

Questions for Stef Penney from Tana French

1. I've never been a believer in the whole "write what you know" thing. I think it negates imagination and empathy, which are probably the two most crucial qualities for a writer, and I think it's especially pointless for mystery writers—what, you shouldn't write a murder mystery unless you've actually killed someone? But you go deeper into unknown territory than most, especially most in the crime genre. Is that a deliberate choice? Do you feel a pull toward exploring stuff that's very far from your own experience? Or is that just the way the ideas come up?

SP: I definitely do feel a pull toward people and places that are far from my own life. Whenever I pick up a book I think, "Tell me something I don't know." Because I work quite slowly, I have to keep myself interested over a long research and writing period. So I can't see myself writing about modern middle-class Londoners anytime soon. But, then, you never know . . .

2. You're one of the writers who stretch the conventions of the genre and that's one of the things I love about your books—they read equally well as unputdownable murder mysteries and as straight-up wonderful books. Is that deliberate, that blurring the genre boundaries, or is it just the way the books come out?

*SP: Thanks! But, no, it's just the way they've come out—so far, anyway. With *Tenderness* I thought I was writing a western, and with *The Invisible Ones* I felt it was a noir—and, of course, it does feature a detective—but, then, what do I know? I love literary thrillers, having that very strong narrative pull through a story, especially one that has a uniquely angled voice. Two of my favorites are *Smilla's Sense of Snow* by Peter Hoeg and *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. I've enjoyed using and benefiting from that structure, but I'm not sure that the next book will be classifiable as such. Again, it's not a deliberate choice—the story I want to tell just doesn't fit that pattern.*

3. In your books, the setting becomes a major player—it's inextricably woven together with plot, theme, characterization, everything. Is the setting one of the first things to come to you?

*SP: With *Tenderness*, the setting was definitely one of the first things—I knew my characters would be travelling through a harsh, winter landscape, and it felt incredibly vivid to me. With *The Invisible Ones*, the story came first, and I knew that it would be in a more domestic setting. It was a challenge—could I make England in the 1980s feel as atmospheric and strange as nineteenth-century Ontario in winter? Having said all that, it's really the main characters who come knocking first—Mrs. Ross and Ray—but setting and character is impossible to disentangle.*

4. When an outsider writes about a marginalized and relatively closed community like the Gypsies—especially a community with such a tangle of myth and mystery around them—there's always a risk of either romanticizing or even being offensive. Did you worry about either of those or both?

SP: Yes, very much! At one point, I considered giving up the subject, but I really love the story, so here it is . . . My hope is that, first, I have given a well-researched, unstereotypical account of unique fictional characters who just happen to be from the Gypsy community, and, second, that the more portrayals there are culturally, the more balanced the overall picture becomes. Gypsies are, to say the least, underrepresented in literature and film.

5. You switch perspective apparently effortlessly between Ray, the worn, damaged private investigator, and JJ, bursting with teenage energy and curiosity. Was it difficult? Did you write Ray's bits first and then go back and do JJ's or vice versa? Or did you have a deep enough sense of both characters that the shifts in perspective came naturally?

SP: All I can say is, it didn't seem difficult! I wrote them as you read them. I found it fascinating to deal with two characters who are struggling with how, and who, you can love at such different stages of life. I think it felt easy because they both embody aspects of me—Ray the middle-aged, knackered aspect (obviously), while JJ, in part, channels my teenage self—although he's sweeter and more confident than I ever was. Maybe he's the teenager I wish I'd been.

6. For me, the most fascinating character in *The Invisible Ones* is also the one we get to know least—in quick, tantalizing glimpses—Ivo, who keeps us at arm's length the same way he keeps the other characters at arm's length. Do you have a favorite?

SP: Ah . . . there's such a lot that didn't end up in the book. I find him fascinating too, but that is perhaps a whole other story. If I have to choose, I think my favorite would be JJ—I love writing teenage characters. That mixture of white-hot intensity, discovery, and idealism is very engaging.

Questions for Tana French from Stef Penney

1. You have created a tapestry of interlocking characters who all work in law enforcement in Dublin, and so far you've turned the spotlight on three different police officers . . . Do you have a favorite? Have you found some harder to inhabit than others?

TF: Frank Mackey in Faithful Place was by far the most fun to write because he's got that dark, abrasive Dublin sense of humor that surfaces even—or especially—at life's worst moments. The hardest to get into was Scorcher Kennedy, in my new book, Broken Harbour—I've just finished the edits. I think it's to do with the gap between the way Frank saw him in Faithful Place, where he was a supporting character, and the way he sees himself. Frank sees a rule-bound, up-himself, irritating git; but from Scorcher's point of view, he's a man struggling desperately to do the right thing in a world where you have to trust in the rules because your own mind is too fragile and slippery to trust. There's a huge gap between the two perspectives, and it wasn't easy to switch. That perspective shift is one of the things I enjoy most about writing a series of books, where a secondary character in one book becomes the narrator in the next—it lets me explore the way truth can be mutable and

subjective, shaped by people's own needs as much as by objective reality—but it's also the toughest part of it.

2. You're known for writing about Dublin. Can you see yourself going anywhere else as the setting for a book?

*TF: I'll be sticking with Dublin—for the foreseeable future, anyway. It's the only city where I know all the little details—the sense of humor, the connotations of the accents, where to get a good pint and where not to go after dark. Setting a book in a place I didn't know this intimately would feel very dislocated. I think crime is very deeply rooted in its setting—it happens everywhere but the form it takes is shaped by the fears and desires of the society where it happens—and so crime novels are rooted in setting, too. Both *In the Woods* and *The Likeness* deal with the relationship between past and present—how to balance the two without destroying either—and that's a question that Ireland's been struggling (and often failing) to deal with over the past twenty years. It wasn't a deliberate choice to make the books "relevant"; it's just that since the issue was a central part of the world I lived in while I was coming up with the books, it soaked into them. If I set a book anywhere else, that connection wouldn't be there. Plus, I love Dublin. I care about its fears and desires with a passion that I don't feel for any other place. *Faithful Place*, especially, is a love song to Dublin, its bad side as well as its good. I can't imagine writing about somewhere I don't care about so strongly.*

3. The Mackeys in *Faithful Place* are extraordinarily vivid, but it's a terrifying, bleak portrait of family life. Does this relate to anything in your life? Or, if not, what made you interested in writing about such a family?

*TF: Thank God, my family's nothing like the Mackeys! I had an unfashionably happy childhood. But I've always been most interested in writing about things I don't know about. That's at the heart of *Faithful Place*, in a lot of ways. It's about a big family, and a viciously dysfunctional one, neither of which I've experienced. And it's also about a family that's very deeply rooted in Dublin, and specifically in the centuries-old community of Faithful Place. Those roots have shaped everything the Mackeys are. I've always been fascinated by that kind of rooted life because it's something I'll never have—my parents have a handful of nationalities between them, I grew up in several continents, I'm an international brat . . . Writing about something so far from my own life is the closest I'll ever come to understanding it.*

4. Down to nuts and bolts: How do you write? Are you very disciplined? I imagine you must be since you're quite prolific!

TF: Hah, I wish. I'm not one of nature's disciplined types. Back in college, I had a reputation for going into the library only to convince other people to come out for coffee, and I haven't changed that much. Every morning, I fight the urge to call my friends and see if I can persuade anyone to come out and play. These days, though, my disciplined side almost always wins. I work six days a week, about seven hours a day. What makes the difference is

that I love what I do and I feel ridiculously lucky to be doing it. After years of acting, where you're dependent on other people to decide whether you're allowed to work or not, being able to work every day feels like a massive gift. That considerably lessens the urge to goof off.

5. Any TV or film adaptations in the works? Because there should be! If yes, how did you find the experience?

TF: Paramount has optioned The Likeness and In the Woods, and I've just heard that Likeness is in development. I'm not totally clear on exactly what that means, but it sounds very cool but slightly intimidating. I'm dying to see what comes out at the other end, but I deliberately didn't even try to ask for any role in the adaptation process because anything I know about writing fiction is probably worthless when it comes to writing film. They're such utterly different genres that the book's going to have to change in ways I can't begin to picture.

6. I loved the mythic quality of the backstory in *In the Woods*—and the fact that in the end you refused to answer the question. Did you encounter any resistance from publishers over the ending?

TF: No resistance from publishers. I was expecting it, because the ending does break genre convention—I was all ready to argue my case that this was the only ending with integrity and anything else would be forced and artificial, sacrificing character truth for cheap closure. But none of the editors ever suggested changing it. I do get e-mails from readers who hate the ending. Fair enough; the genre comes with expectation of closure and the book doesn't provide it, and some people have real trouble with that. But I also get e-mails from readers who love the ending and who would have been furious if I'd sacrificed that integrity in order to stick to the rules. There was no way I could have written something that would make both types of readers happy. All I could do was write the best book I could and hope there were enough people out there who like the same kind of thing that I do.