



PHOTO: GERALD ISAAMAN

# A trip down memory Lane of his childhood

Joseph Connolly recalls his early years in Hampstead, and the row of shops that have inspired his latest novel. By **Gerald Isaaman**

far from innocently above the ironmonger's, the butcher's and the sweet shop. And while he insists his 11th novel is purely fictional and not autobiographical – there is a small boy too in the cast, though he declines to identify himself – nostalgia overwhelms him as he recounts the past, loquacious and articulate just like the stream of consciousness

that commands his chapters.

"My daily existence, especially in the school holidays, revolved around England's Lane," he recalls. "My mother used to shop every day with a little wicker basket and purse, that was the ritual."

"In the sweet shop the penny tray and halfpenny tray were very prominent. Black jacks were only a farthing, but they didn't taste very nice. And next to Allchin, the chemist, who is remarkably still there, was a shop called Moore's, with Art Deco frontage in glass and chrome, who were nominally stationers but sold toys, particularly Matchbox cars, which I was totally addicted to."

"This was the centre of my life – then a weekly trip to Swiss Cottage and John Barnes, when it was still a department store."

That was a joy. And often my mother and I would have plaice and chips in the cafeteria there."

He muses over the days when departed United Dairies, now the ironically empty remains of a bookshop, had a horse-drawn milk float to trawl the streets, when shops had "& Son or Bros" painted on their fascias to reflect stable continuity. Today they are "uniformally hideous", and what was once Barclays Bank is now part of universal Starbucks, all part of the changing social history woven into his novel.

He worries somewhat that his use of some actual shop names will irritate local readers while other names are totally fictional.

"I suppose I'm going to get lectures about that," he moans.

Nevertheless, he

reveals that when it came to writing *Love is Strange*, his first contemporary novel set in the 1950s, he never realised he remembered so much now he lives further up the hill in Netherhall Gardens.

"I didn't have to do any research at all. It all rushed out and I could have gone on and on. So I knew I hadn't quite done with the 1950s."

"I knew I was going to come back and use the voices of people as they are thinking, as I do, and I never have to go back and change the vocabulary because, though it may sound a bit spooky, I know the all the words are absolutely right."

You may, however, question the action amid the compelling voices of some of his dysfunctional and duplicitous characters living in a lane alive with lies, secrets,

conspiracy and deceit.

There is prostitution, violence, even sexual abuse. But having mastered the art of comedy in his earlier novels, he seems to have surprised himself with these dark episodes.

"I don't even notice it happening when I'm writing," he confesses. "I never think, 'Right, now this is all a bit chummy, we've got to have something dark and criminal going on'. It just occurs. Apparently it is dark. And some people love that and some people, I suppose, hate it."

Yet he refuses to equate his decadence with the way television, especially, is changing our culture, the plots of soap operas becoming overloaded with horrendously violent and pornographic scenes – the aim simply to grab the attention of a mass audience who stupidly believe in their reality.

"Sex and rape are practically indistinguishable and so degrading," he protests. "Living through the screen is equally dangerous because it deadens people to the finer sensibilities of life."

"We read in the papers

about young boys who expect girls to behave and look like porn stars.

"Nobody ever talks about affection. I do terribly hope we can combat this. I fear the genie is out of the bottle and we can't put it back."

As far as his own acclaim is concerned, he enjoys a strong readership in France without knowing exactly why.

"And the bigger the readership generally the better," he adds. "Yes, I'd love my book to go automatically into the bestsellers because it means more people are reading and talking about it. But I've never craved celebrity attention. In fact, I would hate it if I walked down the street and was stopped six times. That would drive me nuts. No, I've never wanted fame in that way."

● England's Lane. By Joseph Connolly. Quercus, £18.99

## About that beard...

CONNOLLY grimaces when you asked him about that beard, his appearance too often described as a cross between that other Hampstead resident Karl Marx and Father Christmas.

"I didn't ever consciously grow a beard," he protests. "When I was about 19 or something I inherited a really terrible electric shaver from an uncle that got red hot in your hands and leapt around."

"So whenever I shaved it just burned my chin terribly. And I had a couple of weeks off – I was working in publishing at the time – and I just stopped



PHOTO: GERALD ISAAMAN

torturing my face in this way.

"Nobody actually laughed out loud when I had two weeks of growth."

"So I just never shaved again."

To hide a weak chin?

"I do have a terribly weak chin but it is also to hide a weak personality – and I never boast of this."

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