



‘Initially, I kept the book secret, before finally letting my wife and a few colleagues read it’

Teacher Réamann Kennedy writes about a post-ceasefire Northern Ireland in his debut book



Release: Réamann Kennedy with his novel *The Marksman's Gospel*.

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A physics teacher from Ballinascreen has recently published his debut novel. The Marksman's Gospel by Réamann Kennedy is set in a post-ceasefire Northern Ireland and follows a former IRA sniper, Conor, as he attempts to accept his past.

Conor has much on his mind: bigger themes of identity and forgiveness, as well as his relationship with a Presbyterian minister's daughter.

"I went to St Mary's Teaching College and, through no fault of theirs, I learned very little. Between the ages of 18 and 22 I was mainly interested in three things: playing sport, drinking pints, and telling yarns - and I was probably best at the third of those," says Réamann, who teaches at St Mary's Grammar School Magherafelt, when asked about his writing career.

"In later years, though, I went back to Queen's University Belfast to do creative writing evening classes, and that definitely helped give me the confidence to expand those yarns into a novel."

The clash of cultures drew the author to the story, with Northern Ireland creating tension and drama because people from different backgrounds can live only a few miles apart "while almost inhabiting different worlds".

"I grew up in Ballinascreen and, to drive anywhere else, we passed through the village of Tobermore. It's only 3.7 miles from us, yet it often struck me that I didn't know a single person from the village. Back when I was single, I often mused that there could be a good-looking, dead-on single girl living there and I wouldn't even know she existed.

"I also shared a house with a lad from Cullyhanna during college, and I stayed over there a few times after nights out. The tension in the Cullyhanna area after dark during that era was almost like an invisible force. I had the idea back then that I'd like to capture that atmosphere and put it into words. So I took those two components and expanded them into a much deeper storyline."

Touching on themes of thriller, romance and spiritual journey, The Marksman's Gospel doesn't neatly fit into one genre.

"What probably separates it from many other novels set during the Troubles is the deeper spiritual dimension running underneath the story," says Réamann.

"At its core, the novel asks whether forgiveness and personal change are truly possible for someone shaped by violence. I think the modern push towards materialism - expensive cars, gym memberships, and trying to look good on the outside - has left some people struggling on the inside. Exploring that spiritual emptiness, and the search for meaning, was something I didn't want to shy away from.

"One of the biggest challenges was constructing Conor's character arc properly," he continues.

"If a redemption story is going to work, the protagonist has to begin in a position where he fully believes in what he is doing before doubts slowly begin to emerge.

"That balance had to be handled carefully because I wanted him to feel authentic rather than forced. I also

wanted the novel to have genuine depth while still remaining entertaining and accessible to readers.

"Another challenge was keeping the book in a close, third-person point of view while still allowing readers to get to know the other characters.

"Because the story stays so closely tied to Conor's perspective, I had to reveal people gradually through dialogue, actions, and the way Conor himself interpreted them."

The father to Bridgeen, James, Lana and Lochlan and GAA coach found his main challenge to writing finding time to do so.

"I'm not a great sleeper, so I often wrote at night in the Notes app on my phone, then emailed the material to myself and tidied it up on Microsoft Word the next morning at school while eating my breakfast. I also came in on bank holidays to get full days at it. It took three years to complete," he explains.

"Initially, I kept the book completely secret before finally letting my wife, Cathy, and some teaching colleagues read it. The editing process was more gradual.

"I passed the manuscript around and gave readers a highlighter to help spot anything I might have missed. Their feedback has been really positive. They have actually been the driving force behind releasing the book to the public."

Planned as part of a trilogy, he's already a third of the way through the second novel, The Marksman's Reckoning.

"In recent months my motivation has dipped a little. I'm hoping that finally releasing the first novel, and hearing readers' reactions to it, will give me the spark to get going again."

● **The Marksman's Gospel by Réamann Kennedy is available from Amazon now, in paperback £9.99, Kindle £2.99, and free on Kindle Unlimited.**

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