Homecoming: Joseph Connolly in north London

A page in the life **Joseph Connolly**

The final hurrah for old London

***Elena Seymenliyska** talks to the writer about why his nostalgic novel has been ignored by the Booker judges*

England's Lane tells the stories of three families who live above three shops – the ironmonger's, the butcher's and the sweetshop. It is set in north-west London in 1959, a time and a place Joseph Connolly knows well – as a child, he lived around the corner, and his mother sometimes worked in the hairdresser's.

The street has changed since then, of course – now it has a Starbucks, a couple of estate agents, an Indian and a Chinese – but not as much as you'd think. Allchin the chemist, where the sweetshop man buys his wife's pills, is still there. As is the Washington, the pub where the ironmonger goes for his pints of Bass.

"It was a real beery hellhole, I remember the stink," says Connolly over a glass of rosé in one of the Washington's snugs. "That smell of stale beer and old carpet and dead men."

But the book is not autobiographical, as Connolly is keen to stress. No wonder: *England's Lane* features a gallery of grotesques – repulsive men, duplicitous women and not-so-innocent children – in a story of secrets, lies and brutal murder. This, his 11th novel, is a return to the themes of his last, *Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary* (2007), about a backstreet abortionist and her spivvy bloke during the Second World War. And it is a return to the period of *Love Is Strange* (2005), the story of your average Fifties family, with violence, prostitution and sexual abuse thrown in (the last, set in an Irish convent, so disturbing it should come with a health warning).

"That was very difficult to write," Connolly says. "My wife was in tears. She said, 'Look, I've never skipped any of your books, I don't want to, but I've got to do this in very small doses.'" Some readers, however, are less committed, and a glance at the Amazon reviews shows two camps – those who love his darkness, and those who recoil from it with loathing. A bit of a Marmite man, then? He laughs, rippling the grey hair that flows from his face. "Well, yes, apparently! Except that Marmite sells awfully well."

Connolly's earlier novels were comic, contemporary and did sell well, especially *Summer Things* (1998), a comedy about a typical English seaside holiday that goes badly wrong. It was made into a film starring Charlotte Rampling, directed by Michel Blanc, whom Connolly describes as the French Woody Allen. There were prizes (for the film), tie-ins, a sequel. It felt like things were about to happen. But the follow-up, *Winter Breaks* (1999), "did terribly", he says, "and that amazed me because I thought that's exactly what people wanted".

He is still waiting for things to start happening. "This is the bloody trouble! Every single book we've ever done, it's been, 'This is the one, this is it.'" But *England's Lane* was not longlisted for the Man Booker, nor were any of his previous novels, and he clearly minds. "I wish I could say to you, ha, it's a lottery, it's a bauble, who cares. It certainly wouldn't be for the money, although I wouldn't turn down the money. It is the…" he pauses, searching for the right word, "…the accolade."

But Connolly is big in France, where his books sell better than at home. There, "when you reel off the names of the English authors, Barnes, Amis, I'm always in the list. But in this country, I'm not. It's quite odd. Well, it isn't odd. I don't know what it is."

Another mystery of sorts is the move to a new publisher, after close to 15 years with Faber. Ever since his days as owner of the Flask bookshop in Hampstead in the Seventies and Eighties, he has loved the literary independent. Enough to turn down higher offers for his debut, *Poor Souls* (1995), but also enough for them to commission him to write a book celebrating 80 years of Faber cover designs (2009).

All 10 previous novels are still in print with Faber, but there was a "falling out". So Connolly was left with an "unwanted pregnancy" of a book that would have returned to the comic and contemporary terrain of his early fiction. This novel will emerge at some point, he says. But he wasn't done with the Fifties, and so, with a new publisher, he went back to the bad old days.

> *Connolly lived round the corner from England's Lane as a child*

England's Lane is his "last hurrah for the London row of shops". Since then, not only have our shops changed, we've changed. In the Fifties, "people didn't talk" – not about sex, not about death, not about anything – whereas "nowadays they don't stop!"

This atmosphere of repression and taboo is the perfect culture for Connolly's dark novels. And thanks to his particular style of writing – a fluid, first-person stream of consciousness that records every fleeting thought and base impulse – his characters are revealed, warts and all.

But Connolly – who looks like a cross between Karl Marx and Father Christmas, only gentler – is no misanthrope. He rallies to the defence of his characters, especially his women, who "always turn out to be the strong, capable and more interesting".

"I don't set up my characters as ninepins to be knocked down," he says. "I quite like them. I certainly get to know them. But things happen.

"That's why I think English novels are so vastly superior to American," he adds, "for the very reason that they don't go in for this vast vista, the Great American Novel. It is actually people's lives and small victories and injuries that strike the heart."

England's Lane is published later this month by Quercus at **£18.99**