# Books

## Top five SCIENCE BOOKS

This week's bestsellers supplied by Waterstones

1. THE QUANTUM UNIVERSE: EVERY THING THAT CAN HAPPEN HAPPENS – Brian Cox & Jeff Forshaw
2. IN DEFENCE OF DOGS: WHY MAN NEEDS HIS BEST FRIEND – John Bradshaw
3. THE MAGIC OF REALITY: HOW WE KNOW WHAT'S REALLY TRUE – Richard Dawkins
4. PERIODIC TALES: THE HUMAN STORY OF THE ELEMENTS – Hugh Aldersey-Williams
5. EDEXCEL AS AND A LEVEL MODULAR MATHEMATICS – Keith Pledger & Dave Wilkins

SUITS HIMSELF Conformity is unlikely to afflict Joseph Connolly any time soon JASON ALDEN

# Fine and dandy

Joseph Connolly shares fashion tips and his happy memories of 1950s Britain, with **James Kidd**

It's hard to miss Joseph Connolly, even in a busy Hampstead café. Although I glimpse only his right hand side, the smart jacket, flash of pink shirt and cuff link, bush of grey hair and sprouting beard all distinguish the author of the excellent new novel, *England's Lane*, from the yummy mummies and carefully dishevelled young men sipping espressos.

"I know I look singular," Connolly says a little wearily when I mention his appearance. "It would be stupid to affect ignorance. The only regret I have is that people think I work really hard at it, and I don't. I have looked like this for 40 years."

Style is arguably Joseph Connolly's stock in trade, whether as the author of vibrant tragicomic slices of cosmopolitan Englishness, or elegant man about town. His entry in *Who's Who* lists his recreations as "wine, lunching and loafing", and includes "Founder Member, Useless Information Society" under his achievements. His conversation displays comparable panache.

We meet on the real-life England's Lane itself – a bustling, photogenic street close to Belsize Park in north-west London. The venue is entirely appropriate, but does create the eerie feeling of talking to a novelist inside his own novel. The story is a high-brow soap opera, set half a century ago. Despite the limited setting, there is enough action for several novels: death, murder, blackmail, confidence tricks, suicide, prostitution, and extra-marital affairs.

What brings *England's Lane* to life, however, is the carousel of voices that Connolly sets in motion. There is capable Milly, who pursues illicit romance, love and sex with a neighbour. Or Jonathan Barton, the local butcher, whose refined demeanour hides the darkest of pasts. "I love doing this period because the language just falls out of me. I remember the feel and the smell and what people said back then better than I do things from 10 years ago."

Central to the novel's drama is the disjunction between these rich interior lives and the rigid social codes of behaviour, morality, and speech. "Before the Sixties let it all hang out, people did not speak about the things that were most central to them. Even to their spouses. In fact, above all to their spouses. Any sort of a problem was seen as a weakness."

Connolly is quick to reject any direct autobiographical context for the novel, but it feels personal nonetheless. Born in 1950, he grew up a stone's throw from England's Lane, and has remained in its vicinity all of his life. "I was born in the prep school I was later educated in. I was pencil-sharpener monitor in the same room that my mother gave birth. Few can say that." Connolly was just three years old when his father died, leaving his mother to raise her imaginative but wilful only son by herself – like many other widows of the period, she did not remarry.

**England's Lane**
**By Joseph Connolly**
Quercus £18.99

*'She got all the appliances. She got appliances coming out of her bloody ears. Telly, twin washtub – fridge, she got. Hoover, you name it. Blimey – she wants to take a leaf out of my old mum's book. When I think back what my old mum had to go through, fair makes me weep. It do. Never give it no mind at the time. Well you doesn't, does you? When you's a kid, you don't think about nothing nor nobody ...'*

Connolly's memories of childhood are defined by the lingering influence of the Second World War. "In the Fifties, every sentence was preceded by 'Before the war ...', 'During the war ...' or 'Since the war ...' People were still enormously grateful to be alive. It seemed almost rude to complain about little things because they had been through the big thing."

As Connolly describes it, 1950s England was a country where everyone – men, women and especially children – knew their place. He remembers boys and girls dressing like their parents in the desperate hope of being taken more seriously. "Everything now is geared to the young. Back then nothing was. There wasn't any point in being young. There was just a great list of things you couldn't do or couldn't afford. If a 19-year-old said 'I have written a novel', they would have been laughed at. Now, publishers are falling over themselves. 'The younger the better – particularly if they are pretty."

As Connolly's own flamboyant appearance suggests, his mature character developed, in part, as a reaction against these postwar restrictions. He confesses, sadly, that he missed the Swinging Sixties (he was at boarding school "in a field in Oxfordshire"), and speaks yearningly about that decade's "peacock revolution". "Suddenly men were allowed to wear what had been banned since the 19th century. Beautiful big cravats, velvet coats, long hair. The dandy re-emerged. But there were still enough old men around to laugh at them and think they were pansies."

Ask Connolly whether he envies young people today, and he weighs the pros and cons in similar fashion to his wholehearted fiction. "I'm not anti-progress by any means. *England's Lane* is not a wallow in the past. A lot of the 1950s morality had to be swept away, but it's the usual case of the baby out with the bath water."

Many areas of modern life leave Connolly cold: rampant consumerism, tower blocks, inflated property prices, the obsession with careers and what he calls "un-English egomania". A mention of Twitter causes his eyebrow to rise. Nevertheless, he loves ebooks, his laptop and, more generally, the freedom enjoyed by today's younger generation. If only they would dress more imaginatively. "There are no parameters left. The way people now go to a party is how people in the Fifties dressed to wash the car. Casual is the rule. This is good because they don't have to prove anything any more. But I think it's a waste. Men, who now have the freedom to do whatever they like, are conforming."

Conformity is unlikely to afflict Connolly any time soon. "That's the thing about blokes," he tells me with feeling. "You can be a serious person, but you tend not to lose that sense of fun. Women think it's a bit pathetic. We're not afraid of being idiotic."