Transcrição da entrevista de Alinne Balduino Pires Fernandes com Eimear McBride

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Alinne Fernandes	00:04	OK. Hello everyone, good afternoon! Thank you so much for being here with us. This afternoon I'll be interviewing Eimear McBride. I'll be reading from my notes if you don't mind… if you don't mind. I am very pleased and honoured to introduce you to Eimear McBride today. Eimear is the author of very intense and varied writing when it comes to style. She's published three novels: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* published in 2013; *The Lesser Bohemians*, 2016; and *Strange Hotel* 2020. She has also published the short stories: 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room', in Prospect in 2014, and that was also published in Dubliners 100, right? 'Through the Wall', in The Long Gaze Back in 2015; 'Atheist', in Winter Papers in 2017; the essays 'If I Ruled the World', in Prospect, 2016; amongst various others for *The Guardian* and BBC Radio 4, as well as the non-fiction book *Something Out of Place: Women & Disgust* , from 2021. She grew up in the west of Ireland and studied acting at Drama Centre London. In 2017 she was awarded the inaugural Creative Fellowship at the Beckett Research Centre at University of Reading, which resulted in the performance works *Mouthpieces*, later broadcast on RTE Radio and published by Faber & Faber in 2019. She is also a screenwriter and currently has scripts in development with See Saw Films, House Productions and DMC Film, each co-commissioned by BBC Film; and she has contributed with forewords to books by Anna Akhmatova, Edna O'Brien and Elizabeth Hardwick. Last but not least, she is the recipient of the Women's Prize for Fiction, Goldsmiths Prize, Desmond Elliot Prize, James Tait Black Memorial Prize, Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Irish Novel of the Year Award [laughter]. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and lives in London [laughs]. So, today, I'm in charge of interviewing this powerhouse woman, whose impressive trajectory inspires so many aspiring writers and delights readers. Eimear leaves a mark on the reader wherever she goes. Eimear is the first invited artist to be with us in person after Covid-19, and for this

		I'm truly grateful, and in particular to Eimear herself, of course, and the Irish Consulate. Eimear, you're here, at last, right after our two rounds of elections. The country has been immersed in excitement and turmoil, at the same time, things that only Brazil can afford, I'm afraid. Thank you so much for accepting our invitation to be here in the sixth edition of our Irish Studies Symposium. And I hope you're already having a good time.
Eimear McBRIDE	03:28	Yes, I'm having a great time. Thank you very much for having me. Thank you everyone for inviting me, I feel so welcome. You said so many nice things about me, and it only just began [laughter].
FERNANDES	03:41	Well, Ok. In line with this year's theme, my questions will revolve around modernisms, the reception of your work, taboo topics, your influences and models, amongst other things. This is meant to be more of a conversation, kind of—one, of the several ones I seem to be having with you inside my head for a few months since I started planning this interview. If I sound a little crazy this is the reason [laughter]. OK, so my first question to you is: 2022 is the year of the centenary of the first publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. You've been interviewed by so many important journalists, critics, and scholars about Joyce's influence on your writing. In a conversation with Anne Enright and Dr Clare Hutton, organised by the British Library, you even said that Joyce showed you that anything could be done in terms of writing. So Joyce was the beginning of a major shift in your life. Inspired by Joyce, you're known for having brought forth a renaissance of modernism in the twenty-first century. How does it feel to be responsible for the revival of Modernism nearly a century after the publication of, perhaps, what is its major canon? [Laughter] It's a very simple question [laughter].
McBRIDE	05:09	Well, you know… I think for me it was something that I [inaudible] maybe having not come out of an academic background didn't realise that modernism was supposed to be dead, and so that was what interested me. And so, when I started writing, that was what I went towards and it was really only when I started trying to get published that I realised that actually modernism was supposedly dead, and no one was interested in that sort of thing anymore. And so it took me very, you know, it took me nine years to get my first book published and… but at the moment it was published, I think there was a change in the publishing industry in, sort of, readers'

		appetites. I think that had been kind of an increasing sense of frustration and boredom with what the reading public were being offered. I think the industry itself was very much in crisis because of the arrival of the Internet and the fear the publishing would be decimated the way the music industry had been decimated. And so there will be a lot of cynicism about charting out very very safe things, which continues to this day, but there was brief period around 2013 and *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* were part of that where that suddenly broke open and a lot of people who were interested in modernism were very pleased to see something influenced by that appearing and kind of jumped on that and it also then proved that there was lots of people who are writers who were interested in that who were working away ignored up until that point so, you know, I was… you know, the book was helpful pushing that door open but the world still existed underneath that hold it all if we just been told no one was interested in experimental work anymore. Yeah, modernism was dead but… it is here! [inaudible] amongst us.
FERNANDES	07:16	OK, I think I might… Hello? Hello? Hi? OK, sorry… OK, so I might get back to that point of, you know, the hardships of publishing *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, but before that… following my script here [laughs]. Differently from Joyce, who very explicitly had always had very ambitious intentions behind his work — like *Ulysses* itself being a demonstration of his readings and profound knowledge of the literature published up to his time — your uses of the stream of consciousness depict what's going on inside the minds of common people — of course, Joyce is also about common people, but there's this huge display of encyclopaedic knowledge, right, just throughout the novel. A girl… In your novel we have, a girl growing up in the countryside, a young woman who moves to London to start Drama school, a low-key actor, a woman who travels around the world and who's in search of herself while at the same time trying to escape from some past that she can never leave behind. Your characters are relatable as everyday people in their struggles, traumas, suffering, and earthly desires. Besides your literary influences, how does your own observation of people affect your writing?
McBRIDE	08:44	Well I think for me, you know, characters is the beginning and the end of everything for me and that comes out of where I started really, which was wanting to act. And so when I was, you know, 17 I went to London and I went to Drama Centre which was

		notorious Stanislavski-hardcore-method acting school. And I spent three years there which they kind of taught you how to deconstruct what it was to be human and what you needed to look at in order to reconstruct a character. And so when I started to write, that was the tool that I had, that's what I had to do and what I was interested in, because I was always interested in character and people and in language. But then, in trying to apply a kind of method technique to writing, understanding that in order to do that, the language had to be used in a different way, that kind of linear grammatical language was completely inadequate when it came to the intimate reconstruction of what it is to be a person both the inside, the internal life, but also the intimacy of inhabiting a body in the world and how those two things interact. And so, you know, people and observation is completely essential central to me, without that the language would not exist in a way that it does, and the books would be academic exercise, I think, other than hopefully that living breathing experiences for the readers.
FERNANDES	10:32	As a writer, do you feel that you were also kind of a voyeur, like in the sense that you're you know kind of prying into people's lives?
McBRIDE	10:49	Yes. Necessarily, I suppose, I am. But I think I don't subject anyone to greater scrutiny than I do myself. I mean, I think, you know, it sort of goads me to admit it but of course they are locked in all of my books that the jumping off point comes from somewhere inside my own life. And so in a way I don't feel as though I'm invading anyone worse than I'm invading myself. Once you're willing to invade yourself then it's kind of everyone else is fair game, right?
FERNANDES	11:28	Thank you. Still in relation to your non-literary influences, you've mentioned, in one of our email exchanges, some works that have been important to the writing of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, such as Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* from 1996. You've also mentioned that Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia* from 1987 and the second album by the band Tindersticks, *Tindersticks*, from 1995, were very influential to the writing of *The Lesser Bohemians*, and I can already imagine an awesome film adaptation with Tindersticks playing for its soundtrack! Can you talk us through how those two films played such important roles in your writing and also the importance of *Tindersticks* to *The Lesser Bohemians*?

McBRIDE	12:19	You know, I mean I think I've always been a magpie, and that's very… it's a very important influence on my writing is that it doesn't come out of an academic base and it doesn't really come out of a literary place, because again of the acting training I tried to be constantly alert to the world and finding ways to translate what I see and what I hear into language. And so there are different… So music it was very very important in writing *The Lesser Bohemians* and it began really with just trying to, because I had — the novel is set back in the same year that I went to London and went to drama school — and so, initially, it was just about the memory about recreating that memories of that time and place, of trying to capture the atmosphere of what it was to be in Camden in the in the early 90s, and the kind of people who were there things that were happening. And so I just started to listen to music that I had listened to back then [inaudible], you know Blur along that Britpop stuff. And then, I discovered a tape that someone had made me back in the day of this Tindersticks album, and I haven't listened to it for years but I had listened to it back then a lot. And I put it on and I just… immediately transported me back to that time, but also the more I listened to it, the more it became sort of a talismanic work for *The Lesser Bohemians*, it seemed to explore so many things that I was interested in, but also because *The Lesser Bohemians* is the first time that I was writing a male character, a really significant male character, and you get to see in 3D. And it was quite interesting to listen to this music which is, you know, it's a old male band and the lead singer Stuart Staples writes most of the songs, and a lot of those songs are, you know, about struggling and how to be a good man in the world, how to be a father, how to be a lover, how to deal with the worst sides of oneself and it just, it sort of taught me to think in a more complex way, and also because music is necessarily more immediate and more emotional. You get to see people in a much more intimate way than you would if they were telling you the same story but it is written then. And so, I think it's an interesting access point for women writing about men because male voices are suddenly much more vulnerable, in that kind of situation — I mean obviously not if it's Metallica or something, you know [laughs]. I think Tindersticks, you know, there's a kind of sophistication [inaudible] approach to the world and an awareness. And so, you know, that kind of became a very very important record to me and I listened to it a million times, and yeah…

		Bizarrely many years later I met Stuart Staples and he read *The Lesser Bohemians* and he was, you know, “wow it really reminded me about that time” [laughter]. God! But yeah, so that was very important, but going back before… Also, yes… Tarkovsky’s *Nostalgia* was also a really important film for *The Lesser Bohemians,* because, again, there was this kind of lost male character who is trying to find a way to return to their own humanity, to themselves. And there's something about Tarkovsky who just sets himself outside of time and adds all the constraints of having an expectation of how a story is told and what are the important things to look at. And that… I found that very liberating, just to think “OK I don't… If I want to have a 30 page monologue in the centre of this novel that is completely different to the rest of the novel, what would Tarkovsky do?” [laughs], he’d just do it, right? So you know, it felt again like Joyce, like someone who just kind of… in their production of their own art, gives permission, because they just take a space and you think “well if they can take a space I can take a space, why not?”. But *Breaking the Waves*, Lars von Trier’s film was a more visceral influence — although, of course, there are similarities in the narrative to *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* about young girls [inaudible] she goes through and pursuit of love and disappointment. For me it was the first time I'd ever left the cinema and felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach, and it's a very hard film to watch and it's very, you know, quite shocking. And I just remember thinking “I would like, one day, to make something that makes other people feel like that”, as I do like to make people suffer it seems [laughter].
FERNANDES	17:49	You did it.
McBRIDE	17:50	But yeah, I just thought that to be able to create something that powerful, something that is not a talking point, something that’s beyond language, where you just kind of go “I don't know what happened but something enormous has just happened”. That was, you know, I kind of felt that [inaudible] or set the bar quite high at that point. I wanted to see if I could follow.
FERNANDES	18:17	Thank you. We could say that Tindersticks worked as a memory trigger really and *Nostalgia* worked to help you think of structure, in terms of the structure of the novel itself, like having it narrated it inside of a narrative?

McBRIDE	18:34	Yeah, I think so for something that was also dealing with a lot of emotion but isn't busily explaining that to you, that kind of is the thing itself, you know? Is the experience as you're watching the experiences that came up in the panels earlier today that which I thought “yeah, that’s exactly what it is to experience the film”. And I think with Tarkovsky, who requires so much investment and concentration, and it's quite transformative to go through the experience of watching this film, you feel like you invest yourself — and again, this is important to me in terms of style and writing, and knowing that I was asking a lot from readers. I mean, they weren’t just getting a traditional narrative where you open the book and everything is clear, they have to invest and they have to work. But actually, hopefully, by the time they get to the end they feel that that effort and investment has been worthwhile for them and, you know, it's seeing those other models, where I felt “OK I participated in this work, I haven't just experienced it but I have actively participated in it” is very, kind of profound experience, I think.
FERNANDES	20:00	Thank you, it’s really interesting. I think you've just spoken about models. The magnificent North American writer, Alice Walker, in an essay titled ‘Saving the life that is your own: the importance of models in the artist’s life’, she wrote about the importance of having fellow artists and writers not only as sources of inspiration, but as sources of strength; important references that psychologically and emotionally validate what we do. She says that Vincent Van Gogh killed himself as he was “suffering under an absolute lack of models”. She concludes her essay saying, “It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are ‘minority’ writers or ‘majority’. It is simply in our power to do this. We do it because we care. We care that Van Gogh mutilated his ear. We care that behind a pile of manure on the yard he destroyed his life. [inaudible] We care because we know this: the life that we save is our own.”. It’s a very powerful citation I love. I love this passage and I thought you’d enjoy it too.
McBRIDE	21:16	Yes [laughs].
FERNANDES	21:18	So, I’m not talking about influences now, not in formal terms, but models, in the sense Walker is talking about here, if we can differentiate the two. So who would be your models and why? Do, for instance, Edna O’Brien and Anne Enright, for once, stand as such figures in your life…? Or even unknown figures, I don’t know…

McBRIDE	21:45	Yes! I mean Edna O'Brien has always been hugely important to me and before I was a writer myself. So, really, it was really in *Country Girls* when I was, you know, 13 under the covers, away at the [inaudible] which is the Irish Language Summer School and I should not have been reading it, O'Brien, back in those days. It was I think my first adult experience of literature where I was old enough to be able to sit outside and somewhat understand that what she was doing with language was making the whole experience so much more powerful than just telling the story or, even sort of the inclusion of sexual desire, which of course incredibly exciting when I was 13, but that the language itself in the way that filled those space was the purpose of it. And so yeah, before I knew anything about her, before I knew any of the stories of the *Country Girls* and what happened, and all the crap that she's had to put up with over the years and all the kind of bizarre sexism and what she has come to stand for, she was important just for how she could put words on the page, and of course, now she is important to me for all those other things as well. The ability to continue in the face of stupidity and sexism and ignorance and self-congratulation of people who delight nothing more than, you know, trying to explain away the importance of workers sentiment or something, it's just… yeah, so she's right and so yes she's always been an important figure to me. But I think also someone like the musician Scott Walker. I would say he's very important figure to me because that was someone, you know, who was kind of the great pop star of the 60s in The Walker Brothers, who then turned his back on fame and being gorgeous-Californian-sex-God and started to create this incredibly anxiety-inducing-modernist music the like of which, you know, still has no parallel in contemporary music, and just obsessed about creating what he wanted to create. So the idea of the artist who is willing to just do what they want in the face of all logic would suggest that it is impossible for them to do that and pointless for them to do that, that's the kind of person I find very inspiring. And, you know, good for the soul purifying for the soul in the face of all the pressures to be this and do that and, you know, write this kind of book or say these kind of things in public, someone who is utterly engrossed in what they're doing to the detriment of their career is a great inspiration I think.
FERNANDES	25:08	Amazing… and always being bold and brave and…

McBRIDE	25:12	And also just to be stubborn, to refuse, to accept that transgression is the mode by which you make your art or music or write your book, and to accept that transgression will necessary annoy and insult people, that you will be an aggravation and a thorn on the side, that not everyone will be pleased with you and people will take great delight in making sure you know that. And to continue, to try to continue with the pure soul anyway, despite it — which is not an easy thing to do as we all like, you know, money and mortgages and all that stuff that, you know, that goes on in life — but to continue to be transgressive, to refuse the role of acceptance, of being the kind of great artist who is fulfilling the thing that everyone thinks they should be doing, it's very very important to just dig your heels in and do your own thing against the wishes of everyone, which is, you know, in a way [inaudible] like an act of "yeah, everyone thinks I'm this kind of writer but maybe I want to be this this kind of writer" [laughs]. And yeah, I think it's got [inaudible] or something [inaudible] important idea there.
FERNANDES	26:33	So, being coherent and loyal to no one but yourself.
McBRIDE	26:37	Well, to be loyal to nothing but the thing that's driving you, to do what it is you're doing because that, if you betray that, that's the end, then there's nothing else, it doesn't matter what you do it doesn't matter, where you get invited to speak or what jobs you get offered. If you break the thing, the only thing that rides you forward, then you're done, right?
FERNANDES	27:03	What's the point, yeah.
McBRIDE	27:04	It's just the same walk over and over and over again.
FERNANDES	27:07	Yeah. Oh my goodness! This is my very long question, I'm sorry [laughs].
McBRIDE	27:11	My God! That is a long question [laughs].
FERNANDES	27:13	I'll try to sum it up. Okay, now I'm moving on. It's like the whole page [laughs]. I'm moving on more specifically to *Strange Hotel*, my most recent reading of yours. *Strange Hotel* was indeed a difficult read, as you yourself acknowledged in your interview for the Bay Area Book Festival, back in 2020 if I'm not mistaken. From the point of view of someone who's read what you wrote prior to Strange Hotel and in chronological order, like me, it looks easier from the outset, but then you realise you're fooling yourself as a reader, like no. What made me groundless at times in the book was the lack

		of context. As a reader, I kept looking for information about the unnamed protagonist as so many whys remain practically unanswered in the novel, like until the end of the novel. However, it grew on me, and I appreciated it even more after preparing for a discussion with our students and especially after discussing it with them. There's so many topics we could discuss, there's so much in *Strange Hotel*, but I'd like to talk about suicide. It's a taboo topic, and you're a master of dealing with taboo and transgression, and just putting it out there. There's a passage that I would like you to read from, that starts on page 46, I think it's the last line that's…
McBRIDE	28:56	"However"?
FERNANDES	28:57	"However", yeah. And then going on to the end of the paragraph at page 47, please.
McBRIDE	29:03	OK. "However, if the truth is – as she's just insisted *is* the case – that everything still lies where it lay, that the past is immobile and can never be resuscitated, she's at liberty to think about it as much as she likes. She doesn't imagine she will but, were she so inclined, she might admit that the thought of a jump had occurred to her most days, for maybe a year and a half – the thought that she could, or that she even might. Not to mention randomly calculating the height of whatever building caught her eye. No, not to mention that. But, actually, now that it's too late not to think about it, every day would be more accurate. And on some days, every hour. Some hours, every minute. And really, for two years or more."
FERNANDES	30:02	Thank you. That really reminded me of Anne Enright's 'Night Swim' that was published in 2020 as well, in March 2020 in The New Yorker. There is a passage that says: "She did not know what she was doing in this place. It was coming to catch her, even here. It was coming to catch her children [inaudible]. The night swim was not the end of it; she had been in thrall to death for some time afterward—months, a year. Because of course you could leave the lake but you could not leave desire itself, and all its impossibilities." Flirting with the possibility of ending it all, but not actually doing it; the thrill of the flirtation itself. Could you talk about this? Because it's something that is… it's there in *Strange Hotel* like from the beginning until… How was it? How is it to write about something that feels so forbidden? And,

		of course, not in a nonchalant way, but in a legitimate, and very kind of serious way.
McBRIDE	31:17	Well, I suppose the start is to think that it is not a forbidden topic, that there are no forbidden topics, there are only things that happen in life, and all things that happen are interesting and all things that happen are worth examining and thinking about. And, you know, the idea of this woman who thinks about suicide thinks about having thought about suicide [inaudible]. And again, it comes out of character and although you are given very few cues as to who this person is, why she is where she is, what she's doing, what she's supposed to be doing when she's there, what you do come to know, of course, is that she has lost someone that she loved. And that loss of intimacy has… in order to survive it, she has refused herself all forms of intimacy since then, apart from physical intimacy. But this is also extended into infusing intimacy with herself, to even thinking about herself, to considering. And so, a lot of the book is an attempt by someone — not to get to there themselves but to escape themselves, to not think about the things in their past which caused them pain, or once made them happy in the loss of which [inaudible] causes them pain. And so, also I think when you go through the experience of losing someone close to you, you do become, for a time certainly, more untethered from life yourself because you have been close to this someone who's gone over the edge, who's gone to the other side, who's no longer there. And so, death stops being theoretical and becomes a physical presence in your life, and the and the absence of life allows you to emerge, and your own not being there anymore and, of course, pain encourages you to think about anything [inaudible], and in pain one way or another. And so, it was not out of a desire to write about suicide, but a desire to write about what it is to be a person who has been in pain, who has wanted to stop being in pain, and who has gone to great lengths to create a life in which she is completely in some kind of space, where she doesn't feel anything because she's trying so hard to not feel pain that she has lost her ability to make that connection, you know. The point of the book is that she gets to the end and it's like, she realises that, and should she do something or should she not do something about it, is she willing or not? And so of course, the idea of suicide is also present in my personal growth in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, but then again is something that is a reaction to death of a beloved one. And I just think it just pushes people to

		walk on a strange path for a time, most people come back, some people don't come back.
FERNANDES	34:49	How does one deal with grief, right?
McBRIDE	34:53	Yeah, it's a bit of an impossible agony of something that even if you know it's coming, you cannot be prepared for it.
FERNANDES	35:01	Yes, absolutely. Thank you, that was quite deep. We still have 15 minutes, I'm keeping track of time, unfortunately, but you know that's what one's supposed to do [laughs]. OK, now changing subjects quite a bit, I would like to know more about the reception of your work in translation, OK? If you… How has it travelled outside the English-speaking world? I know of translations of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* into Spanish and French, apparently it's been translated into European Portuguese as well; *The Lesser Bohemians* into Dutch, for instance. How does the translation process usually go? Do translators get in touch with you or the other way round? Like, "Oh, what did you do? My novel!" [laughs]. Do any exchanges take place? How do you feel about having your work translated and how has been the reception of your work outside the English-speaking world? These questions are quite important in this context because we have loads of translation students here.
McBRIDE	36:23	Well, I've had lots of bitter experiences of translation [laughs], but also some wonderful experiences of translation, I have to say. And, you know, I very wholeheartedly pursue any kind of translation avenues, I'm very keen to my work to be available in lots of different languages, and although I do understand that the nature of it, of the language itself, is a barrier to translation. So, to that end for instance the book has been sold into many different languages for translation and many of those languages have never ever managed to translate it, so there's lots of enthusiasm to try but either they couldn't find the right translator for it or the translator started it and felt that they couldn't do it, that said, I have also had some like really wonderful translation experiences. So, probably my translator I'm closest to is my Croatian translator who's done both *The Lesser Bohemians* and *Strange Hotel*, and I have really kind of extraordinary relationship with her where, you know, I can't wait, I look forward to her, and she sends me this long list of questions — always an e-mail that

		says “I've just got a quick question” [laughter] and then it’s 20 questions.
FERNANDES	37:45	Like my questions [laughs].
McBRIDE	37:47	Yeah, so many caveats to this question. And it’s, I mean wonderful, it's incredibly flattering that someone is willing to put so much work into your work, and so much time and effort and thought and that’s, you know, you end up having quite a close bond with them because… And you also realise that the act of translation as a creative act it is not a technical “I can sit down and I know this word and I'm going to put that word there and then meaning will be clear”, and especially not with books like this, it requires someone who not only has the facility of language, but has the capacity for making an imaginative leap into inside the work, and I know that in Croatia that it really it is an imaginative leap she has to take because often the literal translation doesn't capture the point of the passage, and she understands that. And so, often her questions will mean more about the wider meaning of the piece rather than “what exactly do you mean in this sense?”, I mean sometimes there are those questions, but more often it's “this is what I think this is about, am I right?”, and then we’ll tweak it a little bit. But because she's very sensitive to the language and very sensitive to what I'm trying to do in the books, more often than not she is like exactly right the first time in, which is very interesting. But then I've had other less great experiences where, for instance, the translator has…