

Fame? It shouldn't be a career in itself

Novelist and food critic Joseph Connolly tells **Alex Bellotti** about his new book

Stylism. It's not the first word one might associate with Joseph Connolly – a man who will happily flaunt a pinstripe blazer, checked shirt and spotted tie ensemble – but equally, he knows how to stand out from the crowd.

It doesn't take long to realise why. Alongside the fame that comes with being an acclaimed 13 novel author, and indeed the food critic for this very paper, there's a certain type of recognition reserved for having a truly gigantic beard.

"I know because of the way I look and everything, people think that I might work at it," he insists after we sit down at The Flask in Hampstead. "The truth is I don't. I've had this hairstyle since I was 18 and never thought to change it. When I had the Flask Bookshop a few doors down, it really was... (he motions down to shoulder length). It's a short back and sides at the moment."

Whatever the fashion, *Style* is the name of Connolly's latest book, and by all accounts it's his most contemporary work to date. Following the story of 10 year old Alexander – a good looking but ordinary boy inexplicably catapulted into fame – it's a timely comedy of manners lambasting Romeo Beckham-style child stardom, pushy parents and the shameless stupidity of Britain's celebrity culture.

For a man who enjoyed the rise of the Beatles during his teenage years, the subject is one of great frustration. It says a lot that of all the characters involved, Alexander is the only one who never actually appears.

"The trouble these days is that the giddy heights have nothing to do with ability or hard work, it's all to do with simply being in the public eye. That's why kids at school keep saying what they want to be is famous, and they don't want to be famous for being a medical pioneer or for having written a great novel, they simply want to be



JOSEPH CONNOLLY
STYLE

■ Author Joseph Connolly. Picture: Polly Hancock

famous, as though that's a career in itself, which is very bad."

Connolly's own upbringing saw him raised as a true child of Hampstead ("I was at prep school in the room I was born in").

He attributes his stream of consciousness writing style to the fact that he was an only child. While he wasn't bookish – that came later when he owned Flask Bookshop from 1975 to 1989 – he found comfort early on in another medium: "Television was my great friend and I used to do all the voices – particularly the comedians which I loved and of course American films and all that stuff."

"I think that might have a lot to do with it because I can get – I think I can get, I hope I can get – voices of people."

The writer is most pleased when he receives praise for the voices of his female characters, because "ultimately it's a guess". He even goes so far as to insist the strongest characters in his novels always turn out to be women, but it gets a bit sticky when I ask why.

"It's a strange thing in fiction," he remarks, "because feminism is another thing I think is a bit out of control. It's become a kneejerk reaction as opposed to a deeply felt thing in that people now have an antenna for anything that is offensive to... I was going to say coloured minorities, but apparently you're not allowed to say coloured – I don't know

what you're meant to say now – and women and all this."

Hmmm. "Well I think it's a generational thing," he concedes after a while. "I think young people are much more acutely aware of it than oldies are probably. But the thing with writing about women is that I do think I understand what it's like to be a woman without ever actually having been one."

Admittedly, as Connolly himself remarks, he's never been the sort to write a "bloke book" and he's far too much of a Camden dandy to care for fast cars, explosions and martinis.

Even for a writer who prides himself on voice however, it's an ambitious task for a baby boomer to write about millennial youth culture. Has he even heard of Zoella?

"Oh sure, yeah," he says of the vlogger-turned-bestselling novelist. "And actually I don't terribly object to that because that's kids with a following of kids. In fact I should think they're all quite annoyed – who is it, Alfie Deyes and Zoella? – that we're talking about them because it wasn't meant for us, it was meant for the kids."

"As soon as people like me know what they're talking about, they'll probably want to ditch it and do something else entirely."

And that, we both agree, is the real crux of style throughout the ages.

■ *Style* by Joseph Connolly, published by Quercus for £19.99, is out on March 5.

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