

INTERVIEW: CHRIS ARTHUR

BY HEIDI EVANS

Chris Arthur is author of [Irish Nocturnes](#) (1999), [Irish Willow](#) (2002) and [Irish Haiku](#) (2005). He was born in Belfast and lived for many years in County Antrim. After posts at the Universities of Edinburgh and St Andrews, he moved to Wales and now lectures at the University in Lampeter. He's listed on the [Irish Writers Online database](#) and is a member of Irish PEN and the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures. His writing has won various awards, including a Theodore Christian Hoepfner Award. He is currently working on Irish Elegies, due for publication in 2008.

Interview can be found here: <http://swanseareview.com/INTERVIEW.html>

How would you describe your writing to someone who has not yet read your work?

That's difficult—I wish I had a short, convincing answer. Sometimes I think musical terminology provides better descriptions of what I'm about than traditional literary terms. "Twelve Studies in all the Minor Keys" was the title Charles-Valentin Alkan gave to his opus 39 series of piano pieces. I really like that. It would fit *Irish Willow* pretty much as it stands. With a slight adjustment for the number of pieces they contain, it could be applied to my other books too. "Studies"—like "pieces"—is nicely non-committal. Or, taking Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" as a model, maybe I could describe what I do as "Words Without Music." I'm interested in writing lyrical prose fragments that explore, celebrate and advance my understanding of aspects of the world that catch my eye. To some extent, I write in order to think. These fragments are of a meditative turn of mind. As well as looking at language and memory, they tend to focus on themes to do with time, transience, loss, suffering and death—thus the minor keys—and they're invariably coloured by my Irish birth and upbringing. You don't have to be interested in Ireland to read them, though. The books address universal issues, but in an individual accent that just happens to be an Ulster one.

This is, of course, a deliberate evasion. It's a roundabout way of postponing any mention of "essays"—a booby-trapped word if ever there was one. Essentially, I'm an essayist, but the negative connotations of "essay" are so dire that the word can't really be used without qualification. On its own, it acts as a kiss of death in terms of attracting readers. Far too many people simply equate "essay" with the dull assignments they had to do at school or university. If it's not stuck in the classroom, the essay often gets stuck in a kind of bizarre time warp. This locks it into the Edwardian period as a kind of genteel prose pastime—of withering mediocrity—written by people who have very little else to do. Graham Good—one of the best contemporary commentators on the genre (I'm thinking of his *The Observing Self*)—offers a depressingly accurate caricature of how the essayist and essay still so often appear to people today. The words, he says, "Conjure up the image of a middle-aged man in a worn tweed jacket in an armchair smoking a pipe by a fire in his private library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, mauling on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine and old books, blissfully unaware that he and his entire culture are about to be swept away."

This type of essay—miles removed from the vigorous, edgy, unconventional and challenging writing being done in the genre today—is characterized by Ian Hamilton (in *The Penguin Book of Twentieth Century Essays*) as the "something-about-next-to-nothing school" involving "virtuoso feats of pointless eloquence." Unless the deadwood of these outmoded connotations can be got rid of, "essays" just sound tedious. I'd like to think my writing helps to counter such dismal misperceptions, but it's not as if *Irish Nocturnes*, *Irish Willow* and *Irish Haiku* are the only antidotes to them. Original, exciting, compellingly written essays—of a type that would have made the old-fashioned, pipe-smoking, tweed-jacket-wearing essayist's hair stand on end—have been flourishing for several decades now. It seems to me to be one of the most interesting areas of contemporary writing. But don't take my word for it—

take a look at the twenty volumes of Robert Atwan's Best American Essays. These have been published annually since 1986. The editor's remit (there's a different editor each year, but the whole project is under Atwan's guidance), is to trawl through the literary journals looking for the best in nonfiction writing over a twelve month-period. The quality of the writing so collected is superb. Lots of eloquence—but none of it pointless.

In your book, *Irish Nocturnes*, where did your idea of the essays becoming nocturnes come from?

John Field (1782—1837) was the Irish composer who pioneered the nocturne form. His compositions were a profound influence on Chopin, whose name is now so closely associated with nocturnes that people tend to forget about Field. Obviously you can't do in words what Field does on the piano—listen to one of his haunting, complex, beautiful pieces, and this will quickly become apparent. Despite this, though, I thought “nocturnes” would make an apt title because of the resemblance in mood and scale between what I write and Field's pensive, introspective, lyrical pieces. The fact that Field was Irish was important too—but again (obviously!) you don't have to be Irish, or have any interest in Ireland, to appreciate his music. What I hadn't come across at the time I chose “nocturnes” as a title was Theodor Adorno's suggestion that “the essay verges on the logic of music.” I was delighted when I discovered this. It seems to me to catch something of the nature of this mercurial genre, and it confirmed that my choice of title was appropriate.

Do you think the creative non-fiction genre is underappreciated in comparison to fiction and poetry?

Absolutely! I think things are gradually changing, though, and the situation in America is different from the situation in Europe. Robert Atwan—series editor of the wonderful Best American Essays, which I mentioned earlier—has said that essays now outshine poetry and fiction and are “our most dynamic literary form.” I don't much like the idea of ranking the genres in this kind of competitive way, but Atwan's high estimation of the essay certainly comes supported with impressive evidence—in the form of the vibrant annual selections his series offers. Gradually, people are taking the creative possibilities of nonfiction more seriously. But it's still depressingly common to find creative writing being viewed through the old threefold lens of poetry-fiction-drama, as if literature couldn't occur in any other forms. This is as silly as ignoring the fine prose of scientists like, say, Loren Eiseley, Stephen Jay Gould, and Alan Lightman and supposing that good writing can only happen in English departments. Good writing does not respect disciplinary boundaries. It crops up in all sorts of places.

If you asked a reasonably literate person to name an Irish poet or novelist, they probably could. If you asked them to name an Irish essayist, they probably couldn't. OK, in part that's because there aren't that many of them, but I'm sure if the great Hubert Butler had produced the same quality of prose in a novel as he has in his essays, it wouldn't have taken nearly so long for his reputation to become established. Likewise, I suspect the reason that, say, Michael Viney's beautifully written *A Year's Turning* is less well-known than Roddy Doyle's novels is very largely to do with the way in which fiction still taps into the literary consciousness more quickly than nonfiction. These terms, incidentally—“fiction” and “nonfiction”—are highly dubious. Imagination and truth have an intricate, tangled and fascinating relationship that can't be accurately mapped by presenting particular genres as either factual or fictional. The dividing line between them is much more blurred than any neat dichotomy would suggest. I'd also agree with Chris Anderson that “nonfiction” is unsatisfactory because it's “a negative term for something positive.” Why describe the current renaissance of the essay in terms of what it's not? I also like Jocelyn Bartkevicius' point that describing something as “nonfiction” is pretty arbitrary. You could equally call in “nonpoetry.”

Still, I shouldn't stress the negatives. This is a time when hugely interesting things are happening in creative nonfiction writing, whatever name you decide to give it. In the States, journals devoted to the form are flourishing—*The Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Creative Nonfiction*. Lots of other publications are very receptive to essays (the *Southern Humanities Review*, and the *Southwest Review*, for example). On this side of the Atlantic, some of the best creative writing programmes—those at the Universities of East Anglia and Lancaster, for example—now include a strong nonfiction element. Looking at Ireland's two main journals for contemporary prose writing, *Irish Pages* and the *Dublin Review*, it's clear that editors, readers and contributors are interested in essays. Looking to Scotland, it's significant that a poet like Kathleen Jamie has recently turned her attention to the essay, with her

lovely collection *Findings* (2005). In Wales, I hope it's an indication of essay-receptiveness that the Swansea Review has decided to include this interview in its inaugural issue. So, it's a stimulating time to be working in this genre, and it'll be fascinating to see how things develop over the next few years.

Besides essays you also write poetry, and in your nonfiction offer some haiku-like moments. How much of a relationship is there between your poetry and nonfiction?

Oddly, given their disparity in length, haiku and essays have a lot in common—particularly in terms of their interest in focusing on ordinary things but seeing them as extraordinary. I'm fond of Matsuo Basho's advice: "Let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write." Basho—Japan's great haiku master—also wrote in prose. I think this comment about "a hair's breadth" would apply as much to his *Narrow Road to the Far North* as to his haiku. I'd like to think that the attempt to close the gap between feeling and expression, thought and word, life and language is something that informs all my writing, whether poetry or prose. It goes without saying that for the most part I fail to close it to anything like the narrowness Basho recommends. This is more an aspiration than something that can be achieved. George Steiner says something along similar lines to Basho when he describes poetry as being "thought at its most intense." It's this kind of intensity that results in worthwhile writing, whether in poetry or prose. I'm not conscious, though, of any links between particular poems and particular essays, and I'm not always sure whether a piece of writing will turn out to be one rather than the other.

In "Walking Meditation" you speak of the legacy of your family "leaving trails like snails" in your parents' Irish garden. How aware are you of (perhaps indirectly) continuing their legacies with your writing—and your own "footsteps"?

I'm aware—I hope—of how much I owe to previous generations in terms of being in a situation where I enjoy the enormous privilege of writing what I want to write. I'm not so sure about continuing a legacy. The essay is very much an independent genre that resists rules and regulations and any form of standardization and insists on going its own way—something that I suppose might tie in with the dissenting tradition of my Presbyterian ancestors. But I also know that some of my forbears would be likely to disapprove strongly of at least some of what I write. The idea of writing constituting footsteps is interesting. I'm exploring something similar in an essay I'm currently writing about how the bookscapes we "walk" through via reading can be compared to the landscapes we inhabit.

You have a talent for making seemingly mundane moments into epiphanies. How much has your study of Zen-Buddhism played a role in this?

I'm glad this aspect of my writing struck you. A common theme of the essays is to point to what Georgia O'Keefe calls "the faraway nearby"—the fact that the mundane is really miraculous, the everyday—if you stop to look at it—quite astounding. Haiku—which someone once described as the essence of Zen expressing itself in seventeen syllables—have helped me to be more attentive to the ordinary. So yes, Zen has played—and continues to play—a part in things.

Many writers say they write best at a certain time of day, or in a special place. What would be your ideal writing nook of choice?

That's easy. My ideal would be a room with a sea view in the East Neuk of Fife—maybe in Anstruther or Crail. I love that part of Scotland. The quality of the light there is amazing. It lifts my spirits. When I'm there, writing seems to flow more easily. My best writing time is always first thing in the morning, a habit cultivated by having to fit writing around the demands of work. Early morning is when I'm most alert, but I also like the symbolism of starting the day with—giving priority to—something that means a lot to me.

You have been compared to Wordsworth, Yeats, and Seamus Heaney—among other greats. How does this make you feel?

Pleased but unworthy! I've been very fortunate in the reviewers who have read and commented on my books. I've learnt something about my own writing from what some of them have said and am grateful

for the insights they offer. The literary comparisons—to W.G. Sebald, V.S. Naipual, Aldo Leopold, C.S. Lewis, John McGahern and others as well as to the three you mention are, of course, unwarranted and I certainly don't take them literally. They strike me more as encouraging indications that reviewers think my writing is worthwhile but that they have difficulty placing it and so end up pointing to a diverse range of writers. The frequent comparisons with Seamus Heaney have, I suspect, very little to do with any genuinely Heaney-esque quality in my work and a great deal to do with Heaney's renown. He's become a kind of literary landmark, and it's almost as if any Irish writing needs to be orientated in terms of where it stands in relation to him. Not that I mind the comparisons—I think highly of his work.

What sort of future projects are you planning? Is there another genre you would like to try and haven't yet?

I'm working towards Irish Elegies, a fourth collection, similar in style to Irish Nocturnes, Irish Willow and Irish Haiku. Some of the constituent essays have already appeared in various literary journals. I'm not sure what I'll do after that. Maybe a fifth collection. Or maybe I'll do something different. I'm very much drawn to haiku—something about these slivers of verse holds huge appeal. If I could get an artist and publisher on board, I'd love to do a book of bird haiku. One of the things I've enjoyed with my books to date has been collaborating with the illustrators. Haiku offer all sorts of possibilities here—look at what George Bruce and Elizabeth Blackadder did with *Through the Letterbox*. As an academic, I sometimes toy with the idea of a campus novel—but I suspect higher education in Britain has gone beyond satire, so this probably wouldn't be as much fun as it would have been some years back. The likelihood is I'll stick with essays. It's a genre that offers enormous freedom. I don't think I'll be finished experimenting with it anytime soon. Or maybe I should just don my tweed jacket, get a pipe, retreat to my library and surrender to a stereotype that's horribly difficult to kill.

What advice could you give to young writers?

Rush out immediately and buy lots of copies of my books, and recommend them to all your friends—then I can use the royalties to buy my ideal writing retreat in Fife...Sorry! Seriously, individual writers are in such different places that it's hard to give any general advice that rises above the obvious: remember there's a link between good reading and good writing, so always leave time for the former; try not to be disheartened by the inevitable rejections when you submit work for publication. The main thing is that you're pleased with a piece yourself—an editor's decision doesn't always correlate with quality; make sure you don't just write—also live!

One piece of advice I'd recommend to any writer, young or old, is Annie Dillard's "Notes for Young Writers". This forms the Introduction to *In Fact: the Best of Creative Nonfiction*. What she says is really useful. Lydia Fakundiny also says something that I've taken to heart. Fakundiny—a superb commentator on the essay (see her *The Art of the Essay*)—was involved with Cornell University's John S. Knight Writing Program and in their *Discoveries* magazine for 1995 (available online), she says that "if an essay doesn't at some point surprise the writer, it probably isn't worth writing." I think that's true. The surprise—which tends to be disruptive/difficult/unpredictable—is what gives a piece its creative edge. She reckons that it usually happens "somewhere in the process of composing"—so make sure you give that process enough time/space/attention to develop properly. The surprise may not be generated in the first draft.....or even the fifth draft, but it will come eventually—provided the piece has any merit and is something worth writing.