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Interview

David Ireland

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Interview

Abstract
Mark MacLeod interviewed David Ireland at Macquarie University in October 1980.

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Mark MacLeod interviewed David Ireland at Macquarie University in October 1980.

David, are characters the starting point for your writing?

'No. Well I suppose in The Chantic Bird I really started with the incidents that I want to use to make the book come out the shape I've planned, and then I get the characters to fit them.

Well, the incidents are stronger than the characters in that book, but then in The Unknown Industrial Prisoner would you have started with the characters there...

No; the main incident was the growth of the cracking plant. That's really the main character. And I drew on the people that I knew and the sorts of people that are around an oil refinery because they're necessary furniture for the thing. The refinery was the main thing. I could have had quite different people although the spread of people round a refinery is really much the same anywhere. A new friend swore — and he'd been a chemical engineer at Caltex — he swore it was about A.O.R. refinery because the fuckups were the same, the delays, finding bits of rock in the pipes, slapdash construction. It was All the same.

When I was 16 and first went to work, I wanted to write a book some day about work. I didn't think of a factory or an industry and I certainly didn't think of a petrol refinery, but when it came, that was it. And when the refinery came I really just fitted the characters into it, once I had the incidents and the growth of that plant. I didn't think of the destruction of it. So there were 20 years between the idea and the writing of it.

My first full time work was for S.T.C. They manufactured radios, radio valves, and I was so disappointed at being at work with all my
David Ireland won the Miles Franklin award for the third time with his novel, *A Woman of the Future* (Allen Lane). The award, one of Australia’s most prestigious, was established under the will of the writer Stella Miles Franklin and is given annually for a novel ‘which must present Australian life, in any of its phases’.

(Photo: News Ltd)
friends still at school, I thought I'll write about this, because it's so awful. And that feeling persisted through all the jobs I've ever had: the waste, the stupidity, the inefficiency.

But I don't want to push any ideological angle. If I'm close enough to my objects and my incidents and the soil out of which I grow I don't need to think about it. Of course I do think during the construction of the book, but I'm frightened of getting too close to any wider frame of reference in case I push the material one way or another. It's my own feelings, my own reactions and the material working in me and I feel if I'm close enough to it, the meanings will arise out. Someone said in a review once 'in the astringent Lawson tradition'. I've never read Lawson. I don't know about the tradition. If I'm close enough to what I'm doing, really getting it, sure, I'll be in the tradition because this is the same soil, only 50 years on.

Well I'm wondering if this is the key to one of the big differences between the Prisoner and The Glass Canoe on the one hand, and A Woman of the Future on the other. You seem to have moved towards a more conscious complexity, more conscious of its levels of ambiguity. In the Prisoner the subtleties do seem to, as you say, arise out of the book, less consciously. A Woman of the Future and City of Women seem more playful.

I think you're right there... I didn't feel it at the time, but looking back, yes.

You value the closeness of your novels to your feelings about what you see. Have you ever been able to take a whole character from life?

I've never done that yet. The Samurai was a complex of two people I knew, plus some of me. No, I'm scared of that. And in all my novels, I try to pitch things just that little bit ahead because I've got this horrible fear with publishing delays and so on putting things back by 18 months, that it's going to be out of date, and I so much want a person picking the novel up to feel NOW. I know that with some of the things in The Chantic Bird or The Flesheaters you can't help feeling it's a few years ago. Perhaps the currency, weights and measures, some phrase about a mile or a yard. At the time I knew those things were going to change, and I tried to put them ahead, but I'm not sure. Some might have slipped through there. I try not to have events that will date the book too much.

That problem's really caught me right now. This book in which the
The first problem was: what? To do it with this the middle of his life so you’ve got 40 there and 40 there? I’ve finally come round, if I can, to doing the story as if it’s gone through many people’s mouths over a number of years and we’re looking back on the 20th century without too much obvious mucking around with historical events. I want to get away from the present day 1980, so that someone reading the book in 20 years’ time won’t be conscious of 1980, or the Depression or the war, or Korea or anything like that. I can see the value of looking back at a book and saying Ah, the ‘thirties. I can see the value of it, but I don’t want it.

Well, one of the lines that struck me in City of Women was where the narrator says ‘the old order was male and sterile’. As a writer you’ve made your mark with many of your readers, especially with The Glass Canoe and The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, as somebody who has gone further in exploring male mythology in Australian fiction than anybody else. Further than Lawson: his range is narrower.

Did it seem to you with A Woman of the Future and now City of Women that you were finished with writing about men for a while?

No. That comes about because of a gradual change in me I think, this growing dissatisfaction with the male lot, which is to a great extent separate from say the intellectual life or the life of arts represented often enough by females. I came across it in my own personal life and I didn’t know what to do with it; I didn’t know what to think about it. Just as I still haven’t worked out my attitudes about war, about prisoners and warders ... and police. And both those things have been socked home to me pretty heavily in the last few weeks. One, by the film Stir and last night by an exhibition of paintings on war and peace.

And you think of those as being part of the male principle?

Yes. I don’t mean to say that if women were concerned with it they wouldn’t have armaments just as effective. Up to now they’ve been to one side and those things have barrelled on by themselves without any help from women. I know that in women’s prisons the same sorts of people get the power amongst the prisoners; the warders are similar, I believe. It’s still worrying me and I haven’t got any answers to it and it worried me in my own personal contact with the people I habitually met, even though those people were from a pretty wide spectrum. Law people and public servants over in the city pubs I go to and actors and other sorts of people down in others. And knockabout people in others.
Those people male?

Oh yes all, just about all male, and when the females were there the females were silenced or they stood back and let the males talk; or if they were talkative the males abandoned them. I found that I could no longer talk with the people that I was thrown amongst.

With A Woman of the Future can you remember a specific moment where you said 'Yes that’s what I’ll do!' or was it something you intended to do all along?

I intended to do it actually, but I came to it only through something very trivial. I came across a couple of references from vaguely literary people to the effect that Australian male writers didn’t seem to be capable of writing convincingly about female characters. And after I’d seen that about twice or three times, I thought this is getting on my works. If one’s a writer it’s all one, and one must be able to write about a woman. So that’s what I’ll do next. And I thought about the parts of Australia that I would write about if I wrote about a female and then the two things started to grow tendrils towards each other and then the thing was obviously about the country: about Australia.

And in City of Women, a book in some ways like The Glass Canoe where you take individual character studies: in the process of writing those has it ever been that you based the story on a male and simply reversed it?

Oh... most of them, I think.

That’s really interesting, because what comes across right from The Chantic Bird is some concern with androgyny. The relationship between Peterson in the narrative is an interesting beginning to that and in this new book those neat confusions between Bobbie and Billie and those phrases where you talk about the girls being 'good guys' and so on...

Well, don’t forget I hear girls talking about other girls as 'guys'.

As 'guys'? Really?

Oh, yes: 'She’s a good guy.' I’ve seen it written in American books but I’ve heard it more recently here in Sydney. Rather rough girls, it’s true...
Is that theme something you’ve noticed and been interested in in Australian society or is it a projection of the often talked about androgyny of the artist — as you were saying before, the need to be able to write male and female?

It may have elements of both those, but I think the main spring is in me. And I’ve always felt about human beings that they’re always running to either this extreme or that and they want you to believe this or that and right from the time I was a child I thought, in respect of manners, one’s attitude, women were over there and men were here and it seemed to me that was quite wrong: they were intertwined. Now, you’d see more of the female; and then more of the male. Males and females partook so much in common of human nature that the great division between them seemed quite wrong. I didn’t go into it in the sense of preaching in the book but it’s the sort of thing I have in mind privately in sympathising with Alethea, when she says ‘Nothing is as they told me’. I guess I’m preaching that, but only in a very oblique way.

Yes, but at a surface level I’d imagine that to many of your readers, four of your major books seem to split up almost as they say an Australian party does: men up one end and women down the other.

Mm — but again you’ve introduced another thing that I’m a bit against. That is you’ve said ‘Australian’. If you go to an Italian party the men’ll be up that end and the women talking down there.

You’ve picked the right one of course to compare. I wonder if it’s true elsewhere.

Well it depends where it is. In outer suburban New York at a barbecue you haven’t got them mixing so well that the grown up boys ... the men ... talking football are mixing with the ladies who’re talking about the patterns in Vogue. You notice I’m selecting the examples.

Yet Americans are often the first to revolt against the male/female polarisation they see in Australian society and say ‘Well this wouldn’t happen in the States...’

I guess I’m being selective there because I think one’s perception of one’s own social stratum has a big effect. And the Italians I’m thinking of are of the same stratum as the Australians I’m thinking of.
Does it have anything to do with the supposed unfriendliness of Australian society to the creative person. Back in Lawson, to take 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', in the first paragraph Joe Wilson says 'I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake and grew up to be a Bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me — or the world.' Do you remember feeling that? In all the books, for the narrator figure there's a strong sense of isolation.

That's a very strong thing. I'm writing about it in this present book. I think I was given this by my mother... and the fact that I was born into a minor religious sect. Didn't bother me in the least, but I went to a number of different schools and that meant that I didn't have a life like my kids have got. They'll have been with at least some of their confrères through primary and all through to high school and they're now looking forward rather sadly, to leaving them next year. But I've had a history of leaving and not being close to anybody.

Because your own family was on the move.

Because of that and also because my own temperament took to it. I had to. Otherwise there'd be some grating and conflict — and to get out of that I changed.

When you were at school did your friends know that you wrote and if they did, did that make a difference in their attitudes to you?

Oh no. No, I wouldn't discuss anything like that with the kids I knocked around with. I didn't actually try to write till I left school. I left school early. No, I was always a singer and a drawer and a painter in the different schools I went to. I didn't mind people seeing my productions in these things, but not with this... Because I felt within myself that it would be many years before I could write anything acceptable to me and it didn't seem anything more than bullshit to be surrounded by people with much the same abilities as I had who therefore would admire things that were much the same as what they were producing. I wanted to be different and much much better at it.

And in this isolated position that comes out in The Glass Canoe, City of Women, A Woman of the Future, given that you seem often to be documenting a vision of a society and a very broad one, has that meant they haven't let you into some of the mysteries? How much of Sibley is there in you?
Well I didn’t take Sibley personally. I had to invent Sibley, as I invented Alky Jack, to make less pointed the first person narrator’s position. Here’s a person coming in, although he was brought up in the district and therefore not really a stranger to the tribe. If I’ve got this person Meat constantly probing and analysing, he’s more or less doing Sibley’s work. So in order to take the heat off him I created Sibley. He’s got to make the sacrifice. And Alky Jack’s got to take the more pointed of his reflections on life. And Meat has got to pretend only to be giving him an ear out of sheer decency. Otherwise if I didn’t have these two characters I’d have this guy being a turd! It’s like me — to the people I used to get around amongst in order to get some company, I wouldn’t mention anything of my private interests. But I would be as knowledgeable about their things as I could be: Sport or whatever it is that they were interested in.

Christina Stead has said that people tell writers everything, that they’re falling over themselves to tell you bizarre stories because you’re recording them. Does that happen to you in these pubs, or in other places?

Yes. But you’ve got to treat it with a very suspicious eye. If people know you’re a writer they give you all sorts of things that are useless. Whereas if they don’t know you’re a writer, but just that you’re a sympathetic presence, they tell you lots of things without knowing it. If you don’t ask questions you’re hardly suspected — and of course you’ve got no tools round you...

And of course, that’s Meat Man’s advantage, isn’t it? The reason that he’s allowed to know so much of what goes on is that he’s not ostensibly there to set it all down, as Sibley is.

Mm. In the football team he’s a hanger-on more or less, with the bigger boys.

This sense of isolation goes right back to The Chantic Bird, with the hidey hole up in the roof, with the 16 ¾ year old looking at all the action, and yet not entirely part of the action.

I realise this can be sheeted home to me to a large extent, but there’s another reason for it. In The Glass Canoe, to get the pub up as a little citadel and increase the sense of the isolation of the people from the rest.
of society, in this little eddy, I’ve cut their laterals that connect most of them with their parents, their friends and their relatives. There must be some days in real life when those guys are simply not there — they’re on holidays with the family or with some friends out fishing and they’ve got all sorts of clubs they belong to at work. It’s not as bleak really — I’ve falsified it to get them all together in their little temple.

*Yes, but whereas the other drinkers talk to Meat Man in The Glass Canoe, there’s very little interchange in The City of Women between Billie and the other characters. She’s all the time addressing Bobbie; but of course Bobbie never answers. So it’s closest to the narrator in The Chantic Bird isn’t it? There aren’t the answers. You got a sense of somebody moving through a world, being part of it and yet not.*

But when you get to the end of *City of Women* and you see that what you’ve been told is wrong, that the city’s just normal, and that the city of women is what she sees, this lack of her going out to them reinforces the feeling that she is strange; this girl cut off, growing up and not ever wanting to let go. Her voice is almost schooled and she’s just describing things. Her life is all inside her.

*She finds solace in words, the manipulation of language is very clever for a chapter or so — but did you tire of her doing that? Because she doesn’t keep doing it with such frequency throughout the book. Did you find that an unattractive aspect of her character?*

I don’t know why I dropped it, I can’t say that I tired of it. But I think I thought that it was mucking up the stories and that they were stories as they were. The piece about Mouse is in the third person — and any quotation marks is what someone else said, and I felt that that was much better that way. She’s only talking about these people that she’s alleged to get around amongst.

*So it’s less her self-consciousness that’s the centre of interest as the novel goes on...*

Yes, that’s right: less.

*Can you tell me about leopards?*

*Leopards? I don’t know a thing about them.*
Oh yes, you do. I'm thinking here of A Woman of the Future and the lament of one reviewer that in an otherwise uncompromisingly Australian novel, you've chosen such an unAustralian animal as the central image. Do leopards have particular associations for you?

I wanted something that was a convincingly large animal and there are none in this country. And as a matter of fact, I wanted something in Australia, something absolutely strange and a reminder of all that this country isn't. An image as violently different as a leopard is from our tame little animals was necessary for the image of Alethea's change: a change that could not have been predicted from what you can see around us here in the country. Something exotic, that doesn't have vices and stupidities attached to it. The lion has a bad name and it's a symbol of other things in the past. And the panther has a name for subterfuge and stealth and springing out. But the leopard is a real hunter and a real climber and is very smart.

Particularly female?

Well, there's no gross difference between male and female leopard as there is between male and female lion. And no gross difference between their hunting habits as far as I know, whereas there is with the lion.

Which takes us back to androgyny. You've given the characters in City of Women androgynous names Billie and Bobbie, and you've played round with that. Any associations with Dionysos?

No. Not to me.

O.K. I give up! Can you remember the first thing you wrote?

Well I got them together and threw them away some years ago. The first few were highly derivative. I remember some stupid thing clogged up with adjectives. Perhaps I was about 15 or so.

Prose?

No, verse. But I don't remember beyond the first line so don't make anything out of it! I think 'Low sullen clouds, grey with grief and pain'. I'm damned if I can remember the second line. I think it had about 12 lines.
Did you read a lot then?

Well, I had the impression I did, but I find now there's so many things I haven't read I don't know what I was doing all the time. I read a lot of poetry then.

Still?

Nup. No, I find it's impossible to keep up. I read it at random in magazines.

You're working on a novel now: you don't consciously stop reading other novels?

No — I simply haven't got time. I keep up with a certain minimum for my own information. But I find that I don't like to surrender myself to a novel.

And yet you write the bloody things! ...

Yes — other people can surrender. I find I can look at parts of what the writer's doing with the language and that's my interest in it. Because I'm not affected by other people's subject matter — not any more. Originally I read as much as I could to see what other people had written about as well as how they'd written it, so that I wouldn't duplicate it. I didn't base my Chantic Bird on Salinger and it was many years before I'd read Burgess. I wanted to be quite different.

You don't go to the novel for what it says about life, then.

I don't, no. I think one of the chief values of novels is — well it's all very well to talk about the novel as the way someone sees the world, but in a very real sense this is the world. Lots of people are writing from the world and it's fair dinkum stuff straight off the street. I'm not that sort of novelist. I want to give it an eccentric, off-to-the-margin view, perhaps an angle people haven't thought of.

And do you regard a novel as a vehicle for exploring that angle? You said earlier that you're not a preaching novelist, that you don't have a preconceived set of notions about life that you use the novel to put forward.

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Well, to some extent I'm actually exploring it for myself. But as well there are pet ideas of my own that constantly go in.

What's the most important one to you?

I'd have to read some of those things! No. One of the most important is to remind people that other people exist.

This business of the community and the tribe is really important in your writing, isn't it? In City of Women the narrator says the problem with men is they can’t form communities. Did you find out in writing these last two books that’s also true of females?

It's not so much males or females, but the way your outside life's organised. But I still think it's part of the way males have grown that they're more inclined to stand everyone off and do something they want to, irrespective of anyone else's well-being. Women stand for co-operation because of traditional roles, but I fear that given the same opportunities... Well, I'm really manipulating old-fashioned ideas.

SVEN POULSEN