

## FIVE QUESTIONS

Joseph Connolly

**Your new novel, *England's Lane*, is set among a row of shops on a street in Hampstead, north London, in 1959 and named after a road that still exists. What has changed there?**

Architecturally it remains unaltered, save for the generally hideous fascias. It is the customs of the shoppers that have changed. Women used to use specialist shops for essentials; now, they shop at supermarkets, so we have a Chinese restaurant, a 'gift shop' (a concept wholly unknown in the 1950s) and a 'nail bar' (ditto).

**The novel, although comic, is full of queasily revolting characters and continues your recent darker themes. Is it fair to say your work is getting more violent?**

I would not describe the book as violent. Darkness is there, alongside true love and desperate striving. The bestseller charts are awash with crime novels that are so very horribly and relentlessly violent I could not even read them, let alone write them (Martina Cole, say). My novels are not about that but because they concern ordinary people, human frailty will be there. And sin.

**You have set novels in the 1950s before. What draws you back to this**



**period? *England's Lane* certainly doesn't suggest nostalgia...**

The first third of *Love Is Strange* is set then and, although I was extremely young at the time, I found I remembered everything – smells, texture and emotions. It all

fell out of me with ease and I wrote with excitement. I knew then that I wasn't yet done with the 1950s. It was a time when things were open on the outside and more convoluted within.

**Do you feel modern comic fiction isn't taken as seriously as so-called highbrow literary fiction?**

I have always objected to the artificial division between 'literary' and 'popular'. While I in no way compare myself to the great man, Charles Dickens demonstrated that a fine novelist can be both. It is harder to make people laugh than cry and, while we cherish TV comedy and exalt its creators, in

print it remains a little suspect, I know not why.

***England's Lane*, with its peekings behind net curtains, has an 'all life is here' quality. What pleasure do you find in holding the seemingly ordinary up to the light?**

This is an important part of the novelist's job. One chooses between extraordinary characters living a humdrum life, or – which I prefer – ordinary people placed into an extraordinary situation. The everyday traumas that people will suffer, no matter how organised their existence, give us great insight into who they really are.