

The Privilege to Write What You Want

Roddy Doyle Talks to Joanna Kosmalska¹

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JOANNA KOSMALSKA: In some of your recent works you tackle the issues of migration. Tell me, have you ever lived outside Ireland?

RODDY DOYLE: Yes, I have. I spent five months in West Germany. I lived in London for several periods, which, added together, amounted to about a year. Later I went to New York for six months. When I was a student, I worked in Germany and London. The summers were very long. I would leave the day after the exams finished and I would come back, not on the day when college started, but on the day when you'd be struck off the register if you didn't turn up. Once, I left in early May and I came back in November.

JK: How about New York?

RD: In New York I was teaching in a college in Manhattan for a semester. I loved the city and I wouldn't mind spending more time there. We

stayed in the States right through the winter. It was spectacular. Although we did not get any hurricane, we experienced the snowfall, which we have had a bit now in Ireland for the last few years, but at that point me and my children would have never seen snow and that was a daily occurrence in New York in the wintertime. As for the teaching side of it, I had been a teacher for fourteen years, I had enjoyed it but I wouldn't like to be teaching all the time. Even though it was college teaching, so it was quite different, I don't think it would be a good move for me to go back into teaching. Just as a variety now and then. Besides, it gave me the excuse to live in New York, which was wonderful.

JK: Have you had a chance to visit Poland?

RD: I was in Poland in 1977. It was a long time ago. I was a geography student in UCD back then and it

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was a part of our programme. I travelled with a group of people on the bus. We went through West and East Germany into Poland, first across the country into Warsaw and then south to Wadowice, where the pope was born. It was a beautiful city.

JK: What were your first impressions?

RD: You have to bear in mind that I was visiting a Communist country or what was an attempt at a Communist country. I'd just come through Germany, and I'd been to East and West Berlin, so the differences were very stark. Really stark. One of the things that struck me immediately while driving through East Germany was how flat it all was, and how few divisions of land there were. Just vast areas, like one huge field. It may have made economic sense but it was all dreary to look at. It was so boring. Then we went to Poland and it also seemed flat, quite in contrast with my own country. No sea I could see anyway. Warsaw struck me at the time as a place that had been built in a hurry, which was true. The reconstruction works were going on at the time, but it was still a very new project. That was interesting itself. The Palace of Culture was like something taken out from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In fact, it may well have been. The couple of department stores that I went into were almost empty. Empty of variety. People queuing up outside

the shops. A lot of queues. A lot of vodka. People were friendly.

JK: Any second thoughts on the visit?

RD: My politics has always been to the left. What the visit had done when I came home and it all began to sink in was shape my beliefs. I was 18 when I went to Poland. By the time I turned 19 my political views were more precise and I wouldn't have considered myself a Communist. I didn't like what I saw after the Berlin Wall. I took a very keen interest in the Solidarity movement in the late 1980s. I kept myself up to date and when any books were appearing, I bought them immediately. I read virtually everything I could lay my hands on, especially a lot of Timothy Garton Ash. He had a great familiarity with Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. As I started to write around that time, I realized what a privilege it was to write exactly what you want. People can react with it and say it is rubbish. But there is no one to say you can't write that whereas that was the case with the intellectuals in, what was then called, Eastern Europe. It was a fascinating visit. But it was almost like visiting history. Time travel. I haven't gone back yet, which is strange in a way.

JK: Ireland, in turn, took a leap forward. What would you say has been the most significant change in Ireland since the 1990s?

RD: I would say it is reflective in the census, in the proportion of people who weren't born in Ireland but are living their lives here. Effectively they are citizens, even though legally they are not. It is a huge proportion of population and it's a much more complicated picture than it used to be the case. That is for me the most important change.

JK: How did Irish people cope with this massive wave of immigrants?

RD: One thing that reassures me that we didn't cope too badly with it is the fact that immigration has never been a political electoral issue. Nobody has ever jumped up and claimed that there was an excessive amount of immigrants. Nobody has said there was a high number of unemployed people and if we got rid of the immigrants, we would have a lower unemployment rate. That has been a simple, stupid mathematics often in the UK and their far-right parties that have seats in councils and seats in Europe, not in the House of Parliament. I wouldn't call it racist as such, but that extreme negative point hasn't been made out loud in Ireland because nobody wants to hear it. If any politician or people who aspire to political ambition felt that it would grant them extra support, they would start shouting. And I haven't heard it. That is a good thing.

On the other hand, the fact that I've never seen a black Garda is worry-

ing. By now we should hear Garda speaking accents other than rural Ireland. We should be seeing Garda that either haven't been born in Ireland or whose parents haven't been born here. We haven't seen that in the public sector yet. I think that integration is needed. Efforts have to be made to bring immigrants into the institutions of the state to reflect the facts that have been revealed in the census.

JK: There are a lot of Polish people among the immigrants. How do the Irish perceive Poles?¹

RD: As far as I can make out, I've never heard about any hostility towards the Polish people. In fact, the attitude of the Irish is quite warm. They feel certain affinity. Even people like myself, who have no religion, but they were brought up Catholic. They understand it. If I am walking on a promenade outside on a Sunday, I can often tell who the Polish people are because they are dressed in their Sunday clothes. That used to happen here in the 60s and 70s when I was a kid. The Irish people don't do that anymore. But the knowledge of it is still bubbling away inside them. The Polish people are here to remind us what we used to be like. There is also a certain rhythm to the Polish life that is probably very similar to the

¹ According to the Central Statistics Office, the estimated number of Polish immigrants in Ireland amounts to about 123,000.

rhythm of the Irish life. The Poles are also similar in that they land in a new place and organize themselves into communities straightaway. The Irish do exactly the same when they go abroad.

JK: Is there a stereotype of a Pole in Ireland?

RD: All I ever hear is that the standard of work by Polish men is brilliant. And they clean up after work, unlike Irish guys. They turn up on time. You don't smell a drink. I've never heard anybody say "Bloody Poles" and I don't think there has been any change of the attitude despite the crisis.

JK: Some of your recent works depict Polish characters. One of them is "The Bandstand." How did it come about?

RD: I approached the editors of *Metro Éireann*, Chinedu Onyejelem and Abel Ugba, and asked them if I could contribute to the multicultural magazine they were going ahead with. I started to write short stories for them, which were published in instalments. For the first time I had to work close to the deadlines, under more pressure than I'd been used to.

JK: Have you tried to mirror the way Polish people speak?

RD: I've noticed that most Eastern Europeans have really good English. They are very articulate and fluent. But their language is often unnaturally formal, as if taken from a course book. You can tell there's something not quite right. So I underdo the characters' English to mark that it is not their mother tongue. I put a little crack in the sentences now and then. It doesn't hinder the understanding but signals that it's their second language.

JK: Are your characters based on real people?

RD: No, they aren't. I know some African people but not many Polish. "The Bandstand" came out of an article I saw in *The Irish Times*. It was a story of a Polish guy who came here with a university degree but no English. He couldn't find a job and ended up homeless but was too proud to go home. That was a starting point. Then I did some observing in pubs and streets. It got my imagination going.

JK: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today.

WORKS CITED

Central Statistics Office. *Press Release Census 2011 Profile 6 Migration and Diversity*. Web CSO, 4 Oct. 2012. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.