



An Interview with Ian MacMillan: A Startling Vision

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AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN MACMILLAN

A Startling Vision

MĀNOA We want to introduce your story “The Smallest Circle,” which follows immediately in this issue. But first we should give some background. Your recent novel, *Proud Monster* (North Point, 1987; Bodley Head, London, 1988), has been highly praised in America and England. Early on part of it appeared in *Best American Short Stories of 1982*, edited by John Gardner, where he singled out your work, above all others, for his “highest admiration.” Like *Orbit of Darkness*, the new book you’ve just completed, *Proud Monster* comprises closely interconnected stories that make a unique kind of novel. Except that most of the stories in the new book are a more traditional length, whereas in *Proud Monster* they were almost all very short—short-short stories we could call them—and by the time *Proud Monster* came out, fifty-three of them had been published in groups of two to eight stories in the literary reviews. When the book itself was published, National Public Radio said there had been no book like it since Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*. Others, many others—and we’ve gathered a long list of reviews and snippets here—cite it as an extraordinary achievement. It’s been called appalling, horrifying, terrifying, yet, as one reviewer said, “The book’s ultimate effect is liberating and uplifting in the way great fiction often is when it looks at a bleak truth without blinking.” Another phrase comes to mind—about the book having the terrible ring of truth—not for the phrase itself but because it comes from a review in *The Jerusalem Post*, in Israel. One might think a novelist writing about The Holocaust would be Jewish, though obviously he needn’t be. It was a world, a human, holocaust, and people were in the camps for many reasons, such as their races, their political views—on the political side, Tadeusz Borowski comes to mind. Still I wonder, what’s an American WASP writer, of another generation, relatively young, from rural upstate New York, who went west to Iowa and Hawai‘i, doing in Eastern Europe during World War II?

MACMILLAN Maybe the answer is that I was always interested in World War II because of its enormity and because it’s a war of our century. And I was always interested in philosophical literature because it raised elemental questions—who are we, as creatures I mean, and so on. World War II is a war that was going on when I was born, and it is probably the most frightening extended event in history, in terms of its implications relating to who we are.

MĀNOA But why here, of all places, in Hawai‘i? Not that you have to write about the locale you’re living in, or that there haven’t been plenty of outstanding writers here writing on subjects of all kinds in Hawai‘i, poets like W. S. Merwin, the biographer Leon Edel, O. A. Bushnell, the historical novelist, people who are living here now. Or people who have lived here, and have written about Hawai‘i—James Jones, James Michener, Maxine Hong Kingston—for that matter Robert Louis Stevenson, Melville, Twain. Still, it seems an odd conjunction.

MACMILLAN I think Hawai‘i’s a great place to raise kids, I like the ocean, all that. What I do with my typewriter has always been a separate thing. I’ll probably always write rural upstate New York cows and chainsaws stories, as I call them, and probably more on World War II, and I would guess that I would be doing that even if I had chosen to live in Peoria instead of Hawai‘i.

MĀNOA Cows and chainsaws. I should underscore the humor in that, and add that many of the stories in your first book, *Light and Power* (which was selected by Richard Yates for the Associated Writing Programs Short Fiction Award and subsequently published by the University of Missouri Press, 1980) are very tough stories, yet they’re funny, too, sometimes. And they’re contemporary, they have nothing to do with World War II. It’s true that the characters are often, though not always, faced with extreme circumstances. But chainsaws reminds me of that movie, what was the title? *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, something like that. Yours are not that at all. For comparison I think at the moment of Richard Ford’s writing—powerful, richly detailed stories, closely observed, often involving a loner, or at least someone forced by circumstance to act on his own. In “The Drive” the youth’s grandfather dies while they’re herding cattle, just the two of them, in a blizzard. In “Rat’s Eye,” you’ve got a profound inner journey, though there’s plenty going on in the external events, which are beautifully realized. There was one Hawai‘i story in that book, but most were set in upstate New York, where you grew up. Which leads to a usual interview question, about the author’s early life, except in this case it’s an unusual life. As I understand it, your mother died when you were young, and your father more or less left you and your brothers to raise each other. You were just kids, really. And you were isolated, for years, sometimes in bitter cold winters, on that upstate New York farm, without heat sometimes, without even electrical power. It was a hard life, in some ways primitive, in which you had to do everything for yourselves. But to come around to the question, how has that informed your writing?

MACMILLAN Somebody said that writers always return to writing about what happened to them in their formative years, or the early years where their basic visions about things are formulated. My brothers and I were alone, and too far away from civilization to get that much help from it—so my experience was one of extremes. One time years later I told a friend that he had to read Hamsun’s *Hunger*. The book raised the hair on my head. It is about hunger and all the psychological and physical things that go with it. My friend didn’t think much of the book. I still think it’s a good

book, because everything in it seems to me to corroborate my own experience. And here's another favorite memory of mine: we had an old malfunctioning woodburning furnace and never enough wood. Constant air pollution in all the rooms and near zero temperatures in our bedrooms in the morning. To give you an idea of how cold it can get up there, one of our cats went to sleep on top of the warm furnace one night, and in the morning I went down to try to start another fire and found him still rolled up there on the furnace, frozen hard as a rock. After that my brother and I got spooked and slept on the kitchen floor near the woodstove, which worked a little better. So I write stories and novels in which characters are faced with various kinds of extremes—I nail them to the wall. I bend them till they either break or survive. Of course I mean sometimes mentally, sometimes physically, sometimes combinations of both . . .

MĀNOA Obviously you did go on to college. And later went on to Iowa to take an M.F.A. You got to know Kurt Vonnegut there, I think. Who else was an influence there?

MACMILLAN At Iowa I got a great deal out of studying with Verlin Cassill, whom I believe is probably the best creative writing teacher there is, or was—he's retired now. And, right, I also studied with Kurt Vonnegut, whose advice was more on the practical side, but nevertheless was valuable to me.

MĀNOA At that time you were still writing stories set in upstate New York, or that region. And for that matter still are . . .

MACMILLAN [smiles] I never left New York.

MĀNOA What I'm trying to get at is there's both an obvious connection here, and a break in it—though maybe the obvious isn't so obvious. I take it the *Light and Power* stories aren't autobiographical in a strict sense. As Tim O'Brien said here recently, some of his autobiographical stories are made up whole cloth. But here's the break, the interesting thing: a writer struggles out of adversity, begins to succeed in his profession, has a good job for many years, leads the good-if-not-affluent middle-class life, is happily married, his wife and he raising a family, two daughters, in circumstances about as far from his early life as possible, in Hawai'i—and as I said, in that first book, *Light and Power*, there's a Hawai'i story. You might have continued in that direction. Instead you went beyond either Hawai'i or New York and plunged into the barbarities of Eastern Europe. How did that happen? You said before you had an interest in the War, but of course so do a lot of other people, in a general way, and it seems a tremendous leap for a writer from your background. Exactly how did you get started with this?

MACMILLAN The World War II subject is one of those “as luck would have it” things. In the middle seventies Bob Onopa and Elliot Anderson ran *TriQuarterly*, which was the best literary magazine of that decade. Bob asked me if I had ever written

anything around three pages, what he called a “minute story.” I think I said, “Of course not,” as if that would be the type of story a serious writer would avoid. The average length of my short stories then was twenty to twenty-five pages. But I figured what the hell, and one weekend wrote three of them, and the first thing that came to mind were images from World War II—like a lot of kids who were born when I was, I was brought up on grainy documentaries about that war, and the visual imagery of it was very strong in my memory. I realized how much I liked these little stories—after all I could set my three typed pages on the desk and see the whole thing. Anyway *Tri-Quarterly* took two of them and the *Pushcart Prize* reprinted one of them a year later. That was a lot of mileage for a weekend’s work, and so I wrote more, again about World War II, and sold more. Anybody who writes knows how tough it is to get stuff published, and here I found myself in a kind of hotcake situation. I’d write them, they’d sell. I guess I realized that it was a book around 1980, and found the title [*Proud Monster*] around that time.

MĀNOA The title’s from a Goya sketch or drawing? One of those depicting the horrors or war, around the time of the Napoleonic campaign . . .

MACMILLAN *Proud Monster*, or *Fiero Monstruo*, is the title of the 81st etching from Goya’s “Disasters of War.”

MĀNOA A little while ago you said you were always interested in philosophical literature because it raises elemental questions. There are crucial questions, in your work—how we can live, *why* we can live, in the face of brutality; or how such things, some of the atrocities you’ve written about, can happen. And the answers, or the grounds of those questions at any rate, appear not in some grand romantic drama, the strategic sweep of war, etc., so much as in real and particular situations—there’s a great deal of research in the novel—and with ordinary though sometimes remarkable people. Individually they are faced with questions that are still very much in the world now, with genocide going on in Africa and elsewhere. The killing in Sri Lanka, Latin America. In this morning’s newspaper there was a report that the Russians are now documenting that Stalin killed twenty or twenty-one million of his own people. Recently, there was the holocaust in Cambodia, and in the South China Sea the slaughter of the Vietnamese boat people. We have to think of our own past, too, with Native Americans, and the continuation of that into the present, and on and on. Maybe I’m raising far too much here. But I want to try to bring your work into a universal context, to see how it cuts across cultures, and to try to get at the essential ideas of your work. To get at the heart of what you’ve been discovering . . .

MACMILLAN One of the main ideas in *Orbit of Darkness* is the idea of absolute freedom (more or less an existential term) manifested in an extreme of brutal self-indulgence—the Nazis at their worst. In the book it repeatedly clashes with an absolute freedom achieved by those who go in the opposite direction toward absolute selflessness, or self-renunciation. The character in “The Smallest Circle” discovers this extreme,

and his heroic selflessness—maybe I shouldn't say that, I shouldn't get into that—since you said this interview would go before the story. Another character, sprinkled throughout the book in the shorter pieces between these stories, is Maximillian Kolbe (who was real), who volunteered to die in a man's place in a starvation cell. He was described, in reality, as being a “traumatic shock” to his Nazi jailers at Auschwitz. Kolbe was a Franciscan priest—but I use him more as a philosophical example. I think the Nazis knew that no people were more dangerous to them than those who had given up expectations of survival and had accepted their own deaths, thus releasing them to clash freely with their philosophical opposites. But that's getting to sound kind of pompously abstract, sorry . . .

MĀNOA But we can be particular about the story in *Mānoa*. By the way, we should probably add that not all the stories, the sections, are about the death camps—you've also got the partisans, farm people, city people in Germany, in Poland especially, Russia, too. But “The Smallest Circle” is somewhat unusual in that this time it's the Germans who are the victims, the ones in the extremest circumstance. Though I wouldn't want to be a Russian guard, either, in this story. How does “The Smallest Circle” relate to the novel overall? And, although I don't want to spoil it for our readers, what can we make of the startling vision—*miracle*—suddenly sawed out of a tree?

MACMILLAN The soldier Fenske is a good man who instinctively puts others ahead of himself. When he becomes selfless to the extreme, the Russians become afraid of him, in the same way the Nazis were afraid of Kolbe, in fact could not even stand to have him look at them. About the image Fenske finds in the wood—it is one of those curious gifts of chance that sustain the hope of even the most miserable, and also verify the Russians' fear and superstition.

MĀNOA Our idea of an interview like this, that is, one that introduces a story, is that the reader shouldn't have to turn the page more than twice before getting to the story itself. So let me ask just one more question. Again a usual but in this case intriguing one: where do you go from here? This is a terrible but rich vein you've struck in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, in earlier work you've gone to another world altogether, the future, as you did in that classic shorter novel of yours, *Blakely's Ark*.

MACMILLAN I am doing research for another novel set during World War II, this time at Treblinka, a death camp in Poland that lasted only one year and is alleged to have killed anywhere from seven hundred thousand to a million two hundred thousand people. Of course I continue to write cows and chainsaws stories, maybe later a cows and chainsaws novel.