

May 2011 - JOHN CONNOLLY / Book for Keeps

John Connolly isn't the first adult crime novelist to try his hand at writing for children, but to my knowledge he's the first to have his own soundtrack albums of the music featured in his books - three so far - which is way up there on the cool scale. His crime fiction is that magical combination of critically acclaimed, award-winning *and* best selling, so to get to grips with him as a writer of children's fiction there were a few questions about his other persona that needed answering.

If you didn't know otherwise you'd think, reading a Charlie Parker novel, that Connolly was an American writer, not Dublin born, bred and educated. Had he set out to beat the Americans at their own game, and was he surprised that he'd managed to do it so successfully? "Yes," he sits back, smiling. "I set out to do it, at least to write a *version* of American crime fiction, and yes, I'm surprised I was successful. Americans do it perfectly well themselves and don't really need English and Irish people going over there and doing pale imitations of it."

The reasons he set out on this path are complicated, he goes on, in that most writers write what they read and what he read was American fiction - not just crime fiction but all kinds of American fiction. "I did this because I had a generational turn against Irish fiction, which was very insular, very concerned with the nature of Irishness, and that's true of a young nation. People sometimes forget that we haven't had a hundred years of independence."

One of the first things that happen when you achieve that status is you begin a process of self-examination, he says, and in Irish fiction that went on for a very long time, with part of that process being the almost complete exclusion of genre. "We didn't write crime fiction and we largely abandoned fantasy fiction, which was Ireland's own literature. And so if you were a writer like me, who was fascinated by genre, there were no models and I didn't feel that I could import the tropes of US crime fiction into Ireland and make them work, no more so than you could into England."

The private eye novel, posits Connolly, has never really worked in England. It comes out of the West, and also the distrust of institutions, the establishment and the forces of law and order, because there's the perception that they're all corrupt. "They've been bought and paid for, and if you're poor or vulnerable and you need help, you need someone from outside. In England there's never been that degree of disenchantment with the forces of law and order and the establishment. Even though someone like Hercule Poirot might seem like an outsider, he's not really."

From Connolly's point of view, you can never shake off your social and cultural baggage, but he thinks his has allowed him to bring something different to the American crime novel because the language he uses is not the language an American novelist would use. "And I also brought my Catholicism with me."

In my head, I told him, I had been calling it his spirituality, but he says that that's a word which has become debased, because it's been hi-jacked by people who think angels look like fairies. "I use the word Catholicism deliberately. It's all about a journey towards redemption. And redemption, if you are from a Catholic background, comes freighted with spiritual baggage. You can't separate the two, and I guess I took some of that along."

So what made this hugely successful Irish writer of American crime fiction decide to add 'Children's author' to his CV by writing *The Gates*, and then its sequel *Hells Bells*? "Two reasons: firstly it doesn't seem as big a departure to me as it does to other people, because childhood constantly recurs in the books - it's there throughout the Parker novels, Parker is fascinated by the sins of one generation being visited on the next. Children are in all the books and in *The Lovers*, Parker is the child. And *The Book of Lost Things* was an exploration of childhood for adults, very much concerned with the formation of the adult through that period, and I didn't see a big jump in finding another way to write about childhood. And secondly, one of my stepsons, Alistair, was turning eleven and it was simply the urge to write something he could read."

Connolly, an Olympic expounder of ideas, stops for a moment to gather his thoughts, which gives me time to observe the man behind the words.

Compact, casual, amusing and enthusiastic, he's not what I had visualised, given how he writes crime fiction; what you see is more what you get in his children's fiction.

"I think I'm probably slightly defensive about the kid's books," he says, taking up the reins of our conversation, "because I think there's a perception that kid's books are a cash cow, and I've certainly heard adult authors say that 'children's books are where the money is'. But the reality, for me, is that I get paid a fifth, sixth of what I get for an adult book. And it kills my adult sales.

"The reality is that if you want to be a Number One crime author, you have to write the same book with the same character, publishing at the same time every year. When crime writers deviate from a series, readers get a bit antsy. So there's a price to be paid for experimentation, and when people say you're jumping on the bandwagon I kind of want to tell them that I jumped *off* the bandwagon and now, when I want to get back on, it's disappeared! But the fact is, I really wanted to write something for Alistair."

As a writer, says Connolly, you find that there are ideas which simply don't fit into what you're doing, but you become so enamoured of them that a way *has* to be found to try and use them. And then, he says, there's the magpie-ish nature of writers which impinges upon things as well, because writers - and, he points out, journalists - are always on the lookout for shiny objects to power the work along and decorate the piece. And the shiny thing which caught his eye a couple of years ago, in the way that it can do, he says, when you feel you've missed something as a child, was physics. "Mainly because I was doomed by a terrible physics teacher at school."

And then there was 'The Idea', which had been gathering dust in his ideas box, about a boy who opens the gates of Hell. It was only when he started reading about the Large Hadron Collider, and hearing that people like Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, really thought that if it was switched on it would create a black hole and destroy the world, that he put the two

elements together and realised he had what he calls ‘a functioning mechanism’ for a plot.

“I looked at it, saw how it worked and then it was written quite quickly, which rarely happens for me, because everything came together and all the cogs meshed...there’s a great pleasure in writing these books [as they] allow me to be funny in a way I can’t be in the adult books, they allow me to be silly.”

There is a distinct, and distinctive sound to the voices in his adult and children’s books, the sound in the latter being, to my ear, more that of a storyteller; Connolly sees it slightly differently.

“The voice in the children’s books is closer to my voice; that is *my* voice. I would have said it was the other way round, the Parker books are more, posed and self-conscious in the way they’re written.” Actually, what I meant was that when I read the children’s books I felt like I was sitting down having a story told to me, while with the Parker books the experience is much more visceral. “Ah, I see what you mean...I do find the Samuel books easier to write, simply because that’s my default mode or way of talking. I think when I’m in company I probably sound a bit like that, with random digressions and jokes. All of that I slipped into quite naturally, whereas with the Parker books I’m probably a little bit more restrained and channelling it in a slightly different direction.”

There is, Connolly says, a great deal of satisfaction in writing something funny and getting a joke right, but probably a deeper satisfaction in the Parker books, in the exploration of themes and going into them in depth. “The language is more worked upon in those books and they go through ten, eleven, twelve drafts before the publisher sees them. I think, especially with comedy, if you start working on it too much you kill it, so you have to go with the first impulse.”

I wondered if Connolly found it at all odd, not to say bi-polar, to be writing in these two quite dissimilar ways; to inhabit, on the one hand, Charlie Parker’s ‘real’ made up world, where rules we all understand apply, and on the other to be in Samuel Johnson’s fantasy, made up world, where he, the author, is the law. “There is a kind of freedom, being in complete

control, but just because anything *can* happen doesn't mean that everything *should* happen," he says. "You begin imposing limitations on your story. Even Hell has rules, if you're basing it on Dante. And once you begin creating a geography for your world, that in itself puts a frame around it within which you're going to work."

Hell seems to be, while not a uniquely Catholic territory, is at least more of a trademark feature of it. Was this was where his own Catholicism came into his writing? Inevitably, he says, the moment you bring up the concept of Hell it does come in. But, he goes on, he is very careful what he imposes on the reader. "What I was interested in, in these books, was exploring the concepts of good and evil; if you look at the footnotes, they're peppered with questions: what is it to be good, what is it to be evil? Samuel is surrounded in the book by examples of particular notions of evil - he sees Greed, he sees Vanity, he sees *Wrath*, he sees Deceit and Disloyalty. The great virtue in the book is loyalty, to your friends, to concepts; but these notions of good and evil are explored in non-religious ways, the footnotes continually jab at the fact that evil feeds upon itself."

For books that are fiction - and, on top of that, fantasy fiction - the footnotes speak of an enormous amount of research, to my eye giving the books a quasi-academic feel. It was a device he decided to use after observing his stepson Alistair's reading habits, and remembering reading Nabakov's *Pale Fire* at college. "This is going to sound so pretentious, but *Pale Fire* is essentially a commentary on a poem, but you realise that you have two different narratives at work: there is the voice of the poem and the voice of the person commentating on the poem. And I realised the footnotes didn't have to be in precisely the same register as the book itself." And they're not, they're slightly sarkier, with a voice, as Connolly puts it, like your uncle who's younger and cooler than your dad. I think he's also right when he says that the only people who have any difficulty with the footnotes are adults, who associate them with hard work. Guilty as charged.

It's not at all difficult to see John Connolly as a successful children's author, he has the same Celtic ease and oratorical skills that have made

Eoin Colfer into such a hit, off as well as on the page. Is he going to carry on writing for a younger audience? “I like the character [of Samuel], and I like the voice he allows me to write in, there’s a real pleasure in that,” he says. “But I think it’ll probably be two years before there’s another one. I’ve been prevaricating about what to do next, so I started two books on the same day...I wasn’t making the decision, wasn’t writing anything at all, so I wrote a thousand words of a new Parker and a thousand words of a kid’s book. And it worked. I didn’t think I wanted to write a Parker book, but actually, I do, it’s the right one.”