



GLOBAL

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE JULY 2016 ISSUE #2

RIGHTS

THE FLOOR IS YOURS...

9 INTERVIEWS TO WRITERS FROM PALESTINE,
IRELAND, BASQUE COUNTRY, URUGUAY AND CUBA

con tent

GLOBAL RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE JULY 2016 ISSUE #2

08 **SUSAN ABULHAWA /// PALESTINE**
"WE WANT TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY IN THE LAND OF OUR ANCESTORS"

14 **UXUE ALBERDI /// BASQUE COUNTRY**
"BASQUE WRITERS ARE CONSCIOUS OF WRITING IN A SUBORDINATED LANGUAGE, BUT IT'S OUR LANGUAGE"

20 **GAVIN CORBETT /// IRELAND**
"LANGUAGE TELLS ME WHO THE CHARACTERS ARE, THEIR STORIES, THEIR VOICE"

28 **AHMEL ECHEVARRÍA /// CUBA**
"FOR ME EVERYTHING STARTED IN A LITERARY WORKSHOP"

38 **JORGE ENRIQUE LAGE /// CUBA**
"I AM INTERESTED IN USING IMAGINATION, FANTASY AND INVENTION TO MAKE THE READER UNCOMFORTABLE"



50

44 **LISA MCINERNEY /// IRELAND**
"WRITING HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY ONLY AMBITION"

52 **PAUL MURRAY /// IRELAND**
"WE HAVE TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE ALIVE NOW, TO LIVE THESE TIMES"

62 **LEONARDO PADURA /// CUBA**
"LITERATURE ALLOWED ME TO REACH PLACES I WOULD HAVE NEVER IMAGINED TO REACH"

72 **RAMIRO SANCHIZ /// URUGUAY**
"I AM INTERESTED IN WRITING A LITERATURE OF IDEAS, A CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE"

08



28



the growing team

editors: sergio segio - orsola casagrande
editorial team: maider varela - jm arrugaeta
bibbi bozzato - berna ozgencil - yado uzun
félix julio alfonso lópez - vroni plainer -
guglielmo guglielmi - simona malatesta -
mauro guglielminotti

THE FLOOR IS YOURS...

LITERATURE

The series of interviews that we present here was taking shape as a collateral project during the editing of a book of short stories with the city of Havana setting and scene. The Book of Havana, published by Comma Press (www.commapress.co.uk) will be published this summer.

After two initial meetings with writers Jorge Lage and Ahmel Echevarria, a third, almost casual encounter happened, this time with Uruguayan writer and critic Ramiro Sanchíz, who visited the Cuban capital to be part of the jury of the prestigious Casa de las Américas Prize this year. A fourth encounter, this time via a very special and intimate interview to well known Cuban author Leonardo Padura, made by a common friend, himself a Cuban: professor and intellectual Felix Julio Alfonso.

Ideas resemble seeds and once planted begin to grow by themselves, so to these four testimonies of writers in Spanish we went on adding interviews that came from other tradi-

tions, languages and places, taking advantage, as much as we could, of digital connectivity, and from the idea that, if multi-culturalism is an essential part of our times, languages could not be an obstacle but only a challenge. And it is why we have made translations as if they were "return tickets", to be able to understand each other as well as to understand these writers at least in English, Italian and Spanish.

Palestinian Susan Abulhawa, Irish Lisa McInerney, Gavin Corbett, Paul Murray, and Basque writer Uxue Alberdi (part of a little known but very meritorious literature), completed the nine interviews with men and women of our times, who share a common and intense feeling: their tireless passion to create, imagine and tell us endless stories. Therefore theirs is the floor as they are the translators of what we generically name as literature.

Questions and conversations were individually prepared, from a knowledge - certainly not exhaustive - of their work, with the view that

each of them is unique and unrepeatable, but at the same time we have been dropping issues and concerns that can surely be shared, such as cultural influences, their particular implications both personal and artistic, in both themes and more in general political and social issues, the creative process as a challenge, anxiety and method, and the difficulties of living off their work.

Other interviews have been left in the drawer, so we "threaten" you to turn this into a whole saga, with (so fashionable these days) seasons included, if necessary, and if you of course are interested in joining us in this journey through literatures in other languages and from other geographies as well as through different literary genres, poetry, essays, criticism and journalism. All genres, it has to be said, in which these authors are leaving their traces.

Beyond the interviews themselves and the interest we are sure they'll generate to you as readers, our greatest desire, interest and

ambition is to encourage you to also contribute ideas, reflections, suggestions not just on the issues addressed in this summer issue of Global Rights (www.globalrights.info) magazine, so that this virtual space will actually serve not only as an information platform but also as a place for permanent discussion and exchange.

Interviews conducted and edited by Orsola Casagrande y J.M. Arrugaeta

Interview with Leonardo Padura conducted by Félix Julio Alfonso

Translations and editing by O.Casagrande, J.M Arrugaeta and Seamas Carraher

Editorial by Sergio Segio

Design and graphic concept by Maider Varela.

Photos: courtesy of the authors and Global Rights archive

The forms and places of unsuspected subversion

Text: Sergio Segio

"You can not bend the subversion. You defeat it by forcing it to change its target", wrote Edmond Jabès in *The Little Book of unsuspected subversion*.

In our time, the words of politics no longer know how to explain what is happening, they can not understand nor heal. Political subversion has become the space of the unspeakable, in the sense that no longer has object and project, failing to imagine, and therefore to name, an elsewhere and otherwise.

The voice of the peoples and movements is weakened and stammering, choked by technical and technological perfection reached by the domain, the thousand forms of repression, the pervasive control that toppled, the sign and meaning, alphabets and direction of the revolt and, before that, of indignation. *In-*

digne *vous*, exhorted a few years ago Stephane Hessel, in an already forgotten pamphlet, where it was stated that "to create is to resist. To resist is to create."

Re-sisting presupposes not only to stay, but to have the memory of the past and to have a project, a subjective intentionality on the future. Which is to say, to be rooted in space and time. The strength and transformation belong to the world of the real, not of the virtual.

The world will perhaps be saved by children, as Elsa Morante said. Or maybe it will be thanks to the old, to those who in the twentieth century have tried to bring heaven on earth, to free (often, however, not to free themselves, underestimating the essential order of the factors; hence, also, a root of their defeat).

Or, more likely, the change - radical, as necessity, will become possible only by beginning from the ability to listen, dialogue, exchange and alliance between one another. Between experience and energy, between the tenacity and curiosity, between the slowness and the impetus, between memory and becoming.

But always from the word we must start, or re-start. And today, as always, the one that has greater inherent strength is the poetic word. It's the artistic expression, in its multifaceted and endless forms, which owns the CIFRA/FIGURE, the code able to combine the old and the new, reason and feelings, awareness and perspective. To break the CAMICIA DI FORZA of a social communication governed by hidden algorithms and owners, of the loss of the imaginary. A word, in short, able to tell stories and to stimulate desires.

Only imagining and desiring another world, other social systems and relationships, in fact, the change becomes concrete. Only by recovering forgotten and subtracted vocabularies, by rebuilding proper syntax and new grammars, subversion becomes viable.

Only patiently building the places where those vocabularies, syntax and grammar can interchange and recognize themselves, the words will regain *destruens* and *costruens* strength, and try to indicate and to practice ways and paths of transformation.

These pages, these interviews, this magazine, the project "Global Rights", want to be a contribution to this. Modest and fragile, of course, but confident, with Jabès, that subversion is the very movement of writing.



“

We want to live
with dignity in the
land of our
ancestors

”

Susan Abulhawa was born in Kuwait in 1970. Her parents were born in At-Tur in Jerusalem and were refugees of the 1967 war. Susan was sent to live with an uncle in the U.S., where she stayed until she was five years old. She was then passed between various family members in Kuwait and Jordan. At 10 she was taken to Jerusalem but ended up in an orphanage. She has written essays about her experience in the Dar el Tifl orphanage. A chapter of her first novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, is dedicated to those years.

Aged 13, she was sent to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she was a foster child. She has been in the US since. She majored in Biology in college and attended USC School of Medicine as a graduate student in the Department of Biomedical Science, where she completed a Master's Degree in Neuroscience.

Susan Abulhawa began writing her first novel in 2002. She was inspired to write after she visited a Palestinian refugee camp that had been under siege by Israeli forces. Abulhawa felt strongly that she wanted to tell the refugees' story. Her book, published in 2006, had a small first life in English. It was titled *Scar of David* and came out from Journey Publications shortly before the publisher shut down. A few events and a smattering of controversy marked its release. The book might have been forgotten, but things changed when it was picked up by a French publisher. The novel was successful in French, as well as several other languages — it was a best-seller in Norway — and was republished in English in 2010 under its French title, *Mornings in Jenin*.

Since then it has sold half a million copies and has been translated in 25 languages. Abulhawa's second novel, *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, has been published in June 2015 by Bloomsbury. It is a story of powerful, flawed women; of relocation, separation and heart-ache; of renewal, family, endurance, and love spanning generations and continents. Abulhawa is founder of *Playgrounds for Palestine*, an organisation dedicated to upholding of right to play for Palestinian children who are living under Israeli military occupation.

SUSAN ABULHAWA /// PALESTINE

You moved from Palestine to the US, in a way to the belly of the beast, but also perhaps the best place to understand first hand what is going on in our planet (not just in Palestine). How is your relation with the US, how was the first period after you moved there?

My relationship with the US has changed over the years but on the whole, I can say that I have always felt as an outsider here. September 11 really solidified those feelings, as it made a definite demarcation for Arabs and Muslims.

You have always been involved with Palestine. What kind of work did you do in the US? And what was the response?

I don't do solidarity work with Palestine. I'd like to stress this because "Solidarity" implies an outsider. As a Palestinian, this is my struggle. I do solidarity work with other struggles.

When did you begin writing?

I never imagined myself a writer, nor did I imagine that I could write. I studied biology and biomedical science and worked as a researcher for many

I don't think anyone should remain silent or look away from the face of injustice, especially those with a voice, like writers

years. At the start of the second Intifada, I began writing political commentary out of sheer frustration at the blatant lies and misinformation so pervasive in US media. To my surprise, editors wanted to publish me and I kept writing. My public views were not popular where I worked and became even more so after September 11, which eventually got me fired. That was the moment I started writing *Mornings in Jenin*.

Mornings in Jenin was published and very well received. Did this allow you to move in literary circles? How do you find writer circles in the States?

On the whole, I think US *intelligencia* is starting to move toward Palestine. I don't think it's for some moral awakening. Rather, I feel they are being pulled along by the sheer force of international outcry against Israeli abuses. I believe the BDS campaign has moved a lot of people from the comfort of ignorance.

We were recently reading an interview with Syrian writer Khaled Khalifa and he was saying: "I have always wondered about the ability of some writers to remain silent while the body parts of their own people are strewn about: murdered or drowned, refugees or prisoners;

when a regime destroys a country and kills civilians, with impunity and for its own survival. This silence is disgrace itself, and it will follow those writers as much as those who justify crimes in any name whatsoever". Letting aside the personal view on the Syrian regime, do you agree that writers shouldn't remain silence while war is almost everywhere.

I don't think anyone should remain silent or look away from the face of injustice. This is particularly true for those who have a voice, like writers, artists, celebrities, musicians, etc.

Yet it took a while before the international community spoke loud and condemned the Gaza siege of 2014.

In reality, the world wasn't silent. In fact, only the West was silent. Nations throughout Africa, South and Central America, and Asia spoke up in horror. I think it's important to say this, because the West is not 'the world'. And even within the West, only governments were silent. The masses took to the streets and demanded accountability.

As for the role of writers, I don't think there is any question that literature is inextricable from its social and political context. And when it emerges



from an oppressed people, narrative cannot be separated from the overall struggle from whence it is born.

How did *Mornings in Jenin* come about? What prompt you to write it?

Briefly, I was in Jenin in the immediate aftermath of the massacre that Israel perpetrated there against the refugee camp. Shortly thereafter I was laid off from my job and I began writing, initially just reflections on what I witnessed. But then it quickly turned into a novel.

I made a conscious decision when I was writing, not to think about the audience. I didn't want to think about the reader at all. Any time that crept in, I cut it out completely. It just wasn't a part of the story — how the reader was

going to react, what they were going to think about that story. However, from the outset, I wrote this novel knowing that I wanted to make a contribution to English literature. I wanted to put a Palestinian voice in English literature.

How do you write? Does a story come to you, or a character comes first?

It starts with an idea, a title, a thought. Something small. I don't write outlines and I don't know what will happen in the story before I sit down to write. The characters and plot unfold as I write, then again as I rewrite and rewrite more.

You wrote that the first time you heard Edward Said speak in person at an Al-Awda Right to Return rally,



“I wanted to put a Palestinian voice in English literature

he said “we [Palestinians] should remember the solidarity shown to us here and everywhere.” You have been promoting the need to seek “natural allies” and said Palestinian is a black struggle. Have links been forged with these “natural allies”?

Thank you for doing that research on me. It's something I feel strongly about and I invest much of myself into exposing the intersections of various struggles of peoples. There are many people who feel as I do in many communities of struggle and as a result, the fruits of these efforts have indeed fostered reciprocal solidarity. One of the most evident manifestations occurred during the Ferguson and Baltimore uprisings in the U.S.

What is your opinion, in general, of what is going on in the Middle East? do you see a way out?

A lot is going on in the Middle East. In general, whole nations, entire ancient societies have been utterly destroyed, dismantled, looted, unhinged, and plunged into despair, violence, ignorance, and unspeakable darkness. It has happened in large part because of greedy outside forces seeking profit, power, and domination. What can I say? I'm just a writer. I can only point to these horrors and try to capture them in words, hoping that words can harness power, somehow. Someday. It's hard to see the light of day from the hell made in large part by the U.S. and Israel, but I know it's there. I know it will come, maybe in my lifetime. Maybe in my daughter's lifetime.

And how do you assess the situation in Palestine?

Palestine was always a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country where people of many backgrounds existed in relative harmony. This is the ideal that other nations strive toward. Other nations fought wars and struggled through civil movements in order to attain a situation where all citizens are treated equally under the law. This is what we want and expect. To be accorded the same basic human rights that are the applied to the rest of humanity. We are the natives of that land and we expect to live in dignity in the land of our forefathers. This is the solution - That we live as citizens, equal under the law, whether we are Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or any other religion. Measuring the worth of a human being by their religion should not be accepted in the 21st century.

Your ONG project for Palestinian children focuses indeed on kids, young people, the future. How culture and literature in particular can engage children and young people in a world where people read less and less?

The future and heritage of contemporary societies hinge, in many ways, on how much it reads. One of the greatest tragedies of the US imperial wars has been the devastation of libraries, schools, and literacy rates. It is an immeasurable tragedy. And it's intentional. There's a reason that Israel regularly bombs Palestinian schools, actively prevents students and teachers from reaching their classrooms, steals and destroys student records, and embarks on mass traumatizing of whole generations. The enormity of this tragedy becomes painfully apparent when one confronts the extent of their crimes against children. It's devastating, but not final. We've not reached the end of history. Theirs will not be the final word.

Have you been to Palestine recently Israel no longer allows me to enter Palestine.

Finally can you tell us about what are you currently working on?

I'm working on a novel set in Kuwait and then in Palestine. It's about a sex worker.

“

Basque writers are conscious
of writing in a subordinated
language, but it's our language

”

UXUE ALBERDI /// BASQUE COUNTRY

UXUE ALBERDI ESTIBARITZ WAS BORN IN ELGOIBAR, GIPUZKOA (BASQUE COUNTRY) IN 1984. GRADUATED IN JOURNALISM, SHE IS A WRITER AND BERTSOLARI¹. SHE HAS WORKED WITH DIFFERENT MEDIA AS EDITOR, REPORTER AND BROADCASTER OF RADIO LITERARY PROGRAMS. SHE WRITES IN EUSKARA (BASQUE LANGUAGE) AND HAS RECEIVED TWO GRANTS TO WRITE TWO OF HER BOOKS. SHE WROTE THE SHORT STORY BOOKS, *AULKI BAT ELURRETAN* (ELKAR, 2007) AND *EULI-GIRO* (2013) AND THE NOVEL *AULKI-JOKOA* (ELKAR, 2009), TRANSLATED INTO SPANISH IN 2011 WITH THE TITLE *EL JUEGO DE LAS SILLAS* (*THE CHAIRS GAME*). SHE HAS BEEN AWARDED SEVERAL PRIZES BOTH FOR HER SHORT STORIES AND WRITTEN VERSES. SHE IS ALSO AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR OF CHILDREN BOOK. CURRENTLY SHE WRITES FULL TIME AS WELL AS PERFORMING REGULARLY AS VERSE IMPROVISER. SHE HAS WRITTEN SEVERAL ARTICLES ABOUT *BERTSOLARISMO* AND FEMINISM.

When and how did you start writing?

When I was a child I was writing rhymes and very short stories. When I was 16 I started publishing some opinion articles in a local magazine, when I was 18 I was writing short stories for the Basque radio (Euskadi Irratia); some of mine stories were awarded some local and national prizes.

When I was 21 I was given a grant to write my first book *Aulki bat elurretan*. Since then I haven't stopped writing.

Being a writer is something that takes you by surprise really: one day you get up and read on the news, "Uxue Alberdi, writer". It takes you a while to get used to the label, but then writing is something coming from nearly deep inside me.

You are also a bertsolari, therefore you are used to work improvising. How much does it help in your writing, if it

does at all? And going deeper into your creation process, how do you write? Are characters coming first, or is the plot you start with?

The creative process in writing and in *bertsolarismo* are very different, I would say even antithetic to a certain extent. During times of intense writing I tend to notice some difficulty in improvising *bertso* (verses), because the ideas coming to my mind tend to be too complicated and wide to adequately adjust them, or to get them to properly fit into the metric of the verse. On the contrary, after times of many *bertsolari*² performances, I need a period of time to get acclimatized, and get into writing, because the mind is used to search

¹ Bertsolari, poet improviser. Bertsolarism is an art of the oral culture of the Basque country and a very old tradition. This type of traditions are alive in various parts of the world. In the Basque case the use of metric and composition is very rich. Improvisation is without music, only voice.

I write in Euskara and from Euskara, and I write from my body: an euskaldun woman

for short sentences, concise, so that the audience can grasp then immediately, a kind of unified code easy to understand, common imaginaries and shared references, being them cultural, funny, social, thematic, linguistic or visual references, weaving links between those who improvise and the audience.

As to the literary creative process, it something that changes depending on the type of project. The initial boost not always comes in the same way: sometimes it is an image first, or a character, a feeling, a more concrete argument...There is something telling me this image, this character or this fact could actually have a story and I start pulling the strings, imagining, making notes, trying tones...Right now, I am writing a novel based on the life of a real person, and for this I have made several interviews with this person, over 40 hours of tapes. At the moment I am trying to translate into fiction the material I have collected, turning this person into a character, mixing her/his ideas with mine, merg-

ing real events with fictional ones...Every story requires a different process.

Tell us a bit about your literary, musical, cinema influences...

Over many years I read a lot of short stories: Julio Cortazar, Antón Chécho, Samanta Schweblin, Alice Munro, Eider Rodriguez. I also read a lot of Basque literature, also because I use to lead three literary groups in which we work with literature written in Euskara, or translated into Euskara. Thanks to bertsolarismo, then, I always keep in mind oral language. I have the luck to have a mother who owns a bookshop and who provides me with any the books I want. These days I am reading more novels than short stories. I am currently reading the novel "Lili eta biok" by Ramon Saizarbitoria.

Let's talk about your own work?

I have published two short story books (*Aulki bat elurretan* y *Euli-giro*) and a novel (*Aulki-jokoa*). Some ten years ago I spent some time living in Sweden and I have put together short stories set in this nordic country in Aulki bat

elurretan. I was only 20 and this was my first serious literary attempt. I was lucky to get a grant for writing the book and its publication opened quite a few doors in the Basque literary scene. After that book, came the novel *Aulki-jokoa* (translated into Spanish in 2011). It is a novel about love, war, freedom, rebelliousness...ever present darts crossing the lives of the citizens of a small coast village of Euskal Herria (Basque

Country). A story knitted by three female voices in different stages of their life: childhood, teenage years, and old age. It is a story built over feelings but also over dignity and the healing role of memory. My last publication, *Euli-giro*, is a book made up of nine short stories. The title refers to a rarefied but daily environment and describes the feeling of surprise or threat, more or less veiled, recurring in the stories.





“All Basque writers are conscious of the fact that they write in a subordinated language. But this is our language”

The tension in family relations, frustration, danger, death or betrayal is served in a small plate, through the details and the small gestures. Although almost all stories start out from the daily life, in this book I have given up a more realistic perspective to gradually dive into symbolic, fantastic, magic and even surrealistic at time, narrative levels. In reality this game between the real and the fantastic is to be found in all of the three books I have mentioned.

How much of Euskal Herria there is in your work?

I write in Euskara and from Euskara, and I write from my body: an *euskaldun*² woman. These are my geographies

² Euskaldun, a person speaking the Basque language. In Euskera the collective term “Basque” in reality does not exist. Euskaldun is used to

and from them start my look. Most of my stories are set in my country and for this reason are impregnated of our history, our landscapes, our people and the imaginary all of them share, however my characters' experiences are also, to a certain extent, universal. After all, the particular and the universal are the same...particularities are what make up the universal.

identify those who speak or know the Basque language, therefore doesn't not include those Basques who don't know the language. Its opposite is “Erdeldun”, those who don't know Euskera but other languages, without specifying which. The current Euskaldun population is of around 800 thousand people (with a relevant presence among young people) on a bit more of 2, 5 million people living in the Basque Country (both French and Spanish) and the ancient Kingdom of Navarra.

Language is of course very important in your work, and we refer here both to your mother tongue, Euskara, and the language more in general. What is the place of literature in Euskara today? For example among young writers, and how would you describe the Basque literary scene?

All Basque writers are conscious of the fact that they write in a subordinated language. However, this is our language, we are the only ones in the whole world who can write in Euskara. Basque literature: either we do it, or no one else will.

As to literary production, I believe we have many and different authors writing in Euskara and they do it very well. As for readers...we always like they would be more, but I think this is true in every language. The future of Basque literature is tightly connected to the future of the Euskara, and in this future we cannot only count writers, readers

and speakers...There is a need for policies in favour of the Euskara and not against it, as our very institutions use to promote. We live in a great cultural colonisation and the worst of it is that many people don't even realise that... They are telling us about peace and living together, but in reality what they want is to drawn us little by little...Being part of a nation without a state bring us to a linguistic, cultural, identitarian, economic subordination...

Do you feel you are part of a generation?

I do feel part of a generation of women writers who are very aware of the double subordination (as Basques and as women) we suffered and we fight through our literary activity. I see a lot of muscle and talent around me, and it is a pleasure to be writing together with my women comrades.

“

Language tells me who
the characters are,
their stories, their voice

”

GAVIN CORBETT /// IRELAND

GAVIN CORBETT WAS BORN IN COUNTY GALWAY, IN THE WEST OF IRELAND BUT HIS FAMILY MOVED BACK TO DUBLIN, WHERE HIS PARENTS CAME FROM, WHEN HE WAS A SMALL CHILD. HE NOW LIVES IN THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD OF PHIBSBOROUGH, IN CENTRAL DUBLIN. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THREE NOVELS, *INNOCENCE* (2003), *THIS IS THE WAY* (2013, FOURTH ESTATE) AND *GREEN GLOWING SKULL* (2015, FOURTH ESTATE).

When did you start writing and in particular when did you decide to be only a writer?

I started writing in school, because I had to – it was just something you did in school. But I discovered immediately it was something I loved. Very often teachers would set you a writing exercise as punishment, and the knottier or more abstract the subject matter, the greater the punishment, or so they thought. “Write five pages on the inside of a ping-pong ball” – that kind of thing. But writing five or ten or twenty pages on the inside of a ping-pong ball was the best idea of fun for me.

I’d always wanted to be a writer full time, but was realistic enough to know that being ‘full time’ as a writer meant devoting as much of the non-working, non-paying day to writing as possible, and that to earn enough money to work solely as a writer was not achievable. But just so that I could work with words during the day, I became a journalist, or at least a sub-editor. I worked in newspapers for years – all through my twenties and early thirties. I wrote a novel in my early twenties and had it published when I was 26, but I only became a full-time paid writer in 2011, after signing a contract for my second and third nov-

els. But even that money only goes so far – I also teach to earn money on the side.

How did you decide to give voice to the Traveller community? Any personal connections?

I never set out to give voice to or represent the Traveller community at all. That community has some very eloquent advocates, and who am I to speak for it? My novel *This Is the Way* started with the idea of writing a small and personal book. I simply wanted to write about an outsider, about disconnection. I had no concept, at the outset, of who that outsider would be. I began playing about with voices, to discover this person. Quickly, I realised that the voice I had developed was one of an Irish Traveller. It was obvious – the sound coming off the page was very distinctive. So I had it then. I knew my outsider would be a Traveller – cut off from mainstream Ireland, cut off from the life of the city in which he finds himself, and cut off even from his own culture. Of course, with that realisation came the dawning that I had a certain responsibility, because I have no familial connections to the Traveller community myself. The last thing I wanted to do was to denigrate or misrepresent that community.

What research work did you do for your book?

I didn't labour myself with too much research. If I had done lots of research, the book would have been a very different one, and probably would have been terrible. I would have felt obliged to include everything I had read. But

the focus in *This Is the Way* is very much on one plight, of one person, and on a particular voice – not a general Traveller voice, per se, but the voice of this guy, my protagonist, Anthony Sonaghan. So I just trusted that voice, and where it led me. I trusted and used my imagination. I was familiar enough with Traveller voices anyway – Travellers used to come to the door of our house as kids and my mother was very good to them. But naturally there were places in the book where I needed to have my facts right. I read quite a few sociological studies, and also lots of material published by Pavee Point, the Traveller advocacy group.

How is the Traveller community perceived in Ireland? I remember in Belfast they suffer a lot of abuse, except in West Belfast where they were actually living in their caravans.

Travellers are viewed very dimly and suspiciously by the general population of Ireland. It stems from the very short journey we've come on as a people. We are nation obsessed by property ownership. In a few decades at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, we went from a country of tenant farmers and tenement dwellers to one of homeowners. The condition of tenancy was identified with who we were as British subjects; the condition of home ownership was a sign of independence, maturity, Irishness. In tandem with this social upheaval, the status of Travellers changed. They went from being seen as free spirits, wandering poets, romantic guardians of an ancient Celtic tradition, to being



seen as the lurkers over the back wall, the mob, a class of beggars and thieves. Neither perception, of course, was or is accurate. Whereas Travellers were glamorised and patronised in earlier times, they are now demonised, vilified and shut out.

We live in a world where the idea of "the other", different from us is used to create fear of the other. You have chosen, with Anthony, to be "the other"....

Irish people are obsessed with comparative status. I think it's true that every people needs another 'yardstick' people, or 'touchstone' people, to keep its own identity in focus or relief. This is particularly the case in new nations, where a set of criteria has to be decided quickly, almost forcedly, as to who belongs in this place. A good way of answering the question of 'what is

Irish identity?' is to ask 'what isn't English identity?' Passion, an easygoing bearing and state of mind, lyricism and quick wit – these are all things we associate with Irishness and not with Englishness, but the Irish have a lot more in common with the English than many would be happy to admit. It's been proven by geneticists, for example, that the Irish and English have a virtually identical genetic make-up!

Similarly, the Travelling community serves a useful purpose in Irish society as a mark of what modern Irish identity is *not*, of what condition we must never allow ourselves fall into again. When I came up with the character of Anthony, I knew he'd give me an interesting perspective not just on mainstream Irish society, but on Traveller culture too. I wanted him to examine how he fitted into both. I wanted him to ask himself,



'I'm a Traveller, and my people tell me I'm supposed to be good with words, but why am I incapable of telling my own story? Why is the story of where I came from a mystery?'

How important is language for you in your work?

Language is key for me. Everything starts with it – the language tells me who the characters are, and the characters then tell me what their stories are. A character like Anthony was a gift for me – someone with a distinctive voice in itself, but also someone whose story was about locating his identity in storytelling! This conceit allowed me to really play about with the language on so many levels. My last book, *Green Glowing Skull*, too, is all about language. It's about the swirl of words about all of us today. I love getting my fingers dirty with language. I always say that I'm a writer who, primarily, makes things rather than says things.

And plot? We read somewhere you consider plot something of a distraction.

I love reading books with gripping plots, but whenever I write according to a plot plan it never feels natural. I always somehow have to make the thing I'm writing suggest or even announce that it is a 'thing', a creation, in order for it to feel honest. Plots just feel a bit corny to me. They are a vessel for the good stuff (the language, the characterisation), but why do we need that vessel in the first place? I'd rather find a shape that is other than plot. I always like my writing to have a nice shape, good solidity, but I don't like using plots, even though, despite myself, my books do have plots, of sorts. I'd love for my writing to evolve to a point where I can find a way of presenting story in the way that story presents itself to us when we're not consciously looking for it – in other words, when we make connections with things we see in our physical environment,

“Language is key for me. Everything starts with it – the language tells me who the characters are, and the characters then tell me what their stories are”

or online. I think Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' was getting towards that. I'd like one day to write something like that, but with a binding material connecting the sections.

What about characters? How do you create them? Or they just “find” you?

Characters start usually with a vague sketch. Then I'll write a few lines and come up with a voice, and end up writing reams and reams in that voice, by which process I find out much more about the character and end up rewriting the sketch completely. I'm a huge believer in discovering what your themes and characters are through writing itself. It's only when the imagination is in the white-heat state of creation that it's really working properly.

Your new novel also deals with themes like exile, or at least separation, distance from family, friends, your home and identity. What does identity mean for you? And Exile?

Two more issues we can find in your books are those of loss and history. How important are these themes for you? And why they are important.

The central themes of my three novels so far have been identity, without them really meaning to be, or, I should say, without me really being conscious of theme. I suppose I'm not unique in that regard – many novels, if not most, are built around the central question of 'Who am I?' Isn't that every protagonist's journey? A central character's journey through a novel is one of self-discovery and change.

Irish writers, and Irish people, are particularly concerned with identity, and of course, identity and exile are closely tied in the Irish context. People have been leaving the island of Ireland in their millions for two centuries or more, but people have also been coming to settle in Ireland over a very much longer period of time, which is what makes

Irish people are particularly concerned with identity, and of course, identity and exile are closely tied in the Irish context

the question of Irish identity so intricate and interesting.

If you were to ask me what the key shapers of Irish identity are I would say the first is loss. Ireland is unique in that it went in a short period of time from being the most densely populated country in Europe (eight million in 1840) to one of the least densely populated (under three million a century later). Most of the people who died or left this country in the middle of the 19th century had been concentrated in a kind of linear megacity along the western seaboard. That place is haunted with the material remains of that era, but then so much of Ireland is. If the Great Famine/Genocide had not happened, the population of Ireland today would be around 40 million. Instead, Ireland is a really barren, open, swampy, windy place. It is subject to a strange water-filtered Atlantic light that can sometimes be mistaken for ghosts.

The other key shaper of Irish identity is social fantasy – a kind of lurid idea of what goes in to make the Irish character that was born around the time militant nationalism emerged at the end of the 18th century, and was updated in the 20th century by a host of conservative revolutionaries and clergymen. A version of that idea of *Irishness* is what the descendants of Irish people in America specialise in, and is one of the main themes of my latest novel, *Green Glowing Skull*. I have to say, too, that it's an idea I have a certain affection for.

How do you write? With music, in your room

I write anywhere and at any time. I don't have a routine. I just try to force myself to write every day and hope that I get into the state of mind where the ideas flow freely. But I'm very lazy and chaotic, and I'll happily allow myself be distracted by the internet, by a sunbathing cat, by anything. I do lis-

ten to music when I write, but it usually has to be instrumental music – other people's words tend to block my brain. I'm the current writer-in-residence at Trinity College Dublin, and that's been very good for my writing in that I have my own rooms, where I can lock myself away and write. My office is in the house that Oscar Wilde was born in – indeed, it's in Oscar Wilde's attic! It can get a bit spooky at night.

How would you consider the Irish literary scene at the moment?

The Irish literary scene is having something of a 'moment' right now. A group of writers have emerged from Ireland in the last few years who are receiving great plaudits around the world. These include Lisa McInerney, Colin Barrett, Sara Baume, Louise O'Neill, Paul Murray, Danielle McLaughlin, Gavin McCrea, Rob Doyle, Kevin Barry, and a number of others. I know most of them personally. We all meet each other at events and festivals, and the Dublin-based ones drink in the same one or two pubs and cafes! The talents of these people are amazing, and they deserve the success they're getting. I'm practically unknown compared to them, even in Ireland, and I'm sure many outsiders look at me with them and wonder 'who the hell is that fool and chancer?' but these writers are all lovely people and great company, so

I'm happy to have them as my friends. **Do you feel there is a State policy of supporting culture?**

The Irish state does its best to support culture but successive governments would rather that the arts and its state supports disappeared, because they don't consider any of it important. After the last general election, there isn't even a proper Department of the Arts anymore. It's so idiotic. These foolish, ignorant politicians don't understand what the arts is – I think they think of it all as 'arts and crafts', a very minor part of the manufacturing sector or tourist industry. They don't see culture's part in the public realm, but then they pay no attention to the wider public realm anyway, given how ugly and badly planned our towns and cities are. Theatres, galleries and libraries, and craftspeople that contribute to the beauty of the public realm, such as sign-writers and glass artists, should be prioritised in budgets. Governments can't grasp the good that the arts does for a nation's sense of self-worth, and how damaging the demotion of the arts is for a nation's image to the wider world. I go to France chasing the mystique of France I get from certain typefaces or certain shades of blue. Likewise Turkey and the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, or Spain and the books of Marias and Vila-Matas.

“

For me everything started
in a literary workshop

”

AHMEL ECHEVARRÍA /// CUBA

BORN IN HAVANA IN 1974, AHMEL ECHEVARRIA GRADUATED IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING BUT EXERCISES, IN HIS OWN WORDS, THE WRITER'S CRAFT. HE HAS PUBLISHED FIVE BOOKS, THE FIRST BEING *INVENTORY*, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES, WHICH WAS FOLLOWED BY TWO NOVELS, *ESQUIRLAS* (SPLINTERS) AND *DÍAS DE ENTRENAMIENTO* (TRAINING DAYS). THESE THREE BOOKS MAKE UP WHAT AHMEL CALLS "THE MEMORY CYCLE". INDEED THE NARRATOR-PROTAGONIST IS CALLED AHMEL AND SEEKS TO DESCRIBE WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO A TYPICAL CUBAN FAMILY FROM LATE 1958 UNTIL 2000. THESE TITLES WERE LATER JOINED BY THE NOVELS *BUFALO CAMINO AL MATADERO* (BUFFALO TO THE SLAUGHTER HOUSE) AND *LA NORIA*. A LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT TO WHICH WE MUST ADD HIS REGULAR COLUMNS AND WRITING OF BOTH LITERARY CRITICISM AND OPINION PIECES IN MAGAZINES AND ONLINE. WE MET AHMEL IN THE HOUSE HE SHARES WITH HIS PARTNER, ARTIST CIRENAICA MOREIRA, IN COJIMAR, THE FISHING VILLAGE LOVED BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY. THE HOUSE LOOKS ON TO THE SEA AND HAS A VIEW OF THE DOCK WHERE HEMINGWAY MOORED HIS BOAT.

How did you move from being a mechanical engineer to writing?

How can I explain this to you? After I graduated as an engineer, I did my "social service" time, and I met new friends, some of them writers. I served my "social service" in the Military Unit and in the early months the work was not so heavy. I slowly began to write small things, mini-short stories, as well as what I called at that time poems. Then a friend, Michel Encinosa, currently a translator, writer and editor, suggested to me that I join a literary workshop which at that time was coordinated by the author Jorge Alberto Aguiar.

I went along and in doing so I met someone who I wouldn't hesitate to call the ideal person. He began to talk about literature not just from the point of view of narrative technique. He invited us to "think literature", understanding the society we live in, and the factors that affect it, such as politics, the economy, culture. As time passed my texts began to distance themselves from my experiences. I stopped writing from my own personal biography to create a sort of biography of "the other".

How would you assess contemporary Cuban literature?

Many young and not so young people write in Cuba. They are men and women, heterosexuals and gays, and the themes they write about are as various and diverse as are their ways of approaching them. It could be said to be in a fairly healthy state. However, above and beyond this healthy state, I am interested in the "less healthy" state of our literature: those writers who have decided to embark on the more tortuous path, the path taking them away from the rules, and who launch themselves out into this unexplored space without a parachute or a net. I am talking about those who take a gamble where the pain is no small thing, nor is the emptiness, the delusion, the defeats that they suffer.

There is a generation of writers whose fundamental approach I consider very interesting. Quickly naming names I could mention for example Jorge Enrique Lage, Raúl Flores Iriarte, Legna Rodríguez, Osdany Morales, Orlando Luis Pardo or Daniel Díaz Mantilla, when it comes to fiction. The literature of the



first two writers is full of elements of the absurd, Hollywood superstars, famous international singers and writers in a context as real as Havana; these luxurious mammals stroll around and interrelate with ordinary Cuban people. Lage is very political, Raul on the other hand is more candid and naive. Legna is pure delirious with language and the body, openly coarse, Osdany sets out to craft a plot where literary elements have multiple layers: plot, as well as structure as well as mystery. Daniel is like a time bomb sitting in the livingroom of a house looking pleasant. Orlando Luis Pardo is a political animal, putting his stories 'out there', risking it all with his speech, his language: in his work the word itself has more importance than the conflict.

When it comes to essays, I could talk about Jamila Medina and Gilberto Padilla. Jamila is a poet and storyteller, her prose is difficult and intense and this makes the militancy in her work twice as deep and inspiring. Gilberto situates himself on the opposite field and his literary criticism and essays have the lightness, weight and lethal power of a silver bullet.

As for poetry I could name Jamila and Legna, again, and then Oscar Cruz, José Ramón Sánchez, Sergio García Zamora and Javier L. Mora. It's a long list, really.

In the same way that I talk about this group of writers, I can go a little further back and mention writers who are no longer in their 30's or 40's, but whose approach is very appealing. I

I stopped writing from my own personal biography to create a sort of biography of "the other"

think for example of Marcial Gala, Victor Flow as essayist and as poet, Alberto Garrandés as writer, essayist and critic (he has written some very interesting literary essays and essays on the cinema, focusing on the relationship between eroticism and sex in films, for example). I would add to that list Ricardo Alberto Pérez, Rito Ramón Aroche, Soledad Ríos, Nara Mansur, Antón Arrufat... and I stop here knowing I've left someone out.

We are talking about contemporary Cuban literature, but at this point we should introduce the part of this work produced by Cuban writers outside the country, geographically speaking. How do you assess this work, do you consider it part of contemporary Cuban literature?

Absolutely yes. However we have to take into account the opinion of the writers themselves who are part of the diaspora or in exile. It is important to know how they see themselves, where they place themselves, if they see themselves as part of Cuban literature. I guess more than a few of them would

consider themselves a part of it.

If you look at this question from the perspective of the state institutions we could speak of a 'hard line', from a political point of view: this is where not all of the writers living outside actually do have a place. The Dictionary of Cuban Authors would be the best proof of what I am saying.

From a literary, social, cultural and a political point of view my own opinion is that if the writer decides to have a connection with what people describe as "roots", that is to say family, neighborhood, friends, country of origin, and if he or she wants to think in a critical way about the future of that country, this writer remains a Cuban writer, even if they are living in Iceland.

At the same time I don't want to avoid a different type of danger, that is, the one of including those writers who are the furthest away from their national roots, who don't want to get trapped in "the Cuban". Cuba can find a place in a story even when there is not even a trace of a palm tree there.

By the way, do writers living on the island who decide to take the risk of thinking differently, of imagining and creating different characters, stop being Cuban?

Are you in contact with Cuban literature which is produced outside the country?

Yes, there is often personal contact with those Cuban writers. Social networks, e-mail, and invitations to international fairs and literary events are the spaces for dialogue, exchange, polemic. Those who come and go bring the books of these authors, then these books pass from hand to hand, and this is another way to keep in touch. At the same time and in the same way, our books also find, and circulate among, other readers.

If we say *Generation 0* what do you say?

Critics have used a label to gather together in one place a group of young people and that label is Generation 0. This comprises a group of writers, poets and essayists who began publishing in 2000, hence the name: 2000 being the year 0 of the new century and the millennium.

This label is also a variation on an objective along with a name. Before being modified, "Generación Año 0" (Generation Year 0) was the name of a group of young writers, not of a generation, trying to find a place in the Cuban literary scene. Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo was its intellectual author. By the way, not

all those gathered together under the name were feeling part of the group, but that is another story. The important thing was that for Orlando, Jorge Enrique Lage and myself this represented the theater of our operations.

Regarding the general characteristics of this generation, I think the "brand", so to speak, is indeed the variety and multiplicity of themes and of the different ways to approach them.

In your work of literary criticism and in other places you often speak of groups and authors who don't live in Havana. Likewise many of your articles appear in cultural magazines that are not edited in the capital. Do you argue for the decentralization of Cuban literature, so that it is not confused with what is produced only in Havana?

The thing is, there are interesting literary projects, of great rigor as well as taking risks, being created outside of the capital. I could mention for example what is happening in eastern Cuba. As well as being poets, Oscar Cruz and José Ramón publish a magazine called *la noria*. There they invite Cuban writers who share a similar creative imagination, interests and other cultural connections to collaborate with them. This magazine is also a window out onto the world through translations of and collaboration with, Cuban authors living outside Cuba as well as foreign writers. Another example would be Yunier Riquenes born in Granma and living in Santiago de Cuba. Apart from being

a prolific children's writer he also has a digital project, *Claustrofobias*, that goes beyond the region and aims to show the world what is being created in literary terms in Cuba.

In Holguín there is poet Luis Yussef who directs a small publishing house called La Luz that has become one of the most important in the country. In Villa Clara there are Anisley Negrín Ruiz and Sergio García Zamora. Although some of them live in Havana and some outside Cuba, we also have to mention from Camagüey, Legna Rodríguez Iglesias (in Miami), from Nueva Paz, Osdani Morales (in New York), from Holguín, Jami-la Medina, from Pinar del Río, Agnieska Hernández.

The list could be longer, but we can leave it there, better to leave someone out than to put someone in who doesn't deserve it!

Let's talk about you. You are from Havana. How does the city influence your writing?

Havana is the environment I know, because of this it has ended up being the main stage for most of my books. However there is some of my work that goes beyond this personal space, as what also intrigues me is writing or inventing a different biography, other scenarios.

With the book *Búfalos camino al matadero* (*Buffaloes to the slaughter*) I leave the national context. Let's say I "traveled" to the United States as I was interested in the life context of a marginal guy who had been in the Iraq war and returns to his country with a plan: he is going to come up with a plan. Thanks to correspondence with a Cuban friend who lived in New York and was a social worker, I got to know the substance of this life. I decided to explore



a different universe because I wanted to disconnect from a scenario that could have become a prison. As you move away you are also going back. I feel that this novel, which does not happen in Havana, nevertheless has a point of contact with this city and with Cuba. Undoubtedly, I think that yes, Havana has a place in my work.

What influences would you acknowledge for yourself and your writing?

For me a very strong influence has been Pablo Picasso, especially with his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*. I am very interested in the visual arts, hence one of my literary models is Pablo Picasso, because of the way he shows an interest in what is happening, how he cares for other artists and cultures and then produce a sort of translation of what has captivated him.

Among my influences are also cinema, music, and of course literature. I like Reinaldo Arenas, Virgilio Piñera, part of Cervantes and Guillermo Rosales' complete *oeuvre*, which is not much. There are others: Claudio Magris, Chéjov, Borges and Eco... As you have noticed, I try to define genealogy not just in terms of its starting point, because it is also from that context that I like to be understood. I try to produce work that is not afraid to look at other writing, work that is able to take on board the proper tools that will help me situate myself on the path towards the masterpiece of the future... even if I won't achieve it. With my own resour-

es, skills and mistakes, I want to move forward, like the clock's hands.

What is your relationship with other non-Cuban literature?

I spoke before about a genealogy in which there is a bit of everything. This lineage is the foundation as well as my theater of operations. It defines me, I believe, it provides me with keys, it allows me to escape from being trapped. I read Ricardo Piglia, Houellebecq, Borges, Kundera, Chekhov, Italo Calvino, for example, Bulgakov, Sándor Márai, Carver... There I uncover my deficiencies. I try to escape from my own isolation. Kafka in his diary warned of the mistake of having writers from the same country we live in as our only literary references... As Umberto Eco said, it's about 'thinking the difficult', or as Cortázar advised, to 'situate yourself' before writing any subordinated sentence. I suppose the previous sentence is a sort of reference, a sign indicating how I interact with non Cuban literature.

What do you think of Cuban cultural policy, especially with regard to the field of literature?

This is a pretty tough question to answer given that the Cuban state sees culture as both the sword and shield of the nation. A word is enough to the wise: in a fortress under siege, the shield is for defense, the sword for attack.

There are more than a few cases of authors and books considered politically incorrect or inappropriate be-

There are not many living Cuban authors who have managed to come out of anonymity

cause of the conflicts they address. The moment we are living in now is not the same as that of the '70s; let's say cultural, or editorial, policy now allows itself some license: prostitution, racism, sexual diversity, painful chapters of our history post '59, but it is just "some license". Until more than part of the work of an author is published, or that of other authors who cannot be mentioned, not even on TV, until an entrepreneur – with his own resources and taking the risk himself – will be able to establish a publishing company and circulate a catalogue of authors and a magazine to the newsagents, then cultural policy will still maintain this siege mentality.

What would you propose in this regard?

The job of an intellectual is to observe, connect with and analyze, in a critical way, the context in which he lives and then to share and circulate his work. Of course, it's almost a duty to choose not just who you want to address but also the way of elaborating and distributing the content. It's not enough on its own just to open a blog, a digital magazine, or become an independent publisher. To think is to create, and to create is to resist.

And in regards to spreading Cuban literature in the international arena?

The Instituto Cubano del Libro (Cuban Book Institute) and the Ministry of Culture organize international fairs and festivals, and they also organize groups of writers and specialists who are invited to international fairs and festivals together with their publications, their books... However I don't believe that this translates into really efficient work, nor that the investment produces the desired effect. Outside Cuba we barely exist, and that is the reality.

There are not many living Cuban authors who have managed to come out of anonymity. On the one hand there is the success that comes with publication, perhaps the result of a prize or of promotion by a big publisher such as Anagrama or Tusquet: Leonardo Padura is a case in point, being one of the few Cubans known beyond our borders, together with Wendy Guerra, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Abilio Estévez. On the other hand there are other writers who have come out of anonymity thanks to the research of academics or thanks to their own efforts and risk taking. I would add some names, by no means all, but I don't even think it's an incred-

“Generación Año 0” was a group of young writers, trying to find a place in the Cuban literary scene

ibly long list: José Koser, Reina María Rodríguez, Ronaldo Menéndez, Karla Suárez, Daína Chaviano, Zoé Valdés, Fernando Retamar.

The others, and I include myself among them, we barely exist. But this could change.

By the way, the Spanish daily El País published an article arguing that most Cuban writers are not part of the market. Indeed, we should ask how could a Cuban writer be part of the international market? We have so few possibilities at the national level, publishers serve as proofreaders, literary agents do not have the resources to do their work. If the work philosophy of many Cuban publishers is dominated by chaos, by the illogical, what can we hope to come from this except a surreal panorama, a Kafkian one?

Luckily not everybody accepts the status quo and many are moving ahead in different ways.

Do you make a living out of writing? Can you live off your writing?

If you mean whether I manage to live off the copyright of my books, then the

answer is no. If you are referring to the various activities that have writing as their core, than yes: the copyright from the publication of my books, competitions, grants, cultural journalism, talks, work as a juror in literary prizes, added to my salary as web editor in the Center of Literary Formation Onelio Jorge Cardoso, all add up to a sum of money which makes it more or less difficult to get by to the end of the month. There is really nothing different here from the reality of any writer in half of the world.

You were talking about the importance of a literary workshop during your early formation. Currently you are working in an institution that, in some ways, is the most important place in Cuba for this type of workshop. What is the importance of these workshops?

I think it was in a literary workshop that everything started for me. Clearly all that responsibility cannot be left to teachers, because the need to write, to think literature, to channel a concern, a worry, and to do this in a unique way cannot simply be taught. A good teacher is one who takes you

by the hand in the early stages, he shows you the rules, encourages you to understand them, to master them, before inviting you to break them. The true teacher is the one who helps you free yourself.

You work at the Center of literary formation Onelio Jorge Cardoso.

I am the web editor there. Like any twenty-first century institution this one has a physical space as well as a virtual space: my work is in the virtual space. In this space we try to gather all the work of the Center Onelio, whose reason to exist is the young people joining its annual course on the craft of writing.

The content of the web is various: news related to the work of the students, reviews of books by Cuban and foreign writers, interviews, calls for literary awards, publication of the winners of the Onelio short story award, more information about the centre.

I select, edit and publish the content of the site, and often I also write it. I am also one of the specialists at the Centre and I help in the selection of students, as well as being a juror of the prizes given by the Onelio, and produce articles for *El Cuentero*, the magazine of the Centre.



“

I am interested in using imagination, fantasy and invention to make the reader uncomfortable

”

JORGE ENRIQUE LAGE /// CUBA

WE MET JORGE ENRIQUE LAGE IN HIS OFFICE AT THE CENTRE FOR LITERARY TRAINING, JORGE ONELIO CARDOSO, IN HAVANA. HERE HE WORKS AS THE EDITOR OF THE MAGAZINE OF THE CENTRE, *EL CUENTERO* AS WELL AS OF ITS PUBLISHING HOUSE, *CAJA CHINA*.

LAGE WAS BORN IN HAVANA IN 1979 AND HE LIVES IN THE CUBAN CAPITAL. NOVELIST AND SHORT STORY WRITER, HE IS PART OF WHAT HAS BEEN CALLED “GENERATION 0”. HE HAS WRITTEN SEVERAL BOOKS OF SHORT STORIES AND NOVELS PUBLISHED BOTH IN CUBA AND OUTSIDE HIS COUNTRY.

Let's begin with the influences on your work.

I don't have a humanistic or literary education. Actually I studied science and graduated in biochemistry and when I started reading I felt I was leaning towards science-fiction and the fantasy genre. I read a lot of north american science fiction, its classics, horror literature, heroic fantasy, in other words I went through a phase. After that I read many other things but I kept my taste for fantasy and science fiction, I was especially interested in the introduction of science into fiction; not so much that of conventional science fiction, rather one that was experimental. As I said, I read a lot of north american literature and found the '90's generation interesting, north american writers like David Foster Wallace, at some point Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland. I got many ideas from reading these writers. In recent

years, I have tried to work more professionally, reading a bit of everything and above all reading the Cuban classics, Cuban literature written outside of the country and European literature.

What do you think of today's Cuban literature?

What interests me most is not narrative but poetry. Among the poets, yes, I think there are many voices of value. There are also good books and essays. As for fiction, I am not really very interested in the contemporary Cuban novel or contemporary Cuban short stories. It's not something that grabs my attention except for a few things. I prefer to read the dead: Reinaldo Arenas, Cabrera Infante, Virgilio Piñera. I think they are like heights which have not yet been conquered, challenges the new generation has not yet picked up.



How would you describe this generation of writers called *Generación 0*?

It is true that there are a number of authors who marked a turning point from the year 2000, because when we speak of Cuban literature of the '90s we are talking about a literature which is marked by what were called *los novísimos* (the very new) and the *post-novísimos*. It is a literature related to the *Período Especial* (Special Period) and everything that happened in those years. Critics then were looking for some specific issues that had to do with the crisis, the diaspora, the collapse of ideologies in Cuba, the uncovering of issues such as homosexuality, corruption or *jineterismo* [today the term refers to both male and female prostitution]. Things that are no longer spoken about and from the year 2000 ended up in the background. Now, in terms of generation, if I remember correctly we started to get together, a small group of friends like Ahmel Echevarria, myself, a friend who now lives abroad, Orlando Luis Pardo. The group

was gaining the attention of people who began reviewing the latest Cuban literature. It was a somewhat unconscious way to draw the critics' attention to what we were doing, the books that had been published since 2000. It was not a term we thought about with some kind of "group intention", nor was there a generational aim in the sense of a community with an aesthetic interest or a specific aesthetic literary style. It was something rather local, centered in Havana, a group of friends who started using that term trying to turn it into a well known "label", or identity so that when critics would begin to publish reviews of our own books, they could be labeled, marked out as something different. Later on, this idea spread to the whole country, and other names started to appear and be associated with the same generation. Outside of Cuba and in the academic world people have paid attention to this phenomenon and this has been useful in order to make it visible. So I guess it was a good thing, to the extent that it served to

“The city is a place where one invents, experiments with things

make this group visible, to call attention to a different environment and new things.

Going through the names of the young authors in the contemporary scene and also among those identifying with Generación 0, we can observe that the vast majority have passed at some point through the Jorge Onelio Cardoso Literary Training Centre.

Yes, the fact that most of us have been students of the Onelio Cardoso Centre has been especially important because it gave us the opportunity to know each other and grow closer. The main literary friendships I've had have revolved around this centre. Some authors could have joined other writing workshops before, but you can be sure that at some point they also landed here and this has had the effect of generating a type of complicity. This centre is unique, I mean it is like the University of Havana, sooner or later almost everybody joins its workshops.

How do you see Havana in your literature?

Mine is not a realistic Havana, nor costumbrist¹. Neither is the dirty Havana

¹ Costumbrismo: is the literary or pictorial interpretation of local everyday life, mannerisms, and customs, primarily in the Hispanic scene, and particularly in the 19th century.

portrayed in the stories of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. To me it is like a ghost Havana. I'll give you an example: in my short story "Diary of an assassin in the Jurassic" I show a Havana where various layers overlap and leave signs to be recovered in a distant future. For example at that time the idea of an American Embassy in the capital was something absurd, or the idea of the underground, things like that. And they mix with elements from prehistory. The city is a place where one invents, experiments with things, not to describe nor to give testimony to the way Havana is, because I am not interested in this urban thing, this way of looking at the city. My interest is in raping the city, raping that urban space I see as something traumatic. To me this is a city frozen in time, with many deficiencies in social, human, and urban terms. I am not able to speak about Havana with the admiration of a city-inhabitant of the capital.

How does your creative process develop?

My narrative way of thinking, and which I use to write, is something natural, flowing like a river along its riverbed. I am not interested in being realistic, nor do I worry about addressing a reader looking to identify himself with situations or characters. What inter-

ests me is using imagination, fantasy and invention to make the reader uncomfortable. There is an Argentinian writer I like very much, César Aire, who has a literary program which starts from the unrestrained imagination, inventing things all the time, being radical, that is, experimenting with the imagination, with the *fabula*, with the story; and it is this which leads me to incorporate the scientific elements, the speculative elements with theories and situations. Many people label this as science fiction and I don't mind that, the problem is that when they say one is a science fiction writer, most people think in specific terms. In the worst case scenario they think of space ships, robots and things like that, influenced by Hollywood movies and a golden age in science fiction, that of the great novels of this type.

Nevertheless I don't identify myself with these types of expression. In Cuba there are authors who feel comfortable with these guidelines and write what I call realist science fiction and invent creatures, events, futures and pasts with professional rigor. On the contrary, I am interested in destroying all this and place science fiction elements following a different logic and type of story telling.

In your published work there is a continuous reference to music.

There was a time in which I was interested not so much in music itself but rather in rock and pop music from anglo-saxon culture and what I could do with it, because it was carrying with it a series of myths, legends, characters and fetishes, and it occurred to me I could use them, move them around and combine them. Nowadays though,

this doesn't interest me much; before, I had stories kind of full of pieces of songs and bits of what I was reading, movies I was watching at that time. Back then I was very interested in north american culture, now I feel a bit more distant from that influence.

What kind of access do Cuban writers have to other literature?

I think the biggest deficiency of Cuban readers, and of writers as readers, is that even though Cuban literary borders have expanded a great deal, we continue to have no access to a lot of stuff, and this really is a serious embargo. We cannot access, for example, feedback from the world about what we are writing. Nowadays though with the possibility of reading digital books something has changed. I read a lot of e-books, they have a wider circulation, and you can have a quicker access to this material.

What is your opinion about the Cuban publishing world, its values, its limits?

I don't think there is anything particularly Cuban in this sense, and in any case the peculiarity would be that the publishers here are owned by the State and its publishing and editorial interests don't follow very clear criteria, beyond publishing all it can. The final product, i.e., the published book is ultimately relatively cheap.

On the other hand there are no literary agents nor independent agencies, although if there were I don't honestly think they would be overwhelmed with work. I don't see Cuba to be much different from the Dominican Republic or Nicaragua, countries more or less similar in this respect to our own. It looks



to me that if the State were suddenly to withdraw from publishing, there could well be in its place big editorial groups, independent groups and literary agencies, but all in all most writers will continue to remain virtually "unknown" outside of Cuba. What I mean is that for example Leonardo Padura would continue to be the writer promoted in Spain while the others will get no attention. Nevertheless should this happen indeed it is possible we would witness the flourishing of initiatives like magazines which would mark a trend and point out to the critics certain phenomena. In this sense, I think we'll have to wait and see.

You have referred to critics a few times during this interview. What importance for a writer has the so-called literary critic?

I think criticism is something connected to creation. Critics I like to read are essayists who consider their work not merely like the weekly review of books

but who create themselves and try to move and circulate ideas beginning with the books they read and review. Here in Cuba what is lacking is the infrastructure which would support the critic, because a critic needs a space to be published in, needs magazines, spaces in the newspapers and supplements and here there is very little of these.

Then there is the question of the independence of the critic, i.e. to be able to review a book saying what you really think, be able to review all of the new books being published and not just here. But then, in the end, all of this could be a minor problem, given that the issues affecting literature does not interest many people, here, like in many countries. In Cuba there are so many difficulties that the ones to do with literature are far down on the list of problems to solve. Perhaps when the economy and the society become more stable, then perhaps things will change.

“

Writing has
always been my
only ambition

”

LISA MCINERNEY /// IRELAND

Lisa McInerney was born in 1981 in Galway and, as she writes in the bio section of her blog, “just about grew up to be a writer of contemporary fiction”.

In 2006 she started a blog about working class life in a Galway council estate, ‘Arse End of Ireland’, through which she documented Irish life with a kind of gleeful cynicism.

In the same year, The Irish Times called her ‘the most talented writer at work today in Ireland’, and author Belinda McKeon said that ‘she takes the Celtic Tiger by the scruff, and gives it a sound kicking in prose that sears’. Nominated for Best Blog at the Irish Blog Awards for three years running, she took away the Best Humour Gong in 2009, which, we read in her blog “came as a surprise as she wasn’t aware she was being particularly funny at the time”.

In 2013, Lisa’s short story *Saturday, Boring* was published in Faber’s Town and Country anthology, edited by Kevin Barry. *Berghain* was published in 2015 in *The Long Gaze Back*, an anthology of Irish women writers edited by Sinéad Gleeson. *Redoubt* was commissioned for Christmas 2015 by BBC Radio 4. *The Butcher’s Apron* was written in 2016 for the special *In The Wake Of The Rising* issue of The Stinging Fly.

Again in her blog we read that “a challenge set by her agent led to Lisa’s writing *The Glorious Heresies* over the summer of 2013. Through the mischief made by five Corkonian rebels – a drug dealer, a sex worker, an unrepentant penitent, a gangland boss and a failed family man – she explores family, shame, regret and redemption in modern Ireland”.

The Glorious Heresies (2015, John Murray) was awarded in June the 2016 Baileys Women’s Prize For Fiction and the 2016 Dylan Thomas Prize and was also named as a book of the year by The Irish Times, Sunday Independent and Sunday Business Post in 2015. It has been longlisted for the 2016 Desmond Elliott Prize.

Lisa lives in Galway with a husband, a daughter and a dog called Angua.



Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I was born in Galway and raised there by my grandparents in a big and boisterous family, but I was kind of bookish and dreamy and quite unfocused. I've always written; I can't remember a time I wasn't writing little stories or poems or creating magazines as a child. Writing is how I make sense of the world. I went to University College Cork to study English and Geography, and worked as a barperson, a shop assistant and a receptionist, but I was always a writer. Everything else was for financial necessity – writing has always been my only ambition.

What are your influences, not just literary but musical, cinematographic, in general...

My biggest literary influences were Melvin Burgess when I was a teenager, Hubert Selby Jr now. Music is a massive part of my creative process; I never walk or travel without headphones and a playlist. I'm fired up by Murder By Death, Patrick Wolf, Frightened Rabbit, Imogen Heap, Sarah Slean, Portugal: The Man, Mokadelic. Tough cinema – Irreversible had a huge effect on me. Underground gigs, passionate discussion, city streets. Cork City always does it for me – its compactness, its people,

its coffee! The most important thing is taking time to be alone. It's very important to be alone, listening to your own thoughts from time to time. Otherwise all of those influences can't possibly take root.

You were writing a 'working class blog' or so it was described somewhere. Tell us about that project? How important are the new social media in your work as a writer?

I was living in a council estate (state-built housing) and I needed an outlet. I needed a way to write where I would also be read, and the literary world felt very inaccessible. But blogging was a new and exciting platform, and it was free, and anyone could do it. So I did it as a way of finding readers. I wrote about my own life, though I tried to make it as entertaining as possible, and I wrote about the issues affecting me. As it happens, this was in the Celtic Tiger years, and there were few depictions of modern, working-class Ireland in the media; it was all property porn, socialites and aspirational shopping. So the blog worked as a counter-point.

Now I don't have much time for blogging, but I do stay in touch with people via Twitter. Not only in a promotional sense (how boring!) but because interacting with people in such a succinct medium forces a writer to be quite sharp and quite inventive. When used right, it can be very rewarding. And it's nice to have

an outlet sometimes – writing can be very isolating.

How do you write? What was the genesis of your novel?

I'm pretty strict when I'm writing. I close the door, sit at the computer, start an instrumental playlist and don't permit myself to stop working until I get to about 1000 words. My agent signed me off the back of a short story I'd written for Kevin Barry's Faber anthology, Town and Country, and so he set me a deadline for handing in a novel. I had a few ideas about which characters I would employ; I just needed a story to fit them. Once I had the first incident in my head – a middle-aged woman's spontaneous use of a heavy religious ornament to attack an intruder – I let the cast lead me. My process is pretty organic in that sense.

Your novel, *The Glorious Heresies*, is actually set in Cork. Why? How did you get to chose Cork?

I moved to Cork alone at seventeen to attend UCC, so Cork was really where I found my voice. That sudden level of independence and personal awareness coupled with the new ideas I was expected to engage with at university – that made me, more than my childhood, more than rural Galway, more than my family, even. To me, Cork is home as much as Galway is home. It's not a surprise that my characters started speaking to me in Cork accents.

How important is language for you? Joe O'Connor wrote you have "a juicy way with a phrase". how do you work with language in a world where everything must be reduced to 141 characters?

The fewer the characters, the bigger the challenge. There's nothing at all wrong with being forced to be pithy sometimes.

Because I write in the vernacular, my way with words is almost entirely thanks to Ireland's way with words – the way we express ourselves, in particular our capacity for dark humour and badinage. I have a passion for Hiberno English, and a hatred of language scrubbed clean of its regional variants, accents or sayings. Capturing our turns of phrase feels quite natural to me. But, like all writers, I served my apprenticeship: I was a voracious reader as a child.

Do you feel part of a generation of writers? Do you have any contact with other writers, do you do projects together? Is there a sense of community somehow?

Absolutely. I feel part of a generation of writers. There are so many immensely gifted, imaginative writers coming through in Ireland right now and I feel fortunate that I take some small place in that community.

I am friendly with quite a few Irish writers, but there's no one I work with in any collaborative sense. But there is definitely a sense of community. I can't speak for everyone but I think sometimes we're very lucky to have found each other.

How important if they are at all, are the '90s writers to you. Have you read them, have they influenced/inspired you Do you feel them close, distant?

There are two that made an impression on my teenage self: Roddy Doyle and Patrick McCabe. Roddy first because he was accessible, because his prose was vivid but economical, his characters familiar and his dialogue raw. For a working-class teenager this was adult fiction written to be read. As I approached school-leaving age, I started reading Pat McCabe. Here was a much wilder literary landscape, much less welcoming; here were big ideas caught in a fever dream. I found *The Butcher Boy* and *The Dead School* intoxicating.

Both Doyle and McCabe were influential to me as a budding writer, Doyle for making the remote seem reachable, and McCabe, then, for showing me that literature is an ultimately redundant thing if it's too comfortable.

The themes of this new generation are not completely different from those of the '90s writers: yours are often, for example, 'marginal' characters, working class people What has changed is the context, the environment. You write of a post conflict Ireland and also of a post-Celtic Tiger Ireland What is your interest as a writer? Who do you want to write about and why?

I don't know what I'm going to write about in five years, or ten years, but right now I'm drawn almost exclusively to working-class

“blogging was a new and exciting platform, and it was free, and anyone could do it”

writing: characters, themes and setting. Primarily because I'm working-class, and so I feel more attached to these themes, more able to take some truths from them. But also because I don't see a lot of working-class stories in contemporary literature, and I write the stories I want to read. My stories usually come to me through characters – the character exists first, and the story is shaped for them.

Continuing on a sort of going back to the '90s...then it was Dublin a lot. You are from Galway. How is it living in Galway? What has changed from when you were a teenager say?

I live in rural County Galway, not too far from the Burren. I was raised here, but moved to Cork City in my late teens, and have gone back and forth between the two places ever since. I'll move back to Cork eventually – right now rural Galway works because it's quiet and it's cheap. What's changed? Physically, economically, very little. The Celtic Tiger didn't have the impact in small town Ireland that it did in our urban centres. Socially we have, of course, seen some massive

shifts in attitudes – the Church beginning to lose its grip, people becoming more tolerant of those who identify as LGBT, people less inclined to judge others' lives, communities becoming more diverse. We're a good bunch, I think. All over Ireland, we're a good bunch.

How would you describe the Irish cultural scene, literary but not only...

In a very healthy place right now, but perhaps precariously so. There is a real sense of creative community in literature, poetry, publishing, filmmaking and so on, and a lot of gifted and entrepreneurial creatives making space for themselves, with some support from the Irish government and arts organisations. I hope it continues, that we as a whole support and nourish that spirit.

How would you define the cultural policy of the Irish state/government?

I try to be fair: there is a certain amount of support offered to Irish cultural enterprise. There are some great arts festivals, programmes, organisations, etc in Ireland who would not survive without government funding. I've gotten an

right now I'm drawn almost exclusively to working-class writing: characters, themes and setting.

Arts Council bursary to help me work on my second novel. But funding for a lot of programmes has been cut, especially in education; there is a sense, I think, that arts and culture is low on the list of the state's priorities, especially after the recession. And to an extent I get that, but investment in culture is investment in the state's health as a whole, in our identity, in the esteem of the nation, in our future, really.

You are a woman, do you feel discriminated as a writer?

This is a tough question, because I'm only starting in my career, and so if I miss out on an opportunity I'm as likely to wonder if it was down to my own failings – a story not being good enough, for example – than any kind of bias. Right now I haven't been writing long enough to spot any negative patterns in the types of professional interactions I've had, but I listen to and learn from more established women writers, and so I hope I have the tools and the wisdom – secondhand! – to be able to deal with discrimination if I identify it.

There are other biases too; I'm very conscious of being a working-class writer in a literary world that's decidedly middle-class and, as a whole, more interested in middle-class themes, stories, or even participants. But people are becoming very good at raising, appraising and discussing these issues, which is great.

May I finally ask what is your relation with the North? You were 13 when the IRA called its unilateral and permanent ceasefire, 17 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed...

Here's the thing: the North is something many of us in the Republic don't think about at all, except in a drunken, romantic sense of someday becoming a united nation again. And I think that's a shame, that we have a fraternal sense of responsibility towards the communities in the North who identify as Irish. We should support them. Two examples come to mind: often writers from Northern Ireland are simply not considered when people talk about Irish literature, their contributions and identities erased through nothing more (or less!)

insidious than neglect. And on a more general level, Northern Irish people are fighting for marriage equality and reproductive rights; the first we have in the Republic, the second we don't, but in the case of Northern Ireland both of these rights are allowed to citizens of other parts of the UK, and it's ridiculous that they don't have parity with more privileged parts of their own country. In the Republic I think that we don't make enough noise in support. We might sing about wanting a united Ireland in the pub, but in the everyday we don't show a lot of solidarity.

In terms of the conflict in the North, I don't remember any of it; it wasn't something that entered my consciousness as a child, or something I worried about as

a teenager. I visited Belfast while I was at school. A friend enrolled in university there. My friends and I never thought of it as an unsafe place. I was socialising in the city a few months ago; it's a vibrant, cool city. We continue to be nonplussed when people from other countries ask us, wide-eyed, how frightened we are of the conflict. We were spared it in the Republic and we only think about it now in terms of what we see as overblown sectarian scuffles – the bonfires, the marches on the Twelfth, that kind of thing. Ask a person who grew up in the North and they will have a completely different experience, obviously, but most striking is how many Irish people from Northern Ireland feel spurned by the Republic. That's not right.



“

We have to write about what it means
to be alive now, to live in these times

”

PAUL MURRAY /// IRELAND

PAUL MURRAY WAS BORN IN DUBLIN IN 1975. HE HAS WRITTEN
THREE NOVELS, *AN EVENING OF LONG GOODBYES*, *SKIPPY DIES*
AND *THE MARK AND THE VOID* (HAMISH HAMILTON).

HE LIVES IN DUBLIN. WE TALKED TO HIM A FEW DAYS AFTER THE
BREXIT REFERENDUM WON BY THE “LEAVE” CAMP.

Paul, also given the content of your last novel, *The Mark and The Void*, we could not avoid asking you an opinion on that.

Disbelief, incredulity, horror. It's very frightening. I don't think anybody here was thinking it was actually going to happen. It reminded me when GW Bush were re-elected in 2004. I remember going to bed that night and the polls, and everybody were saying that Bush was going to loose and then getting up in the morning and entering this new world of GW Bush again! And I had the same feeling with Brexit, when going to bed and David Cameron and everybody were saying “Remain” is going to win, and the next morning it was the “Leave” camp

that had won. It is very strange because most of the times, I feel some kind of affinity with the rest of the human race, I feel that everybody is to some degree on the same page, but with Brexit I realised that I genuinely don't understand what many people want and what they think is going to happen. It is clearly going to have a sharp economic consequence on Ireland, given that Britain is a major trading partner. It's pretty terrible, yes. It's frightening to see all these right wing people, like Trump in the US, and all these terrifying far right movements spreading and unfolding across Europe. People is kind of withdrawing into themselves and into these primitive, idiotic myths of nationalism. When you look back at War



World I for example you ask yourself how could it happened, as it does not make any sense, but today you see the same thing, we are getting into something which does not make any sense. And yet this process does not stop, nobody seems to have the will to stop this.

What do you think of the current Irish literary scene?

I think the literary scene is definitively more vibrant than it was during the economic boom. The literary scene has always been pretty rich, there has always been a number of good and new writers. But during the Celtic Tiger between 2001 and 2007 there were very few new writers emerging, which was strange to a certain extent. I think just everybody got a job, there was so much money and opportunities, that even writers who are hardly able to deal with many aspects of life, except writing, even they were finding lucrative jobs. So during the boom there were a lot of money, jobs, it was a weird time but it was a very un-Irish time, in all kinds of ways, in particular in literature and culture. So during that time we stopped producing culture, we stopped producing literature and started producing horrific vacuous simulacra of others vacuous simulacra. So Ireland started producing boy bands, like Boy-

zone, West Life and who became quite successful band, and when you watch them on the internet you realise they are just the emptiest kind of cultural experience ever. They actually used a West Life song to torture prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, I think. Which is to say that times of economic adversity seem to produce literature and culture and exciting ideas and people genuinely think of ways to engage with reality. Something that does not happen during economic good times. And this is what we are experiencing very sharply in Ireland. There is loads of amazing new writers at the moment. There is a woman writer, Lisa McInerney who recently won a couple important prizes, there is Colin Barrett and Kevin Barry, to name only a few. What I would like to see in Irish writing is a little be more political engagement, it's very hard to write about politics, and you are sort of not supposed to write about politics, but as George Orwell said, Believing politics has no place in art is in itself a political statement. And it seems a political statement a lot of people here seemed to have swallowed. A lot of the books coming out are set in the country, are actually quite nostalgic, there is no much about technology or globalisation and it's a bit frustrating to me because if you live in Ireland, as you did,

historically the catholic church and the british empire have always been very powerful forces in ireland

you would know that Ireland is a very very globalised country, a very open country, so technology, foreign money, foreign investment, IT, these things are very very powerful here and they are the real engine that drives everything that's happening in the country. That is why I would like to see in literature a little bit more of engagement with these voices that are propelling us instead of just perpetuating this illusion of subjectivity that we are all individuals trying to get on with our lives.

Perhaps you are tired of talking about Anna Ferrante, but I really like her books, and was taken with the anger in them.

Getting into your literature. How and when did you start writing?

When I was very small, I guess. My father is an academic, retired now, and was professor of Irish drama and the house was always full of books and me and my brother and sister were always reading. And writing stories was a kind of natural continuation of reading, so it was something I did since I was very small. I am still slightly surprised that I can actually make a live out of it but this is a great position to be in.

Why a novel about banks? How did the idea come about?

It came about in two ways, or two stages. Back in 2002 my sister got a job in Bank of Bermuda which was based in Dublin (and is gone now, part of a bigger bank). I never heard of course of Bank of Bermuda and thought it was quite funny that there was actually such a thing, as I'd always thought of Bermuda in the context of the famous Bermuda Triangle, where planes disappeared...It seemed like a bad place to put a bank in! So, I didn't know what an investment bank was and started to investigate this and set out to write a very comic book, with a very basic joke, gag at the centre of it: a comic two-hander in which a banker meets a writer. The joke was that the banker, who thinks of himself as a very boring person in a very boring job, is in fact sensitive and intelligent, and the writer, who is supposed be those things, is in fact a boring and crass individual. So I started writing this book in 2002 and worked on it for about six months and then I stopped because I wasn't quite happy with that. So I put it aside and started to write something else. Then in 2009 I came back to it and certainly then the meaning of banks had completely changed and all of the terrible things

banks had been doing had started to come to light, those weird devices they had come up with, like credit defaults were being revealed for the first time. So suddenly it was much more a interesting world to write about, interesting particularly because the cool thing about Ireland is that it is a very small country where very big vulture converge in a very naked open way.

And where globalization is very "visible"...

Indeed. Historically the catholic church has always been a very powerful force in Ireland. So the British Empire, the other very powerful force in this country. And indeed those two forces have clashed in the culture of the last 80-90 years. But then in the last 20 years or so you have these new forces coming in, the forces of globalization, these enormous American based multinationals setting up shop here and using Ireland firstly as a port into Europe and secondly, and more importantly, as a place where they can wash all their dirty laundry, where they can do all these illicit activities. Also because the Irish government has agreed to look the other way. So Ireland is a tax heaven and centre of what is called shadow banking. All of these banks can make themselves invisible. This concept

was interesting to me in itself and also because it was allowed to happen in my country, the country where I grew up. The country, Ireland, which always represents itself as a place of authenticity a place where the people are honest, decent...and in fact it has become a place for all these kind of complex, abstracted meta-banking...It was also interesting in a metaphorical way, as all this is about de-realisation. These banks are going to de-realising themselves in order to de-realise their money and where their money have come from and what their money were actually doing. A way to make this invisible and clean. I think this was related with what was happening in Ireland, partly because of these banks and the money they brought here, but partly because of the direction the society is going in the XXI century all over the Western world: we are living in this increasingly de-realised world, where we communicate with each other less and less and instead we live on our screens, in this weird, clean, antiseptic environment where we don't have to deal with people or stuff anymore, as everything is on remove. I thought this was very interesting and frightening: even in a country, in Ireland, which is very very small as you know, where everybody virtually knows everybody else. Yet, at

the society has become alienated and everybody is lonely because we don't talk to each other

the same time you can have a society which was becoming alienated and everybody was becoming lonely because we don't talk to each other, we just look at our phones all day long. That's why I wanted to write about it, it felt very important to me to write about it.

Do you know a writer called Ben Lerner, the author of *Leaving the Atocha Station* [2011, Coffee House Press]? Well, there is a good review of his book by James Wood in The New Yorker: Wood says this is a novel full of deception and self-deception. Lerner is trying to restore the individual to the moment. You read the book and you go, oh wow, I am living in the moment, the air is fresh and the grass is green and the stone feels very stony... Wood said this is a kind of nostalgic idea of experience that's not the way we operate anymore. We don't wake up to the moment because the moment doesn't really exist outside of technology in the independent and autonomous way it used to.

I think it's a hard thing to do, it's hard to write about this stuff but I do believe we have to try and do this, to represent what is like to be alive now, or else you'd be producing nostalgic pieces,

historical pieces which seems kind of pointless.

Absolutely, but then the next question is, do you feel you belong to a generation. Or better still: do you have venues, or places where you can talk and exchange ideas and discuss issues like these with other writers or artists? Because this is the other think: intellectuals, artists, writers don't see to have spaces where to meet and discuss.

That's very true and a very interesting point actually. I think the short answer to that is no, I don't talk about these things with other writers. I guess these things are interesting to me, but perhaps not to others. Actually Irish writing is quite rhetorical. It is formally experimental sometime, but is quite often - compare to the American novels for example - naturalistic maybe. I guess in Ireland we mostly talk about money or rather about not having much money and how we are worried about books disappearing completely, books about technology or about naturalism or books about vampire would be gone in ten years time and people would be fucking their phones or who knows what they'll be doing. I have a

great friend who teaches English in York but also studied economics. When I was writing the book, as he comes over to Dublin once every six months, I was meeting him and his friends, and we were having these amazing conversations, about economics, literature, philosophy. But by and large I think writing is kind of an isolated activity. Ireland in particular, I am a bit weary about complaining about Ireland but perhaps what I am going to say is not a complaint but rather a plea. Ireland is very frightened of intellectualism. The word intellectual here is almost an insult, unlike I suspect in Italy or Cuba. There are very few people here who would be pointed out as "intellectuals". I don't know why, but the worst thing you can do in Ireland is act as you are a big boaster about something, if

you talk in a grandiose way about, say, technology, people would immediately go: "*Who is that pretentious idiot waffling on about these things*".

For that reason and because Irish writers and writers in general are quite isolated people it is very hard to find venues to talk about these issues. That said, there is an Irish literary scene, if you want to call it that. There are a lot of writers now, which also means there are a lot of book launches, events and those things are, in general, a kind of torture, shallow and unfulfilling meetings...but sometimes you get very interesting meetings, and great conversations about writing a book, for example, and then you would feel that writing a book is still something important.





I started writing professional in 2001 and there was no internet, And no literary scene because there was no internet and you felt much more on your own. But now you feel a little more connected.

Let's talk about your literary and cultural references...

When I was in college in the mid 1990s there was this wave of American directors, indie directors I liked very much, like Richard Linklater, Steven Soderbergh, Hal Hartley, Gus Van Sant, David Lynch. All very important to me. In terms of music, Nick Cave and interesting experiment called Kurt Vile...I listen

to music everyday. The Script is a band I like, I like their music concept. I also like a band called Rachels. Very romantic music but also freaky and strange.

As to literature, certainly Thomas Pynchon is the guy I will think of first. And then Don De Lillo: I am reading his new book, *Zero K*, fantastic. I read a lot and a lot of different things. I read a lot of philosophy, but very slowly. I like Anna Ferrante, David Foster Wallace and the post modern American guys. I like Irish literature of course, from Joyce to Yeats, and, coming to our times, I like Anne Enright and Eimear McBride. Then I love my friend Neel Mukherjee,

a writer I went to college with and wrote a book called *The Life of Others* [2014, Chatto&Windus], an extremely powerful book.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am working on a screenplay. It's the first time I do something like this. It's going quite slow, actually, and it's completely different from writing a book. That's why, I guess, it's taking much longer than I thought. But I like it. In a film every moment of the film has to have a point or reason to be there, and I feel it's a bit writing against the grain of how I would normally write as I don't think there always ought to have a point. I have learned things on structure but I'd be happy to go back and writing books. I have a few ideas in mind, but I don't know which one is going to win.

Is a story coming to you first or characters.

It's usually an image or even a line, sometimes is a line that I think of and become the first line of the piece. In my book *Skippy Dies*, I just imagined two kids having a doughnut and just a scene. In *The Mark and The Void*, the idea of the character was there, and this slightly absurd idea of the existence of a Bank of Bermuda and these very intelligent people doing this very deceitful, useless and also absurd work. I thought the idea of a poetic banker was a good one. So yes,

there is an image and the image would have a character in it, and then if it is a good idea, or my definition of a good idea, it would sparks new ideas...

Starting to write a book is the best part in a way, because you almost have to do nothing, you seat back and your unconscious has done all of this work behind the scenes and it sparks all these ideas. You just write down these things falling from the sky. You always have this idea of a super novel, hyper novel where you think there would be some way to join all of these ideas together. At the start it feels it's all there and you can fit it all together, but then you realise that you are mortal and your book is huge and you'd have to select and decide what goes into it so that people can read a story and not 15 thousand pages.

One last thing, out of curiosity: we were reading somewhere that someone made a song inspired by your book. Tell us about that.

Yes, yes, it's true. There is this amazing musician, Lisa Hunningham [www.lisa-hunningham.com] and she has a song called *Home* which was inspired by *Skippy Dies*. She has a new album coming out in September, called *At Swim*. Recently I pretended to be a music journalist and set off to interview her, very interesting musician, indeed.

“

Literature allowed me to
reach places I would have
never imagined to reach

”

LEONARDO PADURA /// CUBA

Leonardo Padura is today the Cuban writer who perhaps enjoys more international recognition, both in terms of success and translation of his books, and awards (National Literature Prize 2012 and Princess of Asturias Prize 2015). Literary fame, however has not changed the simple and cordial attitude of one of the brighter writers of his generation. I can proudly say he honors me with his friendship. I have been a reader and have reviewed all his work, and we both share a mysterious belief about the deeper meaning of baseball as a socio-cultural practice

To interview him we went to the house he has always lived in, located in the southern neighborhood of Mantilla in Havana, a place that has also been the scene of some of his famous detective novels. Padura received us in the dining room, surrounded by paintings of great Cuban painters like Roberto Fabelo or Arturo Montoto, with a steaming cup of Cuban coffee in hand, dressed casually and with the complicity of his wife Lucia. With eloquent and passionate verb, the writer speaks of the new Cuba-US relations, Cuban journalism, baseball, music, the influence of history and friendship in his novels, his neighborhood and personal affection in a nice, bright and close conversation.



Let's talk about baseball, a sport that has traditionally been a sign of Cuban identity, and is a passion for you. I think my relationship with baseball can be exemplary as a Cuban person. My father was very happy because his first child was male and one of the first things he bought me was a baseball player and a uniform. He was a fan of

a club founded in the late nineteenth century very famous in Cuba in the '30s, '40s and '40s, the Almendares. Furthermore we lived a family situation very typical in Cuba at that time: his brother with whom he shared a business (shop) was a follower of a different team from his, and I think one of the reasons for the bad relationship they always main-

tained was indeed baseball. My father passed on to me that passion and my uncle helped me to develop it. I think that way of relating to baseball from the family around us was always normal in Cuba. Up until I was 18-19 I spent more hours of my life playing baseball than doing anything else. Some time after my father died, reviewing papers my mother, who has a great sense of humor and has a lot of mental agility, found one of my school mark paper and when she showed it to me I knew what she was thinking when she said: "I sent you to school every day" but the paper showed only slightly more than 60% attendance. Indeed it was because I was going to play baseball with friends.

However the relationship of young Cubans with baseball you remembered today seems to be in crisis.

So it seems, I judge what is happening in contemporary Cuban baseball from the passion I commented to you. Rather than worrying about what is happening in the super-structure where there are many, many problems, I worry about what is happening at the base, in the neighborhoods, in the streets of Havana where I see more and more children playing soccer and every time less playing baseball.

There is a media invasion of football in

Cuba, a bad programming of baseball, a loss of competitive quality, a lack of figures/players to identify with, and all that is affecting the presence of baseball in Cuba. And this had not happened in this country for more than a century, when one of the "heroes" par excellence of Cuban society was the baseball player and he was reference for many people.

You mean that its projection went beyond the sport itself?

Sure, baseball for example was an important factor in the process of Cuban racial and social integration. It was a practice present throughout Cuban society economically and ethnically. This is what is on the substrate of baseball, that's why a bad status of baseball in Cuba worries me.

However it seems hard to tackle from Cuba the challenge of a show-sport model moving a lot of money?

It is certainly a bad phenomenon, yet it seems inevitable. That is a competition that cannot be avoided, but we have to understand the rules of the modern world and we must adapt to them and get the best that we can get. I think we have to learn lessons and adapt to the requirements of the time. We have to make a revolution in Cuban baseball. I have lived the one which occurred in the 1960s, where a lot of am-

ateur players who replaced in no time professional players appeared, and the mystique that baseball had remained. I educated myself watching those new figures that helped create a social, figurative state, this constant presence of baseball in Cuban society has been lost and needs to be rescued.

Let's move to music, another of your passions and one which has so much to do with Cuban culture.

Indeed it is an issue that in recent times has been the basis of inspiration and has to do with the fact that in the 1970s in Cuba the importance of the phenomenon of the *salsa* was not acknowledged. There was an unfortunate attitude of considering *salsa* as a "theft", so it was called then, of the historic arsenal of Cuban music. It was not understood that there really was a process of growth and evolution of Caribbean music being born from the historic arsenal of Cuban musical tradition. That was finally understood around the '80s, when there was a boom of *salsa* in Cuba, as popular dance music, and it was a phenomenon that lasted up to the late twentieth century.

At the beginning of the new century other trends begin to enter which polarize the interests of artists. The first was the incidence of American hip hop which produced in turn a rhythm of Caribbean

origins called reggaeton. A number of artists begin to make fusion music, that starts from the patterns of Cuban music but freely integrates elements from other influences like the ballad, jazz, etc. It's like a kind of *sa/sa made backwards* which creates a whole range of possibilities of consumption and musical taste in the current Cuban context.

How do you assess the popularity and preference reggaeton is enjoying among a significant part of Cuban youth?

Unfortunately what most rooted at grassroots level has been the reggaeton and I think it is not by coincidence, because it is a music that basically expresses the mood of a society from its most lurid ethical, social and human standards, to put it mildly. It has expressions of sexism, sometimes contemptuous with respect to women and certain values related to social order, and as people need an expression of protest or at least rebellion with respect to certain undoubtable immobility which unfortunately exists in Cuban society, reggaeton fills a space among the less educated population, the less favored economically, the most damaged by all the crises that we have experienced.

Not the whole musical spectrum is occupied by this style, though.

Clearly not. I recently saw the record-



Carpentier is a writer from whom I learned so much about the art of the novel and the achievement of Latin American own art, through his theory of magical realism



ing of a concert by Descemer Bueno and what I was listening to was music of high quality. There is a group of Cuban musicians who are succeeding at market level and are making popular music of quality.

They are not trying to turn us in the most educated people in the world by getting us to read novels, as it was happening in the nineteenth century, but with music that people like. There is a whole group that may fall within this trend apart from Descemer, such as Gente de Zona, Interactivo, Kelvis Ochoa and others. All this group that was meeting around the project Habana Abierta, which was created in Madrid at the beginning of this century. Some of them remain faithful to the aesthetic, rather than style, while another group has turned to reggaeton and enjoys a very important presence in Cuban society.

Reggaeton has become a phenomenon of coexistence often complicated in Cuba. People who listen to this music, for example, like to listen to it at a fairly high volume and they don't care about the musical taste of their neighbours, and this type of attitude sometimes becomes dangerous. It is also a reflection of social problems which is why we have to think about it, because many times when there is a problem what we do is trying to circumvent it instead of solving it.

Let's talk about Cuban literature, what figures have influenced you more in your narrative?

I think few people have contributed as much as I did to save from oblivion a figure like Alejo Carpentier, with my essays, my journalistic work and my writing. Carpentier is a writer from whom I learned so much about the art of the novel and the achievement of Latin

American own art, through his theory of "magical realism". I have devoted many pages to study the work of Carpentier and revise it narratively from my perspective, although I am a completely different writer to him I feel heir to Carpentier.

The same I would say about Cabrera Infante: with Cabrera I learned how to write "in Cuban", in fact rather than in Cuban in Havanero, his reading has been instrumental in my work.

Another influence is that of Lino Novás Calvo, an author who despite being born in Galicia (Carpentier was born in Lausanne), is an essentially Cuban writer. Lino Novás Calvo with Mexican Juan Rufo taught me how to talk about violence, because they were two writers who worked the concept of violence much in the sense of subtext, where they lean on with events that one discovers reading. Reinaldo Arenas is another important writer for me, from him I learned the meaning of Cuban disproportion, a completely hyperbolic sense.

Do you feel part of a literary generation?

I've always acknowledge I'm a very generational writer, I think writers like Senel Paz, Arturo Arango, Abilio Estévez, Miguel Mejides, Francisco López Sacha and others - I always forget some names - we learned to write together.

Each then was outlining his personal style, but our literary conception, I think, is the same, and that was, at the beginning, to take politics out of literature and place human conflict as the center of our first stories and our first novels. For this reason almost all are initiation texts, love text and not political or memories. We had at that time a very close and daily relationship, which for us is still very important. We are a generation of storytellers with a very close personal relationship, the success of one is the success of all, aggression against one is aggression against all, we have retained that spirit, and I think it is a really enviable value my generation had. That's why I think we're more than contemporary writers we are contemporary friends.

In an important part of your work history plays a significant role in the narration, why this marked interest in history?

I think the historical novel only makes sense if it helps us understand the present, because no matter how hard we try it will never overcome the capacity and possibilities of a history book. Historians manage information levels, elaborate a certain type of synthesis and analysis that are alien the novelist, and the territory of historical text is very important as knowledge of the past. I think the role of the historical novel is to illuminate the present teaching that there

is something eternal and universal called human condition. In a medieval village or in a settlement on the outskirts of imperial Rome things happened that are relevant to understand and assume from our perspective in the present. That is the aesthetic that I practice in the historical novel, and it is the kind of novel of this genre that I like to read. I find it interesting, for example, when "The Name of the Rose" teaches me things about ourselves that we do not know, with a historical perspective that gives them a much greater projection. When I wrote novels like "The novel of my life", "The Man Who Loved Dogs," "Heretics", "Adios Hemingway" or "The fog of yesterday" I always sought to understand the present.

In this set of novels which one do you consider the most successful?

I always say that of all my historical novels, the best is "The novel of my life" because I think it is in it where this proposal to look at the past to understand the present worked better. I achieved this in the best way. It is a very Cuban novel, very much of the Cuban national drama, which may be reflected in a moment by exile, in another by the quest for independence and in another by the presence of secret societies in Cuba or by the practice of literature. In other words, all these things can be found in this novel, and I think it was a book in which the balance between my purposes and the result is higher, that's why it is my favorite novel and I think it is the most complete.

Talking about this novel, how can the life of a romantic poet with a tragic life in the mid-nineteenth century help us understand the present?

Yes, the life of a nineteenth Cuban poet, founder of poetry and practically of Cuban culture, the first man who speaks of the Cuban nation, the first who in his poems

and in his literature refers to motherland. José María Heredia allowed me to reflect back to the present, to myself, to my contemporaneity a number of essential conflicts of the Cuban identity, a subject that always have me worried and which has much to do with the person I am, the way in which I want to write.

Would you dare to repeat that narrative experience with the highest of Cuba's literary and political figure, José Martí?

Yes and no. I think about Martí to much has been written and this overrepresentation his figure has acquired somehow has castrated him for fiction. It is really very difficult. There is an excellent director of Cuban cinema, Fernando Perez, who made a film about his childhood and youth, and I think he took refuge in that early stage of Martí's life because it was where there was a space to recreate his life. Of the big names in Cuban history of the nineteenth century there is one that I find very attractive and that attracts me as a fictional character: I am referring to Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the so-called father of the nation, the man who runs the first uprising for independence against Spain. This is a character, like Martí, with all the tragic components that attract me, but are very difficult to treat because of their meanings.

I think the historical novel only makes sense if it helps us understand the present

Why in your work there is such a strong presence and defense of friendship?

I think that friendship is one of the most beautiful manifestations of this concept I was talking about earlier, the human condition. Man is essentially a social being, in fact, rather than a social being a gregarious being. In my youth when I played baseball in Mantilla I was studying at the secondary school in La Vibora and then in college, we were very gregarious and this marked me as a person. I think the friendship of those people who accompanied me during that time, and fortunately most still accompanies me, build us as human beings.

I was born, raised and have lived in a Cuba in which we were all very equal, although there was always some less equal, and that equality gave us a spirit of solidarity, fraternity. We grew up as frater, in my case also accom-

panied by concepts such those of the Masonic philosophy of my father or my mother Catholic belief in Our Lady of Charity. Solidarity between people has been a value that I learned from the cradle and that helped me a lot later in a country where really we were very equal. In the neighborhood where I grew up, didn't matter whether you were better or worse off, it didn't matter whether you were whiter or less white, because almost no one was white, it didn't matter whether you were a better or worse baseball player because we were all bad ... That feeling of closeness I have practiced throughout my life and this is why in so many of my novels I worship friendship.

You have referred to Mantilla, the neighborhood where you were born and you are still living, away from the central areas of the capital, why this special root?

Why Mantilla is very easy to say. I have a very strong sense of belonging to this place and also the characteristics of Cuban life conditions decanted me for this sense of belonging. When I reached my adult life at a time in which to have a house in Cuba was virtually impossible I had no choice but to build one on the roof of my parents' house.

“For me Cuba as a whole does not exist if not through its concrete manifestations such as a song by Benny More or a novel by Carpentier

Here I created my house with Lucia, we built it between the two, each brick in it pass through my hands or my back, plus, there is the atmosphere of the neighborhood and the presence of my parents.

Recently I was making arrangements, for my mom were to spend some time with my brother, who lives in the US, and I told my brother to just buy her a month ticket because she does not resist more than a month outside Mantilla, she feels bad, she misses talking to the neighbors.

Although my father died two years ago, I know that taking them out of here would have been like taking a tree and put it in a bad place. In addition I have the chance to get close to people in the neighborhood, we know each other since we were born, when I meet friends I have not seen in a while, they know who I am and I know who they are. It was always a fair play between us.

What does Lucia mean for Leonardo Padura?

Lucia has been my companion for 40 years. Imagine, we started dating in 1978. I have almost spent all my adult life with her, she was 18 when we met. She has not only been the partner of a life, she has been the companion of growth. We work together, she has always been my

first reader, my first reviewer, my staff, my shield in difficult times, and I have a great debt of gratitude in this sense.

What does literature mean to you?

Literature has been after baseball my big passion. But I owe it to literature much more than baseball, because it has given me the possibility to get things that were not available to me in baseball. I could never stand in the Latinoamericano stadium wearing a blue uniform, however thanks to the literature I could get to places I would have never imagined. In the 1990s, during the most fucked crisis, when food was scarce, electricity cuts were daily and endless, there was almost no transport, there was nothing, literature saved me from madness.

Between 1990 and 1995 I wrote three novels, an essay on Carpentier, prepared two anthologies of short stories, one of journalism, screenplays, I wrote like a madman to keep myself from going insane. Literature has been, is my

job, I live to write and am fortunate to live thanks to what I write, which is a privilege anywhere in the world.

What does Cuba mean for Leonardo Padura?

The day I received the Princess of Asturias Prize, the most important prize given to me, I went to pick it up on behalf of Cuba. This is why I brought two things that seemed to me absolutely essential, I was dressed in a *guayabera* I did not buy in Yucatan or Panama, where they make them beautiful, it was made by a Cuban tailor, and I brought a baseball ball in my hand. In that ball and in that shirt I carried with me all Cubans I wished had been present. I would have liked my people were able to watch the ceremony on TV. I said it there and I repeat it wherever I can: I received this award not as a writer but as a Cuban writer.

I have a very special relationship with

what is called national belonging. I have a hard time assimilating a patriotic or historical discourse that encompass all. For me Cuba as a whole does not exist if not through its concrete manifestations such as, for example, a song by Benny More or a novel by Alejo Carpentier. This is my specific case.

For me Cuba is especially Havana and even more Mantilla, especially that street that was the border where my childhood freedom ended, because I was forbidden from crossing the road, and breaking that border meant passing from being a child to being a teenager.

When my father was sick he told me he wanted his funeral to pass by five places: the house where he was born, the bus station of the Route 4, the warehouse where he worked many years with his brother, the Masonic Lodge he helped to found, and finally the house he built and was home to the family.

The day he died we did that journey, and between the two most distant points there were barely 250 meters. The five most important places in the life of my father could fit in 250 meters of this road, this is the motherland.



“

I am interested in writing
literature of ideas, a
conceptual literature

”

THE WRITER, RAMIRO SANCHIZ, WAS BORN 37 YEARS AGO IN MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY, WHERE HE HAS SINCE LIVED. HE ALSO WRITES LITERARY CRITICISM AND HIS ARTICLES APPEAR REGULARLY IN THE NEWSPAPER “LA DIARIA”.

RAMIRO SANCHIZ /// URUGUAY

For some time you have been focusing your writing on one specific character. Tell us about this.

Between 2006 and 2010 I began to articulate a narrative project I am still working on: it was about putting together a sort of macro-text or macro-novel, from which every book published, each story, is a fragment or a chapter. That is, one can read any of my novels and find the beginning and end – or something similar to a beginning and an end – in complete autonomy. Nevertheless, after reading others you'll see a kind of mosaic taking shape. This mosaic revolves around a recurring charac-

ter, who is explored in several possible lives. In some he is a writer, in others an academic, in others a musician or whatever, a photographer, bookseller, shopkeeper etc. That is the narrative project to which I am committed and I will continue with it until I get bored or I die, I don't know which will happen first.

At what stage in the evolution of this *macro-text* do you find yourself now?

Well, the thing is, for me, I tend not to consider the texts final and that includes when they have already been





I write on the computer; I can't write by hand, I think that is because of the speed I have gotten used to

published, especially the short stories. I go back and work on them many times, I change them, sometimes with small changes, at others with more substantial ones. In this sense I believe in a project more than in a piece of work: something undergoing permanent construction, never definitive and always expanding and expandable. The causes of this expansion or proliferation vary, and because of this I sometimes like to play with the idea that my texts actually *write themselves*. For example, I like to take an already published story and make changes to its plot, or even its subject matter, and see how it develops after the changes, both in terms of plot and style or tone or the ideas involved. Moreover I think this comes from the musical concept of *variations*, i.e. the same theme with several variations that in essence are recognizable, but at the same time altogether different. In my project perhaps the theme is the life, or rather the lives, of this character called Federico Stahl, and in the musical analogy, we could think of my macro-novel as an extended musical score having many points where it is possible to improvise.

Let's talk about your cultural influences, and especially your literary influences?

I am very interested in fantasy, science fiction, the literature of the imagination, let's say in literature we could define as 'different'. I admire many writers like Ballard or Pynchon, authors who are not necessarily from my Uruguayan tradition. If I have to refer to national literature I have to acknowledge my great admiration for Onetti, for Mario Lebrero, and some of our poets, in particular Julio Herrera y Reissig. However I also take inspiration from other cultural traditions: from cinema and music which is very special for me because I was a musician, or at least tried to be one at some point. I had my own rock band for a few years but in 2008, after the disintegration of the last band I funded, I decided I didn't want to start all over again and I preferred to dedicate myself completely to literature. My first book had been published in 1995, when I was 16, and since then I have published short stories in magazines, especially science fiction magazines. Later, in 2009, I published my first novel, in Montevideo.

How do you write? Do you create the characters first or the plot? Do you write at home?.. Listening to music? Tell us a bit about your creative process.

That is a nice question, but I'll try to make an effort and keep it short. I write on the computer; I can't write by hand, I think that is because of the speed I have gotten used to: by hand or with a pencil it would inevitably be slower and I get exasperated quite easily. At the same time my handwriting is horrible and after a while I'm sure I would end up not understanding it or having to make a bigger effort than one I know I would want to. So I use *Word* and nothing more; I take notes in text documents and then I start writing drafts. When I feel I have a finished draft, i.e. a lucid and accomplished version of what the text should be, story or novel, I leave it to rest for a while and then I start correcting it. Then I add and cut, as appropriate, and correct mistakes. When I feel the resulting text is more or less presentable, I begin to look at how to publish it. And finally, once its publication has been agreed and before the proofreading, I do a final edit, that sometimes culminates in changing several things and making my publishers nervous.

As for music: yes, I always have something playing in the background, and I always believe that what I am listening to constantly while writing actually influences the particular text. For example, when I was writing my novel *El orden del mundo*, at the beginning of 2014, I was listening a lot to the post-metal band Giant Squid; so, the images in that novel, to my mind, are inseparable from the landscape this

band evokes in me, in particular their recording *The Ichtyologist*, which I find excellent.

Having said all of this, I do not consider myself a writer of characters. I mean, I do not pay much attention to characterization: this is a feature of a certain type of fiction I am not interested in, that of the psychological novel, that I associate with the nineteenth century and with a type of English high modernism. I am also not so much interested in the plot, in the sense of creating novels in which its unfolding is the most important element, the proverbial *beautifully told story*. I prefer telling many histories, mixing and interweaving one with the other instead of carving a perfect single story, for instance. Perhaps this is a heritage of my early reading, what I am interested in writing, above all, is a literature of ideas, a conceptual literature.

What about the work you have published so far...

The Uruguayan publisher Estuario has published three of my novels, *Perséfone* in 2009, *La vida desde el puente* in 2011 and *El gato y la entropía* in 2015. Then there are several publishers who have published me in Argentina: the novels *Los viajes* (2012), *Ficción para un imperio* (2014), *Vampiros porteños, sombras solitarias* (2014, also published in Madrid in 2010,) and *Las imitaciones* (2016). In 2014 I published *El orden del mundo* in La Paz, Bolivia.

How would you judge the health of Uruguayan literature at the moment?

I have an optimistic feeling, enthusiastic, if you like, about it. I think it's a

great time for an Uruguayan literature that has, above all, gone through a complete renovation. I don't know how deep the change is, but there are a variety of books available now and this always seems a good thing to me. Our literature had descended into a huge abyss during the dictatorship, from the middle of the 1970s to the middle of the 80's.

I will give you the example of a writer I greatly admire, Fernanda Trias, who has published in Uruguay, but also in Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Spain. Right now she lives in Bogotá and is one of the novelists I consider fundamental to the Uruguayan literature of this century. I must say, and this might sound a bit vain, I have read all of the writers of my generation; and of course I have my favorites: Agustín Acevedo Kanopa, who in reality is a bit younger than me but who enjoys the same conditions that allowed the work of my generation to become visible; Rodolfo Santullo, who, although writing fiction very different from mine, has a very clear, defined and solidly cultivated project I am very interested in; and then I like Pablo Dobrinin, Pedro Peña and Daniel Mella.

Among the younger writers I am following with interest: Carolina Cynovich, Hoski, Matías Mateus, Federico Gior-dano and Miguel Averó.

Similarly there is a group of writers who are devoted to the work of science fiction, fantasy and horror, who have published in high-prestige journals in Europe and the United States. Perhaps the paradox is that these authors who

are recognized internationally are not as well known in Uruguay. Within this group perhaps the most important are Dobrinin, who I mentioned before, and Roberto Bayeto.

Uruguay has had great writers recognized at the international level. Do you believe these writers still serve as reference points for new authors?

Indeed it is quite striking that for a country whose population always hovers around the 3 million mark, there are so many names with such a large reputation such as Horacio Quiroga, Felisberto Hernandez, Onetti, and many others. However I am not sure about the extent of their influence on the younger generation of writers. I think that – leaving aside 'milestone names' such as Onetti and Levrero – most writers of my age take inspiration from non-Uruguayan traditions – namely the North American and the English, among others – and from the cinema and television. Nobody, for example, cares about Benedetti nowadays.

So who would be the main influence in Uruguay for younger writers?

Well, if you were to ask Horace Cavallo, who is an excellent storyteller and poet, this question, or even simply by reading his books, you will see he is hugely influenced by Onetti. Indeed, Cavallo with his references to writers of other generations ends up constituting, along with other writers, an Onetti fan club, quite well known and with whom, to be honest, I prefer having nothing to do with, as much as I consider Onetti a great writer.



I would then add the big circle of Mario Lebrero's disciples: not just enthusiastic readers, like myself, but especially those who have joined his writing workshops.

Do these influences also extend to the wider Latin American level?

Of course. Argentina's literature is very important: *Cortázar* and Borges are two central figures. They have been central and they will continue to be so. For this reason I prefer to talk about a *rioplatense* literature, as opposed to an Uruguayan or Argentinian literature. The same is true from the perspective of Buenos Aires: Quiroga, Onetti, Levrero,

Leo Masliah... they are all Uruguayan references in Argentinian literature, even though it might sound weird to put it this way. Then we have Gandolfo, of Argentinian origin who lives in Montevideo and has produced important critical work, as well as a solid body of short stories.

This year you have been part of the jury of the Casa de las Américas Prize, in the section dedicated to books of short stories. What is your assessment of what you have read?

The thing is, I don't know to what extent the sample was representative of something. We received a lot of mate-



rial from Argentina and to be honest I found it more or less the same, of a similar tone, a group of people from the same place and with the same interests. All this bored me a lot. The winner, who was indeed an Argentinian author, was completely different and peculiar: luckily, his short stories didn't look like any of those of his fellow countrymen.

As for the rest of Latin America, let's say it was quite different, not only in terms of theme and style but to a certain extent also in writing skills. There were very bad things, including some that would have made you ashamed. Others, a few...very interesting. Some Cuban books, for example, seemed incredibly good to me in terms of working with humor; one of them indeed was on my shortlist. The Argentinian, this I must say, was at the same level: all of them had surely participated in workshops and learned the basic rules. But this, of course, didn't necessarily make them praiseworthy.

Do you manage to live off your writing?

Not off my fiction, no, I can't live off that; I do live off my criticism and my work as editor, proofreader and translator, though.

I actually don't know any writer of my age, or even a bit older, who can live off his books, except those like Rodolfo Santullo who has a publishing contract with one of the best publishers of short stories in Rio de la Plata.

In Uruguay perhaps this is also due to the fact that there are no major incentives for book publishing. There are prizes and initiatives that can provide a bit of money not just to live a little better for a time, but also for personal publishing: paying the publishers yourself, something I vehemently refuse to do (they are the ones who have to take a risk, the publisher who doesn't want to run the risk with my books is not the publisher I want), or going to the printers yourself (something, also, I never

what I am interested in writing, above all, is a literature of ideas, a conceptual literature

did: before doing that I would publish e-books). Other than that, all we are talking about is just a small amount of money that would allow you to buy yourself a treat or pay some debts, I don't believe in prizes: more often, it seems to me, they actually impoverish the publishing environment. Under these circumstances, and because printing in Uruguay is expensive, publishers have to survive as businesses and this implies not taking risks, publishing sure things, conservative works, most of them forgettable or only justified by the fact that they won the prize.

However you were talking of a Rioplatense literature, which potentially could involve a fairly similar market, because of the language.

Uruguayan publishers seldom export out of Uruguay, they sell very precariously in Argentina, there is a connection but neither a distribution network nor massive sales. For this reason, given that the Uruguayan market for books of fiction is minimum in the country (400-600 people if you are lucky), and that there is not much hope of getting more than 80 copies of a book to Buenos Aires, clearly it is difficult for a writer to live off the copyright of his or her books.

You recently edited for Casa de las Américas an anthology of new Uruguayan writers...

Yes, in February 2016 I was lucky to travel to Cuba to present it. It was a nice experience. I gathered together 17 writers – originally they were going to be 19, a superstitious number given that Uruguay is divided into 19 departments, but two of the writers pulled out for different reasons – and with each one of the writers I discussed which short story they believed most representative of their work. In the end the result was, at least to me, a very good book, to which I added a prologue trying to draw a bit of a map of twenty-first century Uruguayan fiction. As I am just the 'compiler' (actually it would be more correct to say 'the one who selects the authors', as when it came to choosing the texts their authors also joined in) I can boast about the quality of the book: on an average level, as far as I am concerned, it is superior to any other anthology of writers of my generation published in Uruguay. Perhaps there are 2 or 3 short stories that are not as accomplished as the best ones, but this is true in every collection, I think.

Biographies

Susan Abulhawa

Susan Abulhawa was born in Kuwait in 1970. Her parents were born in At-Tur in Jerusalem and were refugees of the 1967 war. Susan was sent to live with an uncle in the U.S., where she stayed until she was five years old. Aged 13, she was sent to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she was a foster child. Her first novel was published in 2006 and was titled *Scar of David*. The book might have been forgotten, but things changed when it was picked up by a French publisher. The novel was successful in French, as well as several other languages and was republished in English in 2010 under its French title, *Mornings in Jenin*. Abulhawa's second novel, *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, has been published in June 2015 by Bloomsbury.

Uxue Alberdi Estibaritz

Born in Elgoibar, Gipuzkoa (Basque Country) in 1984. Graduated in journalism, she is a writer and bertsolari. She has worked with different media as editor, reporter and broadcaster of radio literary programs. She writes in Euskara (Basque language) and has received two grants to write two of her books. She wrote the short story books, *Aulki bat elurretan* (Elkar, 2007) and *Euli-giro* (2013) and the novel *Aulki-jokoa* (Elkar, 2009), translated into Spanish in 2011 with the title *El juego de las sillas* (The chairs game).

Gavin Corbett

Gavin Corbett was born in County Galway, in the west of Ireland but his family moved back to Dublin, where his parents came from, when he was a small child. He now lives in the old neighbourhood of Phibsborough, in central Dublin. He is the author of three novels, *Innocence* (2003), *This is the Way* (2013, Fourth Estate) and *Green Glowing Skull* (2015, Fourth Estate).

Ahmel Echevarría Peré

Born in Havana in 1974, Ahmel Echevarria graduated in mechanical engineering but exercises, in his own words, the writer's craft. He has published five books, the first being *Inventory*, a collection of short stories, which was followed by two novels, *Esquirlas* (Splinters) and *Días de entrenamiento* (Training days). These three books make up what Ahmel calls "the memory cycle". Indeed the narrator-protagonist is called Ahmel and seeks to describe what has happened to a typical Cuban family from late 1958 until 2000. These titles were later joined by the novels *Bufalo camino al matadero* (Buffalo to the slaughter house) and *La Noria*.

Jorge Enrique Lage

Born in Havana in 1979 where he lives. He has written several books of short stories and novels published both in Cuba and outside his country. Among his short stories books: *Yo*

fui un adolescente ladrón de tumbas (Ediciones Extramuros, La Habana, 2004), *Fragmentos encontrados en La Rampa* (Editora Abril, La Habana, 2004), *Los ojos de fuego verde* (Editora Abril, La Habana, 2005), *El color de la sangre diluida* (Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana, 2008), and *Vultureffect* (Ediciones Unión, La Habana, 2011). And the novels *Carbono 14. Una novela de culto* (Ediciones Altazor, Lima, 2010; Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana, 2012), *La autopista: the movie* (Editorial Caja China, La Habana 2014) and *Archivo* (Editorial Hypermedia, Madrid, 2015).

Lisa McInerney

Born in 1981 in Galway. The Irish Times called her 'the most talented writer at work today in Ireland'. In 2006 she started a blog about working class life in a Galway council estate, 'Arse End of Ireland'. Nominated for Best Blog at the Irish Blog Awards for three years running, she took away the Best Humour Gong in 2009. The *Glorious Heresies* (2015, John Murray) was awarded in June the 2016 Baileys Women's Prize For Fiction and the 2016 Dylan Thomas Prize and was also named as a book of the year by The Irish Times, Sunday Independent and Sunday Business Post in 2015. It has been longlisted for the 2016 Desmond Elliott Prize.

Paul Murray

Born in Dublin in 1975, the son of an academic, professor of Irish drama and a teacher. He has written three novels, *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, *Skippy Dies* and *The Mark and the Void* (Hamish Hamilton). He lives in Dublin.

Leonardo Padura

Born in Havana in 1955, Padura is the Cuban writer who perhaps enjoys more international recognition. Several of his books have been translated into English. Among them: *Pasado perfecto* ("Havana Blue", 2007 originally 1991, Bitter Lemon Press); *Vientos de cuaresma* ("Havana Gold", 2008 originally 1994, Bitter Lemon Press); *Máscaras* ("Havana Red", 2005, originally 1997, Bitter Lemon Press); *Paisaje de otoño* ("Havana Black", 2006, originally 1998, Bitter Lemon Press); *Adiós Hemingway* (2006, Canongate U.S.); *La neblina del ayer* ("Havana Fever", 2009, originally 2005, Bitter Lemon Press); *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, (2014, The Man Who Loved Dogs, Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Other books: *Fiebre de caballos*, La novela de mi vida, 2002, Herejes, 2013.

Ramiro Sanchiz

The writer, Ramiro Sanchiz, was born 37 years ago in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he has since lived. He also writes literary criticism and his articles appear regularly in the newspaper "La Diaria". The publisher Estuario has published three of his novels: *Perséfone* en 2009, *La vista desde el puente* en 2011 and *El gato y la entropía* in 2015. In Argentine he has published the novels, *Los viajes* (2012), *Ficción para un imperio* (2014), *Vampiros porteños*, *sombras solitarias* (2014) and *Las imitaciones* (2016). In La Paz, Bolivia has published: *El orden del mundo*, in 2014.



THE FLOOR IS YOURS...

9 INTERVIEWS TO
WRITERS FROM
PALESTINE,
IRELAND, BASQUE
COUNTRY, URUGUAY
AND CUBA

SUSAN ABULHAWA, UXUE ALBERDI ESTIBARITZ, GAVIN CORBETT,
AHMEL ECHEVARRÍA PERÉ, JORGE ENRIQUE LAGE, LISA MCINERNEY,
PAUL MURRAY, RAMIRO SANCHIZ, LEONARDO PADURA