



Inspiration

Maria McCann

WHenever someone asks me where I got the idea for a book, I'm surprised, all over again, at how random, yet complicated, the answer is. There are always at least two things going on.

When I started my first novel, I was working in education. A friend was enjoying Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* and said she would lend it me. 'Come round the day after Boxing Day', she said. It was the last time we spoke. On the day of the visit I was about to set off when the phone rang: she had died unexpectedly that morning.

I was then about forty. My friend was in her fifties and an exceptional person: the sort of friend you want to live up to. She'd been planning new directions for herself – study, voluntary work – and now none of that could happen. After the funeral the mourners went back to her house and there I saw the book she'd offered me; I asked her husband if I could take it as a keepsake.

My friend's untimely death galvanised me: I decided to see if I could write. I went on an Arvon course, already primed by the book she had told me to read, my head stuffed with the English Civil War. As I sat quietly at Lumb Bank, near the Bee Bole Wall, I saw a man sailing away from England. I didn't know who he was, only that he trailed destruction. That first scene turned out to be the end of the novel. Next came the same man in courtship, sitting in a maze with a woman who loved him. All the rest of the book, *As Meat Loves Salt*, grew from that.



The Wilding, my second novel, was inspired partly by a local war crime that took place in the 1600s but, bizarrely, another inspiration came from visiting Hardy's home, Max Gate, and seeing his architectural plans for it. They included a room for *itinerant men*, not vagrants but peripatetic traders and workers. Later I discovered Hardy's poem 'Shortening Days at the Homestead' which mentions a travelling cider-maker. I was intrigued by the idea of such work and I made an itinerant cider-maker my protagonist.

Two strands of my third novel, *Ace, King, Knave*, grew from images: one was a still from Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon*, showing eighteenth-century lovers lounging in a rowing boat, their surface elegance concealing emotional hunger, manipulation and deceit. Another was a photograph of Dylan and Caitlin Thomas holding up glasses of beer: Caitlin looked bold and assertive but again, there was that element of performance. Once I started writing the novel, researching as I went, I became fascinated by the duplicity of much eighteenth-century life. Some of the outrageous impostors who flourished during that period inspired its plot and are referenced in the novel.

I'm currently tinkering with a short story inspired by Brexit and a photo of some jam puffs.

Watch this space.