Crafting a story: Brian Doyle on the act of writing

Mary Harker

Brian Doyle with Mary Harker, in Ottawa, in 1991

Résumé: *Brian Doyle explique à Mary Harker les raisons qui justifient le choix des narrateurs dans ses romans: il préfère de beaucoup les garçons de dix à douze ans parce qu'ils ont une "vision claire", à l'inverse des adolescents qui, eux, sont aveuglés et dominés par la "montée du sperme" au point de devenir "idiots".*

Editor's note: Mary Harker conducted this interview with Brian Doyle in Ottawa in Spring, 1991. Since 1991, Doyle has achieved international attention for his books, and he is widely considered one of Canada's most innovative writers for the young adult market. His unique voice comes through in his two interviews in this issue of *CCL*—as well as in his books which find a devoted readership both with young people and adult audiences.

HARKER: Have you always been interested in writing books?
DOYLE: I've been writing since I ever remember. As a child, we wrote letters, diaries and messages. I was always keeping little notes about things I'd seen. Then I wrote a lot as I got older—wrote a lot of plays which I put on in schools—and soon I wrote two or three long stories—they were almost novel-length. They were very good but other than that.... And I had a couple of short stories published. Then when my kids were small, I began these stories.
HARKER: What about your plays?
DOYLE: At the school where I worked—Glebe Collegiate in Ottawa—I had a partner and we did—we wrote, and we performed—ten full-length musicals. We wrote all of the lyrics, of course, and these were mostly satire—local satire.
HARKER: One got shown in a club.
DOYLE: Two of them. We were downtown at a place called the Blue Gardenia on Laurier Avenue—where the Journal Buildings used to be—and we were there for six performances, cabaret-style.
HARKER: So your teaching had quite an effect on your writing career—the fact that you were teaching young people.
DOYLE: Well, I don't think so. You just don't do these plays at a school—those were always extra-curricular things that we were interested in doing. There was a tremendous well of talent there—a part of going to that school—there were wonderful musicians, so in order to put them to work, we did these plays. There were huge casts and it would be impossible to do them professionally because you wouldn't be able to afford it. They were well-attended and we had all kinds of offers, which never came to anything because you could never—we had a sixteen-piece orchestra and back-up sixty-five-piece choir in four-part harmony, thirty-five-piece dance line—you know you just can't put that on professionally; it would just cost too much.
HARKER: Well, we'll get back to your books and stories and I have a question: what gets you started when you're writing a story: some anecdote you've heard, a character or a personality that you've encountered or a phrase or a bit of language?
DOYLE: Most of the time—in the last four books—it will be in a very important place to me in my psyche, my background. There are four places—they are places in my mind's eye I could shine my way around in the dark. We all have those places. That's the beginning—
HARKER: Then it's the locale.
DOYLE: That's right. The second one (*You Can Pick Me up at Peggy's Cove*)—and that is also a place, that little town which is the hero of my book—and the first book (*Hey, Dad!*). I had just done this for my daughter—I think the place there is inside her little head.... Place is probably a character.
HARKER: I think in *Up to Low* you really get a feel for the place. It's one of my favourites.

DOYLE: People have favourites, but I feel the same kind of poetic energy goes into presenting the place in *all* my books. Some people like some better than others ...

HARKER: How do you write—in chapters? For instance, *Up to Low* has just three parts; *Hey, Dad!* is written in chapters and the action is much more episodic.

DOYLE: I tend to write in scenes. I think it's my experience in writing plays. For that, I wait until hopefully the scenes have some kind of direction. If I don't, well, I don't have a book. But when they do take on a direction of their own, then I think that the very last thing I would do is to chop it up into [chapters]. That's almost like putting a cover on it or something to me.

HARKER: That's because you think that you started out by writing these plays and you visualize them—all the people and where they are and—

DOYLE: —what they might say.

HARKER: How do you achieve the superb pacing and the timing of the humour of your books?

DOYLE: I don't seem to be capable of looking at something for very long without seeing something funny about it. I guess I inherit that from my father, my grandfather, his great-grandfather. Although I never heard him, I heard enough about him. Once I start to look at some external reality, it either doesn't take on any meaning at all or it becomes very sad or very funny. I just don't seem to write between those extremes. It tends to oscillate between one extreme and the other. But I long ago stopped trying to guide people's tastes and opinions into which way they'd like to read. I have enough trouble writing to care about reading—that's your problem.

HARKER: So you don't visualize how it's going to strike the reader?

DOYLE: No. Every time I'm writing and a voice comes in and says: "I wonder what the reader will think of that?" I throw that out. That's just not the proper way to think. That's deadly. You're not really writing properly if you're doing that.

HARKER: It's all-alone work?

DOYLE: I'm a very lone worker. I'm mature enough to know what's passable. And then, once in a while, I have editing help, too. But initially, I've got to be my own policeman and one of the major criteria for whether I keep something or not is exactly what you just said. A little voice says: "I wonder what they'll think of that" or "I'm not doing very well," but you've got to be less conscious of that, no more than an athlete—if he was worried about the crowd, then he's not involving himself in that activity. If the quarterback is wondering whether the crowd likes his sweater that day, he's in big trouble.

HARKER: So you really don't worry about the reader at all?

DOYLE: Well, I can't. I can't worry about the reader while I'm writing, and after it's published, it's too late.

HARKER: Are you interested in readers' comments?

DOYLE: Well, quite a bit. I find them interesting, but I find them irrelevant. There's really no point, not much I can do about it. All I can do is to try my best and if I do poorly I'm the first one to know about that.

HARKER: How do you judge that?

DOYLE: Well, if I've been true to the process as I know it and haven't cheated—allowing in some stuff I have doubts about—that's what it comes down to. I think one of the reasons that these books are so small is that I keep throwing things out.

HARKER: How do you do research for your fiction? There is a great attention to detail in each of your books. For example, did you keep a diary when you were younger?

DOYLE: Well, nothing that exists any more. I seem to have an excellent memory for some kind of detail that's very deep in the past. For the others, I research a lot. I use the Archives a lot—anything I can get hold of. For instance, for *Covered Bridge* I spent the whole summer there, and I've been on every covered bridge in Canada, I'm sure, and I'd read everything about them, studied the engineering of them. I didn't use this. I'm confident that even if I say something about a horse and carriage, I know what I'm talking about. That's why there's a whole pyramid of facts that we don't need, and I feel confident in it because I'm standing on a whole platform of very solid knowledge.

HARKER: Is writing from a female point of view more difficult? Because you did that in *Hey, Dad!*.

DOYLE: I did. I just felt at that time that I knew my daughter so well that it didn't trouble me a bit. I just knew exactly what she was thinking at all times; I felt like I was inside her skin.

HARKER: How important do you feel the sense of roots or the sense of community in each of your novels is to young people today and to yourself?

DOYLE: It seems that young people now have less access to a sense of family, a sense of local community. I'm not sure that the modern world offers such easy access to belong as in our past, but then again, I think I'm out-of-touch with being young today.

HARKER: Yes, but your books aren't.

DOYLE: No. Young people today like my books. Maybe they like them because unconsciously they find that sense of belonging attractive. It could be that they lack it themselves—or maybe they have a lot of it themselves and like to identify with it. I don't know.

HARKER: Do you hear the language of your books before you write them?

DOYLE: I hear it in my head. I think that more than a lot of other writers my books almost have to be read out loud—if not literally out loud, they have to be read out loud within one's head because a lot of what there is to say there is said with rhythms and the sounds as well as the denotative meanings of the words. In other words, I think to read it for the information and the activity only, you would only maybe get a third of it. But to read it for the sound and the musicality

of it and the implications of the poetics in the prose, well, then you'd get the rest of it.

HARKER: Does the fact that you write in scenes mean you're listening to people talking?

DOYLE: Yes. Even it it's not a scene, if it's a connecting kind of piece, you're listening to the narrator.

HARKER: Yes. Like in *Covered Bridge*, you have Hubbo writing to Fleurette. This way you can portray to the reader things that might not happen—his idea of what might happen.

DOYLE: *Covered Bridge* is a book about writing really, and about writing one's past. You've known that covered bridge: you go in one end—and come out that end and you're living almost 75 years ago.

HARKER: Can you comment on the differences in the language from novel to novel? In *You Can Pick Me up at Peggy's Cove* the language is very clear and bright like the snapshots the tourists are taking. The language was different in *Hey, Dad!*

DOYLE: Well, there's a different narrator and so there is a difference. The narrator in *Peggy's Cove* is a much more literal sort of person than the narrator of *Hey, Dad!*—much more dramatic and probably a lot more resourceful than the person who narrates *Hey, Dad!* who is more of a poet and more of an idealist kind of adventurer.

HARKER: When you say the person is more resourceful do you mean that he can solve problems better?

DOYLE: Well, yes, and making pragmatic kinds of decisions about things, or even just judgments that may not result in any activity, but just to judge a person that they've met.

HARKER: The narrator is worried about death and time, the big issues. I found there were a lot of words to do with time in *Hey, Dad!*

DOYLE: She sees the big issues and the other guys are more earthbound.

HARKER: Yes. Of the six novels you've written so far, which is the most autobiographical?

DOYLE: They're all very much targeted with a sense of personal sensibilities and—necessarily—experience, but sensibilities with regard to the humour, the people who come in and out, the places. These are the things that stick to you.

HARKER: Yes. Do you go back to the places?

DOYLE: Yes. I had to go back. It's hard because it was bulldozed. There's not much left. But there's an Ottawa archives—there's pictures of those buildings I looked at then: the old synagogues, car barns. I suppose some writers make things up but I think that they're fooling themselves. I don't think anyone makes anything up. Nothing.

HARKER: Is it that you sort of put form to your memories?

DOYLE: Well, "memories" is not so happy a word—emotional responses to things—memory is more like "remember the time we went and picked berries."

To me it's the smell of the berries that does it.

HARKER: Your books don't shelter children from death: In *Angel Square* the kid's father gets beaten up; in *Up to Low* the father dies; in *Covered Bridge* the priest dies. He may not be very well loved or liked because he's sort of satirized ...

DOYLE: God loves him!

HARKER: Yes, but whether his flock loves him or not is another question. But do you think it is important to present life whole—with death and sickness—for kids.

DOYLE: That's the only way I've ever talked to anybody and that's the only way I was ever talked to. My parents and my grandparents do it. We'd all sit around while they were talking. We were never sent to another room or anything, we were always included. We got as much of it as we could. I don't like that business where there's a different language to a topic or subject depending on who's in the room. It doesn't seem to me to have very much respect for who's there. When they told stories, we were all in there, we would listen and I'd hear they were all laughing. Part of it was funny. They didn't bother explaining. When we went to the library we didn't go to find a section for kids either. We just went to get a book that you could understand.

HARKER: Your books are not all in the children's section. A librarian at Carlingwood public library said the first two or three were in the kids' section and the others are in the adults' section. She didn't explain very well how they made the differentiation, or why.

DOYLE: I get as many letters from grandparents as I do from kids. There is something in my books for everyone.

HARKER: Yes. That's what I feel. There is, because it doesn't matter who the narrator is. If it's a young person you have devices and techniques to include others. There are always adults and so on to make it of interest to everybody. Do you have a favourite novel?

DOYLE: Well, no. Usually the favourite one is the one you worked on last.

HARKER: Do you know which novel your readers like the best, or which you get the most letters from?

DOYLE: They have all sold relatively the same.

HARKER: Do you have a favourite character that you've created?

DOYLE: I don't think so.

HARKER: It's for the readers to decide?

DOYLE: If you ask a magician: "What's your favourite trick?" he'd reply: "It used to be where I sawed the lady in half, but now I like the one ..."

HARKER: What do you think the future of reading is for today's young people in the face of TV, video, movies and computer games?

DOYLE: Well, these books sell really well and I get three or four letters a month steady—not the letters from school where they *have* to write the stuff—you know, real letters. The books sell in the thousands every year so somebody must be reading them. I don't think there are any less people reading now than there

ever were.

HARKER: Do you think these other forms of entertainment have made a difference, then, in people's reading habits?

DOYLE: Well, let's say fifty years ago, twenty per cent of the population had the advantage of the environment and the propensity to become readers, and the other eighty per cent didn't. And the other eighty per cent—what did they do? They went to the show, they did other things. It's the same today: twenty per cent of the people have become readers, and the other eighty per cent do other things. There's the TV and stuff like that—nothing's changed—it's the same twenty per cent. And the universities, they all lament "this terrible wave of illiteracy" and so on. Don't they realize fifty years ago only the twenty per cent were hanging around the university. Now everybody's there. No wonder they look illiterate—they are!

HARKER: And whose fault is that?

DOYLE: Nobody's! It's the way society's always been: twenty per cent of the people are literate, and the rest are semi-literate. That's all, that's all there is to it.

HARKER: Do you think there are people who should be kept out of the universities?

DOYLE: No, but the universities should stop complaining about them. It's not nice. They're getting more than their grandparents ever did—the grandparents quit in Grade 8. But they're not book people. Nobody would have ever expected them to be. The crowds of people that work in universities have lost sight of that fact—everybody's there. Well, not everybody, but practically everybody. In 1950—this is a statistic—that in 1950 of every 100 kids in kindergarten, three of them went to university, seventy of them had quit by Grade 10. Now, of 100 kids in 1990, 90 of them get out of high school and go to higher learning, 90 of them! As long as you keep your eye on that, there's no need to panic. Fact.

HARKER: What do people ask you or say to you in the letters that you get? Just "like your books?"

DOYLE: Yes, mostly. "Write to me." They're curious because there's magic to it. It's like writing to know how the magician does it, and it's a foolish magician that tells. I don't know what they'd get out of it except that it satisfies a need for a segment of the population to reflect their own experience intellectually.

HARKER: Are your novels primarily entertainment or something more?

DOYLE: You asked me a lot earlier: "Is it fun writing?" No, it's not, but it's pleasurable, like all that is hard work, that has results. But not fun. Writing is the hardest work I've ever done. But it's pleasurable because it bears fruit. I imagine it's like bearing a child—it's not fun, it's pleasurable and it has rewards in its way. This is the work of the world. If it's just entertainment to people then that's fine. Entertainment to me has to do with all your being; entertainment is a very

difficult word to make sure you've got an accurate hold on. It's not sitting, watching somebody else doing something—that's a pastime.

HARKER: Who were your formative influences: Shakespeare, Dickens, or any Canadian author?

DOYLE: Shakespeare, Dickens, Dylan Thomas. W.O. Mitchell was an inspiration, but not because of his writing, more because of his attitudes, what he said a few times when I heard him. He's so brave, he's a brave man.

HARKER: Brave about his writing?

DOYLE: Brave about himself—who he is. I like that. You don't find that in many Canadians. And Alice Munro—the same kind of bravery. I like her, too, for the same reasons. Margaret Laurence ... It's not so much for the writing but for the happy confidence of their stance, you know. They seem to be very healthy kinds of people and "brave"—a good word.

HARKER: And did this help you when you were just beginning?

DOYLE: Yes. No one has enough background in this country—we're so young. But for the craft itself you know the pulse where I'm writing, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, Dickens, James Joyce.

HARKER: I could have asked you this before, but have you used your teaching experience in your writing career?

DOYLE: No. The people I've spent my career with are teenagers. They're in that great coma—age thirteen to nineteen—and they don't know a lot about anything really. They've forgotten everything. When they were ten their insights were a lot more clear, they were a lot more with the world. They'll be back. It's not their fault. Some of them perform fairly well in spite of it.

HARKER: What do you mean by coma?

DOYLE: Well, they're changing. They don't know what the hell is going on, really. I've seen it in my own children: when ten, very bright, incisive, sensible, idealistic. When they were thirteen, idiots! They're the same people and didn't know a thing! You know when you're suffering semen backup, it's hard to see anything! So, those people are not my narrators. My narrators have a very clarified vision. [They're a little younger], they're not sophisticated, they're not widely experienced, but their vision is very clear. I've dealt with kids all of my career but this has nothing to do with my actual writing.

Mary Harker, *who lives in Ottawa, has an Honours B.A. in Political Science and an MLS in Library Science. Mrs. Harker co-authored* "Anne of Green Gables*: An Annotated Bibliography" in CCL issue 55 with Professor Barbara Garner of Carleton University, and interviewed James Houston in issue 61.*