

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



E.M. Reapy

You Can't Outrun Your Shadow: Interview with E.M. Reapy

Eamonn Wall

E.M. Reapy was born in 1984 and raised in Claremorris, Co. Mayo, Ireland. She was educated at NUI-Galway, University College Cork, and Queen's University Belfast where she received an M.A. in Creative Writing. In addition to other non-writing jobs, Elizabeth spent eighty-eight days working on an orange farm in the Australian Outback in order to secure a two-year visa to live and work in Australia – experiences that resulted in *Red Dirt*, her highly-acclaimed first novel. For *Red Dirt*, Reapy received the prestigious 2017 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, an award for a body of work by a young Irish writer showing exceptional promise. *Skin*, her second novel, also shares an Australian setting, among others.

I met E.M. Reapy for the first time when we read together for the 'Over the Edge' Reading Series at the Galway City Library in 2018. On that occasion, Elizabeth read two beautiful short prose fiction pieces. Of course I had heard of her acclaimed first novel *Red Dirt* but had not yet read it. The next day I went into Charlie Byrne's and bought a copy of the novel. A primary focus of my research through the decades has been on the literature of the Irish diaspora and I was excited to read Reapy's exploration of the lives of the young Irish who had left home and moved to Australia, most on short-term visas, in the wake of the 2008 recession that caused the collapse of the Irish economy and, for all intents and purposes, bankrupted Ireland. I found *Red Dirt* to be terrific in every respect: beautifully realized, terrifying in places, always absorbing, and moving. Reapy's second novel, *Skin*, while quite different from *Red Dirt*, is equally important in its intense exploration of how difficult it can be for a person to live in her skin. After Dr. Gillian Dooley has heard me deliver a paper on E.M. Reapy's work at the Irish Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand (ISAANZ), she asked me to interview Elizabeth for *Writers in Conversation*. The interview was conducted by email (January-April 2020).

Books by E.M. Reapy

Skin. London: Head of Zeus, 2019.

Red Dirt. London: Head of Zeus, 2016.

As editor: *30 Under 30: A Selection of Short Fiction by Thirty Young Irish Writers*. Galway: Doire Press, 2012.

More information at <https://emreapy.wordpress.com/>

EW: Growing up, as a child and a teenager, did you always see yourself as someone who would become a novelist?

EMR: Yes, I can't think of a time that it was any other way. I knew I would write books, have always been sure of this and it seems to have been with me since I was very young. As a kid, I adored reading, writing and drawing. My bookishness went underground when I was a teenager, I was awkward and unsure of myself and I didn't want to annihilate the passion I had by sharing it with the wrong people. But still, I wrote creatively with my friends. I'll never forget the liberation I felt reading *The Barrytown Trilogy* when I was 15. Though it wasn't set in my part of Ireland or written in my accent, Roddy Doyle captured an essence of life in a way that I could sense was accessible to all and yet it had great depth and heart to it. His writing style resonated with me. It showed me that Irish literature didn't have to be all flowery language and misery.

EW: 'Writers write what they are worried about,' is something that the Canadian writer Alistair MacLeod said and that you have quoted. Is this a good starting point for your own process?

EMR: It was, initially, when I was younger and more worried about things. It was a way to free myself from my anxiety, I'd dive into a distressing topic and explore it from different angles, to try understand it more and then in giving myself more perspective around it, I'd also be giving myself more space. Nowadays my process is more playful and jump-offs come from passions and interests. I also trust my artistic instinct a lot more, so if there's synchronicity in my life or if I'm being magnetized towards a topic or thing, I'll follow that and know it's my creativity leading me.

EW: When you write do you have a particular audience in mind?

EMR: I probably write for myself but for a past version of me who would have loved to read what I'd written. I think if I write for her, there's probably other people now who may need to hear what I'm saying, and also that it's a way to heal and entertain myself across a timeline.

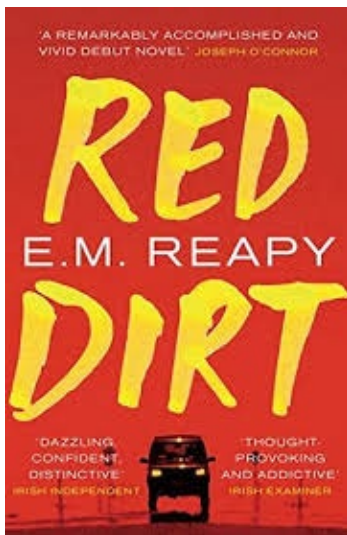
EW: Is *Red Dirt* one of those books that had a long period of gestation and was written quickly or was some other process at play?

EMR: It was more like it happened in bursts and went through quite an evolution on the way. Initially, I was in Australia and writing unconnected short stories about the young Irish

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

migrants there. These pieces started getting attention and a film producer got in touch about turning one of them into a movie, if it could be longer and sustain feature length. I returned to the story and it probably was the most magical of all the writing I've done yet, where for a fortnight I was straddling two worlds, this one and my imaginary one, and just completely following what was playing in my mind's eye, typing as fast as I could. This would end up being the Me section in *Red Dirt*. It wasn't long enough. The producer asked if there were more characters to include. I had stories with female voices and worked on uniting them for Fiona's You section. It never sat well with me that Hopper was last sighted abandoned in the outback and I wrote Them to give him his story. The Film Board rejected the proposal but I was way too far into things to stop. I was then approached by an agency and after much rewriting and polishing, the book finally came to be. Blank page to print took about four and a half years and countless drafts but I was pretty determined with it.

EW: It is only when you visit Australia that you begin to understand how far away it is from Ireland. This distance from Ireland seems to underline how the Irish people act and think in *Red Dirt*?



EMR: Personally, I found the vastness of Australia striking. I had never experienced space like it until I got there. Ireland is tiny, it's mostly cloudy which gives it an even smaller feel, and it has lots of ruins, stone walls, little hills and bits and pieces everywhere. The sky in Australia was infinite and clear blue. In many places, you could do a 360 turn and there was just expanse. Even the gaps between places was massive, like towns were neighbouring when they were an 8 hour drive away. For *Red Dirt*, I wanted the characters to have that sort of parochial recklessness you'd see during Rag Week or on a Bank Holiday weekend or maybe any big Saturday night out in Ireland but that they'd be the other side of the world. This created innate danger. They are not respecting the culture or environment they're in and thus tension is amped up naturally.

EW: Yet, Murph, Fiona, and Hopper, bring emotional baggage with them from Ireland, baggage that is impossible to shed?

EMR: Emotional baggage is impossible to shed when you're trying to escape it. I guess that realization is part of growing up. You can't outrun your shadow, or numb it out with drink or drugs or sex or whatever. The longer you let it grow behind you, the more you've to integrate when you do stop and face it.

EW: Reviewing *Red Dirt* (2016) in *The Irish Independent*, novelist Mike McCormack noted that 'the gap-year generation of young Irish men and women who went to Australia has found its laureate.' Was your purpose in part in *Red Dirt* to tell the story of the post-2008 Celtic Tiger collapse generation of men and women in their twenties?

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

EMR: It was more that I was telling this story because nobody else was, at the time. I was in Australia and observing things and having experiences but also I'd been writing a lot, really working on my craft and I had a sense that if I could honestly capture the energy of some of what was going on around me it would be distinctive and fresh material. I was also, to return to your first question, deeply worried about the recession and how bleak things seemed in Ireland at the time.

EW: In 2012 Elizabeth Reapy, as the *Irish Times* pointed out in its report on the Rooney Prize, 'was the Tyrone Guthrie Exchange Irish Writer in Residence in Varuna Writers' House in New South Wales, Australia – a decisive appointment given the motifs of her novel'.¹ How important for you was this period spent in Australia?

EMR: I'd gone from backpacking, sharing dorm rooms and doing 11-hour night shifts 6 nights a week in an outback orange factory to being a guest in a gorgeous house that had a cook, a stocked kitchen and a library. A stunning viewpoint for the Blue Mountains was a short walk away. I joined a local gym for the time I was there and took up yoga. I finally began to slow down and breathe and I was also back amongst artists and writers, which always feels like a homecoming of sorts for me, that belonging or understanding that exists amongst creative people is very comforting. In *Varuna*, I worked on editing an anthology of young Irish writers and organized a literary festival for when I would return to Ireland. It was a very enjoyable and peaceful time.

EW: What has been your connection to Australia? What has it been of such interest to you?

EMR: I've always found Australia interesting because of its historical connection to Ireland, its remarkable nature, landscape and Indigenous culture and also the colonisation project and the aftermath of that. Australia was very good to me, and for me, I learned so much there, wrote a book about it that still gives me opportunities years later and I've met fantastic Australians who were very supportive and influential on my creative path. My time in Australia was when I finally figured out who I was and what I wanted. It was a tough, wonderful, adventurous and tumultuous point of my life but it all was worth it.

EW: *Red Dirt* can be dated to the latter part of 2011 as the characters discuss the recent death of Amy Winehouse (23 July 2011) and also sporting events taking place at that time. Why were so interested in this time?

EMR: I went to Australia in summer 2011, came home for Christmas and went back again for another seven months or so in 2012. *Red Dirt* is definitely about the first time I went there, it was that trip which had a much more manic feel to it. The Australia in *Skin* is the Australia of my second trip.

I referenced Amy Winehouse's death to time stamp the stories, and show when things were happening, e.g. when Hopper lights the fire in the hostel to when Fiona's dorm mate is

¹25 September 2017, Online.

in black to mourn Amy, it's to show where we are overlapping in clock time in the different sections.

Her death was significant to me in that we were a similar age when she died. She had a notorious party lifestyle and I admired her wit, had seen her perform and respected her music. I remember that gut-punch awareness of my own mortality when I heard the news, that jolt of how fragile life is no matter how talented someone is, they've to nurture their own sense of health, worth and creativity.

EW: For Murph, Fiona, and Hopper, whose adventures are the primary focus of *Red Dirt*, their Australian odysseys add further layers of complication and cloudiness to their lives. Towards the end of the novel, Hopper, the most hapless of the three, makes a rather innocent observation: 'I only want to have a good time in Australia.' Australia does not offer salvation. You point to the notion of people having to save themselves in both *Red Dirt* and *Skin*?

EMR: Yes, I feel that's what most people are doing until they can get themselves out of survival mode. *Red Dirt* is definitely a fight or flight type of novel; in *Skin*, Natalie may have a bit more 'freeze' going on until she figures out how to be with herself.

EW: *Red Dirt* makes us think about Irish emigration in another way – as something that is often short-term rather than being a life sentence. How do the characters you create fit in to or not fit in to the long story of Irish emigration, in your view?

EMR: I wouldn't feel qualified enough to answer this. All I know is that there was a weird time after the crash when thousands of young Irish people went, not just the destitute or the adventurous. Skilled workers, university-educated professionals, hardcore criminals, or people who'd never really been outside their one-horse villages before and everything in between had left home. Some of them were desperate, some just wanted to make more money and remain comfortable but in a different country. Then there was the 'gap-year' crew too who were travelling around and didn't identify as emigrants. It was such a variety of people that sometimes the only connection they had to each other was nationality. Though you could throw into the mix too that most of the above did not grow up under Catholic rule in Ireland and so the characters in *Red Dirt* left a different Ireland to previous generations.

EW: Today, Irish writing, keeping pace with Irish lives, is often 'a travelling or mobile discourse'. *Red Dirt* is set in Australia while *Skin* has multiple locations: Bali, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, Holland, Ireland. On the one hand you are keeping pace with contemporary Irish lives while on the other hand multiple locations makes your life as a writer easier. Is this a fair assumption?

EMR: I probably make my life as a writer easier by writing about places I've visited! It does help me pay attention to where I am and to be open to new experiences when I travel. The book I'm working on now is set in the Caribbean and I haven't been there yet. Hopefully I'll have the good fortune to go on a research trip when I'm a little further on with it.

EW: Women's experiences are central to your work. Does society demand that women carry their baggage on the inside?

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

EMR: I would have thought so then. Thankfully shadows are coming to light again, like for example the Irish church sex scandals aired in the 90's highlighted this horrendous abuse that was being ignored for god knows how long, and it altered power structures in society. This past decade has brought to light the permeating sexism that exists in society. People are finally saying, or listening to, 'No more. It's over.' There's a shift in consciousness, I believe we're here in a time of great change but this will inevitably bring resistance from those who were benefitting from the old paradigm. The #metoo movement woke a lot of good men up to the fact that women were afraid, that they feared sexual violence and harassment daily, that there was inequality going on and that it's time to stop ignoring this stuff. It's embedded in our culture unless we dig it out. It hurts men too. When women view them as suspicious, it creates an atmosphere of mistrust. Men are friends of, partners of, sons of, fathers of, brothers of, colleagues of women that they undoubtedly love. It's awful to know people you love are being hurt and you feel powerless to do anything about it. And I haven't even touched upon how destructive the suppression of 'feminine' qualities are to all genders and to our planet.

To understand trauma too is to know that someone who has suffered it is likely to freeze, repress, bury stuff in order to get on with their life. It's so upsetting to hear or read something like, 'Apparently this attack took place a few years ago, if it was true, she'd have reported it then.' That kind of talk is damaging and it's inaccurate if you look at the science and psychology around trauma. The psyche will not allow something to surface until the individual is strong enough to handle it. That's survival instinct.

Both women, and men, carry a lot of things.

EW: At the heart of *Red Dirt* is male violence. Men are violent towards women, towards other men, and toward themselves (drinking too much, drug taking). You portray all of this clearly in harrowing detail. Comment?

EMR: With distance, I can see my own disappointment at the time that I wrote *Red Dirt* with the social structures that privileged men and I also wanted investigate my misandry and internalised misogyny. I had such a dissonance between what I was being told to think, why I felt so angry and yet felt I wasn't allowed to express it. I had to channel all this fury into my creativity or it would have been too destructive. I also had to really check myself and know that if I was able to see this injustice, I was adding to it or projecting it somehow. Blame is a trap.

In many ways, I wanted *Skin* to be a response to *Red Dirt*, a book with no violence, only storytelling, a book where men are people and women are people, with hang-ups and hopes held in bodies covered by skin, just like everyone else in this world.

EW: Can you comment a little on the technique of *Red Dirt*? Its episodic structure and your use of multiple narrators: *ME*, *YOU*, *THEM*?

EMR: The episodic nature of it was probably the vestige of it being short story collection to novella to potential movie to novel. The POVs were *Me* for *Murph*, a first person narrative, to be symbolic of his selfishness. His voice came to me as an 'I' and I typed what I heard. For

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

Fiona, it was in second person, to represent her victimhood. Her story happens to her, she's passive and giving her power away until the end of her section when she breaks her silence. Hopper's section is Them, in third person, he doesn't even get to tell his story, I wanted that to be representative of people who've been otherized in society.

EW: The Irish you focus on in Australia in *Red Dirt* are a rough bunch of Irish misfits: drug fiends, booze hounds, killers. In *Skin*, the situation is somewhat different. Do you mean these characters to represent the young Irish who grew up as wealthy and privileged and boorish during the Celtic Tiger?

EMR: Not deliberately, I would imagine the books represent the age and maturity I was at more than the young Irish. When I was in Australia initially, I was pretty lost, worried and confused and meeting a lot of damaged people who probably reflected my own internal states. *Red Dirt* was what came up from my subconscious around that period in my life. During the next few years I was much healthier and still travelling but focused on getting *Red Dirt* completed. I had all these new interests and experiences. *Skin* would be what creatively arose from those years. I felt I couldn't move on to new projects without writing those stories down.

EW: In both novels, older women such as Dorothy in *Red Dirt* and the grandmother in *Skin* are wonderfully open and life-affirming characters whose wisdom and kindness Fiona and Natalie benefit from greatly?

EMR: Older women have very little representation in literature and in culture. A lot of the best advice and grace I've received was from older women. One of the biggest lies I've found out as I've gotten older myself is that ageing is something to fear. Ageing is beautiful, it's so much fun and it's an absolute privilege. The amount of people, including me, who wished someone they loved got the chance to age, that they had a few more years with us. And yet there's all these myths and marketing and propaganda in Western society. And then for women, there's this added layer that the maturation of their looks or body tone means they are somehow lesser. I don't buy it so I won't be selling it. I want to authentically place what I see and how I see it in my work instead of bemoaning all the above.

EW: In various ways the main characters in *Red Dirt* hit rock-bottom (Fiona, Shane, Murph, and Hopper) in Australia. Both Maeve and Hopper (from the Adelaide biker-gang) are rescued by kind people who in *Red Dirt* stand for Australian kindness and generosity. Your portrait of Australia is a complex one?

EMR: Australia is a generous and beautiful country but it also has a bloody colonial past and some issues to be resolved around the people and the land. It is a complex place – fun, dangerous, cosmopolitan, stark. The nuances were what appealed to the writer in me.

EW: For these young Irish in *Red Dirt*, Australia is a convenient place rather than a new interesting country to embrace? But Fiona is different. She seeks a dialogue with the country, symbolised by its wildlife?

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

EMR: Yes, she's beginning to make peace with herself and in that awakening, she's also waking up to life around her. Australian wildlife is vibrant, impossible to ignore and that sense of awe and wonder that nature brings is very healing.

EW: In *Red Dirt* people travel to Australia and in *Skin* they travel further afield but both of your novels are about journeys rather than travel. Why does the journey attract you as a writer?

EMR: Stories are journeys. Everything's a journey.

EW: John McGahern was a great literary master of the novel and short-story from your region of Ireland. Though he wrote well about women, his novels were primarily concerned with a world centered on men. I sense that you see the world in another way. Are you McGahern's opposite in this regard?

EMR: I admire McGahern's work but I don't know if I can compare myself to him other than we're both from the west of Ireland. I am a woman and my default is to see the world from this perspective. But I hope I've enough imagination and determination to write from a male voice if one should speak to me again.

EW: *Skin*, you have written 'is a story about a woman, Natalie, who struggles with binge eating and anxiety and is spurred to travel to "find herself", literally and metaphorically.' Can you explain your objectives in writing *Skin* in a little more detail?

EMR: Yes, I wanted *Skin* to be a more gentle study of self-discovery. Natalie is realizing that other people have their own worries and insecurities. I think there's something really beautiful in that moment where you realize 'Oh, everyone has problems,' and you're not alone. Vulnerability is connection.

EW: Natalie's journey to build a life is a difficult one? Movement is key—from place to place and movement of the physical body as in her involvement in the Spin class?

EMR: Embodiment is key. I'm very interested in movement, bodywork and somatic awareness. Our bodies are our vehicles in this life, they house us, they're always right here now – they are us. The Cartesian split of mind and body and its subsequent influence on philosophy and science fascinates me. In *Skin*, Natalie is learning this skill of being consciously in her body. The spin classes are a way for her to merge her old teaching life with this new physical one.

EW: In both novels, mental illness is an issue. 75% of mental illnesses occur before the age of twenty-four. *Skin* is a wonderful exploration of the pursuit of mindfulness (though it is not a great term in my view). Comment?



Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

EMR: Mental ill health is a huge issue in Ireland, though a lot of it is actually emotional in nature. I hope that the end of *Red Dirt* was a nod to mindfulness, where Hopper has begun to distance himself from his thought patterns and unconscious actions and is explaining this to Fiona. With *Skin*, I was more interested in embodiment as a way to ground consciousness in the moment, and that most anxiety is from using the gift of your imagination against yourself. Natalie has to come down from her head and reconnect with her body in order to overcome her challenges.

EW: You have mentioned Alastair Macleod in an interview. Who are the other writers you have read that have been important to you?

EMR: Alice Munro. Denis Johnson. Roddy Doyle. Anne Enright. JD Salinger. Elizabeth Strout. Claire Keegan. Roald Dahl and Dick King Smith too, for the joy I got reading their books when I was a child.

EW: Earlier you mentioned Roddy Doyle's *The Barrytown Trilogy* as an eye-opening work for you. Are there particular novels and short stories by the writers you have just mentioned that influenced or enabled you? Can you say a little bit about the writers who are not Irish?

EMR: *Antarctica* is Claire Keegan's first short story collection and it's excellent. The stories are haunting and the writing is exact, though maybe slightly rawer than in her second collection *Walk the Blue Fields*, but I liked the first book more for this reason. Anne Enright's stories too, but also her novels, and non-fiction – everything she writes is a pleasure to read. Her observations are fierce and fresh.

When I travelled I always carried Alice Munro's *Selected Stories* and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* in my backpack and studied both books to see how the writers were doing what they were doing – Munro for her handling of time and the unsaid, Johnson's simple sentences which were completely loaded by his precise word selection. I still keep both books on my writing desk to inspire me. *Train Dreams* too by Denis Johnson is beautiful. I've read most of his books and to be honest, I don't love the storylines or characters that feature in them, but sentence by sentence, I am smitten.

EW: Are there people out there that have been of great help to you in your own journey as a writer?

EMR: John Corless was a great mentor when I was starting out and then in Queen's, Glenn Patterson and Ian Sansom were very encouraging. After university, with some friends, I set up an online journal called wordlegs.com and through that I connected with a lot of peers. The writing community in Ireland is lovely and supportive.

EW: What is your current project?

EMR: I'm working on a novella at the moment and have some ideas for screen which I'd like to develop this year.

Eamonn Wall is a writer and literary scholar and a professor of Global Studies and English at the University of Missouri-St. Louis where he is also the Smurfit-Stone Cooperation Professor of Irish Studies. A native of Co. Wexford in Ireland, he received his Ph.D. in English from the City University of New York-Graduate Centre, and is a past-president of the American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS). His prose books include *From Oven Lane to Sun Prairie: In Search of Irish America* (Arlen House/Syracuse University Press, 2019); *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Notre Dame, 2011); and *From the Sin-e Café to the Black Hills: Notes on the New Irish* (Wisconsin, 2000). His most recent collection of poems is *Junction City: New and Selected Poems 1990-2015* (Salmon Poetry, 2015). Current projects include a new poetry collection and a literary study of the Global Irish.

Interview with E.M. Reapy. Eamonn Wall.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>