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A Conversation with Jan Carson

Jan Carson is a Belfast-based writer originally from Ballymena. Her books include Malcom Orange Disappears (2014), Children’s Children (2016), Postcard Stories (2017), The Fire Starters (2019), which won the EU prize for literature in 2019. Her third novel, The Raptures, which Lucy Caldwell describes as “Blistering... Glorious... written from the gut and from the heart”,¹ was released in 2022. In addition to being a writer, Jan has been a community arts facilitator for more than twenty years. She has recently been involved in a research project at Queen’s University exploring the depiction of dementia in contemporary fiction.

Context

The interview that I conducted in Belfast on 15 June 2022 with Jan Carson in C. S. Lewis Square, East Belfast, builds on the conversations and exchanges that occurred as part of the Rennes conference in November 2021 entitled “Participation: Making Community in Contemporary Irish Arts”. It also ties in with several strands of my research, which are interconnected. My key research field has been the growth of community arts in Belfast before and after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in relation to peacebuilding and conflict-transformation. More recently, I have developed an interest in the emergence of community arts initiatives in the Shankill seeking to challenge the assumption that unionist/loyalist communities are reluctant to embrace the arts as a means to nurture change and dialogue. This research has led me to take a closer look at PUL communities (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities) where tensions have re-surfaced in the wake of Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Footages of rioters setting cars on fire, however, do not give us the full picture. The success of Alliance Party in the May 2022 general elections clearly signals a desire among some sections of the population to move away from binary identity politics and support political parties committed to addressing issues such as education, health or climate change. In that context of shifting circumstances, it is worth looking at what happens at the community level through the lens of participatory arts. How do artists engage with communities? What are the challenges in terms of ethics and art practice? The aim of this interview in Belfast was to gain a better insight into Jan Carson’s experience as a community arts facilitator in the specific context of Northern

1. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/241383/jan-carson>

Ireland. This text is the transcript of this interview. Some questions and answers have been slightly rephrased for the sake of clarity.

Hélène Alfaro-Hamayon: Could you first tell me, Jan, about your upbringing or family background and how this may have informed your writing and your desire to work with people within community arts projects or may not?

Jan Carson: Yes. I was born in 1980 in Ballymena, which is way north through here.² I was born into a very conservative, Presbyterian kind of family with not a lot of arts but a lot of community. So, we would have been very engaged with people in the area where our church was. There were all these activities for them, youth clubs, mums and toddlers, all of those things. I think very early on I realised the importance of community and of supporting people. I think I also began to understand early on the importance of talking and words, and how healing that could be to people to tell your stories, to be able to see your story as something valid. And that really morphed into when I moved to Belfast in 1998 for my undergrads in Queen's, I straight away got involved in a project, a community project on the Ormeau Road doing writing workshops with people.

HAH: Well, I was going to ask you if as a younger person you had got involved in community arts?

JC: I guess I was involved with a group of friends I ran about with at Queen's. As students they were very community-minded and also really creative. So back then we loved music, we loved cinema, we were always looking for ways to connect that with real people. And one of the benefits of being here in Northern Ireland is you see how much heavy lifting the community arts sector has done, particularly during the peace process and the first years after Good Friday; that a lot of those projects were creating spaces for people to come together who otherwise would never have been in the same room.

HAH: I believe that at some point you were in charge of the Poetry-in-Motion programme.³ Was it a long time ago?

JC: So, I worked for the City Council and the Tourism, Culture and Arts sector there for about seven years. And then six years ago I transitioned out of that to go freelance and to work full time as a writer and I got a part-time job at Community Arts Partnership,⁴ which was two days a week, and part of that was looking after

2. Ballymena is a town historically in County Antrim Northern Ireland.

3. Poetry-in-Motion Schools is an innovative literary programme for primary, secondary, grammar and special schools. The Poetry-in-Motion programme was launched more than twenty years ago.

4. The Community Arts Partnership (CAP) is an independent advocate for community arts and offers a wide range of assistance and opportunity to get creative and engage in community-based arts activity. Their vision is a just, inclusive, peaceful and creative society where difference is welcomed and participation valued. In 2011, the Community Arts Forum (created in 1993) and the New Belfast Community Arts Initiative (1999) merged to form the CAP.

their schools project, which is taking poets into schools and doing workshops with young people and the Poetry-in-Motion competition for emerging writers there.

HAH: I believe they've been running this programme for about like twenty years. They started in 2001 or 2002. Why has it been so successful? It has been successful, hasn't it?

JC: Yeah. I think it is quite established now and it has kudos attached to it; you know, the winner, it is a good stepping stone on to a career in writing and it is widely recognised in that way. I think I'm particularly fond of the schools programme because you know children don't often get to meet somebody who has a career in something that is not a STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] subject and even the sheer power of having an artist in a classroom going "I have made a career out of something that is a little bit odd and fun". I have done quite a bit of schoolwork myself and I think that is really powerful. And then the anthology that comes out of that with the children seeing their own work in print and they get to come and celebrate in a big event in the Ulster Hall where they read. That's such a milestone for a young person.

HAH: Do many schools get involved every year?

JC: Oh, yeah. It's massive. I think there's about twenty-five schools across Northern Ireland and then they all come together. The children who have been part of the project all come together to the Ulster Hall. We launch the anthology.

HAH: Yeah. I have got a few at home that Conor Shields gave me some years ago.

JC: Yes, I think if you were a child who was thinking about a career in arts, that's such a big confidence boost to have that.

HAH: Do schools have to apply?

JC: Yeah. It is quite hotly contested. You know full well there is not as much funding for the arts as there should be. And so, a lot of schools would like to get involved in projects like this but they just don't have the resources to include everybody.

HAH: Before we move on to other projects you have facilitated, I would like to ask you questions about the practice itself. What issues does working in a community context or community arts context raise, if any, in terms of ethics or empathy, the way you relate to people? I mean if you were going to train other young artists who want to get involved in such projects, what would you tell them?

JC: Well, I am actually mentoring a few people at the Irish Writers Centre. I am mentoring a couple of writers who want to get involved in community arts writing projects. And I guess the first thing I would say is: it is not for everyone. That ability to translate your work from the page to something that is accessible to every person is not a skill that everyone has. I think we need to be honest about that. I also think that Northern Ireland brings its own particular bunch of issues and for me one of them has been the trauma sometimes that is associated with community arts. Often you are flung into environments where people are sharing

desperately difficult traumatic experiences; through – you know – through the vehicle they want to write about it or work it into a piece of theatre or something. And as a facilitator, I have not had any training in how to process what that feels like for me. So, I have been in spaces where what has been shared is incredibly traumatic and I've had to come out to the car park and have a cry. There is no... I don't know that that happens in every community centre. I think it is peculiar to Northern Ireland. I also think that what is very very frustrating for me is that the funding setup here is outdated. So, a lot of it is still working along with traditional sectarian binaries. Do you have 50% Protestant, 50% Catholic in your group? And that's frustrating in a neighbourhood like East Belfast, where we are sitting, where ethnic diversity is probably more of a prominent issue here and I would love to have been working with groups where you could disregard that sectarian thing. So, sometimes the structures we are working with, you need to have a degree of creativity to work around them, be flexible to get to do the project you want to do.

HAH: I thought the Arts Council of Northern Ireland had put up a policy around intercultural arts and interculturalism,⁵ trying to promote ethnic minority artists? Is it a problem that people are always being categorised or pigeonholed?

JC: Yeah. I hate it. I find it really kind of offensive to get at the end of a beautiful project where you shared opening with each other for two hours and to hand out a form and ask people: What do you identify as? Do you have any mental health issues? Are you working-class?

HAH: So, you are still doing that?

JC: Oh yeah. Everything.

HAH: And the data-collecting process?

JC: I don't know whether it is ever processed or whether it is really helpful. It just feels restrictive for us.

HAH: And very reductive.

JC: Yeah. And it also takes up a lot of time. I think if I was training somebody up in this area, I would warn them to think of the lovely stuff, you feel that you are harnessing your skills and you are really making a difference, and then there is a lot of administrative and restrictive difficult things that you need to work around.

HAH: When you attended the conference in Paris in October,⁶ you mentioned a workshop you facilitated involving men I believe, and you said that they were initially a bit reluctant to engage. So I suppose this was one example but that you have been faced with other similar examples. So how do you “break”, I don't know whether

5. In 2011, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland launched its first Intercultural Arts Strategy (2011-2016).

6. The “Novelty in Unionism” conference jointly organised by Joana Etchart and Hélène Alfaro-Hamayon was held at Gustave Eiffel University on 14 October 2021.

break is the apt word, that initial resistance or perhaps it is a form of shyness? People not being comfortable articulating emotions. So, what are the steps? Or is it perhaps something that is not tangible, you know, and cannot be put in words?

JC: This is the difficult thing to teach because it is really hard to teach the flexibility that you need to adapt to every single different situation. That you might go into a room like that particular group of men. It felt actually almost hostile. You know that art was something that they were not interested in, felt it was beneath them and they sort of had been tricked in, ok so we are going to do an art session. So with them I actually ended up taking in some of my Dad's tools. We wrote about that but I didn't tell them we were writing. We just talked about the tools: "Have you got one of these? and what would you use it for?" And it morphed into storytelling.

HAH: So starting from something very practical?

JC: Yeah, and something familiar to folks. It is really important. I always say to my facilitators when I am training them: "You set the tone in the room". So if you go in and you pick up on that vibe and you are shy and like scared and a bit backward yourself you are going to make it worse. You have to go in with enthusiasm. The one good thing about people in Northern Ireland is they have got a great sense of humour.

HAH: Since you mentioned this idea of making it accessible, when I used to come to Belfast like fifteen years ago, some people I met like Martin Lynch⁷ or Jo Egan⁸ said the community arts practice was underpinned by a number of principles such as ownership, access, collective authorship. Do you still use these words today or would you use other words to describe what you do?

JC: Yeah. I think like collective curation and – you know – developing ideas through a kind of process. A lot of the projects now you don't go in with fixed objectives. You go in to consult with the participants to see what it is that you would like to do. What are the outcomes that you would like from these projects? There is such a degree of ownership in that and also a degree of putting people at ease where you are not going to say: "We are all going to do an all singing and dancing musical by the end of this". Would that make you feel comfortable? What I do think, what I have noticed over the years of doing this, is you have to set the bar quite high and encourage them towards that. Because of the fear factor – often people will say "I am gonna do a very small thing" and if you can encourage them to try and take a wee risk to do something new, at the end of the project they are so proud of what they have achieved. And that pride and celebrating, it is a huge part of doing these projects.

7. Martin Lynch is a Belfast-based playwright who pioneered the development of community theatre in Belfast from the late 1970s onwards.

8. Jo Egan, having worked as a playwright and director in the community theatre sector in Dublin, relocated to Belfast in 1996. She has been involved in numerous projects such as *Crimea Square* (2013), a large-scale community play charting the history of Shankill Road since 1912.

HAH: So you would say, building on what you've just said, that it is really about building trust and building confidence. That's perhaps what characterises a number of participants, this lack of confidence in their own skills?

JC: I think that frequently I hear that kind of commentary regarding people who lack confidence. I often mostly work with older people and you frequently find people who have never had a position of autonomy in their whole life. Suddenly you are asking them to express themselves and that's terrifying. It's kind of coaching, nurturing them towards that place. There is also a question around validity. Is my story the right story to tell? Is my story a valid work? I also think that the big thing I've learnt is that these projects often create an ability to look at the world around you objectively, which is something that is not often taught in Northern Ireland. So, you know, you could disagree with another participant in the group and how they are expressing themselves but you have to be able to sit with that difference and that is not a skill that happens often in Northern Ireland, mostly people will just get up and leave the conversation if they don't agree. To me that is almost the most important unique thing that art does here in Northern Ireland.

HAH: So it is really about listening and articulating your views.

JC: Being able to say, to know the difference between a fact and a kind of perception or... you know that we can both read the same poem and one person could like it and one person could not like it and both would be legitimate responses. And when you trickle that down to the kind of binary divisions here that's a huge implication that you could say: "You worship in this way and I worship in this way and neither is wrong".

HAH: You mentioned too that you have worked a lot with elderly people. And I read somewhere that you did not understand why people ask you: "Why do you like working with elderly people?". So, apart from the obvious human bond or relationship you develop with people when you work with them or you facilitate a workshop, is it a way for you to explore the past or to know more about their lives when they were younger? Or is it a way to get a better insight into Northern Ireland as a place?

JC: Not so much. Ethically as a practitioner, I don't really like reminiscence work because I feel for a lot of my older people it situates their worth in the past. So if you are endlessly talking about the good old days, the implication is they are over and what are you worth right now? It is more that I find older people here are more open-minded than people think. A lot of them have been through desperately difficult times and they just want people to get along. I find them quite flexible and quite... there is a perception that they are tighter than they actually are. They also have a lot of time, a lot of wisdom and that wisdom, you know, is not necessarily about things they have done in the past but they have been around for a long time, they have developed opinions and thoughts and I just also really love being able to introduce something new into the mix. We made a radio drama together a few years ago and none of them had been in a studio to do that before. They are learning a new skill in their 70s or 80s, that's class.

HAH: And people are ready to learn more and to get enthusiastic about something new?

JC: The very baseline reality is most people in their 40s don't have a lot of time on their hands. If you are 75 and you are retired, you have time to sit with the project. We did a three-year project there with older women in the Falls and Shankill women's centres and it is rare that you would get a group for that length of time.

HAH: Three years. How important is the time factor? How crucial is duration? I imagine people need time to feel confident and open up and...

JC: And develop friendships. It is not just that they have to get comfortable with me, they have to get comfortable with the other people as well. The funded projects that have longevity usually are the ones that are slightly more worthwhile. Even if it is, twelve weeks is better than six weeks, six weeks is better than two weeks. It is not to say that you can't do something meaningful in a one-off workshop but that longevity with people and tracking their confidence and interesting new ideas... I would never go in with anything too complicated in the first sessions but when you get further down the line, you can look at things like structure and form and writing and maybe more complicated writers you want to interest them in. They trust you by that stage... [...].

HAH: How do you usually – I suppose there is no recipe obviously – start when you first come in? The first session. The first time you encounter people.

JC: The first session is never about anything except getting to know each other.

HAH: An icebreaking session?

JC: Yeah. Just reassuring people. Like I always laugh. I had two wonderful ladies once in a workshop that didn't take their coats off for the whole first two hours. You know, I said: "You can take your coats off ladies" and they said: "We are not sure we are staying or not". Eight weeks in they were the life and soul of that project. But that first session where you are debunking myths like I am gonna make you do really weird things that you don't want to do.

HAH: That's understandable.

JC: Yeah. Not rushing people. And also for me as a facilitator I am trying to get a gauge on what their skill levels are in the room... the previous experiences, and also particularly in Northern Ireland the issues that hurt, the traumas, particularly in that Falls and Shankill group there were a lot of people who had lost folks in the Troubles and you are picking up very quickly on where the potential flashpoints are. You know the very first day I had two ladies who announced they were proud members of the women's Orange Order and I also had quite a lot of very strong nationalist women in the group.

HAH: Was it on a cross-community basis?

JC: Yeah. So, you are instantly going "Okay maybe in six- or seven-weeks' time, we can talk about that but at the start let's find something neutral".

HAH: Is it really about you being able to assess what you can do or not do at some point?

JC: Yeah. That's why I mean it is very hard to teach that. It's years and years of listening, learning. You know it is not a very dissimilar skill to what I do when I am interviewing somebody on stage. I do a lot of moderating interviews with other writers. You are constantly trying to listen for where are the places you want this conversation to go and where you don't want it to go. It is the same in a workshop setting.

HAH: Once you have completed the whole series of workshops, you said you worked for three years with a group; do you maintain ties and bonds with the people you were involved with?

JC: I can't. I just have too much. And to be honest I haven't done much community work in the last two years because I think those projects [over a long period of time] are the best projects and I no longer have a diary that can commit to be in there every week for weeks and weeks and weeks. And the reality of it is you meet a lot of vulnerable people in community projects. I don't ever hand out my personal email or my phone number because I know you could have somebody land on your doorstep. So that would be something – when I am teaching my students – that I would say right at the start “Make sure you know where your boundaries are”, and not just your boundaries with regard to the participants. The community groups that ask you in often don't have a sense of boundaries, so you might be getting paid for the workshop but they want you to figure in lots of meetings and public relations events. “Of course, Let's have a wee party for the ladies, could you come to that?” So being clear about the boundaries.

HAH: About what you want to do, and how far you can go.

JC: Yeah. And that you are not a counsellor.

HAH: You have mentioned a couple of times these traumatic stories people may deliver and you also explained when you came to Paris that a lot of young people who were born after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, even though they didn't themselves experience the conflict, have to carry what you called at the time “the legacy of the conflict”. Do you think that this issue of young people having to carry these emotions is sufficiently addressed in Northern Ireland?

JC: I think people are becoming more and more aware of it. That there is definitely a problem there. There are young people who are exhibiting signs of trauma. That's a lot of pressure on them. Whether it is being addressed and supported, well some of the organisations that provided funding and arts projects that were there to help kids process through things, they have lost their funding. So acknowledging the problem and actually dealing with it can be two very different things.

HAH: So you would say that at the moment there is no will to address this problem head-on?

JC: What I always say about Northern Ireland is I think we have some of the best people on the street. The community workers, the facilitators, the people who desperately want to change things but there is a glass ceiling if you can't get the legislation changed or the funding to come through. So all the good will in the world until we have significant support from Stormont is not enough.

HAH: Since you raised that question of Stormont being supportive or not supportive, would you say that with the Assembly being suspended three years and being suspended again at the moment because of Paul Givan stepping down, that frustration is growing among people at the local or community level about this "state of paralysis"?

JC: Yeah, I mean we are always frustrated. It has been interesting watching what's going on across the wider UK and even Ireland to some extent. A lot of people seem to recently have lost lots of faith in political leadership. I don't think we ever had much faith in political leadership, so we've always lived with a low-level degree of frustration. Some of that can wear you down after a while where we are not as active and agitating as we could be because it has just been going on for so long. But I think the flip side of it is that often people will roll their sleeves up and do it themselves. And that's not healthy or sustainable but it shows the good will of folks. "If I can't get the funding, I am just gonna do it anyway". It shouldn't be like that, but I think there is a lot of people who care too much to just let it drop.

HAH: Do you think that over the past three or four years because of the Brexit situation and the Northern Ireland Protocol,⁹ attitudes have hardened or is it just a minority of people, namely the DUP because that is their political posturing? Does political opposition to the protocol reflect people's views on the ground or would you say that what we have seen on television – rioters setting cars on fire – is dreadfully reductive?

JC: I think there is a hardening in the minorities. The harder end of loyalism does seem to be getting more and more, I don't want to use the term militant, I don't mean militant in terms of militarised, but angry and the same on the other side of the spectrum. I think in the middle there is still... Most normal, ordinary people just want to get on with everyday life. What the UK or the European-wide press I don't think made enough of during the elections¹⁰ was the rise of the middle ground. The balance *did* swing from DUP to Sinn Fein but look what's been happening on the side:¹¹ this huge swell of people that are demanding more than single-identity politics. They are passionate about the environment, education, mental health issues.

9. The terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol came into force on 1 January 2021 with the end of the transition period. Four unionist parties – Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), and Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) – formed an alliance to fight the Brexit protocol in September 2021.

10. In May 2022, Sinn Fein became the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time with twenty-seven seats. The DUP came second with twenty-five seats.

11. The cross-community Alliance Party returned seventeen Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), more than doubling its previous number in 2017.

HAH: You would say that people want to look beyond Northern Ireland. Are young people today more interested in issues such as climate change or sexual orientation?

JC: Oh yes. Absolutely. They did a poll in 2019 of young voters and the majority of people under 30, they are not interested in binary politics. They don't see themselves as unionist or nationalist. They see themselves as citizens looking at "Who has got the best policy?" that engages with all those topics that young people across the world are interested in.

HAH: You said you were going to write a book about community arts. What is your motivation?

JC: I am a very lazy writer and I write about what I know. I have been doing this for so long.

HAH: But why do you think it is worth getting down to writing about something you have been doing for long? I am sure there is more to it than just that.

JC: I guess I am very interested in those stories that exist at both ends of the spectrum in terms of this desperately difficult stuff in there but incredibly hopeful, beautiful stuff as well. And I haven't seen that played out quite as much as I have in community arts practice. And I also think that we've talked a number of times in this chat about the people on the ground and how amazing they are. They don't get the recognition. I'd like to shine a light on some of those people who have been turning up every day for decades. I was desperately moved last year when they had the footage of the riots and there were community workers placing themselves between those boys and the peacelines and trying to talk them round. That is a visual symbol of what these people are doing every single day.

HAH: So this book will be about valuing community arts practice, as you said, shining a light on people involved in this type of projects?

JC: Well, who knows?... It is still in my head at the moment. There are two characters that work in that sector. It will be their story. It will be a novel. I think for me I've realised that the novels are very closely set within Northern Irish culture. They give me a platform to talk about things I am passionate about.

HAH: Thank you very much Jan.

Hélène ALFARO-HAMAYON

Université Gustave Eiffel