Lawrence - Donal Ryan How I Write, Interview audio
Duration: 71.28 Minutes

Lawrence Cleary.
My name is Lawrence Cleary. I'm at the Regional Writing Centre. This is kind of a unique situation that the Writing Centre conducts interviews with really good writers to find out what they do, how they go through their process to end up with things like this [holds up Donal's *The Spinning Heart*]. So the conversation is on how they write, not what they write, how they write. And to say that it's not easy to separate those two, and I understand that. It's a convenience to talk about how somebody writes without talking about what they write. But that's the way that I will keep the questions focused, on a process. And people familiar with the How I Write, Ireland interviews will know that we record these interviews, we transcribe them, we develop lesson plans for teachers to use in classrooms. Where they can take snippets of video, and they can take something that, a question that was asked and the response from the author, and as a point of reflection for the students in the classroom, okay. What's unique about this situation is that it's coinciding with the One Campus, One Book initiative that we started this year. Donal Ryan is our first author, our first selection for his book *The Spinning Heart*. And it's also unique in the sense that we now have a new chair, the Frank McCourt Chair for Creative Writing in University of Limerick. And that's Joseph O'Connor. And he's going to introduce Donal and then we're going to start the interview. I will speak for about, I will ask questions for about 30 minutes and then I'm going to open it up to the floor and ask you what would you like to know about how Donal writes, ok? So that's the process right. Joseph.

Joseph O'Connor.
Okay. Well, thank you very much, Lawrence. I want to say on this beautiful day what a pleasure it is to be here at the wonderful Regional Writing Centre, and to welcome so many of you to this event. And to thank my colleagues and our distinguished guest for giving permission to talk to you for maybe 120 seconds about creative writing here at the University of Limerick. So we started in September offering an MA in creative writing. Some of you who keep an eye on the papers will have noticed that the eminent English author Hanif Kureishi got into some trouble last week and attracted some headlines when he said that creative writing classes were a load of terrible rubbish and an awful bloody waste of time. He didn't say bloody, but I won't actually say on tape what he did say.

And he is, himself, the Professor of Creative Writing at a university in Suffolk, so his classes must be great craic altogether. We here at UL are going to try and put together a course, a series of courses and modules that will be very practical, very focused, not just on the work shop and helping every writer to find their own individual unique voice. How to understand the story, how to, just the little things that can help to come into the story late to finish it early. How to create characters that resonate and are involving. And also to look at the professional aspects of writing. So we will be having meetings with publishers and magazine editors and theatrical impresarios. Michael Colgan from the Gate theatre in Dublin will be coming to talk to the students here. And we will have a performance for the students by *Fishamble* the new play company. which is a wonderful crowd. The only theatre company in Ireland that specifically does new work. And we will be hoping to prove Hanif Kureishi wrong. And to have a lot of fun. I can promise that everybody who does this course will be a better writer at the end of it than they were at the start. So if you're interested I can answer a few questions about it afterwards or you can write to me here at UL or you can write to Tom Lodge. And we have all sorts of very exciting plans. Including I hope that we'll have a very interesting and fascinating writer in residence. Who I'm not allowed to say at the moment who I'd like it to be, but I'll give you a clue, he is sitting in this room.

(laughter).

Joseph O'Connor.
I don't want you to mention it to him because I haven't fully persuaded him yet. Put in a word for me afterwards. It might be Donal Ryan.

Lawrence Cleary.
No pressure.

Joseph O'Connor
So to the very present business of the day. It is such a pleasure for me to introduce Donal Ryan to you today. It does feel a bit odd as a Dubliner and an outsider and a recent arrival to UL that I would be introducing this man who lives across the road and who attended this college and who so many students and faculty here are reading at the moment. But it's a wonderful joy because I love Donal's work. I love it as a writer, and I love it in a more important way as a reader. It is really remarkable the journeys that his novels take you on.

And also their sense of homecoming, how reading one of his novels, he never tries to wow you. His work stirs deeper recognitions all the time. Donal has discovered the most powerful force in the world, which is the power of simple words placed in order quietly and simply. And he is one of the few contemporary Irish authors who are articulating contemporary Irish concerns, but he does it with such tact and such skill and such grace. I don't have to tell you, he's a young man who has already achieved glittering accolades; his novel was long listed for the Booker Prize. He won the Guardian first novel award, deservedly. But more than that, Donal has already won the greatest prize for any writer, and the prize that every true writer yearns for, which is that his books have been taken to heart. All up and down the country everywhere you go where people read, on every bus, on every train, in every writers group and readers group, people are reading Donal Ryan. It's a wonderful thing for him to have achieved, he has only further huge successes ahead of him. And so, again, if you'll forgive a blow in introducing a local hero, it is a great pleasure to introduce to you today, Donal Ryan.

(Applause)

Lawrence Cleary.
I want to begin by thanking Professor O'Connor for introducing Donal, and I want to thank Donal for being here and not just for today but all the times that you've been there through the One Campus, One Book initiative. You did an interview earlier this year, and we did a few other things, and I just want to thank you for coming.

Donal Ryan.
It's a pleasure.

Lawrence Cleary.
And I want to thank everybody else for coming too. I think this is great. You can really pull them. We can draw. I mean this is a really big crowd, and I'm really pleased by the attendance. I guess I want to just preface everything by saying that what motivates the questions for the How I Write interviews are the writing process, the things that people do as they go through their process, the strategies that they use as they go through their process and their context for writing. And we were talking a little bit about this earlier, about the context for Donal is, that it's a literary context. The things that he is writing are literary. And so in that context that's how I would think about the way that you write. Not so much about the

Irish context, although that does come into it. And then of course the Newport, you know context, that's a whole other issue. We could get into that, but those are the things that kind of centre my questions.

I would like to start out by asking Donal if he would characterise his writing process, like how would you characterise it, what would you say about it, how would you characterise it. And would you recommend it to others?

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, I suppose I would—can I just say thanks Joseph for that introduction, I think they're the nicest words I've ever had spoken about my work. Really appreciate it. I would recommend it, but it doesn't always work for me. And I kind of develop my process for writing from a mishmash of advice that I heard second and third hand and some of it I got from writers and some from other people. And I put it all together really, you know, because I had to, because I spent years and years writing in kind of short bursts. Sometimes late at night, sometimes in the morning, and it never really worked, and I was never really happy with what I wrote. And I tended to over write and over think.

And when it got to the point where I said I had to be disciplined here, you know, I have to give myself a window of time in each day, and I have to be uniform and very strict, it started to work a little bit better. But then I heard things like Kinsley Amos would write 500 words every day before he shaved, and that would be it. And then he'd go to the club, and he'd drink and smoke all day, and I thought great, I can do that. But then I remembered, 'no I have to go to work.' And then, you know, I heard things like Kevin Barry would get up very early in the morning, and before he'd even have coffee, he'd write 1,000 words. So I tried that as well, but it didn't work either. I got really grumpy during the day because, you know, I hadn't enough sleep got.

So then I started to write from 9 o'clock at night till midnight and give myself a lower limit of 500 words, and that was fine. And it's very simple, just those 2 things, that time and that number of words.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right, and so I guess that's one of the questions that I had, was about your process in terms of, like, routine. I was thinking about something that I had done an interview with Joe Slade, she's a local poet, and I had asked her about her routine and she said she got up every morning, at 4 o'clock in the morning, before the kids woke up.

Donal Ryan.
That's a bit early.

Lawrence Cleary.
And I think I read in some of the interviews that you've done that you actually write in the evening after they've gone to bed.

Donal Ryan.
Yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
So kind of like opposites there, but is that pretty consistent, is that routine.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah. I mean for my first two novels, it really was for *The Thing About December*, for a full year from 9 o'clock to midnight every day, you know, and Anne Marie really made me do it, you know, and she kept me going. But I had to have that as well, you know, I was very lucky that Anne Marie was there because I don't think I would have had the discipline myself to do it every night you know. That could have been to do with the TV remote as well, slightly. Because there was a program called *America's Next Top Model*, actually, that was on for about a year.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
Which I can thank, actually, to a great degree for that book.

Lawrence Cleary.

Yeah I'm sure there's a few programs like that that my wife watches that motivate me to do work as well, actually, now that you mention it. I'm thinking, just looking here at one of the things that, there was an interview with Book Browse, there's a lot of interviews out there and they're all with like non-entities. They never mention who it is that's asking the questions.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
I thought that was kind of curious, like I didn't know if it was the same person who just put a lot of different information on a lot of different websites or what, but anyway.

Donal Ryan.
I'm not sure actually how it works, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah, well, you had said, let me see, they had asked, they had talked to you about *The Spinning Heart* and let me see, you talked about *The Spinning Heart* and following the completion of *The Thing About December* and you said, 'I thought I'd better stay going while I had the momentum and discipline'.

Donal Ryan.
Yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
Can you tell us a little bit about the importance for you of momentum and discipline? I guess that's why I'm asking you about the regimen because it's one of the things that a lot of people have problems with, finding a time and a place to write. So like this idea that you had momentum, can you tell us a little bit about how that functions in the way that you write.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah, the one thing, the one element actually of writing that I had huge difficulty with for years was actually gaining momentum and sticking at something, and you know, I started

loads of novels and didn't finish them. And with *The Thing About December*, around half way through, I really had it built up, you know, I was going well and you know for about four months, you know, between the half-way point and the end of the first draft, it was flowing really well. And then it was finished and I was, I felt this triumph, this triumphant feeling. I've finally done it, I've finished a novel, you know. And I'm kind of happy with it. And this is actually something I can say that I did no matter what happens.

And then I was kind of bereft as well because it was over, and I was sitting there going what do I do now? So the logical thing for me to do was to stay going. So I started *The Spinning Heart* kind of to keep my hand in really, just to stay in kind of the mode of writing and of being a writer, and of seeing myself as a writer. It's very hard to see yourself as a writer, I think. I still don't fully see myself as a writer because I'm still a labour inspector, you know, it's still my full time job.

Lawrence Cleary.
Sure (laugh) I've been meaning to talk to you.

Donal Ryan.
Right (laugh).

Lawrence Cleary.
I'm just kidding, kidding.

Donal Ryan.
So, yeah, I said I'll stay going because you know I had my little 9 to 12 slot kind of carved out, and it was there you know, and I had, you know, the thing in my mind that every night I would do this, you know, every day of the week. So really for my own safety really I did it, you know, just to make sure I wouldn't drop the ball again.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right, ok cool. And I guess, I know that in some of the interviews you talked about having 3 things that you're working on right now, following *The Thing About December*. Something about December. And one of them was a play, I'm trying to remember all the things, you are working on two different things now.

Donal Ryan.

Yeah, it kind of, there was a bit of confusion actually alright. I was asked to adapt *The Spinning Heart* for the stage. And I did and I took two weeks off work, and for about 10 or 11 hours every day I worked at it. Now maybe two weeks isn't enough to adapt a novel for the stage, but I thought at the end of it I'd done a fairly good job because I converted monologues to dialogues which is kind of tricky. And you know I rewrote and shuffled things around and wrote new material and you know parcelled it to seven voices. And we had a read through in Dublin that went very well. But then you know these things happen, it kind of got, you know pushed away, not pushed away, you know in any kind of aggressive kind of way but it just didn't happen really. And I was kind of a little bit sad about that but also relieved. But it kind of broke the momentum of writing, you know fiction, that I was doing. But at the same time I was writing short stories and I've two kind of workable first drafts of novels, you know kind of at the half way points.

So I kind of lost my nice rhythm that I'd built up and that single focus that I had on one thing. Which I have to get back now this April actually, I've got a date in mind, the 7th of April is the date that I get back into writing just one thing, you know.

Lawrence Cleary.

Ok, well, that's really interesting, that's an interesting strategy where you kind of look ahead, and you say: ok I'm going to relax until that day. But I imagine there's a lot of head work that's going on in preparation for that day.

Donal Ryan.

Yes absolutely, I'm actually developing strategies daily, you know to actually make myself do this and you know to be this person who actually gets up in the morning and writes all day and then you know watches TV at night. It sounds very boring but I can't wait.

Lawrence Cleary.

Sounds great, it sounds great to me.

Donal Ryan.

Because I love TV as well (laugh). But, yeah, I have to prepare myself mentally for this.

Lawrence Cleary.
So are you writing routinely now, are you writing in the evenings, the three hours that you designated, are you still writing during those hours.

Donal Ryan.
No, shamefully, in say the last 6 or 7 months, I've fallen out of that kind of routine that I had. Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Routine. Okay, so, but you've given yourself a date to go back to that routine.

Donal Ryan.
Yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
That's really interesting. So that's a good way to kind of like save yourself when you've gone off. You give yourself a time, and you build up momentum, and you get back into it.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, it's become very important to me. That date actually had become very important in my head, you know. It's the first day I'm going to start, and if I don't, if it gets to the evening of that day and I haven't started, I'll feel that I really have let myself down, you know.

Lawrence Cleary.
Wow, that's great. I mean I think that that's a lesson for everybody as well. I mean, we all kind of, we want to designate times to write, and then things don't work out, and we kind of pause. And this is a pause for you, really. Isn't it?

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
And in fairness, it's not like you're not busy.

Donal Ryan.

Yeah, that's why because you know I am so busy, and I love doing things, and I love, you know, travelling and being on the road and meeting people. And like last night we launched Paul Lynch's new book, *The Black Snow* by Paul Lynch. It's a fantastic novel, and I was actually very honoured to be asked to launch it because it's just so good. And it's a huge relief as well when somebody you like very much asks you to read a book and to launch it, you know. And, when it's that good, it's such a relief, but that's kind of an aside. But, yeah, I love that kind of thing, but it doesn't marry very well with being in full time employment.

Lawrence Cleary.

Right. Yeah. I'm sure, yeah. Well, let me take this in a bit of a different direction. I want to kind of move into strategies. You've mentioned, in a lot of your interviews, the importance of Anne Marie to your process, and can you tell us a little bit about how she serves to facilitate your process? Are there other people that you draw on for, you know, to further your writing goals, and in what ways do they function, and how do they move you toward your goals?

Donal Ryan.

Okay, well, in a very fundamental way, I wouldn't be a writer without Anne Marie because, at the very start, she said, 'Look, I know you think of yourself as a writer. But you don't write. So just go write a novel, please.'

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.

For god sake, yeah. So I did. I said I'm going to show her, that's it, going to write a novel. But Anne Marie has a natural ability as an editor, and it's actually amazing. She can look at a passage and say, 'Donal, it does not work', or 'Doney', as she calls me, 'it doesn't work, get rid of it.' And she's almost, she's always right. To the degree that, you know, when I was writing *The Thing About December*, about 20,000 words I had written didn't really make sense, but to me they made perfect sense. I think I actually lost my reason for about a month. And for some reason, in that four or five weeks, Anne Marie hadn't been really looking too closely at what I was doing. And then she went, 'Oh my god, you're ruining, you're ruining your beautiful book.' And I was appalled. 'How dare you ruin my beautiful book.' She was

totally right. 20,000 words were ridiculous, and they had to go. And they literally did, I just highlighted the words and deleted them.

Lawrence Cleary.
Wow, do you do that, do you delete stuff.

Donal Ryan.
It's great. I'm so lucky.

Lawrence Cleary.
You don't save it at all, you just kind of get rid of it, and that's it.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah. I do, yeah. Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Ok, that's cool.

Donal Ryan.
Actually because I was offered, actually, I should delete everything because I was offered, I was shown emails that had been printed off and sold to a dealer in England recently. Emails I'd sent to my editor. I have no idea how they got to this dealer, but they did. So I should really delete everything. And we don't, I mean, you know some people's archives get sold for huge money. So maybe in 40 years' time my kids will cash in.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
I guess on the same note, I mean, the reason I'm asking you about Anne Marie is because a lot of people tend to think of the writing process as something that they go through alone. Something that's solitary. Well, I mean, you're watching TV, you're writing, and in a sense, you are kind of alone. But at the same time you involve somebody in your process.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
And I was thinking about something that you said in another interview with Book Trust, you talked about the importance of your parents reading to you when you were little. And you recall listening to your dad reading *Danny Champion of the World* to you. How important is it for parents to participate in the development of a child's appreciation for literature, and was your dad's unabashed appreciation for literature, did that help to validate for you the desire to become a writer?

Donal Ryan.
Oh, absolutely, yeah, because I think in the formation of a person's critical faculties, in the formation of your intelligence, I think, you know, or the use of your intelligence, reading is just so important from a young age. And, I mean, there's no greater pleasure in life for me now than reading to my kids. But dad, I remember that book, *Danny, Champion of the World*, my father is here by the way, who isn't. I have to always say that when Dad is in the same room and we're talking about books. But it's unbelievably important. And all my life, I mean, I was pretty much steeped in books from a young age. You know, I mean, we'd a full collection of Enid Blyton when I was young. We'd a full collection of Roald Dahl and all these wonderful kids' writers. And Walter Macken, that kind of thing. It was just fantastic. But being read to, you know, I was reading kind of before I went to school, which was great. And my parents didn't really say, you know, 'don't read that', you know, I mean, I was kind of reading at kind of a slightly elevated rate I suppose, you know, because I read *The Executioner's Son* by Normal Mailer at about 7 I think or 8. I was a bit upset by it.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
But it's true. But it did feed into my image of myself as a writer because the image of the blood dripping from Gary Gilmore's body on to his white trainers in the prison when he was shot, because Gary Gilmore chose to be shot as a method of execution in Utah.

Lawrence Cleary.
God, I remember that, yeah.

Donal Ryan.
In 70. Was it 73, or 4, I think?

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah, it was way back, I remember it though, yeah, was it, no it wasn't televised, but he was on TV a lot talking about how he wanted to be shot.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, that's right, yeah. And I think there had been no executions for 10 years previous, I think, in the whole of the States. But that image seared into my mind, and I thought about it nearly every day. And then I started thinking about how that person who wrote the book, Norman Mailer, had made that image, you know and put it in my mind, you know, and it stayed there. And I became fascinated by that.

But there were other things too, I mean, like dad's encouragement always was fantastic and being told you're great is a great thing when you're a kid. It's so important. He might have overdone it because I got a bit of a big head at times.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
I was thinking in terms of, I was thinking that for a kid, as a guy, like you know, growing up a guy, usually, it's not easy to tell your friends that you want to be a writer. It's not something that's probably easy to broach, like if you said, 'I want to play hurly' everybody goes, 'ah yeah right.'

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.

Come on. Lets go. But if you say I want to be a writer? Did you deal with a lot of grief.

Donal Ryan.
Well, being from North Tipperary, I said I want to be a footballer, which is nearly as bad as saying you wanted to be a writer.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
But, actually, I didn't start to say I'm a writer until I was about 18, and I used to start saying it to girls at parties. And it never really worked because 'what have you written?', all I'd written was a big box of rubbish really. And dad became my archivist at about 14 and started to put things into a box that's in the attic now, and he threatens, constantly, will come out of the attic. But, yeah, the idea of myself as a writer was fostered by my parents you know. And because, it goes back really, and I know I've told the story a lot, but when Steve Cruz beat Barry McGuigan in '85, I think, in Nevada, in Barry's title defence, I was distraught. And I couldn't stop crying. And dad was saying, 'Don't worry, Donal, there'll be a rematch and Barry will win it', and there never was. But I wrote a story about the rematch, you know. And then I started thinking, God, this is fantastic. This feeling I have now. I have created a story, and to have created a story out of nothing gave me this unbelievable feeling. It's probably in the box, actually, in the attic, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
And you don't forget that.

Donal Ryan.
No, no.

Lawrence Cleary.
You don't, yeah, I'm sure. Are there people out there, without naming them, are there people out there to avoid when you're trying to write?

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, I've a few friends (laugh) who don't, they don't read my books actually. I've a friend who rings me now and again, and he goes, 'man I can't sleep', and he'd read 3 sentences of my book and go (snoring) you know, and he's really funny. And it was funny the first two times, but after about 25, 30 times, it loses its appeal.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
Is this somebody you grew up with?

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah, one of my best friends. But I have to say, actually, Anne Marie's reaction to what I write is very important, and I've started to gauge you know the merit or otherwise of what I've written by Anne Marie's reaction. Because her reaction is so lovely when it's good, you know, and it's so obvious when it's not good.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right.

Donal Ryan.
Because you know I wrote a short story recently that will probably be in my collection that I've to hand into my publishers in October. And Anne Marie cried. I read it out in the kitchen. I never do it, actually, [to Anne Marie] I don't know why I did read it out to you, you were very busy. So I said ok, I couldn't get her to read it, so I said, okay, I'll read it out. And when I was finished, she was really silent all through it, and then at the end she was crying. I said lovely, this is a great story.

Lawrence Cleary.
That's brilliant. And thinking about, and I'm focusing on strategies again, like we think about strategies in the writing centre, and we kind of stole from this lady Rebecca Oxford who talked about language learning strategies. And I try to incorporate that into writing, learning strategies, learning how to write. And the way that we think about it is like things that we think that stop us from writing or motivate us to write. Things that we feel that stop us from

writing or motivate ourselves to write. Things that we do and then people we do it with. And so this is where I'm going with all of this. And I'm thinking about there might be writers here today that suffer from negative thinking. For instance about their writing or their prospect for publication. You know because of debilitating emotions that manifest themselves as panic or procrastination or perfectionism. Have you in the past suffered similarly, or suffer still, and how do you deal with that, emotions that prevent you from moving forward?

Donal Ryan.

That's a great question because, and it's probably one of the most important questions. I'd say everyone is the same. I was assailed for years and years by all those things. I was assailed by the notion of myself as a good writer, which is very dangerous for a while. And mostly assailed by the notion of myself as a terrible writer. But most destructive of all was the idea that I could write a perfect sentence. And there's no way of doing it. Because there's an infinity of detentions between what's good and what's bad in your own head, you know, for a start.

And, I think at about 16, I read *Ulysses* for the first time. And I read it, again, a few years ago. And that one sentence on about page 42, that says nothing except how light plays on a man's body, it really messed with my head. Because it was so perfect, what is it again? 'On his wise shoulders, through a checker work of leaves, the sun flungs bangles dancing coins'. And I read that sentence and said that's the most beautiful perfect sentence I've ever seen. And it stayed in my head, and it echoed around my head for years. And, when I was writing, I'd be thinking of it. Thinking can I match that. It's not matched in *Ulysses*. I don't think it's matched in literature for me. That kind of thing was in my head all the time. And I'd write and rewrite the same sentence over and over again.

And then I'd think I'm suffering from creative torment here, this is a good thing, you know. But I kind of clichéd myself really, you know, in that respect. And until I stopped thinking about that, I couldn't write, I couldn't get more than a paragraph out. You know, for years I'd write a paragraph and look and go, Oh God, it could be so different, it could be so great, it could be so this and that, and it can't because it has to be what it is.

So I've kind of come to terms with the idea now of writing something and then going back to it once to kind of change the shape of it a little bit and to tidy it up a bit and then to let it go to

an editor to tell me, you know, if it's going to work or not. And with Anne Marie, actually, as the intermediary in between.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right, okay, so there's kind of like two editing steps that go on there.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Oh, you get feedback from Anne Marie, and then you modifym and then eventually it goes to a publisher or somebody else who is going to look at it and give you feedback as well.

Donal Ryan.
Yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
I was hoping to come back to those kinds of issues a little bit later on. I'm conscious I'm watching the time because I want to make sure that we leave plenty of time for people in the audience to ask questions as well. I guess, maybe think a little bit about the process. I'm thinking about how novels get started. Like what writers do to come up with something to write about. And can you say anything about how that occurs for you?

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, again, my big problem for years was thinking too much. I remember driving the car, thinking what could I write a novel about, you know, when I'd see a guy walking on the street going, 'What's his story?' And then I constructed his story between the petrol station and the office you know. And I'd go, 'That's a good basis for a novel.' And then I'd go, 'No its not, its crap really'. And until I sat down and started to write, without thinking too much, I was getting nowhere. And, actually, I heard John Boyne saying years ago to always let your unconscious mind be one step ahead of your conscious mind when you're writing. Otherwise you will think too much. But then I think that can be tempered by Kevin Barry's advice not to let fluency be mistaken for inspiration, which is also very good advice.

But, again, you know, when it came to *The Thing About December*, I had a very, very vague idea of writing a book about a man who suffers from loneliness. Really, and it's an old idea. I mean it's been done thousands of times, but I said I can do it my way. And I can make Johnsey a kind of aggregation of the lonely people I know in my life, you know. And give them a voice, and it started to work, and really, again, I know it sounds very simplistic, but this thing of not thinking too much about what you're writing as you write it, is very important.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah, I've heard you say that before. And I'm conscious of the fact that you're kind of doing, when we do these How I Write interviews, what we're trying to do is provide, we always had text to look at and we can, like you look at Joyce's one sentence and used it as a model of perfection or you know something close to perfection. And we can look at texts, and we can kind of, we get inspiration from them. And we kind of try to approximate the greatness of those texts. But we don't have a lot of opportunity to see writers write and to witness writers writing. And the interviews are supposed to kind of bring people closer to that possible way of being modelling.

So like for instance you are modelling writing for everybody right now, but I hear you talking about all these writers that you model your process on. I can hear you mentioning them and telling us about things that people said that changed the way you thought about writing. I think that's really interesting. That's just a comment, that's not a question, sorry. I just thought it was really interesting, and we have this on tape so this is actually going to be out there, and that's great.

But I know that you're conscious of that because in a lot of the interviews you do talk about how other writers have guided you.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, absolutely, and you know, it's not always positive as a writer to have read fantastic books. And I have to say actually there are loads of books out there that I read, and I'd go afterwards, 'That was beautiful, that was brilliant. I could never do that.' And that actually was something that put me off writing as well. *Star of the Sea*, for example, not just because Joseph is here, but you know, and also because he is here, but just as an example, that book. I

read it and went ‘Oh my God, like that’s unbelievable what this writer has done here. I could never do it.’ And then I’d go into this depression, you know.

Loads of books, DBC Pierre book *Vernon God Little*, I read it and nearly started crying, you know loads, there are loads of books like that. It’s terrible, really, because I love reading, you know, and I love literature, and I love all books really. I mean I love Stephen King, you know, and even when I read *The Stand*, I said, ‘No, I’m not a writer’, because I couldn’t write a big long epic book about the struggle between good and evil like that. It has so many, you know, wonderfully realised characters on the page, as well, and this kind of thing.
But all those writers you read feed into your own fiction, there’s no way to not be a little bit derivative. Every writer is because we’re all writing using the same words more or less. I mean we’re not creating anything completely new, ever, you know? So we’re all a little bit derivative. And, you know, everything is to some degree contrived you know. And no matter how well and beautifully you might think it flows and how uncontrived it seems. But that’s the thing, I think. While you’re writing, though, you have to shove away your influences consciously, you know? And let them just be subliminal more or less.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right and I can’t imagine how that works, like to relax like that, to be able to relax and let it happen, there’s got to be some discipline in that as well.

Donal Ryan.
I think so. I’ve never actually meditated, but I think sometimes, when I really kind of get, you know, into a state of real concentration, where it’s kind of going well, you know, and I know if I break out of this now I’m in trouble, you know. I’m kind of in a little bit of a groove here. It does seem to me that that’s what meditation feels like. You know, just even that story that made Anne Marie cry, I think that that, I wrote that fairly quickly. And it felt really good, actually, that story, you know, the writing of it. And it doesn’t always feel good. I don’t always feel good physically, even as I write. I’m sure Joseph knows what I mean about this. You can sometimes feel sick while you’re writing.

Lawrence Cleary.
Sure.

Donal Ryan.

It's a struggle. It's against the grain sometimes, and that's when I think you should stop. But then you know you might be actually getting somewhere with that. I can never really find that point myself where the kind of struggle, you know, becomes kind of the point where I should stop. It's hard to pinpoint it.

Lawrence Cleary.

That kind of leads into what I was going to ask next is I was thinking about the fact that you're working on 2 or 3 things at the same time. And I was thinking there's something that happens, that you think a story is going somewhere, right, so you're thinking I'll stick with this one. And then something happens, and do you get to the point, like do you have times when you park something because you know it's not its time, and move on to a different project as a way of just keep moving, keep the momentum going. Do you do that?

Donal Ryan.

Yes, yeah, I did it twice actually in the last few years. I parked two novels to start writing short stories. Because I couldn't sustain the kind of, you know, the longer narrative thread of a novel because I was writing in such short bursts. And I wasn't writing regularly because I was so busy between work and engagements and things. And I started to realise I can knock out a first draft, I know it sounds reductive, of a short story in three sittings which suits me. So in a week I'll have a first draft of a short story. And in the second week, I can have three sittings to edit it. And then at the end of the second week, I've got something that can go to an editor to be read, you know, which is good.

So I actually parked, yeah, I pretty much parked two novels, thinking, you know, someday I'll have, you know, a big enough offer from a publisher to be able to write these novels full time. And it looks like that's going to happen now in the next few months, luckily. I mean it's not a huge offer, but you know I've been kind of made an offer where they want three books by three points in time. Which is great for me, you know. For some people that would be kind of anathema to creativity to have these kind of deadlines, you know. But, for me, it's great to have somebody say to me we need to have this by October 2014.

Lawrence Cleary.

Okay. So that works for you.

Donal Ryan.
And I said thank God somebody is saying this now, you know. And also we'll give you this amount of money to do it, which is better again.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
That's pretty good. I'm kind of conscious of the time here, I'm just going to ask one more question and then open it up to the floor. Something that you said, I wanted to go with that. It went out of my head. I guess, let me see, I guess I wanted to ask if your novels develop chronologically, linearly. In other words does the story go from beginning to end or do you write like parts of it at different times, in other words, we always say in the Writing Centre, 'write what you're ready to write.' So like, you know, is it conceivable that you could write a story…

Donal Ryan.
That's good advice.

Lawrence Cleary.
Like the middle of the story and then pick up and figure out what the beginning was.

Donal Ryan.
That's good advice, actually, to write what you're ready to write. Because I did write *Spinning Heart* and *The Thing About December* pretty much as they appear in published form. Because I kind of, I had that kind of, you know, discipline and that kind of little bit of time every night to do it. But with the novel that I have to have ready by next year, I wrote about 15,000 words and then things started to occur to me, little vignettes and little scenes. And I heard Roddy Doyle does the same thing, that he actually writes a novel fragmentarily. I don't know if you do Joseph?

Joseph O'Connor.

I sort of start with the end.

Donal Ryan.
Really, yeah.

Joseph O'Connor.
I'll ask a question maybe when it comes time for that. But to me to set out with absolutely no sense of where you're going, I would just get lost and I have got lost a number of times. You know you end up with something that's 100,000 words, but it isn't a novel, and it just seems that it will get longer and longer and have no end. So I try and think my way down to the end first and then go. When you have some sort of destination. And of course it changes in the process. It's just a sort of trick you play with yourself.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Right, that makes a lot of sense. I mean, in a way what you're saying is something happened, what were the conditions that caused it to happen or that led to it or whatever. And that's a great way to kind of build your story from the back up, like I can see where that happens.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah. I mean, I got lucky, it was blind luck that *Spinning Heart* kind of came together properly for me. With *The Thing About December*, I kind of knew how things would fair out for Johnsey so I was kind of working to that end all along. And in a way my biggest issue, actually, with writing is pace in a novel—actually pacing the novel. So I give myself, I use, I've crutches that I use. I mean, it's kind of obvious as well. I use the calendrical form for *The Thing About December* and with *Spinning Heart* I let the kind of, the length of the monologues dictate the pace. So the structure in *Spinning Heart* dictated for me the pace of the story. So I just said it will be about four months. It will be kind of spring and summer of 2010 in this village, and each voice will be, you know, roughly x amount long. And there's my pace sorted out.

And then with *The Thing About December*, as well, you know, there's twelve months, so it will be roughly of equal length to each month, it will be a year. And now I'm writing a novel, and it's the term, the course of a pregnancy, so it's each week of the pregnancy. And I know lots about that because I've a book called *What Happens When You're Pregnant*. And I also knew what happened to Anne Marie when she was pregnant.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
It's good to study.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah. Kind of a very lazy researcher, but…

Lawrence Cleary.
That is, that was the question I was trying to, I was forgetting to ask you, it's like we always assume that creative writers, everything comes out of their head, but my assumption would be that even creative writers do research. Do you do a lot of research?

Donal Ryan.
No, I don't, and actually that's another thing about the *Star of the Sea* actually, that, yeah, the amount of research that went into it was so perfect, and it evoked the time and place so perfectly. I'm very lazy, well, okay, I'll let myself off the hook a bit and say it's because I've very little time because of the old job that I keep using as an excuse for things. But, yeah, you have to I think, I mean, for that definitely, it's great to have that book there, so I know with my heroine, you know, I need to kind of put in some physical complaints she has or whatever is happening to her body at certain weeks in her pregnancy. And it's great to have that there, that resource. And also it's a very small thing, but it's very important. I've a book called *Grammar for Grownups*. Because no one's grammar is perfect. I think even people who are grammarians, is that what you call them, don't have perfect grammar.

And actually that book, there's a book called *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* about grammar. And somebody wrote a book pointing out the grammatical mistakes in that book. And there are hundreds.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah there is actually.

Donal Ryan.
It's amazing yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah I saw that too actually.

Donal Ryan.
But that book, Anne Marie bought it for me, of course, *Grammar for Grownups* is invaluable. I love semi-colons. I don't even know why, but I use them all the time, and my editor said 'Donal, every sentence in your book has a semi colon. What's going on?'

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
I always talk about grammar as the logic of the language. And so, for me, the challenge is to create the new logic.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yes exactly.

Lawrence Cleary.
I'm going to make grammar work for me.

Donal Ryan.
Exactly yes, yeah, well said, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.

I want to open this up to the floor. There are people here who are writers themselves, who are aspiring writers or maybe well published writers. And I would like you to think about some things that you might be able to ask Donal that would help you with your own writing process or your own publishing process as well. Because he's gone through both of those processes, and it took a long time to get to the point where he's published. But he went through a process to get there. And so those are things that he can talk about from his experience as well as his processes of writing.

Can I open up the floor, and I'm going to say we only have one mic, I think, is that true? So what I'm going to do is just for the sake of the tape, I'm going to repeat your question. So, sorry about that. Who would like to ask a question? Way in the back, what is your name?

Cheryl.
Hi I'm Cheryl. The international society is actually reading *Spinning Heart* for our book club which is very, very cool. We had talked actually just on Monday about how short the chapters in *Spinning Heart* are, but how much information is really packed into them and how the characters are really well developed, which is something that I struggle with as a writer. It's something that I notice a lot sometimes even with the longer, is that sometimes characters aren't as well developed. So I was wondering about your process to develop characters and how specific you can be with them for such a short amount of time.

Lawrence Cleary.
Can I just repeat that real quick? Basically you're asking about how he develops his characters and how he can pack up so much information in such a short space through his characterisation.

Cheryl.
Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Ok.

Donal Ryan.

Thanks for that question. I decided very early on that I was going to make every single sentence in *The Spinning Heart* count for more than it would maybe in what would be considered you know an average length novel, because it's less than average length really. So that's just a mechanical thing really. But I wanted to write a novel of voices. And when someone is speaking about themselves, you know they're not going to set themselves up, you know, you're not going to say, you know, John had, you know, a certain appearance or whatever, you know. They're going to talk about the world around them. And through that they're going to describe themselves really.

So I just decided to try to make the voices as vivid and as real as possible. And I know I probably focused far too much on negative reviews of my own work, but somebody said recently that you know *The Spinning Heart*, the fact that the voices and the characters are so real is no great achievement, because I'm writing in the slang and grit of my own language, which is true because we're all immersed in the model of growing up. You know, unless you grew up in a house where people speak with received pronunciation which is unlikely unless you're a British aristocrat I think.

You know, you will hear the demotic or the language of common people, you know as we all are all around you all the time. And that's where people kind of reveal themselves, when they're speaking as the person that they are. Sorry, it's a bit of a woolly answer I think.

Lawrence Cleary.
Can I follow, just a real quick follow up on that is: how do you remember phrasing? Like, in other words, do you, I was kind of wondering about this because I was thinking about the story about James Joyce ducking into the toilet to write down a conversation on toilet paper so that he wouldn't forget. Do you ever, like, repeat things that people said so you don't forget it, or try it out on other people so that you won't forget it?

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yes, absolutely. Anne Marie has phrases that are from West Limerick, you know, and it's not that far away, and I hear them, and I go that's beautiful and ask her to repeat them several times. And, actually, when I'm writing I often hear Anne Marie saying things or my mother, actually, you know, who also has a lovely way of saying things. My mother grew up in Kilmastulla, which is only a few miles from where I grew up. But the demotic changes in

Ireland from road to road and from townland to townland, and it's just an amazing thing, you know. And there are lots of phrases actually in *The Spinning Heart* that people say to me they don't recognise but that they really like and have started to use, you know, which is great.

Lawrence Cleary.
You're going to be changing the language.

Donal Ryan.
But I actually hear, I often hear, my grandmother, as well, actually saying things, you know, and I'll actually write it down, it's funny.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah, and you write it down.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
That's how you record it.

Donal Ryan.
But I hear, you know, my grandmother in my head, you know saying things that she used to say when I was a child, yeah. And it will come out in my writing definitely, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Brilliant, can I get another question, yeah.

Andres.
My name is Andres. Did you ever think of putting a glossary in your book? Because I come from North Tipperary, not too far from where you grew up, over 40 years ago, and I'm from Waterford, so I've got very little understanding of a lot of the kind of (inaudible) a lot of the sayings in north Tipperary, particularly around (inaudible) and around that area, they have a language all of their own.

Donal Ryan.
Oh. Absolutely. Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Just for the mic, you're asking about whether he would think about putting a glossary in his book, or some sort annotation for the vocabulary, some of which is unfamiliar.

Andres.
Yeah, that was a bit tongue in cheek, but I know what you're saying.

Donal Ryan.
Oh, but, no. Seriously, people have said it, really, seriously. And really serious literary critics actually have suggested that I put a glossary at the end of *Spinning Heart*. But I kind of thought that I was fairly successful in making, in illuminating the meaning of what someone was saying by the context. I thought anyway, but you know, I didn't. Obviously wasn't as…

Andres.
What's *noton*?

Donal Ryan
Nothing.

Andres.
I know, yeah, but you know if you didn't know what it was, you'd have to kind of.

Donal Ryan.
I think when I use *noton* now, by the context, you kind of know the meaning, yeah. But you know, actually, people tell me that they actually say these things aloud and then it becomes more clear. But even the phrase, I mean, *moryah* actually is Irish, it's the Irish for *as if*, literally. And, actually, American people have told me that they figured out *moryah* because it's used a fair bit. And, in the context its used in, they started to realise, 'oh yeah, yeah like *mar dhea* actually means, you know, *as if* or, you know, *supposedly* or whatever.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah right, like, yeah right.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah right, exactly, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
I guess that is an issue in terms of the fact that you, I think you've been in the US, have you been in the US lately?

Donal Ryan.
Yeah actually *Spinning Heart* was published about a month ago in the US. But, you know, I always kind of use Irvine Welsh as a touch stone in that respect. I think, you know, if my use of the demotic isn't as dramatic as Irvine Welsh's in *Trainspotting* and other books, I'm ok. Because, I mean, he's sold all over the world, and it's almost impenetrable. It's inscrutable at first reading. And you literally have to read his sentences in a Scottish accent because he deconstructs the words and puts them back together phonetically, you know. And then when you read them, you go 'ah, that's what it is'. It's amazing, and it's a real enjoyable experience, but it takes a long time to read his books.

(laughter).

Joseph O'Connor.
Can I ask you, Donal, to me, one of the many really remarkable things about *The Spinning Heart* is that you know, although it is written in this demotic, often the slang and the juiciness of every day speech, that each of the voices is actually slightly different to each other, which is an incredible achievement. I mean, you can read a really great novelist like Jane Austin, who does everything so well, but all the characters sound exactly the same. So how much work was it? Like, were you aware of moving phrases or snatches of speech from this person over to that person because it sounds more like them?

Donal Ryan.

Yes, yeah.

Joseph O'Connor.
Or did you just sort of hear the voices and write down what they were saying.

Donal Ryan.
That actually was the biggest struggle, I think, with *Spinning Heart*, and *Spinning Heart* kind of flowed fairly well in the writing. And that was the biggest challenge. And, you know, there are places, I think, I mean characters like Shanie Shaper and Bobby, I mean, their speech is almost interchangeable. But because they're kind of in the same position in life, they're the same kind of guy, they're both builders of the same age who worked in the same sites and did the same things, and it was very hard, actually, yeah to do that. I think it's almost why I brought in Lloyd and Trevor, these two lunatics in the middle of the narrative. Almost to break up the kind of, the North Tipperary kind of country accent of the characters around them a little bit.

And it was definitely the biggest challenge. And I did, actually, yeah, I definitely remember cutting and pasting phrases and lines from character to character because they suited somebody else more. And, again, in my horrible habit of self-flagellation and actually actively seeking out bad reviews, that's the one negative thing people always point out, bloggers especially, that 'oh, the characters all sound the same', but I don't think they do, and thanks it's great to hear that.

No name.
My question is: there are many books out there on how to write a book, but is there anything specifically that you would recommend that would guide new writers that might be worth reading?

Donal Ryan.
In terms of books?

No Name.
Yeah.

Donal Ryan.
I think, actually, the best book I have read on writing is called *On Writing* by Stephen King. It's an amazing book. And, actually, he gives a list of books that he recommends everyone reads at the end of it, which is actually great as well. But there are amazing tips in there on everything to do with writing. You know, and it really is, and I think a lot of writers actually hold that up as, yeah, the kind of almost quintessential tome for writers.

No name.
And, then, if you look more at the non-fiction aspect.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, you know, I've actually read very few books on writing, I've tried not to because I didn't want to be too assailed by different advice. But that book I devoured, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
Are you picking up the questions? Okay, I just wanted to check to make sure he's hearing this? Another question?

Caroline.
Can I ask, Donal, when you're creating your characters, do you use an organisational chart to kind of map out the back story and to keep it all straight so that, as you're writing, you don't make any kind of errors or, all the characteristics of the novel your writing.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah. I know what you mean. I don't, actually, but it is a very good idea for a lot of writers. For me, I think, it isn't because, when I do that, I always tend to see myself then as writing to a template. But that's just me, you know, and then I tend to think of it as being too formulaic, even though it's not. It is a great idea. But I suppose, I mean, I hate to use the term literary fiction, but I suppose it's going to be, you know, people are going to put books into certain categories. And I suppose my books, so far, would be put into that category. That's just the way of arranging books in a book shop.

But the plot isn't king, I think, in my books. You know? So I wasn't too worried about having plot holes at the end of a first draft because I knew I could go back, and I could shore

them up, you know, and it wouldn't detract from the book itself. But, again, pure blind luck I managed to get to the end of a first draft of *Spinning Heart*, and I didn't have huge gaping plot holes, even though I thought, when I read it back, that I would. I think really it was blind luck.
And with *The Thing About December*, because it's literally just an exposition of Johnsey's thoughts from month to month, during a year, plot issues were very slight. But, if I was writing a book that was more involving plot wise, I think I would do that now again, yeah, yeah. And I'd have to just kind of cast away these ideas of, you know, making me formulaic.

Kim.
I find this very interesting, the formulaic, you know, that you talk about. You said you went, and you worked every night from 9 to 12. How does that go? Because I'm writing, and I don't do it because I want to. I do it because I have to. And I can't imagine like every single night you were satisfied with the quality of what you had written.

Donal Ryan.
I was only ever satisfied, really, with the fact that I had written. You know what I mean? And it's so important. And I think it was Alain de Botton, or as we call him in Limerick Alanda Botton. Who said, I think, he said you have to have, everything in your life has to be organised properly to allow you to write every day. And he said something about being inspired, but you have to be inspired, something about every day, I can't remember exactly what he said now. But, basically, what he was saying was, you literally do have to write every day to get the job done, you know.

And, again, yeah, I know what you mean about dabbling, and dabbling is that kind of reductive phrase, because it's still writing no matter what. And we tend to apply the term dabbling to writing when you just do it now and again you know. But even though what you're writing could be very serious and very real and true, but I think it's just so important. For me to get a novel finished or to get anything finished or a short story, I have to say I'm going to write now for 3 hours, and I'm going to do at least 500 words.

I heard Anne Enright saying, recently, that for her its 200 words, and I thought, yeah, that's better again, actually. Lovely. Yeah. So now, actually, if I've written 200 words, I think well this is what Anne Enright does, so I feel good.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
It's interesting, because like what he, that's probably, to me, as important as the routine. The fact that he satisfies himself with the fact that he just wrote something. It doesn't matter what the quality was, that he just did something. I'm thinking about our writers groups in the Writing Centre. We have a space in the back, and people come in for two hours and write. And one of the questions at the beginning, we try to kind of get everybody focused, and one of the questions I always ask people is are you going to be happy if you don't do that today. In other words, if you don't finish all the things that you said you were going to do in two hours. And I'm checking, mostly, to see that they don't jump out the window if they don't. You know, but it's like, it seems like people are so invested with the finishing part of it when just any progress is good.

Donal Ryan.
Oh, absolutely. Yes.

Lawrence Cleary.
So I think that's a really important thing to communicate.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, it's like running, if you focus too much on having your five miles ran, you know, you're going to just get exhausted, you know, you have to just, you literally have to focus on each step as you take it. And that, actually, literally that's true because I started to run because I heard Haruki Murakami talking about it, and how it actually improved his ability to concentrate to write when he started to run every afternoon. So I said, well, again, if it's good enough for him, its good enough for me. I'll do it.

With all these things, I just copy all the other writers in the world that I hear talking about writing, you know. And sure what harm really, you know? But discipline is just so important. And it doesn't come naturally to everybody. Again, sure, I mean, you know, luckily, I have Anne Marie to make me do it, you know?

Kim.

I write every night.

Donal Ryan.

Really, that's great.

Kim.

But it's just that I don't always want to, because otherwise I'd be beaten.

Donal Ryan.

Yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.

Joe Slade talks about it as being a habit. She says it's a habit, and I really honestly believe she doesn't know how not to do it. Like her life is not sorted unless she did that writing that she does every day at 4 o'clock in the morning to 6 o'clock in the morning, whatever it is. I imagine the kids are grown up, she probably doesn't get up that early anymore, but still she talks about it like it's something that she has to do, it's like breathing, yeah. Can we get another question? Caroline.

Caroline.

The rapid fire round, just a couple of questions about the number of drafts it took, and I know you said you're writing 500 words a night. How long did that actually take then to complete?

Donal Ryan.

For *The Thing About December*, which I actually wrote first, I wrote it in '08 and early '09, it took exactly a year. And for *The Spinning Heart* it took seven months. And *Spinning Heart* was almost contemporaneous with the action in the novel itself because I wrote it in that kind of, in that time frame its set in, you know. And, actually, things happened in the media that I mention in the book, that happened as I wrote. And, you know, I don't exhaustively write draft after draft. I don't go back to the very start and say, 'right, I'm starting now at sentence one again and I'm going to rewrite all of this', because I kind of do that as I go along.

And I kind of thought when I realised that this was my process as regards drafts and editing, I thought am I being very lazy here. Am I just thinking to myself? Okay. I've done one draft and it's grand, it will do, you know. But I wasn't, because then I realised I was going back really, you know, to my 500 words kind of in the second hour and a half to 3 hours, and probably rewriting the whole thing again a few times, you know, and they were my multiple drafts really.

Lawrence Cleary.
So you're kind of drafting chunks.

Donal Ryan.
Yes, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
And redrafting chunks, and then letting it go for a while and going on to something else.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, and I don't think I'm alone there, hopefully anyway in doing it that way.

Lawrence Cleary.
I would imagine that that happens, like, at different stages. In other words, like, when you're first starting your story, you don't know where it's going or you don't have enough of a shape to it. You possibly don't do that so much at the beginning, but later on, as things start taking shape, you probably focus. You start getting, honing each section like we said. ready to write, ready to edit, ready to hone.

Donal Ryan.
Yes. Yeah, and the one thing I hate doing more than anything else, and you have to sometimes, is foreshadowing, you know, is—something happens in a novel and then you realise I better kind of set it up a little bit better, and having to go back and put in a clause even or a sentence here and there to kind of set this thing up to happen, you know?
And I remember with *The Thing About December*, there's an incident towards the end that I was told by an editor, you know, was too stark and almost was too jarring. That it had to be kind of warned, the reader had to be warned a little bit about this thing that was going to

happen. And I had to go back, and I felt awful, actually, felt almost physically sick doing it because I so didn't want to do it, you know. And I did do it and then, and still, when I look back, and I see those sentences, actually, I don't anymore because I don't look at them. I feel that sickness again, you know. Almost that I capitulated, kind of its maybe this kind of, a slight self-aggrandisement maybe, you know, thinking that, oh. it was so pristine, you know, my work of art, that it couldn't have been touched, you know.

Lawrence Cleary.
Anne Marie how did you feel about those sentences?

Anne Marie.
What sentences?

Lawrence Cleary.
Those sentences.

Donal Ryan.
The ones I put in around September/October, to foreshadow the incident.

Anne Marie.
I think the editor was right.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
That's true as well yeah.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
Actually, that's actually a point that, I'm very lucky in that Anne Marie almost always, or my editors advice almost always concurs with what Anne Marie has said already you know. And then it seems like it must be right, you know.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
Didn't stop you from feeling sick though.

Donal Ryan.
No, no.

Lawrence Cleary.
Okay, so.

Donal Ryan.
But, actually, I'll have a new editor now from April on, and it will be interesting to see what goes between Anne Marie and him.

(laughter).

Lawrence Cleary.
Can we get another question. Somebody else? Way in the back, you're going to have to speak up.

Patrick Griffin.
I have two questions. If you're writing two books, would you recommend putting them one aside and concentrating on one?

Lawrence Cleary.
Did you hear that question?

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, oh, I did, yeah.

Lawrence Cleary.
What was it?

Donal Ryan.
Writing two books, would I recommend that I finish one and put the other one aside till the first one is finished. And, yeah, I absolutely would. And the reason that started again was because I was so busy. And things were occurring to me for both books at the same time. It's terrible, really, crazy, but they were two very strong characters in the books. And things would literally come into my head as I was driving the car. So I'd say it into my phone, and then, you know, play it back and write it down later. So both drafts got to kind of the same point, but definitely, I mean, it almost came to a stage where I was writing a sentence for one novel and then a sentence for the second novel and over and back, which is lunacy really. So you're right, I'll have to put one aside completely, yeah. But for the time being anyway, I have to have a short story collection finished by October, so that will be my focus from April 7th.

Lawrence Cleary.
That's great, good stuff. Another question, we still have some time here.

No name.
How did you know about approaching publishers? What was your process around actually engaging with your personal (inaudible 59.12)?

Donal Ryan.
It's a very simple process. I got a present of a book called *The Writers and Artists Year Book* from my wife for Christmas. And she said, 'this is the only way you're going to get published'. And she was right because I had no ins to publishing, you know. I hadn't ever published short stories, you know, with *The Stinging Fly* or *The Mop* or anything. You know. I didn't know editors, I didn't know anyone in publishing. I had no links. I'd no contacts. I was completely unknown.

So my only hope was to have lottery levels of luck. And I think I can quantify it as kind of local GAA lottery levels of luck. You know, it wouldn't be like hitting the jackpot for the euro millions.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.

You know, I reckon my chances were about 15,000 to 1 of winning this jackpot. And I struck gold because, literally, the very first publisher I wrote to was Anthony Farrell at the Lilliput Press. And three years later, an intern in his office picked up *The Thing About December* from their slush pile, so called, it's a horrible reductive title for a pile of people's really hard work. And that's what happened, and in those intervening three years, I had queried every publisher and agent in the UK and Ireland, and I'd gotten forty-seven rejections and probably about fifty no answers, which I thought was completely fine, and completely normal.
I couldn't believe when I was on the Booker long list, and this became a huge story. It was in the LA Times, and New York Times, they editorialised about it actually in the LA Times. About this huge struggle that I'd gone through, sure I hadn't really. I just sent letters out and got back replies. And we used to look forward to it. Anne Marie and I, we'd wait, remember that, letters would come in and we'd go, 'ah, what's this person going to say', you know. Because we knew it would be a rejection, but it was kind of funny as well you know.
Like people got angry with me, like an agent in America sent me a really angry email pretty much saying like what is this crap, you know. And then I thought will I get into a big ding dong with this guy now, will I email him back, and I didn't thank god, you know because it's so self-destructive.

But anyway that's all you can do really unless you have a contact or you have an in or you know somebody or you know an editor or, you know, or you're known already for your short stories in magazines or for your bits and pieces here and there, you know?

An awful lot of books that are published are commissioned, you know, nearly all of them now unfortunately. You know, I'm kind of, I think I'm nearly the last of a species, you know, the writer who gets picked up kind of by chance, by a publishing house. And, again, it was blind, blind luck you know. And all the cards fell in my favour for about the last few years. Things will surely start going wrong soon.

Lawrence Cleary.

I hope not.

Donal Ryan.

I shouldn't say that really (laugh).

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah, you shouldn't say that, that's a jinx yeah. Anybody else, any other, did you have another question.

Joseph O'Connor.
No I was just going to say I imagine that they read the so called slush pile a lot more carefully since your success.

Donal Ryan.
I think so, yeah. Oh there's been a sea change in the approach to the slush pile I think, yeah.

Joseph O'Connor.
Yeah I would think so. I happen to meet Donal's publisher, Anthony Farrell, recently, just to bump into him, so he said to me we read it a lot more carefully now.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah.

Joseph O'Connor.
Because what every publisher would like is this to happen to him every year, and you know it just doesn't happen very often. But any time I read that story, it is a much repeated story now about the 47 publishers turning Donal down, I do think about the man who turned down the Beatles and how every morning shaving he must have looked at himself in the mirror going oh, Jesus Christ. what did I do.

Lawrence Cleary.
Yeah.

(laughter).

Joseph O'Connor
You know, it's the great thing about the world of books that something like this can happen. I mean, it isn't like winning the lottery, because Donal has this great talent and his fortitude to

fall back on, but you know people have been saying for 30 or 40 or 50 years that that can never happen, and it does sometimes. People say, it seems you can't open the colour supplement of one of the UK newspapers these days or the literary pages without being told that literary novel is dead, and, you know, there are no novels about contemporary Ireland. There are no novels saying anything about what's on people's minds. But you know there are. It's the great thing about the literary world, is that sometimes these things can happen, so I suppose that's what keeps everybody going. Well it's one of the things, that is, you know, the door that seems closed does open sometimes you know. So it's hard, you have to motivate yourself, you have to keep going.

I mean we've said writing is like running, and I think it's a bit like swimming, you know, because you just, you jump in, and you have to get to the other end of the pool somehow, no matter what. And then you work on the grace of your stroke after that. But it's really, the metaphor that means most to me is that it's like marriage. It's a lot more like marriage than it is like falling in love. You know if you make a serious commitment to writing that's what it's like. And you're going to have to do it on the days that you're not overwhelmingly in love. You might have a little quarrel with writing sometimes and maybe not want to speak to writing for a couple of days. But you're hoping that, over the long term, it's going to be worthwhile. And that's what it's like. There are moments of huge excitement and passion and thrill, you know, but they're not there every day. And that is one of the things that separates real writers. If you're able to give it that level of commitment, you're certainly not going to hurt your chances, and Donal is living proof.

Donal Ryan.

And there are far worse stories, I mean Eimear McBride who wrote *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing*, which is an amazing novel, it's amazing. It won the Goldsmith's prize this year, the inaugural Goldsmith's prize for, the prize is kind of for innovative fiction or kind of something that's kind of very (inaudible). But I mean this book is written as a series of fragmented sentences. It's a series of thoughts and ellipses. It's just amazingly done. And for nine years she was rejected by all the same crowd that rejected me and more. You know, I think she was over 100, I'd say, in that time, you know. Everywhere all over America, England and, you know, Europe she was rejected. And that book is just amazing.

Lawrence Cleary.

I'm just thinking in terms of the slush pile. And was that Doubleday, who was that, was it Lilliput?

Donal Ryan.

No. Actually, yeah, you see the story kind of got a bit out of control. And it kind of got reduced to this nice little fairy story kind of thing. You know, or not fairy story, but you know, kind of nice happy ending story. But really poor Brian Langan at Doubleday, kind of gets glossed over a bit. Because I received an email from a guy called Brian Langan, who was an editor at Trans World Ireland, and they were developing an imprint called Doubleday Ireland to be kind of literary imprint.

And he had read the first three chapters of *The Spinning Heart*. And he'd emailed me, and he sent me this unbelievable email. I remember getting it, and Anne Marie and I danced around the kitchen with the laptop open on the kitchen table because it was so amazing. He loved it, you know, and we couldn't believe it. I said, you know, an editor like at a proper publishing house.

And about a week later, I got a phone call from Daniel Caffery at Lilliput, and I thought it was Brian Langan. And I got totally confused, and I hung up, going 'what was I saying to that person? That wasn't Brian Langan, that was some other guy, ah god.' But anyway Lilliput are a small independent press in Dublin. And they had a contract formulated more quickly really. And Doubleday are part of Random House, who are this huge machine, you know, the second biggest publisher in the world. So they had to go through committees and boards and, you know, different levels of people okaying things before they could say to me, yeah, Donal, we can offer you this. And Lilliput within days had a contract drafted, and I had signed it.

And then, you know, they had sold the rights on to Doubleday, and they ended you co-publishing in Ireland and selling on, you know UK and international rights all over the world which was great you know.

Lawrence Cleary.

I guess that was what I was leading to, I was wondering as a publishing strategy if it would be smarter, especially initially, when you're first trying to publish, to submit to smaller publishing houses rather than large, like I would imagine Doubleday is a gi-gunda machine, like. So I can imagine how clumpy the whole process is through them.

Donal Ryan.
Yeah, they are a company and, again, you know most of their books are commissioned, you know. Well, most of them are written by writers who are already on their books. They rarely take on new writers. So, again, it was really lucky that they decided to do a deal with Lilliput. But it is, you know, I mean, writers who want to be published are always advised against the scattergun approach, where you approach everybody. But I just went for it bald-headed, basically, literally bald-headed.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
And I just sent stuff everywhere. I sent stuff to places that weren't even publishers, I'd say. Companies that make stuff, you know, 'What the hell is this?' Because I got a manuscript back from a really, really, with a lovely letter from, I think, a solicitor in Dublin. And my manuscript had somehow landed in his office.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.
I think there might have been a publisher maybe 100 years ago on the same street. I don't know how I managed it, but anyway got a lovely letter saying best of luck and that it looks really good. I just had a little glance at the first few pages.

(laughter).

Donal Ryan.

Which was lovely. But, yeah. You see I can't advise against the scattergun approach because it worked for me, you know what I mean? But it will lead, if you're sensitive, and I actually am. I don't know how I managed to survive all the rejection. But we just laughed at it. If you're prepared to get letters back in the post almost every week saying 'no', and you know, to get lots of form rejections, which are kind of, you know, in a way, aren't as bad because they haven't considered your work. So they haven't said no to your work. They've said no to a manuscript from an unknown writer, you know?

If it has a compliment slip with kind of a very formulaic sounding sentence on it, you know it hasn't been read. It has just been put back in your envelope because you always send an addressed envelope with stamps; otherwise, you hear nothing back, you know.
So if you're prepared to receive loads of those letters in the post, then do use the scattergun approach because it's the most effective. It gives you the biggest chance. It's like doing the lottery more times, you know. The more times you do it, the more chance you have.

Lawrence Cleary.
This will be the last question and we're going to have to stop.

No name.
How much do you learn from your day job.

Donal Ryan.
Well I mean I'd be on the street otherwise, you know, I'm sure dad and mam would take me in, and the kids and Anne Marie, but (laugh). I mean, you know, because having a day job actually gave my life structure and gave my day structure. You know, and I knew I had to do certain things, to have certain things done by certain times for work. So then, I just kind of, I attached the writing to that, you know, so it just felt like going back to work for three hours at night.

Lawrence Cleary.
I need to close things up, I do want to invite you to maybe just—any advice that you want to give to people who are struggling writers, who are novice writers, any advice that you would give them, just in I guess the overriding advice that you would give.

Donal Ryan.
And you know the most prosaic advice is the best really. Just to stick at it, and the thing I always say is not to over think things. And to remember that there are officially a million words in the English language. So you might as well say there's an infinity of ways to put those words together in sentences, you know, so there is no perfect sentence. So basically, the first way you write it is probably fundamentally the best way, you know, obviously you tweak your sentences. But don't write and rewrite and rewrite the same sentence over and over again.

And just one very nice little bit of a mechanical thing that I used to do is I used to take—Shakespeare's sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. So there's a series of five beats in a line. You know, so, like, like as the waves make towards the pebble shore. When I was really stuck, and I couldn't think, and I couldn't write anything, I would write a line in iambic pentameter. So that I was giving myself just kind of a bit of structure, you know? So I'd write a little four line sonnet in that structure. Or else I'd do an ABBA rhyming scheme. So I'd try to rhyme four sentences. And then I'd be back into it again, you know, and it could be just literally nonsense. You know make up a nonsense sentence but write it in that structure. So you're writing something. So you're not sitting there going, 'Oh, I'm not a writer. I'm not a writer.' You know, because while you're writing, you literally are a writer.

Lawrence Cleary.
That's brilliant. Donal, I want to thank you, again, for everything. Delores has a little something for you just to say thank you for all the work that you've done for us.

Donal Ryan.
Really, oh wow.

Lawrence Cleary.
It's just a little something, it's nothing big.

Donal Ryan.
Oh, thank you very much. That's lovely.

Lawrence Cleary.

We just wanted to thank you.

(Applause)

End.