

books

The first Joseph Connolly novel I read, when I was 14, was his classic dark comedy *This Is It* and I have counted him amongst my literary influences ever since.

Fitting then, that the novel we are now meeting to discuss all these years later, *Boys and Girls* (his 12th), marks his return to those earlier darkly comic escapades.

As we start our interview, Connolly is charmingly keen for reassurance about revisiting this element of his work. "Does it work?" he asks. "Is it funny?" I reassure him it does and it is – I have been cackling to myself on the tube as I remember the highlights. Starting out from the comic proposition of a woman deciding she wants another husband – not instead of, as well as, her existing one – the novel carries on to deliver classic comic reversals, humorous point of view shifts, some excellent observational humour, and wonderful coined phrases (the best of which are probably too risqué to quote here).

Given Connolly's previous, moodier novels, in the middle years, why did he decide to treat this as a comedy? My current novel is about a writer who believes he has to research everything in order to write about it. That could have been a comedy, but the character is a crime writer, so it's a thriller. Was he not tempted to go darker? "*Boys and Girls* could have been



■ Amy Bird

The master of contriving a comic escape

Amy Bird, whose second thriller *Three Steps Behind You* has just been published, talks to Hampstead literary legend Joseph Connolly about his new novel *Boys and Girls*

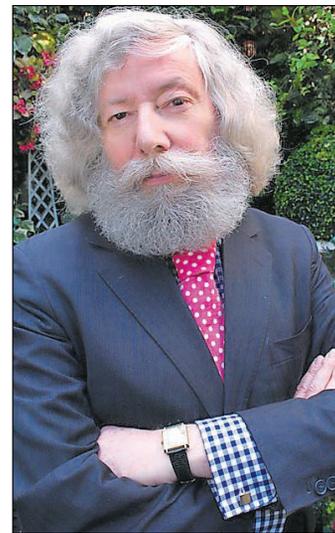
a tragedy," agrees Connolly. "The husband could have been so outraged and insulted that it led to, say, murder, but I wanted to go back to the novels I used to write, to do a real contemporary comedy." Does he laugh out loud when he writes comedy? "I'd be worried if I didn't," he says. "Humour is organic – it just bubbles up as I write." Even in the novels that have not been labelled as comedies, such as *Love is Strange* or *England's Lane*, there have been laughs. "There is always humour in a good novel," Connolly proclaims, with a conviction that suggests a sound personal manifesto.

But this is Connolly, so we get something meatier than just pure comedy. As he says "You can't be laughing forever – you must turn the page and find tragicomedy. I want the reader to be entertained. I don't just want them to think, 'This is funny.'" In *Boys and Girls*, the tragicomic edge comes from the personal escapes that all his characters are trying to make. "I do like the idea of characters having a secret life, whether they sense it or not," Connolly acknowledges. The most deliciously whimsical escape is the

secret beach that husband number one constructs in a spare room. The more substantive escapes start later when characters finally learn what it means to be themselves. "Certain people are constrained by lies, fronts and pretences of their own creation – and they aren't able to break free," observes Connolly.

Trickery

Connolly's focus in *Boys and Girls* is on these pretences, or games, at which men and women play. He enjoys the odd game with his readers, too. At points in the novel, characters appear to make morally repugnant – not to mention illegal – choices but then, just when we are about to abandon hope in them, Connolly executes a deft shift, then another, and the reader can breathe a sigh of relief that they are allowed to like the characters again. Connolly grins delightedly when I tell him how much I fell for – and enjoyed – this trickery. "I'm so pleased you said that. I like to push things just far enough for the reader to worry about what the characters are doing." It's important to Connolly, though, that the reader is left with a warmth for the characters at the end of the book. "When the reader



■ Joseph Connolly © Polly Hancock

is just about to start worrying I bring them back."

It's remarks like this that highlight what a skilled craftsman he is. The real Connolly-ism, of course, that he has honed over the years, is the art of the controlled digression – those amazing sentences he twirls from characters' heads, with multiple parentheses or a point of view shift halfway through, or entire chapters that diverge from their starting point only to come full circle, never detracting from the structure of the novel. I tell him that if he'd been on a creative writing course, he might have been told to cut that out, thus losing the whole joy

of his style. Believe me, I've been there. There are wise words from the master craftsman: "You have to know the rules utterly – in order to break them gloriously."

And there is so much that is glorious about Connolly's writing. In particular, fans of his *Ham&High* restaurant column will delight in the numerous dinner set-pieces. "Dining is a good way to bring people together," he says. The challenge is greater for him than it would be for a film director, though. In a novel, you can't just rely on background people in shot to create the mood. "You have to keep the hubbub going. You have to create the whole scene – everything." Connolly, of course, more than meets the challenge.

Driven

Connolly must be pretty driven, he's already working on a 13th (which, sadly but probably wisely, will not bear the hilarious spoof title one of his characters comes up with in *Boys and Girls* – Mr Darcy's Chocolate Manolos) "I love to create," Connolly explains. "I must keep creating." He offers some final advice for writers like me, on the second rung of the ladder, gazing up. "It's harder than ever to succeed. But every book could be the one that changes everything. That's exciting." There's a shine in his eyes that shows he means it.

■ *Boys and Girls* by Joseph Connolly is published by Quercus priced £18.99. *Three Steps Behind You* by Amy Bird is published by Carina UK priced £3.99.

LAWYER TURNS CRIME WRITER

Amy Bird's debut novel, *Yours is Mine*, a psychological thriller about two women who exchange identities, was published in 2013 by Carina UK, the digital imprint of Harlequin. It reached the coveted No.1 spot in the Amazon.com women's crime chart. Born in Hampstead, she now lives in Finchley with her husband, dividing her time between writing and

working part-time as a solicitor.

Her second novel, *Three Steps Behind You*, published in March, is a psychological thriller largely set in West Hampstead about a crime writer who believes he must experience everything in order to write about it. Behind his writing lies the obsessive need to get close to his childhood friend, Adam, and Adam's wife, Nicole.

Mystery over Titanic launches barrister into world of Sherlock Holmes and beyond

The Titanic never sank. On that fateful day in 1912, hundreds of people lost their lives on its sister ship – the Olympic.

This is premise at the core of an epic series of novels in which Sherlock Holmes unravels the mystery of what really happened in the Atlantic Ocean more than a century ago.

"I wrote the books, with Sherlock Holmes, to unearth the mystery of the Titanic," says author Stephen Lees, whose day job as a construction barrister gives him unprecedented access to all the hidden tunnels that run beneath our streets.

"The sinking of boats, there's nothing new in that," he continues. "What was quite sad was the loss of life, of course, but there are reasons for that and that's why I get Sherlock Holmes



■ Stephen Lees

to use that as the means to explore this information."

His books, he says, are "fiction based on fact". Volume 1, *The Iron Mausoleum*, looks at why the Titanic went down, with the following four – *The Iron Vault*, *The Iron Soul*, *The Iron Titan*, *The Iron Metropolis* – go "into greater depth into the Edwardian era and

“Something went wrong and, the more you go into that, you realise there's a boat that sank but not the Titanic and there are facts for that

society at the time. The end is quite shocking."

Lees, who lives in Marble Arch – not far from where his novels are set, became interested in Holmes as a child growing up in America. Interest in the Titanic was amplified when he read a story that it was switched for the Olympic in an insurance fraud scam.

"A few years ago, there was more interest in the Titanic than I think there was when the thing went down. A hundred years later, people are fascinated by it because of what it was, because it ought not to have gone down.

"Something went wrong and, the more you go into that, you realise there's a boat that sank but not the Titanic and there are facts for that."

The five novels delve into historical data and vivid descriptions of Victorian and Edwardian architecture, as well as the atmospheric descriptions of the seething underbelly of contemporary London, New York and Pittsburgh.

From the St Pancras Hotel to the hidden Iron Vault bar beneath the Marylebone Road, from the secret tunnel near Madame Tussauds to the hidden rooms above Holmes' apartment at 221b Baker Street, all

the books are illustrated with map and fine architectural drawings of Sherlock's London, including Hampstead, etched by Lees himself. "I've drawn the buildings in St Pancras, Camden, Westminster and Soho which are all linked into this massive mystery," he says.

Conan Doyle Estate

Lees has licence from the Conan Doyle Estate to publish the books, "coincidentally written", he says, on the heels of a Sherlock resurgence, typified by the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes*, starring Robert Downey Jr with Jude Law as Watson, and the BBC adaptations starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

His latest book, *The Premiere*, and its sequel, *The Finale*, is based on a series of incidents leading up to and following the London premiere of Gustav Mahler's mighty *Eighth Symphony* in 1910, taking in the arts, architecture,