Making magic: an interview with Brian Doyle

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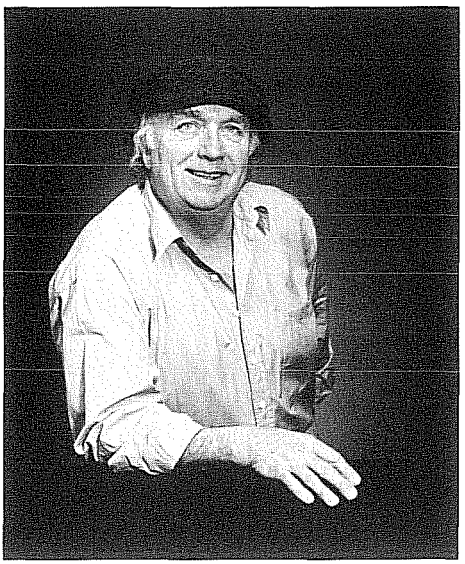
Résumé: *Dans cette entrevue, Brian Doyle explique le processus de création littéraire qui préside à la naissance de ses récits et tente de préciser l'état présent de la littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse.*



Brian Doyle is an internationally celebrated writer who was born in Ottawa in 1935. He brings this region into the setting of many of his young-adult books. His stories are notorious for featuring the clarity and vision of young narrators who face moral dilemmas with varying levels of support from a decidedly wacky selection of adult characters. Doyle's storytelling captivates the reader through meandering plots which deal seriously with issues of social justice, but are laced with a delightfully wicked sense of humour. In a non-didactic way he tackles issues such as racism and multiculturalism in Canada, as well as environmental concerns. These issues rarely threaten the rhythm of his language or the ritual of storytelling.

In his writing, recurring themes of alienation and loss lead to a healing process where strength of character and the spiritual and emotional health of people are stressed above and beyond conventional definitions of physical beauty or surface happiness. Doyle's world-view embraces a truth about justice, and a respect for the balance between human suffering and manic comedy. His genius for comic timing and intuitive slapstick brings the written word to life, and the sophistication of his texts makes his books enjoyable for adults, as well as for young adults. His books are especially effective when read aloud.

I spoke with Mr. Doyle on the telephone early on the morning of August 22nd, 1994, and was instantly disarmed by his soft-spoken manner. He is at once off-

hand about and critical of his writing. He speaks in a charming, understated way, pausing frequently before answering questions. In these pauses, he gives the impression that there are always mysteries that an interviewer will never discover.

KRISTYN: Could you tell the readers a little bit more about your personal writing process and the research methods that you use when working on a book? Do you have a set pattern which you follow through the various stages of writing a text?

BRIAN: First of all I write long-hand. I write mostly very early in the morning: I get up early. I have a person who types my stuff and then I go over it, a first-draft kind of thing and then I work it over again in pen, in ballpoint pen. Then it gets typed again, a second draft. Now that's the physical approach to it. Where I start, with regards to those little books ... I usually start with the place. The places often end up in the title. I don't do that intentionally, but to me the place seems to be the most important part. I try and get a good environment that I really know well and then I begin to put the people in it, and the last thing I try to concern myself with is the activity. Other writers work differently, I know, and I envy them sometimes because they seem to know more about where they're going than I do.

KRISTYN: Do you have to be in the place that you're writing about?

BRIAN: No, but it has to be a place that I have known very intimately and often—on the question of research—I end up going back there to re-familiarize myself with it. It has to be a place that I've lived or that I've been intimate with for some other reasons, I guess. So I do research in that I go back to the place. It's often a place where I lived when I was younger. [I] go back and try to get some of it back, and if some of it is torn down or gone or changed a lot, I try and ignore that and rebuild it in my imagination.

KRISTYN: I guess part of that rebuilding process might relate to the books you read as a child which influenced you, or to the books that you have read to your own children and grandchildren.

BRIAN: My reading was, I think, as a child either comic books, or for some crazy reason, Dickens. There didn't seem to be much in between. I don't know why that was. The comic books of my youth were full of big vocabulary, big words. I think that's why I read them mainly, for the sounds of the words. And I guess I was looking at Dickens only half understanding it when I was a kid, too, for the sound of the stuff, the rhythm of it. Other than that, what I read to my own kids was kind of the standard fare, but with Grimm fairy tales, Mother Goose and stuff like that.

KRISTYN: Do you have any boyhood heroes who were inspirational for you?

BRIAN: Well, not so much. I think my father and grandfather and their relatives were heroes of mine because of their ability to spin tales. They were very funny people and they weren't writers, but they were storytellers. I would, for instance,

listen to my father tell the same story over a period of months, maybe years, to different people and it would never be exactly the same. He'd constantly be changing it, fiddling with it. He was a wonderful liar. It's not so much that they were my heroes in other ways, but their abilities as storytellers made them heroes to me.

KRISTYN: So they would craft the stories over time?

BRIAN: Well they seemed to, [the stories] rolled off so easily. But they were crafted and that seems to be some kind of gift that they had and I don't have, you know, an oral sense. But even as a kid I was starting to write that stuff down. I did, I guess, get an ability which I transferred to paper. Maybe it was an ear that I developed for it. I wasn't a storyteller myself, but I was a listener.

KRISTYN: How did they feel about the writing down of some of the stories that might have triggered their memories, or the stories they told?

BRIAN: Well, unfortunately by the time I started this sector of my writing career—I only began to do this when my own children were around ten or so; I was writing other stuff before that—so by the time I started that, which was about fifteen years ago, the old folks were all dead. So unfortunately they never got a look at it.

KRISTYN: But is it a way of remembering them and keeping ties, family bonds?

BRIAN: Definitely. [long pause] It's a kind of memorial, I think.

KRISTYN: Were there friends from your youth, your boyhood, who have ended up as characters in your books?

BRIAN: Oh, I think a lot of the people, a lot of the caricatures in the books are based on adults I knew as a kid. Not my own friends, but kind of concoctions of adults who were around. There's a game I had as a schoolteacher: looking at kids sitting there in front of me and imagining them, seeing them, as adults. D'you ever do that?

KRISTYN: [laughs] Yeah.

BRIAN: You see, you know, a girl about twelve or something and you can just see what she's going to be like when she's fifty. Or you can see a sixteen-year-old boy and you can see him as a man of seventy. I can, anyway [chuckles]. I kind of did a lot of that—concoct these people who run in and out of the stories.

KRISTYN: Do you find that there is a strong distinction between fiction and autobiography, or "truth" and "facts"?

BRIAN: [laughing] Oh, I get them so blurred, I don't know the difference anymore. My own children, who are now grown up and have children of their own, sometimes accuse me of blurring the lines to the point where I don't know what the hell is real—which I don't mind and it doesn't hurt anybody, so I don't see what the big deal is.

KRISTYN: There are a number of substitute or replacement mother figures in many of your books, as well as a general anxiety about lost or deceased parents.

You mentioned earlier that some of the books are a kind of memorial to your own relatives. Is that the strongest connection?

BRIAN: Well, I always had a lot of trouble resolving myself with my mother. I didn't realize that this came out in some of the books—her absence—until it was pointed out to me. So here I am, my eighth book is just coming out, and I still haven't really been able to establish a consistently strong mother figure. They're always depicted as foster mothers, aunts, or something like that. The lady in *Easy Avenue* is a strong lady. I have some other strong women, but I still seem to be a little shy about making them their actual mothers. Deep down I must be sick or something [long pause] or afraid.

KRISTYN: I think that the female characters have really strong personalities, which I'm happy to see, and they're very nurturing in a lot of ways. I just wondered about that because they were never actually the birth mother, the "natural" mother.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's a thing that I really haven't answered to myself. I think it's a classic "never-having-resolved-yourself-with-your-own-mother" kind of pattern.

KRISTYN: Part of the communal atmosphere that I find in your books involves a recognition of loss, like this, and a grieving process which eventually leads to the spiritual, emotional and psychological healing. Would you care to elaborate on these aspects of the life cycle in your personal philosophy?

BRIAN: I was always very influenced by that birth, love and death cycle or kind of emphasis. Oh, you find a lot of it in Shakespeare, and you find a lot in Dylan Thomas, people I like. There's a strong relationship between that kind of focus and the tendency that my people always had: either to laugh or to cry and forget the in-between, you know. And funerals and christenings were the biggest events, and crying at a christening and laughing at the funeral was very common. It was some kind of a "whistling by the graveyard" sort of view of life. It seems to me it's a mind set and I don't seem to be able to fuck around between the two. It just seems that something's a real hoot or all of a sudden it's full of tears. I must get that from those old storytellers, or maybe there's something Celtic about it.

KRISTYN: Do you find readers unable to relate to that?

BRIAN: No, on the contrary. I get a letter a day. That's 365 letters a year and I answer every one of them. They all say roughly the same thing, and that's the very thing that they like. They like to laugh and they like to cry [laughs]. I don't know, they like both ends.

KRISTYN: I wondered if it was the Celtic influence.

BRIAN: It must be. It's commonly recognized. It's also a wonderful [traditional] Yiddish sort of thing, those two extremes. Charlie Chaplin was a big hero and you laughed or cried and there was nothing in between.

KRISTYN: One of the things I love best about your books is the heightened everyday life; this tragedy and joy, the up- and down-ness you are talking about. For example, the important conversations take place in a scene with completely

unrelated actions and activities; the rhythm and comic timing are wonderful. One of my favourites is the packing scene during the opening for *Up to Low*. To me that's a perfect example of writing which is well suited to visual representation, either on stage or on screen. How do you feel about stage or screen adaptations in general?

BRIAN: There was a wonderful stage play here at the Ottawa National Arts Centre of *Angel Square.*

KRISTYN: Did you see that?

BRIAN: Yep. And I liked it ... I didn't write it, but ... a lot of people went and it ran for 29 nights or something. It was great. It was filled every night. And then the same people did a stage play of *Easy Avenue* and put it on at another theatre company here in Ottawa and that was a big run, too. It translates to stage very well. Now they're going to do the *Up to Low* thing. At least I noticed they bought the rights to it.

KRISTYN: What was it like to see the text come to life like that?

BRIAN: Oh, you don't like it at first, you know, until you relax. I dunno, it's just like somebody dressing up your kid. They'll put the wrong clothes on the kid. Then you say, "Forget it," and you sit back with the rest of the audience, and then it's good. But you don't like it at first, and you know, I'd be the least qualified person in Canada to comment on it.

KRISTYN: Have you ever considered working in film or video?

BRIAN: Well, I was hired a few times to write some screen adaptations, and I did. They paid me all kinds of money, but it never got on the screen. That's a tricky business, that film stuff. I've written a couple of TV scripts which also never appeared but which I was paid handsomely for, so I don't understand what the hell's going on. The other stuff ... it's an end of the art world that I don't get, but I don't mind trying that. The business aspect of it is very, very complicated.

KRISTYN: Maybe they'll wait and release material when they think it's timely. Who knows?

BRIAN: Sure. I don't really want to begin to learn. I'm too old to learn all that stuff. I'll just stay and do my end of it here.

KRISTYN: You do have a history of working in the theatre. Do you think that the years of working on musicals and stage productions have affected your writing style, or how you approach literature in general?

BRIAN: Well, I think it might have. I'm not sure which came first, but the reason I've been doing all that stage work is 'cause it seemed natural to me. So I think all of my writing, even before I did the stage stuff [when] I was doing short stories, they all had that same kind of ... I think everything I write is for the ear.

KRISTYN: I'm going to go back to something you mentioned earlier, about the split between adults and children. Is this a major division for you, in your world view, the division between child life and adulthood?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess it is. That tale of the Emperor, you know, the Emperor with no clothes? As I see that tale, there's a big parade, the crowd is all ... the

kid, the person, the kid, whoever notices that the Emperor has no clothes on is the clear-sighted, pre-puberty, smart but unsophisticated person. That to me is one polarization of your life. The other is your adult life. I believe that you're never as clear-eyed as you are when you're the age of that kid who saw that the Emperor had no clothes on. That's the clearest vision you'll ever have. People who maintain that kind of clarity, while they're adding sophistication to it, I think they're the people who wind up [being the ones] on the planet who we call "wise." It's very difficult to keep sophistication from clouding your vision, so I end up with a kind of simplistic view, I guess, of a life span. You're either moving toward that clarity and then you hit puberty, and you go into that sexual coma ... and some people never get out of it [laughs]. They're gone! Two personages somehow run it all.

KRISTYN: And they don't mix for you?

BRIAN: Well, no. I guess it's simpler. It helps to write, it helps me, anyway, maintain the young voice.

KRISTYN: I have a couple of questions stemming from that, and one is based on the reference to "sophistication" as a clouder of vision. I think it's interesting that in the books there are love interests that are pursued, and there is a lot of reflection on that, but very little representation of sexuality or physical contact beyond a first kiss. Is this why?

BRIAN: Yes. Yes, I think it is. These days there's so much talent in Canada, writing in the field of, you know, "Kid Lit." There's a tremendous amount. I know there is because for the past two years I've been Chairman of the jury that picks the Canada Council prize for the best book of the year. So I get to read all of it, and there's a tremendous amount of good stuff. It's almost as though the adult literature over the past twenty or thirty years is really just stuff with the graphic sex. It's crazy, but if you took the graphic sex out of so-called adult books, I mean what would be left? There's so much good stuff in the "Kid Lit." now. I think that they're hard pressed [laughs]. There's something about describing sex on paper that, to me, seems to get in the way of what's really going on. So it's a great privilege, or rather a great advantage, to be able to dig into a life in a little book and be able to skip the necessary sexual questions. It's really irresponsible of me!

KRISTYN: There are a few characters who seem partially successful at crossing the boundary, who straddle these two worlds.

BRIAN: Yes.

KRISTYN: How successful do you feel you are at straddling the world of childhood? You said earlier that you try to keep in touch with your child vision and young voice through writing, however, you are obviously an adult living in an adult world.

BRIAN: Oh, well, I guess the books and I are separate. So I can strive to keep that young narrator's voice clean and consistent in the books, but outside the books I'm just a normal dirty old man.

KRISTYN: [Laughter]. Oh good. That leads me to my next question. In a previous interview with Amy Vanderhoof you said, "in all of my books I've purposely included a word so that schools won't use them." Why is that?

BRIAN: [laughter]. Well I've taught school long enough to know that one of the biggest enemies of reading is the teacher. And more young people have been steered away from books by teachers, and more good books ruined by teachers than by any other single profession. I had hoped, when I started doing this eight books ago, that kids would just read them on their own and to hell with taking any risks that some teacher would give them questions on the book and make them do projects on it and everything, so that by the time that it was over they would hate the book and hate the author. In those days they wouldn't use a book with "fart" in it, or something, so it was working until recently. Now they're all using them. So, I don't know. It didn't work. My books are being taught in hundreds of schools, but at least maybe they're being taught by the teachers who aren't that stupid.

KRISTYN: That could be. And don't worry, I'm sure that they're banned in a number of places, as well!

BRIAN: Great! I love it! The person who wants to ban the book is the very person I don't want teaching it anyway.

KRISTYN: One of the other things I love about your books is the sense of community in the closure of all the stories, and the traditional so-called "family" values which seem to be reconciled in contemporary situations with so-called "dysfunctional" family units. I mean units made up of orphans, single parents, people with disabilities, *etcetera*: "families" made up of people with no blood ties but who care deeply about one another. Would you say that you have a broad or unconventional working definition for the term "family"? Or, simply put, what does "family" mean to you?

BRIAN: It's funny. I just never gave it a thought. And I don't, unless it's pointed out, for instance, like now. I think it's more my idea of the closed world of a book and the modern composite family, of several-times-divorced and broken-up people and everything. That still in the emotional world of one narrator there is always some kind of comfort and closed confidence with some people ... although it doesn't look like that from the outside, from the social worker point of view. It doesn't look like the old values are there, but I don't know. With all of the people I've met, they have some kind of circle that they feel is like a family to them, emotionally anyway. But that's the most thought I've given to that problem in months. I don't even think about it.

KRISTYN: I find it interesting that you use the term "circle" to describe the emotional bond between people and I guess what is missing from, say, a social worker's point of view would be the structure, the typical nuclear family structure.

BRIAN: Yeah, exactly. I guess that must be it. Now that you mention it, I tend to write the narrators themselves as basically healthy people, so that could be the

answer there. I haven't tried to write something from the point of view of someone who's really unhealthy emotionally. They seem to be strong people. They seem to be able to handle their lives. I don't know if that's reality or not.
KRISTYN: Reality for readers, do you mean?
BRIAN: I'm not sure. I think it is a reality for readers; *they* can probably handle their own lives.
KRISTYN: Did you mean a reality for you?
BRIAN: [long pause] I guess that's right.
KRISTYN: Something else about community in the novels that came very strongly to me was the link to food descriptions.
BRIAN: [laughter].
KRISTYN: The preparation and sharing of it, and so on, had such sensual descriptions.
BRIAN: Isn't that crazy? I don't know why that is.
KRISTYN: Do you have strong images or memories of family meals that inspire this?
BRIAN: No, not so much family meals, in the conventional sense, but breaking bread with friendly members of the family was always something. Maybe it had to do with when we were summering together without electricity or running water, making a meal was a pretty big deal. And so, you know, you had to make the fire, and carry the water ... all that. It was more than just a kind of fast food thing. And it was always informal: you might be eating outside, or in a boat, or the shit house. But it was important. I think that was part of it. Maybe it was also the way my father used to cook. He was pretty unconventional. He could make a stew from about ten yards away, and he'd peel the carrot and try to get it in the pot. You know, throw it? Didn't matter whether he got it in or not because there was always another carrot.
KRISTYN: Did he actually have a recipe book like the one in *Up to Low*?
BRIAN: [laughs]. Well, no, but that's the way he acted!
KRISTYN: I loved the way Frank [a hopelessly drunken friend of Young Tommy's father] would throw out the compost ... against a closed screen door!
BRIAN: Well, some of them weren't very neat.
KRISTYN: I guess you have to sacrifice some things for genius.
BRIAN: I just came back from Australia. My publishers sent me down there for three weeks to promote the books, you know, and they like that food stuff. I got a lot of requests to read that stuff out [loud]. Everybody wanted to hear it. In October I'm going out to Vancouver. Ron Jobe, a prof at Simon Fraser University, is having a banquet and they're serving all Doyle food at it. I don't know how he's going to work it, though!
KRISTYN: You have a new book coming out in 1995. How is it coming along?
BRIAN: Oh, it's finished. It's the sequel to *Spud Sweetgrass* and the publisher's going to bring it out in January. I don't know why. They usually bring them out in November, before Christmas, but I don't question her. She's a genius. I just

say, "Yes, Sir!"
KRISTYN: How do you feel about the sequel? Are you "done" with it, now that the writing process is finished?
BRIAN: Well, I like it. It's a very wintry book. It's as wintry as *Covered Bridge* is summery. Maybe that's why the January launch.
KRISTYN: I may have to forfeit my last question since I'm not in Ottawa with you in person and therefore can't buy you a few drinks first, as you suggested in your earlier correspondence. Nevertheless, would you consider singing a bit of the Irish Turnip Love song that Young Tommy's dad sings in *Up to Low* ?
BRIAN: Oh, that Turnip Song goes like this [sings in a very deep, mournful voice]:

> "Oh the place where me heart was you could easy roll a turnip in
> It's as broad as all Dublin and from Dublin to the Devil's Glen
> And when she took another sure she could've put mine back again
> Since Molly's gone and left me here alone for to die"

KRISTYN: That was wonderful! You have a great voice!
BRIAN: Nice to talk to you, Kristyn.
KRISTYN: Thank you so very much.

Kristyn Dunnion, *whose undergraduate degree at McGill was in Theatre, is presently finishing her M.A. in English at the University of Guelph. She has worked extensively in community radio, doing interviews and creative documentaries. She has co-written and acted in a play, "Blatantly Sexual," which was produced twice at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. A published cartoonist, she enjoys working in diverse media.*