

an interview with
G R A H A M S W I F T

Conducted by Stef Craps

Graham Swift is one of the most successful and respected novelists writing in contemporary Britain. Since 1980 he has published eight novels, a collection of short stories, and a nonfiction book. His work has garnered critical acclaim and literary prizes, and it has won a large and appreciative audience throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. His most celebrated books are *Waterland*, from 1983, which is widely considered a modern classic, and *Last Orders*, which was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in 1996. Both novels have also been made into films. His latest novel, *Tomorrow*, came out in 2007.

Swift belongs to a generation of talented novelists born around the middle of the twentieth century—including Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Salman Rushdie—who, as they came to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were seen to represent a new wave in British fiction. However, Swift has never allied himself with any literary school or movement, and his work defies easy categorization. For example, it seems too invested in the traditional concerns of the English novel (like exploration of character and storytelling) to warrant the label “postmodern,” which can be more readily applied to many of his peers, yet too self-conscious and formally sophisticated to fit comfortably under the rubric of realism.

With fellow novelists Pat Barker, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Caryl Phillips, though, Swift shares an evident and abiding preoccupation with issues of trauma, memory, and recovery. His protagonists—mostly first-person narrators—tend to be humble, unheroic,

vulnerable elderly men who are forced by a crisis situation in their personal lives to face up to an often traumatic individual and collective past. They feel the slipping away of the foundations upon which they, and the society to which they belong, have built their existence, and by means of which they have sought to keep the trauma at bay. The question that they now face is how to respond to this situation of unsettlement and perplexity—whether to hide or flee from it or to try and engage with it in a meaningful way. While denial is shown to have catastrophic consequences, Swift's work also raises the possibility that the process of working through trauma might create the conditions for a viable alternative *modus vivendi* based on openness to and respect for otherness.

This interview was conducted in the dining room of a beautiful and delicately restored Victorian pub in the South London suburb of Wandsworth, near where the author lives, on January 31, 2008. I had first met Swift some two months earlier at a conference in Liège, Belgium, where he gave a keynote address that I had been asked to introduce. The text of this lecture, titled "I Do Like to Be beside the Seaside: The Place of Place in Fiction," was to find its way into *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, the nonfiction book published in 2009 which he was then working on. The writing of this new book, which involved revisiting and reworking several older pieces, put him in a retrospective mood, as did the introduction for a special anniversary edition of *Waterland* on which he was then about to start and which he had completed by the time we met again on the other side of the English Channel. The moment seemed right, therefore, for an interview that would focus not only on his most recent novel but also on recurrent concerns and evolutions across his work—an interview, in other words, that would take stock of where Swift stands as a writer twenty-five years on from *Waterland*.

Q. At your publisher's request, you have written an introduction for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Waterland* that will be coming out later this year. Am I right to assume that you have mixed feelings about this project? After all, *Waterland* is a book that has obviously brought you fame and, I hope, fortune, but whose huge reputation has also, to some extent, come to overshadow all your later work, with the possible exception of *Last Orders*; and now

with this new edition coming out, it will be getting even more attention than it already did. Would it be fair to say that you have a love-hate relationship with this novel?

A. I think that's a little extreme. I do have a mixture of feelings, as you put it. But even that phrasing suggests I might be more uncomfortable than I am. I'm actually perfectly happy to be going back to that book now. It's nice that my publishers want to make a thing about its twenty-fifth anniversary. But there was a sort of middle period when that novel did dominate people's impression of me. On the one hand, I was happy, like any author should be happy, that my name could be linked with at least one of my books. After all, there are many authors for whom that doesn't happen. So I had become "the author of *Waterland*," and in one sense that label was not a bad thing, but it started to hang around my neck a little. The more I produced after *Waterland*, the more I felt this to be the case. Until, I would say, *Last Orders*, which had a comparable success, in some ways a greater success, winning the Booker Prize and so on. For me, that virtually solved the difficulty. So now, with two novels after *Last Orders*, I feel I can quite comfortably go back to *Waterland* in this way and see what I feel about it.

Q. Would you say that *Waterland* is as relevant to the world today as it was to the world twenty-five years ago? Does it still speak to contemporary concerns?

A. Yes, it does. In fact, this is one of those things that, coming back to it now and writing an introduction for it, I actually address. What I've found is that it feels as relevant now as then. Not just because it deals, I hope, with some timeless things that are always relevant, but because even some things that seem to date the novel have their equivalents now. It was published in 1983, but it looks back to the late 1970s. It looks back to that time very much still within the cold war, and to the prevailing fear—I have a direct memory of it—of some nuclear Armageddon. Everyone felt it, but certainly young people of school age. Their futures were shadowed by this very real possibility. That fear is very much part of the book, and you could say that it's all gone now, it went with the end of the cold war. But there are clearly other very apocalyptic notions around, which have taken the place, as it were, of that fear.

Q. I assume you're thinking of terrorism, global warming, and so on?

A. Terrorism, climate change, global warming: all those obvious things, which, I would say, exercise the minds of young people, students, just as much as the nuclear thing would have troubled students back then. So on the one hand, I can see how the novel dates, like any novel dates. It belongs to the period of its writing, the period it refers to. But in another sense, I was struck by how it relates to the present day. Then again, you could take some of its central metaphors, the whole metaphor of the Fens—not that the Fens are just a metaphor—as embodying a process of history, human endeavor, an elemental struggle, preserving the land against water and flooding: all that seems to me to work just as well now and even to have certain applications, implications, that it might not have had then.

Q. Such as?

A. Well, I think you could say that the geographical quality of that metaphor is even more pertinent now, because, for one thing, we're getting more floods. This country, many countries are getting more floods. The land that we live on is more physically under threat now in most parts of the world. So a landscape that embodies that constant threat and that constant need for preservation has all the more resonance now.

Q. Right, definitely. But that's on the literal level still: what about the metaphorical level?

A. But I think the literal and the metaphorical really merge with each other. The physical process of preserving territory blends with the historical process of how we progress or not, how we survive, how we hold on, not just to physical and geographical things, but to civilization itself, how we face the future, how we acknowledge the past, how we use the past to face the future. All those things are implicit in the business of land reclamation. One thing that struck me, going back to the book, was how wonderful it was that at some point in the evolution of the novel I hit upon the Fens as my setting,

this region that can look so flat and empty, yet which proved so rich in significance. It was a key moment in the genesis of the novel. It seems to me now that the metaphorical dimension is virtually limitless. You can make it work in all kinds of human dilemmas, in all kinds of historical situations, including those the world is in right now.

Q. I agree. It seems to me that *Waterland* offers a critique of ideological mystification. A central point that it makes is that redemptive ideologies more often lead to catastrophe than to salvation. As a kind of antidote, Tom Crick, the narrator of the novel, promotes the cultivation of curiosity. He champions a model of progress—progress as land reclamation—that requires a sustained commitment to the questioning of grand narratives which distort a complex reality.

A. Yes. Something very prosaic and, to use a word that the novel uses and dwells on, phlegmatic. Something undramatic, unsensational, very much not to do with moments that are going to change things overnight—revolutionary moments. It's very skeptical.

Q. Exactly. These concerns were obviously very relevant in the early 1980s, when the cold war—which was basically about two opposing redemptive ideologies coming into conflict—was still in full swing and the Falklands War, Britain's then latest imperial venture, was still fresh in people's memories. But they are also relevant, it seems to me, to our own era, in which we are still reeling from two disastrous wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were partly justified on the grounds of spreading freedom and democracy throughout the world—another ideological fantasy, perhaps, in need of debunking.

A. Well, one might have to be a little bit careful here with exact chronology. *Waterland* was published in 1983, after the Falklands, but it was being written before that. The writing of it really didn't, in any effective way, register that event, though it was referred to in my next book, *Out of This World*. It would be a mistake, because *Waterland* was published in 1983, to see it as immediately incorporating things that occurred in 1982, 1983. As I say, it looks back to

the 1970s. But more broadly, what you suggest is true. I wrote *Waterland*, which, among other things, deals with nostalgic, grandiose notions about British power, empire, influence in the world, and then, lo and behold, there was this event which made a huge appeal to that kind of emotion. Looking back now, I think there was a curious innocence to the Falklands episode, grotesque though it was. It was possible to say that there was a justification for it. That's to say, there were those British citizens, living in those islands far away on the other side of the world, and they were about to be kicked out by a foreign power. Absurd though it was, you could argue that the British government had no choice but to do what it did, assuming it couldn't solve the problem diplomatically. That little, questionable war had a kind of genuineness to it. The wars that we're talking about now are not like that. They have no innocence—innocence is not the right word anyway, in connection with war, but they absolutely don't. While I remember feeling skeptical and uncomfortable about the Falklands, I don't think I ever felt about it the real sense of shame that I feel now about how my country is involved in Iraq. It's shameful. My nation is besmirched by it in a way that I don't think was the case with the Falklands. So we've moved on, or rather moved back, in a pretty appalling way. I guess that's a real difference about the climate now—let's forget the climate in the literal sense. The moral climate in this country now involves a feeling of shame. What is there to be proud about? I don't think that was true in the 1970s or 1980s, for all the troubles that we had then, even including Northern Ireland. Even Northern Ireland didn't produce the underlying sense of shame that exists now.

Q. It's interesting to hear you talk about politics . . .

A. I seem to be doing so, yes. I don't very often do that.

Q. Indeed. Which brings me to my next question. Do you think that writers have a political responsibility? I'm asking this because many other British writers, especially since 9/11, seem to believe this to be the case: Martin Amis, David Hare, Ian McEwan, Harold Pinter, Salman Rushdie, and so on. However, in marked contrast to

these writers, you have so far refrained from making public pronouncements on burning political issues such as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or the war in Iraq.

A. Which I wouldn't want to do. I would say that it's not me. I'd be extremely hesitant, at least, about doing that. And insofar as I have been asked and invited to do that, I have always basically said no. I don't think that's the role of a writer, in fact. There's a great tendency to think that if a person has some sort of expertise or mark in one field, they're therefore good at everything else. So a writer with a reputation should therefore be able to act as a kind of leader of opinion on any number of subjects. I think that's a very false assumption. I find it actually often rather embarrassing when writers, as it were, sound off in the press and media about this or that subject, which is not their real purpose.

Q. I'm reminded of your essay "Looking for Jiří Wolf," published in *Granta* in 1990, in which you reflect on the uneasy relationship between aesthetics and politics. You describe your encounters with a number of dissident writers from the former Czechoslovakia who lived and worked under communism. From reading this piece, I got the impression that you shared the "secret wish" expressed by one of them not to be involved in politics, but that you also appreciated how under certain circumstances it becomes imperative for a writer to speak out and take a stand. Have you ever felt that need yourself?

A. No. I can conceive of finding myself in a situation which, as it were, demanded that I should speak out, but I don't think such a situation has actually occurred in this country.

Q. So what would it take for you to feel the need to speak out?

A. I think I'm talking about radical and extreme political changes which would seriously affect freedom. I'm talking about the kind of thing, in other words, that would have pertained in Czechoslovakia and many other countries at the time I wrote that piece.

Q. Also in contrast to quite a few other writers, you don't deal with the great dramatic events of the early twenty-first century in

your recent fictional work. In fact, both *Tomorrow* and *The Light of Day* are set in the 1990s—that is, in the pre-9/11 era.

A. I've often said, a little teasingly, that I don't believe in contemporary fiction. I don't think there is such a thing as contemporary fiction. The great strength of fiction is that it isn't and cannot be contemporary, because of the time it takes to write. If I was going to write a contemporary novel about now, today, late January 2008, that novel would take me—being me—at least a couple of years, by which time it would, in that sense, be out of date. Fiction has to handle time and change in a longer way. I think the contemporary area belongs to journalism. It's the task of journalists to write about now, today: that's what "journal" means. Novelists do something else. I think the notion a lot of novelists have—maybe young novelists more than older novelists—that they've got to be contemporary all the time, have got to put in contemporary references, have got to demonstrate that they are responding to the world now can be misguided. What the novel can do is to put a period, a long period of time, in perspective, so that the great novel—if there's going to be one—about the war in Iraq, about my country in the beginning of the twenty-first century, may well not happen for another ten, fifteen years. It will take that process of historical ingestion, and anyway it will take the long process that it takes to write a novel. You can't do it just like that. September 11 particularly has made some writers feel, "God, this is such an inescapable, such a huge traumatic event, with the world's eyes upon it, that I must write about it, I must produce my 9/11 response in some form." Doing that, with conscious effort and will, has landed some writers in trouble. I don't think it works like that. Again, it's journalists who do that work. One big change that has occurred in my lifetime in the world of writing is an ever-increasing confusion of the roles of the journalist and of the fiction writer—sometimes quite literally, because there are many fiction writers who, I think, would like to be journalists, or indeed who were once journalists, and vice versa. There's been a growing lack of distinction between the two activities, but I think there's a fundamental distinction, an important distinction.

Q. You are currently working on your first-ever nonfiction book. Who or what gave you the idea for it? I'm intrigued, because in the

past you have only very rarely written nonfictional prose; in fact, you've been remarkably single-minded in your dedication to the art of the novel.

A. This book, which is probably going to be published next year, sprang up partly just as a matter of opportunity. I had finished *Tomorrow*, although I was still seeing that book through to publication. I was in the mood a writer can be in after finishing a book: part of you wants just to do nothing, part of you is wondering what you will do next, part of you is looking for a change. It began to strike me that I should have a look at some pieces I'd written a long time ago, like the Jiří Wolf piece, and see if I couldn't put together a book of such pieces, with some new things added. Such an opportunity—especially for a writer like me, where there haven't been many such pieces—is only going to happen once. I suppose I recognized I'd reached a point in my writing life where I could do this, where there would be enough material to make this book. But that was only the beginning, because, as I thought about it, I very much wanted this book, if it was going to happen, to be not like the average book that novelists can produce in this way—that's to say, just a collection of pieces, a bundle of items. I wanted it to have a real shape, with linking pieces that would be specially written. Those links are often autobiographical ones, or to do with the personal side of writing, or my sense—so far as it goes—of being in a community of writers. I mean, my writer friends—there's a lot about my writer friends. It's a personal book, a very refreshing book for me to be working on. But I'm convinced that it's a total one-off. I have no idea how it will be received.

Q. It seems to me that autobiographical writing is another new departure for you. In the past you've always said that you dislike the notion that writers should write from their own experience, about what they know.

A. Well, in fact, that is the starting point for the book. I've written a short introduction which makes that very point, that as a fiction writer I'm very much nonautobiographical. I've often made a point of this when I've spoken about my work. I want to turn that around with this book and, as it were, step into the foreground for once, say

things about me, what it feels like to be a writer, things about certain periods in my life which were important for my writing. I'm putting myself in front of the reader, in the full knowledge that normally I don't do this. I hope this might have a certain appeal, but we'll see.

Q. I'd like to talk about your development as a writer. Critics can't seem to make up their minds about the nature of the relationship between your novels. MacDonald Harris, for example, has described your oeuvre as "a familiar family of novels that resemble one another like siblings who have, perhaps, an odd marital infidelity or two in their heritage"; John Banville, on the other hand, has said that your novels "differ greatly from one another; indeed, were it not for the evidence of his name on the title page, one might think that all six of them had been written by different hands." Could you perhaps adjudicate between them?

A. I'm quite pleased by the contradiction, because insofar as I think about this at all, I think that both things are true. And I think it's healthy that both things are true. There is a way in which, after you've written a number of books, you can't really fail to recognize that there are certain things you keep coming back to. There is a core of concerns, which I wouldn't really be able to define, but it's always going to be there in anything I do. So, too, the reader knows there's going to be that recognizable element: "This is a Graham Swift novel." That is going on at the same time as every novel is in some way a new departure, it's something different. I think my work so far manifests that—sometimes quite strikingly. Just take the contrast between, say, *Ever After* and *Last Orders*. Both have, at their core, concerns that will always feature in my writing, but in another sense they're vastly different. The one has this highly educated character in a very educated setting; the other has these people who are talking a totally different language, in a completely different world. Or if you were to take the contrast between either of those novels and my most recent one, *Tomorrow*, again there's a huge change of milieu, of where the characters are coming from. So I think there's diversity and range in my work. And quite right, too, because that's one of the things you want to do as a novelist: you want to have range.

Q. Do you also see an evolution of your work, in linear terms?

A. I'm less sure about that. I don't mean that there may not be such a thing, but I'm not sure that I'm able to draw conclusions.

Q. OK, let me try. Take the sequence of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Ever After*, and *The Light of Day*. To some extent, I think, *Ever After* and *The Light of Day* can be seen as rewritings of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, which in a sense take things one or two steps further. In some ways, *Ever After* begins where *The Sweet Shop Owner* leaves off. *The Sweet Shop Owner* ends with a suicide; *Ever After* starts with a failed suicide. The protagonist of *The Sweet Shop Owner* appears to be stuck in a state of incomprehension and frustration with no possibility of redemption this side of the grave; *Ever After*, on the other hand, can be read as a prolonged, tortuous attempt by the narrator to break free from the unreflective, narcissistic way of life that led up to his desperate act and to move toward a more viable and sustainable ethos. It seems to me that *The Light of Day* carries this process still further. It's a novel that refers back to *The Sweet Shop Owner* even more explicitly than *Ever After*. In both *The Light of Day* and *The Sweet Shop Owner*, the action takes place on a bright and sunny day, in a rigorously circumscribed London setting; the protagonist runs a business on the main shopping street, used to be a poor student, and does "homework" for the woman he loves; and so on and so forth. However, the differences are even more striking. *The Sweet Shop Owner* is a very bleak and pessimistic novel, in which the protagonist is devastated at being abandoned by his daughter; in *The Light of Day*, however, the daughter miraculously comes back. There is a lot of love in *The Light of Day*, whereas love is almost unthinkable in *The Sweet Shop Owner*.

A. Yes, in one sense it's a pretty loveless book.

Q. It's also significant, I think, that the crisis situation in *The Light of Day*—the protagonist's sacking from the police force, his divorce from his wife—does not occur in the narrative present, as is usually the case in your work, but years earlier. George has been given a new chance in life, and he's facing the realistic prospect of a new love relationship. I'm inclined to see this difference as evidence of a

kind of linear evolution, from an emphasis on denial and evasion in your early work, through an intense preoccupation with the demands of trauma in your “middle-period” novels, to an embrace of renewal and regeneration in your latest novels. Does that make any sense to you?

A. Well, I think a lot of the things that you have said I certainly recognize. For example, the echoes that exist in *The Light of Day* with my first novel, *The Sweet Shop Owner*. Those echoes have occurred to me, but only after I’d finished *The Light of Day*. During the writing of that novel, I was immersed in the world of that novel, and I certainly wasn’t pausing to think, “Oh, I have a character here who has a position on a high street, who is making these very localized but resonant journeys in the course of a short period, like Willy Chapman in *The Sweet Shop Owner*.” I didn’t really think of that at the time. It may sound odd that I shouldn’t have done, but it just shows you how engrossed you are in the individual thing you’re working on. But having written the novel, I can see that. And I can see that such things are examples of what I was talking about earlier. You write six, seven, eight novels, and you start to see certain things recurring, certain things you’re not going to get away from. There’s a way in which, though you write several novels, you may even be working on the same, single novel, as it were, with each one.

The linear thing, though, is tricky. I really think it’s an interpretive thing. If you were to take George in *The Light of Day* and Willy in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, yes, you could say that for George there is redemption, for Willy not much redemption, only a kind of ultimate settling of accounts, a death which is a form of suicide. But I’m not sure that the difference between the two characters represents some evolution or conscious direction. They’re just two different characters. It’s a matter of interpretation, anyway. When I write, I’m very much not an interpreter. I don’t wish to be one stage ahead of my characters, interpreting what they’re doing with hindsight, and certainly not with some kind of overall plan. Another way of putting this is to say that I actually have as much rapport, empathy, sympathy, connection with Willy Chapman as I have with George. Both of those characters are still as present and as real for me as they were at the particular times I created them and wrote about them.

I don't grade them morally, ethically. I don't wish to say that one was more successful than the other. All of that is precluded by the need to be as empathetic as I can be. While I'm not an autobiographical writer, while neither of those characters is me, I want to be as close as I can possibly get to my characters, and I want my readers to be as close as they can possibly get to my characters. And that closeness is almost more important to me than any form of interpretation. One of my articles of faith as a novelist is that you are suspending judgment, you are not saying that this is better than that. You're putting sympathy and compassion before moral judgment—which is not the same as saying there is no moral dimension to writing, far from it. I think there is a moral dimension, but it's a moral dimension which is governed by empathy, compassion, and a preparedness to suspend easy judgment on anyone who features in the story. If I have developed as a writer, I hope that I've developed in accordance with that article of faith.

Q. Let's stay with this article of faith for a while. In "Throwing Off Our Inhibitions," a feature published in *The Times* in 1988, you wrote, "the fundamental task of literature is to enable us to enter, imaginatively, experiences *other* than our own." However, the kinds of characters peopling your books fall within a rather limited range in terms of racial, gender, and class background: all of your protagonists so far have been white and heterosexual, and most of them male and middle class or upper lower-class. I'm not suggesting that you "are" any of your characters, but in these respects, at least, they don't seem to be all that far removed from you or from your own experience. Or would you say that such social markers are irrelevant when it comes to understanding what it is like to be someone else, that any "someone else" will do?

A. I think they're secondary, I think they're very secondary. I'm not sure that I agree with you, in one sense, that I am so close to the range of characters I've written about. I mean, it may sound a bit obvious and simplistic, but I've never been a detective, I've never been a butcher, I've never been a woman who works in the fine-art world, that sort of thing. The difference between any two people, however seemingly alike they may be, however seemingly they

may belong to the same socio-economic bracket, is vast. The difference between one unique individual and another unique individual is a unique difference. It's as vast as that. So I think the way that we group people, as though they are like each other, is often highly suspect in itself. Merely to inhabit, so to speak, another person, as a writer or as a reader, is to cross a huge gulf, and to assume that certain people would not be that different from you, the reader or the writer, would be superficial and to disrespect their unique individuality. There's a kind of politically correct notion that a novelist ought to have all the right ingredients in the recipe, ought to include people with ethnic differences, different sexual proclivities, different social backgrounds—that that is almost of itself the stuff of any novel. I think that's, frankly, silly. It's not like that. The big jump, the big gap, is just the gap between any two people.

Q. As I'm sure you're aware, accusations of political incorrectness have in fact been leveled at your work. Your frequent reliance on white, male, and middle-class protagonists has been taken to imply—and I'm not saying I agree with this—a narrow and conservative outlook, a refusal to engage with feminist issues and with the multicultural reality of contemporary society. I'm thinking particularly of criticisms that have been made of *Last Orders*. One critic, for example, used the words "narrow-minded," "smug," and "parochial" in this connection.

A. Well, I wonder who the narrow-minded one really was.

Q. Fair enough. If you will allow me, I'd like to pursue a little further this question of the sympathetic imagination, which you say you have faith in and which you view as a force for good. I'm wondering whether the picture isn't more complex than that. Insofar as the imagination is a reproductive, mimetic faculty, isn't there a danger that instead of welcoming otherness into the world, it only pretends to do that, while what it's actually doing is endlessly reproducing the self?

A. I think you could say there is good and bad imagination. Imagination can be used well, or misused, or, indeed, neglected. But as a creative writer, as a writer of made-up, fictional worlds,

I absolutely have to trust in and believe in the imagination. Imagination is the driving force of it all, and I set enormous store by it. It has a moral dimension. If we can imagine ourselves into the lives of others, that clearly has a moral effect. What else is morality based on than the ability to be not just a solipsistic unit but to imagine what it's like to be someone else? That's the beginning of morality. So the imagination is fundamentally important for me in that way, and I almost instinctively recoil from a notion that suspects the imagination. As I say, it can be misused, but I do think it's essentially one of the great forces of life, something that makes it possible better to enjoy or better to endure life. That's not me, that's Dr. Johnson. There may well be circumstances in which the imagination operates in a sort of corrupt way, but I think they're the exceptions and the peculiarities rather than the main thing. And I feel confident that my own imagination isn't corrupt, if I can put it like that.

Q. Sure. Let's talk about the settings of your novels. It has often been noted that your novels have a great sense of place. Rather than being a merely accidental backdrop, the setting has a crucial role in your writing, as it actively interferes with the human drama played out in it. Many of your novels are set in specific South London suburbs—Clapham in *Shuttlecock*, Lewisham and Greenwich in *Waterland*, Bermondsey in *Last Orders*, Chislehurst and Wimbledon in *The Light of Day*, and Putney in *Tomorrow*—or in quiet provincial backwaters like the East Anglian Fens in *Waterland* and the West Country in *Ever After*. Moreover, they seldom venture beyond English borders. In fact, the only novels with a slightly more international setting that come to mind are *Shuttlecock*, *Out of This World*, and *Last Orders*, some parts of which are set in France, Greece, the United States, and Egypt. Both the marginality and the Englishness of your settings make your work stand out. What is it that draws you to these suburban or provincial English settings?

A. I think it is their locality; it is the localness. Localness is the key. If you are going to write about things which are in fact universal and timeless, then the way to do it is through the focus of the local. If, on the other hand, you say, as it were, "Hey, look, I'm now being universal and global and big, because my book has obviously big

things in it and it is set in half a dozen different international localities”—well, that often turns out to be rather pretentious. Some novels I have read which do that sort of thing have ceased to interest me quite quickly. I think you have to begin where we all begin, which is with our indisputably local sense of life and experience. However “global” we like to think we’ve become, it remains true that life is about our little corner, our little nook, our little niche, our little territory. It’s a small world, but that small world opens up to the big world, and that’s simply the way I go about things. For me, the London suburbs, for example, are as rich a field as anywhere, as rich a beginning to a novel as any beginning.

Q. So you don’t see any tension between the familiarity of the places that you typically write about and your “maxim,” as you called it in “Throwing Off Our Inhibitions,” that novelists should not write from their own experience? Would you say, perhaps, that these familiar places are not so familiar as they seem?

A. They start by being familiar, but they become less familiar. That’s one of the thrills I look for—discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary. That’s the direction I like to go in. I can see that there would appear to be a contradiction between my saying, “Don’t be autobiographical, don’t write about what you know,” and my producing several novels which are set very close to home. However, I would come back to two things. Firstly, there’s that huge difference between one person and another, so that even if the physical territory is superficially familiar, you are entering the unique inner worlds of your characters. Secondly, I think the familiar simply can be strange. The London suburbs, once you look beneath their surface, can be very strange. That paradox attracts me. I think writers perhaps have a special alertness for the strangeness we can all encounter in ordinary life. You walk into a familiar room, a familiar place, you go down a familiar street, but there’s a strangeness in the air, you sense it. What’s going on here? That’s how a lot of stories begin.

Q. I’d like to talk about *Tomorrow* for a while. *Tomorrow* marks the first time that you have chosen a woman to be the only narrator of a novel, though there were already speaking parts for not-so-minor

female characters in *The Sweet Shop Owner*, *Out of This World*, and *Last Orders*. I'm wondering what made you decide to narrate this book entirely in the voice of Paula, rather than (also) in that of her male partner, Mike, who is sound asleep beside her. After all, Mike appears to be in deeper trouble than Paula is, as he is in greater danger of losing his children. Does this not make him at least as qualified to take on the task of narrating the story, or some parts of it, as his wife?

A. I think what made me decide was a fair amount of reflection. I certainly gave consideration to who was going to be telling the story, and, of course, there was the possibility that it might have been the husband, Mike, and the possibility that it might have been any permutation of all the members of the family. But in the end, I felt it had to be Paula's story. I felt the wife and mother was in the best position to tell the story. But this feeling really came simultaneously with the feeling that she would be telling the story at this critical point of the night before an important revelation. Placing the narrative at that point was crucial. The two things arrived together and merged in the image of Paula lying awake while her husband, amazingly, is fast asleep. The novel really began for me with that image—as, in fact, it begins on the page. Mike, the husband, is the one who's going to have to do the talking anyway. He's going to have to do the actual telling, brief though it may be—brief but important—tomorrow. Paula is now, in advance of that, engaged in a whole other operation of telling, which puts the telling her husband will do in its fullest context. There are so many ways in which Paula does in fact speak not just for herself but for Mike and for her children. I can't now conceive of the novel as being narrated by anyone other than her. I wasn't impelled by the experiment of having a female narrator. I just felt she was right.

Q. And you didn't feel that crossing gender boundaries in your choice of narrator posed any extra challenges for you as a male writer?

A. Not a lot, no. Honestly, that was not important. Once I felt I knew her in the way that a novelist can feel they know a character, writing it as a female narrative—if that's even the right expression—was not a particular issue at all.

Q. You said that at one point you considered dividing the narrating burdens between not just Paula and Mike but also the twins. That would have involved exploring the impact which the announcement would have had on the twins, I suppose—otherwise they wouldn't have had much to say.

A. Exactly.

Q. This would have required you to carry the narrative beyond the point where, in the novel as we know it, Paula's voice goes silent, which is before anyone else wakes up and so before the crisis—if there is to be one—gets a chance to explode. This also strikes me as an innovation with respect to your earlier work, in which the starting point of the story is often a crisis situation in the narrative present that brings back the ghosts of the past, which the characters thought had been laid to rest. However, in *Tomorrow* this moment of crisis is not recounted: it is anticipated with anxiety by Paula, but the novel comes to an end before it actually happens.

A. Yes, it's very much a novel about anticipation.

Q. Why is this so? Is it just the way it happened?

A. Well, the short answer would be precisely that. It's not a dishonest answer, it's a perfectly sincere answer. But if I'd included the twins in the narrative, that could not have been done, as you rightly say, except by pitching it all forward to some point in the future where this critical day would have happened. The children would have been told what Mike has to tell them, so they would then be able to express their thoughts and tell their story in the light of that event. And that would have then begged all kinds of questions. Where do you pitch it in the future? Is it going to be the day after, is it going to be years after? The repercussions of such a moment might be ones that would continue to affect the rest of the lives of those children. So where would you place it? Apart from that problem, it would anyway diffuse the intrinsic drama and tension of putting it right on the brink—literally on the eve—of this critical day. So I fairly quickly ruled out that the children were going to have any sort of voice. You have a novel which ends on the brink.

No one knows, I don't know, what actually happens tomorrow. And that's just as I wanted it to be. A certain kind of reader, I can see, might say, "You've deprived me of the outcome, I don't know what the ending is." I can only say, "Well, that's one of the points." One of the curious things that any novelist or any storyteller has to deal with is the notion of an ending: how do things end? The fact is, in life there are no endings, apart from the obvious one. But in stories and fiction, there are endings: they are fabricated things. I try to be as honest and as responsive as I can be to the fact that in life there are no endings by writing the kind of novels—*Tomorrow* is perhaps the best example—where, in one sense, there is no ending, the ending is yet to come, and that ending anyway would be not so much an ending as a beginning, since it might have any number of different outcomes that could last a long time. That seems to me to reflect the way life is. Several of my novels end with an unknown outcome, with no real ending. *Waterland* does, *The Light of Day* does. Both *Out of This World* and *Last Orders* end in the air. If you write a novel which has a clear-cut ending, then you may be satisfying a certain kind of reader, but you are cheating on the way life really is. I want to write the kind of novels which become more mysterious at the end than they were at the beginning.

Q. *Tomorrow* has received some rather unfavorable reviews. Quite a few critics were disappointed with what they saw as the banality of the secret whose revelation the novel works toward, and which Paula fears might destroy her family. It concerns the twins' conception through artificial insemination, using an anonymous donor's sperm. The narrative hangs on the device of an explosive secret about to be disclosed, but some reviewers saw this secret as a huge letdown, not really worth all the fuss. After all, artificial insemination was hardly a shocking concept anymore in 1995, the year in which the novel is set. Is this a fair criticism, in your opinion?

A. I think it's thoughtless. There are two things here. One is the mechanistic notion of the novel just hanging upon a revelation, which supposedly keeps the reader guessing—that that's really what the novel is all about. To be honest, what I feel is that any intelligent, imaginative reader will probably guess what this revelation

is quite quickly, possibly in the first pages of the novel. In any case, if they don't actually guess it, by the time it does get revealed—roughly halfway through—they will, I hope, have realized that the novel is about much more than merely waiting for this revelation. If it had just been about that, then I would have left the revelation to the end. But this is a minor point. The bigger thing is the nature of the revelation itself. There's a kind of reader, perhaps, who feels that any revelation must be outlandish, totally surprising, unguessable, because otherwise it's not worth it. I think, in fact, that the more commonplace, the less remote a revelation is—the more likely it could relate to any one of us—then the more meaningful it becomes. The revelation in *Tomorrow* is, indeed, nothing unusual, something that a lot of parents, families, children face. That's why the novel was worth writing. "What's the big deal?" it might be said, but it's a big deal in the sense that it's faced by a lot of people, and it can significantly affect their lives. It's one of those many things in life of which it's possible to say in the abstract, "What's the big deal?" That's because it's not happening to you. As soon as it happens to you, then you understand that the "not a big deal" is really a big deal after all. This is one of those essential things I think the novel is about, another article of faith. The business of imagining what it's like to be somebody else is also the business of saying to yourself, "Suppose this were happening to me." If you actually go along with that, empathetically, if you really think about what it would be like to be either a parent or a child who is on the giving or the receiving end of this bit of news, you very quickly realize that it's something that raises fundamental questions and can have enormous implications. It's core stuff. I think some critics of the novel simply haven't gone there.

Q. I find that an interesting way of looking at the allegedly anticlimactic structure of the novel. By generating suspense about the nature of the announcement, you're actually defamiliarizing it, inviting the reader to appreciate and learn anew how extraordinary such situations or moments really are and remain. While it's true that the situation in which Paula and Mike find themselves is hardly unique these days, and that the impact of the announce-

ment they are planning to make the next morning may not be as devastating as she imagines, the point your novel is making is that, in spite of all this, it would be wrong simply to dismiss it as ordinary or mundane.

A. Absolutely. And even if we suppose that what occurs tomorrow is not devastating and that this family, which—although it is not all it seems—is actually a successful and loving family, carries on being that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, as is not unlikely, there are still things out there on the edge of what seems to be the main issue which are very tricky indeed. One of the parts of that book which I found particularly engrossing is where the reflections on birth mingle inescapably with reflections on death—the thoughts that Paula has about what it will be like when either she or Mike is no longer there. If she goes first, then Mike will be able to see in the children a vestige of her, because she is the genuine mother. If it's the other way round and Mike goes first, then she won't be able to see any remnant of the husband she loves in the children. As soon as you start to go into that area where the facts of birth mingle with the facts of death, it gets very complicated.

Q. So the announcement does in fact have far-reaching consequences, even though on the face of it things may go on as normal.

A. Absolutely.

Q. An important theme of *Tomorrow* is the nature of the connections between parents and children. The novel seems to suggest that there can be different kinds of "family," that a family is not just blood relations or something that you are born into but can also be a voluntary association. In fact, questions of kinship have always been central to your work, which features a considerable number of substitute father figures and children who are adopted or whose paternity is uncertain or in dispute. For example, in *Waterland*, there is Mary Metcalf's aborted baby, who may or may not be Tom Crick's son; Dick Crick, the product of an incestuous union between Helen Atkinson and her father, who is adopted by Helen's husband Henry; and Tom's star pupil Price, whom he at one point refers to as

“my son.” In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis junior finds a father substitute in his boss. *Ever After*’s Bill Unwin is adopted by his “Uncle” Sam after losing his father, who turns out not to have been his biological father after all. In *Last Orders*, we have Vince, a war baby adopted by Jack and Amy, who also find surrogate daughters in Mandy and Sally. And now in *Tomorrow*, there is the question of the twins’ paternity, but also of Mike’s multiple fathers (his “real” father, Grandpa Pete; his Uncle Eddie; his honorary “Uncle” Tim). How do you explain your constant concern with the nature of kinship relations?

A. Well, I would say that kinship, family relationships, family bonds, whether we like it or not, raise for us the big questions: where do we come from, and where are we going? How is it that I am here and I am the person I am, and will there be anything left of me when I’m gone? Factors of kinship also raise the big question of whether we are governed by biological forces, by nature, or by the human bonds we form. What you have in *Tomorrow* is the irony of a family which is in one sense not quite real, which is semi-artificial, but in another sense, emotionally, all the bonds seem to be there and seem to be more effective and more binding than they can be in a lot of families where the biological connection is a hundred percent. But in any case I think when you write about families, you inevitably touch on those core human areas of origins and destiny. I found, curiously, when I went back to *Waterland*, some remarkable similarities between that novel and *Tomorrow*. They’re both concerned with birth, and misbirth, in one form or another. They both address children. Paula isn’t literally speaking to her children, of course: she’s addressing her children in some strange chamber of her mind—and that’s exactly what Tom Crick is doing. He uses the word “children” about his former students. He’s speaking to a kind of class in his head. But both Tom and Paula have in common a concern for how the past translates into the future. In *Waterland*, you have the whole issue—excuse the pun—of the abortion, the child that never was, the child whose ghost, as it were, comes back in the form of a snatched baby. The power of biology. The stuff of birth.

Q. Still, I’m struck by the upbeat tone of *Tomorrow* and the contrast this presents to the much more muted tone of *Waterland*, or indeed

most of your earlier work. While there was already a fair amount of optimism in *Last Orders* and especially *The Light of Day*, this is the closest you have ever come to writing about sheer happiness, about people leading basically contented and fulfilled lives—a fiendishly difficult subject for a novel, it seems to me.

A. Yes, happiness isn't a narrative, it's a state.

Q. I find it hard to see, therefore, how you could go down this road any further—so in a sense I'm not so surprised that you're taking a break from fiction and turning to nonfiction at this point in your career.

A. When I give readings from *Tomorrow*, I sometimes introduce them by mentioning the famous beginning from *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I'd dispute Tolstoy's sweeping generalization—though this was hardly a motive in writing my book. What Tolstoy is implying is, "Let's forget about those happy families, who are boring and uninteresting, and let's deal with the unhappy families, where there is drama and excitement"—which is simply unfair. I think I wanted to say that happiness has its place in fiction and can even have its drama. *Tomorrow* is driven by the joy of possession brought up against the fear of loss. And I don't feel it's left me with nowhere to go; I don't feel it's the end of a road.

Q. I'd like to hear more about your reaction to the critical reception of your work. On the whole, your work is held in very high regard by critics, but when it is criticized, the reasons why often contradict each other. For example, while some find your work overly intellectual, cerebral, schematic, not from the heart, others find it overly emotional, sentimental, even melodramatic. What do you make of these conflicting appreciations? How do you account for them, and which one do you agree with least?

A. Well, I'm not sure I need to account for them. Critics are these people who speak their minds about your books. There's nothing I can do or should do about it. I try not to trouble myself too much about the opinions of critics and reviewers. It becomes easier not to

be troubled, the more you write. I'm of course simply human, like any writer: it's nice to get a nice review, it's not nice to get a hostile review. But you framed your question within the polarization of the intellectual and the emotional. I think, generally speaking, critics like to be intellectual. They feel themselves to be intellectual figures, often to the extent that they can be wary of emotions.

Q. Do you feel that the intellectual element of your work has been overemphasized by critics, at the expense of the emotional dimension?

A. It may work in that direction. I think often the emotional content of my work may have been skirted by critics who find it hard, as I've just suggested, to write about emotion. It's not easy, actually, to write about emotion in five hundred words. Nonetheless, it should happen if a work has emotional content. Ordinary readers can get as emotional as they like in the invisible, private act of reading. God knows, you can cry over a book. No critic particularly wants to say, "I cried" or "I got emotional." It's embarrassing to do that in public. I hope that as a writer I embrace both things—the emotional and the intellectual. I want to be a writer who produces narratives which touch the heart, which move the reader, which generate emotion, and in some ways I want to do that more, maybe, than the other thing, of provoking thought. But I hope that both dimensions are there. You can't really have one without the other.

Q. Are there any other aspects of your work that you feel have been largely overlooked by critics and that you wish would receive more attention?

A. I have been sometimes thought of as gloomy or pessimistic, but I think my work is far from being all darkness. We've been talking about the happiness in *Tomorrow*, and the book before that was called *The Light of Day*. It contains some dark things, it's about a murder, but it doesn't have its title for nothing. It contains a lot of light. I think there's a lot of humor in my work, even quite a lot of comedy. I'm sometimes tempted to describe *Last Orders* as a comic novel, which might surprise some people. Perhaps what I'm saying is that the light and dark go together; you have to do both. I believe,

in any case, that whatever the subject matter, fiction is an inherently positive thing. I like to use the word “creative,” a word which has become—I don’t quite know why—rather unfashionable, but I think what I do is a creative thing, and I think being creative is positive. The mere business—or the not-so-mere business—of starting from nothing and creating the whole world that a novel can be is inherently positive, the business of bringing things to life. I think that fiction is always at some level celebratory. Even when it’s exploring some of the most dismal aspects of experience, it’s doing that, it’s not being inert. And doesn’t any novel simply want to offer, whatever else it may be doing, the stuff, the flavor, the taste of life? Isn’t it constantly reminding you of the feeling of being in this world, and urging you not to be complacent or indifferent about it? “No, look again at that tree, have a look at that tree that you haven’t noticed, just think for a moment, isn’t that a wonderful tree?” I think that fiction should be constantly having such little—or not-so-little—effects. They may be almost subliminal, or they may be the point of a whole paragraph, but they’re saying, “This is life, this is what we have, look at it!” Isn’t that inherently celebratory? As you get older, the more precious things become, not less. It’s as simple as that. The more of your life that you’ve lived, the less of your life that you have yet to live, the more you value the stuff that’s there. If you’re a writer, the more, perhaps, your work will want to reflect, before you go, what can be good about this often terrible world we live in. One doesn’t have to think very far, or need to have lived that long, to know that it can be a terrible world. But it can be also very good. It’s very good that we’re sitting here right now, able to talk like this.