



Inspiration

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GROWING UP DURING the Troubles in Northern Ireland, I wanted to run, but instead I remained rooted to the spot, in my home parish of Killeeshil in Tyrone, about three miles from the Irish Border with Monaghan. By staying here and raising a family, I've managed to lift my childhood landscape out of the darkness of the past. The trees and rivers I played in as a boy with my brothers and sisters live on in my children's world, their familiar sounds and images translated into new stories and adventures.

In search of inspiration for my crime novels, which are set in my home landscape, I often go for long walks, moping around the parish like a dog that has lost its scent. I walk the familiar route between my parents' farmhouse and the cottage where my mother grew up, now abandoned and used as a cowshed by a neighbouring farmer, the white church at Ackinduff with its square tower, which my grandfather had helped build, and, along the way, the hidden springs and little glens of holly and hazel.

I explore the small fields of my grandfather's farm, trailing through hummocky grass and peering into thickets of blackthorns. It's a lopsided landscape, rising quirkily and dipping into little streams and marshy bogs. This part of the parish is known as Fashglashagh, which my Irish teacher once translated as the 'watery wilderness'. As a boy, I loved exploring its spongy boundaries and its profusion of springs shimmering in the sunlight.

The land is always sinking and rising, and men and women like my



grandfather and his mother contained the land with their spades and ploughs, digging drains, cleaning out ditches, unblocking wells, soothing and curbing the unstable water that lay beneath. My grandfather's mother spent the coldest months of the year cleaning the brimming ditches of the fields she rented, and I can imagine her silent vigilance as she patrolled the brink between land and water. Generations of her family had done the same, managing this equilibrium between the elements.

They'd grown up in meadows covered in bitter sorrel, water-mint and sloeberries. All their lives, they'd been nourished by this watery wilderness. They'd never known acres of green pasture, fertile fields of grain, or potato drills clear of stones and boggy hollows. They were reared amid springs that shifted and shimmered underfoot, overflowing wells, narrow fields that flooded every winter and were home to strange vapours, rows of mouldy crops, weed-filled ditches that had to be cleared every year, bankrupt farms and rotting cottages, a landscape that penetrated to the marrow of their bones and made them constantly fearful.

I find new vantage points of the landscape I share with my parents. One part of me is sinking deeper into my roots, and the other is struggling to get away, to evoke a freer world in my writing. Writing about the Troubles and the landscape of home feels fraught with danger, but it is also a way of expressing and exerting myself. Every time I turn an empty page, the world of my fugitive detectives opens, and I feel a shiver of excitement.