

Tony Tremblay & Ellen Rose

*A Fictional World of Moral Ambiguity: An Interview with Ian Colford*



Ian Colford is the author of dozens of short stories, published in literary journals such as *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Pottersfield Portfolio*, and *The Fiddlehead*. His genre-defying *Evidence* (2008, The Porcupine's Quill) was hailed by *The Globe and Mail's* Jim Bartley as "a rich, shadowed, mind-tweaking puzzle of a book" and became one of Bartley's top-five picks for 2008; it also won the 2009 Margaret and John Savage First Book Award, the silver medal for short story fiction at the 2009 Independent Publisher Book Awards, and was shortlisted for both the Thomas H. Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize and the Danuta Gleed Literary Award. Though Colford had been writing and publishing for some time, the novel was universally hailed as a stunning debut. His most recent publication is the novel *The Crimes of Hector Tomás* (2012, Freehand Books). We met Ian Colford for this interview on a rainy day in December 2012 in Dalhousie University's Killam Memorial Library, where he has worked for 25 years.

TT: I'd like to start by asking about the relationship between your two books. They both have the same kind of landscape, the same kind of imaginative space.

IC: That may have something to do with the chronology. I started writing *The Crimes of Hector Tomás* in 2002, and set down some ideas, and had an idea where I wanted it to go. But then I got sidetracked — of course, I was working full-time, and I didn't have a solid piece of time to devote to it — and I started writing *Evidence*. I wrote *Evidence* in a six-month period from late 2003 to early 2004, after I'd started writing *Hector Tomás*. And then the process took over with *Evidence*: it was published and reviewed with a lot of fervour, and it wasn't until after everything died down in 2009 that I got back into *Hector Tomás* seriously and devoted a lot of time to it. I ended up on a couple of writing retreats. One was at Yaddo, in upstate New York. And I went to the Hawthornden Castle Retreat in 2010, where I finished it. So even though *Hector Tomás* was started in 2002, fifty percent of it was written after 2008.

TT: The beginning of *Hector Tomás* opens up to the same world as *Evidence*, a totalitarian world of deracination where characters are constantly off balance. Why did you choose that setting rather than something closer to home, something more familiar to you and your Canadian readers?

IC: I think that what happened was that Colette, my spouse, and I started traveling in the 1990s, and we went to Greece, Turkey, Portugal, and other unfamiliar places. I think I absorbed the atmosphere from those countries, and it crept into my fiction. Before that, I was writing fiction that was basically set here in Nova Scotia or Toronto or wherever else I had been; but after being in these other places, I started writing fiction that was set elsewhere. And then when I decided that the type of story I wanted to write was one that would place characters in dangerous life-threatening situations, I realized that unless I'm going to write a dystopian fantasy, it can't be set in Canada. (Canada is too familiar and predictable.) So I had to set it somewhere else, and when you're thinking of totalitarian regimes and torture, you think, unfortunately, about South America.

ER: Why did you want to place your characters in these kinds of extreme and life-threatening situations?

IC: I wanted to explore the drama of those situations. I wanted to create characters that the reader would come to care about, and not necessarily just because their lives are threatened, but because they're facing situations that we would not want to face ourselves. And I wanted to see not just how to carry that forward as a viable story, but to experience the hardships as

a challenge to myself, if I could do that, and create out of these various situations that I put my characters in an entire story that would go from beginning to end, have cohesion, a dramatic arc, and all the rest of it.

ER: And yet in these extreme situations in which people are victimized, the victims, with whom we are meant to empathize, don't always behave well. In many cases, they behave selfishly or badly. Certainly in *Evidence*, with Kostandin, we're often drawn towards him, and then he does something nasty that repels us. And so there's this constant tension ...

IC: Moral ambiguity is what I find fascinating in other people's work. Characters have moral codes, but those are often based on selfishness and personal interest. At other times, these same characters are capable of generous acts, selfless acts. So they break out of whatever parameters they might have set themselves. And I find that fascinating. I mean, obviously people are not black and white. Everything appears in shades of grey when you're talking about people. So that's the moral ambiguity that I wanted in my books. I'm disappointed when I'm reading a book and can figure out what the character is going to do next — when the bad guy has the black hat on, the good guy has the white hat on, and there's nothing in between. That's just too simple. In my own work, I like to introduce layers of complexity in the characterization. I don't want to confuse the reader; I don't want the character to do something that will leave the reader scratching his head. I want a certain amount of consistency, but I do want that complexity of character.

ER: Would you say that your stories begin with a character or a situation?

IC: For the novella I'm working on now, I have a situation in mind. What I'm thinking about is a story about a young man in his early thirties. He's a journalist who wants to interview an infamous criminal and find out why he did what he did. That's the germ for the story. Behind that, I have a moral picture in my head of someone who is kind of high-handed, looks down on this man who is a criminal. But then certain things happen within the framework of the story that cause the journalist to realize that maybe he's no better than this criminal. I have in mind a dramatic progression of events that are going to take him to that conclusion. So we'll see what happens.

ER: I can certainly see the connection between that project and *Hector*

*Tomás*, where, as readers, we project ourselves into these extreme kinds of situations and realize that we might behave in similar ways.

IC: Yes, my characters are backed into a corner, where a survival instinct drives them. At that point, morality goes out the window. In order to be a moral human being, you have to survive first. If it means killing somebody, then that's what it means.

TT: So is writing an intellectual exercise, a political exercise, or a moral exercise for you?

IC: I guess I've always been attracted to the moral dimension. Because, when characters are faced with moral dilemmas, that's when the drama comes in, and then you can create that drama. The politics, I think, are a by-product of that. And the intellectual part shapes the story. So all three are related, but the moral aspect of their interrelation comes first for me. For example, as I'm thinking of the character that I have in my head right now, the one who's going off to interview the criminal, I'm putting him in a morally ambiguous situation. He's going to have to figure a way out of it, and what he does will be in a way a political decision, based on his own internal morality. How I shape that story will tax my intellectual capabilities.

TT: Are you more excited, then, by how he will resolve his moral ambiguity, or are you more excited by how you figure out how he'll resolve his moral ambiguity?

IC: I think the second, actually. It'll be a puzzle, and then I'll get to create other characters around that situation, and insert them into the story, and they will add complications. He's going to be very obviously pulled in two directions, and either one is viable. Either one could be construed as morally acceptable. But, I guess I'll just wait and see what happens.

TT: Getting back to your proclivity to a world of moral ambiguity, I wonder if you've thought about what it says about your position in Canada? You said that you took your fiction off-site in a way, out of Canada, at least imaginatively. When you were explaining why, I was thinking to myself, is that saying something about Canada — about our landscapes here, our emotional and political landscapes? Maybe another way to think about the question is, do you consider yourself a Canadian writer? You don't write like a Canadian writer, let's put it that way.

IC: That's an interesting question. I've been asked that one before, and it's really, really tough, because obviously I'm a Canadian writer, born and raised here. But does my fiction derive from a Canadian sensibility, whatever that is? I don't know.

TT: Or perhaps a movement away from a Canadian sensibility, because you find it inadequate or limiting, because you find the dominant strain in Canadian literature unrepresentative maybe, or shallow, or...

IC: Not necessarily. I've read some pretty good Canadian books. I think my trajectory was probably the result of where my own personal interests have gone over the last decade or so. And the fiction I've been writing that reflects those interests has, of necessity, been taken, as you say, off-site. But I still think of myself as a Canadian writer. In fact, as I was thinking about this question at one point, I asked myself: if I had been born and raised somewhere else, would I have been able to write these books? And I suspect not; I would have written different books. Possibly because the contrast is so stark between my experience in Canada and the experience of my non-Canadian characters; I can see their experience more clearly because of the stark contrast. My vision isn't clouded by having gone through something like this myself.

ER: But that's what amazed me when reading the torture scene in *Hector Tomás*. How do you write about that? Where does that come from?

IC: I know. And people have asked me, have you done loads of research? I actually read a couple of articles on the psychology of torture — not on the actual process, but on the psychology, what it does to the victim. Very disturbing stuff. But to my mind, what was more important was what it does to the perpetrator. The victim is obviously traumatized and manipulated, but the perpetrator is also irrevocably altered. Does the person enjoy doing it? Is the person repelled? I wanted to get some of that in the book as well. But those scenes were tough to write, in the sense that I was making it up. I had nothing from my own experience to draw on to build those scenes; it was all imagination. But again, when you're writing, when you're on a roll, and in many cases with this novel I was on a roll, your imagination takes over and you don't have to think that much about it. It just evolves, almost independently of your own brain working on the rationale of it all. The process is fluid and almost invisible to the person who's doing the writing because everything is just there. I wrote *Evidence* in a six-month period while I was working full-time, and I was

writing it during coffee breaks and lunch hours because everything was so vivid. Kostandin was so well-established in my brain that I could see what he was going to do next. And as I was finishing one of the stories, the next one would have formulated itself, and I'd be ready to start. That's how vivid that book was when I was writing it. I had some of the same experiences with *Hector Tomás* when I was deeply into it, especially when I was on the writing retreats. You get up in the morning and you have nothing to do but write. I could see the scenes — could see it all unfolding — and I didn't really have to think all that much about it. Of course, when you're writing torture scenes, you don't want to think that much about it. You just want to make sure that what you've written is viable dramatically and makes sense on the page, and that the reader isn't going to sit there with a whole bunch of questions, or, worse, be confused.

TT: So how do you get to the point where it's fully formed and vivid in your head, to that stage where you can feed off of it organically?

IC: I think that's the big mystery. If I knew how to do that, I would be writing a new novel right now!

ER: Especially when you're just grabbing the odd minute here and there during coffee breaks.

IC: Yes, you never really expect that to happen. I had that experience with *Evidence*, and I never really expected it to happen again, but then it did happen in some isolated cases when I was working on the intense scenes in *Hector Tomás*.

ER: I want to go back to the question of place. Because one thing that intrigues me about both of these books is that, although the settings are very distinctive, they are never named. I'm wondering why, for example, *Hector Tomás* is set in "B \_\_\_\_\_." Why the deliberate ambiguity around that?

IC: Well, I wanted to have a little mystery there, too, and to avoid nailing it down geographically, to give the reader's imagination something to work on. But also because the minute you become specific in naming cities and towns, there's a lot of things you have to know about what you're writing. I didn't want to have to know street names, what building was on what corner, and the names of actual political figures because I saw that as restricting my imagination. The second you get into specifics, you have

to know the details to make it convincing, thus, to some extent, limiting yourself.

ER: And with *Evidence*, that's part of what makes it intriguing. For example, in one of the stories, Kostandin indicates he's from Greece, but then in the next story it becomes clear that he isn't. He speaks something like seven languages ...

IC: Or he says he does.

ER: ... yes, and he seems to be a citizen of the world, a professional wanderer.

IC: Yes, that was an effort to create an aura of mystery around the character. I think it worked, and I think it gives the reader some leeway to come to conclusions about the character and where he might be from. So when I was writing *Hector Tomás*, I quite deliberately did not nail it down geographically. Anybody who has looked at a map of South America will know that the country I had in mind was Chile. But I didn't want to get into the specifics of geography, which gets in the way of the story.

TT: I'm going back again to the idea of Canada. And I think you're being a very Canadian writer in your aversion to Canada in these works: your aversion to clarity of place, and to our preoccupation, post-Northrop Frye, with asking questions like, "where is here?," and to our preoccupation with self-examination. All those Canadian things that we learned about from the poets in the 1960s and '70s, and the fiction writers of the 1980s and '90s. It seems to me that you're taking those preoccupations as a base, and then you're contesting those in these works. I wonder if this becomes a kind of new trend in Canadian literature: the internationalization of it, pushing away from Frye, Lecker, Atwood, and even figures like Kroetsch and Bowering.

IC: It could very well be that I was attracted to writing fiction of this kind set elsewhere as a sort of reaction against that whole debate about what is Canadian literature, which has gone on basically since the 1950s, and which I just don't find myself really engaged in. As far as I'm concerned, Canadian fiction is whatever we choose to write as Canadian writers. Just because it happens elsewhere and the characters are not necessarily our next-door neighbours, it still emerges from a Canadian sensibility and Canadian values, and I think anyone reading it will probably see that, as

you have done.

TT: The follow-up question, then, is that from your point of view, is biography important for a writer, or is it just a circumstance of citizenship?

IC: I think biography is a red herring. I've always felt that the writer's life is irrelevant to the writing. I don't know why I feel so strongly about that. Perhaps it's because of the assumptions people have made when they read my books: that I've done these things, I've been to the places I write about, I've seen these things happen. And since I know that I haven't, it becomes apparent to me that if the writer has a decent imagination, he or she can write about anything, absolutely anything, and make it work on the page. It doesn't matter what the writer's life might be. I've been working in an academic library for the last 25 years. None of what I write about happens in an academic library. So I don't really see biography as being relevant. If I were to track evidence of my life in these books, it would be quite superficial: as I said at the beginning, having travelled to foreign places and experienced what it feels like to be out of your comfort zone and in another culture, I use those discomforts to infuse my writing with what is more a feeling as opposed to an actual way of living or set of values. That's probably, at this stage, as close as my life comes to permeating my work.

TT: I'm also curious about your exploration of violence. I like to challenge myself, too, imaginatively, but that's not an area that I would necessarily entertain as a way to push myself. So why do you push yourself in that direction, and in that realm? What's your fascination with that kind of political and physical violence?

IC: I'm intrigued by violence as a dramatic tool mostly. It says something about the characters. If a character is capable of gratuitous violence for some sort of self-gratification, then that obviously sends a message to the reader. If a character is a victim of violence, that sends another kind of message. Though it may sound callous, I use violence as a way to manipulate the reader's sympathies and feelings. And what you want the reader to leave your book with, emblazoned in his or her memory, you *do* have to drive home — the way a painter with a canvas will draw the eye to a particular point using highlights and various other tricks of the trade. I see violence as a dramatic tool that focuses the reader's attention in a very intense way on a particular scene. But when you're talking about highlighting in this way,



you can't have too many of them or you're just going to dull the audience's response. And so I'm hoping that I've used violence in a very judicious way, and selectively, to horrify and unsettle the reader from time to time, but not to wear the reader down. I don't want to desensitize the reader to the violence. Every time it happens, I want the reader to basically fall over backwards in his chair. That's the effect I'm after.

TT: I have another question about your interest in violence as a dramatic or fictional technique, and the way you want to push yourself outside your comfort zones. Is your fascination with violence just formal in that way, or do you also believe that the world is not a very safe place?

IC: The fiction I've written derives from either a conscious or a subconscious understanding that the world is not and never will be a safe place. In *Evidence*, I created a character who drifts from one setting to another to avoid violence or its likelihood. He can never rest. And he's always either being pushed by somebody else to do something he doesn't want to do, or he's doing the pushing. The violence in that book is a motivating thing for him to take action. In fact, there is a whole story in there that's basically about perpetrating violence [the second last one in the book]. Various people who have been the victims of violent crimes and have perpetrated violent crimes themselves get together and discuss what happened and try to come to some sort of understanding and resolution. And it's plain from that encounter that violence isn't easily or predictably derivative; there's no meeting of minds when it comes to violence. Yes, it's something that galvanizes opinion, but the question is, what do you do with people who are violent? How should we react to violence? Should we be lenient, vengeful, or understanding? One of the things I'm exploring in my novels is the extent to which it's in human nature to be violent, and to use violence to achieve certain ends. Some people feel guilty about it; some don't. But I think that as long as there are people with ambitions and appetites, there's always going to be violence. And it's worth adding, of course, because it is often misunderstood, that by exploring this tendency in human nature, I'm not saying anybody should be in favour of violence.

TT: Do you approach your fiction with these kind of questions formalized in your mind? Or do you write from instinct?

IC: I would say it's a combination. When I approach writing a book like *Hector Tomás*, I do have certain questions in my head to start with that have to do with drama and story, and what it's going to take to bring

the character from point A to point B. But there's a lot of writing from instinct, too.

TT: To what extent do you move from those intellectual and moral questions? Do they shape, in a rational way, what you write? Or do they percolate in the background and inform your unconscious?

IC: I think it's more the latter. I'm conscious of certain limits when I'm writing. And to be fair, there were scenes in *Hector Tomás* that I did get rid of because they were saying things about the character that were flawed and not necessarily consistent with what I was trying to achieve. In one case, I got off on a tangent. I had written about 100 pages, taking Hector in a different direction, as a leader, the one pushing other people to perform violent acts. But then I saw clearly that that's not what I wanted him to be.

ER: What I notice is that, in the violent world of your fiction, people are alienated and very much on their own. Is violence an isolating phenomenon?

IC: Yes, Kostandin is a particular case of somebody who is basically orphaned; he came out of a situation that didn't really encourage making connections with people. And he doesn't trust anybody as a result. I think in order to make human connections, there has to be a certain amount of trust. He was disadvantaged, then, from the start. The final scene in the last story is about as close as he comes to actually caring about somebody. But *Hector Tomás* was different: I felt it necessary, for dramatic purposes, to psychically isolate characters from one another. Enrique has to be irresponsible and undependable and selfish in order for the whole series of events to be set in motion. And Hector is isolated because he was close to his brother Carlos, who disappears, cementing his alienation further. So the isolation in the book flows from the dramatic situations that characters find themselves in.

ER: Enrique is a fascinating character, despicable yet engaging and likeable. This "failed academic," as he describes himself at one point, where did he come from?

IC: I can't say for sure. I was creating a story where certain events had to be set into motion, and while I was writing I discovered that Enrique's weaknesses could make things happen. I had to make him weak in a certain

way, and vulnerable, but also petulant and unreasonably demanding. So I just kept piling on the characteristics; and he seemed to be able to bear the weight. I did find him fascinating, too, and at a certain point, I was looking forward to writing the next Enrique scene. I wondered what he was going to do next. Enrique is capable of truly caring about other people, and he recognizes his own flaws. He's just unable to behave consistently in a manner that shows that the welfare of his family is foremost in his mind. He cares about everybody, but then he betrays them.

TT: So what redeems your characters, or, more specifically, a character like Enrique?

IC: In this new book nobody is truly evil and nobody is truly good. Some characters behave according to instinct more than rational thought, but then they're backed into a corner and have to respond. That a character such as Enrique can actually engage the reader's sympathies says something about what I was trying to do as a writer. Again, I'm going back to the shades of grey versus the black and white. I was hoping that every single character in this book would have those shades of grey. It didn't matter if the character was a torturer. I wanted the reader to see him- or herself in every character. Every character is trying to do something, commendable or not, and has a genuine goal in mind in trying to move some agenda forward. Even Dimitri, who is just trying to do his job, and not a pleasant job at that.

TT: Well, maybe redemption is part of that old black and white narrative you're challenging.

IC: Yes, that's right. I think Enrique is probably the character who is the most self-reflective. Hector is young, he's not fully formed yet as a human being, and the other characters we don't see long enough to get into their heads completely. So the idea of redemption is alien to most of them, unfortunately. The other character we haven't talked about yet, Nadia, is also very young, but she is a little bit more self-aware than Hector — also more naïve. And I was sending her into places in the book that I wanted the reader to take note of — and to say No!, don't go there, don't do that. Nadia is meant to engage the reader's attention, and I saw her as a dramatic tool at first, but at a certain point, she opened up and I just had to bring her more fully into the story. There was no way that I could leave her behind. And then when I got her and Enrique together, there was a wonderful dynamic.

ER: An amazing dynamic. You were talking about scenes that flowed for you, and I think the scene where they meet and he ends up going to the bank must have been one of those.

IC: I wrote that when I was at Yaddo, and I realized at one point that day I hadn't eaten my lunch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and I had started writing that scene at eight in the morning. That's seven hours in one stretch. I think just about everything I wrote at Yaddo is in the book, almost verbatim; it took very little editing to whip it into shape. I immediately saw the dramatic opportunity in the dynamic between those two characters, and I didn't want to let it go. You have two sympathetic characters working against each other, they both have reasonable aims, they're both trying to do something that they see as worthwhile, and the reader is engaged sympathetically with each. When you find something like that, it's magic.

TT: That leads me to something I've been thinking about. Which is, what do you want your reader to take away from your work? Do you write to entertain your reader? Do you write to challenge your reader in a particular way? Or do you write with the hope that your reader will take something away from your books?

IC: I think challenge is a good word. As far as taking something away, I want readers to remember the struggles that characters went through, and to know that there are actually people out there going through similar struggles. Again, I didn't sit down and read books about Pinochet and his regime, for example. I'd heard enough through news reports, and I knew enough to know that there were thousands of people who lost their lives in those struggles. People basically disappeared, and their stories are lost. What I wanted to do was produce an awareness in readers about the untold stories of those people who disappeared, and for readers to come away thinking that maybe this book brought them closer to what those people might have been able to say.

TT: So to push that forward a bit, do you feel a responsibility to lay the responsibility somewhere, perhaps at the foot of state authority? Does addressing state ideology play a role in your work as it does in Allende's work?

IC: Not so much. What I'm doing doesn't coalesce in a coherent philosophy or anything as deep as that. Rather, what I see is in macro:

political arenas where there are certain pressures that come from various directions, and situations are created that make it possible for people to do certain things or behave in certain ways, and either derive benefit from those behaviours or exact some kind of revenge. When I think of the latter (revenge) I think of the Balkans, where ethnic groups had been waiting a thousand years to exact revenge, and then Yugoslavia self-destructs, and all of a sudden opportunities arise to be vengeful. So political pressures create events, making it possible for actions to happen that create these dramatic and fascinating (often disturbing) situations. And if people are so inclined, they are free to act in ways that, in civil society, would land them in prison. So I see the politics both from afar and from up close, as deriving very much from the individual person. It's the situation that is created that enables people to act in certain ways. That's how the macro meets the micro. And just for the record, I don't see myself writing anything like this again.

ER: Let's use that as a segue. I'm curious about the novellas you're working on currently. You're saying that they move away from the violent, foreign world of *Evidence* and *Hector Tomás*?

IC: Yes. I wrote one of them while I was working on *Hector Tomás*. It is set very much in the here and now, Nova Scotia. I can't remember if I actually mention Halifax in it or not, but anyone reading it will see there are certain landmarks in the city that appear in the novella. Another novella I had written previous to that also uses Halifax as an imagined landscape. And the one I'm finishing now is similar: when I think of where the action is taking place, it's probably on Spring Garden Road. And the next novel I have lined up in my head, is, if not overtly, a Nova Scotia setting in everything but name.

ER: So it sounds like you're on a roll, creatively. I'm interested in asking you about your experiences with publishing. We have in Canada the literary stars — and the sons and daughter of those stars, and the journalists — who have no trouble getting published, or getting the publicity necessary to power up the publishing machine. But for everyone else, it is not an easy matter to get into print. So I'd like to ask about your experience — particularly because *Evidence* was well-received, and yet *Hector Tomás* was still published by a fairly small press.

IC: For someone at my stage of career, success with one book is no guarantee of anything. I know a couple of people who have had one book

published by one of the big presses, like Random House, but couldn't find a publisher for the next book. I have a novel that I wrote back in the nineties that I tried and tried (and tried) to get published. It got all kinds of glowing comments from the editors of publishing houses — and that was at a time when you could actually approach editors yourself, and they would open the envelope and pick up the phone to talk to you. It's not like that anymore. Some of the rejection letters I got from those editors were so good that you could excerpt sentences and put them on the jacket as a blurb. But I couldn't get that book published. And so I thought, well, maybe the manuscript is crap. So to check and see whether it was crap or not, I entered it into the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia competition for unpublished manuscripts in 2001, and it won first prize. But I still couldn't get it published. So after that I started writing *Hector Tomás*, and then wrote *Evidence*. And I thought with *Evidence* I was writing more for myself — you know, the whole Jerzy Kosiński kind of influence: you create a displaced character and he's roaming around causing mayhem. Disgruntled with the publishing business, I only sent *Evidence* to two publishers: first, Insomniac, one of those Toronto presses that prides itself on publishing groundbreaking fiction, and I got a letter back saying sorry, not interested. Then I heard that John Metcalf had left Porcupine's Quill. I had submitted to Porcupine's Quill before and got very terse rejections from them, always from Metcalf. So with Metcalf out of the picture, I sent them the whole manuscript in August 2006, and I had an acceptance by November. Not only that, they said they would publish it "as is." But what intrigued me was that I submitted the manuscript as just *Evidence*. It didn't say *Evidence*, a short story collection, or *Evidence*, a novel. I think five of the stories had been published in journals, but when I submitted the manuscript, the stories had no titles and looked for all the world like chapters in a novel. I found it really intriguing that they didn't question that; they just went with it the way it was. But then later it was marketed as a short story collection, and it was shortlisted for the Danuta Gleed, which is a short story competition, and when the shortlist came out, it was in the short story category. So by that point, people had made up their minds: it was a short story collection.

ER: But it really is kind of genre-breaking. To my mind, it's neither a short story collection nor a novel. It's just somewhere in between, in a grey area.

IC: Yes, I like sitting in that grey zone, even with the structure of a book. So anyway, Porcupine's Quill had first kick at *Hector Tomás*, and

they actually accepted the manuscript. They said they would publish it. But then I got an agent and discovered that Porcupine's Quill won't deal with agents. So I did some editorial work to shorten the manuscript a bit and the agent started submitting it to all the big publishers, and got all kinds of really great comments, but, once again, despite those, none were going to publish it. So then my agent went to the second-tier publishers, Freehand among them, and they said they would take it. So, yes, even though *Evidence* got a fair bit of press, and was shortlisted for several awards, the big publishers didn't bite, their decisions influenced by their marketing people. If they don't see an easy way to market something, then it doesn't get accepted. If you're not being marketed as the new Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje or something that is easy to define, you are in trouble — and my work, if nothing else, is not easy to define.

TT: So, what do you feel is your natural form, if I can put it that way?

IC: Well, I don't know; I might write a big novel again. When I started writing in the 1990s, I gravitated towards the short story because, I suspect, of the instant gratification. I could write for a couple of weeks and have a product to send out to the magazines, test the market quickly. With a novel, it's a longer-term thing. *Hector Tomás* took me eight years. I think the ideas that I'm getting now for stories are too complex for the short story form. So if I were to ask what my natural medium is now, I think it would be the novel. With the novel that remains unpublished, for example, I came to a crossroads: when I was 30 pages into it, I started getting conflicting ideas, and I knew if I took it one way it would be finished within two or three pages as a short story. But another way, and it was going to go on longer. I decided to take the longer route, and it ended up about 300 pages.

TT: Does the novel form give you the larger canvas?

IC: I think that's it, yes. And I like creating more characters, bringing them together, creating those dramatic situations where they begin to interact. And then once you bring the characters together, lots of other things can happen that surprise you. With *Hector Tomás*, for instance, I had the final scene in my head. But all the in-between was yet to be worked out. And that's where the adventure was for me, in taking the characters and the story from point A to point B. The novel that I have in my head now is similar: I'm pretty sure I know where it's going to end up, and I have some of the characters clearly defined, but the adventure will be in the writing.

TT: I have a couple of questions that follow from that about the mechanics of writing. How do you manage this on top of a full-time job? You talked about writing in stolen moments. But do you plan or block writing times?

IC: It's very difficult to plan when I'm working full-time. I can say, well, this Saturday afternoon I'm going to write, and then Saturday afternoon comes and I just don't feel like it. So, for me, it's the whole captured moment scenario, for the time being anyway. I can produce a little bit or do some revising in a lunch hour or coffee break, but to retain that momentum over the long haul is very difficult. With *Evidence* it was different because I was crafting short stories, and obviously I was rolling along with it, I had that connection with the character and the dramas that I was creating. With *Hector Tomás* it was a totally different experience because there were long gaps between writing sessions; sometimes I didn't work on it for a year. But for whatever reason, I remained connected with the story in my head, and never really lost track of it. I think that was key to being able to pick it up again a year later and run with it — with the help, of course, of writing retreats. I was at Yaddo for three weeks, and I wrote 130 pages.

TT: So when you describe captured moments, do you mean to say that you don't have consistent writing times? Like you're not a 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. writer every day?

IC: No. Whenever it happens, it happens. Sometimes I'll take the manuscript to bed with me; other times, maybe it is a Saturday afternoon. Usually I write several times a week. I do everything on a laptop now, for mobility. The laptop makes it easy to go from one place to another, and to take advantage of those fortuitous moments when they come along. Even the kitchen counter, waiting for the water to boil. The captured moments can be that small.

ER: Staying with the mechanics of writing, do you write a draft and then go back afterwards and edit, or do you edit as you go?

IC: I edit along the way; that's how I stay connected with the story. Right now with the novella I'm writing, I've reached the point where I know it's going to end within ten or fifteen pages. But the five- or six-page passage I'm currently working on has been edited now about ten times. And even though I'm finding it difficult to move forward, at least I'm keeping



that connection with it through the editing.

TT: And when you say revise ...

IC: I'm working on language, taking sentences out and putting sentences in, hoping that at a certain point some darkness will lift and I'll see how to take it to that next stage.

TT: So has writing evolved to become your main preoccupation? Is it what your major distraction is now?

IC: I think so, yes. If I were to retire, it would be so I could do more writing, and write at a consistent pace. Now that I have an agent, he's helping me in unforeseen ways. He's on to me, you know — what's next? I've never had anybody asking me what's next; that's new.

ER: Does that help or hinder?

IC: I think it helps. It's a motivation, an incentive to get something done. But I don't know how some writers do it, those mystery writers who churn out a book every six months. Having said that, I can work very quickly when, as they say, the iron is hot. I wrote *Evidence* really quickly, and some passages of *Hector Tomás* I wrote very, very quickly. But at certain points my process slows me: I have a tendency (a need, actually) to step back and see what I've done. I don't consider that a liability.

TT: How do you balance those two things: your career and your preoccupation? Do you have to restrain yourself from hoping that you could become a full-time writer? Do you sometimes resent that your career takes energy and focus from your writing?

IC: Oh, probably. But if I were relying on my writing as a source of income, we'd be living in a cardboard box in the street. So obviously there's a balance to be struck. My job has made it possible to live a fairly comfortable life, and write on the side. Because I'm working in a university, I have the advantages of an enlightened environment — as a librarian, for example, I am granted sabbaticals, and I used my last sabbatical to work on fiction. But the tensions are always there: if I'm in a boring meeting, my mind might revert to the novella.

ER: I have a few final questions about reading. How do you use

reading? Do you use reading to energize or open up possibilities in your work? And, if yes, whom do you read in order to do that?

IC: I'm reading all the time. And, probably, like most writers, if I'm reading a book and it's not teaching me something about writing, I lose patience and drop it. But if I can find a book that teaches me about pacing, scene selection, depicting characters in certain ways, I'm with it until the end. And I will freely allow what another writer has done to find its way into what I'm trying to do. The novella that I'm writing now is inspired partly by a novella by the Austrian writer Peter Handke. He's written a lot of novellas, and I've read maybe a dozen of them. He's a master at that form. I wanted to write something that had the Handke intensity to it, and that was in a sense claustrophobic — claustrophobic because you're in a character's consciousness for a little more than 100 pages. So I am influenced by other writers to that degree, especially when I see what somebody has done and say, oh yeah, I'd like to try that. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. The book that I'm reading right now, *Our Daily Bread* by Lauren Davis, interests me because of its character trajectories. She's got three sets of characters, and I can see how she's carefully placing them. They're doing certain things, there are conflicts going on in each of their lives, but you can also see their convergence. I'm fascinated by how she has paced her story. It's a very patient story. I can see a reader becoming frustrated with it because there's nothing of large import happening, but from my perspective there's minutiae on every page. So, yes, I will use what I can find; all writers are like that. And if you're going to steal, you might as well steal from the best.

ER: What writers do you reread, or await anxiously for new work?

IC: I came upon John Cheever early and always return to him. Peter Handke has become an influence lately because I have read a lot of his work recently. Jerzy Kosiński, of course, has always fascinated me. I would even go so far as to say that *Evidence* is my Kosiński book. I read *Steps* really early, when I was a teenager. It was the book that came out after *The Painted Bird*, and it's even more severely distilled. It's just fatal to come across a book like that when you're a teenager thinking you might do some writing. You think to yourself, Oh, god, look what this guy did. And of course you're trying to do it for the rest of your life.

ER: So writing is something you've always wanted to do?

IC: I think I've always had it in my mind. I didn't actually start writing seriously until I was in my thirties. I wrote a novel when I was in grad school, but I think it was just an amusement. But then I started writing short stories in the early 1990s and actually going through the process of trying to get them published. It became a more formal ambition at that point — I said, you know, maybe I can do this long-term. And then I started getting stories published; I think, overall, I got about 30 stories published in various journals, and one in the *Journey Prize Anthology*. From that point, I followed the momentum and will, I hope, continue to do so.