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A Visit with Dame Iris Murdoch

by John Walsdorf, II

Several weeks ago, I learned via his father that John Walsdorf had conducted an interview with Iris Murdoch. We are lucky that he decided to share his experience with us! — KS

I arrived on a misty, overcast noon-time Monday in March of this year. Coming up the overgrown pathway to the house I was a bundle of nerves. I was ten minutes early but I knocked on the door anyway. Dame Iris Murdoch opened the door and I entered. Her hair was longer and covered her face to a greater extent than in most of the pictures on her dust jackets. It gave her a more youthful appearance than her chronological age would suggest. She was comfortably dressed in an oversized sweater of crimson and off-white with gray cotton slacks. The house was absolutely cluttered with books, papers and other assorted items scattered throughout. We sat in comfortable chairs by the warm electric fireplace, with a wonderful large green glass serving plate containing rounded black sea stones in front of us, and talked. I kept meaning to look down at her shoes because of a suggestion by a colleague that "she buys sensible shoes at Marks and Spencer;" but I was too captivated by her words.

Dame Jean Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin, Ireland to parents of Northern Irish decent in 1919. Her father was a civil servant and her mother was training to be an opera singer when the two met. Dame Murdoch's father wanted her to follow in his footsteps as a civil servant and during the Second World War she did work for the civil service in London at Whitehall in the Treasury Department. She then left this at the end of the War to pursue humanitarian aid work for people displaced by the ravages of the War. She went to Brussels and then to Austria in this capacity with the United Nations and said she had been tempted to make humanitarian work her life as there was something very gratifying in helping people in so much need.

It was in Austria after the war that Dame Murdoch had access to reading materials again (because of the wartime limitations on paper, books were not readily available in Europe during the Second World War). She wanted to read philosophy and the first book that she

came into contact with was one by Sartre. She said she was very happy to have such a large and wonderful book to read again.

After we spent some time getting to know each other, she asked me if I had any questions for her. I had first developed an interest in her writing when I was looking to pick up some extra credits at the University of Oregon. At the time, I was waiting to be admitted into the Business School when I noticed a special small group seminar taught by a philosophy professor from whom I had previously taken a class. In the description I noticed the author being studied was listed as being from Oxford, a place my father had often been and talked about in the course of his employment with Blackwell booksellers. I decided to sign up for the course and thus my introduction to Dame Iris Murdoch. That term we only read about four of her novels, but when summer vacation arrived, I hurried down for a local book store and bought several other of her novels. I could have spoken with her now all day about the depth of her books and particular characters but I chose to keep the conversation on a more general level. [Note: Dame Iris Murdoch is the author of 25 novels, 5 plays, 5 works of philosophy, and one book of poetry.]

The first thing we spoke about was religion. Spirituality and religion always seem to play important parts in the works of Dame Murdoch and I was curious about her personal views. I mentioned that I was unsure about religion in my own life, and we agreed that a common human theme currently is that people are searching for spirituality in their lives. She feels that the way of the future will be in the broader and more open religions of the East such as the Buddhist and Hindu religions. Christianity Dame Murdoch accepts, but not as a whole. She does not believe in the Trinity, an afterlife, or in the doctrines of Christianity, but does believe in the spirituality within the religion. She held up the Christian massacres in the name of religion as examples of where unthinking, blind faith can lead one. This led us to talk about the influences of religions and cults in

America as opposed to those in England, on the recent induction of women priests into the Church of England (she was a strong supporter of this, but not being in the Church of England, she could not take too active a role) and about gay rights

which she strongly supports.

Coming from a literary background, I have tried my hand at writing and found that it can be hard work. I next asked Dame Murdoch about her own writing technique. She said that she develops the whole of a novel in an outlined form first, in a very carefully planned out frame. It takes about as much time to do this frame as it does filling it in for the final work. She writes the story on the right side of working journals and makes notes and changes on the left hand side. This way she can make note of interesting background material but it does not necessarily get incorporated into the actual work. When she works on her frames, "ideas come to her like little birds" as she goes about her day. Dame Murdoch does not write on a computer, she says she hates them, but does write with a Mont Blanc fountain pen.

We spoke of her background as it relates to her writing and I was surprised to learn that she feels that she is an Irish writer with Irish ties rather than an English one, even though she has spent most of her life in England. Having visited Dublin and seen how much they thrive on their heritage of famous writers, I was also surprised that Dame Murdoch does not, yet, seem to be embraced among them.

We spoke of her latest book (*The Green Knight*), and I mentioned that the reviews that I had read had been mixed. She said that she never reads her critical reviews unless they are forced on her by other people. We spoke about Oxford. She likes Oxford very much and thinks it is a special place, but she would not write directly about the Oxford college life/place because it is too personal for her. I have trouble with names in my writing, so I asked her about her names. She said she keeps lists and books of names for characters in her novels and

continued on page 70

Publisher's Profile

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Number of employees worldwide: 275
1994 estimated number of books to be published: 400
In-print titles: 7,000

In 1992, Academic Press celebrated its 50th anniversary as one of the world's leading scientific publishers. With publishing centers in San Diego, California, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, Academic Press collectively publishes approximately 190 scholarly journals and 400 new books per year; its backlist encompasses over 7,000 titles, some of which appeared as long ago as 1943.

Academic Press was founded in 1942 as the New York counterpart of Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft in Leipzig. The company soon instituted a series of advances in specific sciences, published primary information journals and eventually branched out into textbooks. The first journals published by AP, **Archives of Biochemistry and Biophysics** and **The Journal of Colloid and Interface Science**, are still important parts of today's program. Early book serial programs, such as **Vitamins and Hormones**, are still alive and well today. **Methods in Enzymology**, AP's foremost book serial appeared in 1955; close to 250 volumes have been published to date. The textbook division was established in 1961; its first book was **Laboratory Studies in General Chemistry**.

Academic Press is now part of Harcourt Brace and Company. In 1981, the Journal Division moved from New York to San Diego, followed by the Book Department in 1987. In recent years AP has begun to offer its products in a variety of media. CD-ROM versions of key encyclopedias and long-standing serials will soon be available. Bulletin boards and other online services are being used to promote AP titles.

In the spring of 1993, Academic Press started a new imprint: AP Professional. This is a list of professional and reference computer books which provide computer professionals with better access to the tools of their trade. Some 40 APP titles have been released, including such notables as Luther, **Authoring Interactive Media**, and Weiskamp, **The Borland C++ 4.0 Primer**. ☞

Dame Iris Murdoch

continued from page 68

as she develops the outlines of the characters, the names become evident for them. Getting to know and like one's characters, letting them tell you who they are so that by the end of the novel you are very attracted to them is very important, she says. I asked about her inspirations and how much she draws from her personal life. She does keep a journal/diary that goes back before the war and she keeps meaning to destroy it before she dies(!). She is currently working on a new novel, but says it is in the first very rough stages. Her most important piece of advice to an au-

thor was to "give writing time."

Finally, I asked Dame Murdoch about the past productions, or future possibility, of her works in forms other than novels. She has written "five or six" plays but does not particularly like doing them. She has done them mainly for actor friends who have convinced her to do them. She has trouble with plays because she doesn't love the stage and this is a necessity for her in writing good drama. The one she did with **J.B. Priestly** ("A Severed Head") she did enjoy, though. I had once seen an old paperback copy of **A Severed Head** that boasted "Now a Columbia Picture," but had never found out anything more about

it. I asked Dame Murdoch about it, but she did not remember distinctly any of her works being made into movies or television shows. She said they could have been, especially since she does not own a television. "This is one of the only households in England that does not, I am sure," she said.

At this point I felt as if I had taken up enough time with this great author and said my thanks and goodbyes. It was only later, when I was talking with other literary people of Oxford, who told me that Dame Murdoch did not make many public appearances and very few in town, that I realized what a wonderful and unique experience this had been. ☞