

First Time Solo: Iain Maloney launches debut novel



How does a thirty-something Scotsman living in Japan end up writing a book set in Torquay?

That was the question put to [Iain Maloney](#) at the launch of his debut novel [First Time Solo](#) at [Looking Glass Books](#) on Monday. It's a story of young men joining the [RAF](#) at the tail end of World War Two, young men who think they're going to France but end up going to Babbacombe. It's about jazz and freedom, change and anger. And it started with [Spike Milligan's](#) War Diaries.



Adrian Searle, Iain's publisher at [Freight Books](#), opened the evening by outlining Iain's career to date. As a student at [Aberdeen University](#), Iain entered a writing competition for Freight's [The Hope That Kills Us](#), an anthology of stories about Scottish football. His was the only undergraduate submission and it won him a place in the book. Iain gained a Masters in Creative Writing from [Glasgow University](#); he now lives in Komaki with his partner Minori and runs an English language school in Ichinomiya. Adrian encouraged him to submit more work whenever he could, and he soon became the most published writer in [Gutter](#), Freight's award-winning journal for fiction and poetry from writers born or living in Scotland. As soon as Adrian read First Time Solo, he wanted it.

Iain began by reading two short excerpts from First Time Solo. In the first, two 18 year olds who've just signed up with the

RAF meet on the train to London, whilst the second finds them posted to the Devon coast ('face to face with Jerry') where a momentous event brings the war to them and changes their lives forever. Iain's style is staccato; short sharp phrases convey Jack's darting thoughts, whilst the conversation between Jack and Joe, a brash Glaswegian ('so you're a sheep shagger?'), instantly gives us a feel for these very different characters.

Iain's inspiration for the book came from his grandfather's war years. He too signed up in 1943 expecting to enter combat, but by the time he was trained the RAF no longer needed pilots, so he just went on training till the end of the war. Although the book is not Iain's grandfather's story, he wanted to explore the lives of young men who were perhaps fifteen years old in 1939, who saw the war approaching them, saw their fathers and brothers signing up, and realised that their turn would come; the war would not in fact be over by Christmas.



One of Iain's favourite writers is [Yukio Mishima](#). Mishima wrote of the liberating effect of war; servicemen knew that their time was mapped out and that they would probably die young, so they were free to live for the day. Diaries of British soldiers show that they too had a view of the future that we would not understand today. By 1943 the changes that were to come after the war were becoming evident; men who had been trained for nothing but battle were to return to the civilian world unprepared for post-war life. The freedom they had felt turned to anger; that anger fueled change. One of the characters in the book is what Iain calls 'a firebrand commie' – Adrian observed that the novel has strong political undertones without being a hectoring polemic. Iain credits his editor [Rodge Glass](#) with that, 'Rodge cut a lot of the hectoring and now the story makes sense.'

Growing up in Aberdeen, Iain used to annoy his parents by reading Spike Milligan's War Diaries into the small hours of the morning. These taught him that eighteen year old boys haven't changed much over the years; they still like the same jokes and have the same ways of dealing with their fears. Despite the book's strong sense of time and place, the characters' language feels modern; many authors, Iain says, have a tendency to use the vocabulary either of nostalgia ([Dad's Army](#)) or 'stiff upper lip' ([Bridge On the River Kwai](#)); he wanted to avoid cliches and create fresh dialogue whilst avoiding anachronisms.

Music is a huge part of Iain's life. In the war Americans, Poles and the Free French poured into London; it became a culturally vibrant city. Jazz and bebop flourished, clubs stayed open, people wanted to have fun. A perfect reason, then, for Iain to allow Joe, a trumpeter, to start a band with two of the other men. Having three American jazz players in the story also made it easier for Iain to use modern speech. His research for the book included asking his mother to interview his grandfather, but his own experience of leaving home to go to university also informed his writing. He may not have experienced war first hand or received letters telling him his friends have died, but the breaking of childhood bonds is a universal experience, a part of growing up. The war is still part of our collective consciousness; it is taught in schools, portrayed in film and on television; whilst Iain was able to rely on readers' prior knowledge to a certain extent, he wanted to focus on an aspect rarely examined – the experience of those who went to war but never engaged in combat.

Iain first had the idea for the book when he was still in Aberdeen; it's taken him ten years to achieve publication. In the meantime he wrote two other novels, both of them binned, and three drafts of First Time Solo. Once he had planned the story properly and knew the journey and the ending he

completed the third draft in a year; the characters changed greatly from draft to draft – Iain even killed off Jack’s girlfriend to avoid what he calls ‘the sweetheart cliché.’

Adrian said that the post-submission process is always slow – editing, designing and marketing all take time – but that Iain has been very patient. For Iain publication is a dream come true; Rodge Glass was, he says, a brilliant editor, having vast knowledge of what makes a novel work whilst remaining sensitive to a new author’s concerns. The Glasgow Masters course also toughened him up, ‘I was past the preciousness of it and could accept Roger’s suggestions and cuts.’

A voracious reader, Iain cites his influences as [Iain Banks](#), [Alan Moore](#), Mishima, [Janice Galloway](#) and of course Milligan himself. He’d like to see First Time Solo published in Japan, though it would of course need to be translated first. He’s about to feature, along with [David Peace](#) and [David Mitchell](#), in a Japanese magazine article about British writers working in the country. In Japan the war is still not a subject for comedy, and Iain would be intrigued to see how the book would be marketed there, and how the Japanese readership would receive it. He also hopes that it might be adapted for the screen, saying he would probably prefer television to film; his favourite TV series is Banks’ [The Crow Road](#). He’s not sure about a musical, but who knows? He’d have no trouble coming up with the music.

First Time Solo will be published by Freight Books on 19th June 2014 and will be available from [Looking Glass Books](#), Simpson’s Loan.