

John Connolly presents *The Wolf in Winter*

☒ THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT STANDING BY

Writer John Connolly on moral heroes, mixed genres – and middle-aged men.

John Connolly has updated his image. He's even bought a new waistcoat – 'the middle-aged man's gastric band' – and this week he was at Blackwell's to show it off, and to discuss his new novel, *The Wolf in Winter*, the thirteenth in his series about Charlie Parker, former detective and anti-hero. In a hugely entertaining and fast-paced talk, Connolly switched effortlessly from jokes about failed Irish criminals to thoughts on the moral themes that inform his writing.

Connolly is Irish, but sets these books in Maine. He says it's because Ireland has little history of crime fiction – but he also likes the US state's environmental extremes; its vast forest; the contrast between its wealthy coast and less affluent interior. Many US crime writers set their books in states other than their own, and Connolly feels that looking at a place from the outside 'allows you to see the oddness of it.'

Rejecting the received opinion that crime writing is plot-driven, Connolly sees readers as far more interested in characters. He challenged the audience to recall the plots of the last three thrillers they had read (I couldn't, but proving his point, I could remember Hercule Poirot, John Rebus and VI Warshawski.) Our affection for crime writing is, he says, tied up solely with its people, especially as it's one of the few forms that allow a writer to return to the same characters time and again. He admires the work of Ed McBain and Ross MacDonalld, and sees James Lee Burke as the greatest

living crime writer.

Connolly writes in a variety of genres, including ghost stories and children's books – he is all too aware that some crime writers trade on the affection for their characters by simply churning out the same book every year, good or bad; he likes Parker, and doesn't want to waste his readers' time, so he takes a break from the series to work on other projects and keep his Parker novels fresh. He is also keen to thank his loyal followers; one way that he does this is to include a CD with each book – music that seems to match the story, either lyrically or musically. He says only men define themselves through music: 'it's a fan boy thing.' Ideas, he says, can be expressed through many different media – indeed, after having written another of his novels, *The Book of Lost Things*, he noticed that its story was mirrored in the film *Pan's Labyrinth*. 'We are all pulling from the same pool of ideas, the same cloud of inspiration.'

Asked why his novels are bleak, Connolly replied that he did not see them as such. Raised a Catholic (although no longer practising), he grew up with strong values of morality, justice, compassion and empathy. His characters are all in search of redemption, and their stories offer the reader hope. Parker is a moral being, this is his strength and his weakness, and for Connolly the books are about the importance of 'not standing by.'

Breaking away from the purely logical traditions of classic crime writing, Connolly has now started to introduce a supernatural element to his writing. Younger readers, he says, have grown up with fantasy and graphic novels and are far more open to experimentation: the genre advances only by people pushing the boundaries. He is letting Parker age through the series because he hopes this will allow the character and the novels to develop; he is not interested in writing 'rote books.' He resisted hopeful questions about the plot of the next book, but said that he already has the series' conclusion

worked out.

A character who cares about his characters – and his readers – Connolly was a deserving hit with Tuesday night's enthusiastic audience; the queue for the book signing afterwards showed that his books are every bit as popular as his banter.

The Wolf in Winter is published by Hodder & Stoughton and available from Blackwell's, Edinburgh.

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)

