



Nick Laird

Utterly Monkey
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Utterly Monkey is your first novel, but you've also published a well-received book of poetry. Was it always your intent to write longer-form fiction? If not, what inspired the decision?

I'd written stories at college but the demands of a job as a lawyer put a stop to that. I was still reviewing novels and writing poetry in spare moments (lunchtimes usually) but I didn't have the necessary contiguous hours to write anything longer. I took a sabbatical from work to do a visiting fellowship at Harvard in 2003, and knew that if I was going to write a novel, it would have to be then. I wrote the first hundred or so pages of it there, snowbound in a flat in Cambridge, Mass., and then finished the rest back in London.

Your own biographical details (ex-attorney, Northern Irish by birth, London dweller) collide suggestively with those of your protagonist, Danny Williams. To what extent were you constructing your fiction on the facts of your life?

There are certain similarities of circumstance between us at the start of the novel, but everything (and everyone) in the book is imagined. It's true to say that I did take my own life as a point for the book, as it were, to jump from, but after that you have to keep adding characters and events just to see what will happen.

The action of *Utterly Monkey* is extremely compressed – why did you decide to confine the action of the book to five days?

There were lots of reasons really. I was trying to make the book compelling, and I thought that setting it in a tight chronology – over the course of a long, weird weekend – might help. I was wary of writing the novel that I thought people might expect from an Irish poet. I wanted it to be exciting rather than ponderous.

What do you think readers of your work who are not familiar with the history of the conflict between Northern Ireland and England will glean from the events you explore in *Utterly Monkey*?

I'm not sure. A novel's grace is that it doesn't lend itself to précis easily. Fiction allows space enough for competing thoughts and opinions to exist together. In fact, I suppose I'd hope a reader might glean, if anything, that there are a lot of competing thoughts and opinions existing in the space of Northern Ireland, and that the usual received narratives surrounding Ireland and Britain are much more subtle and compromised than is generally understood.

Here's a link for a piece I wrote earlier this year for the London Review of Books. It deals more directly with current Northern Irish politics. I think you have to pay for it.

(http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n09/lair01_.html)

Will there be more fiction in your future? What about poetry?

I'm at work at the moment on a second novel, and have just finished the first draft of a second book of poems.