

THE INVISIBLE ONES - talking about the book

Quercus Q and A

Q. This novel is very different from THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES. Where did the idea come from?

It was about 10 years ago that I had an idea which was, then, an idea for a film – it was a story about a private eye, and it grew out of my love of film noir – Chandler, Woolrich and Hammett... but I liked the idea of joining some of the themes of film noir – the brooding romanticism, the melancholy and stylish pessimism – and marrying that to details of normal life and bringing it down to earth a bit. I'd been reading a lot of Haruki Murakami, who does that sort of thing beautifully. But it is similar to the last one in that it begins as a mystery – someone is missing, and someone else needs to find out what's happened.

What I tried to do with this story was create a mystery whose solution could emerge somehow balanced between two first person narratives – neither of the main characters would have all the information, but between the two you could find the answer.

Q. Your private investigator, Ray Lovell, isn't exactly a 'super-sleuth'. He's very human and he makes mistakes. Was that your intention?

Yes. I don't like – or I'm not interested in – the idea of too much competence. I always have the feeling, reading Chandler, or watching films like 'The Big Sleep', that I don't get how he solves the mystery. There's an element of smoke and mirrors, and so I wanted to take a noir-ish story and really try to understand the thought processes of the detective. When I was researching this stuff, it seemed to me that a lot of successful outcomes happen because of a random stroke of luck – like a phone call from out of the blue, not from great ingenuity. I like people getting things wrong. I have sympathy for that.

Q. When did you decide to put a Romany family at the centre of your story?

This family was always at the centre of it - I've long had a fascination with Romany Gypsy culture, and the idea of a society that is somehow 'in-between'. There's a lot of 'in-between-ness' in the book: there is a Romany Gypsy family, who are both English and not-English (in that they have Balkan roots); and being travelers they are part of general society but also not of it... This family is also on the margins of traveler society, so they are on the margins of the margins.

The detective, Ray, is half Gypsy, so he is both in and out of that world, and JJ is a teenager, and teenagers are, in a way, marginal to adult society!

Q. How does the novel begin?

It begins with the private detective, Ray, waking up in a hospital bed, after a car crash but he can't remember anything much about it. Then the action switches back three months to the events that led up to the crash. Like a classic *noir* detective story, Ray receives a visitor at his office, a man called Leon Wood. He's a Gypsy and he's looking for his daughter, Rose, who disappeared some years before. She married into another Gypsy family, the Jankos, who are rather isolated, so Ray has to go into a world that is enclosed and secretive, and try to find out what happened.

Q. There's a second narrator. Would you tell us about him?

The second narrator is called JJ. He's a 14-year old Gypsy boy. I thought it would be interesting to tell the story of a mystery from one outside perspective, and one inside perspective. The story also charts a kind of coming of age for JJ.

Q. Were there any particular Romany myths or legends that found their way into the novel?

Yes, there was one in particular. I came across a Gypsy myth; it's from Romania but it's known here – and it seemed to dovetail strangely well with the idea that was coalescing. It goes like this:

Once, in the land far away, the Demons made war on the Fairies, and the Demons were winning. The King of the Demons said if the beautiful Queen of the Fairies agreed to marry him, he would let them live. For the good of her people, she did, but she could not bear the sight of him; he had to drug her before he could touch her.

So, the King and Queen had nine children; but they were the most terrible children the world has ever seen, for they were demons who cause all the diseases of mankind. There was Melalo, a two-headed bird who made men mad and violent; and there was Minseskro, who caused illnesses of the blood. But the worst of all was the ninth child, Poreskoro. Even the King of the Demons was frightened by this child, but I'm not going to say why because it would give away too much of my story! You'll need to read it to find out what was unique about the ninth child.

Q. What were your reasons for setting the novel in the 80s?

There was a story reason and a personal reason, I think. The story reason was that in the 80s we didn't have the internet or mobile phones, and that has a great impact on the way a detective works and speeds things up. I wanted things not to progress too fast, or for the characters to communicate too easily. The other reason was that I grew up in the 80s, and I could give JJ some of my pop preferences – he's a big Smiths fan.

Q. Was it a relief not to have to do quite so much research for this book, or did you have to do just as much?

I think I thought there wouldn't be so much research, but there was at least as much, spread over those 10 years. I think research is like compost – you want to leave it until you can't see where it came from.

Q. What are you planning to write next? Will it be historical or contemporary?

The book I'm working on now is historical; it's set around the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century. It's also going to be quite cold!