



Belfast Festival panel, Paul Muldoon, Lucy Caldwell and Glenn Patterson in conversation with Marie-Louise Muir

Marie-Louise Muir: Welcome to the Big Book Weekend. This session should have been part of the Belfast Book Festival, run by the Crescent Arts Centre. It was due to take place in June and understandably has been cancelled. I am joined by three patrons of the festival, who were all due to take part in events talking about their work and the work of talent they particularly admire. We call this section Patrons' Picks. Glenn Patterson joins me from his study / library / workspace – can I see a guitar behind you? – in East Belfast, welcome!

Glenn Patterson: Yes, I'm just round the corner from you.

M-LM: Yes, we are very close. In fact if I stuck my head out of the window here we could probably shout hello to one another.

GP: Or indeed if you were to lose a cat, it might turn up on my doorstep.

M-LM: That is a story for further down the line. I want to bring Paul Muldoon in. Paul Muldoon, welcome to this unusual get-together.

Paul Muldoon: Thank you.

M-LM: I have to say that as well as an esteemed poet and wonderful man of words, you've got a fine crockery collection behind you.

PM: Yes, well I'm working my way through them, you know, crock by crock. It means that one doesn't have to wash the dishes other than once a week.

M-LM: It's a good plan, it's a good plan. And Lucy Caldwell, welcome to the programme. Your latest book, *Intimacies*, was due to be published but I see now that it has been pushed back to this month, next year. Welcome from your very beautiful-looking, well-ordered, well-structured book-lined shelved room in London.

Lucy Caldwell: It's all an illusion, Marie-Louise, I'm in ratty leggings and slippers under the screen. Behind me I've got three bookshelves in a corner of my bedroom, which is all I've had for the last few years. And my husband also has a desk at right-angles to this. So everything that might disrupt this perfect visual has been hastily shoved aside.

M-LM: It would be so good, if we felt the need later down the line, to swing the cameras around and show the true nature of everything that is out of sight of our rooms...

LC: The backside of the tapestry.

M-LM: ...because this is the new normal. This is where we find ourselves. Can we begin by getting a sense of what life is like now? Paul Muldoon, can I go to you in New York? What has life been like for you since lockdown happened?

PM: I don't want to sound flippant, but in a strange way it hasn't been much different because as many of you will know, if one's engaged in the writing business one lives in a



kind of permanent lockdown, and one is socially distanced for most of one's life. As I say, I don't want to make light of this, I don't want to sound flip, but in a strange way it hasn't changed all that much. Where I am right now is in Upper New York State. I live in Manhattan, but also here. It's a bit over three hours north of Manhattan, and I've been here for five weeks, and I've been scribbling away. Again, I don't want to sound as if I'm above all this or aloof from all that – far from it. But I am doing the ultimate social distancing, so I'm trying to be a responsible citizen and also trying to write a few poems at the same time.

M-LM: Have you gone out? Have you gone out for your weekly grocery shop? Have you gone outside and can you give us a sense of what the outside world is like for you now?

PM: The outside world here is an agricultural – it's a farming area. It's mostly dairy farming. There are quite a few Amish people living in the vicinity, and they're living as they would three or four centuries ago. And in a strange sense, actually, we're all living in that way, with some slight variations in that, for example, in addition to going shopping – which I do, sparingly – I actually get deliveries. So FedEx rolls up to the door and I'm taking advantage of that, so groceries are arriving from some far-flung spots, including the West Coast of the US. So I get fish, for example, ferried in from there. So again, I don't want to make light of this, because I'm extremely lucky in my life. I'm able to socially distance, and that unfortunately is not the case for everyone in this country or many others.

M-LM: Can I come to Lucy now? Because Lucy, you're in London. I imagine, you know, this is people crowded on top of one another. What are London streets looking like now?

LC: They're so empty. We had been trying not to go out very much at all, and my five year old was getting so terrified that we've started doing slightly longer walks every day, just to show him that there are still buses, there are still trains, there are still people. And we walked yesterday – we love walking. We always walk through the city streets, on a weekend especially, when they're deserted. Well we walked yesterday to the Tower of London and I think we saw two, three other people? It was really eerie. No one else. No one else there. So for the most part, it's very quiet. Everyone's confined. Everyone's staying inside in our area, at least, which is very high-packed, residential. But I find it very strange because as Paul said it's both much much harder and much more gloriously possible writing than before because my children are five and two. I look after them most of the time. Normally I have two mornings a week, but now, because of course, my husband is home as well, we're dividing the childcare. And suddenly I have six half-days a week. I haven't had this much writing time in six years? So it's, as anyone trying to amuse young children will know, it's so hard. They're going stir-crazy and missing their friends and not understanding. And my two-year-old is terrified and convinced the corona virus, which I think she thinks is some kind of dinosaur, is going to eat her. But at the same time, I have – I'm really struggling to read. I'm struggling to have the emotional capacity to enter into much else. But I have a world, an imaginary world, that I've been slowly creating, building over months – textbooks and reference books and



people's diaries and maps and that feels like that's what's keeping me going at the moment, being able to go there.

M-LM: Glenn, for me – and Lucy touched on it there – it's trying to keep yourself focused, and trying to not watch the news relentlessly. How're you managing in the sunny surrounds of East Belfast?

GP: Like Lucy and Paul there is a part of me that finds this very familiar, and, no matter what I'm doing, if I'm in the middle of writing a book, I always try to come down, walk down the landing, walk to the room in the back of the house where I am, and sit here for at least the first hour of every day. So I've got that, and I've got far fewer things making me get up out of this chair and go and do anything else later on. I am fortunate in that I have this room that I can be in, and I can sequester myself. And the first couple of weeks I suppose the news was – just seemed to be constant, and now like everything else it's become if not the new normal then the new temporary. It's nice to feel conversations starting to come around to what we're going to do after, and when that after is going to be, and rearrangement of festivals that were all being cancelled in February and March. So it feels like... yeah. And it's been interesting too, I think, for me here in Belfast it brings back memories of times in my childhood in the 1970s. Strikes and the loyalist workers' strike in 1974, very particularly. Power cuts – we haven't had power cuts, but that kind of idea of things closing in and the outside being difficult and perhaps a little frightening.

M-LM: Let's extrapolate that a bit, because what I'm feeling is that we grew up, we adjusted to the normal of the Troubles, but things didn't *stop* the way they've stopped now. And they've stopped on a global level. It is hard to get your head around what is being expected of us. Is it too early to expect writers like you from Northern Ireland to be able to give some kind of focus to what's happening at the moment?

PM: You mean to look at the COVID-19 phenomenon in terms of the Northern Irish experience, for example?

M-LM: Just in terms of – I mean, we kept going. We accepted the adjustment of normality, and some people will say that we all suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because of it, and that's a whole other conversation, but is there something that Northern Irish writers can give that will somehow share that there is a way out of this?

PM: Well, you know, quite apart from the Northern Irish phenomenon, as human beings it's remarkable how resilient we are. It's one of our greatest glories that we can live through almost anything. One doesn't have to look too far to see the most distressing conditions. I think of the concentration camps, where people were astonishingly able to, somehow, make it normative. It's one of our glories, but it's also one of our greatest curses in that we can get used to anything at all. So I think some negotiation between those two is vital for our sanity. To go back to the word normal, if I may, for a minute – I don't want to sound overly wise here—

M-LM: Go on, go on. We'll give to you.



PM: One of the things I hope we don't go back to is what we thought was normal before, actually. And one of the things I'd like us to bring away from this is the idea that what we had before was in fact far from normal, and that normal, really, was much more like what it was in 1918, or indeed 1957 at the time of the so-called Asian flu, or in 857 and 1757, 1357 and almost every other date in human history where actually we were exposed to some version of a plague. That was the norm; it is the norm. It's what it means to be here, and really I think armed with that bit of information we can march boldly out into the world.

M-LM: It's the medieval notion, Glenn, of quarantine. Despite all our technological advances, we still just have to wash our hands and stay away from each other.

GP: I just, as Paul was talking I remembered, I don't know how I forgot this, but I've been working with Colin Carberry, who I do my screenwriting with. Colin and I have been working on a TV series, an idea, for a number of years, set in Venice during the plagues of the 16th Century. I don't know how that slipped my mind. It's called *Pisa Gavotte*. We've just been – in the new year we had just been gearing up to a draft of the first episode of that, and then this started to come closer and there was that sense in which, as Paul just said, that this is something that has recurred throughout human history. And there was a moment where it seemed, and you hate to say this, but there was a moment where you thought, 'Is the thing that we're working on now particularly interesting and useful?' And then there this other thing where you think, 'Actually, do you know what? This is the last thing we should be doing, or anybody wants, too.' Of course, it's just a piece of fiction. It's a drama that we started thinking about seven to eight years ago, and the moment that we're in will pass and we will still be working on this particular thing. But it was a very curious thing to be writing about Venice in the 16th Century and then see Venice in the 21st Century be one of the first cities to go into lockdown.

M-LM: Lucy, from a writer's point of view, how do you get through something like this? Do you look at it in the eye? Do you say, 'I'm going to write about it'? Do you park it? Does it seep into what you are thinking about, what's percolating through your mind?

LC: Well, like Glenn I have a project that's on hold. It was a drama that I pitched a year and a half ago to the BBC, a radio play. I wrote it – I finished writing it at Christmas time. And it's about a family, a sort of posh, middle-class London family, and civil society has broken down. There's war in Ireland; Scotland's a republic; there's a pandemic in England. And so it starts in the outskirts of Berwick-upon-Tweed in a refugee camp, and they're trying to pay people smugglers to get them across the Scottish border to Stonehaven, from where they hope to get a fishing boat to illegally take them to Scandinavia, because that's where they think they have the best chance of being refugees and of building a new life. And of course you can't record anything at the moment because studios are closed, but they've said that's too much. That's not what people are going to want imminently.

M-LM: Oh no!



LC: So there are these things that – what I'd wanted to capture with that play was the powerless certainties that we live with anyway. How far are we ever away from everything that we take for granted yet being overturned. And my radio play was suggesting, *not that far*. And I think probably, you know, we live – who knows, generation to generation, decade to decade, how much we assume is permanent, is not at all. So I think maybe people are constantly writing about things like that. I was thinking, my son, he's going to be six in a few weeks and he's desperate for a bike so he'll get his bike for his sixth birthday. And, who knows, that's what he'll remember of the pandemic, the same way when people are asked what are their recollections of the Spanish flu or, I've been interviewing people recently about their experiences in the Belfast Blitz and it's lovely hearing their... I was speaking to Glenn's mum, who was saying that it was such a happy time and she remembers playing with her older brother and sunbathing on the air raid shelters, and playing shops, and suddenly people would say there were oranges in Turners, and all the ladies would grab their wicker bags and dash down with the children. And so it's funny. As Paul said, you can't put things on hold. Life goes on. You only get to be six once, and learnt to ride a bike once, and only get to fall in love or whatever it is you're going to be doing – those things are going to go on. I've always been interested in writing that anyway, you know, writing behind or between or...

M-LM: That's beautiful. Glenn?

GP: It was just I remembered – most of my novels are set in Belfast, and most of them have been set in the years from the late 1960s through to the present day. And very often they would be described as stories about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances and after a while I started to think maybe it's just the – not the mayhem of the world, but it's very rare for any human being in the span of our years not to encounter something, whether it's a financial crash or whether it's a pandemic. Who knew that we would live through a pandemic? Whether it's war... and actually that is the ordinary in some sense, and the extraordinary thing is, as Lucy just said there, how two people meet. How extraordinary is that, that two people would meet, would fall in love, be getting on to a bicycle and not falling off repeatedly or eventually managing to go...? All of that extraordinary thing about everyday life is perhaps the way round I would like to see it. Life is extraordinary, and the world and the mayhem that it serves up repeatedly is sadly just the ordinary that we do live with.

M-LM: Paul, your latest collection, your thirteenth, *Frolic and Detour* – if you were to write something now would it be infused by the pandemic, or would you, in your wonderful contrary way, play with it and put it somewhere else? What I'm trying to get at is, should writers address what's happening? It was a question, as you well know, was asked of many Northern Irish poets during the Troubles: should you be the voice? What do you make of that?



PM: I think one shouldn't do anything [laughs]. However, it is inevitable that if one is demi-, semi-conscious in a time, in a place, that that will be reflected in what one writes. I was fascinated to hear Glenn Patterson talking about the fact that he'd been working on that script about Venice. There are those who would say that, somehow, that the place – art, somehow, I don't want to say that it *precedes*, but somehow it's wiser than us. It tells us something. And the fact that he was interested in that particular subject says something to me about the ongoing interest in that, and our ongoing engagement with it. You know, as it happens, I've actually been writing poems, a sequence of poems that refer specifically to the day-to-day life over the last few weeks during this. At some level I've found myself wondering, 'Well wait a minute is it too soon to do this? Is it relevant to do this? Does it matter?' and sort of thinking, well, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. No one's going to have any particular interest in it, probably, anyway, but I might as well be writing about this as anything else...

M-LM: But I disagree – I disagree because...

PM: ...you can write about anything at all, subject matter doesn't matter in a strange way. Sorry, go ahead.

M-LM: I think you should write about it. I think we *all* should write about it. Obviously I'm not a Pulitzer prize-winning poet, but even writing something down – I was talking an historian of the Spanish flu and she says that what she lacks from that time are the journals, are the diaries, are the emotions – tell me how you feel. Are you sleeping? What are you telling – Lucy, what are you telling your children? These are really important things that historians need.

PM: You know I was thinking there, even as you were speaking there on 1918. 1922, of course, one of the great years in literature, 'Wasteland' published that year, you know, is there any mention of the great influenza in 'The Wasteland'? I think not...

M-LM: Okay...

PM: ... certainly nothing directly. You know, maybe indirectly in the sense of a society that was for a moment broken, seemed particularly broken, broken of course through the First World War. Is it referred to directly? Not exactly. But somehow the situation may out in some way. You mentioned Northern Ireland being called upon to speak to various topics. I mean, so much of that has to do, really, with presenting a position on a subject. Is one in favour of a particular position in Northern Irish politics, for example? And it probably doesn't quite apply here, though I think it'll be provocative to find someone writing in favour of COVID-19. That would be the unlikely position, rather than saying, 'Oh this is a terrible thing', saying 'Oh this is actually a great thing. Good for it!'

M-LM: I think we would struggle to find that individual. Lucy, from a mother's perspective, how are you couching it for the children? Mine are teenagers; they have become vampires. They only come out at night, and the older girl is terrified of going out in the street as



though she will get; this virus will just cling to her. How are you helping your young ones through this?

LC: I think – I don't know, I'm not sure that we're doing particularly well. Everything is sort of made up as we go along. We try to let them have little video calls with their friends, but you know my son is five, five and a half, so a bit young for that. He and his friends video-call each other and show each other their Lego that they've built. So we try to keep up contact, but I think the most important thing was, when we really haven't – we've really been trying to stay at home, you know. We've been leaving the flat as little as possible. And it was realising that actually it is really important that we go on a daily walk along the canal, which is just ten minutes from us, to look at the ducklings and the swans' nest. And today the cygnet had hatched. We've been going to see them every day for a couple of weeks, and so finding the ways like that that life is going on seems to be important. My son, today, he had a story – a postcard in the post from Jan Carson, who does her postcard project. Jan's a Belfast writer who every day for a year she wrote a postcard to someone, and today William was overjoyed because Jan sent him a postcard of the Enormous Crocodile, with a story on the back. So I think those tiny parts of connection are important. But for me, going back to the point that Paul was making, about searching for something positive written about COVID-19, I've been really interested for the past few years in contemporary Shamanism, contemporary Shamanic practice. And there's a – she wouldn't even use the word, probably, Shaman, Shamanic practitioner, to describe herself, those are titles given to you by the community rather than you assuming them. But she writes on art and wilderness and Shamanism, art as a sacred practise. And she said actually viruses are our greatest – she is a very interesting [unclear 27:36] person – viruses are our oldest ancestors and so much of our DNA is still made up of viruses, and a virus occurs because it has something to tell us. So maybe COVID-19 is trying to tell us something: there are things that are very fundamentally wrong with the way that I live, we're living our lives. And if we don't listen to them, the same or worse will happen again. And it's interesting to, sort of reading at the fringes, to read people who are already trying to, I suppose, reactively interpret or respond to from traditions that draw on folklore, that draw on myth, that draw on a lot of the practices that have been sidelined or forgotten, that are sort of resurging a bit. I find that very interesting.

M-LM: Well that's very interesting because, you know, a lot of the conversation over the last five-seven minutes has been about wondering what you should do as a writer, but also nature, going and seeing the birth of swans, and nature seems to have absolutely come forward. You talk about Venice, Glenn, and look at how Venice is so peaceful without all the tourists there. We talk about the lack of air pollution.

GP: I would have been there right now, kind of trying to do some – honestly I'd have been researching, standing at the bar, that would have been research, I'd have been researching, really.



M-LM: But life, in a way, there's something incredible about what Lucy has just said about that, the Shaman thinking, that we are being warned. We are being told 'stop, adjust to life; adjust to this new normal', that we call it.

LC: I think it's so important, especially when there's so much news and information being funnelled at you and you're being told to react this way or not to react – it's always so necessary to try to stop and not, not think something without deliberately – you, know, to choose the angle at which you look at something deliberately is important, or to be conscious of what you're assuming and why, I think.

GP: One thing I – to go back to that question about what we should be doing, whether as writers we should be doing anything particular – I wonder whether actually what you do is, it'll come through in ways that you might not expect. Lucy said, she was writing about the Second World War; she was chatting to my mum about my mum's experiences as a child during the Blitz, and in some ways what Lucy's talking about and writing about at the moment is very similar to what we are living through. Something that you can see coming towards you, something that overtakes the entire society for a period of time, a period of grave uncertainty, a period of terror. And so this novel that Lucy's talking about is, although it's set 80 years ago, is actually possibly going to be very informed by what's happening now. There might not be a better time to be writing a book that's set in Belfast during the Blitz. The thing that I've been working on for the last while, although I didn't think of it as being particularly about the present moment, undoubtedly is. You know, the things that are interesting me, the things that I find myself preoccupied by – when I look at it, when I stand back next year, when I hope it's finished, will say something very clearly to me. Whether they're as obvious as writing a diary or a journal of this particular moment I don't know, but it'll certainly be all the way through it.

LC: Sorry, I always think of Henry James, his brilliant essay 'The Art of Fiction', and he describes the extent to which a writer in the world – he had this image of a spider's web, you know, nothing is lost, no impulse is lost upon the writer, and so everything, if you're alive and in the world and attuned to the world, you can't help but be writing about the present. You can't help it, you're taking it all in.

M-LM: Paul, can I—I don't know whether you've got the poetry in front of you, but what are these poems? I mean, this is a sneak preview of new work, but what are you talking about? Are you having weird dreams? Are you going mad looking for hand-sanitiser or what? What is that is in these poems.

PM: Well these poems are really – they have to do with the day to day. They're journalistic in many ways, and they... just hold on one second, I'm just going to get up for a minute.

M-LM: That's great, because I'm actually thinking I've got a bird perched at the top of my chimney who's tweeting away like mad, and my daughter's started playing 'Havana' there on the piano, so God knows what's coming through in this lockdown.

PM: Sorry about that.



M-LM: No, that's great – so you've got them?

PM: You know funnily enough, I'm just going to read a little extract from [cross-talk, unclear 33:22] use it.

'At the end of our driveway a standard yellow recycling bin brings back the idea of a future to which we once subscribed. Even as I pine for a past in which the use of straw for cattle fodder was a topic of interest to the serious mind, it's a past in which one constant is some form of pestilence. At present all I can think of is the burial mound once known as Plaguey Hill that dominates Friar's Bush Graveyard in Belfast. The yellow of that bin is more the yellow of bog asphodel than the yellow of forsythia and firs. In New York City they've worked hand over fist to set up a system of field hospitals. Now there's been a flattening of the death toll from the novel coronavirus.'

So that's actually a little sonnet and it's one of a sequence of sonnets. That's the closing one and they're all sort of connected. So oddly enough Plaguey Hill and Friar's Bush Graveyard there in Belfast, not too far, as you know, from where the Belfast Book Festival was going to be held at the Crescent Arts Centre, is somehow looming up there.

GH: Paul, the piece that I've started working on oddly began inside the Crescent Arts Centre, one Friday at the very very end of February. And I was looking out through the window and I was down at the Seamus Heaney Centre Presents evening that we do down there, and I was looking out the window onto King William Park – you'll know it Lucy, you'll know it too, Marie-Louise – and I started thinking about King William Park, smallest park in Belfast, and just beyond that is a maternity hospital, Malone Place Maternity Hospital, which is where I was born. And I took a photograph from the window of the Crescent that evening, and looked at it the next morning and started to write just about what was in the photograph. And then, as the days have gone on, the weeks have gone on, I've got nothing else to go to except this photograph with the reflections into the Crescent looking out into King William Park and all that lies beyond, and I'm trying to mine that one image to see how much I can get, what it gives me.

PM: In that regard, of course, one could write about King William Park for the rest of one's live.

GP: Well, I think, I hope... may it be long!

[laughter]

PM: Well it's true, but I don't know if one would want to. One could probably write about COVID-19 for the rest of one's life. Whether or not one would want to, directly, is another matter.

LC: I was looking—I've got a history of Friar's Bush somewhere very close on one of these shelves by my desk, because I was terrified of it as a child, because I learned that all the victims of the plague, the bubonic plague, had been buried there and they could never use the graveyard again because they were worried they would dig it up and release the plague back into the world. And it's interesting, because you think we have these memories that



are passed on in folklore and story, but do we also – are these fears also somehow passed on in our DNA, all these ways that science somehow catches up with what stories know instinctively. That terror! I haven't thought of Friar's Bush in a while, but I feel that terror. I've had a stack of books on it. I've never been able to go there because of that childish terror that if you open it, if you go in, something will be released.

M-LM: We should explain to a wider audience that it is a graveyard in the centre of Belfast, very close to the site of the Ulster Museum, and at one point in time, the café in the Ulster Museum would look out onto the graveyard and there are – when I think of it, I think of going in and getting some sort of flat Coca Cola, having gone and looked at the dinosaur. And then going and getting this, long before we had coffee, culture and cappuccinos and all that, and looking out and being terrified. But when you walk into it, it is a really beautiful, beautiful graveyard. But the terror, as you say. I also wonder as well, the fact that, I remember my mother saying to me 'Wash your hands', always being told to wash my hands. 'Don't sit somewhere, you'll get cold.' That sense, that fear of damp rising. You have to think, was that said to my mother by her mother, who came through the 1918 flu? Are my children now going to say to their children, 'wash your hands', and you know, do we just constantly pass this on?

PM: I suspect we do, and it's a very good piece of advice. Though of course the other side of it is that if we're not exposed to germs, microbes of various kinds, we're in deep trouble also, so we have to find a happy medium between opening up the small pox burial mound, and just steering slightly clear of it.

GP: Going back to what Lucy was saying there and what Paul was talking about, Friar's Bush and the plague burial there. Our Pisa Gavorte [39:47], the Venice-set drama – Colin Carberry came across a news article eight years ago about burials in Venice, and they'd discovered that some of the plague victims had been buried with stones in their mouths, and there was a thought that the plague was, there was something vampiric about it. So this was to stop vampires. So you put the stone into the mouth because the bodies, their gums receded, so every time they opened them up, they looked as though they had these incredible teeth. So some of the superstitions from that period seem bizarre: they were burning dogs because they thought dogs were plague carriers. But then you look at the burning of masts and 5G, and you look at the stories that are circulating at the moment, maybe we're not so far at all removed from the superstitions as well as the healthy advice of earlier times. So again, that sense that what we're experiencing at this moment is something that collapses history. And we realise of course that the people who lived 400-500 years ago were in every particular like ourselves, coping as best they could with the information at hand. Who knows what people will make 500 years from now about our behaviour at this moment, how ludicrous we might seem to them, how completely sensible we might seem. It's very hard to know what we're going to look like. They might not understand us, and I think it's one of those



moments where something opens up and you do recognise that essentially as human beings we haven't changed an awful lot.

M-LM: Can I pause the conversation? Because as part of the Belfast Book Festival, which has now been cancelled because of coronavirus and is now part of the Big Book Weekend, we've got a unique position here. I've got three patrons of the festival, three artists from Northern Ireland and it's a chance to talk about other writers who have come on to your radar in recent times. And within the festival it was called Patrons' Picks. So I would like to just briefly go around the three of you, and I'll start in London first, with Lucy, just to namecheck the writers that you have chosen. Because we've got a tremendous platform here now, of a much bigger audience than we would have had sitting with each other in the Crescent Arts Centre to celebrate the writing. So Lucy, who have you picked?

LC: My first Patrons' Pick is a Chinese-born writer called Yan Ge, and she met and fell in love with an Irishman in New York – this is a very modern story – and moved to Ireland where she has been raising her son. She's currently living in Norwich. And I discovered her work. She's a bit of a superstar in China, from a literary dynasty, a very famous family, but since she moved to Ireland she started writing in English. And I read one story that she published online, and it had such a spark to it, such a snap, I took a big chance on her and commissioned a story from her when I was editing *Being Various*, the Faber anthology, and boy did she deliver. She wrote this brilliant, brilliant story called 'How I Fell in Love with the Brief and Well-documented Life of Alexander Whelan', and it's about a young woman, Chinese-born but who's moved to Ireland. Her real name is Xiaohan, but she calls herself Claire Collins from Tipperary, and she meets this young man and has a very brief connection with him. He takes his own life that night, first opening paragraph. The rest of the story is her stalking him online, everything he left behind, trying to work out what this moment of connection is. And there's this real gut-punch to the story because you discover what you think you've been reading is her obsession with him. What you've *actually* been reading is her trying to decide whether or not she's going to live or die. So Yan's story is – there's such a new energy coming into Irish fiction at the moment. We've always looked at the diaspora in terms of Irish-born writers going elsewhere, but we're at a point now where so many writers like Melatu Uche Okorie – who's another writer, very interesting – writers who are coming to Ireland from other places. So I was really looking forward to talking to Yan, particularly when it looked as if the COVID crisis might just be over! What wishful thinking that was! But on the Chinese version of WhatsApp very early on she was saying to people, something's coming, we've got to— things are being hushed up, you know, she was hearing all these rumours and sort of trying to translate them all for friends. So that would have been a very interesting extra strand. My other pick is a young writer called Lucy Sweeney Byrne who published her first collection with Banshee Press, called *Paris Syndrome*, recently. I feel particularly sorry for the debut writers. You know, my own book is delayed a



year, but that's fine, I know the way it works. Especially debut writers, that build up to your first first first book I think it's really tough...

M-LM: It's gutting.

LC: It's really tough, it's really gutting. I was looking forward to Lucy, and possibly also her mother, Cathy Sweeney published her first collection of stories with Stinging Fly, and so in a kind of provocative way I really wanted to have mothers and daughters writing about each other.

M-LM: Okay. Well thank you, London Calling... I've now started to channel my Eurovision compere. Now we move to New York. Mr Paul Muldoon, what are your Patrons' Picks?

PM: Well I again am disappointed not to be able to introduce, and have a conversation with, and hear reading, two fabulous new writers: Dawn Watson, a poet, and Scott McKendry.

One of the great things I think one realises is that if one's very lucky, one is just part of a process. One does one's little bit as a scribbler oneself. I'm not sure what the most rewarding metaphor might be; I don't know if it's 'hands on the baton', I'm not sure if it's that 'someone picks up the baton' – actually I do know, I have a much more useful way of thinking about it, and it's not unrelated to some of the things we've been talking about earlier, about what's in our DNA and maybe even how a virus works. The baton finds the next person. The baton reaches out and says 'Hey, will you take me for a while?' I mean, it's one of the great things to know, at any stage in one's career, about the writing business. So it's great to see these rising stars on the Irish scene.

LC: I like to think of it as a flaming baton, a flaming torch, you know, the passing on the flame. I like to think of people who sparked something for me, or times when mine has dwindled very low someone has helped to relight it.

GP: I think if it was a flaming baton I would inevitably be holding it the wrong way up. Round like *that* say.

PM: Quite quite quite!

L-LM: Well, with a fire blanket close at hand, Glenn Patterson, what are your Patrons' Picks?

GP: Well I was again really really looking forward to talking to Niamh Campbell, whose novel *This Happy* was to be published – is to be published, I think, still – in June, and to Susannah Dickey, whose first novel was, and again I hope it still is, coming out in July. A novel called *Tennis Lessons*. And actually Susannah Dickie was a student at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queens, just up the road from the Crescent Arts Centre, where I'm the director, and actually she's a poet.

PM: She's a poet also, but she's going over to the other side.

GP: She's *coming* to the other side, Paul, is the way we like to think of that.

M-LM: The dark side!

GP: She's released a couple of pamphlets, one with the very brilliant Lifeboat Press – Paul published a pamphlet with them just last... was that September, Paul?

PM: Something like that, yes. It was thrilling to be part of that.



GP: A press run by two PhD students at the Seamus Heaney Centre. So there is such an amount of very very good writing at the minute here, and as Lucy said it's writing by people who were born here, people who have come here, so it's a particularly good time. We're just going to have to do this. I know there are lots more people watching this, *perhaps*, than would be sitting in the Crescent, but I really really really want to be in the Crescent, sitting on the stage, talking to Niamh and to Susannah Dickey about their books.

M-LM: I could talk to you guys for much, much longer.

GP: I know that!

M-LM: You know that, but life beckons, and the sun is shining outside, and I have enjoyed every single minute of it. Lucy Caldwell, thank you for your time. Paul Muldoon, thank you as always for your time. Glenn Patterson, thank you so much. It has been a real pleasure being part of this virtual Big Book Weekend. Thank you all.

LC and PM: Thank you.

GP: Thank you! We never got to talk about your kitten, but another time.

M-LM: Well, Toast the cat went walkabout from my house, and whose house in all of East Belfast did he end up in?

GP: So I found this cat, and it had a collar with a number on it. So I dialled the number, and as I was dialling the number I was thinking, 'Marie-Louise's number has just come up on my phone. Why is that?' And I had her... when you said Toast the cat, I thought something serious had happened to it!

M-LM: He's got many, many lives, but obviously he has a literary bent as well. Thank you all and take care.

GP, PM, LC: Thank you, bye.