

River Before Me

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In his book The Art of Writing Fiction, the novelist Andrew Cowan provides a list of twenty-odd questions which he suggests as a prompt for finding the surprises in characters. As somebody who asks questions for a living, his method slightly blew my mind. As a journalist, the best moments in “real life” come when your interviews go precisely none of the places you want or expect them to. Cowan’s method lets me enjoy those moments in the “fake life” of fiction. My novel Can You Hear Me was written in response to all the different ways that notion of “fake life” can be understood. The novel attempts to map the holes that are everywhere in the written lives of enigmatic Irish blues guitarist Rory Gallagher. By “faking” his voice, I try to cut through the white noise of his stage persona and isolate some kind of true frequency concerning the operation of trauma, pain, and regret within a life, setting Gallagher off in search of the real, warm kernels of consolation enwrapped by the fakeries of Robert Altman’s adaptation of The Long Goodbye.

Best train trip we had was out of Tokyo. There’s an English garden just outside Shinjuku Gyoen. Visited there when we were in Tokyo — ‘77, it would have been, when we played the Budokan. I barely ever travel alone, even within a tour stop. There’s always either Donie or the band or both. If we’re on tour, there’ll be a fixer with us, especially in Japan or Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, where the lingo would be more complex, and where your presence is more of an oddity, meaning you have people wanting to really show you a place. Our lad that day in Shinjuku was a young fella from a record-shop. Hippie-long hair, not a tangle at all, wee tache, no tangles at all. I’d say Yer Man was jealous and in fairness who wouldn’t be, especially if you were in the nick he was in. Retted hair, he always had, no matter how clean he was, if ever. Gerry was jealous, too — he’d be big into his clothes, our Gerry, and the lad giving us the tour had a decent tan leather jacket and bell-bottoms, and even though it’d have been wintry and mucky enough there not a stain touched the hem. His English had an American accent, very impressive. Gerry liked his trainers, these soft sort of trainers like they have there — no, not Adidas, similar, though, probably nicer, smoother and tighter fitting. Can’t get them anywhere else. Hm? Oh, yeah, the garden. Blasted white columns of trees, and a curve of firs against the blank sky, like writing I couldn’t read. Absolutely class. In Zen, apparently — this is what the young fella told us — ‘sky’ and ‘emptiness’ are the same word. I know it’s typical European to read too much into things you hear out foreign or whatever but to go in that double meaning within a word from this idea that heaven was where the sky was to heaven being an emptiness, a wanting of nothing at all, well, I don’t know. It seemed an exit from a whole bunch of sad notions, all at once like. And you can laugh at what I’m about to say if you want to, but detectives, noir films, all yokes like that, they all say something like the closest thing to peace is wanting nothing at all. The loneliness of the heroes, I suppose. There’s something indestructible in them. Way an empty highway looks on-screen, the broken white line curving through nothing and nowhere past nobody else but you, it’s a picture of life on the road — hotel to hotel, venue to venue, city to city — but it’s a picture of where we’re all at, really, like. Same lonesome highway that we all must travel. That’s a quote, isn’t it? Well. Alright. Maybe it just sounds like a line from someplace, I don’t know. But the loneliness of it sits as warm and comfy as a favourite denim jacket. Way an Alain Delon

character looks in a film, there's a philosophical ideal in it somewhere for me, a stoicism, a Zen, whatever you want to call it. The whole mood of that kind of a film has an almost cathedral peace to it, whatever about the gunshots and the intrigues and all the rest of it. And *The Long Goodbye* was part of that, big time. After I see a good one I will be seeing scenes of it in my head behind my eyes for days, weeks. But that film's been playing behind my eyes since I saw it. Like, all's anyone is in *The Long Goodbye* is the things that they want, right, and the more they want the more chippy and nasty and cruel they are — Marty Augustine breaking a Coke bottle on a girl because he wants dosh, or Terry Lennox killing his wife because he wants a quiet life with someone else's wife, and shafting his pal to make it happen. The novelist fella turning into a monster because he's frustrated about his talent drying up. And that's why Elliott Gould's character's so much stronger than everybody else. Because he doesn't really want anything. Not for terrible long, anyway. Second he wants something he winds up with egg on his face. What? Oh. Yeah. Or muck, that's right. Every time something bad happens, he shrugs like as if to say 'You got me there!' and gives a fish-hook smile and says, 'That's OK with me.' The hippies next door jump on him with a favour because they're too high to go to the shop, and, even though he's stressed out because his cat woke him and he's off to placate the cat, he just does his shrug, does his smile, and says: 'That's OK with me.' When he turns down a spiked brownie and the hippie won't leave him alone, he huffs out smoke and says, 'That's OK with me.' When the cat turns his nose up at the wrong brand of food, and pegs it out of there, yowling, past the 'El Porto del Gato' sign written on a torn-off chunk of cardboard, and runs off, never to be seen again — another smile, another shrug. 'That's OK with me.' When he hears Nina Van Pallandt's voice on the phone and feels him slide into something like love for her, and knows he's sliding into a trap just by listening: 'That's OK with me.' Shooed out by nurses from the retirement home where the novelist's been kidnapped: 'That's OK with me.' When Nina Van Pallandt towers over him, hollering, tugging his beard, fixing to lamp him: 'That's OK with me.' When he discovers Nina Van Pallandt has done a runner to Mexico, taking part of his heart with her, he curls his lip, bobs his head side to side like he's measuring up the weight of the information: 'And that's OK with me.' It's the whole film in miniature, really, tracking that line through the film, but it's more than that, it's a whole approach to things, that line. He gets messed around by his cat, he gets messed around by a girl, he gets messed around by the girl's husband, he gets messed around by the people who kidnapped the girl's husband, he gets messed around by the man that the girl wants to run off with. And at the end of it? Yeah, exactly. It's all OK with him. The more he loses, the lighter he gets, the freer he gets, the closer to happy he gets. Nothing could break you, if you could only live that way.