



Reading Group Gold

Darling Jim

Christian Moerk

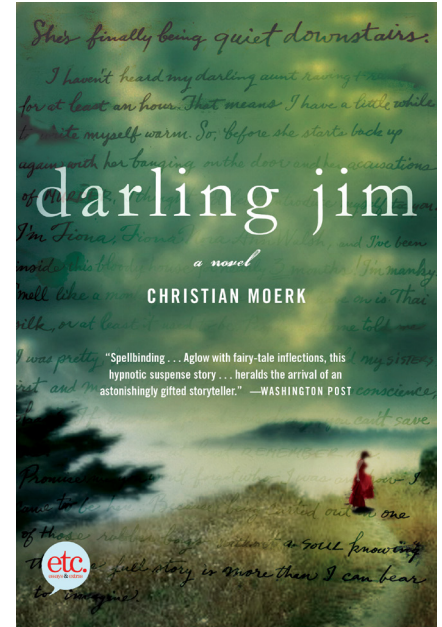
A Conversation with Christian Moerk

You grew up in Denmark, and have lived in Vermont and New York. While you've said that this story grew from an actual Irish newspaper story, it obviously could have been relocated elsewhere. What was the draw of Ireland itself for you? And with so many great Irish authors already out there — including a great batch of Irish crime/suspense writers — were you at all intimidated by stepping into that territory as an outsider of sorts?

I really wasn't intimidated by the Irish literary talent, from Joyce and on down to Roddy Doyle and Pat McCabe; perhaps I ought to have been. I don't read crime novels, really. Not because I have anything against them, it's just that they're often narrowly focused on finding the killer. I, on the other hand, want to tell a larger story of the people he touches on his way. I just stayed focused on my story, because if I'd sat down and thought about the local literary giants in the least, I would have been terrified, probably, and given up the ghost.

I have to admit that, on the face of it, it sounds pretty absurd to have a Danish guy living in America for 22 years go to Ireland and take on the language as his own. Probably just as well that I went and did it without thinking about that part too much. As it was, I felt energized about setting a story in a country I've loved and admired for many years ever since flying back and forth between Los Angeles and Dublin as a lowly film executive. But naturally, I was an outsider, and I used that in the book; the way that poor Niall can never quite penetrate what's going on around him; the way people regard him with suspicion — all this was drawn from my own experience of holing up in a small boarding house in the winter and spring of 2007 and writing like a fiend, fueled only by Mrs. Crimmins's scrambled eggs and tea, while trying to avoid her curiosity about why I had really come to Castletownbere.

Ireland does become the invisible extra character in the novel, doesn't it? Not every country can pull that off. Ireland, way out in its outermost regions, has resisted modernity. For me, it's still one of the only countries in Europe that retains unruly smudges of history you can't gentrify or modernize with a penstroke or a community plan (which is why I put Niall in Ballymun; a place that will be proudly North Side no matter how many cappuccinos they serve). Ireland's remoteness from the Continent, its recent violent political history, and its willingness to embrace folk tales and myth (I often had dinner guests make up narrative songs about the day's events, which they performed at the drop of a hat) all make it ideally suited for my story of wolves transgressing the way human beings do. That's why I don't agree that the story could have been set any place but in Ireland; the family patters, traditions and respect are all so particular that the interplay between Aunt Moira and her three nieces would not have been believable if I'd set the book in, say, upstate New York or New Hampshire. Small-town Irish religion, even faded, is an important underpinning that doesn't exist any place else, either. West Cork is the only place this could have happened in my mind, anyway.



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The novel draws on the seanchaí tradition and includes in its own structure several layers of storytelling. Even a few pages into the book, we get Desmond's story (which also includes the townspeople's various takes about what might have happened to the dead women), the beginning of Niall's story (which includes him wanting to be a storyteller of a sort himself with his artwork), then Niall reading Fiona's book, which is not only marked by a desire to tell "the true full story" but also relates its own fascination with the storyteller at the novel's core; and then Jim himself with his own stories, another layer. And that's only the beginning of where all this goes. Was this structure something you'd planned from the start? If not, how did those layers emerge in your own quest to tell this tale?

I planned it all from the start. As a big fan of Kurosawa's 1951 film "Rashomon," in which a violent incident between a samurai, his bride, and a robber are recounted from each person's point of view, I wanted to attempt a multi-layered story in which each scene becomes part of a daisy chain; the more you pull on it, the more will be revealed. But I will tell you that the characters often grabbed more space than I'd planned for them originally; Bronagh the dour, guilty cop, for instance elbowed her way in and showed she could be more than just a plot point. Likewise, desperate Aunt Moira took on many more colors once I'd decided not to treat her as a villain; her need to be loved made her multi-faceted, which is much more fun. But even with the structure I'd laid out – I always write a 75-page treatment before I start writing the book; it's a chronological spine, complete with plot transitions, some dialogue, and main dramaturgical points – the story itself shifted direction a few times, forcing me to stay on track. Like a Russian doll, really.

While oral and written storytelling takes center stage, there's a strong visual element to the narration as well. You've worked in filmmaking yourself and written about films and filmmakers. How did that background in the visual arts impact your work as a novelist?

I think it'd be dishonest to deny that I think very visually about introducing each scene. Naturally, as you can see, I often become a camera made from flesh and blood when I peer over the ridge to see the lights on a graveyard poor Niall is about to walk near, or see how the bay has been swept clean of boats; I do use the visual medium to ground each scene before diving into each person's psyche. It's probably second nature. I don't think of it as I do it. I find it natural to set the scene. Anything else feels like cheating.

Darling Jim first appeared in your native Denmark. Did the book change at all as you translated it for English-language readers?

I should clarify that I wrote Darling Jim in English first, not the other way around. The 2007 Danish version, then, was the translated version (and I translated the novel myself). This is because I write all my novels in English first, then translate them right afterward for the Danish home market. So, in other words, the Danish version was not the original, even though it was published first. That's why I'm so delighted to finally have someone read the story exactly as it was intended.

I couldn't do a straight translation from English into Danish, because the languages and the tools they have in their idiomatic arsenal are so dissimilar that I had to re-shape many expressions to fit – in this case – Danish ears. Swearing, for instance, takes on a different tone in West Cork than it would in Copenhagen. Ireland is filled with local expressions that are untranslatable, such as "gobshite" or "manky." That meant I had to invent some, or jam existing Danish one into the same hole to see if



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they'd fit. My U.S. publisher has retained all the Irish-isms and resisted the urge to Americanize the dialogue, which I'm so grateful for – anything else would have been a disaster.

Most readers in Denmark still have no idea I conceive and write in English first – they're convinced I start in Danish. And most Americans have looked for the “translated by” credit somewhere and have been confused not to find it. And the answer is simple. It's just me and my bifurcated head.

[Footnote] Christian Moerk's conversation with Art Taylor was originally published on the blog Art & Literature (artandliterature.wordpress.com), and an extended version of this conversation can be found there. Reprinted by permission.

Christian Moerk On writing Darling Jim

Darling Jim, just as he does to unsuspecting townspeople in the book, snuck up on me by degrees. It was about four years ago, and I found myself in Dublin, Ireland writing for an Irish TV show. I missed my flight back to the States, and was stuck for a while. An old friend took pity. “Come down to County Cork,” he told me, laughing. “You'll like Castletownbere.”

I had been to Ireland several times before, in an earlier life as a movie executive for Warner Bros. in Los Angeles, and was dispatched to overlook films like the historical drama “Michael Collins” and the small, scary “The Butcher Boy.” As someone born and raised in Copenhagen, Denmark, I instantly loved not only something familiar I could see with my own eyes – locals playing possum trying to draw you out, and good-natured teasing of strangers like me – but something more powerful:

I was drawn to Ireland's secrets. To what I could only begin to see inside my head.

So when I arrived in the small fishing village of Castletownbere, I saw it spilling over with hidden stories: A long, narrow main street was home to a few pubs, and the air was filled with seagulls' screams. What did people dream about here? What did they love? And what might they fear more than death itself? I walked around for days, listening to teenagers often speaking not English, but Irish, to each other. I soon found the parts of town not meant for tourists: Two derelict graveyards, both at the edge of town, whispered something that could become a story. Before I left my friend's house, I saw a kid on an old motorcycle rattling by on the road, and a character began taking shape in my head. But he had no personality to go with it yet. No flesh, bone, or desire.

I found that desire elsewhere, at another Irish friend's wedding, set in an ancient ruin deep in the rolling hills of the Midlands: A traditional storyteller – a so-called seanchaí – sat all the guests down and began telling us about how the wee folk of the forest were still out there, somewhere, just out of reach. I left already merging the wizened storyteller and the young man on the motorcycle. What if a handsome raconteur arrived in a sleepy town and gradually began to bedevil and charm everyone? I liked it. But on the way back, I still wasn't satisfied. Because who would fight back? Who would rise up and try to resist that handsome smile, the sexy promises, and that beautiful, doomed story?

A random article in an Irish newspaper provided the final leg in the tripod.



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Three middle-aged women had been found in County Kildare, just outside Dublin, it said, apparently dead for weeks. Their elderly aunt was also found dead in the house, and an inquest revealed that all had died from self-starvation. I began, instead, to imagine two young sisters kept as prisoners in their aunt's house as revenge for something that had happened in Castletownbere long ago. Something that involved a man named Jim, a shiny black motorcycle, and a love triangle that didn't end as one might suspect.

Whenever writers tell you that “the book seemed to write itself,” I've always cringed at the obvious cliché. But once I started, sitting in a tiny bed-and-breakfast at the edge of Castletownbere, it all came down on the page as if every scene in it were absolutely real, and the sisters' fears and obsessions more lethal than edged weapons. I didn't leave the small room for weeks, to the consternation of the very nice Mrs. Donegan, who somewhat nervously inquired each morning what I was up to today, then? She could hear me typing, she said. I smiled and tried not to answer. Because how do you tell a perfectly lovely citizen of a peaceful fishing village that you're about to populate it with leather-jacketed, dangerous storytellers and three young women trying to tune out that sexy spell, and fight back?

In the end, a different story materialized than the one I'd set out to write.

I had initially focused on Jim's hypnotic talents and the medieval tale he was spinning, but what emerged much more strongly were the three distinct personalities of the courageous Walsh sisters – Fiona, Róisín, and Aoife. They are as real to me as people I've known for years in the real world. As an only child, they're the sisters I'd like to have had. They love each other fiercely, no matter what. They're loyal to the end, and beyond. And they always leave a surprise or two up their sleeve just when you think you have them figured out. Just like the Irish.

Darling Jim is a love story in a thriller's body, a gothic suspense novel wrapped around a detective story. More than anything, it's about investigating the nature of hidden desires.

Do I have a favorite Walsh sister? I do. But I can't tell you which one. The two others would never forgive me.

Discussion Questions

1. What makes Christian Moerk's storytelling style unique? How were you affected by the novel's innovative structure, which presents Desmond's point of view first, followed by Niall's, before weaving in the girls' voices and the legend of Euan?
2. Why does Niall's artistic vision make him the ideal person to receive Fiona's diary? What might they have thought of each other if they had met when she was alive?
3. What were your first impressions of Fiona when you began reading her words? How did her true self compare to the image of her that was inferred by the police?
4. How did your sympathies shift as you learned more about the Walsh sisters' secrets? How did their early years, and their parents' death, affect the way they handled adversity?



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5. Discuss Fiona's impressions of Jim when she meets him in chapter three. Are sex appeal and storytelling the only traits that make him "darling"? Would you have been drawn to someone like him? Would you have cheated on Finbar? (C'mon, be honest!)
6. How would you describe the relationship between Fiona, Aiofe, and Róisín? How do they compare to your siblings?
7. The girls kept diaries during their captivity before they knew they would be read by anybody. Do you think that sustained them as they waited for the end? Do you think they kept diaries when they were children? And do you keep a diary? If so, why?
8. How early do you think Aunt Moira caught on to Jim's wicked ways? And do you believe that loving someone to that degree can make them forgive even the worst of crimes?
9. What gave Fiona and Róisín the ability to conquer their aunt in death? How did storytelling save them in the end?
10. Did you predict that Euan would slay Aisling, or love her? Reread the novel's closing lines. Which triumphs more often—love or death?

Five books Christian Moerk can't live without:

The Story of my Disappearance
by Paul Watkins

This book is like looking into a mirror, but staring back at a stranger's image. Paul Wedekind grows up in the former East Germany and is pressured into becoming a spy. Having betrayed his best friend, he winds up a sleeper agent in Rhode Island, pretending to be a fisherman. When the Berlin Wall comes down, his embassy stops taking his calls. Stuck, his fake identity becomes all he has left. He lives in a stranger's skin. Spectres from his past begin to haunt his fragile present. An elegant psychological drama from a world now long gone.

Close Range: Wyoming Stories
by Annie Proulx

For writing where a sense of place becomes as flesh-and-blood real as the characters, this selection of stories is my favorite of its kind. A chronology of everyday (but desperate) events tattooed onto the hardscrabble landscape, these short, sharp stories seem deceptively simple. But they're not. It's nearly impossible to write this kind of sparse language and evoke such unsentimental beauty. I read this book several times driving cross-country. And I'll read it again. Everything about it feels authentic, never constructed. A masterpiece.

The Things They Carried
by Tim O'Brien



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A girlfriend from home, cheerleader dress and all, arriving in a Vietnam war landing zone? A young draftee – the author himself – escaping to a remote location while deciding to go or not? A place where the war-torn land itself whispers to you? O'Brien commits an act of literary brilliance by presenting all these scenarios and more as his own way of understanding his past as a GI in that war. I never knew anyone could write like this: by standing the conventional way of simply remembering the past on its head, he writes straight for your heart, not your intellect. I dare you to remain unaffected by it.

What Makes Sammy Run?
by Budd Schulberg

As a Hollywood survivor myself, I found this angry, fast-paced book timeless. Well-meaning friends kept sending it to me when I worked as a film producer. It worked. I quit and began to write novels, instead. The psychology of what drives a young kid from New York to shed his humanity in search for the rush of action is brilliant because it covers naked ambition in any area of life, not just the movie business. 1941? No, it could be 2010. There are new Sammies born every day. They're self-loathing and heartless. And they all want everything. Right now. No matter what getting it may do to them.

The Great Deep: The Sea and its Thresholds
by James Hamilton-Paterson

I've given this book to all my friends for the last fifteen years. While aboard a ship mapping the ocean depths, the author weaves together human mythology of the deep with naval history and science. The reader suddenly understands that everything we thought we knew about the depths barely scratches the surface. Below lies an untold tale that affects the lives we hold dear and the future we hope to see. This combination of genres is one of the most surprising reads I've ever encountered. At once heartbreakingly beautiful and journalistically precise, it's impossible to do justice in a quick summary. But if you're lucky enough to find this rare volume, don't hesitate. A rare beauty.