

INTERVIEW:

Sebastian Barry

By Nadine O'Regan

In the most successful period of his career to date, Sebastian Barry tells Nadine O'Regan why the storyteller still feels like a student at 64.



Photo: Naaise Cullhane

S

ebastian Barry has won myriad plaudits for his novels and plays over the years, but when it comes to the art of storytelling, the Irish

writer considers himself an eternal student. “In a funny way, you’re always starting out,” Barry says, as he settles himself in the Alumni Room, looking out onto a cold and rainy day in Trinity, where he once studied Latin and English. “It’s always new for me – because whenever I’m starting a book, you’ve never written this book before. I think it was Günter Grass who said he always comes to writing as if for the first time.”

It’s an energetic and sparky approach to fiction and it’s one that has seen Barry’s career flourish through the decades. At 64, Barry, an erudite and engaging presence with a flair for a colourful anecdote, has entered perhaps the most successful period of his career. Having already been shortlisted twice for the Man Booker Prize, in 2017, the Wicklow-based author became the first author to win the prestigious Costa Book of the Year prize twice, for his novels *The Secret Scripture* and *Days Without End*. With a film adaptation of *Days Without End* in the pipeline, Barry’s latest play, *On Blueberry Hill*, recently premiered in an off-Broadway production Stateside.

Barry is also the Laureate for Irish Fiction, having taken over the three-year post from previous incumbent Anne Enright, who was the first person to occupy the prestigious role, an initiative of the Arts Council which seeks to reward the contribution of writers to Irish cultural life, while also supporting them to promote Irish literature and encourage a new generation of readers and writers. “The moment that Michael D reached up to put the medal around my neck was a scrumptious moment,” he recalls. “But I was worried, because you have to invent yourself – and do something meaningful. So my idea was to do book clubs with people who were temporarily constrained, whether in hospital, prison or direct provision. And I have found it quite overwhelming in a good



Sebastian Barry & Nadine O'Regan

way, just to go down as an ordinary citizen, father and writer, and be with people who were maybe having to do their dialysis three days a week. They engage with you in this beautiful way.”

Barry has always rooted his creative energy in other people, and in the stories and secrets they might tell him. Although he has a difficult relationship with his architect father, Barry’s mother was the late Joan O’Hara, a member of the Abbey Players, best known for playing the role of Eunice in *Fair City*. “She was wonderfully indiscreet – if there were any family secrets, they were there to be told to me,” he says. “But the minus side of that was that we were told things far too young.” A comforting contrast came in the shape of Barry’s grandparents. “I made a sanctuary of them,” he says. “One taught me how to paint and the other taught me how to listen to stories. I wrote a novel called *The Temporary Gentleman* and it was the hardest thing I’ve done, because it was about my grandfather.”

More recently, Barry’s inspiration has stemmed from his three children, Toby, Merlin and Coral. The central relationship in *Days Without End* was sparked by Barry’s son Toby, who was 16 when he revealed to his parents in 2014 that he was gay. Barry and his wife Alison had been worrying a

lot previously about Toby, who had seemed depressed, but the effect of coming out was transformative for him, even though Irish society sometimes remains an inhospitable place. “Toby has told me that not a week goes by without something being said to him in the street,” Barry says. “There’s no such thing as a hate crime in this country. There’s no specific law against homophobic remarks made in public, which I think is very serious.”

As part of his fiction laureateship, Barry has begun giving occasional courses to university students – and he hopes that part of what he will teach them is to remember that they must be themselves, both in real life and, if they seek to become writers, in how they compose their fiction. “It’s the shape of your inner mind [that’s important], and not somebody else’s shape,” he says. “You make sentences out of an inchoate sense of something. To my mind, it’s easier to write like James Joyce than yourself, even if your own work makes no stain upon the silence, and is of no worth. Nonetheless, that is the higher thing to do. It’s your birdsong.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadine O'Regan M.Phil. (2001) is a journalist and broadcaster. She is Books and Arts Editor with *The Sunday Business Post*. Follow her on Twitter at @nadineoregan.



Days Without End

EXTRACT FROM *DAYS WITHOUT END* BY SEBASTIAN BARRY

Chapter One

The method of laying out a corpse in Missouri sure took the proverbial cake. Like decking out our poor lost troopers for marriage rather than death. All their uniforms brushed down with lamp-oil into a state never seen when they were alive. Their faces clean shaved, as if the embalmer sure didn't like no whiskers showing. No one that knew him could have recognised Trooper Watchorn because those famous Dundrearies was gone. Anyway Death likes to make a stranger of your face. True enough their boxes weren't but cheap wood but that

was not the point. You lift one of those boxes and the body makes a big sag in it. Wood cut so thin at the mill it was more a wafer than a plank. But dead boys don't mind things like that. The point was, we were glad to see them so well turned out, considering.

I am talking now about the finale of my first engagement in the business of war. 1851 it was most likely. Since the bloom was gone off me, I had volunteered aged seventeen in Missouri. If you had all your limbs they took you. If you were a one-eyed boy they might take you too even so.

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The only pay worse than the worst pay in America was army pay. And they fed you queer stuff till your shit just stank. But you were glad to get work because if you didn't work for the few dollars in America you hungered, I had learned that lesson. Well, I was sick of hungering.

Believe me when I say there is a certain type of man loves soldiering, no matter how mean the pay. First thing, you got a horse. He might be a spavined nag, he might be plagued by colic, he might show a goitre in his neck the size of a globe, but he was a horse. Second place, you got a uniform. It might have certain shortcomings in the stitching department, but it was a uniform. Blue as a bluebottle's hide.

Swear to God, army was a good life. I was seventeen or thereabouts beginning, I could not say for certain. I will not say the years going up to my army days was easy. But all that dancing put muscle on me, in a wiry sort of way. I'm not speaking against my customers, I'm speaking for them. If you pay a dollar for a dance you like a good few sweeps of the floor for that, God knows.

Yes, the army took me, I'm proud to say. Thank God John Cole was my first friend in America and so in the army too and the last friend for that matter. He was with me nearly all through this exceeding surprising Yankee sort of life which was good going in every way. No more than a boy like me but even at sixteen years old he looked like a man right enough. I first saw him when he was fourteen or so, very different. That's what the saloon owner said too. Time's up, fellas, you ain't kids no more, he says. Dark face, black eyes, Indian eyes they called them that time. Glittering. Older fellas in the platoon said Indians were just evil boys, blank-faced evil boys fit to kill you soon as look at you. Said Indians were to be cleared off the face of the earth, most like that would be the best policy. Soldiers like to talk high. That's how courage is made most like, said John Cole, being an understanding man.

John Cole and me we came to the volunteering point together of course.

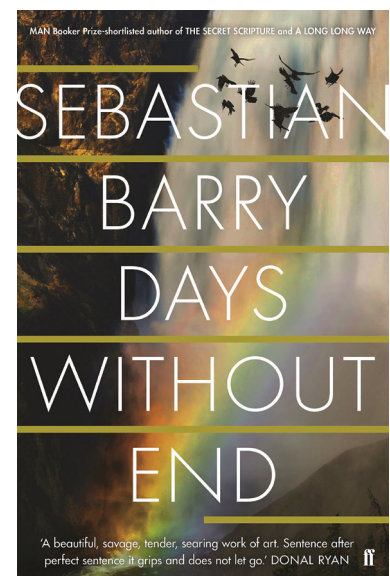
We was offering ourselves in a joint sale I guess and the same look of the arse out of his trousers that I had he had too. Like twins. Well when we finished up at the saloon we didn't leave in no dresses. We must have looked like beggar boys. He was born in New England where the strength died out of his father's earth. John Cole was only twelve when he lit out a-wandering. First moment I saw him I thought, there's a pal. That's what it was. Thought he was a dandy-looking sort of boy. Pinched though he was in the face by hunger. Met him under a hedge in goddamn Missouri. We was only under the hedge as a consequence the heavens were open in a downpour. Way out on those mudflats beyond old St Louis. Expect to see a sheltering duck sooner than a human. Heavens open. I scarper for cover and suddenly he's there. Might have never seen him otherwise. Friend for a whole life. Strange and fateful encounter you could say. Lucky. But first thing he draws a little sharp knife he carried made of a broken spike. He was intending to stick it in me if I looked to go vicious against him. He was a very kept-back-looking thirteen years old I reckon. Anyhows under the hedge afore-mentioned when we got to talking he said his great-grandma was a Indian whose people were run out of the east long since. Over in Indian country now. He had never met them. Don't know why he told me that so soon only I was very friendly and maybe he thought he would lose that blast of friendship if I didn't know the bad things quickly. Well. I told him how best to look at that. Me, the child of poor Sligionians blighted likewise. No, us McNultys didn't got much to crow about.

Maybe out of respect for the vulnerable soul of John Cole I might skip ahead violently and avoid an account of our earlier years. Except he might also acknowledge that those years were important in their way and I cannot say either that they constituted in any way a time of shameful suffering in particular. Were they shameful? I don't see eye to eye with that. Let me call them our dancing days. Why the hell not. After all we was only children obliged to survive in a dangerous terrain. And survive we

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did and as you see I have lived to tell the tale. Having made our acquaintance under an anonymous hedge it seemed natural and easy to join together in the enterprise of continuing survival. That is John Cole in his minority and I placed our steps side by side on the rainy road and proceeded into the next town in that frontier district where there were hundreds of rough miners working and a half dozen tumultuous saloons set up in a muddy thoroughfare endeavouring to entertain them.

Not that we knew much of that. In these times John Cole was a slight boy as I have laboured to illustrate with his river-black eyes and his lean face as sharp as a hunting dog. I was my younger self. That is though I was maybe fifteen after my Irish and Canadian and American adventures I looked as young as him.



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