



Friday 8th May

MAGGIE O'FARRELL IN CONVERSATION WITH DAMIAN BARR

DAMIAN: Maggie, normally, I'd be interviewing you, we'd be together somewhere lovely at some festival or whatever. But as we're both locked down in our different places. And I'm very much loving your wallpaper, it's very nice.

MAGGIE: I'm looking at all the pots and your very fine – is that a cheese plant?

DAMIAN: It's a fiddle fern. It's not a fiddle fern it's like it. It's very nice, isn't it?

MAGGIE: It's beautiful.

DAMIAN: I know.

MAGGIE: It's sort of healthy-looking and fecund.

DAMIAN: It is. It's been recently polished with a mixture of milk and water, so it actually smells slightly like a three-year old who's just been sick.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]



DAMIAN: But it is lovely, and beautiful-looking. And also admire my bookends. How nice they are. Look, let me get them for you.

MAGGIE: You'll have to bring them closer. It's just a blur.

DAMIAN: Look at that.

MAGGIE: It's a Viking boat!

DAMIAN: Yeah. How nice is that?

MAGGIE: That's amazing.

DAMIAN: Isn't it lovely.

MAGGIE: Is it really heavy?

DAMIAN: It's really murder-weapon heavy. It could really finish you off. And during lockdown who knows what uses the bookends might come to. But you and I have both had books come out during lockdown so... And you did the Twitter takeover with Will. But what was it like? You wanted to write Hamnet – I have my lovely proof copy here.

MAGGIE: Ahhh.



DAMIAN: For ever. And then you wait forever and then it comes out and you're locked down with it.

MAGGIE: It is odd. No, it's really weird actually. That's why it's really nice doing this. That Kit has put this together. Because as you know, I mean obviously I think you're out and about in the world a lot more than I am... [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN That's fair.

MAGGIE: But there is that thing, you know, that you spend however long it is. You say in your book, in the notes to your book that took you five years, and so imagine if you were an ordinary mortal, and you were locked away for five years, not like you've been on TV, y'know, gadding about...

DAMIAN: [LAUGHS]

MAGGIE: And at the end of that five years you get to go out and you get to meet people, and you get to kind of talk to readers, and you get to talk to audiences, and other writers, and you know it is something you look forward to, I think.

DAMIAN: Yeah.



MAGGIE: It's great going to festivals and meeting readers, cos you often... people ask questions that you'd never thought of. I don't know if you've ever found that.

DAMIAN: Oh, loads, loads.

MAGGIE: And also that kind of idea where you get into y'know a kind of dialogue and people can tell you what they've been reading and what they love, and... It's that that I miss actually more than anything. You know, you have that expectation after three years sitting in your room talking to your imaginary friends, and you can actually go out and interact with real people! But it doesn't happen. I'm really missing that a lot. Just that kind of face-to-face meetings with people.

DAMIAN: I can't remember was it Johnson who said, he always said the clever thing that, you know, it's a writer who begins a book and a reader finishes it.

MAGGIE: Yeah.

DAMIAN: And I love when I've been touring with this novel people come up to me and tell me their stories, their families' experiences of the Boer War, their contemporary experiences. Some of the stories are so brilliant and interesting that I sometimes feel that I wish I could do the book tour, and then incorporate the stories into the book, because they're so good. I met a woman in Australia, in Adelaide, whose father fought in the Boer War. I mean that's... just wow. Actual dad.



MAGGIE: That's incredible.

DAMIAN: Yeah, she was incredible. So I definitely miss that thing of getting out and hearing from readers about what they think. It's not so much about the ego – it is partly about the ego if we're honest – but it's more about what they bring to it. The excitement they bring to it.

MAGGIE: Yes, certainly.

DAMIAN: It's all new to them, but for us, we know every sentence.

MAGGIE: Yeah. But it's also that thing of being in the environment of a book festival, and I've often found that sometimes I will wander into an event, and I don't know anything about the person who's on stage, and something will kind of hit, and connect, and I'll just think, God, I want to read this book. And also sometimes you go and see someone because you love their book, and maybe they're paired with somebody else, and you think my God this person's incredible, I have to read that.

DAMIAN: Yeah.



MAGGIE: It's that kind of –

DAMIAN: Discoverability.

MAGGIE: Yeah, exactly. And just being in that environment, and lots of different ideas, and lots of different people's books, and just the idea that people have worked, and crafted this thing for so long, and then they're going to present it, and if the book reaches you it's an amazing moment.

DAMIAN: I remember, that happened to me at Hay once, when I went to see Edmund de Waal, and it was his first ever reading from *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*, and he'd never done a reading, and he was really nervous, and it was one of the really tiny tents. And I remember sitting there looking around at all these people, and you just had this feeling that this book is going to be huge, and this story is going to somehow change my life in some way.

MAGGIE: Yeah.

DAMIAN: And I went there because I couldn't get into another talk.
[LAUGHS]

MAGGIE: You see that's it right there. What's the best thing you've ever seen at a book festival? Do you have one that's a favourite?

DAMIAN: What, that I hadn't planned, or just my favourite ever?



MAGGIE: Favourite ever.

DAMIAN: I think my favourite ever was seeing Alice Walker at the World of Wonder women's showcase in South Bank.

MAGGIE: Oh my God! Was she incredible?

DAMIAN: She was. She was being interviewed by Mariella, and it was this thing of... she was a little bit Vanessa Redgrave in that way of having become so loved and so grand that she wasn't quite on her level. And I'm fine with that. I don't need her to be like me. Y'know she was just so... Her thoughts were at such a level, and she every now and then managed to come down and sort of share them with us, and then she disappeared again. And I asked her a question about chickens.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: Because she'd written this mad book about chickens, which precisely nobody has read. I think I'm the only reader. She wrote a book about chickens, and her other key interest – Michael Jackson.

MAGGIE: No.

DAMIAN: Yeah! It's a mad book. You need to read it, it's mad.

MAGGIE: I'm gonna read it.



DAMIAN: And in this book she reveals that, because she keeps chickens, she reveals that they were very important to her because as a child she had a really traumatic moment. This incident happened. She never said what it was. But chickens were there, in the yard, in the house, when this moment happened. And she's forever associated them with kind of rescue and comfort. I asked this question, which made people laugh, because why is this person asking about chickens?

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: And then she gave this kind of *incredible* answer. So that's mine. Who's yours?

MAGGIE: Well I think it was two things. The most amazing event that I ever saw was Margaret Atwood interviewing Alice Munro [LAUGHS] I know!! I know!! Honestly, it was standing room only, everybody was just crammed in. It was just incredible. But the most amazing thing about it was, you'd think it would be these two kind of almost Greek goddesses up there on the stage.

DAMIAN: Yeah.



MAGGIE: I mean, just the idea of being in the same room as either one of them was astonishing. But the two together was just... But the amazing thing was, they were obviously very, very old friends, and so they just nattered. It was a bit like being in a cafe watching to ladies have a cup of tea, just having a chat and a gossip. And I think it was more that than anything else that was incredible. The other thing I saw once when I was on a book tour in Canada, in Vancouver, at the Vancouver Literary Festival, and I'd never, ever seen or heard of Alistair MacLeod.

DAMIAN: Uh-huh.

MAGGIE: This kind of Scottish/Canadian writer.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: He just... I was in this thing and there was lots of writers and he just stood up and read this story. I suspect it's based on his own family history, about these people leaving the Highlands, and getting on a really small boat, and sailing to Canada. And it was just, honestly, it was one of those moments when ice was creeping up my spine. And he described the dog leaping off the beach, and the dog's being held back by people, and the dog swims towards the boat. And half-way through they're telling the dog to go back, and half-way through they say no, no, come on, come on, and they get the dog, and the dog just swims and swims because it can't bear to be left



behind. And they get it on to the boat and they take it to Canada with them. And honestly it was so incredible.

MAGGIE (cont.): And I went out and bought every single thing he'd ever written that I could lay my hands on. And that was one of the best things... It was one of the best readings I've ever seen, actually, seeing him do that. It was amazing.

DAMIAN: I love that we get to have these moments. I think it's one of the real benefits, the unsung benefits, of going on a book tour is that you get to go and have these interactions, whether you're a member of the audience, and whether it's in the green room, or whether you turn around in the queue and you're like *oh my God it's...*

MAGGIE: Yeah.

DAMIAN: And you're, you know... Was it last year at the Edinburgh Festival when I had the malfunction with my trousers?
[LAUGHS]

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: Do you not remember?

MAGGIE: Yeah!

DAMIAN: The button popped off my fly!

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]



DAMIAN: And you had a wee pin.

MAGGIE: A safety pin? Yeah. Because that's what mum's have in their bag. Also, you know what, I once did... I once went on stage... I had the worst malfunction on stage in France, when I did a reading, and it was full of all these incredibly elegant Parisienne people. And I got up there, and I was wearing this kind of vintage dress, which I love, it's navy and it's got this beautiful 1940s polka-dot collar. And I thought yeah, y'know, I feel like I can hold my own sartorially in this Parisienne thing [LAUGHS] And when I got down off the stage thinking *okay, that wasn't too bad*, I realised that my dress was unzipped all the way.

DAMIAN: [LAUGHS]

MAGGIE: All down the side! Yeah, showing, y'know, the whole lot: pants, bra...

DAMIAN: They probably thought that was the chicest thing they'd ever seen.

MAGGIE: No. It wasn't a good look. [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: [LAUGHS]

MAGGIE: I did think why didn't anybody say to me, y'know – your dress is completely undone? [LAUGHS] Everyone can see your underwear! Awful. Anyway, ever since that night I never travel without a safety pin. But I'm very glad it came in useful, see?



- DAMIAN: It was very useful, and I did also appreciate you going down on bended knee to apply it carefully to my crotch, which is I think the moment that Val McDermid walked into the tent. [LAUGHS]
- MAGGIE: It could have been terribly misconstrued.
- DAMIAN: Horribly misconstrued!
- MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] Also a microphone malfunctioned that night as well. Do you remember that?
- DAMIAN: That's right! People still talk to me about that. So... For those who don't know Maggie's written this *incredible* memoir called *I Am, I Am, I Am*, about her many brushes with death – many more, in fact, than she put in the book. I think there are seventeen in the book. But anyway... And, it's heart-racing. And I was interviewing her with the microphone on my tie, and I could hear this noise from another tent, and I thought *how could you be so insensitive to programme drums? Why is somebody drumming at the same time as I'm interviewing Maggie O'Farrell?* And it was the *ba-boom ba-boom ba-boom* of my heart beat being picked up from the microphone.
- MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]
- DAMIAN: It took me so long to work it out! And you.
- MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] There was a moment where we both looked at each other and kind of... [LAUGHS]



DAMIAN: Amazing... We should talk about writing history.

MAGGIE: Yes.

DAMIAN: And what that's like.

MAGGIE: So we both wrote a memoir – not at the same time – and then we followed it by a novel, and both the novels we wrote are inspired by real events.

DAMIAN: Mmm.

MAGGIE: It's quite strange, isn't it. And both of them are about the death of a boy.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: The deaths of two boys. The premature death of young boys.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: I mean, they couldn't be more different in a way, both our novels, and our memoirs, obviously, but there are kind of huge links between them.

DAMIAN: There are links between them. And actually, I think, also if anybody reads – this is the first book of yours that I read after the memoir, and I read your novel differently having read the memoir.



DAMIAN (cont.):

And I also think, for me, my novel – it's my first novel – but also I think if you'd read my memoir and you read the novel, you can see it's different situations, but it's the same story: mothers and sons and survival and love. And when you read *Hamnet* and then you've just read *I Am, I Am, I Am*, there are these moments of heart-stopping honesty in the care for children, the worry about children, intense motherly love... I mean, it's... You may not have intended to, but I think when you wrote *I Am, I Am, I Am* you definitely handed people the keys to unlocking other stuff in your writing. Definitely.

MAGGIE:

I think that the exciting thing but also the risk about writing a memoir, is that you are handing people a kind of insight into your life.

DAMIAN:

Yeah.

MAGGIE:

But it's funny, in a sense I think memoir if you're the writer of it obviously it's an autobiography rather than a biography, you do have control over what you can put in it, obviously, what you can reveal and what you can conceal. I think what struck me actually... Because after I read *You Will Be Safe Here*, I actually went back and re-read your memoir, and it was really odd, because in a sense I feel that your memoir, *Maggie and Me*, is almost about – I think we should have called this session Maggie and Me, really.



- DAMIAN: Really we should have done! We should call every time we get together for a cup of coffee Maggie and Me. I mean, why wouldn't we?
- MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] We are, we are, we are.
- DAMIAN: We are, we are, we are.
- MAGGIE: In a sense it's funny, I felt as though the whole arc of your memoir, in a sense ends at the title for your novel.
- DAMIAN: Oh my goodness, I hadn't thought of it like that.
- MAGGIE: There's a sense about this little boy, I almost can't bear to call him little Damien because I can't bear to think it was you that went through those things [LAUGHS] and I know it was. But he's just looking for security. He's just looking for somewhere to feel safe. And he really doesn't. He's under so much threat, this boy and this adolescent. For various reasons, you know, familial and societal. And somehow he – I'm going to say *he*, even though I know it's you – he reaches adulthood, there's almost a sense when he gets to Brighton, and it almost feels as if somebody could have said to you *You'll be safe here. This is it, you're going to be okay now.* Oh, I'm getting a bit tearful! I've got something in my eye. [LAUGHS]
- DAMIAN: [LAUGHS]
- MAGGIE: When I see your title it's almost as if, and now I'm okay, and *now* I can write this. Now I'm released from my



childhood and my adolescence I can be who I need to be, and this is who I am. I'm going to write this book, and I'm going to write about Raymond Buys.

DAMIAN: Well, I mean I think I could only have written that novel from a place of safety. It was so endangering personally to go into those places. So for those who don't know, this is the paperback that Maggie is talking about.

MAGGIE: It's a beautiful cover.

DAMIAN: It is a beautiful cover. And what's really crazy is, this boy on the paperback looks just like me at that age. I mean, when I showed it to Mike, my husband, he was like *Well where did they get a picture of you?* I mean he looks exactly like me. The back of the head, the shape of it is exactly the same. It's so weird. And he's this vulnerable boy.

MAGGIE: Something about the shoulder blades makes him look very vulnerable.

DAMIAN: Yes, it is, it is the shoulder blades. Exactly. It's truncated bird wings. It's exactly that. And this is based on a boy... The contemporary part of the story is about a boy who's sent, as you know, to this contemporary camp by his mum and his step father to be toughened up. And it's run by soldiers who say *we make men out of boys*. And these are based on real, contemporary camps, and a boy has been sent to one of these camps at the age of 15 and murdered, and his murder was absolutely horrific. He was



so disfigured and tortured that his mother didn't recognise him when she found him in that hospital. You know, you see the pictures of the boy – I wrote a big article about it in *the Guardian*. You look at him and he looks just like somebody from Belsen, doesn't he.

DAMIAN (cont.):

He's bald, his arms are so thin, his joints are thicker than his bones. I looked at him, and then I looked at the boy who went into this camp, who was beautiful and alive – he looks just like a boy from my own childhood, a friend of mine that I had, and that was my emotional connection, was that this boy who's been destroyed looks like a boy that I knew, that I had loved. And it was all that contemporary stuff that led me back to the Boer war, that led me to what the British did, inventing the concentration camps where more women and children died than soldiers died in the whole war. And so the whole terrain of that book, and the fact that it's called *You'll Be Safe Here*, when patently nobody is... You've made me realise in our conversation just now that I couldn't have written this novel in the place that I was when I was 28, when I started writing my memoir, because I didn't yet feel psychologically safe or protected in myself. I had to write the memoir to get through those feelings, to get to the point of *being* safe enough to put myself in a situation as a writer that's unsafe.

MAGGIE:

Hmmm.

DAMIAN:

And that's something that I've just realised now. But I think it shows you what you have to do as a writer, where



you have to put yourself. But I wanted to talk to you about *Hamnet*, because when you told me – well you only told me when you were just about finishing it.... I know you've written history in the sense of the early 20th Century, but this is history with a capital H. In fact, a *very big* capital H.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: Capital-H history. And it's 1596, and there in the notes you say you'd wanted to write this book since you were a girl. So what made you want to write it, and did you write the book that you thought you wanted to write?

MAGGIE: Well I wanted to write because when I was doing my Scottish highers, and what was I 16, coming up to 17, and we were studying *Hamlet* the play, and it is really a play – there are huge elements of it that will appeal to a slightly dreamy adolescent like I was. Because *Hamlet* is. I went back and read the play obviously when I was writing the book, and I hadn't read it for quite a while, and it was so odd to me because I remember when I was at university reading about all these theories by scholars about how old is *Hamlet*? Is he 30? Is he 25? Y'know, how old is he supposed to be? Having had my own kids – and I've got a teenage son – and I just thought *he's 15*. He's 15 or 16.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: It's so specific. It seemed like such a specific – what we would now call a developmental stage. [LAUGHS] I mean



everything about him. He's wearing black, he's very gloomy, and he just seems like this young –

DAMIAN: Self-obsessed.

MAGGIE: Who's been pulled into this adult world that he has no comprehension of. And there's murder and incest, and his mother marrying again, and his father's dead. And he's just caught up in this maelstrom of adult behaviour that he doesn't really understand at all.

DAMIAN: Hmm.

MAGGIE: Anyway, so when I was whatever I was, 16, he just really got under my skin.

DAMIAN: Did you fancy him?

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] Did I fancy him?

DAMIAN: Did you, though?

MAGGIE: I don't think I did, no. I think I just wanted to be him, actually.

DAMIAN: You wanted to be him.

MAGGIE: I wanted to be him. Or I felt that I was him, in a sense. I don't think it was a romantic thing. It was more a kind of fellow soul. It was like a Cathy/Heathcliff for me anyway!



DAMIAN: Okay. So you felt themed by him and his great pain in all of that.

MAGGIE: He's like my brother or my twin, perhaps. And so I had this absolutely amazing English teacher called Mr Henderson, and he just mentioned in passing that Shakespeare had had a son who was called Hamnet who died several years before the play was written. And even then I just thought well that seems extraordinary. And then I studied literature at university, and I read all these biographies and criticism about Shakespeare, and you realise he's such a mysterious person.

MAGGIE (cont.): For all this incredible output and work that we have, there's so little we know about him. And all these huge biographies, 500 pages, they're all kind of strung together – brilliantly so – from this tiny little scant number of facts that we have about him. And it just seemed to me that we know so little about him but calling a play – probably his most famous tragic hero – after your dead son, seems like an extraordinary act. It's so exposing. And it speaks enormous volumes of the grief he must have felt for that. The loss of that boy. And the idea that... You know I remember looking at the time frame of it and thinking *Hamnet* the boy would've been 15 when he wrote this play. And obviously Hamnet has a twin sister, Judith, and so you have this constant visual reminder of his twin. And it seemed so likely to me that he had reimagined this boy, his own boy, he'd brought him back to life and called him by his name. Because, of course, they are the same name and Elizabethan spelling was so unstable. I don't



know how you felt about tackling the story. Because I felt great trepidation handling the lives of real people in fiction.

DAMIAN: Yep.

MAGGIE: These people in most cases have been dead for four hundred years. And how did you find it? Because it's a massive responsibility as a novelist, to take a real life and pass it into fiction.

DAMIAN: I found it incredibly difficult to even give myself permission to do it. At the beginning I felt very bounded by memoir and journalism, and this idea of truth and facts.

DAMIAN (cont.): And what I quickly realised was this boy's mother in real life feels responsible for the death of her son. I don't think she is responsible, but she feels responsible for the death of her son. She's never going to be able to tell me the truth of it. None of the men who ran this place, and who never admitted guilt but are in jail, they're never going to tell me the truth of it. So I had to try and ask different questions. And that's when it started to become a novel. I just thought I can't answer all these questions, so I'm having to make stuff up, and also I'm having to ask different questions, which are why did these contemporary camps exist in this place and this time? What is it about this country, what is it about its history? And so definitely I felt a sense of responsibility.



MAGGIE: Did you ever think about writing non-fiction? Did you begin thinking it was going to be a novel, or did you begin thinking it was journalism?

DAMIAN: It was just an obsession to begin with. It wasn't ever a writing project. It was just I wanted to know what had happened to this boy. I was just following the trial online obsessively. And then it was taking up so much time I thought maybe I should write something about it to kind of justify my time on it. And eventually it became a novel. It wasn't like I was looking for an idea for a novel. It's not what you had, which was a question: why did Shakespeare write this play? Why did he bring this boy back to life? Who was the boy that he brought back to life? And all the questions that then unfolded in your novel once you started to create that world, which I'm sure you didn't have to begin with. But this was a series of one question leading to another.

DAMIAN (cont.): And what I had to do with it was create a beginning and an end. So I begin with that story of the Boer War and the English arriving and setting fire to these barns and smoke rising on the horizon. But, y'know, I could have started with the previous Boer War, or I could've started with earlier colonisation. It's like how long is a piece of string? And I wonder how you... Because I know there isn't much history about Shakespeare the man, but *endless* history about the period, and about the work of theatre and drama in that place and that time. Professor Stanley Wells and people like this, they spent their entire lives in this world. How do you *nimbly*, it seems to me, go into the



world and get enough of what you need from it and come out with your story without getting bogged down in all the history?

MAGGIE: I think I deliberately swerved away from the idea of sitting down at my desk and thinking *and now I shall begin my historical capital-H novel*. I couldn't really do that at all. I suppose it was just reading... I suppose I just tried to approach it as any novel. I tried to forget its historical past. And it did involve a lot of research. There's so much you need to know.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: But then you have to edit it out, I think.

DAMIAN: Totally. A hundred per cent. Absolutely. Yeah.

MAGGIE: You have to use the tiniest tip of the iceberg, with all the foundation underneath. Because there's nothing worse, I think, than reading historical novels where you feel the writer's just wanting to show you that they've done all their homework, and they're shovelling all this information. And I feel like saying to them if you want to write a PhD, just please write one, but I don't want to read it. [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: No, no. I feel the same way. It's like some kind of terrible over-stuffed sausage. I can't deal with it. I know that when we spoke about this book before, when you



launched it at the Salon and that was your first live event, and it turned out to be your *only* live event.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: But we talked about how you bring to life the house, and you bring to life Stratford Upon Avon, which I think now is a curious delightful place in lots of ways, but with Stratford Upon Avon you bring to life the house the family live in with the grandparents, how close and observed they are by the community around them. But the domestic interior, you describe the chairs and the softness of the wood... Did you spend a lot of time in those houses? And how different are they? Or similar? I mean have they been National Trusty chintzified or are they as they were?

MAGGIE: They're not at all. Especially the one on Henley Street, the birthplace is pretty much as it was.

DAMIAN: Really.

MAGGIE: There have been various extensions to it but it's almost kind of magical really because as I was saying there's so little about Shakespeare that is known. So many people have searched for his library, for example, because he obviously had a really extensive library that's probably annotated, but no one's ever found it. And all his letters. Hardly anything exists. There's only I think six examples of his signature, which is extraordinary.



DAMIAN: That's extraordinary.

MAGGIE: Yeah. And there is a theory that he would have had this library, but it may have been destroyed in the Great Fire of London. Which would make historical sense, but no one knows. Given all that, it seems absolutely astonishing – jaw-dropping, actually – that you can walk into the house where he was born, stand in the room where he ate his breakfast, stare at the chamber which he shared with his brothers. It's amazing that it's been preserved and saved, really. From everything. It is a really strange place. Stratford isn't... All the layout of the streets is the same. You can look at old Tudor maps and the streets are the same, and they've all got names like Sheep Lane. You can see where all the little guildsmen would have had their stalls, and you can imagine the market. It's not a big leap of the imagination. The things that's very different, I think, is Anne Hathaway's cottage.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: What they call that. Because in her day it would have just been one room. It would have just had a fireplace in the middle and no chimney, and it was obviously a lot more rustic than it is now. Now it's been on a thousand chocolate boxes and jigsaws [LAUGHS]. But it was her brother who extended it. It was Bartholomew. Yeah.

DAMIAN: Before we talk about her, because I do want to talk about her at length, because I love her and am obsessed by her, let's just talk a wee bit more about him for a minute,



because you never mention him by name. And I realised this when I was looking at my proof, you never say *William Shakespeare*, it's the glover's son, later it's Agnes' lover, it's this that and the next thing. But I noticed when I opened today that you do say '*For Will*'

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: Which is like your husband, but is there another level?

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: Is there another level of textual operation. No, no, it's just for Will. But it's the only time you see his name in the whole thing! Why did you not use his name?

MAGGIE: I was going to write it to, my husband's initials are WS, weirdly, and for a while it was WS, and my editor did say [LAUGHS] It didn't even occur to me. And I said no, no. So it is a bit weird that he and my husband have the same first name and the same initials. But absolutely not, no, it's 100 per cent not.

DAMIAN: Okay. The last doth protest too much. We'll gloss over that. Why do you never use his name? Or any of his names? In the book.

MAGGIE: It's partly because his name carries such enormous heft. We all have our own relationship with him inside our mind. He's pervaded our very language. He changed the way we think about ourselves, and continues to do that, I



think. And also, on a very kind of basic level, it's almost impossible to sit down at your desk and pick up a pen and say *William Shakespeare got up and had porridge for breakfast*. I mean you just instantly feel like an eejit, and you think *no I can't write this. What am I doing? This is an idiotic thing to attempt*. So in a way I wanted to kind of defamiliarize readers, and I wanted to ask them to forget everything they think they know about him and his wife and his children, and to kind of think again. And also he isn't the centre of the book.

DAMIAN:

No, he's not. I mean she's the centre of the book, and that is in a sense what keeps it a very Maggie O'Farrell novel, with its incredible central female character. Let's talk about Agnes slash Anne. Who is she? And who is she up to the point that he enters her life, and how, if at all, does him coming into her life change it? What kind of person is she? What kind of class is she? What does she do? What do we know about her?

MAGGIE:

Well actually what we know about her, the real – the woman we know as Anne Hathaway – is so... We think we know little about Shakespeare, pretty much nothing is known about her at all.

MAGGIE (cont.):

There's not even a record of her birth, for example, because she was born before parish records were kept. But it's odd because I had originally conceived the book to be about fathers and sons, as the play is, mostly, but while I was doing the research and I was reading around the subject, I just got more and more distracted by her,



because her story, and William's as well, is filled with such enormous voids, and such huge longueurs, but it seems in her case, I don't know why, but everybody – scholars, critics, film writers, script writers – they all rush to fill these voids, but there's a huge amount of hostility and criticism.

DAMIAN: I can't imagine what structural misogyny would create that level of characterisation.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] Really vile accusations. And it sort of pervades right down everybody's sense of her. I think if you ask people, if you stop someone in the street and say *what can you tell me about Shakespeare's wife?* They're probably likely to say *she tricked him into marriage, she deceived him, he hated her.*

DAMIAN: She was old, she was ugly.

MAGGIE: She got herself knocked up. She trapped him. He had to run away to London to get away from her. And you see this again and again and again. And I don't think there's any evidence for that, and I felt I got really outraged on her behalf in a way, because I think there are two things that I thought were important.

At the end of Shakespeare's career, he retired and he came back to Stratford Upon Avon to live with her, which doesn't sound like a man who hated his wife.

DAMIAN: Hmmmm.



- MAGGIE: Right at the end of his career he was probably the equivalent of a multi-millionaire, incredibly successful businessman, as well as not being a bad writer. [LAUGHS] He had a huge amount of wealth, but yet in London he lived really kind of modest lodgings.
- DAMIAN: Yeah.
- MAGGIE: All his money was sent back to Stratford, and he bought his wife and daughters, just a year after Hamnet died, this enormous house, it was absolutely vast. And he bought cottages and fields and he rented them all out. It just seemed to me that this was the act of a man whose heart actually lay with his wife and his daughters. I mean why else would you do that? There's this kind of obsession about the second-best bed, he was insulting Anne, he was this, there's no sign of any affection for her in his will, but his will is a very dry document and there's no affection in it at all for anyone. There's none of his –
- DAMIAN: It's also a will. Y'know it's not a love letter.
- MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] Exactly. But also the thing about the second-best bed is actually an interlineation. You actually look at the document, and it's something squeezed in between two other lines. So there wasn't a great deal of space for anything.
- MAGGIE (cont.): But I wanted to give her... I wanted her to be a three-dimensional character, I wanted to give her a void, and a



presence. They had a partnership that they were in love. And she had her own skills and artistry.

DAMIAN:

You give her these powers. Let's talk about the powers you give her. You give her this power, which I've never even conceived of when she touches people she takes the pulse of their personality and all the life within them. And she's a bit witchy. At one point she says, or somebody says of her, *it is not Christian, this ability*. And she's also a healer. She grows plants, she grows herbs, she has her garden that she takes care of. So she's an incredibly wise woman, and she also has this sort of supernatural ability. Which I love.

MAGGIE:

I was trying to imagine what he would have been like. In a quite small market town in rural Warwickshire, and how much he must have stood out. He must have had the most extraordinary brain. What must he have been like at school? Y'know, when he was 15 or whatever. What would it be like for the teacher? Even then he must have been extraordinary. I'm sure a lot of people found him.... When he was 18, when he married her, basically he was tradeless and penniless and his family had fallen into a bit of disgrace. His dad had started illegally wool trading, and his dad, who had been a high alderman, like a mayor, he'd kind of fallen, he'd been fined quite a lot, and he'd been in court. He was on a bit of a downer, the dad, John.

DAMIAN:

He was very angry and scary, the dad.



MAGGIE:

Well it's funny, to be fair to the real John Shakespeare, I have no idea [LAUGHS]... It's quite possible he was an absolutely lovely man and the life and soul of the party, but I've always wondered where those really quite crazed, psychotic men in Shakespeare came from. And I've always thought they don't come from nowhere. You don't get that sense of incredibly aggressive, violent – the Coriolanuses of the world – where did he come from? So I've taken very much a novelist's liberty. But it is possible that William loved his dad and he was the greatest guy in the world, we don't know. I suppose I was just interested in that. And also interested in there are a lot of instances in his plays in particular, of very steadfast, loyal wives, and maybe slight errant husbands shall we say. I don't know, I suppose I was just interested in rooting some of the emblems that you see in his plays into the book.

DAMIAN:

Yes, you do that, and it's not at all heavy-handed. We were talking earlier about memoirs and novels and in a sense this is in a way a memoir for Shakespeare, and a memoir for Agnes. You're giving us the keys to his plays, I think, but it doesn't feel reverse-engineered. So much when I was re-reading it I was struck by the imagery of the forest, and how important the forest is, and it makes me think how important the forest is in Shakespeare, the forest of Arden, and there's a place of escape, a place outside of civilisation and normality. And I think it's an absolutely terrific book. The other thing is that when I was re-reading it, I realised it's the perfect kind of corona novel, it's a plague novel.



MAGGIE: Yeah.

DAMIAN: They're all terrified.

MAGGIE: Well I think they were.

DAMIAN: They're locked down...

MAGGIE: I think they were probably terrified all the time. What we now call the Black Death – that was a constant, ever-present threat for all of them. So was cholera and typhoid. In those days you could cut your finger and then two days later you'd be dead of sepsis. The death rate was absolutely horrid. Life expectancy was 47. And the number of children who under the age of five died was a third of all children under five. You know you were considered lucky if your child lasted two weeks, let alone a year, let alone five years. It was a completely different mindset, I think. That's partly why I wanted to write the book, because I've always felt that people... I don't think the boy Hamnet is well-known enough. I feel like he should be better-known.

DAMIAN: Where is his grave? Do we know where he's buried?

MAGGIE: We know he's buried in the churchyard. We assume he is, but there's no grave for him, no gravestone. No one knows where he's buried. Which is very sad.

DAMIAN: It is very sad.



MAGGIE: Yeah. I wish that we knew where he was buried but no, no one does. Judith has no – there's no record for Judith.

MAGGIE (cont.): Agnes is buried next to William, and then [LAUGHS] Sorry, my daughter's looking at me. *Hi!* [LAUGHS] *This is coronatime!* It's so hard to concentrate . I thought I've got about an hour and I can really write, and then as soon as I sat down both my daughters appeared on the glass the other side, and were sticking snails all over the window. [LAUGHS] And I was thinking about writing with loads of snails all stuck to the window!

DAMIAN: What were you writing?

MAGGIE: Oh, I can't tell you that now. I'll tell you later.

DAMIAN: Was it – tell me later.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS]

DAMIAN: I'd love to know.

MAGGIE: I was wondering whether your book, *You Will Be Safe Here*, whether you felt impelled because you didn't feel the stories that you wanted to tell were well-known enough. Was it outrage?

DAMIAN: Oh my God, the rage? Yeah. It's interesting with both the memoir and the novel, anger propelled me in the early start. Anger's a really good starter but not, I think, your



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injustice about wanting people to know about Anne or
Agnes and about Hamnet...



DAMIAN (cont.):

That's a good place to start, but it's not a good place to end, and I don't think that it's great for readers, because I think that anger comes through in the prose, and it starts to become didactic, and it starts to become about what you want, not what the characters want or about what the readers want. I definitely, I felt very angry that these boys had been sent to these camps in South Africa now, the parents are doing it, people are making money out of it.

MAGGIE:

Is it still happening?

DAMIAN:

Yeah, those camps are still running. The camp was closed that Raymond was sent to, but there are other camps. And these camps are all over the world, whether they're outwardly called gay conversion therapy camps, or whether they're called extreme boot camps, they're about taking boys who don't fit in and *smashing* them into a mould. And it's boys... It's like me and every single one of my male friends would've been sent to one of these places, probably even your Will would have been sent to one of them. If you don't fit a very narrow idea of masculinity, South Africa's very intense in this Boer, Afrikaans way – these camps still exist. I got angry about that, and then I got really angry and ashamed about what Britain had done during the Boer War. We knew that taking soap and food and water away from women and children would result in mass deaths of women and children. We knew that if you take soap and water away from somebody and force them to live in squalor, that's as good as putting a noose around their neck. We knew



that, and we saw that, and we saw the death rates climbing.

DAMIAN (cont.):

Watching these corona death rates every day reminds me of the government war books that were kept during the 1900s. The 1899 to 1902 war. We would record the deaths week by week, month by month, camp by camp, and there were over 40 camps, and over 40,000 deaths. We knew exactly how and why and when people were dying. And those children, interestingly, like Hamnet, they have no graves. Their mothers weren't allowed to go to their gravesides. They didn't even have coffins, because they needed the wood to boil water to get it clean enough to drink. They were sometimes wrapped in a cloth, put on a cart, taken away to a mass grave and dumped. And so y'know you have people now in South Africa who don't know where their relatives are, and they've lost this connection and they're still very angry about it now. When I went there with Mike who is English a lot of people wouldn't shake his hand, and I thought it was homophobia, and I realised, it was explained to me, because he's English. Over a hundred years later. So I was definitely angry and that's what started me on it. But what in the end I had to do, actually, to make it a real story, to make people engage with it, was to make people understand not just the anger, what happened to the good people, but how people end up being bad, how people end up making bad decisions. Trying to get inside the heads of, for example, the racist men who run these camps, and understand they're doing this to these boys because they genuinely feel that they're looking after them, they genuinely feel, in their twisted, warped way,



that this is toughening them up, and saving them. And the real thing was not just going with my anger, or the challenge, which there was, was to feel empathy for people whose actions disgusted me.

DAMIAN (cont.):

And to try and understand why they felt that way. That was really, really, really hard.

MAGGIE:

What about Raymond Buys' mother. Did it take you a long time to convince her to talk to you? Was she happy to talk to you? How did she feel about the novel?

DAMIAN:

I'm still in touch with her now. I spoke to her a couple of weeks ago on Facebook. She lives with her son in Johannesburg. She has a remaining son from her second relationship. And I got in touch with her... She's had lots of media abuse and bad times, and is very mistrustful – quite rightly. And I got in touch with her and said I'd like to come to South Africa, I'd like to meet you, I'd like to talk to you about your son and find out more about him, would you be willing to do that? I got in touch through a charity that had supported her. She said she thought I was a journalist who wanted to do a bit of journalism, and I said no I don't want to do that, I think I want to write a novel. Her background is not privileged, she's not from a house where there's lots of books. I had to explain to her what using her experience might mean in a novel. So it wasn't going to be a book about her son. Because Willam the character in the second part of the novel, isn't Raymond at all – they're very, very different boys. Willam is a fiction, Raymond was the emotional way in for me. But



some of his experiences do carry over into the novel.

Although interestingly, I've made the novel less violent, less awful than what happened in real life. But I did share it with her. I went, and I spent time with her, I spent about a week with her, and I went with her to all the places that were involved.

DAMIAN (cont.):

We went to his school, we went to the court room, and then we went to the graveyard where his ashes are in the wall, and, it was absolutely heart-breaking. He's in this wall, and it felt like a kind of prison, and she said it's so dangerous here that I couldn't have a grave because it would be dangerous for me to visit grave on my own here, this is a safe place, it's within a wall in a church and I can visit him. And there he was. She's since scattered his ashes on what would have been his 21st birthday in June. But I shared the process with her, and then I sent the book to her. She doesn't read in English so her sister read it to her in Afrikaans. And she didn't get back to me for weeks and weeks, which you can imagine were some of the worst weeks ever, you know I'm sitting here going *oh my God, I've hurt this woman, I haven't done right by this woman, guilty*. And then she got back to me and said... I asked if I could dedicate the book to Raymond, and to the women and children who died in the camps, and she said yes. And she said, *you've given my son another kind of life*.

MAGGIE:

Oh! Oh my God!



DAMIAN: She feels that. And she said she thinks that if she'd read this book she wouldn't have sent her son there. And he might still be alive. So she feels for her it will do a sort of social good. But she was very brave and generous to spend any time with me, and trust me at all. And talk to me at all. I felt a massive sense of responsibility because on the one hand I want to make it better for her, of course, but I can't, I can't bring him back to life. All I can do is tell a kind of truth, and hope that that kind of truth offers something to her.

DAMIAN (cont.): But yes, I don't think... I don't know what I would have done if she'd come back and said she hated it. I don't feel like I could have published it. I mean, I would have had to, but I couldn't have done it in good faith. I would have had to get the book to a place where she felt happy with it before I would have felt that I could have done that. But that's the advantage you write about people who are hundreds of years gone, maybe that's what – but I still feel a sense of responsibility to the characters from 1900; they're long gone. I still felt a sense of responsibility to the women and children, because I'd read all these diaries and letters, and all of that.

MAGGIE: Are they based on anyone in particular, are they based on specific people.

DAMIAN: They're not. I read hundreds of diary entries and letters from the time, from all the different camps, but I wanted to locate it specifically in Bloemfontein, because that's where the first camp was, and it's now where the site of



the museum is, which they visit in the novel, which is real. And so it's very accurate. People have gone to the museum and asked for Sarah's diary – and I'm like *it's not real, but it's very sweet of you to think it is!* I've still got a sense of responsibility to those women and children. Especially writing about them as a man, and a man from another country, and another time. I wanted to get it right.

MAGGIE: I found them very three-dimensional. They kind of leapt off the page. I completely forgot that I was...

MAGGIE (cont.): It's interesting reading historical novels about particularly horrible things that happened in the past because I think you're always wanting to question how close is this to truth, how much has the writer fictionalised here. But I never kind of felt that with your book, because I knew that you... Also because I think as a journalist, because you've been a journalist for so long there is that very strong seam of ethics and truth behind a lot of what you write even if it is fiction. But in terms of responsibility to real people, specifically what you say about that in the novel, how did that contrast with a similar responsibility in your memoir? Was it very different? Was it the same? Because obviously you were writing about real people in the memoir.

DAMIAN: I thought that writing a novel would totally alleviate me and get me off the hook of all that responsibility and guilt. And it didn't. I thought writing a novel I can do what I like. And what I realised is that actually you are the person



you are whatever you're writing. If I write a cook book I'm going to feel that way.

MAGGIE: [LAUGHS] Is that next?

DAMIAN: I don't think you can free yourself from that sense of responsibility. I speak for myself. I felt unable to operate other than in a kind of moral universe with those characters. I felt as responsible to these women and children as I did to the people in my family, and I gave them the same privileges. I let them read it and all of that kind of stuff.

DAMIAN (cont.): I think that you need to be really clear whether you're writing memoir or whether you're writing fiction that you are taking a position, and that it's *your* perspective, whether that's a fictional character or whether that's a fictive version of yourself. And that'll be the same whatever I choose to write next. When you wrote *I Am, I Am, I Am*, having said that you were never going to write a memoir, and having taken a £1 advance for it so you could pay it back if you didn't get on with it, would you – I want to ask you about the experience of publishing a memoir, as opposed to publishing a novel, going out in to the world with a memoir, as opposed to going out with a novel. And then would you write another? But let's just talk about that because I think it is a very different experience. But there are similarities.

MAGGIE: Completely different, actually. The nerves I felt about publishing a memoir were about, probably, times a



hundred to what you feel publishing a novel. But it's funny because a lot of people in the run up before, obviously, the situation which we're now living in, this pandemic happened, people kept saying to me *are you nervous, are you nervous about Hamnet coming out?* And actually the real answer was [LAUGHS] compared to last time it's a total breeze! It's really odd, it's like that – it's always nerve-wracking publishing any book, I think publishing a memoir – it seems very stupid to say it – is very exposing, because there's no mask you can wear in a memoir. It's you, and everybody knows it's you. And it was! There were times when I just thought I have no idea I've done the right thing, y'know, what am I doing?

MAGGIE (cont.):

Even doing events was quite stressful because sometimes – I don't know if you found this when you were doing your memoir – mostly people were very, very respectful, but sometimes people would just ask you a question and you'd think... Even my closest friend may not have asked me that. [LAUGHS] It's an odd one. But I think what's interesting to me actually is that, and I don't know whether you found this as well having switched between fiction and non-fiction, is that in a sense you realise actually once you've written a memoir you realise that there are versions of yourself and other people hiding in novels, but of course you can hide in plain sight. Nobody will ever know. And there's an awful lot more in a novel that you can get away with. It's much more elastic. And I think there are probably moments of truth, which I would never have written about in a memoir, which I can just put in a novel. I can just put it in someone else's, you know I change the



DAMIAN: Do you do that consciously or do you realise you've done it when you read it back?

MAGGIE: I think it's probably a mixture of both, actually. Do you think that? Do you think there's a lot of you in your fiction, or not really?

DAMIAN: There is... But not where I thought I was putting it. There's a theme towards the end of the novel, which is a really horrible kind of violent scene, and I... Yeah, I wrote that scene and it's based on something that I did in my teens that I'm not proud of.

DAMIAN (cont.): And then I realised, I knew when I was writing it that it happened, but I didn't think I was ever going to put it in the book or anything like that. What surprised me was that I thought in fiction it would be more like wish fulfilment, I can make this thing better, I can do this the right way, I can make this person as interesting as I would like to be. And then it was like, oh actually I've given this person the most horrible part of myself. Thank you, now I don't have to contend with it. So that was unexpected, but I think we've been talking for so long that we're probably actually history ourselves now.

MAGGIE: I think I've asked you two questions on my very long list.

DAMIAN: What you've got a list as well and look and so have I? We're such nerds! We're such nerds! I'm trying to think if there was just one quick question that I might...



MAGGIE: Can I ask you a really quick question? I know that you live with another artist. He's a kind of visual artist

MAGGIE: Do you find there's an interesting symbiosis between the two of you in terms of your artistic vision and your work? Do you talk about things? Do you swap ideas, do you comment on each other's? Do you feel that you feed each other because you have a very different sort of artistic vision?

DAMIAN: I don't know if we feed each other in the sense of giving each other ideas. But we're very, very frank with each other in a way that I think I wouldn't take from anybody else. But what's interesting is that he's a visual artists and he comes from a different tradition of where he works in a studio and works with different people, and I can sometimes be very abrupt in my criticism, so I'll just go like *well that just doesn't work. Why have you done that? That's not right.* And he might have spent like eight days trying to get the shape of a petal completely correct. And I'll just be like *no.* Because I'm used to having an editor saying *that's rubbish* or *this isn't right* or *try harder.* So I think I have to remember that my discipline predisposes me to the murdering of darlings, whereas his is a bit more gentle. But he is able to understand my intention without me having to over-explain it. Whereas I might have to talk to an agent or editor... Whereas I can use a shorthand with him. So that helps. Do you find that as well? Do you talk to each other about your writing?



MAGGIE: I don't tend to talk about things that I haven't finished, at all, hardly to anyone, actually. I always keep it under wraps. But he's always the first person who reads anything. Like you I think we're, not brutal, but we're very frank. [LAUGHS] You know you need that.

DAMIAN: You do.

MAGGIE: And there are times when you want someone to say *yeah, it's lovely, keep going.*

MAGGIE (cont.): But there are also times when you want someone to say *you know what, two-thirds of this don't really work, and this isn't right and that's right, and I have no idea what she's talking about.* But you need that, and I do really trust his opinion. We realised recently there's very few words that go out of the house, wherever they're going, that the other one hasn't checked, that the other one hasn't gone through it.

DAMIAN: That must be very comforting.

MAGGIE: It's useful, having an in-house editor. Can you read three thousand words for me and you think *oh God, really?* And you always do.

DAMIAN: Yeah.

MAGGIE: I think we're very lucky in that way. Listen, I think we're going to have to go because my phone's about to run out.



DAMIAN: Mine's about to run out as well. But listen, it was lovely, as always.

MAGGIE: Nice to see you!

DAMIAN: Thank you for making the time.

MAGGIE: When am I going to see you next?

DAMIAN: Well, you'll see me when we all emerge bubo-free from lockdown, and we'll be reunited in Edinburgh, or somewhere lovely.

MAGGIE: Well, that would be nice.

ENDS