

Something Wicked Interview with John Connolly by Joe Vaz - 19th October 2006

JOE

How ya doing?

CONNOLLY

Is that part of the script?

JOE

No that's just my icebreaker.

CONNOLLY

Oh really? It's really casually done, I like that...I'm fine, thank you very much.

JOE

You've been all over the place, haven't you?

CONNOLLY

Yeah, it's um, I just end up running around a lot, I quite enjoy it.

JOE

Part of the gig

CONNOLLY

Yes, it's not a bad thing, but this is a very very long one. Because there are two books coming out in six months, my heart is sinking because I'm only gonna be home for four months, well actually three-and-a-half months and then the whole thing will start all over again, and um, I'm not that interesting. I'm not being falsely modest, nobody is that interesting that they should be talking about themselves for this length of time.

JOE

I think if it's your first time then it can be interesting.

CONNOLLY

Yeah, I can be interesting once.

JOE

And then it gets boring after that.

CONNOLLY

I don't get more interesting as the years go by, I find, I'm actually probably getting less intelligent it's another thing I've noticed.

JOE

It does happen, I'm four years younger than you and it's happened to me already.

CONNOLLY

(laughing)

I feel slightly re-assured.

JOE

Firstly thank you for the book, it's beautiful, I finished it a couple of days ago.

CONNOLLY

Thank you, thank you very much.

JOE

It's quite a severe move from the Charlie Parker books.

CONNOLLY

Yeah...um...it is and isn't I suppose. Well, you know, these things never, because you're the guy writing them, they never seem quite as much of a departure as they do to other people, or never seem quite as much of a left turn. I've always been interested in folk tales and fairy tales and some of the earlier books, particularly Dark Hollow, was very influenced by folk tales and fairy tales. A lot of the kind of tropes and conventions of them are running through that

story. And then they cropped up again in Nocturnes some of which almost served as a dry run for The Book of Lost Things, you know a story like The Erlking wouldn't be entirely out of place in The Book of Lost Things, it has the same kind of atmosphere about it. But I suppose the books have never been quite conventional crime novels anyway, they've always had that kind of vaguely supernatural undercurrent which is the thing that I suppose I get most in trouble for with people who are very traditional crime readers and who have a very, what I would consider to be a very narrow interpretation of what you can do with crime fiction and I'm sure they exist in any genre but I think they are certainly more pronounced in crime fiction. There are people who'd like to kind of freeze at an aspect somewhere between, the time Sherlock Holmes goes over the Reichenbach Falls and at the Death of Poirot, you know, this is the great period and nothing that's followed really can compare, you know, we're all imitators of either Christie or Chandler and I get really annoyed with that. Increasingly I'm getting annoyed with people who only read mystery fiction, because I don't, and if, and I've said this at conventions and things, you know, if your child only ate spaghetti at some point you would be quite within your right to tie it to a chair and force-feed it strawberries, you know, there are other things in the world. I read a lot of other things and it's natural that they should flow into what I write so... I never signed a contract to say that I was only going to write crime novels, I didn't make that kind of pact with anybody and not every story can be told through the medium of crime fiction, and also it's nice to stretch yourself I've tried to do something different with each

book, even within the Parker series and you know I'm going back to that for the next book and that's different again from *The Black Angel* and probably different from what's come before there, so in one way I see it as kind of a natural progression. And then there are people who will look at it and think well it bears no relation at all to what happened before, and yet I think some of themes that were in the earlier books crop up in this one, I've always been interested in children and...did I just say I'm interested in children?

(laughing)

When you reach a certain age that always comes out wrong, you know, as a 38 year-old bloke, but...um...that idea of children in danger, or children under pressure. Some people ask me, do I not like children, that was the question I was asked in an interview once, you know, "do you just hate children?" and I really don't but I can remember what I was like as a child and the vulnerability of a child. I always think it's interesting that they talk about how soldiers who are wounded on the battlefield will cry for their mothers, that's the first thing that you do. That in times of fear, or stress, or pain you revert, almost, to that child, and that child never ever goes away. That's why the little dedication at the start is quite carefully chosen, seeds of adulthood are in children anyway but in turn what was there in childhood, remains with you into adulthood. And I'm curious about all those things and the impact of the past on the present and one generation affecting the next...so it is a slight departure and yet it seems fanatically consistent, to me, but not everyone has gone for it, it was always going to be a book that was going to be...a difficult one to

convince people to read, in some ways, because it's hard to explain what it is, you know.

JOE

I often find that the mixing of genres creates a kind of hybrid, which tends to often be better, they're like the children of the originals

CONNOLLY

Well, they kind of pave the way for what comes later, and then of course there's the flipside of that, you know as Neil Young always says, "you know it's all the same song". No matter what it is, whether he's been playing with synthesizers for Trans or whether he's been getting Crazy Horse back together for, you know, that one, that one, what was it, Ragged Glory, or whether he was doing Prairie Wind, you know while they seem a little bit different essentially they're all the same song. You know Ross MacDonald used to say that a first novel is an index of the writers interests for the rest of his or her career which I always thought was really interesting in that, almost everything you're ever going to talk about, or ever going to explore is probably there in your first novel anyway. And I think he was being quite generous, because I think there's a criticism of first novelists and it's probably valid in one way, that they put too much into their books, and I mean I certainly put everything that I knew up to the point where I was thirty into my first book. What I've realised since then, is that I've been kind of picking and choosing things that were in it that I maybe didn't explore in great depth then, but that were there, and I think maybe even some of the elements of this book that I could probably point to *that* book and say *again* there's this strong female predatory

figure right from the beginning of Every Dead Thing and those figures recur in the books. And I think MacDonald was right, there was something very astute in that observation, it's what you do, you set up your stall and say "this is probably what I'm gonna do"

JOE

You spend your whole life up until that point writing your first novel, and from then on...

CONNOLLY

And you don't really learn a great deal in the interim I think. Depending on when you write it your worldview is probably, if not fully formed then, at least certainly in the process of forming. I certainly look back on my first book, for all its faults, and say, yeah, that was kind of what I was doing, I think, I was saying that these are the things that interested me and that was why I kept pulling them into the book and then for the later books you tend to pick one or two and really focus on them intently and start pulling them apart and seeing why these things arouse your interest to begin with.

JOE

Do you enjoy the fact that, with the Charlie Parker novels, you can go back to these characters and take them apart and explore more of them in detail?

CONNOLLY

This always sound weird when I say it, because people go, "oh yeah you did" but I never really expected to be published. You sometimes meet writers that think it's their duty to be published, it's not that they hope to be published. The world owes them publication. That's a very different attitude, a lot of them tend to be Americans, unfortunately,

but there is that sense. I never really had that, it's always seemed kind of a privilege to me that I would be published and then someone says to you, "oh, we quite liked that". Your first instinct is to go, oh, well hang on a minute, can I have it back, 'cause I was only joking. Let me do the proper book and you publish that. And suddenly you have to live with a lot of the stuff that was in your first book that maybe, six or seven years down the line you would've thought well I don't want to. There are probably a few things in Every Dead Thing that I've left as a stick to beat myself with, but you know there are other things, as you say you start thinking, well... You know the characters of Angel and Louis in the books were essentially almost a kind of comic relief at the start. Then suddenly they become more ambiguous and you see what actually they represent is an aspect of his [Parker's] personality or a possible life choice, and they're almost like a weapon made flesh and yet they're more complex than that again because they're not just something that he can wield, and they have their own motivations and in getting involved with them there's a kind of a transformation that occurs in both of them. It's like an exchange of genes, you know that they become slightly more morally aware but he becomes slightly more corrupt because of it. There's a question in the next book somebody asks him, "how can you tell the good from the bad when their methods are the same?" That idea that he is increasingly compromising himself, morally, because of the things that he does. So there is a richness there that I didn't really expect.

JOE

Angel and Louis are incredibly interesting characters in

terms of their ambiguity, they're not really on anyone's side. It is simply their loyalty as friends to Charlie that make them safe.

CONNOLLY

Each of them sees something attractive in the other, each of them sees something they're lacking in the other person, and they're like pieces of a jigsaw that fit together while they complement each other. The book after *The Unquiet* is probably going to be a novel just about them. I did try writing it once and it was a comic novel and I thought that wasn't what I wanted to do, and this would be slightly different, but that's probably what's gonna happen.

JOE

Where did Angel and Louis come from?

CONNOLLY

In part it was that you can never quite escape the conventions of what you do, that there are conventions to mystery fiction and how you use them, I suppose, I mean there's a very thin line between convention and cliché. Convention is the word you use when you're defending it and cliché is the word you use when you're attacking it, and it's basically the same thing, I think.

JOE

But you can manipulate those conventions.

CONNOLLY

Exactly, it depends on how you use them, and if you can infuse them with any degree of, just a tiny fragment of, individuality it's not going to be dramatically original but if you can twist it in some way. And I suppose they are on one side, as you see again and again in mystery novels, these characters that act as the strong-arm, almost, in the

books. Whether it's Hawke in the Robert B. Parker books or Win in a Harlan Coben novel there is a certain type of detective novel that uses these characters...

JOE

To do the dirty work

CONNOLLY

That's the thing, yeah, they're the ones that allow the detective to keep his hands clean. So then they become almost caricatures, they're interesting caricatures and they're often funny and often quite complex but yet on one level they are caricature and they allow a certain moral absolution of the central character and I don't think Parker gets that get-of-jail-free card through them. He doesn't, he recognises it. There's a lovely line in Dashiell Hammett's Red Harvest where someone says to the Continental Operative who has set these two gangs against each other, it's quite an interesting novel because not only has it been the basis for a western and a samurai movie, and a gangster movie, which is no small achievement, but it marks that point in which the wild west novel becomes a private eye novel where the kind of character, typified by Shane, lets say, becomes a private detective. This character from outside who intervenes on behalf of people who don't have a voice of their own, but in Red Harvest he's a very morally dubious character, you know, and Red Harvest is such a great title because by the end of it this town is awash with blood. By the end of it, all of these people are dying and someone says to him couldn't you have found a way of doing it that didn't involve so much bloodshed, and he says, "it's easier this way, easier and somehow more satisfying", which I think is lovely. That recognition that there is a kind

of release in doing this, you know. Clearly he's not doing this simply because he's like the garbage man, he likes the violence and he recognises the smell of blood in his nostrils, it's actually something that's exciting. I interviewed George Pelecanos and he said that when he writes these scenes of violence that have a real visceral impact and he says, "You know, I get a kick out of writing them. I've been writing dialogue for forty pages and then somebody pulls a gun, my pulse starts to race, and I'm only making it up" There is an appeal to it, you know, somebody like Parker who has this deep-seated anger and rage and hurt and pain and is probably not a very nice person on one level, you know, he's not somebody that is reliable in any way, there is something appealing about being able to lash out, strike out, and he likes it, he likes it, and they represent that side of him.

In *The Black Angel* he calls his girlfriend and she says, "Where are you?" And he says, "Well, I'm in Prague," and she says, "well who're with?" And he says, "I'm with Angel and Louis", and she says, "I always thought we would go to Prague together", and he says, "well, we got separate rooms". They've almost become this lifestyle choice, you know, they're two alternative lifestyles you just can't lead simultaneously, you know. They represent that side of him that wants to lash out and that enjoys it.

I have friends who dabble in firearms and I know people who are deeply committed to them, and certainly policemen would say that if you ever, because most of the cops never draw their guns, I'm not quite sure what it's like here I think you may have more cause to do it, but in general you probably don't. But I have a policeman friend

who said to me, you know it's that difference between having it and being willing to use it if you have to, and he said he'd only drawn it once, I think, in his entire career, and he'd been a policeman for 15 years or 16 years, he said when he did draw it he had every intention of shooting the gun so at that point, when it was there it was simply theoretical, when it came out, he said, "I was quite capable of doing it", and Parker is a bit like that, I think he has the capacity.

JOE

I interviewed an ex SA cop when I was in London and she had quit the British force because she felt unsafe.

CONNOLLY

Yeah, without her gun by her side.

JOE

Without her gun, yeah.

CONNOLLY

Then again I guess UK police would say that immediately as soon as there's a gun involved, on either side, the whole situation is ratcheted up a notch.

JOE

I would agree with you on that one. But back to the books.

CONNOLLY

Sorry yeah, these conversational cul-de-sacs, but they're nice, they're interesting, you know, we're taking in the scenery.

JOE

Why is the world of faeries such fertile ground for horror?

CONNOLLY

Faeries, I suppose because they're so ambiguous, I mean certainly in Irish mythology they would be very ambiguous

creatures. There is a story in Nocturnes called The New Daughter which is just about that, and although I have never set anything in Ireland it's probably the closest thing, it's one of the few ones that could be set in Ireland. My mother grew up in a village in Kerry, in North Kerry, quite a small village of about two hundred people, and she's not a superstitious person by any means at all, but there was a fairy mountain outside the village, and that was just one of the things that nobody touched, just nobody touched it at all. If you had a farm and you were tempted to knock this thing down, you just didn't. There was an understanding that you didn't go near it. She didn't say this because fairies were gonna come pouring out of it and serve you with a writ or something, but it was a hangover from something that was quite old, there was a feeling that there were some things that you just left well enough alone and if I said to my mother, "did you believe that there were fairies there", she would of said, "of course I don't believe in fairies, it's got nothing to do with fairies, it's do with just leaving stuff alone" which nowadays we'd just never do. It's what's so wonderful about M.R. James, if you want to distil the essence of M.R. James it's leave stuff alone, don't be messing with shit, okay? That's what it is, the moral of the story is do not mess with Stuff.

JOE

Let sleeping dragons lie.

CONNOLLY

Yeah, and so there is that running through Irish mythology, there is that deep distrust of fairies, if we're going to discuss just fairies as mythological entities then they are hugely ambiguous characters. That whole thing about

stealing children, you know that lovely Yeats poem about the stolen child. There is a lovely Yeats poem called The Stolen Child and it is about that;

"With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping  
than you can understand"

and it's all about that, it's a marvellously sad, sinister little piece. So that certainly comes from Irish mythology, I don't know enough about how other cultures would view it, certainly in Ireland their just dreadful, dreadful people.

JOE

You do a phenomenal amount of research and just talking to you now you also seem to have an incredible memory for...

CONNOLLY

Yeah, but if you ask me what I was doing yesterday I wouldn't be able to tell you. It's going to be a gentle slide into old age for me, like when you're talking to your Nan and she can remember the first banana after the war but can't remember where she put her glasses. I've entered that stage of my life.

JOE

How much research was involved with The Book of Lost Things?

CONNOLLY

Hardly any, after all that, which was the strange thing. The Parker books, yeah, they really are immensely frustrating because, no matter how much research you do, you're not an expert, and no matter how many experts you talk to you have to, it's almost like being a lawyer, you have to almost know the answer to the question before you ask it because

otherwise you don't know really how to interpret what you're being told all the time. No matter how much research you do a mistake or two will creep in and it's just human error and I'm getting increasingly impatient with idiots who want to then write to me and explain how wonderful they are and you think, well, you know you write 175 000 taking in everything from, the architectural principles underlying Cistercian monasteries to firearms to, you know, what trees are going to be in bloom at a certain time of year, what do you think I am Buddha, that I'm some omniscient being, you know, I have to fucking look the stuff up, you know, like any normal human being, give me a break, you know, did your mother tell you were clever, well your mother lied, you know. So it was actually rather a release writing *The Book of Lost Things*, because the only thing in it was my childhood, apart from, literally an afternoon spent in The Imperial War Museum, and reading one or two books about the Blitz to make sure that when things happened they corresponded with the time-line of the book's so you know the little things like the bombing of the church, St Giles Cripplegate, it *was* apparently that the Germans had just dropped bombs in the wrong place, they were trying to hit an oil refinery, just little things like that so that the authenticity of the time is right and now that I think of it there was actually a lot more research than I thought about it. What comic book would he have been reading, because some of them stopped printing because of the paper shortages, how many pages there would've been in the Daily Mail at the time, when his father is reading the newspaper it's getting progressively thinner because there was paper rationing. So even when it seems quite a simple

book there are inevitably questions that are raised about them, so I used a little bit of research and must've thrown away quite a lot. Compared to the Parker books there wasn't much.

It was to do with memories of my childhood and of wanting to re-work these old stories, and that came about really naturally, so it was a very organic book. I don't plan novels and this began with this image of this child, you know, everything was going to happen in that first chapter. His life was going to be turned around in the space of just a couple of paragraphs and then the stories picked themselves and the re-interpretations of them, because he was so similar to me, and I understood exactly what he was going through and the way he was thinking that when I began I thought this is the situation where a story like Hansel and Gretel is appropriate because this is the situation this child is in, not just in terms physically but also in a stage in his life where, you know, do you want to keep looking for the lost mother or do you have to realise that this is your first step into adulthood. And then a quite natural progression occurs because in most versions of Hansel and Gretel the children learn to live in the forest, it's about the transition from childhood into adulthood, they don't go back and live happily ever after with their parents, in fact they live happily ever after in the forest, they learn to accommodate themselves to the adult world. So if the whole book is a creation of David's subconscious, essentially he is picking bits and pieces from the books in his room and his mind is attempting to...it's like dreaming, you know, where your mind starts fitting bits and pieces and it's essentially what he's doing. Then it's quite natural that some of these stories

have a slightly different ending because he's trying to find a meaning, and coax a meaning out of them which is why certain stories appeal to certain children. In Hansel and Gretel there are two diverging choices. The girl realises that there is no going back, that this is the way of the world now, and the boy can't, he keeps going back again and again, which is what David is doing all through the book. He wants his mother figure back, he doesn't want the substitute, he wants the one that he has lost and in doing that the boy dooms himself, because he meets this surrogate mother figure and this surrogate mother figure, as it's quite clear, no good can come of this, you know, that this is a woman with a knife on the carving board.

So all of those things occurred quite naturally, and in that sense it was a pleasure to write, not that the Parker books are not a pleasure to write, but you're eking stuff out and it's a very slow process and with this one that wasn't quite the case. It was a very complex book on one level but the complexities were solved quite organically, I think.

JOE

It's just such an incredibly original take on these creatures that are ingrained in the subconscious. I mean I know exactly what Trolls look like and they don't look anything like your trolls but it still works.

10:12

CONNOLLY

Sure, yeah.

JOE

It's an incredibly brave...

CONNOLLY

And foolhardy, actually a guy from a crime mag in England who had read the book came up to me and said, "that's a very brave book to write" and you know brave always comes with the words "and foolhardy", you know. Brave is the charge of the light brigade, you know, that's what brave is, whatever you do, just don't call it that, that's the kiss of death. But really, it was a book written out of contract, mainly because I didn't think I could explain it to my publishers anyway and if I did they wouldn't know what I was talking about, it had to be written and they had to see it and then decide if they were going to like it or not. I'm fortunate in that the crime novels have sold well, well enough, that you buy yourself a little leeway sometimes. The same thing happened with Nocturnes, you know Nocturnes wasn't part of the contract, was given to my publishers for nothing, I said I'll take royalties on it if it sells as long as you want to publish it. Sometimes you need to do stuff because it's important to you as a writer and Nocturnes was that and The Book of Lost Things was like that as well. It was something that I just really really wanted to write, and look if they'd rejected it and said it was horrible and your reader's won't get it...I remember reading that Val McDermid gave a book of short stories to Harper Collins about two years ago and they rejected it on the grounds, not on any quality grounds, but they rejected it on the grounds that it wasn't in their plans for her as a crime writer.

That's just extraordinary, but not unusual in publishing and so I recognised that that might happen to me, that Hodder and Simon and Shuster would be well within their rights to say to me, "the money we've spent up till now has been on

a crime writer and we allowed Nocturnes because it really didn't cost us very much, but this is something that is going to actively alienate a certain proportion of your readership", or there's the risk that it's going to alienate and that never really arose. But to make sure that you don't scare yourself off, you sometimes have to burn your bridges a little bit and not taking a contract was one way and also to recognise that, you know, I could still afford to pay my bills. It wasn't going to be that bad and The Unquiet was going to be finished in time to be published next year and I could take the hit, if that's what happens. I was prepared to take that. And thankfully I didn't have to, there's no pleasure if that happens. Inevitably there would be a souring of my relationship with my editor and my publisher. It's not that the Parker books aren't personal, but there's now more of a risk in doing something different, and then at the same time there isn't because of you've built up a readership and some of them are going to go along with you.

JOE

But don't you find that a creator's longevity comes from evolution.

CONNOLLY

I would agree, and certainly the musicians that I have admired over the years have been kind of in a process of constant change. But you know in mystery fiction there is a sense of which people like their yearly fix, and not in a bad way, I mean I love James Lee Burke, I just think Burke is great, I know exactly what I'm going to get when I get a James Lee Burke book. When I pick up a Robert B. Parker book, I know precisely why I'm paying for that book. In

Parker's case, I really like his books because I know it's going to be a great pulp read, you know, it's going to be fun for two hours on the plane. The plots not going to stretch me, but the dialogue is going to be great, 'cause that's what he does. And there are readers who are like that about Burke, and they don't like it when you deviate. And you do risk alienating them. They're quite fickle. Like dating bad women.

JOE

Your dialogue is exceptional; have you ever thought about writing a screenplay?

CONNOLLY

Thank you, that's very nice of you to say, um, no, no, I enjoy doing dialogue, it's fun. And dialogue, curiously, if it's going well it writes itself quite quickly. It's always honed, I mean that's the great thing about writing books, is you get to seem really witty, when you're not. You get to be the guy who comes out with the quip, even if you think about it six months later you go back into the draft and stick it in and it just seems great. So everything is honed, but there are times when if you're writing descriptive prose, essentially, you're trying to conjure up mood and things, then there is a release in writing dialogue, in much the same way that Pelacanos was talking about when discussing writing very visceral action scenes. Especially if it's got an edge of humour in it there is a rhythm to it that occurs quite naturally, and there's a pleasure in doing it.

JOE

You do the sucker-punch thing very well, in *The Book of Lost Things*, you had me in hysterics with the Dwarves and

five seconds later I was scared shitless.

CONNOLLY

You know, you often get really self-critical, and that Snow White scene seems really out of place but the dwarves are just funny. I thought that David would have seen these little guys and again you've got to remember that it is all in his subconscious and I just think that a) although it is never mentioned in the book, he would have seen, as a child at that time, he would have seen Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. There would have been that awareness of that slightly Disney-fied version of it. It would already have been in British cinemas by that point. I didn't want to labour a point and say, "a year earlier he had seen Snow White and the Seven Dwarves and liked it", but I think our image of that story is coloured by that film to a certain degree. You know in some of the versions they're seven thieves, seven criminals living in the forest. They're not always little happy guys, you know, Sneezy's and Dopey's and things. Some of them are actually quite nasty. So there were two possibilities there, to go along with a bunch of nasty, homicidal little men or to do it friendly mode as they follow David and for them to appear and suddenly they're actually quite benevolent. They're not entirely benevolent because they are homicidal little men, but they're not homicidal towards him.

(smiling)

They're just frustrated.

JOE

You do get worried, as a reader, when they appear you think, "oh crap, there's seven of them" but then they turn

out to be quite nice.

CONNOLLY

(laughing)

Yeah, quite nice and communists. But that's partly because he's trying to make a vague effort to be adult, as I did when I was a child and thinking "I should really read adult books and I should try to be knowledgeable. I will attempt to read something profoundly difficult", and then you go back to reading Ian Fleming books.

But also I remember Tom Waits did a marvellous version of Heigh Ho Heigh Ho for a Disney album called Stay Awake and it is almost done as a kind of a Marxist work song and it always stuck with me and I thought -

JOE

I've got to try and find that.

CONNOLLY

It's a marvellous album, it's got this marvellously eclectic mix of people, but Tom Waits' one is -

JOE

I'm a huge fan.

CONNOLLY

He's got this thing called Orphans coming out, next month, which is a 3 CD collection of un-released material of stuff, off cuts from albums that didn't make it and side projects that he's done.

I got to see him, a friend of mine is a tour manager, he writes detective novels -

JOE

Now you're just making me jealous, you're interview Stephen King *and* you've seen Waits...

CONNOLLY

I know, I know...

JOE

That's it I'm gone.

CONNOLLY

I've always wanted to see Tom Waits and I'd given Paul a quote for his book, and I'm not one of these people who tries to wangle free tickets but I gave him a call and I said, "Listen, I'll buy tickets, for the love of God, he's doing just one gig, can I go" and so he got me tickets and I went along and Waits was great, he was just really fun.

JOE

Have you heard his song Idi Amin with Chuck E. Weiss, "do you know what I Idi Amin", it's hysterical.

Anyway, we're getting side-tracked again...

(reading)

The book manages to be scary, creepy, funny and absolutely horrific all at the same time, how do you do that?

CONNOLLY

(laughing)

I don't know. I wish I knew that. There really isn't a plan. To use the Walt Disney analogy again, he used to say, "I make movies so I can make more movies" and so at some point you recognise that there's that nasty commercial imperative. You need to be at least successful enough that they will allow you to publish another book. And yet the other side is that if you have any kind of self-respect you want to write stuff that you wouldn't be ashamed to read yourself. Occasionally I'll read a book and I'll think, the guy who wrote this wouldn't read it, you know, he thinks I'm dumb, and I *am* dumb because I paid money for it but,

he wouldn't read this, it's just been thrown to me like you throw a bone to a dog.

So I've always just tried to write stuff that I if I picked it up in a store I wouldn't want to run to the guy's house with a burning torch and a pitchfork and demand my money back from him, you know, on pain of death.

The very least you want someone to put your book down and say, "well I'm glad I didn't spend my money on beer". Rather than saying "\$8, what would I have got for \$8, what would I have got for R179" - in South Africa, quite a bloody lot, for the cost of a book. You want to make sure that you at least give them that. You look for so much more from a book but in the end people can spend that money on other things you're induced to provide a minimum standard of entertainment and after that it's gravy.

JOE

It was a lot of fun to read.

CONNOLLY

(smiling)

Well, I'm glad.

JOE

What scares you?

CONNOLLY

Nothing terribly, I'm not scared of bugs or insects or enclosed spaces. Probably seriously, I have a really profound fear of cancer.

Cancer took my father and I remember watching what it did to him. And it was so appalling that it's cropped up again and again in books. The description of Parker's mother

dying in Every Dead Thing, is my father. It's exactly the way my father died.

I remember going to the hospital, because I had been working in America at the time, and my mother had left a message saying that my father was ill. And I called home and she said, "you really need to come home, he's not going to live for much longer". And you know he'd been up and around when I left, he wasn't - he'd had a pain in his back, which somebody diagnosed, in that wonderful way that doctors do, as a trapped nerve. He had cancer running through every organ in his body and they said "trapped nerve" and prescribed solpadine and panadol.

So I came home and my mother wasn't home when I got there, and I dumped my bags and went up to the hospital. I went to one of the nurses and asked to be pointed in the right direction and she said Ward B or whatever and I couldn't find him. I literally couldn't find him, I went around to all the beds and looked at everybody in there, and I couldn't find him. And I went back out and said, "I'm really sorry, but you've sent me to the wrong ward", and she said, "he's in there" and she walked me up to this person that I didn't know, who was lying in this bed. In the space of 3 months it had just eaten him alive from the inside.

And I know if your father has that kind of cancer, it's cancer that just riddles you, your likelihood is increased because of it. I just think it's appalling, that idea of your system being turned against yourself, I find it just terrifying.

And you know someone says, "so you put it in the story and was it cathartic and did it help?"

Not in the slightest

(He laughs)

It really doesn't, you just think it's really just horrible. All the things that can wrong with your body.

I find David Cronenberg movies very difficult to watch.

That fascination with the potential, and not just the potential but the *actual* corruption of the flesh. And I've also just reached that age in my life where I've realised that I'm mortal, and I think it only hit me a few years ago. I was in an accident. I thought I was gonna be the first, you know like most people, I thought, "I'm gonna be the guy who beats the odds here", you know, I was looking good here, and I was in an accident at Christmas and I ended up in a hospital having an operation early in the morning before Christmas Eve. And I was in the public ward in this Dublin Hospital with people screaming and crying and I thought, "this is how it ends, inevitably we all end up here". And I've reached that point in my life where I no longer bounce, you know where you just - it's like a snowball falling - splat.

"I went parachuting when I was 18 and I hit the ground, as you do. I landed in a field where they were only sowing fucking rocks, I don't know what this farmer thought he was going to make out of it, but all he had sown on this field were rocks and I was only a couple of years and it hurt like a bitch. If I land on a field like that now, you may as well just put a cross on top of me, because I'm not going to be leaving it, you know, just put earth over me."

JOE

What horror will you not write about? What is taboo for

you?

CONNOLLY

The Unquiet is about child abuse. But there's not a single explicit scene, at no point do you see a child being abused, at no point is there anything other than a doctor discussing the difficulties of diagnosing it, that's the only thing. And it's one scene. So, I am very aware that there are certain things that I find difficult to write about. Interestingly those taboos kind of change. Every Dead Thing wouldn't be like it is if I wrote it now, it would be very much less violent and much less explicit, and I think there's a recognition that less is more. I find Clive Barker very difficult to read, I don't like reading Clive Barker, as a human being he's probably a very nice man, but I find, say The Books of Blood, and things, too difficult. That sexual horror. I don't find it disturbing, I just don't understand it really. It's always seemed to me, particularly in English people, to be like a flipside of the Carry On films. That there is that horror of physicality and sexuality and it's not something I particularly have. So I don't think I would ever write that kind of book, it's not something that at any point resonates with me and I would be doing it just to shock and I don't have any desire to do it. So I think that where I draw the line tends to be in aspects of sexuality and in sexual horror. It's not something that I particularly want to gravitate towards.

JOE

It's just not necessary.

CONNOLLY

That makes it sound like Mary Whitehouse - "ooh, it's just not necessary, the sex on "Play for Today", it's just not

necessary. No, no, bring back the old “Black and White Minstrel Show”, that was entertainment. They were funny, they were like black people, but they weren't"

You're right, you know, there are just some things that - you know, I can write something like Nocturnes about the cancer, which is something that I find quite genuinely horrific, but you're always treading that line trying not to exploit stuff, and yet writers will constantly do it, especially if you write anything like horror or crime fiction, you're always going to overstep that line at some point.

You just do, because you're treading it so carefully.

Because you are trying to arouse quite intense emotions in people and nobody is a perfect judge of it and people will just overstep the mark. So Barker just doesn't do it for me. Clearly it is just a difficulty that I have.

JOE

I used to be a big fan, but the older I get the less it appeals to me. Who are your current favourite authors?

CONNOLLY

What am I looking forward to, or what have I read lately. I really did like the new Stephen King book. I think Lisey's Story is very slow, but quite beautiful.

JOE

It's one of the things I love about King that most people dislike.

CONNOLLY

(smiling)

He takes his time. This one is very, very deliberate, it's the best work his written. There's nothing in there that isn't there for a reason and it just feels like a book that should've taken years to write. I think it's a fabulous book. I really

liked that.

I like James Lee Burke, as I said earlier, mainly because he was such a big influence on me and his prose style was an influence on me, and I'm not one of these authors who likes to pretend that,

(in posh accent)

"I'm influenced by nobody, I am an original.", you know, I am a product of all the writers that I have read. The good as well as the bad.

I'm looking forward to Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*. This very strange novel about this father and son. It seems like an extraordinary change of pace for a guy who was writing modern Westerns and recently wrote his very strange crime-novel *No Country For Old Men*.

So I lean towards fiction, but not necessarily fiction in the genre that I write about, and really I'm still a voracious reader and perhaps in the most recent years I don't read quite as much crime fiction as I used to. There was a time when the only thing that I would read was crime fiction and now I get much more fulfilment from other types of fiction. I've gradually been reading a bit more sci-fi and fantasy, maybe because I didn't know much about it. So when I go into bookstores and sign, especially with this book because it was moving into kind of that area, the woman or guy who was looking after the fantasy section would say, "well I haven't read you before, but I like this" and so I've been asking them for recommendations. I've read two Neil Gaiman novels this year, *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, *Neverwhere* I really liked actually.

JOE

I loved American Gods

CONNOLLY

American Gods, yeah, it was really interesting but I thought there were some fabulous things in Neverwhere.

Joe Haldeman's The Forever War was suggested to me as a great piece of Sci-Fi. I still have trouble with sci-fi. It's certainly quite philosophical yet hard sci-fi and I wasn't - it didn't do it for me.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FORUM MEMBERS FOR  
JOHN CONNOLLY

From Shanks:

Somewhere in the forum exists a discussion on how we come up with our ideas for stories, it'd be really neat to know what gets a well published author started on a story.

Is it a character, an overheard conversation, a scene, a nightmare, a what if scenario or the need to pay the rent?

JOHN

I tend not to plan books, what will usually happen is that I'll have an idea for the first chapter, or for the prologue; For The Unquiet, say, I was wondering the museum at The Maine Historical Society and there was a junkyard which was more a less the accumulated detritus of Maine history and modern Maine history so old fairground signs and old posters and all sorts of knick-knacks and one of the things he'd acquired was the possessions of a guy called Dave 'The Guesser' Glovsky, and Dave the guesser was a little strange fat man who used to have a booth on Old Orchard Beach.

And his possessions, as far as I could see amounted to a sign, which had been quite madly written saying "Dave

'The Guesser' Glovsky" and a set of big weighing scales that could take a human being and a selection of rubber bands that he would give out as prizes. Now what Dave the guesser would do, is you would come in and he would guess stuff about you, right up until the 80's you know, we're not talking about the 20's, he was doing this until relatively recently, and he would guess your weight or the brand of cigarette you smoked, or the car you drove, or your job, just by taking a quick look at you, e could tell you that. And you paid him 25c and if he got it right you lost your 25c and if he got it wrong he would give you a packet of rubber bands or hair ringlets that were worth about half-a-cent. So regardless he was up 24 and a half cent, but there was obviously an element of professional pride because he wanted to get it right. That must've been fascinating, because he wasn't just a side-show gimmick, he must've been a man who did it for about 60 years. He constantly looked at other human beings, he'd be looking at their nails, or the dirt on their fingers, or the stains on their shorts or the way they walked or listening for little words that they said that would give them away, and so that was the beginning of The Unquiet, this man standing on a beach, reaching the end of his life, realising that he can't do this anymore, that his time is passing, and getting this smell in his nostrils and turning round and seeing this stranger with to quarters in his thumbs and saying, "I want you to guess what I do for a living". And spotting the blood just in there and the dirt on his nails and this look in his eyes. That he's got these three scars, where somebody has obviously tried to take a fork and ripped through his flesh, and he looks at him and says, "you know, I can't say what you do for a

living".

And the guy says, "Well, you know, I've paid my money like everybody else, and I don't want no rubber bands, I want you to guess right".

And that was the beginning of that. Very rarely do I pick up a newspaper story, I'll pick up little bits like, I read something in an American newspaper earlier this year about how suicide rates among white men increase if they listen to country & western music. You know, that's a discussion in a book, there's three pages of dialogue written, that's my day's work done on the basis of that. So little things like that I come up with but the books, the villains, sometimes they just come out of nowhere, The Crooked Man, or Pudd in The Killing Kind; not planned, they're just a natural product of what you begin with, you begin writing that chapter and that raises the ideas for the next chapter. Some people are great plodders but I'm not, I tend to trust my subconscious. Find the characters and the book is in there somewhere, you know, it'll find it's way out, as long as you keep hacking away at it, it'll come out. Ekhmez:

I would like to know how writing and editing is done. Does he write a few pages, then edit the farg out of it, or does he complete a chapter, or the book before he starts.

JOHN

Everybody is different. George Pelecanos, say, would write a thousand words, do something else in the afternoon, come back in the evening, revise those thousand, out it aside and move on to the next thousand and that's his editing done.

I will go from start to finish on a draft, I'll keep plugging away, not look back on what I've done and that will usually

take 6 to 8 months, depending on the book, maybe a little bit longer, just doing that first draft. Then I will finish it on, say, a Tuesday, Wednesday morning I go back to chapter one and start again. I'll maybe do, one chapter a day and go through it with a fine-tooth comb then go back to the start again when that's done. Each draft gradually takes a little less time but it's standard now about a dozen start to finish drafts before my editor sees it, and Every Dead Thing was forty because that took place over a period of five years, but that's the way I do it. Hemingway used to say, "There's no great writer's, just great re-writers".

TD:

I'd like to know how much effort on his behalf goes into publicizing his work, and how that compares to when he got his first novel published.

JOHN

Well, things like the website are mine, the discussion forum, anything to do with the internet, it's not your publisher saying you need to set up a website, or you need to stay in touch with the people who read your books. I like staying in touch with them, I like giving people a chance to discuss other books, not just mine. I've said before, that it would be great if it was an Homage to John site but then I'd have to re-christen it so it's fun when some of them will go on and criticize the books or talk about somebody else, but that's fine if that's what they want to do.

Publishers don't make you tour. They can't put a gun to your head and put you on a plane and drug you like a small dog and suddenly you wake up and you're in Pakistan or something, you know, you have to be willing to go, but by and large, if you're asked you're fortunate.

So I'm very involved, I'm involved with the way the books look, things like the CD's that came out with the first editions of the American version of *The Book of Lost Things*, with music featured in or that inspired my books, and next year *The Unquiet* is going to have the second volume of the CD everywhere, so you'll have it South Africa, Britain, Australia. So that's mine, I paid for that, it was something I wanted to do. Little things like that, I'm always thinking in terms of whether there is any kind of added value you can give to people who read your books. It's just a nice way to send thank you because you took the time to register on the website, or you took the time to come out on some poxy evening to hear me talk, so those things, but I like it.

I like that I'm given a chance to justify what I do or to explain it and say, this is actually where I'm coming from.