

3.6 Colm Tóibín in Conversation with Joseph Rezek

Transcript

Tara Menon

Welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship.

My name is Tara Menon and I'm the host for this final episode of season three. We've had an all-star cast this season, including conversations between Chang-rae Lee and Anne Anlin Cheng, Damon Galgut and Andrew van der Vlies, Ruth Ozeki and Rebecca Evans. We hope that you listen to them all.

Today it is my great pleasure to welcome Colm Tóibín, who will be in conversation with Joseph Rezek. Colm Tóibín is the author of 10 novels, including *The Master*, *Brooklyn*, and my personal favorite, *The Testament of Mary*. His fiction has won too many awards and prizes to list, but the postcolonial girl in me can't resist mentioning that three of his novels have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. To borrow the words of DT Max from his recent New Yorker profile of Colm, Tóibín's novels typically depict an unfinished battle between those who know what they feel and those who don't, between those who have found a taunt peace within themselves and those who remain unsettled. His most recent novel, *The Magician*, which imagines the life of Thomas Mann, is no exception. Colm is also the author of two collections of short stories, several books of criticism, and he is a regular contributor to the New York Review of Books. He is the Irene and Sidney B. Silverman professor of the Humanities at Columbia University and the Chancellor of the University of Liverpool. A few weeks ago, Colm was named the new laureate for Irish Fiction.

Joseph Rezek is associate professor of English and the director of the American and New England Studies program at Boston University. He is the author of *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800 to 1850*. Joe has published widely in the fields of book history, early American literature, early Black Atlantic literature, and British Romanticism. This semester, Joe is teaching the history of the novel in English, a survey course he inaugurated when he began teaching at Boston University over a decade ago. I can think of no better person to be in conversation with Colm than Joe. Now the fun begins. I turn things over to you, Joe, and I get to sit back and listen.

Joseph Rezek

Great, thank you, Tara, for that introduction and for bringing Colm and I together for this conversation. I'm totally thrilled and excited to ask him questions about the craft of novel making.

Now, it's probably obvious that Colm is the best person on the planet to discuss the question of how novelists make novels, because he's published novels about novelists, most recently, of course, *The Magician*, which I loved for so many reasons, mainly because it gets us into the mind and life of Thomas Mann.

So I'm going to ask Colm to read a little bit from *The Magician*, but I first need to ask him a question about that book. The word "magician," as referred to Thomas Mann, for those of you who don't know, came from a nickname that his children gave him after a costume event. But of course, the magician is a term for the novelist, someone who creates a world out of thin air. And I want to ask Colm first about this idea of choosing that term to describe Thomas Mann. It's pretty explicit in the novel. There's a

moment when Thomas, after the publication of his first blockbuster novel, he says "There was some source for it,"--for *Buddenbrooks*—"that was outside of himself, beyond his control."

This is Colm about, thinking about what Thomas Mann thought. "It was like something in magic. Something that would not come again so easily."

So obviously when we read novels, it's a world creating event for readers. You describe Thomas Mann as having it coming from outside of him and I just wonder if you could reflect on the novelist as a creator of magic, as a magician.

Colm Tóibín

I think there are two things. The first is ironic. The first is that in the novel I wrote about Henry James, it's called *The Master*, and he was called a master by many people, but it didn't seem like that when he was alone, he didn't ever feel in control. So the title is ironic in that you see the public life where it seems like the master has come into the room and a private figure that it does not seem to him, or to his close associates that he is in fact in control in that way, so too with the magician, where, as you say, his children as a joke name called him magician. He invokes the word magic in even in titles, *The Magic Mountain* or *Mario and the Magician*. And he has magic occurring even in, say Dr. Faust's historic pact with the devil or even in scenes in *The Magic Mountain* but that he himself, we learned from his diaries, was much more uneasy in the world, that he really doesn't, he--also, he wasn't someone who set the world on fire, he was often deliberate, you know, very careful in the way he proceeded in the world. So there was an element of, this is the absolute opposite to a magician.

But the question you ask is not that, the question you asked can be answered this way: that you can plan a novel and you can even know each day what it is you're seeking to achieve, but you cannot plan the images that will come into your head unbidden as you work, so that as you're in a sentence, the next one comes with an image which you had never thought of before, and it seems to have come automatically as a result of just the rhythms of the prose, bringing it into being and you follow it and see where it will take you. It's not as though it's loose or that it is in control. That's always nonsense, saying you know a novel wrote itself, or you know I didn't feel in control. That's always nonsense, that's Rogers talking nonsense.

You're always in control. You could always just look and say that isn't working and it's going to be deleted. But what happens that's true is something occurs to you from the blue. And that blue is a strange place because you think, a second ago I didn't know this. And now it's here, and it's not just coming as an idea. It's coming, and not merely as an image, but as a rhythm, as it's coming in words and it isn't that the words are leading me but it seems as though they are, I mean it's an effortlessness that can come, and the effortlessness can only come if you've been working. And often it comes, you've been working for days and you're living in language, so that language comes to you in the same way breath comes to you. Almost the same way breath comes to you, I mean almost naturally. And so yes, something like magic can happen in a given moment where you can look back and think, that came from nowhere. And it seemed so easy when it came, but if I had thought about it, it wouldn't have happened. And so that's the magic.

JR

You know you mentioned *The Master*, which I reread in the last couple weeks and it was a great experience for me to compare the portrait of Henry James to the portrait of Thomas Mann. And I had assumed in reading *The Master* the first time that we were getting a lot of how Colm Tóibín writes in the portrait of Henry James. In reading the Thomas Mann book, it isn't, to me it's a very different portrait of

a very different novelist, and part of that had to do with James seeming to, I mean, he's obviously a different person, but his creative process as depicted in *The Master* is very controlled and reserved. Whereas in *The Magician* Thomas Mann is a little bit, he seems to have less control over the things that inspire him. So I just wanted to ask before you read from *The Magician*, is going from James, these two novels about novelists, going from James to Mann, did you see that they were more alike than different? And then how do you, as a novelist, fit in sort of sort of between them?

CT

I think there's a great difference between anyone gay or closeted gay or whatever word you want to use about the 19th century. Born in 1843 of James was and born in 1875 as Mann was, and I think those 30 years made a very big difference about self-consciousness and what you felt you could say or not say and James tended to be very very careful, he didn't keep diaries. He kept notebooks which was about work. But he didn't keep diaries. He burnt most of the letters he received, and he expected other people to burn, which of course they didn't.

But I think the big question is that Mann's first novel published when he was 26 is *Buddenbrooks*, and it really is personal. He describes a possible person that's very close to him and describes his own death, but describes his father, his mother, his grandparents, rebuilds. It would be as though Henry James had gone, I mean to some extent he does it in Washington Square, which is his grandmother's house, and the opening of *The Portrait of a Lady* at Albany, which is his other grandmother's house, but he doesn't follow through with describing, for example, the James family, which would have been an extraordinary novel to have himself and William and Alice with their father and mother. But that's what Mann did. So it meant that Mann's trajectory from then on could be as personal as he wanted it to be, and he could also let things spring on him, such as *Death In Venice*, which you know imagine wasn't planned, wasn't part of a strategy.

And of course, he didn't have the same, James was all up to about 1900's, since you know you're interested in the book trade, you know, he was really writing for serialization. *Portrait of a Lady* is written for serialization and you can see it in the form of the book, but you can also see it in the content of the book. Mann didn't have that problem. His wife was tremendously rich and *Buddenbrooks* had made so much money that he never had to write with any interest in the market. The market came to him, he didn't go to the market. It's the opposite of James. So I think there are many differences between but also, James had no rich domestic life, he had servants. Mann developed his massive brood, who made a huge amount of noise and James didn't have noise, so there's a huge difference between them in that sense.

Also, the big thing is the two world wars. I mean Mann was, everyone in his world, was affected so deeply by those two wars, that you know James, oddly enough, you know, comes into adulthood after the American Civil War, which he doesn't fight in of course, and is dying already when the First World War begins. It doesn't stop him from getting fired up as a huge patriot in England in a crazy way at about 1914. But he lives his life in peace time, which is an unusual period, and James, so you don't have to worry about what was James doing during the Boer War. I mean he was writing a novel, you know he wasn't affected by these wars. So I think that's a big difference between the two.

JR

Would you read something from *The Magician*?

CT

One of the differences between James and Mann is that Henry James, I don't know if he was tone deaf, but he had no interest in music. He was very interested in painting and Mann was really fired up with music. He was brought up with music and being a German of that generation he you know, that tradition of the 19th century symphonic tradition, the problem with the 19th century symphonic tradition, now that he's in California and it's 1942 is that emotion being stirred up by those big orchestras is an emotion that's really got elements of poison in it. But the chamber music doesn't. His son Michael, is a viola player. There's actually a recording, a CD of his son playing. You know, he was a well-known player at the time and he had a string quartet and they're in California. And Thomas Mann, who has built his new house in Pacific Palisades, asks him, will you and your quartet come to play Opus 132. Which is one of the beautiful Beethoven late quartets which has this beautiful long slow movement which is a sort of like a prayer of thanksgiving. And he asks his son to do this, and his son agrees, and then the quartet comes, and you have to remember that Mann, of course, once four young men come into the room, his eyes are, I mean, you know this business of gazing is something that Mann and James have in common, you know, people really object to the male gaze, but if you want the male gaze, here is the male gaze.

But of course, it's also the question of, what I'm writing here it's a sort of code for Jewishness. I mean when he's looking at them, what he's really looking at is some shadow of a Jewish world that he knows is gone in Europe and it's the world, his wife, his wife was Jewish, has been part of, I don't use the word Jewish here but I think you'll see. Thomas's wife is called Katya. His son is called Mike.

"When the music began, Thomas was struck by its daring, the quiet release of a sort of anguish, followed by a tone that suggested struggle, with hints that the struggle brought both pain and joy, immense joy. He must, he knew, stop thinking, give up trying to find simple meaning in the music, but instead let it enter his spirit, listen to it as though he might never get another chance.

"It was hard not to look at the players, however, not to study their seriousness and concentration. Thomas watched them taking their cues from the lead violinist. The lead violinist and Michael on the viola seemed to spar, taking energy from each other; the music edged towards resolution and held back for a moment before it soared.

"He glanced over at Katia, who smiled at him. This was the world of her parents, who had hosted many such chamber concerts in their house in Munich. Out of this old world from which they had been forced to flee, Michael had emerged as the one with musical talent. Thomas watched him playing with slow care, showing no emotion as, handsome and self-possessed, he let the viola's dark sound hit against the sweeter sound of the two violins.

"As the music continued, the lead violinist and the cellist shed some of their Americanness. The rangy, friendly, masculine openness, apparent earlier, was replaced, he saw, by vulnerability, sensitivity, until they could have been Germans or Hungarians from decades before. Maybe, he thought, it was merely something he imagined, something caused by the force of the four instruments playing together, as they found moments of pure connection with one another, and then went silent or played solo, but Thomas could entertain the idea that ghosts from an earlier time, ghosts who had once walked the streets of the European cities carrying instruments, ghosts on their way to rehearsal, were present here in this new house overlooking the Pacific Ocean in southern California."

JR

Wow, beautiful. I think music is a great contrasting artistic form to fiction in your novel *The Magician*, and then reading this scene reminds me of, I don't know if it's, it's probably right after that, or something in your novel where Thomas Mann says "composers can think about God and the ineffable, we have to imagine the buttons on a coat as novelists." The grubby business of writing novels is what Mann calls novel writing after he's thinking about music.

So you know I'm teaching the history of the novel right now I have 13 wonderful students. I asked them if they had any questions for you. Because I told them I was talking to a great contemporary novelist. And one of them had a great question related to this, which is, we think of the novel as a great, a capacious literary form, a giant form that you could put lots of things into. It's an elastic form. It's an experimental form, but they wanted to know if you thought the novel had limitations as a medium. And the scene about music with Mann listening to the music and the way that music brings ghosts into the presence of a room, right, and I'm thinking also sort of Proust's interest in music in *In Search of Lost Time* with the little, with the music in that book. Anyway, is, for you is music a great contrasting medium to fiction writing, or do you see them competing at all, or do you see them as complementary, I guess?

CT

You know you're right that the novel is a capacious form and it's hybrid. You know in other words it comes from so many different sources, the oral source, the folktale source, the sermon, the pamphlet, the satirical pamphlet and it, you know, it makes its way through the 19th century, with everybody trying out one more thing with it to see where it will go, the epistolary novel.

But the big issue for me is the novel as a secular space. That the novel loves things. It loves money. It loves disappointment. It loves people getting chances and choices and it loves coincidence and so it's always pushing you towards, would a new car help the scene if they bought a new car. You know the constant business of material possessions, and the next generation, things being passed on. You can't put a miracle into a novel. It's very, very difficult to say that he prayed that, you know, his bank account would be full in the morning and it was, you know. I mean in a way, the novel was set up to stop that sort of nonsense from coming from the religious side of things, that the novel is standing firm in a time of, you know, early capitalism when people were suddenly, you know, aware more, that they could become rich, you know, by you know, by chance, by choice, by, and we're not having it. You know if the next thing happens, it happens as a result of the last thing. It may be surprising, but it cannot be fully miraculous.

What then, of the soul? Can we trace the word soul in the novel from its beginnings to now and see when it's used? Sometimes novelists use it far too much when they mean something else. But Henry James uses a very interesting ways where he talks about, for example, when Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* is watching Madame Merle who's talking all about that a person comes with their shell, meaning their possessions, their house, their clothes, their art. And you cannot divide the person from the shell and Isabel is thinking, But what about the soul? She doesn't ask it because, well, what about the soul? Does she have to imagine that aspect of Madame Merle? It becomes the crucial question in the novel, in fact Isabel is seeking something. Her yearning is not a material yearning, it's for something oddly spiritual. And Madame Merle is entirely hard and material, and that in fact is the drama.

In *The Golden Bowl*, there's a moment where Maggie Verver is watching her mother-in-law Charlotte Stant, giving a tour of the art collection to the locals in some English place and as she hears her speak it seems like the shriek of a soul in pain. And you realize that James has been moving all along towards attempting to enter some spiritual space for redemption, as an actual serious question. And so that's the

problem we face. I've come to see it as this: that if you only have your characters interested in material things, you actually lose a layer of the novel that's always been possible. The subtle business that probably has its roots in religious writing, you know in 17th century religious writing, and that you know, coming in the form of sermons and storytelling, storytelling in sermons. And that that makes its way down slowly, almost like water dripping into the sense that any story told in a novel has to contain some element that isn't merely material. And you're working with that very carefully, because if you overdo it, you lose it. If you show it, if you give any sign that you're doing it, the reader sees it immediately, smells it, and it's rotten because you're looking for too much for the form, so you have to disguise it, conceal it. But it has to be there.

JR

You know I, we just read *Robinson Crusoe* in my history of the novel class and we talked about this moment that I set up in the class as a kind of like a decision that Defoe makes about a crisis Robinson Crusoe has. Now that novel is, we know that he's on the island, he's like you know, tending to his goats and he's, you know, he's it's very material. There are things all over that novel. But you're right, there's this reaching for the non-material in that foundational text too, and it really happens when he's been alone for 20 years and he sees a solitary footprint in the sand. And Defoe gives us like 10 pages of crisis, it's purely internal crisis, he thinks it's the devil. It is spiritual, but his sort of sets up for the genre in my, you know narrative I tell, a scene of personal crisis that happens to our protagonists that takes the novel out of the material and puts it into the psychological, into the kind of you know, that it's part of a kind of a journey for the protagonists, and I, when Isabel Archer, you know, stays up until the candles go out after she sees Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond being it too familiar in the drawing room, right? Or when Elizabeth Bennett reads Darcy's letter that explains himself, and she has this whole chapter about her personal crisis.

And so one question for you, and this happens in your novels, I've noticed, around death and someone dying. This happens with James, with Constance, and Wilson dying. It happens in the Mann book with his son dying, it happens in *Brooklyn*. So I, that a question about your work and about death as kind of like this moment, I guess building off of what you just said about the novel searching for some things beyond the material and death being a moment when that comes up for protagonists, moments of crisis. I wonder if you could respond, I could say more about how I think it's working in some of your fiction. But I wonder if you could say more about, you know moments of crisis for protagonists and how that might be a way that novels get out of the material?

CT

I love your Robinson Crusoe example and I love the way you moved it into the world using the word "psychological" because psychological is probably the best word to use to describe the umbrella you must put up in order to get that, you know, to get that sense of the spiritual. That if you move it into religious terms you lose it, but actually just merely making psychological, merely letting someone muse over the possibilities of things, but in their own mind, that somehow brings with it a notion of soul, as in the examples you've given.

I'm going to be 67 this year and I'm writing a novel, and it's the first novel I have written which has no one dying during the book. It just occurred to me one day walking down the street, oh I've got no dying in this, what does this say? Because in Australia a few years ago a woman came up to me and she was getting a book signed, and she was very nice until she suddenly looked in and said, "Now how many people die in this one?" I was taken aback. I had to say to her, I'm really sorry, but actually quite a number, I mean, I hope that's okay with you. "I think that's fine, I just wanted to know"

And there are several reasons for this and the first one is personal because I think you've always got to realize how much personal need, things that are unresolved in you make their way into novels. In a way that's what I'm trying to work out in James and Mann, but I'm working it out for very good reasons in that I think I know it, you know that you can't say there is a composing self that makes novels. And there is this suffering, shivering, being that you know, shuffles into the study to do that. They connect and they connect sometimes in the strangest ways because you're often involved in magical thinking, you're imagining yourself as an only child, for example, which I've always wanted to be. As you imagine yourself as an only child, imagine yourself, I mean, James imagines himself, you know, in various guises, as you know throughout his life. Similarly, Thomas Mann imagines himself, you know, even in Doctor Faustus, as a famous German composer.

So my father died when I was 12 and I never really got over that. It was at that time when no one knew that children went through things in the same way or perhaps even more than adults. And so you were simply left sitting on the bus. So kids get over things, kids are fine, they're fine, but they're really, no they're fine. And that really haunted me. And so there was no chance I was ever going to write a novel without that getting into it. And I mean so much so that my father's names are in that first novel, you know, and that it just goes on. And you know, I was in the generation of gay men who, you know, when the AIDS crisis broke, you know, it was just when I was coming into my own, you know, when I was, I suppose I was like 30, 35 and you know suddenly this became the most frightening thing. After all the struggle, after all the struggles against silence, against legislation, against all forms of bigotry. Suddenly there was an element of in the cities of freedom and that very freedom then created a crisis in which men died in the most terrible ways, and everyone was so afraid. And so that made its way into novels, into *The Blackwater Lightship*, into *The Story of the Night*.

And what happened after that for me was that my mother died and then my two brothers died so, we had, because of the town was small and there was an extended family and there were two aunts that had no children who were living very close to us and I was in the room with both of them when they died and so that that whole business of the disappearance of, there was a Christmas dinner we used to have in which there would be 20 people and it just went down each year and there were five years where it wouldn't go down so you get used to it again being 14 or 15. And then it would suddenly start again, to go down and down and down. I mean, and then you realize it's going to be zero some year. And so all of that pain and all that, I think living in that world where Christianity really didn't really mean anything to me, but I was brought up in it so there was a sort of clash between a notion of being a community, believing in afterlife and redemption and all that and not believing it.

So all of that made its way into the novels in ways which are unresolved. So I think that's the only explanation I can give you. If I try and give you a highfalutin one about the novel form itself lending itself to death, yeah, yeah that may be, but I'm afraid this is the explanation I can give you that really means most is that it is personal. And for some reason now, I had cancer, I came out the other side of it and I keep telling everyone I learned nothing from it. Just boring and it was painful, it was all that but when I came out the other side of it, obviously I could suddenly write a novel. But it's also that I'm happier, that I'm in love. But it's not just that, whatever it is, anyway, I'm writing my novel and it's free of that for a change. I think there'll be a lot of general relief.

JR

I don't quite know how to follow up all that. Do you ever worry about putting people that you know, in novels?

CT

You know, I wrote *Nora Webster* about my mother and most of the time the novel is dedicated to my mother and my brother and the three of us were in the house. And so I was the only one left. The other two died. So you know, that that was strange. But I suppose in you know in yes, in something like *The Blackwater Lightship* some of the family configurations were clearly mine and that they did, yes they did recognize it and it was funny. There was a very, very difficult weekend and there was a thing that never happened before where you know, my mother actually stood up from the table and said, could someone drive her home, she wanted to get out of here and “ooooohhhh”. But that problem was solved very quickly because the novel was published the same time as the Booker shortlist was to come out and by some coincidence I was on that list and that lifted everyone's spirits because my mother, when she would go downtown would meet everybody who congratulated her as if she had written something, her son had I suppose. And she sent me, and I used this I think in *Brooklyn* she just sent me a big long list, like a ledger, of all the people she met who had congratulated her on me being on the Booker shortlist for *The Blackwater Lightship*. A big, long list of people in the town. With no comment, just at the top saying, she was highly ironic, my mother, these are the people who have congratulated me on your being on the Booker shortlist. And I just, I don't know how she got a bit of paper but it went right down like a scroll and she sent it to me and that got over the whole problem. It was never mentioned again, the whole issue of putting people into your books.

JR

Great. I want to, change the subject a little bit and you know the last time that I saw you, Colm, was when I went, I ran down to New York to see *The Testament of Mary* with Fiona Shaw on Broadway and it, which was extraordinary. And I do, like Tara, I love that novel I think it's amazing and kind of like thrilling. My question though is, do you think, when you write novels and this is a question that my students had, when you write novels, do you see them in other media. So you know *Brooklyn* was a great giant movie, Oscar nominated movie, and obviously *The Testament of Mary* was on Broadway. Do you think of novels writing for other media, when you're writing a novel, or is that something that comes after the novels?

CT

The Testament of Mary was unusual. I mean it began as a play. It began as a monologue for an actress and it was commissioned by the Dublin Theatre Festival. It just, I just bumped into the director and we just had a conversation and out of the conversation came that. When the play was over and it ran a short time because it was in a festival and we're taking down the set, and it was a Sunday evening and I walked up through Dublin, I saw men coming up the stairs and said who are these guys? They're going coming to destroy the set and take it away, so it's all going to be over. It's like reading on glass, this business. Just wipe the glass. So we're going through Dublin and walking home and I thought, actually I have a huge amount of material that I didn't use in this. And actually can see how it would begin and I can, I'm going to start tomorrow morning on this. I'm actually, also the collaboration thing was fine. We're all still talking to each other at the end of it, but it was always, you're always making compromises, you were always trying to work out what does this person want and can I give it to her? You know, like the director or the designer or the actress, so going back in to the solitary business where you have such control, such power, it was really great for me. And I wrote the book and then that book in turn became the one that Fiona Shaw did.

So it moved in that strange, that's not obviously happened to any of the other books. And the *Brooklyn* thing. You know some films work and some films don't. You can never be sure why and we were just so

lucky that, Saoirse Ronan had not done an Irish part before and if we had had the money two years earlier, which we didn't have, she would have been too young, so just at that very moment we got this great actress and if we hadn't got this great actress, the film might have been very different. So things happened by chance, but no, as you're working on a novel, if you start thinking about movie rights, or movies like you really, really should go to law school. And just get on with some, you know some, playing some useful part in the community because like, you know the idea that some of this is going to make you money or this is going to be very famous, just get on with the next, because if you don't if you start thinking like that, you will miss the magic image that I was talking about at the very beginning. It won't come because you are already, you know, bloated with greed.

JR

When I was rereading *The Master*, it opens with Wilde, in his play, and then Thomas Mann, in *The Magician* you have W.H. Auden, and Isherwood. And in both of these novels you have a relatively closeted, repressed gay writer. And then these foils where you have like openly gay writers in the novels too. And I'm just, I know, you're interested in kind of in characters who can't say much or repression, would you ever write a novel about an openly gay novelist? I mean you have obviously openly gay characters in a lot of your fiction, but is there, is the novel genre for you, I mean writing about novelists, can there be, is it interesting enough to you if you just write about a flagrantly gay novelist? Would you write a novel about Wilde, or, you know, someone from the 20th century who is openly gay?

CT

No, I have no interest in anyone who's sexuality, I mean, in any, in exploring the life of any writer whose sexuality is clear. In other words, I couldn't write about Joyce because it's not, there's no mystery involved. There's no darkness. And in the same way with Wilde, he's absolutely clear to me. But I am, I do have a good lot of a novel, not the one I'm working with, the one after that, which will be about the life of a gay man in Ireland in my lifespan, which of course will mean a lot of period when everything is cool, everything is easy and then, you know so. Yeah, I am going to have a go at that, but what's interesting with this is that I think every gay man in the closet is more frightened by a gay man out of the closet than they are by, you know, bullies or you know you know jocks or straight guys. There's a very frightening thing if you're 14 or 15, even still perhaps, that you're in the closet and you're watching every move you're making, and you're trying to pass, and suddenly this guy comes in who's flaunting it. And he comes over and looks at you, and I think this is everyone who's gay knows this, and it's out of your nightmare and he suddenly sees it in you. There's nothing you can do. All your passing, all your efforts, your invisibility all dissolved and what you want to do is just get away from that guy as quickly as possible.

So I'm sort of working with that, that the reason why man really finds Auden and Isherwood obnoxious is not, they're not being obnoxious, just so frightened by the two of them and the exact the same thing happens with Henry James and Wilde. I don't have as evidence, I mean that scene is invented with Mann and Auden. I mean he did meet, he was with Auden that day. We just don't know what they said but the stuff with James and Wilde that James really was afraid of Wilde and he was afraid of that very thing about someone wandering around flaunting.

JR

I have one last question from my students which I would love to ask you. What excites you most about creating a novel? So what is the most exciting part for you? Is it the characters, the mood, the sentences, the plot, like what's going to happen to characters? So when you sit down to create a novel,

what is the kind of what seems exciting to you about that process and then ask in contrast to something that seems a little bit more mundane.

CT

I have a book of poetry coming out next month, my first and it's coming out of Boston, it's coming out of Beacon Press. And writing a poem has genuine excitement because it's like a form of action. You're almost, you're wiping words out, you're trying new things, you're seeing if it comes right. Writing a novel is a dull business. It's slow, it's plotting, and it's work. You can be as excited as you like, but actually you have to get pages filled, and so it's the day-to-day dullness of it. The constancy of it, the fact that you cannot suddenly start another novel in the middle of this novel, but you have to finish it, that you have to go finish it, and just get up earlier. Why are you in bed? Why are you drinking? Why you talking? Why you on email, you know? So the excitement is not the word. It's, novelling is dull, novelists are dull, dull, dull people. You need a basic dullness in you and then once you're sitting down and doing it, as I said something will come to you, a thing out of the blue that someone can say or do.

But what's happening with me at the moment is I have written two sections of this novel with seven sections, so I'm on section three in my mind. And every day I get something new. Every day I work out a solution. This is just wandering around, staying in bed, just doing nothing. I get another solution. Now that's exciting, where something that seemed intractable. You know? I was thinking that there's a, because there's a man in the book, a straight man and I have to give him quite a lot of space at one point, but I can't think just where would that fit in the overall design. Yesterday, just yesterday, I realized that his conscience, the idea of what he knows to be right and wrong is a very big thing for him. And if you let what you're talking about, the psychological thing happen, they staying up through the night thing happen, then you could give him an awful lot of sort of dynamic energy in the book that wouldn't have to be plot lead. You know, wouldn't have to be that he doesn't drive, he doesn't meet anyone he doesn't, no it's just him alone.

So those things are exciting, where you get a new perspective and you get it in the strangest ways before you write and then as you write in the detail, but I have to say that the main business of writing is dullness, dullness, dullness, dullness.

TM

Okay, I'm going to jump in now with the very last question of the episode. Novel Dialogue always ends with a signature question and this season the signature question is, Colm, if you could snap your fingers and have an extraordinary new talent what would that be?

CT

There are a few things. I'd like to be good mimic. And yeah, I'd like to be able to sing really well. Yeah, I think George always said he'd like to be attracted to women.

TM

Well, thank you very, very much both of you.

CT

Okay, well thank you.

TM

Delighted to have you. Finally, I want to remind listeners that Colm's latest novel *The Magician* is available in bookstores everywhere.

We at Novel Dialogue are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and to Public Books for its partnership. We also wish to thank Duke and Brandeis Universities for their support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer, Claire Ogden, our sound engineer, and James Draney, our blog editor.

Thanks so much for listening.