

Marilynn Richtarik and Kevin Chappell

An Interview with Glenn Patterson

Born in Belfast in 1961, Glenn Patterson is one of the most prominent contemporary Northern Irish prose writers. His first novel, *Burning Your Own* (1988), set on a Belfast housing estate in 1969, won two major awards—the Rooney Prize and the Betty Trask Award. Patterson's early promise has been borne out over the past twenty-plus years in novels that include *Fat Lad* (1992), about an *émigré's* return to a rapidly changing Belfast; *Black Night at Big Thunder Mountain* (1995), featuring a Belfast native employed as a construction worker on the Euro Disney site; *The International* (1999), centered on a Belfast hotel on the

eve of the Northern Irish civil rights movement; *Number 5* (2003), a depiction of the families who live in one Belfast house over the course of four decades; *That Which Was* (2004), a thriller exploring the North's pressing need to come to terms with the past; and *The Third Party* (2007), the characters of which include a Northern Irish writer in contemporary Hiroshima.

As a young man, Patterson lived for a time in England, where he completed an M.A. in creative writing at the University of East Anglia. He returned to Northern Ireland in 1988 and served as Writer in the Community for Lisburn and Craigavon under the auspices of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. He has also been Writer in Residence at several universities, including the University of East Anglia, Cork University, and Queen's University Belfast, where he currently teaches creative writing. Patterson writes journalism as well as fiction, and a collection of his non-fiction prose, *Lapsed Protestant*, was published in 2006. His most recent book is *Once Upon a Hill: Love in Troubled Times* (2008), a memoir about his grandparents and about Lisburn. He was elected to the Irish artistic honor society *Aosdána* in 2006 and awarded a two-year Lannan Literary Fellowship in 2008.

This interview was conducted via e-mail from mid-December 2009 to early February 2010.

Richtarik: Which writers do you find most inspiring?

Patterson: I am forty-eight years old; I have been publishing now for more than two decades; my list of writers who have inspired me is nearly as long as my list of songs that I want played at my funeral (currently shaping up to be a three- or four-hour affair; I would advise

sandwiches). As time goes on I find longevity inspiring, or at least longevity that is not accompanied by diminishing powers. Philip Roth was an early hero whom I then seemed to lose track of—I'd go so far as to say avoid—for a number of years. Then a friend recommended *Everyman* and that was it, I couldn't get enough of him. Angela Carter was a great inspiration, not just as a writer, but as a tutor (at University of East Anglia in the mid 1980s) and, finally, as a recommender of books. It was Angela who steered me towards Peter Carey (she may have given me *Oscar and Lucinda* to read), Robert Coover, and—an enduring inspiration—E. L. Doctorow.

Richtarik: Which writers have most directly influenced your own work?

Patterson: I came at the novel by a circuitous route, having attempted, in my teens and early twenties, short stories, a screenplay, and even—God help me—a bit of poetry. In my second year at university (I had gone there with the sole intention of finding time to write) I read John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy and something clicked. The style, or the mixture of styles, the scope, the sheer ambition of it, excited me more than anything I had ever read. From that moment on, I think, I was preparing myself to write a novel. *Midnight's Children*, which I also read at university, had a similar effect. Salman Rushdie was, not coincidentally, a favorite author of a contemporary of mine, Robert McLiam Wilson. It was one of the things Robert and I talked about when we met in the late '80s, soon after the publication of our first novels. We joked that *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* were the best Northern Irish novels we had ever read.

Richtarik: What exactly is Northern Irish about Rushdie's sensibility?

Patterson: Here was a writer dealing with Partition, with nation creation, with competing identities, with the desire for flight and the myth of roots . . . What could be more Northern Irish? (Interestingly, one of my other literary heroes, the Belfast-born poet Louis MacNeice, covered Indian Independence—the 'Midnight' event of Rushdie's novel—for the BBC in London.)

Richtarik: How conscious are you of working within a Northern Irish, as opposed to a wider Irish, British, or other literary tradition?

Patterson: In matters of nationality I am shamelessly promiscuous. I hold to several identities at once—Northern Irish, Irish, British, European—and am happy to add to them at every opportunity, if only to maximize my chances of being invited to literary festivals. At the center of them all, though, is my Belfast identity, which is the identity I hold dearest. As to literary traditions, I read very little Irish literature growing up; at my Protestant school the curriculum consisted almost entirely of English writers, and dead ones at that. The writing I responded most to was the American writing of the 1920s and '30s—Hemingway, Fitzgerald—especially writing of the city, so in that sense I think I have always felt myself to be writing in an urban tradition. My chosen location just happens to be Belfast.

Richtarik: Do you consider Belfast to be a character in your novels?

Patterson: I have used the word 'character' myself in the past to describe how Belfast operates in the novels, but I think it would be more accurate to say that the city is a presence, often a defining presence, in the lives of most of the other characters, even in a novel like *The Third Party*, which is set in Hiroshima, or like *Number 5*, in which Belfast is never mentioned by name.

Richtarik: What is distinctive about the part of Belfast where you grew up?

Patterson: I grew up on the south side of the city, in a housing estate, Erinvale, built in the late 1950s—exactly the type of setting I have drawn on in several of my novels (*Burning Your Own*, *Fat Lad*, *Number 5*). The houses were owner-occupied, as distinct from rented (there was a large estate of council-built houses next to ours) so in that sense would have been seen as a 'step up' for the majority of the first residents, whose background, like my own father's, is probably best described as skilled working class. My father was a sheetmetal worker 'by trade,' as they say here, meaning he had served an apprenticeship—or at least 'by trade' as they used to say here when we still had industries.

My father and mother had emigrated to Canada in the earlier 1950s (and had three children there) and returned in 1959, in part because of a sense, communicated to them in letters from home, that things were looking up in Northern Ireland. In some ways Erinvale

was a symbol of that optimism (however qualified). Similar—I would nearly say identical—estates were being built then all across the city, south, north, east and west and many of them were religiously mixed. By the early 1970s some of those estates had become notorious as bastions of—depending on what part of the city they were located in—republicanism or loyalism. Again, several of my novels deal with, or touch on, that transition.

Richtarik: How does the physical landscape of Belfast reflect its peculiar history, and how does it reflect wider social trends common to many cities in the developed world?

Patterson: Some of the patterns of development just discussed would be familiar to people from other cities in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and possibly even further afield. I lived in Manchester for a few years in the 1980s, and the city looked and felt very familiar to me: crudely put, a pre-industrial core, surrounded by the chimneys and terraces of the nineteenth-century city, which then give way to the social housing estates of the interwar and postwar years, which in turn give way to less uniform suburbs. I had the thought when I was writing *Number 5*—which opens in 1959 with a just-wed couple moving into a new house, and ends forty years and four owner-occupants later, with a young unmarried couple sharing the house—that I could as easily be describing a place like Wythenshawe in south Manchester, hence the decision not to name the city. It's just 'the town' to those who live in it. I wasn't trying to pretend it was anywhere other than Belfast—and certain things occur in the middle of those forty years that make it quite clear that it is Belfast—but I wanted to draw attention to certain shared experiences and ways of living.

I became very exercised by the fate of the front garden. Make that the Front Garden and understand by it a patch of lawn about eight feet by six, at a stretch, with a path running alongside it to the front door. I have strong memories of my own parents standing in our garden, talking to neighbors, and in the early sections of *Number 5*, that is how the garden is used. By the novel's end the lawn has been paved and transformed into a car-parking space. Now, the longest journey the characters make from their front door is to the car door. They drive to see other people rather than talking to those people living either side of them. To that extent the novel is to me only incidentally a Belfast

novel. (Don't get me started on gateposts. Really, don't.)

Richtarik: You mentioned that your parents had lived in Canada, where your three older brothers were born, for a number of years before returning to Belfast, where you were born in 1961. Do you think your family's international experience gave them (and you) a relatively detached perspective on Northern Ireland's sectarian divisions?

Patterson: Emigration has been such a part of the Irish experience that there can be few families which do not have an international, or at least trans-national, influence. I don't know that my family, more specifically my parents, had a detached perspective on the sectarian divisions, but—and this is a very different thing—I do think they did try to maintain friendships across the sectarian divide in the very worst times. Their own parents had been born into a unified Ireland, albeit one already riven by the animosities and tensions that would lead to Partition. To my mum there was no question but that she was Irish; my dad was equally adamant he was British—that was what it said on his passport. At the same time he would tell me that if the sovereignty issue was to be decided by a one-off match between Belfast Celtic (a now defunct team with a large Catholic following) and Linfield (the team with the largest Protestant fan base) he would be happy to abide by the result. So would I, but having been brought up on a diet of Irish League Football I don't think I could bear to have to sit through the match.

Whether or not it relates to my parents' emigration and return I can't say, but nearly all my novels feature characters coming into Northern Ireland from outside, or characters from Northern Ireland who find themselves overseas. Actually, I say it like that and I wonder would anyone want to sit through my novels, unless of course the alternative was an Irish League match.

Richtarik and Chappell: What impressions of your home do you hope non-Northern Irish readers take away from your work?

Patterson: I hope I am being honest with myself when I say I don't want to convey any message about my home to readers anywhere. I want to set fiction in Belfast because it is the city where my imagination lives, and I want that fiction to convey what all the books that have affected me in my lifetime, whatever their setting, have

conveyed, which is a sense of what it is to be alive in this world: a fraction of that multitudinous whole. I write occasional journalistic pieces too. If I want to say that the ‘War’ that recently ended was a grubby murder campaign, indulged in with varying degrees of sophistication and accountability by republicans, loyalists, police and troops, I prefer to do it there, unequivocally.

Chappell: In your essay “Accommodation and Apartmentality” in *Lapsed Protestant*, you discuss the changes taking place in Belfast at the time you were writing *Fat Lad*. You reflect some of these changes (improving economy, new construction, and a seeming decrease in the destructive violence of the Troubles) in the novel itself. Since 1998, Northern Ireland has witnessed a relative improvement in the economy, changes in the political climate with the restoration of power to the often shaky Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive (currently on the cusp of collapse due to scandal involving the family of the First Minister), and the near-cessation of sectarian violence that was so much a part of Northern Irish life for nearly thirty years. As a Belfast native and resident, do you think these changes occurred as a result of a transformation in the mindsets of the people of Belfast, or did these changes facilitate a change in mindsets?

Patterson: I have always maintained that the mindsets changed first. I had been living in England for much of the 1980s, but was back in Belfast more and more frequently towards the decade’s end. I remember Ciarán Carson’s *Belfast Confetti*, with its repeated references to the unreliability of maps and therefore, ultimately, of the territories so carefully marked out across our divided city, divided island, and thinking, ‘that’s it, the rules have just been rewritten.’ Actually it may have been a bit more visceral than that, more like, ‘That’s it, the Provos are fucked. (And all those pub-armies starting with U.)’

Richtarik: Just how fundamental do you think the changes of the past decade or so in Belfast are, though? Have the attitudes of mistrust and fear that sustained the Troubles for so long really shifted?

Patterson: This is even more ill-advised than getting me going on gateposts. There have been changes, undoubtedly, but I see and hear examples almost daily of that mistrust and fear and, on occasion, naked hatred. A small example is the little three-letter graffiti that pops up all over the city: KAT, in Protestant-dominated areas, and, in Catholic-

dominated ones, KAH. The T is for Taig, a pejorative term for Catholic, the H for Hun, or Protestant. The KA stands for Kill All.

Having said that, I wrote in an article the year before last (at the tail-end of the Ian Paisley/Martin McGuinness double act, and barely suppressed love affair) that we were living here not at the End of History, but the End of Surprise. Nothing that has happened since—up to and including the actual love affair between Iris Robinson and Kirk McCambley and all that has flowed from it—has made me change my mind. I honestly get the impression that many people here can't predict just now, from one day to the next, what is going to happen next. It's like one of those multi-authored novels where the baton is passed to a different writer at the start of each new chapter. Who is going to write us next? Actually, whoever looked at the available characters at the start of this year and decided to make a central character of Arlene Foster (our deputizing First Minister, not to be confused with our Deputy First Minister) may just have pulled off a masterstroke.

Richtarik: Could you explain the Arlene Foster reference for an American audience?

Patterson: When Peter Robinson stepped aside as First Minister for six weeks, to look after Iris, it was said, Arlene Foster became Acting First Minister. There are all sorts of reasons why this was remarkable—not least because everyone was expecting Robinson to resign outright. The Democratic Unionist Party is also notoriously misogynist, or at least some prominent members have down the years been guilty of misogynist statements. (They used to taunt the Women's Coalition members when they tried to speak in the Assembly: 'Away home and make the dinner.') It has certainly been a hard party for women to make headway, Iris Robinson notwithstanding.

Chappell: In *That Which Was*, characters refer to the fact that some people who were likely participants in the violence of the Troubles are leading members in the new government of Northern Ireland. How have Northern Irish people reconciled themselves to this situation, or have they?

Patterson: In one recent poll (conducted by the *Belfast Telegraph*, traditionally a Unionist-leaning paper), Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin (and former chief of staff of the IRA) was named as the most

popular minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, so I think that tells a story. There are, of course, many unionists who are not quite so reconciled, and, it has to be said, many republicans who are not reconciled to the idea of *any* settlement that perpetuates partition, but in the main devolution is popular, even if the conduct of the power-sharing government leaves much to be desired.

Richtarik: Your work conveys a keen sense of time as well as of place. Do you do similar kinds of research for novels set during your own lifetime as you do for your historical fiction?

Patterson: I sometimes think (no, I just this minute thought) that writing a novel is a bit like entering a diving bell (exactly what entering a diving bell is like I will research in due course): no matter the where and the when of the setting, it is a full-immersion process.

Chappell: While not the focus of *Burning Your Own*, the early days of the Troubles play a significant role in the development of the story and of its main character, Mal Martin. Mal is torn between his desire to remain loyal to his Protestant upbringing and his wish to explore the “other” via his relationship with Francy. Is this conflict representative of what many people in Northern Ireland were experiencing during this time?

Patterson: This conflict is representative of all people at all times. See *Romeo and Juliet*. Except of course there wasn’t a dead rat on a string in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Chappell: If one reads *Burning Your Own* in the light of post-colonial theory, the character of Francy Hagan appears to possess many of the ‘savage’ traits historically attributed to colonized peoples to demonstrate their inferiority. Through Mal, however, readers come to see Francy’s intelligence and compassion. What is the significance of your characterization of Francy?

Patterson: In truth I don’t think I knew the first thing about post-colonial theory when I was writing *Burning Your Own*. I had been a very active student socialist and had some very clear ideas about what *all* the characters in the novel represented, but then I also grew up near a rubbish dump, which all the neighborhood kids played on, and knew a boy, a couple of years older than me, who came from a large family

and seemed as a result (or that was how I saw it: no room inside) never to go home. I knew another boy whose family were intimidated out of their house in much the same way that Francy's family are in the book, by loyalist paramilitaries drilling opposite their front door. His brother later died when a mortar bomb he was launching exploded prematurely, so all of that is rolled into the character too. I watched a documentary recently on chaos theory, which explained in terms my eight-year-old daughter could understand (meaning she could then explain it to me) that the very principle that creates pattern in nature also produces unpredictability. I can't think of a better way to describe the creation of a fictional character.

Chappell: As we learn from a heated exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Martin, "Mal" is short for "Malachy"—a name associated with the Catholic tradition in Ireland. So what is your Protestant protagonist doing with a Catholic name?

Patterson: Well it's Hebrew, isn't it? It is absurd, this Protestant and Catholic name idea, as Francy himself demonstrates in his re-naming of Mal (essentially dumping on him all words beginning 'Mal-' e.g. malacophilous, 'pollinated by snails'). I have a brother called Kevin, also a supposedly 'Catholic' name, but then my parents were living in Canada when he was born. Anyway, because our surname is Patterson all the boys in our family were nicknamed Paddy (we tend to make 'ds' or our 'ts' here in Belfast) by all our friends. Two guesses which my brother preferred. In an A-Z of Northern Ireland (written in 2000, reprinted in *Lapsed Protestant*) K is for Kylie, 'a popular forename among thirteen-year-old girls. . . . More power to them, and the Jasons and the Lees,' I write. 'Who's going to tell me any of these are Protestant or Catholic names?'

Chappell: In an interview with Esther Aliaga, you mention that you don't like Drew Linden, the central character in *Fat Lad*. Have your feelings about him changed at all? If not, why don't you like him?

Patterson: Because (as I confess in *Once Upon A Hill*) he looked like a boy for whom the girl I went out with at school was always threatening to dump me—besides which I don't think writers should ever be too in love with their own characters.

Chappell: The concept of change is central to *Fat Lad*. We observe

changes in the novel's main character, Drew, as he moves back to Belfast, a city he seemingly despises, and over time begins to recognize that it is not quite the same place he left. He also grows up a bit as he faces the trauma of his childhood—the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. Drew begins to accept what happened in the past and is able to move forward, embracing his native city once again. How did events in Belfast at the time you were writing *Fat Lad* affect the novel?

Patterson: I was living in Manchester when I started working on the novel—or, rather, started working on another novel, whose central character was Ellen, Drew's sister (although she was called Cassie then) and which I abandoned, in part because each time I returned to Belfast the city had changed in the interim. So I moved back and along came Drew. The way I imagined it, I was following him around, seeing what he saw. There is a description of a Saturday afternoon in Belfast, the sights and particularly sounds, 'a symphony for any city, summer 1990' into which discordant notes intrude—the shots that kill a policeman a few streets from where the central characters are walking. The policeman I had in mind was Constable Harry Beckett, who used to buy paperbacks in a bookshop I worked in after leaving school, and was shot one Saturday, Summer 1990, while I was in a nearby shop with my girlfriend. The novel was probably the most planned of the seven I have written to date—there is a 'ghost' history of Northern Ireland playing out in the background—but there were days when I simply went out with my notebook, came home and wrote from the notes I had made. The 'summer Saturday' was one of the easiest, and hardest.

Richtarik: Danny Hamilton, the protagonist of *The International*, is the product of a mixed marriage, though he claims not to know which of his parents had been born Catholic and which Protestant (in his memory of them, their "native faiths" seemed to have "cancelled each other out"). One of them (he doesn't recall which) compares the divide between Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland to "choosing between turnip and swede". Most Americans have little or no experience with either of those vegetables, so could you explicate that comment a bit? (And how many Northern Irish people get to "choose" in this way at all?)

Patterson: Americans should be made to eat Northern Irish school dinners. All would be revealed. (And to answer the question in parenthesis, you would be surprised. Which is not to say there might not

be people trying to remind you you have no choice.)

Richtarik: Is Danny's bisexuality a metaphor for his ambiguous religious and political affiliation?

Patterson: No, he just enjoys sex with men and women.

Chappell: The Troubles have always been present in your work, but you generally focus more on how life goes on in spite of the conflict than on the violence itself. It wasn't until *That Which Was*, published in 2004, six years after the Belfast Agreement and the supposed cessation of hostilities, that you addressed the Troubles head-on, looking at the aftereffects of the violence on both victims and participants. Why did you choose to write that novel then, rather than prior to the 1998 agreement?

Patterson: 'Choose' is too detached a word for it. As near as I can remember it, this is what happened. For some time I had a character in mind, whom I thought of as the Memory Man, a man who said his brain had been tampered with by the security forces, but for several years that was all I had. Then one Christmas, 2000, in Cork to visit my parents-in-law, and in the middle of writing *Number 5*, I watched *Topsy Turvy*, Mike Leigh's film about Gilbert and Sullivan, which reminded me of a novel I had always wanted to write (and haven't written yet!) about my primary school's production of *Iolanthe* in the summer of 1973 (I was the Lord Chancellor), which in turn must have reminded me of my Memory Man, because in the early hours of the morning I sat up in bed and started making notes: Avery, the Presbyterian minister to whom the man, christened in that instant 'Larry', turns to tell his story was there; the location of the church was there, the precise nature of the memory Larry claimed had been erased. The fact that in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 the past had become the new zone of conflict in Northern Ireland—which party's version of the conflict would out—clearly had some bearing on the novel I saw taking shape that night, but at the time all I was conscious of was having found a way at last to write my Memory Man story, which I still sometimes think of as the 'Gilbert and Sullivan one'.

Richtarik and Chappell: What can you tell us about your current projects?

Patterson: I am writing another novel that began to take shape in the middle of the night, when my youngest daughter was only a few weeks old (she turned four at the end of January) and I was rocking her in my arms trying to get her to go back to sleep. It's Belfast, it's 1831 (although narrated from later in the nineteenth century); it's not the sort of thing I would have imagined writing even a few hours before I started it, but, rather like *That Which Was*, like most of my novels, and most of the novels by most of the novelists you might ask, I suspect, there it is: once the idea is in your head the only way to get it out is to write it out.

I'm also writing—co-writing, I should say, with Colin Carberry—a screenplay about the music scene here in Belfast in the late 1970s, or more precisely about a man called Terri Hooley who, after surviving an attempt on his life, opened up a record shop in one of the most bombed streets in Europe and called it (as we call the film) *Good Vibrations*. It looks like it will start shooting in May.

Richtarik: Is there anything you wish we had asked that we didn't?

Patterson: Maybe what I'd like to drink.