

Paula Romo-Mayor*

Rachel Seiffert: An Interview with Paula Romo-Mayor

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Rachel Agnes Seiffert was born in Oxford (England) in 1971 to Gretchen and Leslie Seiffert, of German and Australian origins respectively. Her father was a scholarship boy from Sydney's working-class suburbs who studied German linguistics in Europe and became a reputed scholar in Britain. Her mother was born in Hamburg to a Nazi family and settled in Oxford where she worked as a teacher. Seiffert's condition as the granddaughter of a *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and later *Waffen SS* doctor in the Eastern Front, and a social worker in the Nazi Party, makes her a member of what might be called the third-generation descendants of Nazis who resort to literature in an attempt to elaborate and respond to their own traumatic inheritance as well as to acknowledge their implication in the Holocaust. Her complex family background and her education in a multicultural household within cosmopolitan Britain granted her a broad transhistorical awareness. Through her fiction, Seiffert explores how unresolved histories originating in the twentieth century still stir different collective and personal consciences. This evokes the necessity for them to become engaged in conversation with one another in order to address the challenges emerging in our globalised present.

Seiffert majored in Film and Theatre at the University of Bristol and worked in the film business for several years. In 2000, she took MLitt studies in Creative Writing at Glasgow University, a course throughout which she started to work on what would become her first publication, *The Dark Room* (2001). The book is a tripartite novel that delves into the impact and legacy of the Third Reich in German memory through the stories of three ordinary non-Jewish Germans belonging to different generations. "Helmut" follows a disabled boy who longs to be integrated into the Germany of the 1930s and becomes a photographer, witnessing and even capturing with his camera instances of Nazi injustices and violence without intervening. "Lore" tells the story of a teenager who travels with her younger siblings from Bavaria to Hamburg in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War while trying to make sense of her parents' participation in Nazi crimes. In "Micha", a thirty-year-old teacher attempts to discover the extent of his grandfather's involvement in

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the Nazi oppression of Jews in Belarus. Seiffert's second book, *Field Study* (2004), is a short-story collection that calls forth the need for human connection. The narratives explore themes of guilt, love, solidarity and responsibility, and are set in various settings ranging from the Scottish seashore or an English beach town to post-Communist Eastern Europe and East Germany. In 2003, Seiffert enrolled in the Doctoral Programme on Creative Writing offered by the University of Glasgow and started writing her PhD thesis. The product of her doctoral studies was her second novel, *Afterwards* (2007), which recounts the stories of David and Joseph, two ex-servicemen who attempt to come to terms with their traumas years after their participation with the British Army in the suppression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952–1960) and The Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968–1998) respectively. Seiffert also delves into the grim legacy of the Anglo-Irish conflict and The Troubles in *The Walk Home* (2014). In it, the members of a Glaswegian working-class family with Irish roots remain trapped in the trauma of dispossession and exacerbated Protestant sectarian practices. In her latest published novel, *A Boy in Winter* (2017), Seiffert returns to the Second World War and the Holocaust and follows a set of Jewish, German and Ukrainian characters as they fend for themselves during the Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941.

More recently, Seiffert has collaborated in the *Refugee Tales* series with “The Waiting Man’s Tale”. The tale was published in the fourth anthology of stories in 2021. In it, Seiffert tells the real story of G, a Ghanaian man who came as a young boy to London in search of a better life and is made to undergo Home Office detention until the government could decide whether he could stay in England or not. In March 2023, her short story “Fury”, a fictionalised account of the true story of a Jewish woman in Poland during the Second World War, was published in the anthology *Furies: Stories of the Wicked, Wild and Untamed*. Her new novel, *Once the Deed is Done*, is expected to be released in early 2024 and follows in the wake of *The Dark Room* and *A Boy in Winter*, as it revolves around the Holocaust. The book is set in 1945 in a small town that has a labour camp on its outskirts and relates the experiences of both local and refugee children.

Her success as a writer is evident from the numerous nominations and literary prizes she has received ever since she started publishing. Her first work, *The Dark Room*, is by far the most widely acclaimed by critics. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the *Guardian* First Book Award in 2001 and received the *LA Times* Prize for First Fiction and a Betty Trask Award in 2002. The story of Lore was used as a basis by Cate Shortland and Robin Mukherjee for the production of a homonymous film in 2012. Seiffert's short story “Field Study”, which gives its title to her 2004 anthology, was turned into a short film in 2014 that was nominated for Best Short Film in the 28th European Film Awards. “The Crossing”, also published in *Field Study*, won the International PEN/David TK Wong short story prize in 2001,

and her novels *Afterwards* and *The Walk Home* were longlisted for the Orange/Bailey's Prize for Fiction (now Women's Prize for Fiction), in 2007 and 2015 respectively. In 2003, Seiffert was proclaimed one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists and, in 2011, she received the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her most recent novel, *A Boy in Winter*, achieved remarkable international recognition within a few months after its release, appearing in *The New York Times's* Notable Books List for 2017. In 2018, it obtained the Honor Book Award for Jewish Fiction from the US Association of Jewish Libraries. The novel was also nominated Book of the Year by *The Times* in 2017, longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018 and shortlisted for the International DUBLIN Literary Award in 2019. Seiffert's fictions have been translated into eighteen languages, which is proof of their global reach.

This interview, conducted on September 13, 2021, via *Zoom*, covers a range of topics, including Seiffert's career, her writing process and style, her work and insights, the stories and experiences that have inspired her literature and her literary influences. It also focuses on her choice of topics in her fiction, such as memory, history, (transgenerational) trauma, guilt and responsibility.

Paula Romo-Mayor: I would like to begin our interview by asking you about your writing process. I am interested in how it begins. Do you act on impulse and start writing as soon as you have a spontaneous idea or image you wish to develop, or do you take a more reflective approach and decide in advance the main topic and certain aspects of each new fiction, including the relationship between meaning and form?

Rachel Seiffert: When you are writing a short story, you can be very spontaneous and it can revolve around an image, a moment, or even something that you just read. It does not necessarily have to be something you are reading for the current work in progress but an occurrence that pierces you, or the story of how that kind of person was in this kind of situation and so you proceed from there. With a novel, it can often be a bit more complex because the idea has to have the weight to carry a novel. So, sometimes it is more sort of a coalescing of ideas.

Yet, having said that, *A Boy in Winter*, for example, came out of a spontaneous urge to write and unfolded from that initial idea. I was writing another novel with which I was really struggling and for which I still have not found the right form. The historian who was helping me at the time, Dr Beate Meyer from the University of Hamburg, recommended to me a collection of testimonies about German and Dutch people who resisted the Nazis entitled *Zivilcourage*. They were members of the clergy, soldiers, all sorts of people, and one of these people was an engineer called Willi Ahrem, on whom I based Otto Pohl. I read his testimony and it was very much like Pohl's part of the opening of *A Boy in Winter*, where he is stationed behind the

lines. He is not somebody who particularly wants to be there but he prefers that to being at the front. Ahrem described waking up one morning in a Ukrainian town called Nemirov and seeing the Jews of the town being rounded up. The testimony went on to describe how his response to that was to have a nervous breakdown. He described how he had stayed in his room for a number of days afterwards, unable to act or to know what to do. But then, over the course of the following year, still stationed there, he managed to save a few Jewish citizens from being massacred with the help of some Ukrainians and send them to a ghetto. Life was not particularly great in this ghetto, but these Jews survived the war. To me, that person in that situation was like a light bulb, like fire in my head. He was somebody who had made the conscious decision that he would not be part of the war and that he would find a way around it, somebody who found himself without knowing what to do in a place where there was a bigger crime happening.

I just wanted to write the immediacy of that. And so I did. I spontaneously wrote how Pohl witnesses the round-up and then spots the Jewish schoolmaster. And so, the schoolmaster appeared as I was writing. Then, I started writing things about the schoolmaster. And then, in the schoolmaster's classroom, there was this boy called Yankel and then so Yankel appeared. And all these things started spinning off and there I found that what I thought it was going to be the short story that would be a break from this longer novel which was breaking my head turned into something bigger.

P: So, it was about all these characters becoming entangled with each other...

RS: Yes. I was writing and all these characters started coming out into each other's stories. They did not all fall onto the page as they are now. Some of them are amalgamations of some of the early writing that I did... or I discarded people along the way and so on. But basically, I ended up with Pohl, Yasia, Yankel, Ephraim and Mykola. To me, they were the most useful vantage points to be looking from for the reader. They presented the most interesting contrasts and ways for their stories to cross over and to think about who is good in this situation, what good can be done in this situation and why people are acting as they are.

P: Yes, in fact, it is very interesting how you manage to create a scope of action for all these characters and to convey the idea that there are consequences if they act while perceiving it broader than it is, as is the case of Otto Pohl... I was sad not to be allowed to follow his storyline anymore, and then devastated when this SS officer, Arnold, confirms to the reader that Pohl has been somehow punished. The same happened to me with Ephraim, whose storyline is also abruptly cut after the massacre.

RS: Yes, that decision to break with characters as if they sort of fell away came from my writing of the schoolmaster. Very early in the book, he arrives in the hall where

all the Jewish people have been rounded up and he gets coshed on the head. At that moment I thought: “oh, my writing did that!” [laughter] That was what my brain came up with at that point. The first thing that came to mind was: “That’s awful!”. But then I also thought: “Well, but that’s what actually happened”. Back then, people were just cut off and I thought that was a way of replicating a little bit of that experience for the reader, when one is just gone but life goes on. When you give a character to a reader, especially if you give them early on in the book, there is an expectation that this is the person we are going to be with throughout the entire story. There is first the declaration of their narration but, under such circumstances, this person could be suddenly gone, and with him/her so would be their narration.

P: Oh, yes. Indeed, I would like to comment on something that I really enjoyed and it is that, because we see the events from the gaze of a character, sometimes we witness the other characters as strangers. For example, when Pohl witnesses Yasia and the Jewish boys, he assumes that they are siblings; or when Mykola recognises townsfolk among the group of Jews who is to be executed, there is one particular character that reminds me of Ephraim because he is helping the schoolmaster. I really enjoyed that!

RS: Exactly [smile]. The reader is put in a position of knowing more than the characters in a way. I sort of allowed that you have accrued something as the reader that the characters have not, I guess.

P: And, going back to the heart of the question, on what your impulse to write is...

RS: Oh, yes. It is about a situation that presents itself as having moral consequences somehow. I think that is really important. The idea of making decisions and the fact that whether you act or not something is going to happen and you are going to be held responsible for it in some way or another. That is in *A Boy in Winter*. In *The Dark Room*, for example, it is more about how much you allow yourself to know or not to know and how much you are going to look. So, I would say it is a combination of character and idea. Sometimes they present themselves very quickly and can make very useful short stories. Other times, they present themselves much more slowly and you have to do a lot of writing before you arrive at it. But there is always some little moral spark, I guess, where the stakes are high enough to make a story. There are also times when you come up with something that you have already done [laughter]. And then you ask yourself: “Why do it again?”. So, then, things have to be discarded. That is also the reflective process that happens while you are writing. I always want to try and write something a bit new, to look at the Holocaust or the colonial past from a different angle or through an unexplored area.

P: With respect to your short stories in *Field Study*, I noticed that “The Crossing” and “Lore” from *The Dark Room* bear many similarities. For example, there is the experience of crossing a river in wartime conditions, the presence of motherly figures (Marta and Lore) taking care of four children, and the fundamental assistance of a stranger that is also a potential enemy. What is the particular relationship between them?

RS: Yes, they sort of... I was writing “Lore” at the same time. That was during my Master’s course. I do not write generally in chronological order. So, I will have ideas of the things that need to happen during the piece and then I will write those scenes, often without working out who the characters are, who is actually going to be in this book, or what kinds of things will happen. And so, this river crossing came from a story from my family, from an aunt of my mother’s who was a Red Cross nurse during the war. At the end of the war, she was in what is now the Czech Republic and had to get back to Germany. She was helped to cross a river by somebody whom she, in retrospect, was pretty sure was a camp survivor. I think she has always told the story as being: “Look, even though I was German, he helped me”. She was very grateful. It surprised her that he would do that. That was why it was told within the family. I stuck with this idea of somebody who would help you, but you do not know if they actually are going to... that sort of situation. I thought that would be something that Lore might come across with her siblings. So, I had this idea of that happening, but I could not find a place for it in the book at the time. I had this sort of scene that was forming but it was not going anywhere. So, I thought that it would work on its own as a short story.

At the time... It was during the 1990s and there were these wars in the Balkans. So, I came up with this idea of somebody who speaks the same language as you and has so many similarities with you, – that has, for example, grown up in the same country and maybe even in the same town as you – and then becomes your enemy. When this conflict happened, lines were drawn and somebody who was your neighbour last week could suddenly become a potential danger to you. And the other way around. So, I had that sort of conflict in mind when I changed it to be a mother and her children rather than Lore and her siblings. I also made other changes. The rescuer in “The Crossing” does not have the tattoo on his arm and his accent is different. And then, during that process, it became more solid to me as a scene, the point at which somebody turns and you suddenly realise something about them. So, when it came to putting it into “Lore”, it had developed and had its little turning points. This made me able to fit it into “Lore”, because there it functions as the point in her story when she starts trusting Thomas. In that scene, he does not just run away with the food. He comes back to help her and her siblings.

P: Yes. I remember the tension while she is trying to remember what exactly is in the bag that he is carrying to the other side of the river and she is considering that she might not see it again.

RS: Yes, so... It is because I had made it a short story and it had a little turning point in it that I was able to see how it could work in the narrative for “Lore”. George Saunders wrote this fantastic book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, and it is my Bible now. It is basically a masterclass in fiction and he talks about the need for things to escalate. He deals with short fiction mainly and how you have to have these escalations. And that strikes me now because it is exactly what I had managed to do with the short story. Turning the river crossing scene into a short story allowed it to serve as a catalyst for escalating the relationship between the characters. And so, that happened between Marta and the stranger in the story, but it could also happen between Lore and Thomas in the novella.

P: That makes a lot of sense, yes. Another issue I am interested in is the role that fiction plays as a vehicle for the expression of notions like trauma, guilt and shame and, subsequently, of direct and indirect forms of involvement in violence. Before becoming an author you were a film editor, why did you decide to start writing instead of making films?

RS: Well, I did not think about being a writer at all until I was well into my twenties. I wanted to be a film editor and then I thought that maybe I would be a filmmaker. But then I saw so many people writing scripts and then the scripts never got made. That is the thing about film. A film is not just a piece of writing but also filmmaking and actors and cameras and there is so much to getting a story into film form... But, you *can* just write. If you choose fiction as your medium, then you can just write. And even if only your mum ever reads it [*laughter*], it is still there. It is complete on its own terms. And also, I think that the film scripts that I wrote were more like short stories, basically. So, it was also just what happened. As well as the sort of conscious decision “well, I’m not going to write screenplays, I’m going to write fiction”, it was also the form, attracted or pretended, itself in my writing anyway.

P: And why did you choose fiction over other possible types of writing, such as autobiography and memoir, journalism or essays, to name the most frequently used by other writers? Why does fiction make more sense to you to explore these topics than any other genre?

RS: Yes, I think... It is not that I would never do a memoir or an essay. I am quite drawn actually to the idea of doing essays sometimes. But, it just feels too narrow somehow. And I feel that when you make a piece of fiction, you allow for more avenues for your reader.

P: It offers more possibilities.

RS: More possibilities, yes. And I say that and at the same time I can think of some great memoirs. I do not want to say that I have not got a great deal out of reading memoirs or essays or journalism, but somehow, for me, in the process of wanting to put an idea over the page, fiction just feels richer.

P: That is interesting. I can see that fiction holds a special place for you. Exploring the Holocaust and colonialism through it, your narratives unfold in very specific historical contexts and allude to events that actually took place in the past. I can imagine that historical documentation plays a fundamental role in your writing process. How do you gather these materials and how do you manage to incorporate them into your fiction in such a subtle way?

RS: Well, I read lots of history books about the Third Reich. It is also very interesting to see that there have been changes over the course of time. I mean, I have been a writer for half of my life, twenty-five years or so, and then scholarship of the Holocaust has moved on. I wrote my first book about it and ten years later, when I came back to thinking about writing more, the scholarship had moved on. And now it is moving on again. So, there is always more to read, but it is always also exciting to find new perspectives or new evidence coming to light.

You are asking what it is exactly that I do. So, for example, for the book I am currently writing I went to the Wiener Holocaust Library in London. They have access to the database in the Arolsen Archives, which, to put it bluntly, is like the most massive archive of Nazi paperwork. More specifically, it provides information about missing persons. So, if you want to know what happened to your ancestors during the Holocaust, most likely you will end up looking in the Arolsen Archives. And then the same goes for people who were non-Jewish forced workers in the Third Reich. There are millions and millions of files there, also in the process of being digitalised and being put in the public domain. There is a lot you can just get online now but while I was researching they were still in the Wiener Library. So I used to go there and look in a computer for the database with the help of the archivists and curators working there. There was a historian, Dan Stone, who was very generous with me. He had had three years of funded research in those archives, so he knew them really really well and he was very helpful with pointing me towards file numbers that were particularly useful. And then, one file would lead to another file which would lead to another file, and you end up sort of going down these little rabbit holes and warrens. It is all about looking for human stories, basically, and for those situations where there is that kind of person who did that kind of thing, and the surprise, and the clash of people, and the impossible questions, and people who come up against the impossible questions. And then, for a long time, you feel really overwhelmed but eventually things start to coalesce and circle around each other.

And then, at some point, you have to start writing. I would read forever if I could. I love the reading and I love the re-writing but the start of the writing, when you are doing the first pages, is hellish because it could be anything at that point and everything that comes out is pretty rubbish unfortunately. It is about managing the influx of information and reducing it to something more specific that contains the really interesting bits. You really have to feel sure that you have got that core. And then, for me, it is also about characters and about investing all of these ideas into humans and making them as human as possible.

P: And then this integration of historical landmarks into the narrative sometimes needs to be subtle because not all of your characters possess a historical consciousness.

RS: Yes. In a way, if I am writing about a character going through the 1930s in Berlin, like Helmut, then certain things just *have* to happen. Otherwise, he would not be living in Berlin at that time. And then you have to think of how they would experience it. They are not going to experience it as *Reichskristallnacht* because that would not have been the name for it at the time. You have to think of what he would have seen and what he would have known, what it is that the reader knows as well and what signals you can use that will show the reader that what the character is seeing is *Reichskristallnacht*. This way, I am allowing the reader to know a bit more than the character. I am assuming knowledge on the part of the reader. I think that is the safest way to do it, in a way, because then you have that feeling as a reader of being inside the character's head rather than being told something by the writer. That is always what I am trying to arrive at.

P: I think that you are very successful in doing that.

RS: [laughter] It does not always feel that way to me. But, hopefully, by the end, we get somewhere with it. It is the feeling of having it, when it has momentum, when you can start having faith and start thinking: "Okay, my readers are also going to feel this". And that is when it gets to be fun again. But yes... I think the research is also important because it has to rest on a really solid foundation. So, I also do the research because I want not just to define the ideas but also to know that what I am writing about accords with what scholars are saying as well. I need to feel that I am contributing with something to that conversation. At the same time, I believe that you cannot write about a subject, things that really happened to people, without being as respectful as you possibly can with the material. And so, knowing that I am getting the facts right and knowing that I also have got scholars who have got my back or are standing on my shoulders.... that feels really important because of the nature of the material that I am dealing with. A lot of the time there would be people who do not have a voice anymore and I have no way of giving voice to their version

of the events. So, you have to be really mindful of all of that, the ethics of all of it... As well as mining history for great stories, there has to be a sort of ethical framework to it too.

P: Indeed, that is an interesting perspective that scholars, including myself, take into account when analysing your work. Most of them interpret your decision to write about the Second World War and the Holocaust as a way to cope with your own family history. I presume you get asked this question a lot, but I wonder whether you agree with this interpretation.

RS: I do, in part, agree with it. The motivation to write about the Holocaust in particular comes from that place, definitely. But then there also has to be a broader purpose, because I am not writing for myself, I am writing for readers. So I have to think about it as being a useful contribution to a conversation. I do not just think I have to make sense of what my family did or my thinking, but also to consider that it may be or have been the situation of others as well and to broaden it out. And this speaks to one of your previous questions on why do this through fiction rather than biography. That is another reason why I do fiction. I had that feeling very strongly in *The Dark Room* and that is why I did it with three different Germans from very different families, because it broadened it and it meant it was not just about my family. Some of it was based on my family. But, it is not just my family and it is not just one German family. Indeed, there are three very different German families and, in a way, they make up in every German, so it broadens it somehow.

P: Could you give me some details of your family background?

RS: My German family... My grandfather was a doctor who joined the SA and then became a *Waffen* SS officer. His family was not particularly comfortable middle class, they were sort of rural middle class. His father had been a doctor before him, his brother was a doctor too. They had middle-class, professional education... But why did they believe in the Nazi cause? It was very common, particularly in that section of German society. That was the most Nazi section of German society somehow. That is where the highest membership of the Nazi Party was, that professional middle class. And I do not think it is just because the professions demanded Nazi Party membership. I think it pre-dates that. I think I am right in saying that. And, certainly, from my family's perspective, it was ideological.

And they also convinced my grandmother of it all. She was not necessarily from a home that would have believed in that kind of thing or would have been disposed to be thinking about the Nazis as being a good idea. The upper classes tended to think about the Nazis, speaking very generally, as being the alternative to the Communists. They thought: "If the Communists get in, we're going to lose all of our wealth. And since we've already lost so much, it's good to put in the Nazis". The

Nazis were kind of the *hoi polloi* and they were not particularly educated. They had funny ideas but the upper classes supported them basically because they thought that they were better than the Communists. So, that would be my grandmother's family's attitude. Before marrying my grandfather, she was told to vote the Nazis by her father and then, when she made this marriage, she adopted Nazism pretty whole-heartedly. I do not think there was any reluctance on her part either. She was Nazi enough that when the Americans came into Bavaria, into the village where she was staying with my mother and her siblings after the firebombing of Hamburg, she was interviewed by the forces that came in because they saw that she was running this mother-and-baby home, that she had a Party job and a Party role and so on. So, she was interviewed and she was deemed to be enough of an ideological problem that she had to be denazified. She had to be in captivity for two years. So that is somebody who definitely believed in it... It is not somebody who just did it because her husband said it was a good idea.

Among the stories told about her captivity, for example, there is this one where she and the other women going through denazification with her would sing "*Die Gedanken sind frei*", "our thoughts are free". These are stories that my grandmother told my mother. So, she sang these things and, even after she came back and had been through denazification, she saw fit to tell her daughter that she had sung those things. And not in a sort of... "oh-I-was-so-foolish" or "awful-me" way. They were stories saying: "This is how I got through it". So, yeah, they were... my grandparents were Nazis.

P: Something that struck me a lot was that the mainstream postwar attitude was to silence it all, but your mother did speak about it. And this was because of the influence of your godmother and your aunt...

RS: Yes. My aunt was... My family is slightly complicated because the person that I talk about as my grandmother is not my blood grandmother. She is my grandfather's second wife. My actual grandmother was my grandfather's first wife and they had one child, my mother. But my actual blood grandmother died when my mother was still an infant. And, so, my grandfather married again very quickly and my grandmother (whom I talk about as my grandmother) was a good friend, actually, of my actual grandmother. So, it all revolves around this very small Hamburg circle. My blood grandmother had come from the same kind of family: they had merchant interests in Africa, they did trade with China, they were tea merchants and so on. Again, that is very broadly speaking, but it is the same kind of person, the same kind of wealthy Hamburg merchant family. Those were the circles my grandfather was moving by that stage.

But, anyway, Tante Lily, whom I am talking about, was my blood grandmother's sister. There were all sorts of reasons for her to disapprove of my grandfather: his

alcoholism, maybe his re-marriage, but certainly his Nazism. She thought of herself as being in a very different kind of milieu, with different thinking. All of what I have said about her family's colonial past and their colonial involvement and the bloodiness of it stands, but I also am really grateful to her because she did this for my mum. She was this other influence for my mum. She was also very Christian and that is another thing that was... The Nazis were pagans and they made themselves an alternative religion. If you were a Christian, you know, like Otto Pohl in *A Boy in Winter*.... If you were Catholic particularly, then you had a sort of alternative to the Nazis and for my Tante Lily, her Christianity was another source of her disapproval of the Nazis. And those were all the sets of values that she brought onto my mum. Her influence was very important. When her parents were absent for years, this other influence came in at the same time as Germany's defeat and the influence of the British in Hamburg and the change in Germany, becoming West and East Germany, and the new governments taking over. All of those changes happened at the same time that my Tante Lily was having that influence on my mum.

Tante Lily is very important. And my godmother Agnes as well. All these different friends that my mum had at school and afterwards, who have had very different experiences of the Third Reich... Not that they spoke about it, funnily. They would not speak about it directly, but I think it is just that you are under a different set of influences, you have got different mindsets... Also, for example, my mum described going to Auschwitz as part of her continuing professional development. She went on a trip with fellow teachers to Auschwitz and when she came back, she talked to my great-uncle, my grandfather's brother, about it. And he, who had been a Nazi doctor, just like his brother, was very sceptical and he said: "The gas chambers... did you see the gas chambers, then?" She answered that she did not: "They were blown up. They were gone". And his reaction was: "Okay, then there is no proof, is there?". And you can see that, by that stage, when she was a young adult, my mother had very different attitudes, very different influences, and she had made that separation. It was through all those influences – Tante Lily, my godmother and her family, her education and the changing of Germany.

P: I appreciate you sharing that. Besides the Holocaust, some of your novels delve into other conflicts and historical periods. What drove you to write about the Mau Mau Uprising, the British-Irish conflict or the post-Communist era in Eastern Europe and East Germany?

RS: There are very obvious reasons in my family background to write about the Holocaust. But then, I think that because I have got that perspective on history, around German history, or on history in general, then I am also... Maybe, it sort of primes me to look at what other nations have done, what are the things in other nations that are sore spots, you know, that are unresolved. For Britain, for instance,

it is very much: the colonial period and Ireland. Those are the two... and many people actually would say the two are very closely related. Ireland was a colony of Britain. And so, they are not necessarily separate things. I am of German heritage but I did grow up in Britain. And, growing up in Britain, it was “Ireland, Ireland, Ireland, Ireland, Ireland” all the way. I can remember things like when the IRA started bombing the mainland, and there were suddenly no postboxes. You could not post any letters in Central London. You could not leave luggage in luggage compartments. Things like that just sort of changed. You were carrying on this sort of fabric of your day-to-day life the possibility that anger about the past, anger rooted in the past that is still about the present, could literally blow up on the street any given moment.

I can remember when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Back then, I was painting the kitchen in my Glasgow flat with my husband. And when this came on the radio, I found myself crying... of relief a bit. I felt really surprised about myself crying. I had not registered that that was a weight, but it was. And then, there is this prospect of... all of that tangle, all of that anger... that there is a possibility for it to not be a problem anymore. I mean, of course, it is not as simple as that but, at that point, that felt possible. That was such a relief. It really took me by surprise. And it shows how deep it goes, actually. I am not somebody who has ever been directly affected. Ever. I did not lose anybody. I remember when the Manchester bombing happened, my brother was studying in Manchester at the time. I was seized by that sort of worry, like: “Oh, my God. Is he okay?”. But I learned very quickly that he was okay, so it passed. That is the closest I have ever come to actually being personally affected by it. But, still, it is there.

P: Well, as you describe in *The Walk Home*, there still are all sorts of open wounds that can even travel transgenerationally in various forms...

RS: Living in Scotland, that is a thing... The reason to write *The Walk Home* was from living in Scotland and being surprised myself that these Walks happened and that there is some importance there. So I looked into it further and talked to people. I had a friend who worked on the housing estate that Stevie lives in, where he grows up until he becomes a build worker. At the time, I was also an arts worker, a cultural worker, doing community arts projects and I did little projects with her. I also talked to her about all the kids that she worked with and found out much more about the lives that you do not know about, that are lived in the fringes of the city that you live in, and how important this all still really is. And, all those connections to Ireland and to the Irish conflict and how it really has a massive material effect on people's lives... It should not really surprise us that people are so invested in it all even now when it still has such an effect on people's lives.

P: Yes, definitely. It is remarkable how that past continues to impact the present. In *Afterwards* you also build one of the storylines in Africa. Would you mind expanding on that?

RS: That meant... After writing about Germany, I made the conscious decision “I don’t want to write about Germany for a while”. It was not the writing about Germany, that was fine. It was the talking about it afterwards. I found that really, really difficult and I think that is partly because I was very reluctant at the time to say that it was about my family. I did not at the time... I used all sorts of ways of getting around it and I think that was exhausting, actually. In some ways, I am glad I did that because I think I was very young still. I was not even thirty yet and *The Dark Room* did get a lot of attention. It would have been very, very difficult to discuss things that are so close to the bone with that lack of experience in interviews and so on. On the other hand, I also felt it was all the time very close to exposing things and to being exposed.

So, back then, I just wanted to step back for a moment. But then, I could not just write about things that were easy, could I? [*laughter*]. It does not make a good book, in my opinion. So, again, I was drawn into the bits that are difficult. And then I thought: “Well, I’m British, so let’s write about Britain and let’s write about things in Britain that are difficult”. Then, it is Ireland and the colonial past. And those two things, I thought... In Britain, World War II looms large. We have this idea that *that* was “the War” and that when we are talking about war, that is what we are talking about. We even call it “the War”. And yet, *we* have been at war... There have been British soldiers in service, in conflicts, around the world every year, I think, apart from maybe 1968 or something like that. And there is some sort of national myth that we have not been involved in anything dirty. We were the ones that did the good thing and the right thing in the War. That is the full stop. And that was the thinking behind *Afterwards*, I guess. It is about getting to look at Britain and what the legacy of that is. If you are somebody who has been involved in something dirty, but you live in a country where that is not supposed to have happened... And so, there is this sort of silence. Both Joseph and David live with silence, don’t they? There is not a way to talk about it.

P: And, at the same time, you choose very complex paths to explore this because... Well, these characters are what I first described as perpetrators because they killed, but they performed duties within a context that allowed and legitimised that, which is war. But also, in the case of Joseph, he kills a man not out of an order but because he wants to save the life of his comrade, so it gets very difficult to analyse them from the ethical perspective. I mean, David seems to me... he wanted to go to war and that was exactly what he wanted to do and I find the character of Joseph very interesting because he becomes a soldier because he does not want to keep on studying, so he is unprepared. I think that, even though he is younger than David, the mental conse-

quences on him are greater than David's, not only because he has killed face-to-face but also because he was unprepared. So, it is all very intricate. You were saying that you do not like to write about easy things, that you like challenges, and so, when you build these characters, you also present them as challenges for the reader.

RS: Yes, absolutely. It is a bit like the way that we discuss and debate now: we want to be right and we want to say somebody else they are wrong. And it is... facile. I mean, that is ridiculous because people are complicated.

P: Certainly. Indeed, when I started reading your work I tended to think of your characters in black-and-white binary terms (victim-perpetrator) or also in triadic terms, including the bystander or the secondary witness. But their complexity constantly challenged my expectations. I then realised that your characters tend to inhabit a vast spectrum of involvement and complicity, an undefined and fluid area between the two antagonistic positions, what Primo Levi called the "gray zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Does this comparison make sense to you?

RS: Yes, absolutely. And I think that, you know... are they perpetrators? Yes, they are perpetrators most of the time. You know whom I am talking about. So, Mykola is a perpetrator and Micha's grandfather is a perpetrator. But then, what is your idea of a perpetrator? That they must be thoroughly corrupted? Evil? That they must have been primed to do this just because of their very nature and that there was no circumstance involved in it? The thing is that if Nazis were so easy to identify, then, we would have known [*laughter*]. We would have been able to identify them and say: "No, we don't want to be led by people like you because you're appalling. You're psychopaths". No human would go along with that. Only the worst of the worst would go along with that. But it is not as easy as that, that is the thing.

I tell stories about it because it could happen again unless we are alive to the idea that the people close to us or even ourselves might be complicit, might become complicit, might do things like this... might be fallible, like in the case of Otto Pohl. I have him so sure that he is going to do the best he can, and I want the reader to like him for being that kind of person, but then I also want the reader to say: "Oh, my God!". Even if you are *that* kind of person, then you can be in this kind of situation and you can unwittingly send people to their deaths, whether you act or you do not act. And you could be like Helmut... so easily. You might not think that about yourself, but you really could. And that is the idea about making people: using empathy to get people to like characters and to see them as humans and to empathise with them and then also see how easily they can form part of a crime. That is what happens. Like Mykola, you know. Mykola is a perpetrator who falls into it like so many fell into it. I mean, there were many Ukrainians who absolutely believed in the Nazi cause. There were Ukrainians who embraced it whole-heartedly and ideologically and so on, but then there were also many many many like Mykola.

P: Or, another example, Josef Kolesnik. He also becomes a perpetrator. This time out of revenge.

RS: Yes. There is one thing he says in the novel... I thought it was very interesting. I took this from an interview with a Ukrainian who had served with the SS. I remember him saying something like: "It was a lie that made sense". And then in the book I had Kolesnik say something like: "Even at the time I knew there was something wrong here, but I still did it". And that was what I thought was so interesting about this Ukrainian SS officer. He was so honest about that. I thought that was really, really a bit of a human insight that had not occurred to me before. You can have doubt and still do these terrible things. Humans are okay with that. It is actually harder to say "No, I'm not going to" than to do something really appalling. Murder is such a taboo and yet it is still easier to do that than to explore the doubt and to stand up against it. Also, the doubt makes you feel that you are not one of them. And I think that is a really important thing. It is like my Uncle Hans. He did not think of himself as a Nazi, but what did he do? He did not do anything that would have stopped anything. And he is not special in that way. I do not hold him special disdain because of that. That was most of Germany. Or... I do not know about most. These are very difficult questions: who believed and who did not believe. But if you think that the Nazi Party membership was only something like a maximum of 11 % of the adult population...

P: 11%? Only?

RS: Yes. I mean, in professions like my grandfather's... In medicine, it goes up to 50 %, more than... But, actually, Party membership... People have this impression that Party membership was just universal, but it was not. There were slippages, like in the teaching profession. Party membership was not compulsory but what *was* compulsory was being part of the Nazi Teaching Union. They had to get along ideological courses and they had to be trained in the Nazi curriculum and so on and so forth. So, that membership carried with it also some sort of ideological indoctrination and complicity in that way. So, just because you are not a member of the Nazi Party, that does not get you out of it. But, people often find that really surprising, that Party membership was quite low. And yet, this appalling crime happened over twelve years.

P: Besides the adult population, there were also children that further complicate these grey zones. Most of your characters, a lot of them actually, are children or teenagers. I am thinking, for example, of Lore and her siblings, of Helmut... but also of Yasia and Mykola, who are teenagers or young adults...

RS: Yes, they are still very young.

P: And, the Jewish children as well. But they are not even... I mean, Yankel, for example. Even though he represents the “official victims” of the Holocaust, he is not portrayed in a very likeable light. He is very angry the whole time. He does not trust anyone, even when he is being helped by others.

RS: Yes, and he is not a good boy.

P: He is rebellious.

RS: He is rebellious, yes.

P: Just like his uncle. In my head, I associate him with Jaakov.

RS: Yes, absolutely. And the mum encourages that. His mum encourages that sense of rebellion. I wanted to write a story about survival and why it is that some people survive, and some people do not. And much of the time it is happenstance. So, Yankel and Momik survive because they happen to bump into Yasia. If they had not, then it would not have happened. But they bump into Yasia because Yankel is stubborn and he will not line up. He is like: “I’m not going to line up. I’m just going to do what I want to do. And what I want to do is live”. He does not necessarily know the danger that he is in, but the thing is his nature means he is not going to put himself in that position if he can help it. So, to me, that stubborn kid was really attractive. And it is also that you get out of this sort of cliché of the lovely imperilled little child. That is the obvious way to get readers’ empathy but actually, I think the kind of readers that are going to read my books are not going to go for that, are they? For them, that is just going to be “Ew!”. *[laughter]* That is too obvious, so no one is going to go for that. Then, it is much more interesting if he has those other qualities. And those are precisely the qualities that are going to help him survive.

P: Sure. Speaking of survival, I would like to diverge a little bit to the end of Yankel and Momik’s story. While analysing the ending, especially the baptism, I thought of this community of marshlanders as one that puts value on spiritual and ethical behaviour rather than material profit. My reading of it was that because Yankel has somehow helped to save Yasia, as she was ill and he called for help, the marshlanders are baptising the Jewish boys in order to protect them, but I am interested in your thought process behind that ending for the Jewish boys.

RS: Well, it came just very practically out of the fact that the very few Jewish people who survived were children and they would often survive because they were baptised. They could pass as being not Jewish. I was really interested in this for a number of reasons. One is this sort of loop in history. Stalin had not allowed religion so, when the Nazis invaded the region, there happened to be a whole generation of children born who had not been baptised. And so, there were this sort of hurried baptisms. The arrival of the Nazis allowed for Jewish children to be baptised, even

Jewish children who were as old as Yankel. And that was a sort of coincidence in history. Those two things came together and allowed some people to survive just because the stars aligned in that way and shifted history. Another reason why this was interesting is that it does not necessarily make a happy ending. If you are as young as Momik, then you do not have memories of your parents. You do not have memory of what you were before and so you are effectively not Jewish anymore. It is like you have been wiped away. The wiping away of Jewish culture was completed in another way. And that is why I could not have... I have Momik smiling in that final scene, as if, in some way, it is hopeful and beautiful. That is why I included the sun and smiling and warmth and things like that. But I also have Yankel doing his usual stubborn quietness, looking to the horizon and the readers still wondering what he is thinking. For me, he is thinking about Palestine. And he is thinking about the future, about something beyond here, something Jewish. There is a Jewish future that he has in mind, as a sort of reminder. That is a sort of double-edged sword of the ending. It is all speculation. I do not make any suggestions about what might happen. But, if you do extrapolate, then you think that maybe Momik would stay and be a marsh boy, be Yasia's dear marsh boy. Yankel would be the one that leaves, and maybe he will make it to Palestine. I have this idea because the boy on the cover was my Yankel. That is the picture I had of him in my head. I found him in my research and he has the number on his arm and he has arrived in Palestine. So, for me, that possibility is sort of embedded in the Yankel in the book.

As for the community, the reason why they are doing that... Yes, the child has helped Yasia. And Yasia has brought them there, so they are doing it *for* Yasia, because Yasia is attached to them. There is that sort of reason, but I also think that they do it because Yankel is useful to them. He can do the woodwork. He has made himself useful to the community, so they will keep him for as long as he is useful to them. So, it is not necessarily this sort of whole-hearted embrace. There is still the danger... Most Ukrainian partisans were antisemitic. It is not like in Poland. In Poland, many Jewish people joined the partisans and also non-Jewish partisans but they also fought side by side with non-Jewish partisans. But that was not the case in the Ukraine. So, there are still dangers for the boys there if they are exposed to having been Jewish, and not just from the Nazis. So, there is this sort of happy ending where people baptised Jewish children and took them into their homes. But at the same time, they would have done that for all sorts of complicated reasons, I am sure. Because they wanted another little worker would have been one of them; because they wanted to do the right thing and give protection to others would also have been another. But then there would also have been the possibility that they had thought: "We don't want to have Jews anymore, so let's baptise them and then there won't be Jews anymore". This also happened. And I wonder that all those sorts of possibilities were woven into this happy ending that is not quite a happy ending.

P: Yes, I usually find that your endings are a mixture of hope and despair. There certainly is pessimism, but also a glimpse of hope.

RS: Well, I do want there to be hope. That was very conscious in *A Boy in Winter*. I had an editor in the US and an editor in Britain looking at the manuscript at the same time. My American editor was very keen that it ended with the massacre and that is it. "It's a novella: we'll have it as short novel or novella and it ends with the massacre". And I was really: "No, I really do not want it to be that". I really wanted it to be also about survival. The Yasia story had become very important there. What is she doing? Why is she doing this? What is her motivation? What possible avenue is there for her? If she develops this attachment, what real chances are there and how would that look like... And then also, I did not want Yankel and Momik just to be... If you just had the massacre, then there are these orphans left floating. By that time in my research, I already knew that children survived through baptism, so I had that idea. And I had already found my little picture of whom I thought of as Yankel who made it to Palestine. There were all these things there that I wanted to include. Not just the massacre but also the hopeful part.

And also in *The Walk Home*, for example. I did not want it just to end with Stevie lying on the pavement having been beaten up, but I wanted it to end with his Dad looking for him and his grandmother still hoping.

P: I found that one, in terms of family relations, quite complex and moving. How the story repeats itself incessantly, Lindsey being abandoned herself by her mother and then abandoning her son...

RS: Yes, you see the history repeating itself, but you also see that these people still love each other. And then there is Graham. Graham is a drummer in a band, but he is not in it because he has got this mad attachment to history. He is in it because he is good at it and he gets that sort of recognition. People recognise that he is good at something. So, he is not beyond redemption. He is not someone who is so wedded to the idea of history that he cannot be a good dad to his son in the future. I wanted that possibility to be there at the end of the story. So, you are not wrong to meet my endings as happy as well.

Things get lost along the way, like Lindsey abandoning her family and disappearing. They do get lost along the way, don't they? You cannot make everything right, but you can make *enough* right. I think the thing about a happy ending is that if you make too much right, then what? You are trying to repair the world in a way the world can never be repaired. You just need to make it right enough so that we continue. There have to be reasons to continue. And I do see reasons to continue. All the time. So, I should put them in my fiction too.

P: That is a very thought-provoking perspective on endings and their role in fiction. This idea of finding the right balance between sad and happy endings also seems to resonate with your nuanced approach to victims and perpetrators in your work. How do you think your nuanced engagement with these figures contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms at work in the overcoming and transmission of trauma?

RS: I think it is in the nuance that we can recognise each other. If we take hard-and-fast positions, then we often exclude any doubt or any prevarication. If you say: “I’m just *this* position”, then you occupy that so solidly that no one can come up towards you and no one can stand on the same spot with you. The grey zone is where we actually all live to one extent or another and that is where we can recognise each other. And that is from where, I hope, we can all see what we are doing to contribute to the transmission of trauma and maybe through a bit more clarity, a bit more realisation of what we are doing and of the grey zones that we occupy and from where we might stop it. To stop doing it quite so much and start contributing a little bit more to something like healing, or something like... I do not know, building bridges.

This also reminds me of the colonial debates now in Britain and how they are so polarised. There is so much bitterness about it. But I think that now, in the multi-cultural, multi-faith nation that we are becoming, we have got so much to gain from each other... There is so much that we share quite literally, you know, from the air that we breathe to the democratic mechanisms that we have. I mean, we are all more than just our race and our gender. We are all those sorts of daily interactions. None of that can boil down to a hard-and-fast position.

P: Indeed. Well, speaking of nuance, there are within the field of Memory Studies ongoing conversations about the phenomenon of complicity and various forms of guilt and shame, understood as inescapable states of being in our globalised and post-capitalist world. In this line, the US critic Michael Rothberg has published a book entitled *The Implicated Subject* (2019), in which he theorises about the different shades of involvement in violence and oppression by focusing on both historical and transhistorical forms of implication. Analysing *The Dark Room*, I realised that you had already adopted this double approach before it was even theorised. How do you feel about writing about complex subject positions against the backdrop of historical violence even before these behaviours are discussed by the academia? You were saying before that you try to be updated in terms of the theories discussed by scholarship, but in this case, you anticipated them.

RS: Well, this question is very interesting. On the one hand, it is like: “Oh, look at me!” [*laughter*]. But, on the other hand, I also think that this is how it goes, because the theory has to be based on something. As a theorist, you would have looked at

material examples and then you would analyse that. I think that Michael Rothberg is amazing. I really appreciated the lecture that he did recently, where he was talking about comparing genocide and other histories of oppression. I think that his sort of mathematical approach to determine whether a comparison is useful or detrimental is very interesting. I do also agree with this idea that none of us can really escape complicity with something. After *The Dark Room* was published, I was quite struck by the number of countries in which it found resonance. I had letters from South Africa, from Japan... places that I did not really think I would get letters from at all, and where readers felt like I spoke to them about their countries and not just about Germany. So, I continue to write in that vein, and I continue to try to find resonances within what is happening now.

The book I am writing at the moment, for example, is set half in a town in Northern Germany and half in a camp which is next to the town. At the start of the book, this camp is still part of a concentration camp, so it is a little subcamp for munition's work. And then, over the course of the book, it becomes a displaced person's camp where all the former workers and many other workers are brought into. This is before the British occupation and, until then, they did not know what to do with these people. So, the victims are living next door to the perpetrators. At the same time, there is the people in the town, who have been living alongside this crime and the victims of the crime. What has happened in the meantime is that the tables have been turned in a way, because now they are under British occupation and the Nazis are no longer in charge anymore, they are now the defeated. So, it is that sort of change. But, for me, there are also resonances with the present, because there are so many people being displaced all the time by conflicts and they are coming to Europe. Sometimes in huge waves. More often in small but persistent numbers. Every week we have people landing on the beaches in Southern England and the lifeboats are picking up people in small dinghies in the Channel and bringing them over. These are all people who were displaced by conflicts in which we may not have a direct hand. Our country may not be directly involved in serialising violence, but our country is involved in perpetuating, in a way, what the international order is. We perpetuate these situations, and we also are sometimes directly involved in them.

P: Yes, and this happens even without us knowing that we are involved in it.

RS: Yes. And, well... In Germany there were also people who convinced themselves that they did not know. They said they had no idea this was happening. And so, this sort of ... what you know and what you do not know and how much you could inform yourself and how much you could be doing actually... Is not knowing any excuse? When I was starting to form the idea of this new book, I wondered: "Why write this book?" This idea of having the camping next to the town is an interesting

phenomenon because it happened all over Germany after the war. And so, historically, that is very interesting to look at. But the resonances with now are also compelling. Why would somebody read it now other than out of historical interest? I think that because there are these echoes, these... who do you sympathise with here? Can I get you to sympathise with this German family who think of themselves as not being Nazis and having done the right thing and slowly starting to realise and think what they could have done to prevent it? They sort of admit to the reader the things that they have done or have not done. The reader gets to know the involvement of the town with the camp over the course of the book and sees how complicit this town actually was.

P: Oh, that sounds insightful. I am really looking forward to reading it. In connection with this idea of knowing and not knowing (or not wanting to know), Helmut's character comes to mind. Among the whole lot of characters in your novels, I would say that the one with whom I have struggled most is Helmut. I find him a very complex and multi-faceted individual. From the moment he is born, the malfunction in his arm makes him a victim of his own society. But, at the same time, his resorting to denial as a coping mechanism and the use of Nazism and photography to integrate into society make him unable to grow and understand what is going on. He eventually chooses the path of complicity, but, at the same time, I do not think he is intellectually mature enough to comprehend that violence is immoral and so, this complicates the question of his ethical responsibility. I even thought that this character could be autistic... What is the aspect of his personality and behaviour that I have not understood? What was the reason why you chose him as the representative of the generation of Germans growing up before the Second World War?

RS: Yes, autism has been suggested a number of times. I do see why you could think of him that way. But, I have to say that there are many autistic people who can absolutely recognise morality. I would describe Helmut as rather cauterised. He has this distancing at the point where he is seeing people being put into a van, but he is also frightened by it. So, he does recognise in that way that it is a violent occurrence, that this thing happening in front of him is nothing benign. But then, he opts for looking at it through a lens. When he gets back to the dark room, when he has got over his fear, he is only able to see them as photographs rather than as human beings. I mean, at the time of writing, I was not thinking whether he is autistic or... For me, it is a means to explore the way we look but we do not look properly. That was a sort of metaphor for me of Germans who saw their Jewish neighbours disappearing from their houses. When the Gestapo came and took people away, they put seals on the doors. So, if you were living in the same tenement block and you passed that door you would see the Gestapo seal. And then, then what do you think? Or do? Is it fear that makes you not act? Is it approval? Or is it just... the anxiety arising

from the possibility that if you do anything the same kind of thing is going to happen to you? I am sure there were many people who made that sort of conscious realisation and felt shitty about it. But then there would also be so many people who would say: “Oh, I’m not going to think about this because it is just too hard to think about”. And that way you can sort of kid yourself, can’t you? In Hamburg, there were businesses taken from Jewish people and given to Aryans. Businesses changed hands. People had their livelihoods, their dignity, and suddenly everything was taken away from them. And did these people who took their livelihoods take them because they thought the same way as the Nazis? Or did they take them because they thought: “Oh, well, this is convenient now and I am just not going to think too hard about who used to have it”? Sadly, I do not think it is necessary to be a violent antisemite for something to enable the Holocaust to take place. There are all sorts of ways of enabling it and one way is to be like Helmut and to not look at things properly, not seeing things as they are.

P: Well, in his case he goes as far as welcoming those principles in order to feel loved and integrate into society.

RS: Yes. In fact, the character of Helmut in particular came from a story of a person that my mother told me about. After the first bombing attack in Hamburg, my mum and her family were evacuated to Bavaria and they lived in a small town in Niederbayern. In that town, there was a small noble family. It was not a particularly big and wealthy family, but they were part of the nobility. The house they lived in was requisitioned by the Nazis and a couple of wings of it became this mother-and-baby home that my grandmother ran. This family had a son who was disabled and did not have full use of one arm. Nazi thinking was complex in some ways but he... I doubt very much that he would have been in danger from the Nazis, with these ideas of physical purity and physical perfection, because he was part of a noble family. But, on the other hand, he was somebody who did not fit with the idea. And yet, when he was finally allowed into the *Volksturm*, right at the end of the war – when they were taking all the young boys and the old men and giving them pitchforks to defend against the Americans who were coming to Bavaria –, he was finally allowed to join in. He dug tank traps, thinking that was going to help them win the war. My mum said how happy he was that he could do that. And that was for me the start of Helmut. That was him at the end. I was much thinking about the boy that my mum remembered and how Helmut at the end has his little moment of victory, of belonging, just as the Russian tanks are going to come into Berlin. And the beginning of him as a character was this idea of why somebody who does not accord with the Nazi idea of what you should be... this whole and perfect body and all those stupid ideas they had... Why would somebody want to belong so much to that?

P: I see... And I also noticed that you named him Helmut, which recalls the term 'helmet'... Was that by chance?

RS: [laughter] No, that is total coincidence. People have asked me if I named him after Helmut Kohl, because he was the chancellor of Germany at the time of writing. But that is... He, like Helmut Kohl, belongs to a generation of Helmut. That was a name that was given to many many boys then, and that is why I chose it. Also, because it literally means "bright nature".

P: Oh, yes. You have his parents mentioning that in the book, which is also quite ironic. For me, the idea of "helmet" resonates very much with the character because it denotes protection and he is a photographer who uses the camera as a means of integration but also of protection from German society. At the same time, he is also somehow protected because he is not targeted by the regime as a disabled person.

RS: [laughter] Well, the book belongs to the reader as well as to the writer. I have also had people saying to me that because the last Kaiser, Kaiser Wilhelm, had a weaker and shorter arm. Like Helmut, he had no full use of one arm. And so, I was asked whether I had based him on Kaiser Wilhelm or whether it was a way of referring in some way to Kaiser Wilhelm. But it was not.

P: Well, I looked it up and this condition where you have a pectoral muscle missing like Helmut is a recognised syndrome, is it not?

RS: Yes. The little brother of somebody I went to school with had that. Indeed, he recognised it in the book when he read it. So yes, I did base it on an actual medical condition, yes, yes.

P: That is very interesting. I think it adds depth to the character of Helmut. Now, moving on to your configuration of the narrative voice, I noticed that with the only exceptions of "Francis John Jones, 1924—" (*Field Study*) and the beginning of *Afterwards* when David recalls his experience in Kenya, where you use first-person narration, all your fictional writings have an external narrator that focalises the actions through the characters. Is there a reason for this narrative choice?

RS: Well, I think it is partly because I want to have different perspectives that you, as a reader, need to occupy. But, at the same time, it is also because first-person perspectives have never been particularly comfortable for me. I have tried it, but I have always ended up feeling that I had to spend inordinate amounts of time making their voices very very very different. So, I wonder: "Is all that effort necessary in bringing very much more to the story?" Not really. And then, there is enough of the jolt, I think... In the first few chapters of anything that I write, I always feel that I have to get my readers used to the idea that we are going to be with this person, and then with that person, and then with that other person, but that we will come back

to them. And it is there, in making those sorts of transitions, that I feel that I need to put the work in, rather than in the first-person narration. But what I also do, for instance, is that switch between focalisers in a scene. Readers are always going to be with one main person. I never switch between David and Joseph, for example, when they're talking. You always know who you are with and whose thoughts you are going to access.

P: When reading your novels, I often get the impression that I am placed in the middle of things but rather than being entirely inside the character, I am a little presence beside them with the occasional privilege of accessing their thoughts. What I observed is that, especially when you focus on the perspective of Helmut or that of *Sturmbannführer* Arnold in *A Boy in Winter*, there is a distance between the third-person narrator and the focaliser. There is some kind of ironic distance that you manage to build there and that somehow tells me that they are problematic characters with whom I should not empathise much. I really enjoyed it in Helmut, for example, what you were saying before... These constant references to what is happening in his present and what will happen in his future, to things that only the readers know. I think that mechanism is very effective in generating distance and avoiding reader identification. But it also prompts me to ask why choosing irony over other strategies, such as humour, to deal with these problematic characters.

RS: I think the tone would have been too different. For Helmut, it would have been too different from "Lore" and "Micha". So, if I wanted to take this little distance, it had to be more subtle than direct humour. And with Arnold... I first wrote that chapter from Pohl's point of view. So, Otto was there at the end and there was this sort of ironic distance there. I guess that what I was doing at the time was to show that he just has not looked at the situation properly, that he has deluded himself, that all he has been thinking about is this road, and he has not been seeing the situation for what it was. But, then, he became this person who actually did go into himself during the course of the novel and did recognise that he could have saved people's lives but did not. We cannot blame him because who is he to know? But the fact is that he recognised that and he became more of a moral actor than I anticipated. So, this ending I had planned, where the reader is sort of looking at him from this distance and thinking "Oh, he's used this road as a way of excusing himself" did not work anymore.

P: I like the ending that you rewrote, the one that was printed on the book. Because up to that moment, we had only seen Arnold from the outside. We picture him as an immaculate man with his uniform, his boots and his insignia. But in that scene, we realise that he is actually vulnerable and very small as compared to the Reich, that

the newly arrived soldiers do not even pay attention to his figure. I enjoyed reading that very much.

RS: Yes. It was much more satisfying, I felt, to have Arnold do it and have that *hubris* rather than Pohl, because you get to see how all these people who thought that were part of something great were actually part of something much much bigger than themselves and that will also eat them up at the end. All these people, these SS, who dreamed of having their biggest days out there in the East and so on... It did not happen for them, did it? Or not for long. So, it basically ended up being more satisfying to have Arnold's thoughts in the end than having Arnold distanced. And I think with both of them, Arnold and Helmut, is about *hubris*, isn't it? Helmut at the end has his moment of victory but it is hubristic, and Arnold as well. And this facilitates the reader's recognition of these wider forces.

P: Yes, indeed. At the same time, these endings were somehow moving. I felt pity for the characters. Not much, just a bit.

RS: I know, yes. But it is... I think that pity is not the same as empathy, is it? It is as if you are looking down on them...

P: I understand what you mean. Empathy and pity do have different nuances in terms of reader proximity. Another feature that I believe defines your writing style very much is the use of fragmentation. I think that it is particularly salient in *The Dark Room*. Since this was your first piece of fiction after abandoning the film industry, I was wondering whether there was any relationship between the idea of writing a film script in fragmented scenes and the way you wrote it. Would you say that the fact of having been a screenwriter and film editor before becoming an author might have influenced your writing style?

RS: Yes, there is definitely the influence of film there. What I saw in the cutting rooms while working in editing is how much things can change depending on what scenes you put next to what scenes, what you leave out, the beginning and the end, the certain look that is cast between people... If that is not there, the scene suddenly feels a lot different. So, there is definitely the influence of filmmaking in it. But also, there is also what you do not need to say. All of the in-betweening. In animation, there are the main movements that the character makes and that are done by the big artist. And then, there is all the in-betweening, for example, to get the hand from here to there, that is done by the smaller artists. I write the things that I think should happen but I do not necessarily write them in the order that they are going to come. By doing this, you can be quite surprised at how much you can leave out. You can put one scene next to another and then you do not have to write all the bits that would logically happen in between because the reader can infer a lot, actually. It makes for a tighter narrative where you are just telling what is needed to be told.

When I achieve that, I always find it satisfying, because I feel that it is a good efficiency for the readers, that I am not talking down to them. I omit the obvious explanations. We can just appear on the other side of town and they just know that some kind of movement must have happened in between. That can also happen with bigger plot elisions... And also, if I am striving for this efficiency in writing around scenes, it is more about the old “show-not-tell” thing. If you think that in a certain scene I have to get across X and Y, then I am doing it through visuals, through my character’s behaviour rather than through what my character says. My character does not have to explain things to the reader. If you are thinking in scenes, then you are much more inclined to show rather than tell.

P: And this does not happen in the rest of your novels. At least not like that.

RS: Not to that extent, no. I think what happened in the intervening times is that I fell more in love with words.

P: Yes. It makes sense. Well, I feel that your contribution to literature is quite complex, so it is difficult to pigeonhole you within a concrete literary tradition. If you had to name a few works that you find yourself coming back to when you write, what would those be? I know you like Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll, but are there also writers in English you enjoy reading and, if so, could you tell me the aspects of their work that you value most?

RS: Sure! Oh, there are many. In fiction terms, somebody that I read repeatedly is William Faulkner. I think that is also because he does this thing with the characters... He is so interesting with characters, sympathy, and the grey zones. So, I am always really interested in reading him again and seeing how exactly he makes me feel about this or that character and what images or phrases he is using to achieve it. His is very different to my style of writing. I am trying to be as spare as possible, and he would do things like using three adjectives rather than just one. But I also like that. I really enjoy reading that. But I think with him it is definitely the way he creates characters and situations that are so complex that you cannot really say who the goodie or the baddie is. I think he is brilliant with that, and he is definitely somebody who I look to as a model. And the same goes for Toni Morrison. Her protagonists... What you were saying about Yankel, for example, that he is very often angry... I think she does that too. She would have main characters who are furious. To do that, as a writer, is a risk because anger can be quite repellent, but she does it... The way she does it makes you feel the energy of the anger and the reasons behind it. But I also admire her because she wrote it so beautifully... So, yes, I would say that Faulkner and Morrison for characters. And J.M. Coetzee as well. He has characters who are really curmudgeonly and very cynical about the world. But what I really admire about his prose is that it is so precise. I really do aim for that

precision. That is why I feel I am really slow often with the writing, that it takes me a lot of time to feel happy with it.

Oh, yes. And I would also add a non-Anglophone author to that list: Joseph Roth. He writes with a great deal of tenderness about his characters. I read *The Radetzky March* at least twice while I was writing *A Boy in Winter* because it is set in the same region. But it also is about the way he writes about people's frailty. He makes you feel for them, and I think that was really important for my characterisation of Ephraim. It is really important to understand why people would have lined up and to not be puzzled by that... That is one of the big puzzles of the Holocaust: this question of why the Jews allowed themselves to be killed. That is so often said and that was one of the things I really wanted to do when writing Ephraim. It is just that we do not see what is happening. Why would we see what is happening? Why would we want to see that? And, I mean, it is not true. Many Jews fought back, many Jews ran away, many Jews were very difficult to kill, actually. Massacres were not at all orderly and I hope I have managed to convey that with the way that I wrote that particular chapter. At the same time, it is also about the reasons for allowing yourself to stand there and be counted for transportation. That is why I was writing Ephraim's story with quite a lot of detail. I included Ephraim's story because I wanted readers to see that, of course, they would want to be all together, they would want to try and do the right thing so that people would not be angry with them, and then, they would let others take them to a ghetto. They have had that experience before. Not personally, but they know of it in their family. And so, they have done that before and they will do it again. And there is also this idea that "as long as we don't make people angry, we'll be fine". Because people get angry and then there is a pogrom. They just want to get through it. So, I looked at Joseph Roth to achieve that. I think he is able to make you see characters' blind spots, make you see their frailties, but you do not judge them for it. Rather, you think that you would probably have done that too.

P: Indeed, Ephraim makes constant allusion to the history of the Jewish community, to this history of persecutions and resettlements. For him, this is just another resettlement, so he certainly believes that they will get through that.

RS: Yes, absolutely. And, as they told that to themselves, the Nazis told up huge lies as well. For instance, they made a station in one of the concentration camps look like a town. They set up fake shops and cafés in it so that it looked like they were just arriving at a place. And so, people did not panic or resist. This illusion of resettlement was absolutely carried out till the last.

P: To conclude the interview, I would like to ask you about your own projects nowadays. Now that I know that you're working on a novel, maybe you want to talk about

your teaching experience. I know that you have recently been teaching writing in primary and secondary schools in London. Do you have any plans to continue teaching in the near future?

RS: Yeah, I do the two things side by side and I definitely enjoy the teaching very much. This course I am going to have a group of Year 10, so they will be fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds and there will be a little more than twenty of them. It will be really really interesting because they all have been through the experience of lockdown and so on and so forth. One of the reasons that I am being brought in is because they need to continue to get back to school again and back with each other and doing that creative writing class can be helpful for that.

P: Does this activity help you develop some aspect of your own creativity?

RS: Yes, I think it does because it means that writing is connected to the real world. I think that one of the hard things about being a writer is that it is quite solitary and you do it for a long time. If you are writing a novel, you can be with it for years and you can end up circling in your own head a bit too much, wondering whether it has a relevance. And, although I am not working on the same subjects with the kids that I teach or the students at university, it does feel like you are having conversations with other writers about the process of writing and about expression and precision and all those sorts of things that you are aiming for in your writing days. This happens especially when I teach at university. It is very stimulating to talk about that with other people, to encourage them in their endeavours and be delighted with what they produce. And I also see that when it is hard for them, you can also feel that fellowship between the writers. The process is startlingly similar between fourteen-year-olds writing their first or second poem and fifty-year-olds writing their seventh novel. *[laughter]* You can feel that sort of fellowship.

P: I guess that you feel back on earth for a while.

RS: Yes. And it makes you feel that this process is being done by others everywhere in the whole world, that you are not alone. And all throughout this interesting communicative process. It is always a delight when somebody writes something they are pleased with and you really feel like it has worked. It gives you faith that the process works in the end.

P: Thank you for sharing that, Rachel. It is wonderful to listen to such positive experiences with teaching. And thank you as well for your time today. It has been a delight to discuss your work with you. I look forward to reading your novel when it is released and wish you every success with it.

RS: Thank you, Paula. It was lovely to talk to you.