

Englishman Graham Masterton puts Cork at the heart crime novel Blood Sisters



Saturday, November 14, 2015

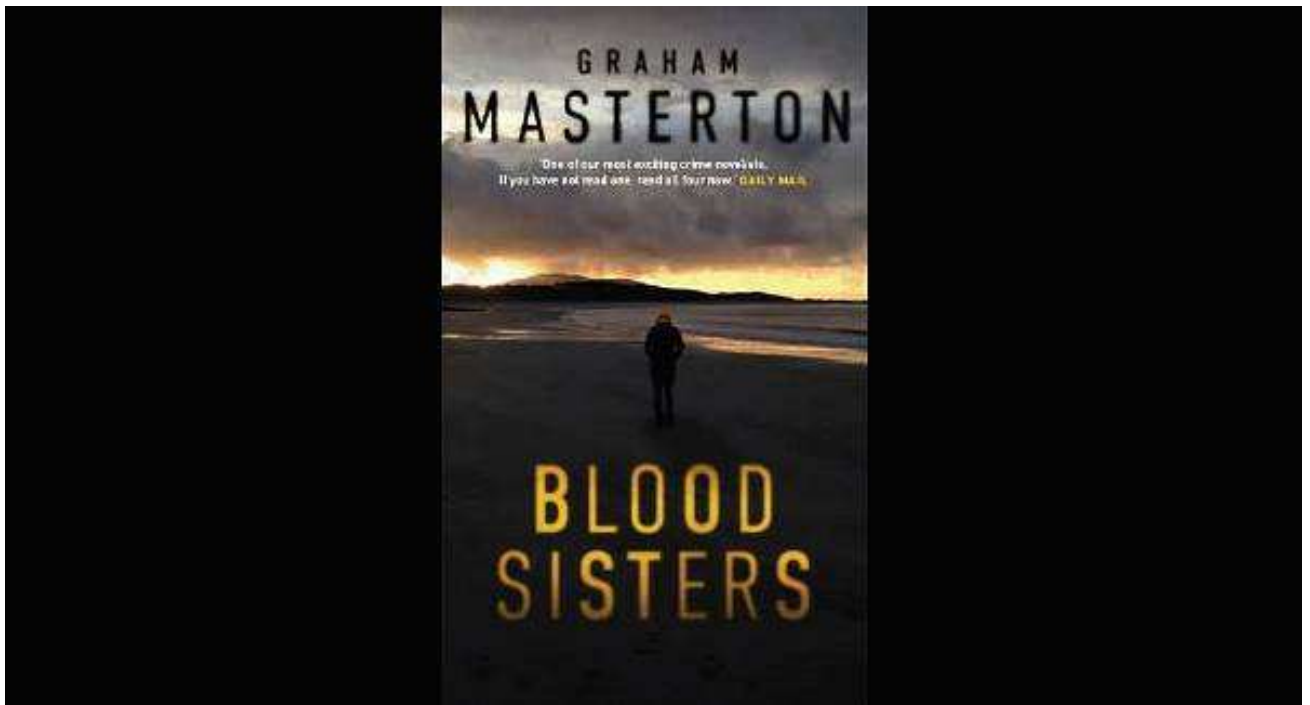
Graham Masterton has set a thriller in Cork and makes a senior garda, Katie Maguire, its central character. He spoke to Sue Leonard about his life with words and stories.



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WE MET days after the tragic weekend that saw the death of 10 Travellers from the fire on the halting site in Carrickmines, and the shooting of Garda Tony Golden.

And in *Blood Sisters*, fifth book in the Katie Maguire series, set in Cork, but by English author Graham Masterton, these events are closely mirrored, so we meet in sombre mood.



"I would like to say a condolence to the family of Tony Golden," says Masterton, sounding shaken. "I have written, so much, about the trials and tribulations of the gardaí, and they have been wonderfully helpful for research."

The 69-year-old from Epsom is nothing, if not prolific. Starting out as a journalist — he edited both *Mayfair* and *Penthouse* magazines — he has been an agony Uncle and a radio sex therapist. And he has written over 100 books.

He has never suffered from writer's block.

"What is that?" he says, sounding perplexed. "When someone first mentioned writer's block to me, I imagined this terrible dingy apartment building full of scruffy writers who couldn't think what to write. If you're a professional writer, you can't let that happen to you."

Never short of ideas, Masterton wrote the first of his crime series, *White Bones* in 2000, whilst he was living in Cork.

"I had never seen books where Cork is a major character, and I wanted to get into the nature of the city," he says. "I chose Katie Maguire because I wanted to explore the character and struggles of a woman in a high position in the gardaí. When I wrote it, there were few high ranking women; now that has changed.

"For this current book I took two ideas from news stories and twinned them together.

The first was about horses thrown over a cliff in County Mayo, and the second came out of Tuam, where they discovered skeletons and looked into how pregnant women were treated back then.

"When they closed that mother and baby home the ten nuns whose graves were there were moved and given full proper honours, and the children were just chucked into a sewage. It's an extraordinary story, and nobody was blamed for it."

The story makes for a great plot. When a nun is found, murdered in a nursing home, DS Katie Maguire is perplexed. And when the killer strikes again and again, creating increasingly gory crime scenes, targeting nuns from the same convent, she struggles to make sense of it all. But the nuns are hiding something. And when a child's skull, found in the garden of the convent leads to a horrific discovery, it all starts to make sense.

"I wanted to get in the point of view of the nuns themselves, because a lot of them did think they were doing the work of God. They did think those were young fallen women, and the families colluded. They got rid of them, saying, 'I can't be seen in Mass with you.'"

Meanwhile, the trial of a much-wanted criminal is scuppered when the main witness commits suicide; and someone is out to get the gardaí.

One garda is shot; another blown up in the explosion that caused the aforementioned fire. Dealing with all this, it doesn't help Katie that her love life is skewing out of control. Great, escapist stuff, but all done with a purpose.

Moving to Cork when his children had grown and left, Masterton and his wife stayed for five years. They adored the city, and, writing his series, he felt on a mission to inform people about Irish history.

"In England people know about the troubles, but they're barely aware of the War of Independence. There's no real awareness of why or how the English treated the Irish, or of the differences between the North and the South."

Brought up in the South of England, Masterton's own education was curtailed.

"I moved from a single sex school to Crawley Grammar which was co-ed. My attention wandered from academic to girls, and I lost interest in literature. I was expelled at 17.

"I got a job on a local paper. That was the greatest training because those papers were run by ex Fleet Street editors. I learned so much about typography and putting a story together. And that ability to look at an incident in the street and say what happened, why it happened, who was involved. That skill is useful in novel writing too."

His first assignment was to talk to a woman whose husband had won a cycling trophy.

Having talked about her husband's cycling, the woman told Masterton that he hit her a lot.

"There I was, aged 17, listening to this woman's marriage problems. I realised that it is possible to get people to talk about anything. They're just bursting to tell you, and that is what I loved about journalism."

He had ambitions to work for *The Telegraph*, but he didn't like their suggestion that he work on provincial papers for a further five years before he apply. Then his girlfriend noticed someone reading *Mayfair*, a magazine for men, and suggest he write to them.

"I told them I was the best thing since sliced bread and that they had to hire me, and they said that my letter was so arrogant that they would interview me. We met in a swimming pool at the RAC club, and they hired me on the spot. There was just the editor, a secretary, a dog, and me. That was it!"

That, too, proved a great training ground, and he ended up as editor, before editing *Penthouse*. And he made a powerful friend in the writer, William Burroughs.

"He was over from Tangiers and he was short of money. I suggested he wrote a series of articles for us, and I spent hours and hours talking to him about how to write a novel so that the reader is not aware of the technique. You should use good, simple vocabulary, and make the writing almost like singing. There should be a rhythm about it."

Writing has given Masterton a great life. The most exciting time, he says, was when his first novel, *The Manitou*, was adapted for a film in 1978.

"I was in Los Angeles a lot. I rubbed shoulders with the stars. That was a lot of fun. We had some good times in New York too, in the '70s and '80s."

He has never taken a sabbatical, and has no plans to retire.

"My wife died four years ago," he says. "We were married for 37 years, and she was my agent for most of that time. Since then I have plunged into writing to take my mind off it. I've written 11 books in four years.

"I delivered the next book in the series last Thursday. The publishers said, 'Can we have a synopsis,' and I said ok, and did one. But they said, 'not for this book — for the next one.'

"I went for a walk and had a think. I'd ended the book I'd delivered on a cliff-hanger.

I thought of where that could lead, and I looked up news stories in the *Irish Examiner*, to see what could be turned around into a story. Then I thought about Katie's character." He hopes the series will continue.

"These books are the coming together of everything I have done. I haven't lost my horror audience, because murder is horrible, and I don't believe you should sanitise it in any way. I'm pleased with the series. My agent and publisher are behind me, and the books are now doing terribly well. I hope I'm getting my message across."