, 2021), two micro-fiction collections, *Postcard Stories 1 and 2* (Emma Press, 2017, 2020) and three novels so far: *Malcolm Orange Disappears* (Liberties Press, 2014), *The Fire Starters* (Doubleday, 2019), which won the EU Prize for Literature Ireland 2019 and the Kitschies Prize for Speculative Fiction 2020, and *The Raptures*, published by Doubleday in early 2022. She has also published in well-known journals and magazines such as *Banshee*, *The Tangerine*, *Winter Papers* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Her awards and prizes are

many. She received an Arts Council NI Artist's Career Enhancement Bursary in 2014 and won the Harper's Bazaar short story competition in 2016 and the Sean O'Faolain Short Story Prize (2016). In 2018, she was the Irish Writers Centre's first Roaming Writer-In-Residence. In 2019, she was awarded the Jack Harte grant, in 2020 she was shortlisted for the BBC National Story Prize (2020), and in 2021 she was awarded the An Post Irish Short Story of the Year Award. Added to her undeniable talent for writing, Carson has curated several festivals, such as the CS Lewis Festival, the Hillsborough Festival of Literature & Ideas, and the Belfast Lit Crawl festival.

But, Carson is not only a gifted writer and arts facilitator, she is also a sensitive soul, attentive to others' needs. During COVID-19 lockdown, she put in motion the Postcard Story Project and wrote postcards to isolated, older people and NHS workers on the frontline. In March 2022, she organised and hosted a fundraising event in solidarity with Ukraine, which consisted of readings of excerpts from contemporary Ukrainian works by Northern Irish writers. It is undeniable that Carson is a versatile and proactive artist.

Her last novel, *The Raptures*, tells the story of several children from the same village who succumb to a mysterious illness in the summer of 1993. The deceased children come to Hanna, the protagonist, and tell her about their fears and longings. At the same time, the novel is an in-depth exploration of the political and social intricacies of a Protestant community during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. When Carson attended the 20th International Conference of the Spanish Association for Irish Studies (AEDEI), organized by the Universidad de Burgos in 2022, she kindly talked about herself as a writer and about the intricacies of her work with special attention to *The Raptures*.

María Amor Barros-del Río: When I first read *The Raptures* I had the feeling I was reading many stories contained in one volume. I thought I could choose any chapter at random and read a whole story on its own, because its rhythm, vocabulary and style had been carefully chosen to accommodate each particular character. Considering the morphology of this novel, would you say that the short story form is your natural way of writing?

Jan Carson: That is an interesting question. Personally, I am absolutely terrified of the short story form. Anywhere else, when you write short stories, the publishers would say: "Where is your novel?" But in Ireland it is the other way round, you write a novel and they ask you "What's wrong with you? Can you not write short stories?". I think there are so many amazing short-story writers that come from Ireland that I find that form quite intimidating. My own stories tend to fall into a kind of uncanny or strange theme. The plots can often be quite outlandish. I've found it's usually easier to sustain a very bizarre idea or concept over the short form than a novel where the suspension of disbelief can be stretched to breaking point. Recently I've been dabbling in psychological horror in my short stories and I've been having a lot of fun with this.

MAB: But *The Raptures* displays a series of intimate stories that interweave to create the complex tapestry that is Ballylack, the fictional name of a small community in Northern Ireland. Your ability to move gently from the personal to the communal is impressive.

Jan Carson: Well, looking retrospectively at my last books, *The Fire Starters*, *The Last Resort* and *The Raptures*, I think I am what I call a "close-set" kind of writer. I like to create a lot of characters and explore the boundaries of their worlds, which may take the form of a caravan park, or a four-block radius, all of them similar to a small village in a way.

I confess that when I am writing, I see myself as a drone. I get to come in and go out, and I also get an overview of all of the issues that the characters are dealing with. This allows me to get in really tight and close, and I am able to see the world through an 11-year old's perspective, or a racist man's perspective, or a conflicted father's perspective. That is what I do naturally, as a writer. And so that is why my prose does sometimes feel like a series of short stories, but to me it's more like I am a little drone covering somewhere I grew up.

M.A.B.: Children feature prominently in your work. Malcolm (from *Malcolm Orange disappears*) and Hanna (from *The Raptures*) are just two examples of your interest in childhood in problematic situations. In *The Raptures*, Hannah's and the dead children's innocence serve to express the brutality of daily life in Northern Ireland. Is that fresh and honest look necessary to address the deep longings and fears of the human condition in a context of violence such as the one in Ballylack? Do you need to speak through children to tackle conflict?

J.C.: Yes, I have thought a lot recently about this in relation to earnestness. For instance, you cannot write a child's voice and not be earnest. Children don't know how to hide, they are earnest about what's cool, what's acceptable, what can be said and what cannot. As a writer, this allows me to reach places that an adult character could not tackle naturally. For instance, in *The Raptures*, Hanna's parents are deeply concerned religious people, yet Hanna asks at one point: "Why did you pray for my auntie Rachel? She's a bad person but we never invite her to our house". If an adult character had asked that, it would have sounded tense or cynical, but in an 11-year-old's voice, it is earnest. I try to be an earnest person, so I like the space that child characters allow me to play with, that earnestness.

MAB: Does this mean that you seek honesty in your writing?

J.C.: With this particular book, yes. *The Raptures* is the book I wanted to write when I first started writing. It talks about my world, the world I grew up in, a deeply conservative, rural, protestant community. It was a hard book to write because I really wanted to do it justice. You see, the early day versions of this novel were quite angry, quite bitter, and I knew that wasn't the book I wanted to write. I wanted the book to start with conversations rather than conflicts. For the sake of honesty, it was really important that I used the right words and included different perspectives. I was trying to avoid the clichés that would make it all look stupid or hollow. The entire protestant culture is quite easy to pastiche, it has been too often represented in sitcoms, plays and novels, with the bombastic atheism type figure, or the domineering housewife, with the kettle, sandwiches and cakes. If you think about it, it is easy to write pastiche, but it is harder to write something honest, that is nuanced and that has something dark sided, or positive stuff, or both at the same time.

MAB: In the novel, unexpected and unreal scenes mingle with real events. This contrast highlights extreme situations such as the one happening in Ballylack. I suppose it must be difficult for a writer to find the balance between coherence and illusion in the creative process of the plot. How did you achieve such a good balance in *The Raptures*?

J.C.: I tend to find all my stories are character driven. I try to pay plenty of attention to my characters and ensure that I write the world as it plays out through their eyes. Then the balance between the fantastical and the realist is quite easy to maintain. It was particularly fun to write this in *The Raptures* as so much of the story is seen through the eyes of children, and children

are often quicker to believe in the fantastical than world-weary adults who have come to see the world through very realist eyes.

MAB: Do you identify as a magic realist writer?

J.C.: Well, I would be comfortable placing myself as a magic realist within the traditions of socio-political magic realists such as Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie. I personally am not a big lover of fantasy; I like to keep my feet grounded in the real world, so to say. I like the way unusual or fantastical elements can be used as extended metaphors to explore complex or even problematic socio-political themes in a way which provides a kind of lens to see these themes through fresh eyes. An unlikely, absurd or fantastical element in a story about something which the reader might feel they are quite familiar with –say the story of the Troubles in Northern Ireland– can often arrest the reading experience and shock the reader into seeing things from a new perspective or in a different context. I often use supernatural elements to this end.

MAB: Magic realism in writing has frequently been associated with contexts of stress, oppression, and the incapability of expressing fear. Was magic realism the best option to address the issues underlying the community of Ballylack in *The Raptures*?

J.C.: Yes, I think so. I've always been a magical realist in my work. In this sense, the pandemic was really useful because I actually spent much time reading up on the genre and finding out some of its history. I realised how it has often been used to speak in parts of the world that have had an experience of colonialism, or parts of the world that have had a troubled past. Magic realism has been key to talk about difficult things in a way that makes them more accessible and approachable. So, I definitely find myself up with that.

My favourite writer of all times is Flannery O'Connor. Once, she was asked why she used grotesque in her writing, and she said something like this: "For the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large staggering figures". To me, this means that when narrative becomes overtold, or people become overfamiliar with it, you need to do something to wake them up and listen to what is happening. With this I don't mean that Northern Irish narrative has been overtold, but publishing houses tend to see the Northern-Ireland topic as a story that has been told multiple times. So, bringing in these fantastical elements forces the reader to think "What does that mean?" or "Why has she done that weird thing there?". I think the magic touch makes us look at the story in a in a different way.

MAB: From the first pages, religion has a strong presence in Hanna's world. In fact, *The Raptures* begins with a quote from Susan McKay that highlights how uneasy identification with Northern Protestantism can be. I understand that magic realism may be a useful strategy to deal with it.

JC: Yes, this novel depicts a deeply religious world. I have always been fascinated with the protestant culture where I grew up. In fact, the Bible is the ultimate magical realist text. That's the book that I grew up with and yet, I was raised in a culture that is deeply suspicious of everything magical, mythical, or fantastic. I wanted to put some of the magic stuff back into Protestantism.

MAB: In another interview, you pointed that *The Raptures* addresses issues that might have been overshadowed by the Troubles, but that play a definite role in the idiosyncrasy of Northern Ireland. You said that rurality, religion, and myth are on “the margins of our culture” (NB 2022), yet they have their part in the repressive and controlling atmosphere of Ballylack and contribute to define it as a distinctive community. Would you say that *The Raptures* is a political novel?

J.C.: Oh, it is definitely a political novel. In *The Raptures* I wanted to explore the various sides of Protestantism. In Northern Ireland, religion has a huge sway on politics. I dare say that all of us, politicians included, learnt how to speak at the pulpit. Another issue is our scepticism of Arts. As a community arts facilitator, this is a compelling issue to me. I grew up in a culture where my religion dictated that art was sinful and something to be wary of. In my opinion, to understand the make-up of contemporary Northern Ireland, you really need to understand how religion has impacted the make-up of society and the make-up of our politics.

MAB: Have you faced criticism for your treatment of religion or any other sensitive issue in the book?

JC: Not at all. The response has been really heartening. Some readers, particularly those who grew up in a different community to that of *The Raptures*, have expressed a degree of ignorance about this world, but almost universally everyone has seemed keen to learn more and full of questions. Moreover, readers from an evangelical rural background have said they are incredibly pleased to see their experiences reflected accurately in a piece of art. That has been truly heartening to hear.

MAB: Going back to children, something that caught my attention when reading *The Raptures* was the social pressure children bear on their shoulders. Once and again, adults divert their own responsibility for centuries of violence, and the children are frequently reminded of their duty to make the country a safer place with messages such as: “The future’s your responsibility” (6) and “You lot are the future. You’ve a chance to make something of this country; stop the fighting and the awful things we’ve done to each other” (9). Is it something that belongs to the past or do you think it still happens nowadays?

J.C.: This is something I have thought a lot about recently. We put much pressure on the generation that came after the Good Friday! We expected them to fix things and be different, more forward, more inclusive than their parents were. And some of them are, of course, some of them are just incredibly inspiring people. Yet, it was unfair to the young people, who didn’t cause the problem.

But today, in Northern Ireland, we keep on raising our children at a school system that is often, for the most part, separated. So, if we are not educating them in tolerance and open-mindedness, then it is ridiculous to expect them to react differently.

I think we are doing the same with climate change and the climate crisis. These kids didn’t break the planet, yet we are expecting them to fix it. And it is no wonder we are seeing so many young people struggling with the pressure of what it is to be a young person nowadays.

MAB: This is also an issue in the novel. At the end, we sense that Hanna will move away from her traumatic experience eventually but, at the same time, we see her struggling with

guilt and responsibility. Do you think young people in Northern Ireland may identify with these feelings today?

JC: I'm not sure that today's crop of young people in Northern Ireland, all of whom were born after the Good Friday Agreement, would express the legacy of trauma as guilt or responsibility for the situation they have inherited. But, I do think there is a widespread understanding here that our young people are living with a set of far from perfect circumstances which are unique to growing up in the aftermath of a conflict. We have huge problems with mental health issues, poverty and unemployment in our young people and though, many probably would articulate these issues as symptoms of a post-conflict society, I think they are nevertheless living with the consequences.

MAB: You have achieved a lot so far. Could you tell us about your next projects?

J.C.: In the near future, I will be spending some time in France to write a new novel. For the moment, we are preparing a collection of short stories that I have already written, but were never published. It is forthcoming in early Spring 2024. After that, I want to write about the community of arts in Northern Ireland and its role in reconciliation since Good Friday. I also have in store a Young Adult novel which explores the experience of caring for a family member with dementia. This one is currently out on submission looking for a publishing home.

Thank you very much for your time and honesty, and for sharing with us your art and your experiences. We will be awaiting your marvellous stories.

María Amor Barros del Río is a Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Burgos (Spain). She is the author of *Metáforas de su Tierra: Breve Historia de las Mujeres Irlandesas* (Septem, 2004) and co-author of *A Practical Guide to Address Gender Bias in Academia and Research* (Fundación General de la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2016). Her articles appear in journals such as *Irish Studies Review*, *Estudios Irlandeses*, *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, *Gender, Place and Culture*, and *Life Writing*. Her most recent essays can be found in *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Peter Lang, 2020), *Women on the Move. Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing* (Routledge, 2020), *Revolutionary Ireland, 1916-2016: Historical Facts & Social Transformations Re-Assessed* (EER, 2020). Her work has been recognized by positive reviews in international journals, grants and awards received to date.

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