

From county hurler to novelist: Meet the Co Derry teacher who wrote a novel on his phone – and launched it off a mountain

By day, Réamann Kennedy teaches physics at St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt. By night, the former Derry hurler spent three years writing a novel about forgiveness, faith and the legacy of the Troubles. Now, after an unconventional book launch went viral, he's tells Helen McGurk why he hopes *The Marksman's Gospel* finds readers across Northern Ireland



Ballinascreen author and teacher Reamann Kennedy with his four children

By Helen McGurk

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Most authors celebrate the publication of their first novel with a bookshop signing or a launch party.

Co Derry man Réamann Kennedy took a more unusual approach.

Standing on a mountain overlooking Ballinascreen, the physics teacher loaded a copy of his debut novel into a clay pigeon launcher, read the opening page aloud, counted backwards from 10 and fired it into the sky.

The video has now been viewed tens of thousands of times online, introducing readers across Northern Ireland to a man who, until recently, was quietly keeping a remarkable secret.

By day, Kennedy teaches at St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt. Before that, he spent almost a decade wearing the Derry jersey as an inter-county hurler.

Writing novels was never part of the public image.

"In truth, I didn't want anyone to know," he laughs. "I imagined sitting at a table in a hall signing books and thought, 'That's just not me.'"



Reamann Kennedy with his children and his recently published novel, *The Marksman's Gospel*

Instead, the launch reflected both his personality and the farming community where he lives. It was quirky, memorable and unmistakably local.

Yet the real story behind *The Marksman's Gospel* began not on a mountain but in the middle of countless sleepless nights.

"I'm a poor sleeper," he says. "I'd go to bed and lie awake for hours, so I started writing on the Notes app on my phone."

"I'd write a paragraph one night, then spend the next night going over every sentence until it was exactly how I wanted it."

Each morning, after getting his four young children ready for school, he'd email the latest pages to himself before arriving at St Mary's Grammar School.

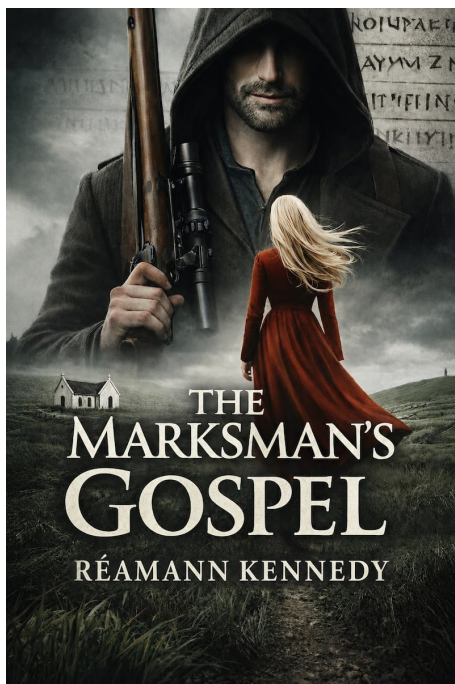
"I usually eat my breakfast at school," he says. "I'd sit at the computer, transfer everything into Word and slowly build the novel."

It took three years.

Surprisingly, writing had once been part of his life before disappearing for decades.

His fascination began with Seamus Heaney.

Two of Kennedy's uncles attended St Colm's College, Derry, alongside the future Nobel Prize winner. One day, after studying Heaney's poignant poem, *Mid-Term Break*, about the death of his younger brother, in school, Kennedy mentioned it to his father.



Reamann Kennedy's debut novel

“He said, ‘Your Uncle Tommy was with him that day.’

“It turned out my uncle had actually been left in charge of the young Seamus Heaney while they waited to be collected after school. I always felt a connection after that.”

Inspired, Kennedy began writing poetry himself before family life, teaching and hurling gradually pushed writing aside.



Reamann Kennedy's uncle Mick Kennedy, Seamus Heaney, his uncle Tommy Kennedy (who minded Heaney during the Mid Term Break Day) and Pat Gormley (uncle of Derry Football Legend Enda Gormley). The group were enjoying a day at the beach

It wasn't until around four years ago that the urge returned.

Ironically, it was another sporting chapter ending that created the opportunity.

After coaching Derry minor hurlers, Kennedy suddenly found himself without a team to prepare.

"There was a massive void," he says. "I'd always talked about writing a novel and thought, 'If not now, when?'"

The story that emerged centres on Conor, a former IRA sniper trying to rebuild his life after the ceasefires.

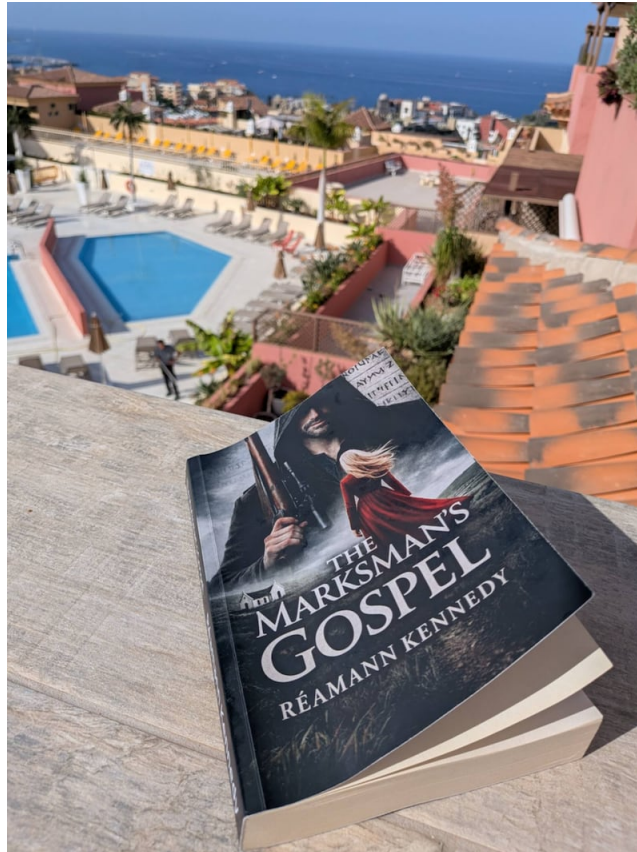
The novel opens during his final mission before moving to St Mary's University College in Belfast, where he begins teacher training and falls in love with the daughter of a Presbyterian minister while concealing his violent past.

The setting wasn't entirely imagined.

"When I was at St Mary's they organised wine-and-cheese evenings with students from Stranmillis. Catholic and Protestant student teachers got together socially, and I always thought that was a lovely idea. I wanted to use that as the starting point."

While the political backdrop is unmistakably Northern Ireland, Kennedy insists the novel isn't just about politics.

"It's really about people."



Readers have been enjoying Reamann Kennedy's debut novel, *The Marksman's Gospel*

Years spent reading newspaper archives, watching old television reports and immersing himself in the history of the Troubles gave him the confidence to write from the perspective of someone whose life had been shaped by violence.

“I’ve always loved researching. I can disappear down rabbit holes for hours reading about history, sport or the Bible.”

That lifelong curiosity explains the novel’s unusual title.

The “marksman” is obvious enough, but the “gospel” refers to another thread running through the story.

“It’s a play on Mark’s Gospel,” he explains. “The novel explores New Testament history alongside Conor’s own search for forgiveness and redemption.”

His expectations were modest, but then the reviews started arriving.

Readers spoke about crying through the final chapters. Others praised its emotional honesty.

One message particularly moved him.

“A friend told me someone had taken the book on holiday and spent the last three chapters bawling. That meant a lot because I cried writing one of those scenes.”

The emotional heart of the novel is rooted in Kennedy’s own life.

Years ago, he and his wife lost their first baby, Dara Jude, after a week in intensive care.



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Around the same time, a friend's father was dying in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

"The two families were praying together," he recalls quietly. "Our baby and his father both died on the same day.

"I genuinely don't think we'd have got through it without having something spiritual to hold on to."

He also reflects on the number of young people who have died by suicide within local communities.

"I wanted people who are struggling to find hope in the book.

"It doesn't have to make someone religious. I simply hope it reminds people there's a spiritual dimension to life that can help when everything else feels like it's falling apart."

Ironically, the biggest hurdle wasn't finding readers. It was allowing anyone to read the manuscript at all.

His wife Cathy didn't know he'd written a novel. Neither did most of his colleagues.

Eventually, two teaching colleagues persuaded him to let them read it.

"They were the people who convinced me to publish it."

Now, with around 300 copies sold and a trilogy already mapped out, Kennedy is writing the sequel, *The Marksman's Reckoning*, while a third novel, *The Marksman's Redemption*, is also planned.

Looking back, he smiles at how worried he once was about telling people he had written a book.

"I thought people would laugh at me," he says. "They've done the complete opposite. The support has been unbelievable."

The Marksman's Gospel by Réamann Kennedy is available to buy on [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

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