

## Say Nothing (Keefe)

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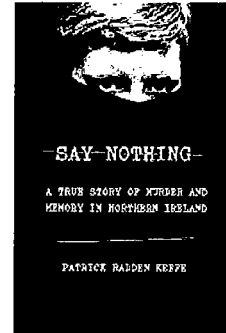
### ***Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland***

*Patrick Radden Keefe, 2019*

*Knopf Doubleday*

*464 pp.*

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#### Summary

*From award-winning New Yorker staff writer Patrick Radden Keefe, a stunning, intricate narrative about a notorious killing in Northern Ireland and its devastating repercussions*

In December 1972, Jean McConville, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of ten, was dragged from her Belfast home by masked intruders, her children clinging to her legs.

They never saw her again.

Her abduction was one of the most notorious episodes of the vicious conflict known as The Troubles. Everyone in the neighborhood knew the I.R.A. was responsible. But in a climate of fear and paranoia, no one would speak of it.

In 2003, five years after an accord brought an uneasy peace to Northern Ireland, a set of human bones was discovered on a beach. McConville's children knew it was their mother when they were told a blue safety pin was attached to the dress—with so many kids, she had always kept it handy for diapers or ripped clothes.

Patrick Radden Keefe's mesmerizing book on the bitter conflict in Northern Ireland and its aftermath uses the McConville case as a starting point for the tale of a society wracked by a violent guerrilla war, a war whose consequences have never been reckoned with.

The brutal violence seared not only people like the McConville children, but also I.R.A. members embittered by a peace that fell far short of the goal of a united Ireland, and left them wondering whether the killings they committed were not justified acts of war, but simple murders.

From radical and impetuous I.R.A. terrorists such as Dolours Price, who, when she was barely out of her teens, was already planting bombs in London and targeting

informers for execution, to the ferocious I.R.A. mastermind known as The Dark, to the spy games and dirty schemes of the British Army, to Gerry Adams, who negotiated the peace but betrayed his hardcore comrades by denying his I.R.A. past...

...*Say Nothing* conjures a world of passion, betrayal, vengeance, and anguish. (From the publisher.)

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#### Author Bio

- Birth—1976
- Where—Dorchester, Massachusetts, USA
- Education—B.A., Columbia University; J.D., Yale University; M.Phil, Cambridge University; M.Sc., London School of Economics
- Awards—National Magazine Award—Feature Writing
- Currently—lives in New York, New York

Patrick Radden Keefe is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, an Eric and Wendy Schmidt Fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of *The Snakehead* and *Chatter*.

His work has also appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Slate*, *New York*, and *New York Review of Books*, among others, and he is a frequent commentator on NPR, the BBC, and MSNBC.

Patrick received the 2014 National Magazine Award for Feature Writing, for his story "A Loaded Gun," was a finalist for the National Magazine Award for Reporting in 2015 and 2016, and is also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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#### Book Reviews

If it seems as if I'm reviewing a novel, it is because *Say Nothing* has lots of the qualities of good fiction, to the extent that I'm worried I'll give too much away, and I'll also forget that Jean McConville was a real person, as were—were—her children. And her abductors and killers. Keefe is a terrific storyteller.... He brings his characters to real life. The book is cleverly structured. We follow people—victim, perpetrator, back to victim—leave them, forget about them, rejoin them decades later. It can be read as a detective story.... What Keefe captures best, though, is the tragedy, the damage and waste, and the idea of moral injury.... *Say Nothing* is an excellent account of the Troubles.

#### **Roddy Doyle - New York Times Book Review**

An exceptional new book... [that] explores this brittle landscape [of Northern Ireland] to devastating effect... [and] fierce reporting.... The story of McConville's disappearance, its crushing effects on her children, the discovery of her remains in

2003, and the efforts of authorities to hold someone accountable for her murder occupy the bulk of *Say Nothing*. Along the way, Mr. Keefe navigates the flashpoints, figures and iconography of the Troubles: anti-Catholic discrimination, atrocities by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and occupation by the British Army, grisly IRA bombings in Belfast and London, the internment of Irish soldiers and the hunger strikes of Bobby Sands and others, the Falls Road and the Shankill Road, unionist paramilitaries, the "real" IRA and the "provisionals," counter-intelligence, the Armalite rifle and the balaclava. It is a dizzying panorama, yet Mr. Keefe presents it with clarity.

**Michael O'Donnell - Wall Street Journal**

Patrick Radden Keefe's new book *Say Nothing* investigates the mystery of a missing mother and reveals a still-raw violent past.... The book often reads like a novel, but as anyone familiar with his work for *The New Yorker* can attest, Keefe is an obsessive reporter and researcher, a master of narrative nonfiction.... An incredible story.

**Rolling Stone**

As the narrator of a whodunit.... [Keefe] excels, exposing the past, layer by layer, like the slow peel of a rotten onion, as he works to answer a question that the British government, the Northern Irish police and the McConville family has been seeking the answer to for nearly 50 years.... Keefe draws the characters in this drama finely and colorfully.... *Say Nothing* is a reminder of Northern Ireland's ongoing trauma. And with Brexit looming, it's a timely warning that it doesn't take much to open old wounds in Ireland, and make them fresh once more.

**Paddy Hirsch - NPR**

★ [Keefe] incorporates a real-life whodunit into a moving, accessible account of the violence that has afflicted Northern Ireland.... Tinged with immense sadness, this work never loses sight of the humanity of even those who committed horrible acts in support of what they believed in.

**Publishers Weekly**

★ Keefe blends... espionage, murder mystery, and political history into a single captivating narrative.... [He] turns a complicated and often dark subject into a riveting and informative page-turner that will engage readers of both true crime and popular history. —*Timothy Berge, West Virginia Univ., Morgantown*

**Library Journal**

Keefe's reconstruction of events and the players involved is careful and assured.... A harrowing story of politically motivated crime that could not have been better told.

**Kirkus Reviews**

#### Discussion Questions

*We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for SAY NOTHING ... then take off on your own:*

1. A saying at the time of the Troubles went, "If you're not confused, you don't know what's going on." The times were certainly confusing: for those on the outside of the conflict, let alone those on the inside. Does Patrick Radden Okeefe clear up the confusion for his readers—for you? In what way has reading *Say Nothing* increased your understanding of Northern Ireland's decades-long (many say centuries-long) struggle?
2. Keefe has zeroed in on the murder of Jean McConville. Given the level of brutality and carnage that took place for so long, why might the author have used that particular episode as the opening of his book?
3. In what way would you describe (as some reviewers have) *Say Nothing* as a murder mystery?
4. Which individuals—in this book of real life people—do you feel more sympathy for than others? What about those individuals whose actions disturbed you? Despite all the carnage, are you able to find any humanity in those who committed acts of violence? Does it matter that they acted in service to a cause, one they believed in passionately?
5. *Follow-up to Question 4:* Dolours Price and others feel that the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement took away any justification for the bombings and abductions she had participated in. How would you answer her?
6. What is the significance of the book's title, "Say Nothing." What are the ways that phrase resonates throughout the book?
7. Since the peace accord, a "collective denial" has washed over the Belfast society. Is this obfuscation, a hiding of sorts, beneficial? Has it lead to a genuine, settled peace? Would an open reconciliation, through confession and forgiveness, work? What are the varying points of view, including yours?

*(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online and off, with attribution. Thanks.)*

top of page (summary)

*GROWING UP in an Irish-American family, I always felt a kind of knee-jerk loyalty to Ireland and, especially, the Republican cause: “Up the IRA,” and all of that. But when I lived in Dublin for a short time in the 1980s, it was driven home to me — in cautious discussions about “the Troubles” (still a lived reality back then) and in the unsettled air of the place — that I really had no grasp of the island’s centuries of internecine tensions and sorrows.*

*I recalled the soggy Celtic romanticism of my youth while reading Patrick Radden Keefe’s astonishing new book, Say Nothing — not because the book is remotely soggy or romantic, but because to this day so many Irish Americans retain a simplistic, binary view of the auld sod. Subtitled “A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland,” Keefe’s sweeping, switchblade-sharp narrative explores the terror and abiding grief at the heart of sectarian violence. To his credit, Keefe doesn’t attempt a traditional history of Ireland’s woes. Instead, in Say Nothing he has produced a nonfiction masterpiece about, in his own words, “how people become radicalized in their uncompromising devotion to a cause” and how individuals and societies make sense of political violence “once they have passed through the crucible.”*

*I spoke with Keefe, a staff writer at The New Yorker and a National Magazine Award winner, about how an American writer approaches a topic as fraught as the Troubles; what he makes of the uncanny silence at the heart of so much of Irish life; and whether Brexit might offer, at long last, an unlikely path to a united Ireland — or spark a new era of conflict. (The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.)* —

□

**BENEDICT COSGROVE:** I’d like to begin at the end, if that’s okay. You mention in the last chapter of the book that while you grew up in a family with Irish roots, you could never relate to “the clover-and-Guinness clichés” of that world. Did your association with Ireland, or with your own Irishness, grow more intense or more personal when writing *Say Nothing*?

**PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE:** I think so. Yes. But at the same time, I don’t know that it became more intense in a way that ties specifically to my Irishness — if that makes sense.

**It does. Sort of. Can you go a bit further?**

Sure. My last book, *The Snakehead*, was based in New York's Chinatown, and specifically among Chinatown's Fujianese population. I go back there all the time, I have friendships there, and there's always going to be a part of me that feels tied to that community. The connection that I feel to Ireland, North and South, is probably more akin to that, where a place just really gets under your skin.

But if there was one thing I knew intuitively while growing up — and this was reinforced as I worked on the book — it's that the Irish and Irish Americans are fundamentally different. There's a tendency among Irish Americans to want to collapse those worlds and think that we're all the same. But in reality, we have utterly different lived experiences.

**I want to ask you about the structure of *Say Nothing*. It moves back and forth in time, from the present to the 1960s to the Easter Rebellion of 1916 to the 1990s, and you tell the tale through the lens of four figures: Jean McConville, a Protestant mom who was “disappeared” from her home in Belfast in 1972; two IRA foot soldiers, a man and a woman; and Gerry Adams, the longtime leader of Sinn Féin. It's a dynamic narrative, but never confusing. Did you map it out beforehand, or did the structure of the book emerge while you wrote?**

I'm glad to hear you say that about the dynamism, because that was very much the intention. Look, there are a lot of great books about the Troubles, but many of them are very, very dense. They can be encyclopedic in a way that is tough-going for the casual reader.

Narrative momentum was a kind of North Star for me. I wanted to keep the reader turning pages while I was presenting lots of information, and I realized that structure was the answer. I'm a fiendish outliner. I outline like crazy. As it happened, in 2016 I got a fellowship to go to Italy for three weeks, without my kids — the longest I'd been away from them in their lives. I cracked the structure of the book while I was there. I didn't actually write a page of prose. All I did was think, “How many chapters? Where do you come into the chapter? Where do you go out? How do you arrange events in such a way that they're clear but convey the complexity of the story?”

I made lots of amendments later. But the skeletal structure, down to the rough number of chapters, was created in Italy. It was three weeks, 50 to 60 hours a week, of sitting there arranging information and figuring it out.

**Let's talk about Gerry Adams, because he plays such a central role in the book — even though he refused to speak with you. He is a towering figure in the Irish imagination, and one of the most divisive. What was**

**it like writing about him, and hearing from people who have known him for years, but not being able to talk to the man himself?**

Gerry Adams is an incredibly compelling personality, and the contradictions of his personality are part of what drew me to this story. I didn't get to spend time with him, but easily half of the big pieces that I've done for *The New Yorker* are write-arounds where I don't have access to the central figure. So I'm not cowed by the prospect of writing about somebody who won't give me access. And with Adams, of course, I had the benefit of the interviews that he's given to other journalists over the years. He's also written at length about his own life.

**The role Adams has played in Irish history, and where people come down on that question, is a thread that runs through the book. He led Sinn Féin for three decades, and today he has that nice gray beard and has that grandfatherly vibe. But plenty of people consider him a sociopath, a terrorist, even a traitor to the Republican cause. How is it possible to reconcile that? Or can we?**

From the start I felt that here was a character that a novelist would be hard-pressed to invent. What I wanted to do was be comprehensive enough in my reporting that I could bring Adams to life and make readers feel like they knew him, to the extent that it's possible to know him — but also to lay out the contradictions and allow readers to make up their own minds.

For many people, Gerry Adams is a saint. Some people I've known for years, and have high regard for, have made the case to me that he's an Irish Nelson Mandela and is deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize. Then there are those who see him as the Antichrist — a hated, hated figure. I wanted to embrace the nuance and three-dimensionality of everyone who appears in the book. For people who have skin in the game when it comes to Ireland and its future, that might mean I've presented an unsatisfying portrayal of Adams, the IRA, the Ulster paramilitary forces, and all the rest, because none of it is unremittingly positive or negative. With Adams, especially, that will be vexing for some people.

**Right. One minute you see the risks he has taken in his life and the political moves he's made, and he seems brilliant and savvy. Seen in a different light, his whole career appears craven and self-serving. That prismatic nature is vexing in the extreme. But that's his genius, too.**

It is. You know, writers are sometimes drawn to subjects in whom there's a great deal of moral clarity. This is not one of those projects. Part of what I'm trying to show is messy reality. So the degree to which you're feeling

one way about someone in one chapter, and then something rather different the next — to me, that’s a sign of getting it right.

**In the book and in an opinion piece you recently wrote about Brexit, you point out that for so many people in Northern Ireland, history is not past. In fact, events that happened decades or even centuries ago are discussed as if they happened last week. Why is history, as you put it in the book, “alive and dangerous” in Northern Ireland?**

Part of the problem is that there has not been a reckoning with the past, the way there has been in other places that have seen sectarian violence. One explanation is that the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, for all of its virtues, didn’t come up with a mechanism for how to look at the past. The parties who agreed to that deal basically punted on that question, because there was no way they could have come up with an arrangement that anybody would agree to.

I had a conversation with a guy who had been a Republican prisoner, and had also spent a lot of time in South Africa. I asked why Northern Ireland never had a South Africa-type truth-and-reconciliation process, and he laughed and said, “Well, in South Africa, there was a winner.”

But there might be something deeper going on. The book is called *Say Nothing*, and there is certainly a culture of silence in Ireland and among Irish Americans. It’s funny, because for all of the clichés about the Irish being chatterboxes, the gift of the gab and all the rest, silence is very much a part of that world. You see it in the context of the Troubles, and you see it in the abuse scandals in the Catholic church, where so many people had inklings — or hard knowledge — of the awful things that were going on, but somehow thought it best not to speak up.

A friend of mine, a political editor in Ireland, suggests that this might have started as a social instinct, going back hundreds of years, when large families were crammed into small dwellings, and not discussing certain things could keep the peace, in a way. He’s arguing that this silence may have to do with the anthropology or sociology of Ireland. But I don’t want to get too culturally essentialist here. Other cultures have secrets, too, of course. Still, I think there’s an overlay of Irish culture that allows for certain things to go unspoken.

**Let’s talk about Brexit. Ireland’s future and the Irish border are essential parts of that endless conversation in the United Kingdom. Can Ireland survive Brexit? Or could Brexit be the best thing that’s ever happened for those who dream of a united Ireland?**



I think in the near-term Brexit is likely to be a disaster. The integration of North and South in terms of trade over the past few decades has been so complete that any kind of divorce could be cataclysmic. Beyond economics, the hard reinscription of the border is just a very, very dangerous prospect.

**Do you tie that danger to the unresolved grievances we discussed earlier?**

Yes. I do. As I was working on *Say Nothing*, I would sometimes talk to people, in the United States and the United Kingdom, who assumed I was writing a history book. “That’s kind of all over, right? Everything’s great now.” And I would remind them that there is still a lot of tension, and the memories are still fresh. Every day there’s a story in the papers in Northern Ireland about something that happened 30 years ago, and how it should or shouldn’t be dealt with.

Before I ever heard of Brexit as a concept, I was aware of a kind of amnesia about the Troubles and, specifically, the problem of the Irish border. And then you get Brexit, which in a sense is that amnesia taken to its logical extreme. So I go back and forth on how worried to be. I tend to be optimistic. I don’t want to adopt the most alarmist scenarios about a real return to violence. But it’s also impossible for me to imagine a scenario in which reintroducing the border won’t exacerbate tensions that already exist.

Of the great disappearances in Argentina and Chile in the 1970s and '80s — during which tens of thousands of people were taken from their homes and never seen again — Argentine-Chilean-American writer Ariel Dorfman wrote, "You cannot mourn someone who has not died."

The number of "disappeared" was much lower in Northern Ireland during the Troubles — the 30 years between 1968-98. Sixteen people were "disappeared" during that time. But the sentiment still applies.

In *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory In Northern Ireland*, *New Yorker* writer Patrick Radden Keefe tells the story of Jean McConville, a 38-year-old mother of 10, who was taken from her home in Belfast by masked intruders one night in 1972. It was nearly 31 years before her children could truly mourn her: Her remains were found in 2003, buried on a beach, just south of

Northern Irish border with the Republic. She had been shot once in the head.

Few people were surprised when Jean McConville vanished. Everyone knew who had taken her — and why. She lived in a tight-knit Roman Catholic community in Belfast called the Divis Flats, but she was born a Protestant. The word was that she had become a tout: an informant for the British Army. The discovery of her body 31 years after the fact simply confirmed what everyone already assumed. That the Provisional IRA had abducted and murdered her.

Article continues after sponsor message

But who actually pulled the trigger?

*Say Nothing* switches back and forth between the mystery of who killed Jean McConville and the wider history of the Troubles. As a historian, there's no mistaking his bias: Keefe is contemptuous of the British government and the security services, and he venerates the Provisional IRA. As the narrator of a whodunit, however, he excels, exposing the past, layer by layer, like the slow peel of a rotten onion, as he works to answer a question that the British government, the Northern Irish police and the McConville family has been seeking the answer to for nearly 50 years.

## **Related NPR Stories**

Keefe draws the characters in this drama finely and colorfully: Brendan Hughes, one-time

In 'Say Nothing,'  
The Story Of A  
Murder In Northern  
Ireland

commander of the Belfast  
Brigade of the Provisional IRA  
and hunger strike leader, is a  
boisterous, devil-may-care risk-

taker; Gerry Adams, the former IRA commander and  
Republican politician who was arrested in connection  
with the murder in 2014, and released without  
charge, is a smooth, Teflon-coated enigma; Dolours  
and Marion Price, sisters who joined the Provos in its  
early days, live up to their nickname, the Crazy Prices,  
after a local supermarket chain. Jean McConville's  
son Michael, who was brutalized in an orphanage  
home run by the priesthood, seems to represent the  
whole province of Northern Ireland: A deeply scarred  
man who finds comfort in sport — in his case, racing  
pigeons.

Keefe is a meticulous researcher, whose dive into the  
source material that informs so many histories of the  
Troubles goes deeper than most. *Say Nothing* is at its  
best when it's at its most granular. Some of the details

are delightful, like the story of the attempt by a British Army unit to get food to an operative watching an IRA target. They bought him a packet of fish and chips and tossed it into the bush where they thought he was hiding. Unfortunately, it was the wrong bush. Other details are chilling in their banality, like Dolours Price's recollection that the IRA's improvised explosive devices, which she and her sister used to ferry across the border, smelled like a cake decoration.

Jean McConville's body was only found because of a storm, which washed away the surface of the beach on which she was buried. The Troubles had ended five years before, with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but the discovery was a reminder that the people of Northern Ireland had a great deal of suffering still to do.

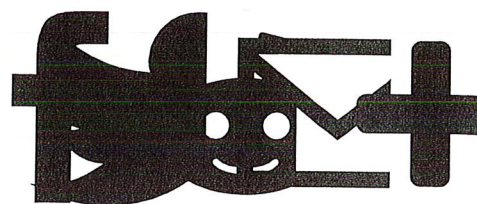
With some of "the disappeared" still missing today, *Say Nothing* is a reminder of Northern

Ireland's ongoing trauma. And with Brexit looming, it's a timely warning that it doesn't take much to open old wounds in Ireland, and make them fresh once more.

# Terrorism, Torture and 3,600 Lives Lost: Revisiting ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland

Patrick Radden Keefe's new book *Say Nothing* investigates the mystery of a missing mother and reveals a still-raw violent past

By ANDY KROLL



The Divis flats in Belfast, where Jean McConville was abducted by the IRA in 1972.

One evening in late 1972, a young mother of 10 named Jean McConville was taken from her home in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, by four men and four women in masks. McConville's children would never see or hear from her again. She had been disappeared and likely killed, one of the 3,600 casualties to result from Northern Ireland's infamous three-decade period of violence and upheaval known as the Troubles.

Forty years later, a pair of detectives working for the Serious Crimes Branch of Northern Ireland's police service arrived at the campus of Boston College. They had flown across the Atlantic to retrieve audio recordings kept under lock-and-key in a secure university-library enclosure called the Treasure Room. The recordings were part of an oral history conducted by Boston College featuring direct participants on all sides of the Troubles who unburdened themselves of stories of mayhem and carnage they had participated in. The detectives were investigating the death of Jean McConville. The audio files, they believed, could help solve the case.

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The story of McConville, the Irish Republican Army militants who abducted her and the search for truth is the subject of a new book, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (out today), written by *New Yorker* staff writer Patrick Radden Keefe. *Say Nothing* is compulsively readable, equal parts true-crime thriller and political history. The book often reads like a novel, but as anyone familiar with his work for *The New Yorker* can attest, Keefe is an obsessive reporter and researcher, a master of narrative nonfiction.

He began researching the McConville case more than six years ago, after he stumbled across an obituary in *The New York Times* for Dolours Price, a former IRA member who had participated in the group's infamous 1973 bombing in London and who, in a late-in-life reversal, took aim at Adams, the former longtime head of the Sinn Féin political party, for his time as a leader of the IRA. (Adams has long denied ever being in the IRA.) In Dolours Price and Jean McConville, Keefe says he saw the makings of an incredible story. "Right from the beginning, there was this idea



the story of these two women, and this one atrocity, to tell a larger story about the history of the Troubles and radicalization and the nature in wartime,” he tells *Rolling Stone*. (**Find *Say Nothing* on Amazon**)

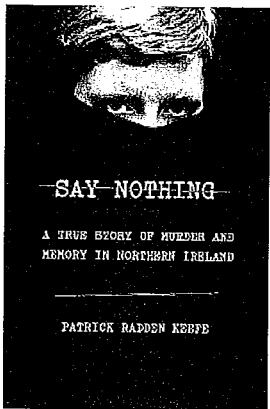
**Was the Troubles something you’d been interested in before, or was that uncharted territory?**

I was somewhat interested in the Troubles in the casual way that anyone who grows up with a name like mine, in a city like Boston, inevitably. But I’ll be honest with you: I found the literature of the Troubles a little bit forbidding. There are a thousand **books** written about this period of them quite good, but a lot of them very dense.

An aspect of this that was appealing to me was just that it seemed like in the story of Jean McConville and Dolours Price and [former IRA lieutenant] Brendan Hughes and Gerry Adams there was a pretty lean narrative structure, a kind of dramatic spine that might be a way to tell a larger story but in a somewhat more accessible manner.

**You didn’t feel daunted by the wealth of material already out there?**

It was incredibly daunting. But on the upside, I’m not an academic, I’m a journalist. I write narrative nonfiction. I’m not Irish, I’m not English. Being an outsider who approached the story as a foreign correspondent more than anything seemed like it might be a liability on the front end, the deeper I got into the process, the more I came to believe that that was an asset.



**Why did it start off as a liability and become more of an asset?**

In the beginning, I think there was a bit of a sense that the nuances and complexities are so daunting that nobody comes in for some brief period of time and doesn’t inhabit this world for some huge chunk of his life could ever get them.

But I kept going back. I made seven trips over four years and spent a lot of time talking to people and immersing in it, and what I realized is that as an outsider I was able to talk to a pretty wide range of people who were generally pretty ready to believe that I wasn’t coming in with an agenda or any kind of preconceived angle on the story.

So that, strangely enough, ended up actually helping in the reporting. That I wasn’t there from the *Belfast Telegraph* from *The Guardian*. I was coming from New York.

**How did you get people to talk? The title of the book comes from a Seamus Heaney poem, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing.”**

I was born in 1976. I’m going and knocking on doors and asking people about a murder that happened four years before I was born. I was kind of astonished at the degree to which that continued to seem so dangerous, in the present day, this murder from almost half a century ago.

It was slow going. But on some level, it always is. There were a lot of people who’d never talk to me, right? Gerry Adams never talked to me. On my day job at *The New Yorker*, I’ve made a bit of a specialty of the write-around. I’m often writing pieces about central figures who for one reason or another won’t cooperate. I feel as though over the years I’ve gotten comfortable with that as an exercise.

There were a lot of people that did talk to me, and it took a certain amount of coaxing and trying to persuade people that I was serious about it and that I wanted to capture the real truth of this story. And then there were others I couldn’t persuade, and so then it became a question of how do you get creative and find a way to gather enough material about somebody that you feel as though you can really understand them and put them on the page in a way that they’ll come alive for a reader.

**You weave together McConville, [IRA members Dolours and Marian] Price, Gerry Adams, Brendan Hughes, but also a lot of history — Bloody Sunday, Burntollet Bridge. How did you decide what is the absolutely essential history that I've gotta have here and what to leave out?**

It was a difficult process, and the rule for me became: I wanted to write the book less in the manner that you would write a history book and more in the manner that you would approach writing a novel. My thought was this is a character-driven story. Here are my characters; did these events affect them personally? Something like Bloody Sunday was important to mention because for somebody like Dolours Price, who right at that time was beginning to think, "Gee, maybe peaceful resistance isn't the way to go here," and then all these peaceful protesters go out in Derry and get shot by the army. I didn't feel the need to have a huge section on Bloody Sunday — again, that's something that's a massive event, but just a sentence or two in the book.

**I often read the book with Google Maps open on my laptop, looking for the streets and neighborhoods you describe. I've never been to Belfast, but as a reader I got a sense of claustrophobia from the book of how packed in everyone seemed. How did you wrestle with describing the actual physical terrain of this story?**

A huge part of what I was hoping to do in the book was capture a sense of place and a sense of atmosphere, and some of that still exists. If you go to Belfast and you wander around, you can still see these streets full of narrow, cramped dwellings that are jammed right next to each other, and one side of the street is Protestant, and this side is Catholic.

I had an experience that felt so revealing to me. I was driving around at one point with Michael McConville, Jean's son. We were driving on a stretch of road, and one side of the street was a Catholic neighborhood and on the other side was a Protestant neighborhood. And there was a strip of businesses on one side of the street — a pub and a liquor store and a laundromat, and there was a Subway franchise.

I said to Michael, "OK, so if you're Protestant, and you live on that side of the street and you're hungry, would you just walk across the street to the Subway franchise, the local outpost of the American sandwich shop, on the Catholic side?" And Michael said, "Not a chance."

To me, that was so revealing, this idea that you have these people living in great proximity, but still in a strange sense of isolation from their immediate neighbors. A lot of what I was trying to do was capture how that sense of geography and those kind of cultural parameters would affect you if you grew up in a place like that.

**How many visits to Belfast did it take you to internalize that geography, the Catholic neighborhoods and the Protestant neighborhoods, what to say, where to go?**

I still wouldn't say that I entirely have. I know parts of the city really well, and I have friends in a lot of different places from different communities. But it's a hard city to get to know.

I had this crazy experience when I was going there. It was my first or second trip there. I was going to meet Billy McKee. He's one of the founders of the Provisional IRA, legendary IRA man, who is very, very old and lives in a very republican area in West Belfast.

I was staying at a hotel in kind of the downtown city center, cosmopolitan part of town. I got a taxi and I gave the guy the address, which is McKee's home address, and I saw this kind of flicker of uncertainty on the guy's face and as we're driving into this little warren of streets in Belfast. I realized that this taxi driver, who was probably about 60 and had clearly been driving a cab for decades, had no idea where he was. He was Protestant, and this was not a neighborhood that we would be caught dead in, and we actually got to a point where he had to pull over and ask for directions.

**Some of the events in the book are four decades old now, but this history still feels immediate.**

I was trying very hard to write about these events in a way that felt like they could be happening today, that they were fresh and vivid. When you look at the central characters in the book, if you want to understand them, you need to understand in a deep way how it all felt to them at the time. Why does Dolours Price go on hunger strike? Why does she drive Joe Lynskey, one of her own close friends, to his death? In order to grasp what a young woman she would do that, you need to feel the brute force of the British Army. You need to feel the sense of panic and oppression that the young marchers on the civil rights march felt.

**Gerry Adams is obviously someone I've read about and known about. I don't know whether to be just absolutely horrified by him, disgusted by him, or in awe of him. He has to be one of the more complex political figures who ever lived.**

He's a feast as a character. If you're not feeling the whole range of emotions you describe, then you're not thinking about him hard enough.

He was an interesting figure to write about in part because some of the other key figures in the book were obsessed with him. Dolours Price and Brendan Hughes both felt so betrayed by Adams and spent their final years, in a strange way, not talking with him anymore, but tormented by memories and the spectacle of who Gerry Adams had become, and by this feeling that he was their commanding officer and he disowned them and he left them behind.

The challenge for me as a writer is that there are a lot of people for whom Gerry Adams is a hero, he's a saint. And then a lot of others for whom he's a folk devil. I didn't want to create a kind of two-dimensional picture of him that would satisfy either of those constituencies, because to me he was sort of both and more, and I think if I did the book right, you've got one person who reads the book and comes out thinking one thing about him and another who comes out thinking something entirely different. And a third who, as you said, feels one thing one minute and something else the next.

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**I want to come back to a word that you used about the Troubles being “unresolved.” The book certainly left me with that feeling. Why is that?**

It’s complicated. Some of it is that there is a tendency in Irish culture toward a certain kind of denial, where there are things that people know or suspect but they just collectively choose not to talk about. I don’t want to be too reductive or culturally essentialist about this, but I think if you ask most Irish people, they would acknowledge that this was the case. I have a friend who’s an Irish journalist who told me, “It started as a social tendency, not a political tendency, but it’s become a political tendency.”

Then there’s a very real political explanation, which is that in order to get all the parties to the table and get an agreement that everybody could live with in ‘98 [the Good Friday Agreement], the negotiators essentially had to agree to punt on the question of how do we deal with the past? You have 3,600 people who’ve been killed. You have acts of terrorism. You have torture, brutality, people who have been disappeared. You have the government sponsoring and tolerating terrorist activity. You have shocking collusion between the state and paramilitary groups. All these tough questions, which in another context might lead to tribunals or some kind of truth and reconciliation process. None of that ever happened.

I talked to a guy who was a former republican prisoner. I was talking with him about South Africa, and this is a guy who studied the South African [truth and reconciliation] issue closely. I mentioned that to him and he said, “Yeah, well, the difference is, in South Africa, there was a winner and it was easier to enact a process like that when the conflict doesn’t end in a stalemate.”