

'The essence of a story is always people'

Author Jan Carson talks to **Audrey Watson** about her latest work, life during lockdown and why she thinks caravans are magical

BUT this thing came down like a guillotine and left us islands, on our own." Taken from the latest work by Belfast-based writer Jan Carson, these are words that describe perfectly how most of us feel in these strange and isolating times.

They form part of 'In the Pause Between Now and Next', a filmed monologue (which premieres online on April 6) commissioned by The Irish Arts Centre in New York and developed in partnership with the Lyric Theatre.

"I'm a very social person and I love the sociability that comes with being a writer," says Jan. "That's been the hardest part of lockdown for me – missing out on book festivals and events, and seeing all your mates and talking about books to other people face-to-face and not through a laptop screen.

"But I think that this last year has been a wake-up call for us to pause and think about our responsibilities," she adds. "It's not just been Covid, all sorts of things have happened in the world – the Black Lives Matter movement, how women are treated and also the

environment.

"It's been a rare moment where people have had time to think about how much they've maybe contributed to some of those issues.

"For me personally, I was travelling an awful lot before Covid. I had been in 25 countries in 2019 with book stuff, so my carbon footprint is awful. Going forward, I don't want to be travelling to 25 countries every year.

"Because so much has gone online, in some ways the pandemic has opened things up a bit for writers – to do a reading all you need is a microphone and your book. You don't necessarily have to travel huge distances.

"In the past year, I've 'virtually' been to about 30 countries.

"I've been very, very, blessed in that work has not dried up for me during lockdown and I really appreciate that.

"If I was a dancer or actor, or worked in other areas of the arts, that wouldn't be possible, so I'm very aware of how fortunate I am."

As well as the filmed monologue, Jan's latest book has just been published. The Last Resort is a collection of 10 interlinked short



stories set in an Antrim coast caravan site. The stories began as radio dramas and aired on BBC Radio 4 earlier this year.

She's also deep into editing her next novel and has another 10-part drama — again for Radio 4 — to complete before the end of the month.

"I do write a lot and I write fast," she laughs. "I spend a lot of time thinking about what I want to write about. For a novel, it might be as long as a year of thinking about the characters and the stories, so the actual writing process is quite quick.

"Plus, I don't have a television, so that's a huge thing. I got rid of the TV a few years ago when I started writing full-time because it was such a distraction and it was too easy to just plonk yourself down and watch whatever was on."

In *The Last Resort*, each story is a vignette of the lives of 10 tenants who arrive at the fictional Seacliff Caravan Park for the first half-term holiday of the year, each one bringing more emotional baggage than luggage.

"I love caravans," says Jan. "I think there's something magical about the way they transform — the kitchen table can become a bed and everything is so small and compact.

"They are supposed to move, but a static caravan doesn't go anywhere. In a way, it's a really good metaphor for where we are in Northern Ireland — we think we're moving but we're not really getting far very quickly."

Born in Ballymena, Jan's previous books include *Malcolm Orange Disappears* (2014), *Children's Children* (2016), *Postcard Stories* (2017) and *The Fire Starters*, which won the EU Prize for Literature in 2019.

Unlike many other authors, she reveals that as a child she never really thought about being a writer.

"I've always loved telling stories, but it took me quite a long time to come to actually writing," she says. "I didn't start until I was 25, which I know is still young, but most writers will tell you that they were scribbling away from when they were 10. I was a huge reader, though. I was the kid that was always at the library and always taking everybody else's library cards to get more books. I was more into just enjoying other people's stories. Sometimes you think there's so many good stories in the world already is there anything new to contribute?"

Now 41, she remembers a very happy, normal childhood with her teacher dad, childminder mum and younger brother.

"I just loved summertime," she says. "Because my dad was a teacher and he had two months off school as well, we would go on quite long holidays. We went to France quite a bit, and lots of campsites and caravans in France and all over the UK.

"I loved being away in another place just tootling about, exploring things and trying new foods.

"People in England always wind me up because I know more about their seaside resorts than they do. Every single Victorian seaside resort in Britain, I think I've been to," she laughs.

"I think it's great to instil in kids not necessarily the desire to travel, but a desire to learn about places that are different from where you grew up, especially if you grew up somewhere like Northern Ireland."

After studying English at Queen's University, Jan travelled to London and then the west coast of America where she worked as an arts facilitator for four years before returning to Northern Ireland and settling in Belfast.

While working as a community arts officer at the Ulster Hall, she studied for a Masters in theology and contemporary culture from St Andrews in Scotland.

"I began writing when I was in America, but it's only in the last few years that I've been writing full-time," she says.

"However, I also still work as a freelance Community Arts facilitator, something which is a really important thing to me and it contributes to my writing as well.

"I think it's very hard to write about a community if you're not engaging with it and community arts allows me to get to know people and engage with them and hear their stories. It also allows me to give something back."

In 2018, Jan was the inaugural Roaming Writer in Residence on Translink and Irish Rail trains.

"That was wonderful," she recalls. "I travelled all over Ireland on trains writing stories. There was an Instagram account on which we posted the stories for commuters to read.

"I had a wee badge and they would announce over the tannoy that I was there, and invite people to come up and talk to me. It being Northern Ireland, people did come up for a chat. One day, someone even showed me their bypass scar," she laughs.

"I did that for about three months. I would also travel to places by train and then teach a

workshop and then get the train back home. I loved it."

In 2019, she spent a week as writer in residence at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

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PICTURES BY **PETER MORRISON**



'I'm not afraid of being alone... that's when you've time to write'

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"That was a really powerful experience," she says. "When I was there I wrote a lot of stories, but I also went round the wards giving readings.

"I was in the ICU and wards where people were desperately ill, but the hardest were the ones where people had been very ill for a long time.

"I got to work in the natal wards with pregnant women who had taken ill and had to lie for three months to protect their pregnancy. It was a strange mixture of boredom and fear at the same time.

"I saw that also in wards for older people and people who had to stay in hospital for a long time. We wrote together and read together.

"I know it's different for every writer but for me, the essence of writing a story, and the essence of a story is always people."

Jan has a particular interest in working with elderly people.

"I really love engaging with older people and facilitating creative writing.

"We talk a lot and we laugh a lot and in real life times we would eat a lot of cake," she laughs.

"Most people who come to my workshops don't want to win the Booker Prize, they are maybe looking for a way to express themselves, or they want to be able to write their story down to share with family members, or they just want a bit of connection and fun.

"I just love those workshops, but they've been very hard to maintain during lockdown. I've been able to do quite a few online, but for some older people the online thing is quite tricky and confusing.

"I'm also involved in a year-long research

project at Queen's looking at dementia. We're exploring how dementia is portrayed in fiction."

For the past 10 years, Jan has lived in east Belfast – the setting for her award-winning novel, *The Fire Starters*.

"I've been around different bits of Belfast and migrated to the east because, very simply, it's cheap and there is a great community of artists who live there because it is cheap.

"I'm also very involved in EastSide Arts, so I'm able to contribute to the community that is supporting me, which is really important," she says.

"East Belfast is really complex and I think that it's one of the most interesting places in the world to write about because it has an almost binary identity. There is the staunch element that is still very loyal, very militant, but very real as well.

"And then there's the new influx of people – a lot of young people, a lot of artists, and a lot of folks who are quite liberal and progressive.

"If you look at the history of any kind of arts movement, they usually begin in geographical spaces where properties are cheap because there are issues, and you chuck in a load of artists alongside those issues and exciting stuff comes out of that dynamic.

"I've got to know people and recognise people and that's lovely. I know some of my neighbours enough to wave at and I think that's a really precious thing to have. It's almost like a village mentality in a city."

Being a writer can be a lonely occupation, so feeling part of a community must be especially important during current times?

"I'm not afraid of being alone, I actually



revel in it," she says. To me that's when you have time to write and read and think.

"Like any artist, you have to be very careful about guarding your creative space, and having that alone time to give to your work.

"It's a very carefully balanced thing. We operate at both ends of a very wide spectrum and can go from addressing 200 people at a book event one day, to the next day, being on retreat for a week and not hearing anything but your own voice, because you're writing.

"I've learned over the last 15 years how to balance that and make sure I don't go too far into myself, but at the same time making sure I have time to be alone and create.

"Even though I'm crazy busy at the minute, the two things I don't compromise on are, every day I have a walk for 45 minutes and every day I sit on the sofa and read with a cup of tea for an hour.

"It centres me. I have no guilt in telling people I'm busy for that hour and three quarters because I am busy — I'm busy looking after myself."

Jan insists that as a writer from Northern Ireland she's never felt any pressure or expectation to reference or address the Troubles in her work, either from publishers or readers.

"Not at all," she says. "For my first four years of writing I was living in America so I set most of my work in a kind of nothing place. It was when I came back to Belfast that I used my writing as a way to explore where I was coming back to because I didn't really want to come back.

"Writing about it was my way of — it sounds cheesy — kind of falling in love with the place again and it came from a kind of natural inquisitiveness... what is this place,

what is it now? I knew what it was before, but has it changed, is it changing, what are the issues that are pertinent now?

"A lot of people think they know what Northern Ireland is, but they've actually got an idea that's grounded in about 1987.

"With *The Fire Starters* being set during the marching season, I found that in a lot of places outside of Ireland, there were readers who had no concept of what an Orangeman is or what the Twelfth is.

"They would maybe be quite familiar with the nationalist narrative because that's been what's put across in movies — and I don't mean that as 'woe is us', it's just the way it is — so when I go to a lot of places I spend a lot of time just explaining cultural things such as this is what a bonfire is.

"Other places such as Spain... the Spanish translation of *The Fire Starters* has done so well because it resonates with a lot of the Spanish issues over national identity. Likewise in the Balkans and also in India.

"I was in India twice in 2019 and there's nowhere in the world that understands complex identity issues like India."

Not surprisingly, considering her output, Jan has no problems with self-discipline when it comes to working.

"I know there are other writers that write in different ways, but I have to give the best of myself to my writing, so for me that's morning time.

"Dean Koontz was on the radio show *Front Row* recently and he was talking about



writing for 12 hours solid – I would die,” she laughs. “Three hours is enough for me in the day. If it’s good quality, you’re not sleepy, and you’re not being interrupted, you can get 1,000-1,500 words done and that’s more than enough for a day.

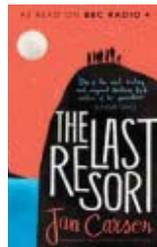
“But you have to have something to write about and for me, a lot of inspiration comes from the community groups that I work with. Also, being able to go to art museums and travel and experience other people’s art, meet people and have conversations.

“That’s all gone at the minute.

“I’m actually teaching a workshop in a few weeks’ time about how to get your imagination back, because a lot of my students are starting to say, ‘I’ve got no ideas. I’ve just been looking at the same four walls for a year’.

“Like everyone, I just want this to be over. I just want to see people. I have a lot of really good friends and I really can’t wait to see them again. I don’t care if it’s in a petrol station or up the M1,” she laughs.

“I just want to see them.”



The Last Resort (Doubleday Ireland) is out now. In The Pause Between Now And Next, written by Jan Carson, performed by Nicky Harley, directed by Rhiann Jeffrey and filmed by Ross McClean premieres online on April 6. Register for free tickets at: www.lyrictheatre.co.uk



