

INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN DOYLE

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JOEY FRANKLIN: I was curious about your essay “Room Eight.” It contains a lot of detail about the classroom conversations of the children. Both in that essay and in your writing in general how do you balance with the true

facts that you can recall with the essay’s need for detail? How much do you embellish?

BD: This is a question that every writer should contemplate all the time, and it’s a question that every writer has had. And that you’ll have in your own work: What’s true and what isn’t? My general answer is that pretty much everything is true. There’s nothing in [the essay] that I made up. I didn’t really embellish anything. Did I remember the exact phraseology of Katie as she was telling me about her grandfather? No. But I vividly remember the conversation. So I suppose my first formal, authorial remark to the class is: trust your memory. And the most important thing of all for a writer of any kind really I think is memory. To be able to sense and retain story, that’s really the most important thing for a writer. Everything else is craft. Smelling story and remembering it and chewing on it and then

pouring it down—that’s what writing is. All the stuff that Patrick is going to work with you about is all technical detail.

You know, the first thing is the engine, so I guess I trust my engine of memory. Did I take notes along the way? Yeah. Sometimes kids would say things to me that blew my mind sufficiently that I would go scribble it down on little scraps of paper. But those acted more as sour dough starters. As you write I find you remember more. All that’s said [in the essay] are true, all those things happened. Nor did I play with the time scale in particular. It happened in that order. I left out a lot. That’s another great piece of advice: learn what not to write. Learn what to take out. Sometimes for the reader it’s better if there’s not as much. A leaner piece is generally better. Short good is better than long good. There’s a peculiar thing to write in your notes.

In some cases if I was writing a profile on someone, sometimes I will check with people and ask Did this really happen then? My father taught me a great lesson. My father was a newspaper man and when I started writing he said, “You know, one great piece of advice I can give you is ask a question

and shut your mouth.” He said the most important thing for a writer to say to a subject is ‘really? Then what? Really? Why?’ People will pour out their stories if only you listen. All you’ve got to do is ask. Another thing I’ve learned is there’s a million billion billion stories. Just keep your eyes peeled and your ears open and stories will pour in, some of them so heartbreaking and some of them so weepingly funny. Whenever I do readings I make it a point to with a piece called “Rules For Small Twin Boys in The Bathroom.” Rule number one: point it down! Rule number two: Keep pointing it down! Rule number three: no you may not help your brother. Coming back to your original question, I want to stay true to these stories. I don’t want to use them. They asked me such piercing questions and their faces asking those questions—they really wanted answers. They didn’t want nonsense. They didn’t want official delivery of dogma. They wanted to know the answer. They wanted to know: Does God forgive Hitler? You have to take that really seriously. Writing this piece I really felt like I really wanted to be accurate with what these kids had said to me, so I tried to remember as hard as I could. Do I play a little bit with the way they said things? Yeah, but each kid I tried to hold in my mind—how did they speak to me, what was that kid Paul like. He was sort of a goofball, but you could smell a good kid inside the goofball. It’s like there’s a class clown in every class and usually there’s a really extraordinary person inside the actor.



JOSH WISE: As your reader, I’m able to connect to you easily. Your stories make me laugh and cry. How do you envision your reader and what role does the reader play in your writing?

BD: Well, to some degree, you don’t. Many writers will say, in

authorial fashion, “Well, I speak to the reader...”—that’s nonsense. I think what I envision is a person sitting across from me, drinking a pint. You know and you’re telling stories. That’s really what I’m trying to do is tell small, true stories. That’s really what I’m after. You know, taut, honest stories. Whether or not they’re fictional or not. You know what I mean? There’s a truth that’s very true of great fiction just as it’s true of essays. One of my pet peeves in life is the phrase is “non-fiction,” I think: *What is that? When the sun comes up is it non-moon? What is that?* That doesn’t make any sense. I hate that. It’s a beautiful non-moon day! That’s silly. So the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is a little thin. You know Barry Lopez lives right on that line; if you ever read Lopez’s short stories, they sure sound like essays of just some guy telling stories to you about real things. I guess I would argue that they are real things—great fiction is totally true to human beings. That’s what human beings are. You know? I forgot the question. Oh, who do I envision? I basically, I’m just telling stories as you would to a friend. Here’s a story. A lot of the pieces I’ve written over the years begin just like that: here’s a story. Think of all the mythic and fable beginnings of your childhood. How many times did your parents start stories: There were three kings...Once there was a guy...There were these two guys...

The novelist John Garner says there are two kinds of stories: you leave town or a stranger comes to town. Those are the two themes—quest novels or somebody comes to shake things up. But I guess I envision only a fellow creature sitting across the table, hopefully paying for the pint. Ah, there is a real writer—he wants somebody else to pay for the Guinness.



ZACH LIFFERTH: All throughout your

writing your faith and your beliefs are a very strong theme. Was there a particular point in your life that you decided you wanted to consciously write about that? A lot of people don't talk about their own faith. At what point in your life did you choose to do that?

BD: Well, actually that is a good question. I get asked that a lot in a funny way, because of being a "Catholic Writer". And...Let's see, did I ever consciously sit down and say today I am going to write a spiritual piece? No. Although there are some aspects of Catholicism that are riveting. I mean the same, there are many aspects that are cruel and greedy, just as any religion is because of their human entities are subject to all the human flaws, right? Catholicism more so lately. You know, let me back up a minute. Let me tell you a little biographical story as it were. Like every other sensible child, when I was 13 or 14 I ran screaming in the other direction from religion. You know...religion was authority...religion was something that I had to carve myself against, right? I mean I think that is totally normal. You know children do that with their parents. In fact my daughter is about to be 13, she is already doing it. You know, I get a lot of the rolling of the eyes, "As if, whatever Dad."

I sometimes think, you know, in my more sentimental moments, "Geez, how come she has to carve her independence against the tree of old Dad? You know, why is that? But that's normal. So I ran sprinting away from Catholicism because I thought it was cruel and authority ridden and male-dominated and subject to greed. But then I realized; I think you can't avoid, I think it's a shallow person who evades contemplation of miracle. I think you need to face up to the fact that there are miraculous things. And I begin to think in my old age that everything is miraculous, even tragedy and sadness are aspects of

miracle. You know, or, I mean you can argue all day about it, which seems silly to me. The evidence seems patent. The ideology seems secondary. Does that make sense?

You know, the evidence of what Barry Lopez would call "Divine Coherence" seems to me inarguable. So that's what I often find myself writing about is again small true stories of epiphany or revelation or stunning little moments of when you really see love. I mean, one of my favorite pieces in this book is "Meteorites". That long piece about summer camp. Everybody read that piece, right? (Collective affirmative answer by listeners) Good...That was one of those pieces that ended surprisingly to the writer! You know I got all the way to the end, and suddenly wrote the ending and sat there weeping realizing, "Oh my God! It's about love! It's a piece about love, about learning how to love. Not from a woman, but from two little boys! Who taught me, you know there's an aspect of sacramentality in that piece, of cleaning little boy, you know. And they needed me, the little boy. I mean, the great moment of that essay really is when the one little boy says, "Counselor, Danny needs you!" It's like, "OH!" It broke my heart.

Which is often one reason that writers write, is to have their own hearts broken. You know this great line from Ian Forrester where somebody says to him, "What did you think about such and such?" And Forrester says, "How do I think until I see what I say?" And I think sometimes why, one of the reasons that writers are driven to write, is to be surprised by themselves. To find out with their fingers what they feel in their hearts. And I recommend, whether or not you do well in this class, whether you want to be a writer for money, (God help you all), but take your story telling absolutely seriously. I mean, don't take it seriously at all, but take it usually seriously at the same

time. Right? Inside yourselves are stunning amazing things that you can only get out for yourself. No lover can do that for you, no authority, no church, no parent no government: only you. You know? And ultimately, I think much young writing especially is about yourself, is trying to find out about yourself, but then when you get grizzlier at it, you begin to stare at other people and see all the little tiny flashing miracles in them. And that's cooler. You discover a lot about yourself by looking at other people. I guess is one of the more mysterious things I will say today.

Another long answer to a short question!



PATRICK MADDEN: Let me ask you real quick: Did it break your heart in the moment when they said, “Counselor, Danny needs you”? Or did that take....

BD: No! I was 18. At that point, it was like, as I remember there was a flash of recognition about what an important moment this was. But I was 18 years old and had crushes on every single lifeguard. So...But there too, I wonder if sometimes a lot of what happens to me in life that a seed gets planted and they flower much later. You know what I mean? I suspect that is what happened there. Somebody said to me recently, “Did you ever want to go meet those boys again”?

I said, “Oh dear no, no, no.” I don't want to see. David now is probably 30 something. God help us. I don't want to meet him now. I want to have him in my heart. I'm a greedy man, I want to have him as he was. Another question!



GARRED LENTZ: In your introduction you said that writers are preachers. Do you think

writers have a responsibility to edify with their writing rather than just indulging in catharsis and say what they see?

BD: Um...well there's an overwhelming temptation to quote Charles Barkley in that no, basketball players are not role models. But, uh...I guess I don't think that...I guess this is something I should think carefully about. The short answer is that I don't...I don't know if writers have a responsibility to edify, no. Um...nor do I think writers can control whether or not they edify. I think writers just try to...they have a, in my view, a sort of moral responsibility to try as hard as they can to tell stories that matter. You know what I mean? And if they matter to you, great. And if they don't matter to you, well, too bad. I can only tell my kind of story. Some place in this book there's a story of a fourth grade girl that says to me, “Well, you know, you go on and on and on about Robert Louis Stevenson who you say is the greatest writer ever and if he's the greatest writer ever then basically, you know, why do you bother?” And that was another one of those little epiphanies and I realized, you know, I could be a really good me. I've written probably five pieces in twenty years that I think are really about as good as I could do. And they may matter. The piece *Leaping* in this book is a piece that matters. You know, I hope that people read that for a hundred years. It says something about America, about human beings and courage and grace and love; about possibility. You know, and if I didn't write that I would be a lesser man. So my responsibility is only to try to tell that story. If it edifies people, great. But I can't, I don't have a responsibility to edify. I think if you feel that way you're tending towards sermon and homily and lecture, which is basically the road to purgatory.

Also, you know, the tendency to sermon and homily and lecture is basically boring. You know what I mean? Everybody

here, I mean I assume everybody in class comes from some religious tradition and we've all been deeply bored in our religious traditions, have we not? I mean there are moments of extraordinary boredom in every aspect of human life. God forbid that writers should add to it. Another question!



FREEMAN GREEN: I was curious, you've already talked a little about the meteorites piece and the ending of that piece, and we noticed that you'd made some changes to the ending and I was curious about what prompted those changes and just kind of in your work in general what prompts changes. Did you just find a better way to say things, did your view of the piece change over time?

BD: What do you mean that I changed the ending?

FG: Revised it.

PM: Between the *American Scholar* and the version in this book the last paragraph is slightly different.

BD: Really? I'll be darned. Um, to be honest I don't remember the changes, especially, you know, essays are pieces of wood and every time you have a chance to have at it with a scalpel you do it again, um, and in some ways, you know, it's a good thing that they're published in books because then you have to leave them alone. I can only imagine what a writer who has published second and third editions of something would do. It's a relentless urge to tinker, you know you want to make it always leaner and a little tighter, and you could strike that sentence and "well there's a stupid word, why'd I write that?" and so, to be honest I don't remember what the changes are. I do remember the ending blowing my mind. And the fact is the story, the other end of that piece began as a strait attempt to be funny about

summer work. Originally I'd written probably two pages, a litany of all the wacky summer jobs I'd had, working on a lobster boat and driving a truck but then after a while it wanted to be about camp and then really what it wanted to be about for a long time was summer with a capital "S" and that piece is very sensitive to light. If you read "The Meteorites" carefully it's sort of "light addled"—it's always talking about the sun spangling and shimmering and gleaming and that's a piece about summer. About the way summer smells on your shirt, but ultimately it's about love. Someone said to me once "all your work is about love" and I thought "guilty!"

PM: That question was kind of my fault, I memorized the original ending and when I read it in the book I was a little disappointed, so that one was my fault.

BD: To be honest I don't remember. I had a young, very earnest editor at Loyola Press who was very fussy, one of those kind of a fussy grad student type editor, who, you know, "ooh, so many semicolons Mr. Doyle..." you know, "too damn bad! Live with it, Heidi! But I can't answer that question quite because I don't remember quite what the changes were, sorry. Next question!"



JESSIE CURTIS: I was wondering about "Grace Notes." I wondered if you if you wrote each piece with the intent of putting them altogether or if they just kind of came together later.

BD: A good question. And here's a little piece of technical information that may help you in your own writing. The piece I so wanted to write an unbelievably honking great essay about grace because it's the most amazing idea. I just could not do it. I tried and tried to write a linear narrative, an essay with a

beginning, middle, and end. I just couldn't do it. There was so much cool stuff. I just couldn't control it. Finally I realized, I have to write this as a mosaic. I recommend to you the mosaic form. Sometimes the only way to get at a subject is obliquely. There's a great Wallace Stevens' poem, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird.' I've often thought of this as a very useful motif for an essayist. Sometimes the way to write about the black bird is to write thirteen notes about the black bird rather than an A-Z story. That's what happens there. I wrote a piece on the Irish genius Ann Morrison that has the same kind of structure because I just couldn't grapple with the whale. I had to break it up into tadpoles. Sometimes I think that's very useful for you. Also sometimes what happens when you break up a story into small stories is that one of the stories is shouting, "Tell me! To hell with these guys. Tell me! I wanna be the story." Then maybe that's where your essay comes from. Allow yourself to be surprised by your own work. Pour it down, but don't try to control it too much. Set out in a direction and then be open to getting lost. Does that make any sense? I can see you all in your student evaluations of Patrick, you'll say, "What was that wacky day with Brian Doyle? That was weird. Allow ourselves to get lost? What does that mean?" But in that piece I could not finally...and then finally I think the piece is much easier to read and much more fun as a series of small stories. You know, really, that's a collection of little stories about grace and after a while there's an aggregate sense of the extraordinariness of the idea. Is that a word? Extraordinariness? The extraordinariatude of grace. Good question.

PM: Wasn't the version in *Notre Dame Magazine* without so many breaks?

BD: Yeah. That's because they were horrified by a mosaic piece

that had like fifty tiles. They wanted me to write more of a linear, straightforward piece. I was about to stop and kick and say absolutely not. And Andre Dubus died who I thought was genius. One of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century. Can I assign homework Patrick?

PM: Sure.

BD: Everybody should read, before you graduate, *Meditations from a Moveable Chair* by Andre Dubus. An extraordinary writer. As good as Flannery O'Connor. One of the two great Catholic writers of the twentieth century: Andre Dubus and Flannery O'Connor, those are the two, so says the editor Brian Doyle.

GL: What was the title again?

BD: *Meditations from a Moveable Chair*. He was in a wheelchair. Great guy. Totally great guy. And a classic weird human paradox. He was a deeply, deeply devout man who was twice divorced. He was an extraordinary father of six children. He was a pacifist who had been a marine captain. He was a sweet man who cursed like a sailor. Anyway, the human paradox, that's the story.



BRENDA MCKENNA: In "The Meteorites," I noticed you used a lot of long sentences interspersed with details in parentheses to describe the summer, and I was wondering what role repetition could play in some of your work.

BD: That's a good question. I guess I have no musical ability whatsoever, as I've often been told by my children, but I'm fascinated by swing and rhythm and cadence in prose. Probably because I read pieces aloud, you know, when I think I'm finished with something I read it aloud to myself, to listen to it, you

know, to listen to the swing and the rhythm and the music and the cadence. But also I think that's the way people tell stories. I mean, a lot of what I'm trying to do, sometimes, is to try to get all the way to the way that voices tell stories to each other. I got obsessed with this for a while and wrote a bunch of pieces that were just like voices telling stories, you know, and I can see where people do this with plays, where you would get into the way that people exchange stories in a real **benign (?)** fashion, you know. People don't speak in little clean sentences. People speak in long rolling sentences with hems and haws and stops and turns and twists. And they interrupt each other. It's a flow, right, a continuous kind of serpentine roiling rhythm to the way that people tell stories. Just this one sentences from me has been going on for ninety seconds now! So I'm very sensitive to it. I also sometimes want the reader to dive in with me, like "Let's go!", you know. You can do that, especially with voices. I mean, there's a great passage—well, I can't say it's great, I wrote it—but there's an *interesting* passage in "The Meteorites" where I was trying to get at this con man Buck, who was a fascinating guy and he was just always on, you know what I mean, he was a total con. But you had to love him, he was so interesting and charismatic. And he talked that way, he was always on a roll, you know, and he was handling seven things at once, six of them lies. And that should be reflected, you know, the way that the thing is written should reflect the thing. I don't know how to say this—Patrick would know better than I do. There's some theory there, that the content of the thing should be reflected in the form. You know what I mean? So if you can do that, especially with stories. Essays again are voices telling stories. A really good essay is really an essayist telling a story out loud that begins to wander. Another great essayist you should read, if you've never read him,

is Edward Hoagland, who I would say is one of the great essayists of America—he's terrific. And his pieces kind of seem to wander, they'll be about three things at the same time. But they're rivetingly done, partly because he's just kind of rolling on telling a tale. To answer the specific question here, yeah, I do sometimes deliberately write long rolling sentences. Is "Two on Two" in this book? Is there a piece called "Two on Two"? That piece is very deliberately like that—that piece is I think only four sentences, but it's like 600 words. And it's about my children and basketball, and both of those subjects are quicksilver liquid, roiling, sinuous subjects, right, so the piece should reflect that. My children should be the verb of an essay, not a noun. Does that make sense? See, that's about the fifth time I've asked "Does that make sense?"—so, sorry!

PM: Their faces all look like everything you say makes sense.

BD: Well, good. Are we taking notes?

PM: They are, yeah.

BD: Bless your souls. Do you have to write papers, are there papers assigned on this conversation, God help us?

PM: No, we're just being inspired.

BD: Oh, you know, while I'm thinking about it, write this down. My e-mail. bdoyle@up.edu. If you want to continue this conversation in any way, shape, or form, be my guest. Send me an e-mail. I respond very quick on e-mail. I generally detest the phone—I owe Patrick money, I think, which is why we are on the phone today.

PM: I wish.

BD: He's a better writer than me. So. Another question?



DEREK BROOKS: Back to “Room Eight,” when the children ask how Jesus could forgive Hitler. I notice how your writing is honest. You say “I don’t know how Christ forgave Hitler”;

you write passionately about what you feel strongly about and yet you are also careful to acknowledge what you do not know. How has having not all the answers facilitated and strengthened your writing?

BD: That’s a good question. That’s a serious question, and I’ll try to answer it seriously. I think being able to admit that you are a mudhead is a good thing. You know, and some function of maturity, I suspect, (not that I’m mature) is to be able to admit that you don’t know. You face this as a father. I’ll tell you in advance, ’cause often children will ask you questions where you have no idea and you can only lean on “ask your mom” for so long. I guess in my writing I try to be...I felt like...a friend of mine by the name of Duncan (he’s a novelist), said “you know, one thing that your writing is a lot better at...You used to have a tendency to sort of have a cheerful confidence; it’s good that you don’t have that any more” and I agree with him. You should be able to admit when you don’t know.

You should be able to admit when you are wrong. You should be alert to paradox, alert to failure in your work. One of the things your writing can teach you about your writing is when it’s sensuous, and in that piece in particular, probably because of the subject, obviously, these kids are asking the biggest questions there are. I want to be really straightforward to say “look, the church believes in ‘x’ but me, personally, you’re asking me, teacher, I believe ‘y.’ And I think that’s honest, I mean no teacher is delivering it straight from the mountain, except Patrick. Does that help at all?”

I guess, again, pieces where you feel the writer is pompous or fatuous, or lecturing you, you turn it off right quick, you won’t bother to finish. **Pompous** in prose is awful, awful easy to see... it’s a venial sin in the Catholic world. So good question, though. Next question?



TYLER ROBERTSON: In your section of “Why Write” you quote John Steinbeck saying, “We search for something that will seem like truth to us,” and you go on talking about searching for...

BD: I go on at interminable length if I remember.

TR: It’s a good quote. I liked it. In what does your writing offer evidences of love and grace to those people who only believe in what they can see and feel?

BD: Also a good question. I guess—not to add any self-importance to the work of Brian Doyle—I think I basically am just trying to pay attention and if I report, “Here is an interesting story,” then I’m basically handing it to you. You know, I’m bringing—essentially this book is a collection of things that I saw or felt or heard that moved me and talked to me somehow, and I’m basically flopping down on the table like fish for you. So if two or three of them talk to you somehow or twiddle your music a little bit, then I did what I was supposed to do in life. As my father says, “We’re not in it for the money, are we, son?” But I do believe ultimately—people ask me this all the time, “Are you Catholic and are you spiritual?”—I think, “Look I just believe ultimately that holiness is endemic.” There are many roads to the city—to the city of light. Human beings are enormously possible and so what I try to do in my work is catch some record of what was possible. You know? Does that make

sense—for the sixth time—does that make sense?

I'm caressing carefully here. I don't set out to write about Love with a capital L. I set out to tell a little story and if I do it right, then I caught something as it swam past in a hurry. And that's a good thing. I often think I'm lucky because I really like the thing, the only thing that I'm good at. There's a story behind "Leap." Did I tell this story? A magazine called me up and said, "We'd like you to write a piece about September 11th." And I said, "No, there is nothing to write. The only thing to say is nothing. Bow your head in prayer and pray whatever prayers you pray. There is nothing to say." So I went home and I was telling this to my wife, and my daughter, Lilly, said, "Well, what are you gonna do then, Dad?" I said, "What do you mean?" She goes, "Well, Dad, you're always lecturing us that if God gives you a tool and you don't use your tool than that's a sin. And you know, Dad, with all due respect, you only have one tool." I said "What do you mean?" But I realized she was right. And I'm lucky because I really like to tell stories. I really like listening to stories and smelling stories. All my friendships are basically hilarious exchanges of stories or poignant and heart-breaking—a friend of mine told me a story yesterday. I sat there and cried. I said, "Oh, God, what an awful thing from her childhood." You give a story to each other. Falling in love is stories—some of them true! Religion is story. Education is story. Citizenship is story. What did Edwards and Cheney do last night? They basically got up and told stories—competing views of the same thing. That's essentially what politics is—who can tell a more believable story? Who can tell a more moving story? I think Kerry is not very good yet at telling the right story—he's driving me nuts. So, another long answer to a short question.