WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Reinventing Lives: A Conversation with Steven Carroll

Gillian Dooley

Steven Carroll is the author of twelve novels, including two series; one based around his family background in Glenroy in suburban Melbourne, and the other inspired by T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*.*

I have admired Steven's work ever since I reviewed The Time We Have Taken*, his 2007 Miles Franklin Award winning novel, for the very first issue of* Transnational Literature.[1] *This was the third of the 'Glenroy' novels – there are now six in that series, the latest being* The Year of the Beast *(2019), based on the experiences of his grandmother in Melbourne in 1917.*

Recently, when catching up on some long-overdue reading, I picked up A World of Other People *(2013), the second of the Eliot novels, to discover that, although it is never made explicit in the book, the heroine is a reinvented version of another of my favourite writers, Iris Murdoch. I immediately decided it was time to travel to Melbourne (on the Overland train, which Steven's father used to drive) to interview him.*

We met in late January 2019 in bustling Lygon Street, Carlton, where it was too noisy to record our conversation. We found a quiet, shady table nearby on the Melbourne University campus and talked for an hour, till the heat drove us back to Lygon Street to continue chatting over a cup of tea.

[1] Gillian Dooley. Review of *The Time We Have Taken*. *Transnational Literature* 1.1 (2008). https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/3249/Time%20we%20have%20taken%20review.pdf;jsessionid=296F5751A915EDEB387DC8A2ADAB5031?sequence=1

GD: I sent you a review of *The Time We Have Taken* that I did at the time – I sent you the link. It's a fairly long review, and I'd also read the first two, *The Art of the Engine Driver* (2001) and *The Gift of Speed* (2004).

SC: I read reviews, because they can affect sales. An academic is currently writing a long piece on my books, along with other writers, but I don't want to read it yet. Maybe when I've finished writing, but I don't want to know too much at the moment. I'll read the reviews, but the long analytic pieces …

GD: When you say, when you've finished, what do you mean?

SC: Everything. When I've finished writing. So it probably means I'll never read them.

GD: You could have them buried with you.

SC: It's a bit like having someone looking over your shoulder. Have you read a book called *Jack Reacher Said*?

GD: No – tell me more.

SC: He's an outsider figure in novels that I've never read by Lee Child. A Cambridge academic, Andy Martin, sat with the author and literally looked over his shoulder – I've met him – as he was writing the novel.

GD: I would hate that.

SC: Yes, it would be awful.

GD: You'd have to be a very particular type of person to be able to put up with that, to be able to work under those circumstances, wouldn't you? I almost don't like somebody being in the room.

SC: Oh no, you can't have somebody in the room, unless it's a library or something.

GD: I'm interested in the way you write – if you don't want to go there that's OK, but … the way you circle around and then drill down. And it's repetitive but it's sort of mesmerising but it never gets boring.

SC: Good to know.

GD: Do you know how that works, or is just your natural way?

SC: I think it's a combination of the conscious and the unconscious: what comes naturally and what has to be acquired. When I was doing *The Art of the Engine Driver* I knew I didn't want

it to be in that style of social realism which usually comes with that kind of subject matter – suburban working-class tales. Not that I've got anything against social realism. Some of my favourite writers are Alan Sillitoe, people like that, John Morrison – I think they're great – but its time has gone. There was a drive to reinvent the subject matter stylistically, so it was partly conscious, gradually worked out over time. I think it's far less evident in *The Art of the Engine Driver:* a far more 'stand and deliver' book. It's also the most honest book of the lot, too.

GD: Honest, as in true to the facts?

SC: It actually happened. It's the one in which I was least conscious of artifice. And I'd written three novels before then. In lots of ways the very first novel, *Remember Me, Jimmy James* (1992), was my first go at this whole Glenroy series. You can't really get it any more. But it's all set in Glenroy, and it's basically a synoptic version of the next six novels.

GD: Oh, really? OK, so you could actually go back to it as a sort of guide to the series.

SC: I've only got three copies.

GD: Quite often when you're reading those novels you wonder, now where does this person fit in, and this event. I feel as though you must have a big map or timeline or something on your wall … or is it all in your head?

SC: It's a combination of both. Just to give you some examples. There were no creative writing classes when I started. I wound up teaching them. But my early teachers were straight out of the canon, people like Hemingway – Hemingway's dialogue often has recurring motifs running through it. The stories, not the novels. I think the novels are not very good but I think his short stories are masterpieces. And quite often you'll have a word like 'joke' repeated throughout the whole page. 'Are you a joker?' 'No I'm not a joker.' 'Do you joke?' 'No I don't joke.' From that I got the idea of having a central motif word, but not in dialogue, in prose. So I started trying it out. Then there's Eliot. When you drench yourself in someone like Eliot his style will emerge in yours.

GD: Yes, he obviously has a profound effect on your literary aesthetic, but then of course he's very spare – back down to the bones, beyond the bones, to the marrow or something, whereas you're expansive. Everything about a moment.

SC: That's quite right. But I think there's a kind of similar rhythmic impulse involved.

GD: I mean it's profoundly poetic, what you do. But you couldn't do it in poetry.

SC: I don't know.

GD: It's funny, isn't it, because we talk about 'poetic' as a great quality that prose doesn't have, but to me prose has its own rhythm and rhetoric and beauty and all that sort of thing. Why should poetry have a monopoly on that?

SC: I agree. Eliot invented the phrase the 'auditory imagination', the idea being that that meaning is embedded in cadence, so how a line falls is part and parcel with what it is you want it to say. And apparently as a child he would run off a line of original poetry – finishing with the rhythm but not the words: dum de dum de dum de dum. Then, some time later, he'd come back with the words. I have a similar impulse. I can be writing something, and I'll get to the end of my thoughts but I know that the rhythm of the sentence insists that I finish it properly. So it's almost as though the rhythm itself gives birth to the words. I don't mean the words are superfluous, but I mean as a completed sentence and one that is aesthetically pleasing, I need to follow the rhythmic impulse through. That comes quite naturally. I don't know if it started naturally.

GD: I wonder where that comes from, because not every writer has that. Even well-known writers, they don't necessarily have that impulse. But the ones I like do. (laughter)

SC: So the short answer is, really, that it's a combination of the deliberated and the natural.

GD: Have you ever written poetry?

SC: Oh, not really. The first thing I ever wrote was a poem, in the style of Eliot, of course. And it was a sort of jokey poem. That was published in a university magazine. There's probably a copy of it somewhere. In a first-year university magazine. I actually started in music, and I think that's another thing that created the rhythmic impulse.

GD: What do you mean, you started in music?

SC: I was in a pop band. I'm a big fan of pop music.

GD: Yes of course. I mean, of course your character Michael was in a band. Though I don't want to fall into the trap of thinking everything Michael did you did.

SC: No, well it's half and half, probably. I wanted to be in a Beatles originals band, but I wound up in an Eagles cover band, and we did the big beer barns of Melbourne. But then I left that and wrote songs with a good friend. And we wrote about 60 or 70 songs. So if you say have I written poetry, no. And I think songs are different from poetry. And I think poets do pop songs a big disservice when they think they are endowing them with a sense of legitimacy and elevating them from mere pop status. I think pop songs are magnificent things in themselves. And so I've written lots and lots of songs – very much Beatles, Kinks …

GD: Words and music?

SC: The interesting thing was that my friend, who's now dead, was a really terrific lyricist, and he would actually come up with the words, at least 2/3rds of the words on lots of occasions – and he was too quick for me. And I did the melodies. So often as not there would be 2/3rds his words and 2/3rds my melody – and the chord arrangements. But you see that's rhythm, isn't it? And I'd find the rhythms and say how are we going to do this. And often I'd just be taking something from the Kinks, or say let's do a 'Penny Lane' or whatever … so that rhythmic impulse does also come from pop music.

GD: So are any of your songs recorded?

SC: Yes.

GD: Were they performed?

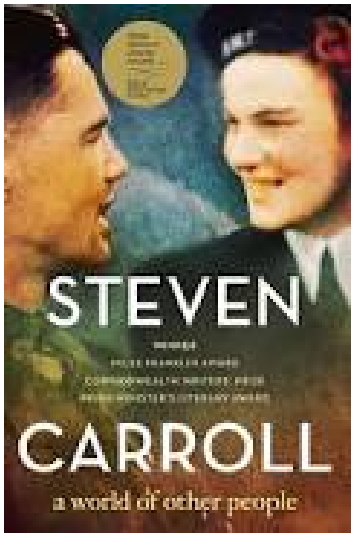
SC: I had an originals band, and we did gigs for about six months or so. That was when I left music, in my late 20s. I'd fallen in love with writing. I'd worked out that that was what I really wanted to do. I started painting and realised I wasn't a painter, and thought, well I must be a musician, and got into music, and eventually realised it was writing, and even then I started as a playwright. Which eventually led to a job as a theatre reviewer. But I did have radio plays performed. And it taught me a lot about dialogue, I've never been afraid of dialogue.

GD: The way you use real people – obviously yourself and your family but also of course I'm interested in Iris Murdoch – it seems to me to be almost the opposite of a *roman a clef*, where you're using a character to be themselves while they're intended to be themselves and you call them something else, while it seems to me you do the opposite, where you use what you need from them and then take it from there.

SC: I think that's it. The *roman a clef* novel is usually fairly boring. The idea of fiction is not to replicate but recreate. So you take what you know, or what you suspect you know, and you reinvent it to the point that it takes off. I can't deny that those characters of Vic and Rita are drawn from my parents, there's no walking away from that, so there is an autobiographical dimension in there, but at the same time, really, after *The Art of the Engine Driver* I didn't see their faces, and that felt liberating, that felt good, because then they could be other things, they could actually operate outside the framework of what I knew, and that's where it actually becomes invention. And I think it's very important to break biographical binds.

GD: I just absolutely loved what you did with Iris Murdoch. When I was reading *Spirit of Progress* (2011), and Vic was saying, about the painting of his Aunt Katherine, 'he got her in one go', I felt exactly the same about Iris. It's just the girl in the ARP coat in the bar – yes! That was what she was like in the 1940s, and that's the sort of personality, and the future she had ahead

of her, not overlaid by Dame Iris, and the poor woman with Alzheimer's. All the stuff – all that sort of veneration and respect, being the great philosopher and all those things. But the girl, there and then.



SC: Her friend's name was Pip, wasn't it?

GD: Yes, Philippa Foot, who became a famous philosopher as well. Then Frank – you saved him from being executed.

SC: In Serbia. Yes, I enjoy that kind of thing.

GD: The kind of Iris Murdoch aficionados who would immediately recognise her are mainly Europeans or English people, or Americans. And I think probably most of your readers are in Australia?

SC: Oh yeah. I can't get these books published in the UK or the US.

GD: So I immediately posted on the Iris Murdoch Appreciation Society Facebook page, look what I've found! And they were all asking how to get a copy. So there might be a case for me taking a suitcase full with me to the next conference. They are all desperate to read it now.

SC: All that came from reading her wartime letters. They're terrific. She just bounces out of those pages. And there's a wonderful biography by Peter Conradi.[2] I thought he did a superb job.

GD: And that really focusses on those early years before she got married. There seems to me to be a whole second volume that could come later to do the rest of the life, but it is an amazing work. So why did you read it?

SC: I was looking for a way in to the character. I write these Eliot books in between the suburban books. They get me out of the suburbs. It's a kind of escapism, if you like. And they're written quite differently, as well. The Glenroy books all take at least 18 months, sometimes two years, to write, whereas the Eliot books don't. I think about them for a long long time, a year, possibly, while I'm doing another book, but I write them very quickly. I think *A World of Other People* took about seven weeks, possibly eight. I went straight on the screen, too. All the others had been done long hand and then been transcribed, which becomes the first edit.

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[2] Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life.* London: Norton, 2001.

GD: Which is very Murdochian.

SC: It's very generational.

GD: She would never even use a typewriter. It had to be a Mont Blanc fountain pen or nothing.

SC: But *A World of Other People* was written in a white heat. But it took a long time to work out the plot line. I had about four or five plot lines and none of them felt right. I wanted to look at the way poetry and art in general affects daily lives. How it can be both solace and source of terror. How it can be constructive and quite destructive. I wanted to look at the effect of it on someone's life. So I had a reasonable idea about the main character, Jim. But the female character – I wasn't quite sure. That's what led me into Iris Murdoch: reading all about her and trying to get a handle on her as a way into the character.

GD: But why her?

SC: Oh, I can't remember. I think it was accidental, coming across those letters.[3] I was in Paris, in one of those English language bookshops, Fullers or something. We were there for a residency. I was writing another book at the time but I knew this would be the next one. I saw Iris's letters and thought they could be useful - a springboard. I think that's how it began.

GD: I think the thing that clinched it for me was Notional Promotions in Absentia. I mean, you couldn't make that up. Everything else could have been a coincidence, but not that.

SC: No you couldn't. I'd forgotten about that. No, it was irresistible. What is it again?

GD: Notional promotions in absentia.

SC: And there was one of the files she was working on. Peter Conradi actually quotes one of the files – which was total goobledygook. And that was irresistible as well. That's Frank saying that, isn't it?

GD: No, that was her job in the Treasury, she had to work out notional promotions in absentia.

SC: Of course!

GD: Obviously it doesn't matter whether people identify her, or not.

SC: It's a little bit of a game, though. So it's nice if you can actually pick the game up.

GD: I mean, her novels are full of those things too – although they're completely different.

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[3] Iris Murdoch, *A Writer at War: Letters and Diaries 1939-1945* ed. Peter J. Conradi. London: Short Books, 2010.

SC: For some reason I never felt the need to actually read her novels. I read her letters and I read biographies, and I read some of her philosophy too. It's quite interesting, you know, that she was first in there after the war to meet with people like Sartre. She knew that what she was doing in philosophy needed to be opened up by continental contact. She was writing about Derrida very early. I'm telling you what you already know. But I found that really quite fascinating. Quite a searching, inquiring mind.

GD: Absolutely. There's a wonderful video of her talking to Krishnamurti. They talk for about three hours, and she is interviewing him, to try and work out, what do you mean by … how do you become enlightened? And he says, no you don't become enlightened, you just are enlightened. And this obviously incredibly intelligent woman just coming up against a completely different way of thinking.[4]

SC: But what did he …? That's such a valid question.

GD: It's one of those snippets I remember – it's a while since I watched it. It is on YouTube now.

SC: I think there is an element of play in these books. You've got the whole Frank Thompson thing …

GD: And then he becomes his brother!

SC: He becomes his brother [E.P. Thompson], and becomes the author of the book about history of the English working class [*The Making of the English Working* Class, 1963].

GD: Yes, that was clever.

SC: I think that kind of playfulness is in *The Lost Life.* It's certainly in *Spirit of Progress*. It's a way of actually reinventing familiar characters.

GD: Once you sort of twig that that's the way you work, you tend to think – there must be someone – Sam in *Spirit of Progress*, and you find out that he painted 'Woman and Tent' and then you find out that painting really exists and you look it up, and it's by Sidney Nolan – oh right! But I try not to do that, because it seems to be kind of beside the point, in a way, but it's irresistible sometimes.

SC: It's something that keeps me amused.

GD: I've just finished *The Year of the Beast*. Was there a real Milhaus? Did you make that one up?

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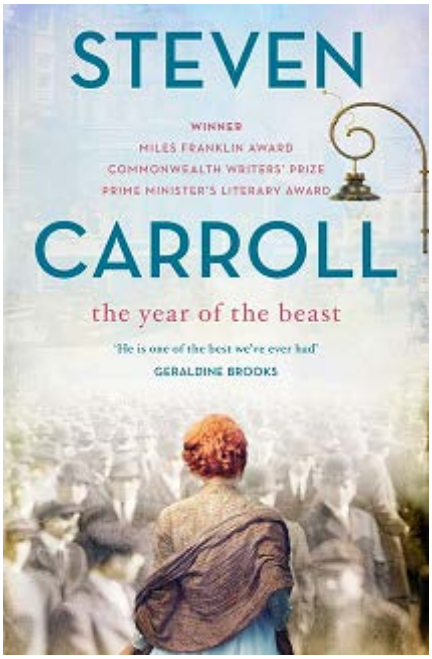
[4] Jiddu Krishnamurti and Iris Murdoch, *Why are we Fragmented?* 1984. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyu0a4FuWhE



SC: To an extent he's drawn from the James Hird case and the Essendon drugs saga. I'm a dyed-in the-wool Essendon fan, and obviously something very dodgy took place during that time.[5] But what I actually found most disturbing was the level of vitriol and nastiness from the media and social media that was directed at James Hird, who I think is essentially a very decent person. It was a way of reinventing it, but also anchoring it to the Dreyfus case as well. So again, it's a bit of dark play, but play all the same.

GD: It made me think, actually. My grandparents married during the first world war – and his mother was German, and we didn't know his mother was German. I only found that out about ten years ago.

SC: It would have been quite difficult. And you would have been at the mercy of people around you. It's like France during the war. Denouncements were taking place all the time, based on nothing. Or based on, what can I get out of this? The denouncer often got property or good business deal.

GD: Yes. I have just read Andrea Goldsmith's new book *Invented Lives*, which is about Soviet society in the 1980s. The main character grows up during Brezhnev's time, and her brother denounces her parents. We wouldn't do that in Australia.

SC: My God. Give us half a chance.

GD: What we're seeing now – movements where there's almost a vigilante culture attached to things which should be legal cases …

SC: So that was where Milhaus came from. I've often found that the characters just come along for the ride as the story evolves.

GD: If a character does something which is not what that person would do, just because the plot has to make him do that, then you're in trouble.

SC: Yes, but at the same time, I also think we shouldn't be afraid to actually have a character do something totally out of character, because we do it all the time. You say, oh, I can't believe so-and-so did that! It's so out of character! You've just got to set it up.

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[5] Essendon is a Melbourne-based team in the Australian Football League (Australian rules football).

GD: Exactly!

SC: It could happen.

GD: It's got to be organic, surely. I've got this quote from *A World of Other People*: 'This is the reality, the messy, anarchic truth on the other side of metre and rhyme, totem and symbol' (273). I liked that.

SC: Part of the impulse of that book was actually to explore that no man's land between what we experience in life and how we come to order it – and not necessarily as an artist, as people, ordering our memories and ordering the past, often rewriting it. Reality is messy. We order it, and the novel looked at the way we order and aestheticise it, I suppose. And to a certain degree what we create is not true, but in another way it's truer than it was, a kind of quintessential truth. The pilot character in *A World of Other People* silently accuses Eliot of using him: there was a tragic event taking place and he imagines Eliot seeing only poetic totem. I don't know to what extent that's worth going into. But I felt like going there.

GD: And then you've got Eliot in *A New England Affair*, being a human being beset by his circumstances and all his problems – the scene in the garden, the spectre of his wife … that's kind of the other side, isn't it?

SC: Yes. I'd always taken the view that I would never presume to go inside Eliot's head. It's too big a task.

GD: Well, you still don't, do you?

SC: No, it's still through Emily's eyes you see all this. I've still got one more to go, and that's the story of Vivienne set in the 1930s. The very first thing I ever wrote was a play about T.S. Eliot, his first marriage, and the writing of *The Waste Land.* And I thought nobody's going to be interested in this. When I finally got the second draft finished, a friend of mine wrote to me from London saying I've just been to see a play about T.S. Eliot, his first marriage and the writing of *The Waste Land*. It's called *Tom and Viv*. I actually don't think it's a very good play. It was turned into a film. My play was performed as a radio play. You can probably download it from the ABC. It was called *Poor Tom.* So it's interesting that I'll return to with the final Eliot book. So, when the quartet of novels is finished, readers will get a picture of all the women in Eliot's life.

GD: I was going to say, you seem to be particularly good at interesting strong – well not necessarily strong but unconventional women characters.

SC: Yes, it's interesting. In lots of ways the strongest characters in these books are the women, and it's the men who are varying shades of weak. Although I wouldn't call Vic weak.

GD: Michael isn't weak.

SC: He's not exactly weak. No. But it's the women who are quite strong. I do come from a family of pretty strong women. And the name itself, Carroll, comes down through the matriarchal line. My father never knew his father, and that's something that runs through *The Year of the Beast.* I think our name should have been Duske, or something like that. Prussian. I don't know too much more. So there are some very strong women in the family and I suppose that has to come through in the books.

GD: In the *Meanjin* article which is reprinted in the afterword of *A New England Affair*, you mention that you already had the title, two years before. Is that usual?

SC: It can be.

GD: But then with *The Year of the Beast* you changed the title.

SC: It was going to be called *Festival of the Id.* And I had this conga line of publishers, editors and sales and marketing people saying, 'No!' (laughter) And so it was my partner, Fiona Capp, who is also a writer, who came up with the title in the end. And I thought, yeah, OK. To an extent, I still prefer the first title. But I can understand how the publishers didn't want it. As for the title of *A World of Other People*, I read some of Iris Murdoch's philosophical essays, and her book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and I think she says something like that in one of her essays. I can't pinpoint that now.

GD: There's a PhD in there somewhere, which you won't have to read.

SC: Which I won't read.

Gillian Dooley *is the co-editor of* Writers in Conversation*. She has been working on Iris Murdoch's fiction for more than 20 years, and in 2003 edited a collection of interviews with her titled* From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction *(2003).*