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# The Guns of Easter

ISBN 978-0-86278-449-2  
eBook ISBN 978-1-84717-406-2

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## Questions and Answers

### Introduction

In the years since *The Guns of Easter* was first published I've been asked an awful lot of questions about it, in school classrooms, in interviews, in letters from readers, or even by kids who've walked up to me in supermarkets while I was doing the shopping.

These questions have ranged from the very intelligent to the frankly *strange* – my favourite strange question of all time being “If I *really* wanted to shoot somebody, would a Mauser rifle be the best thing to do it with?”... which I thought was a pretty odd question to be asked by *anyone*, but especially by a 10-year-old girl who seemed extremely keen to hear the answer. And it got even stranger when her next question was “Do you know where I could get one?”

It's impossible for me to remember *all* the questions I've been asked about *Guns of Easter*, but over the years certain ones naturally crop up again and again. Every time I visit a school or a festival (or whatever) to talk with a bunch of kids I can be pretty sure that at least half of these questions – and sometimes even all of them – will be asked.

Now that I'm an ancient, ancient man with addled wits, who still hasn't learned to drive and who lives in the middle of Wexford, I'm no longer as able as I once was to accept invitations for school visits in distant parts of the country, so I don't get as many chances to answer questions about my books in person. But the questions still keep coming, especially (in this year of 2016) about *The Guns of Easter*.

So I thought it might be useful to list some of the most common questions that I've been asked over the years and answer them in print, and the O'Brien Press have offered to put the result on their website so that anyone curious about the answers can read them there.

I must admit that this isn't half as much fun for me as answering questions in person. That's is because in a classroom (or wherever), if I'm in a good mood, I sometimes just make up stupid answers for a laugh, whereas here I feel I have to be all Proper and Adult and Responsible and such, and tell the truth. And while telling the truth is of course a Very Good Thing, it's not half as enjoyable as just making stuff up – which is what fiction writers most like doing, after all.

What I've done here is to make a list of twenty of the commonest *sane* questions that I've repeatedly been asked about *The Guns of Easter*, and tried to give straight, reasonably comprehensive responses to them. I've been asked many of these questions literally hundreds of times. All of the answers say something about the book, but some of them touch on other things as well – writing, for instance, or the difference between fiction and history, or my own attitude towards both.

To tell you the absolute truth I'd much prefer to make a list of twenty completely *mad* questions that I've been asked about *Guns of Easter* – it would probably be more fun to do and it would *certainly* be more fun for you to read. But as I said, I'm wearing my Proper Responsible Adult hat here, so hopefully some of you will find this exercise useful or informative or even – heaven help us! – Educational. Who knows? Maybe you'll even find a question on the list that you wanted answered yourself.

### Twenty of the Questions Most Often Asked about The Guns of Easter

1. Why were you so interested in the 1916 Rising?
2. What made you want to write a book

about the Rising?

3. Why did you decide to write the book as a children's book?
4. How did you decide which real-life incidents from the Rising to include?
5. Why didn't you set the book among the actual Rebels – in the GPO, say?
6. Of all the other possibilities, why did you decide to write about a poor family living in the slums?
7. How did you write such an accurate picture of life in the Dublin slums?
8. Were Jimmy Conway and his family based on real people?
9. If not, how did you invent them?
10. Where did you get the names for your characters?
11. Why do Jimmy's sisters do so little in the story?
12. How much of the story in the book is true?
13. Why is there so much death in the book?
14. How did you know so much about what happened during the Easter Rising?
15. How did you know so much about how people felt in 1916?
16. Were you ever tempted to change history in the book, and let the rebels win?
17. Where did the name *The Guns of Easter* come from?
18. How did people react to the book when it first came out?
19. Is *Guns of Easter* your favourite among the books you've written?
20. Did anything in *The Guns of Easter* surprise you, even though you wrote it?

## 1. Why were you so interested in the 1916 Rising?

Believe it or not I wasn't *really* interested in the Easter Rising at all till I was nearly 30. Looking back on it, I think this was mainly because of the version of the Rising that I'd heard about as a child. That may sound strange to you, especially this year, when you're being told so much about the huge complexities of 1916. But the story of the Rising as you're hearing it now isn't the same as the story of the Rising I was told when I was your age. *That* story wasn't complex at all.

The story I first heard was what I came to call the Official Version. The fiftieth anniversary of the Rising fell in 1966, when I was eight years old. All over the country there were commemorations – parades, ceremonies, pageants and so on – celebrating this fact. Dozens of books and hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles about it were printed. Radio and television were saturated with programmes commemorating the Rising.

You might think that this sounds very much like what's happening this year, but you'd be wrong. Because a lot of what went on in 1966 was less a commemoration of the actual Rising than a celebration of the Official Version, and the two things weren't quite the same. They shared many facts – the GPO, the Proclamation, etc. But the old Official Version of the Rising was anything but complex: it was as two-dimensional as the Official Irish Versions of everything else tended to be in those days.

Just lately, in a television lecture, I heard the historian Simon Schama say that a historian's job was to tell the story of the past in such a way as to make people ask fresh questions about it. Two things struck me about this. The first was that, while people who write historical fiction can't claim to be actual historians, still that that's a good description of part of their job too. The second was that Official Versions of history tend, by and large, not to do this job at all: the job of an Official Version of anything is not to promote questioning but to close it down, by suggesting that all the *proper* questions have already been answered. Which is of course *never* true.

The old Official Version of the Easter Rising, as it was fed to my generation in the 1960s, was basically a fairytale of Good and Evil – a sort of "Brits and Rebels" version of Star Wars. There were Good Guys (the Rebels) and Bad Guys (the British). The Good Guys

- **every single one of them** - were Heroes, so noble and spiritual that they were more like saints than humans. Everything they did was Honest and Upright and Good and Unselfish, and **everything** that **all** the Bad Guys did was (of course) Cruel and Evil and Nasty. In this version of things the people in the middle – ordinary Irish people who were neither Good nor Evil, who were confused about the whole thing and who maybe weren't involved at all – didn't seem to matter very much, even though they formed the vast majority of those who were caught up in the Rising.

Even as a child that sort of thing didn't really sit well with me. I loved stories, whether they were in films or books, on radio or on television (which had come to Ireland when I was about five) or even the long, bloodthirsty ghost stories that my granny loved to terrify us with. One of the things I loved about history when I was a child was that it was **full** of stories – stories that made me wonder about things.

But the stories I enjoyed were *good* stories – ones that your mind could really get its teeth into, where people you could identify with behaved like *real* people might behave, and where lots of complicated things happened, as they did in real life. And the Official Version of the 1916 Rising struck me, even when I was young, as too *simple* to be satisfying: it was more like something from a cartoon or a comic than a *proper* story.

Don't get me wrong – I was a big *fan* of cartoons and comics; it's just that, even back then, I knew that real life was more complicated than any cartoon, and I never really trusted versions of reality where ordinary people didn't matter – after all I (like everyone else I knew) was an ordinary person myself.

So I guess I was wrong above when I said that I wasn't really interested in the Easter Rising till I was nearly 30: what I wasn't interested in was the old Official Version. There could be no doubting the importance of the Rising itself. It had been one of the most important events in Irish history, because it had sort of kickstarted the process that wound up creating the Ireland that all of us were born in.

Like quite a few Irish people that I've met since, I only really started thinking seriously about the Rising when I was living abroad. Okay, I didn't trust the version of the Rising I'd been handed when I was young: still the Rising had definitely happened – we had the graves and the independence to prove it. And there was no denying its importance. So

there must be other versions of its story out there – fuller, more complicated versions, that included all those people that the Official Version didn't bother with. People who acted like real people did, and got as confused as real people got. Versions, in other words, that seemed more real to me than the cartoonish one I'd rejected as a child.

That was in the 1980s, and when I got back to Ireland, and had access to Irish bookshops and archives and libraries again, I began to spend time learning about the Rising – not the Official Version this time, but the actual events as they were experienced by people who'd lived through them. I found there were many eyewitness accounts of Easter Week, often written shortly after the Rising or even while it was still going on. These were what excited me most. In them I found descriptions of scenes that everyone knew from that Easter – all the scenes that featured in the Official Version - but as they'd been witnessed by ordinary Dubliners or visitors to the city. Here were people with split loyalties, or people worried about family members, or people far less concerned with who won the fight than with finding a loaf of bread.

Many of the little stories I came across were tragic; others were actually very funny. Here, if you took them all together, was a mixed-up and very confused version of the Easter Rising, but a version that smelled unmistakably of real life. Here, in other words, was just about everything whose lack had always made the Official Version less than interesting to me.

Nowadays, when so many personal accounts of that week have been republished or even made public for the first time, and when so many such accounts are available online, researching this sort of material would be much easier. But back then, the late '80s and early '90s, the internet as we know it now still sounded like science fiction, and I'm still only aware of one collection of eyewitness accounts by non-combatants that was available then (I spent half a week's dole money buying a used copy in 1987!).

Most of my research consisted of spending long, long hours in libraries, reading ancient books, delving into big bound editions of newspapers and magazines whose pages were yellow with age and threatened to crumble as you carefully turned them, digging out little nuggets of information, filling notebooks and writing pads with scribbled notes. But I didn't mind in the least. I had no plan to do anything in particular with any of

the stuff I was digging up - I was completely caught up in that pleasure you get from just finally finding out about something you've wondered about for ages.

## 2. What made you want to write a book about the Rising?

I've said that the picture I got from my reading was mixed up and confused: that's one of the reasons that so many people cling to Official Versions of *anything* – because real life is terribly *messy*. To me, as a born messer, that's not such a problem, but I thought that writing about the Rising would help me to understand it better. After reading so much about the subject I knew a huge amount of *detail* about it – names, places, dates and so on. But having a lot of information about something is not at all the same thing as understanding it, and I had real trouble fitting all that information together in my mind's eye into what you might call "the big picture" (normally I hate that phrase, but in this case it's very suitable).

I'd always found that writing a story about a subject helped me to understand it better. Some people are just like that – they find it easier to put their thoughts in order when they get them down on paper (or, nowadays, on a hard drive). So I decided to try and write a story about the Rising, in the hope that it would help me put this "big picture" together for myself. While I've met other writers who share this habit and regard it as perfectly normal, it's hard to describe how it works to those who don't share it, but I'll have a go –

Imagine you're poking around in an attic and you find an old cardboard box. When you open the box it's full of pieces from a huge jigsaw. When you look at the pieces you see that they look like something really, *really* interesting is going on, but you can't make out exactly what it is. All you can see is these interesting details on the individual pieces. The box itself is no help because it isn't the original box that the jigsaw came in – there's no picture of the completed puzzle on the front.

So you have two choices – you can either a) shrug your shoulders and put the box back where you found it or b) spend hours and hours trying to fit the pieces together in some way that lets you make some kind of sense of the picture.

Now most people will be sensible enough to take option "a," because making a big jigsaw without any picture to guide you is a difficult, frustrating and extremely time-consuming job. A few people, though, will

be so curious (or foolish) that they choose option "b," and waste hours and hours and hours trying to fit all the pieces together till they make at least *some* kind of coherent picture.

In a way this is one of my personal definitions of what a writer is: a writer is the sort of eejit who'll spend hours and hours trying to fit all those pieces together into a coherent picture, just out of curiosity. And what the writer winds up with of course, isn't a jigsaw, it's a book – in my case a book called *The Guns of Easter*

## 3. Why did you decide to write the book as a children's book?

Actually I originally tried to write about the Rising in a piece of adult fiction, but very soon realised that the result – whether it was good or bad – wouldn't do the particular thing that I wanted to do. What I wanted was to have a main character who'd travel around Dublin during the Rising and witness certain things. Their main job in the book – as I originally saw it – was to act as little more than a pair of eyes. Obviously this character would need to interact with other characters, but I didn't want these interactions to be too complicated or they'd distract from the character's main purpose in the book – which was simply to be a witness.

Now modern adult fiction has certain conventions, and one of these – if the adult fiction is to be any good - is that the interactions between characters is fairly complicated. In fact you could almost say that modern adult fiction tends to be *about* relationships between people. What I wanted to describe, though, was *events*. So trying to do this in the form of adult fiction was, in a way, like trying to paint a picture of a big yellow flower... using only red paint.

I made several false starts before I realised this, but once I did realise it I was flummoxed. It was "only" a technical problem, but it was a very big one. I don't know if you've seen the recent RTE series about the Rising, "Rebellion," but for me that was an excellent example of the process I'm talking about – it became a series about the relationships between the characters, and the actual Rising itself just turned into a sort of sketchy backdrop... which really annoyed a lot of people (including me).

I tried to find a way around this problem myself back in the day, and I failed. Then one day I ran into a friend of mine, the children's writer Michael Scott. He knew I was trying to write something about 1916 and asked how it was going. I explained the

problem I was having, and he understood it right away.

"Did you ever think of writing it as a kids' book?" he asked. "Children's books are one place you can just tell the *story* of something, and that sounds like exactly what you want to do."

You know that thing in cartoons where a lightbulb suddenly goes on over somebody's head when they have an idea or see a solution to a problem? Well that's what happened to me when Michael said that. The more I thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Six months and many drafts later, I had a finished version of what would eventually become *The Guns of Easter*.

## 4. How did you decide which real-life incidents from the Rising to include?

I had a long list of incidents from the Rising that most interested me – far too many, in fact. No one person could have witnessed all of the things I wanted to describe – apart from anything else there were so many bullets flying around that at some point they'd almost certainly have been killed. So I had to cut the list back, which in some cases was very hard. But I made three rules to govern what incidents might be included: they had to be

incidents that I thought were important in the story of the Rising

incidents that I had lots of eyewitness accounts of

incidents that a single person, travelling on foot around Dublin, could realistically have seen

Using these rules I whittled down the number of things I could believably have my character do, and in the end I wound up with a more-or-less definitive list – the taking of the GPO, the looting in Sackville Street, the Citizens' Army in Stephen's Green, the carnage in Northumberland Road.... In other words (though I didn't know it yet) I was building up what would become the story of Jimmy Conway's travels in *The Guns of Easter*.

## 5. Why didn't you set the book among the actual Rebels – in the GPO, say?

For two reasons that, if you think about them, are quite simple. Firstly, because most of the Rebels spent most of Easter week shut up in the places they were occupying, and couldn't wander about witnessing things in the way that I wanted my main character to

do. And secondly – and more importantly – because I needed that main character to be confused by what was going on, and to spend a lot of time trying to make sense of it to himself (in the same way, really, that I was trying to make sense of it to myself).

Actually setting the book among the Rebels would almost inevitably mean using someone sympathetic to the Rebels as a main character, just as setting it (for example) among the British army soldiers would have meant using someone sympathetic to Britain as a main character. And what I needed was a main character whose loyalties were really completely conflicted – someone like Jimmy Conway.

### 6. Of all the other possibilities, why did you decide to write about a poor family living in the slums?

Largely because they'd be well-placed to have a close-up view of the scenes in Sackville Street. Then, since the area was basically cut off by fighting, there'd be a good reason for someone to wander farther afield – namely the search for food. It's believed that many of the civilians killed during the Rising were actually out searching for something to eat,

Beyond that, though, back when *Guns of Easter* was written I thought that the poor of central Dublin were very neglected in almost all accounts of the Rising. There were huge slum areas right in the centre of what became, for a week, an open battlefield, with fighting that included the use of artillery and heavy machine guns. The tenement-dwellers were incredibly vulnerable, yet the only thing much reported about them at that time was the looting in Sackville Street.

### 7. How did you write such an accurate picture of life in the Dublin slums?

I didn't!

Ever since *Guns of Easter* first came out I've heard people praise its "authentic" picture of slum life. This always baffled me, because nothing could be further from the truth. Compared to the grim realities of slum life in Dublin at the time, the picture given of the Conway household is far and away the most "prettified" thing in the book.

If you *really* want to think about real life in the inner-city slums of Dublin in 1916, a good way to start is to have a look in your own kitchen and bathroom. Then think of a "classic" inner-city Dublin tenement building

in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – one of those in the North Inner City, say, a large old house of three or four storeys, originally built to house one family (and their servants), now divided into a dozen or more one-roomed "homes" and with up to a hundred men, women and children living in it.

Now think that, all other things being equal, there probably wasn't a single cooker in the house – all the cooking was done over an open fire (if there was a fireplace). Next think that there was pretty much no indoor plumbing, just (maybe) a single tap or pump in the back yard where those people had to get **all** of their water (when the pump or tap was working) all year round, including in the harshest winter. Then think that, for all of those people, there was probably only **one** outside toilet – also in the back yard, and often just an earth closet not even linked to mains sewerage.

Lily Conway, in *The Guns of Easter*, has only three children, whereas many slum families were huge. She has lost no children to the fatal (and mostly entirely predictable) childhood illnesses that were rife in the tenements, whereas some families had lost five or six children under the age of five. The fact that Lily's husband is in the army means the family has *some* kind of regular income – something that a lot of slum families didn't have – but only because her husband risks his life - all day every day - to ensure it. The Conways have glass in their windows and none of the floorboards in their room is rotten – things that many large slum families at the time would have considered luxuries.

Like anyone else I love being praised, and as a writer I obviously like having my books praised. But some of the praise that I've had for the picture of tenement life given in *The Guns of Easter* has, if anything, tended to annoy me. The Conways are obviously poor by any kind of modern standards, which is all they need to be in the context of the book. But if I'd written an honest portrayal of exactly what "being poor" meant in Dublin in 1916 then either *Guns of Easter* would have been unpublishable or it would have been a far angrier book, because the subject makes me sort of angry even now – not because people were forced to live like that a hundred years ago, but because for most of them life didn't change very much after independence. Jimmy even has boots to wear – something that some slum children in Dublin didn't have even in the 1950s!

An important word in this context (and one of my favourite words because – apart from anything else – I love the sound of it) is

*verisimilitude*. Verisimilitude can be defined as "seeming to be real," and it lies at the heart of **all** storytelling, in any form.

When we read a made-up story, we know it's made up; but we can still genuinely worry about the people in it, or be happy for them as the case may be. We can do this because part of our mind is able to sort of "forget," just for a while, that the whole story – including the person we worry about – is only made up. This is a very real phenomenon, known as the "willing suspension of disbelief," and without it good novels – and films and tv shows – would be impossible.

In order for us to "forget" in this way, it's important that things in the story **seem** realistic: they don't have to be 100% correct, but they have to be correct enough for us not to worry about them. Basically, in historical fiction, a small historical error (especially if it's useful for the story) is acceptable; but a big one, that sort of jumps off the page and hits you a slap in the face, is not. It collapses the suspension of disbelief, and can ruin the story.

If Jimmy Conway only has two sisters instead of a whole lot of siblings – which would have been more typical for the time and place – then we can ignore that: it's less than 100% realistic, but it has *verisimilitude* – it *sounds* plausible. But if Jimmy's Da, in 1916, had (say) been calling the family from the trenches on an iPhone that would just make readers go "Huh? But that's stupid – they didn't have mobile phones in 1916!" It would (so to speak) break the spell.

Because historical fiction, like all fiction, is just an illusion – an illusion we're happy to believe while we're reading it. Jimmy having two siblings is a simplification, but it lets the reader stay under the illusion; a slum family having an iPhone in 1916 is just a stupid idea, and would spoil the whole book.

### 8. Were Jimmy Conway and his family based on real people?

No, they were completely fictional. As I pointed out above, strictly speaking they weren't even typical. This may sound odd, but sometimes in writing, even about history, there's such a thing as being **too** realistic – too much reality can get in the way of the story, and in *Guns of Easter* the story was what mattered.

### 9. If not, how did you invent them?

Without wanting to be in any way mysterious, I invented them in the same way that any writer invents characters. Some

of their individual traits came from various people I'd known, some from people I'd read about, others I just made up. To be honest, I just lied. I'm a writer, for goodness sake – it's what we do!

Jimmy Conway is basically just like any sensible kid – smarter than many adults think he is, but also (luckily for him!) smart enough to know that he doesn't know everything.

### 10. Where did you get the names for your characters?

Again, I just made them up. Sometimes I give characters the names of people I know, sometimes I just use names that sound right to me. If there's a really nasty character then I tend to call them after a friend, my reasoning being that your friends are less inclined to actually hit you.

### 11. Why do Jimmy's sisters do so little in the story?

This is the only question I've ever been asked about *Guns of Easter* that made me feel guilty. The first time I was asked it, by a girl in a school in (I think) Offaly, I was so surprised that for a while I couldn't answer. And if you knew me, you'd know how rare **that** is!

The girl in Offaly actually put the question much better than I've phrased it above. What she *literally* asked me was why all Sarah and Josie Conway did in *Guns of Easter* was cry and get sick (though she used a shorter and more direct term for "get sick" if I remember correctly).

The thing is, I realised immediately that she was dead right – that really was pretty much all that Sarah and Josie Conway did in the book. I also realised that this had never struck me before, which is what made me feel guilty.

What the questioner really wanted to know, as I guessed, was whether I thought that crying and... er... 'getting sick' were somehow all that girls were fit for in a Rebellion. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but I could see how she might have got that impression from the book.

The truth is that balancing Jimmy's inner thoughts and the real historical events that he walked through had taken absolutely all of my attention while I was writing *Guns of Easter*. It was my first book, and – as many first-time writers do – I'd overlooked something important in it. Once Jimmy left Conways' and was out in the dangerous streets it had been a fulltime job just keeping him alive, and I hadn't given his sisters

a moment's thought until it was time for Jimmy himself to go back home.

I realised there in that classroom that there were probably other girls around Ireland who, while they'd liked *Guns of Easter*, had felt vaguely insulted in the same way that my questioner clearly had, and I was genuinely mortified. I don't mind insulting people if I'm doing it on purpose – it can actually be quite enjoyable, as you may know – but I hate doing it by accident.

So I promised that girl – and through her (in spirit at least) any of my female readers who'd had the same impression she had – that if I wrote about the Conways again then it would be about one of Jimmy's sisters, and if I did then she'd be the bolshiest rebel imaginable.

While there would be other things involved, this is really where my third book *A Winter of Spies* came from. The central character in that is Jimmy's sister Sarah, and she's such a rebel that she terrifies even her mother and father. I never ran into the girl from Offaly again, but I like to think that she went on to read that book too, and I hope she felt I'd kept my word.

### 12. How much of the story in the book is true?

I used to say that if you could somehow "unzip" *Guns of Easter* you'd wind up with two stories. One would be the entirely fictional story of the Conway family, but the other would be a pretty straight historical account, heavily based on eyewitness statements, of incidents from the Easter Rising.

The eyewitness element was very important to me. Virtually nothing in the book about events during the Rising – even down to small details – was invented, and pretty much all of it comes from eyewitness descriptions. Some of the incidents in the book – the Sackville Street looting, for instance, or the fight at Northumberland Road – contain elements from a large number of different accounts by people who were actually there, all woven together (seamlessly, I hope!) into a single account.

Even my own favourite line in the whole book – when someone says that there isn't a cat or a dog left alive in Camden Street – is something that somebody actually said to the writer James Stephens, who wrote a short but wonderful memoir of his experiences during the Rising that I plundered wholesale for use in *Guns of Easter*.

### 13. Why is there so much death in the book?

Because there was a lot of death in the Rising. Most of the people killed were civilians, and many of these were children. Much is being made, in this centenary year, of the civilian deaths, but it still wasn't being really stressed back when *Guns of Easter* was written. It certainly wasn't stressed much in the old Official Version of the Rising when I was a child - unless the civilian deaths had very definitely been caused by the British.

Jimmy wanders through areas of a city where heavy fighting is going on. If I'd ignored the fact that heavy fighting kills lots of people then *Guns of Easter* would have been a very dishonest book indeed.

### 14. How did you know so much about what happened during the Easter Rising?

Because I'd read dozens and dozens and dozens (and dozens) of books, magazine articles, manuscripts and newspaper accounts about it before writing anything at all. Often a writer will decide to write a book on a subject and then do lots of research on that subject. In my case, with *Guns of Easter*, the process was actually weirdly reversed – I read so much about the Rising that the information sort of leaked out of me... and *Guns of Easter* is the shape it came out in!

### 15. How did you know so much about how people felt in 1916?

In some ways the answer to this is the same as the answer to the previous question, but beyond that there's something else that I was really only beginning to realise when I wrote *Guns of Easter*, which is that in many ways people in the past were really very much like us.

Don't get me wrong - manners change, and beliefs change, and newspaper headlines change, and technology changes, and so on. But underneath that very much stays the same. People like freedom, and people like security, and people worry about their families... The way these things express themselves changes over time, but the things themselves are very, very basic human things, and don't change much.

### 16. Were you ever tempted to change history in the book, and let the rebels win?

No, because – as I said – one of the main reasons for writing the story was to help me understand what **did** actually happen,

so changing history like that would have worked against what I was trying to do. The historical aspect wasn't just important to me, it was the whole reason I needed to write the book in the first place. If I'd ended *Guns of Easter* by having the Rebels win, then it would have been a fantasy, so I wouldn't have got much benefit from writing it.

Over the years I've written both historical novels and fantasies – a mixture that used to really puzzle some adults in a way that I never really understood, because in the end I think it's important to remember that **all** fiction is fantasy. Many people say that the Easter Rising itself – which definitely happened, and we have the graves to prove it – had elements of fantasy in the heads of those who launched it. That may well be, though you could say the same about the Crusades or the Second World War or indeed just about any other conflict.

Fantasy, to me, is a very practical and useful way of processing reality – otherwise humanity wouldn't have any need for fairytales, novels, films or politics. The study of history is also a useful way of processing reality – you can learn a great deal about today by studying yesterday, and indeed if you know nothing about the past then I'd go so far as to say that you're simply not equipped to understand the present.

But it's vitally important, if you're dealing with fact and with fantasy, that you stay very clear in your mind about where one stops and the other begins. That was an area where the old Official Version of the Easter Rising fell down. I'm certainly not claiming that **my** version is any kind of definitive version; but it's one that I felt reflected more of the complexities of that week in Dublin than what I'd been told as a young person.

### 17. Where did the name *The Guns of Easter* come from?

I'm always embarrassed admitting this, but I chose it by closing my eyes and sticking a pin in a list of possible titles.

Honestly!

I'm frankly useless at titles. My first editor at the O'Brien Press, Íde Ní Laoghaire, used to find it hilarious that I could write an excellent 200-page book but sweated blood (metaphorically!) at the prospect of sticking a few words together to make a decent title.

With *Guns of Easter*, after spending ages unable to settle on a title that satisfied everybody, I simply wrote out a long list of titles that didn't seem **too** bad and then stuck a pin in it. I was very happy with the

result, though.

The actual name *The Guns of Easter* (by the way) is derived from *The Guns of August*, a book about the outbreak of the First World War. That book was written by the American historian Barbara Tuchman. Now there's a piece of useless trivia for you!

### 18. How did people react to *The Guns of Easter* when it first came out?

Very positively – at least adults reacted positively right away, but it took a while before I got any feedback from the important audience, i.e. kids themselves. When this finally did begin to come in, I was delighted to find that a lot of kids enjoyed the book very much indeed. *Guns of Easter* went on to win a Merit Award in the Book Of The Year awards that year, and also won the Eilís Dillon Memorial Award for a first novel, but of course those things were decided by adults. Personally the biggest kick I got from it (and continue to get to this day) was the way that the book's readers took the Conways to heart – especially Jimmy.

That's all a long time ago now, and many of the book's first readers are by this stage Mums and Dads themselves (which is a strange idea in a way). But the book has stayed in print ever since and there always seem to be new young people discovering and enjoying it, and sometimes sending me letters that suggest they're responding to it in exactly the same way that its first readers did.

Personally I think that's a rare privilege that we writers for young people have – it's like I've been having a strange sort of positive conversation with thousands of Irish kids that's stretched over twenty years! Which, to be honest, is just a really nice feeling for an old crock like me!

### 19. Is *Guns of Easter* your favourite among the books you've written?

Like most writers I know, I honestly don't have a favourite among my books. They were all written for different reasons and in different circumstances, and for me in my own mind each of them is inextricably mixed up with what was going on in my life at the time that I wrote it, in a way they simply can't be for their readers,

If I was actually **forced** to pick a favourite, it would probably be my second book, the fantasy *Dream Invader* – not because it won the Bisto Book of the Year award, but because I had such a fun time writing it and

because it reminds me so much of the happy time when my son was a toddler – I actually robbed several funny things that I overheard him and his friends say and put them straight into the book. And a lot of the jokes in it still strike me as very funny – though of course I'm biased!

### 20. Did anything in *The Guns of Easter* surprise you, even though you wrote it?

Yes indeed – the Conway family, and especially the affection I came to feel for them, really surprised me. I've told you that *The Guns of Easter* began as my attempt to understand the Easter Rising better, and that's true. To do this in a piece of fiction required that I invent characters, which I duly did. There was no *special* reason why these characters should have become – as they very quickly did – almost real to me, so that I found myself having hopes for them, or worrying about them, almost in the same way that I would for living, breathing people that I knew in real life.

It's hard, I suppose, to write well about characters you don't care about at all – I don't actually know, because to some degree I've cared about all of my characters, even the awful ones (in fact *especially* the awful ones). But the Conways were the first people that it happened to me with, and I was very surprised - and very *pleasantly* surprised - at how they sort of moved into my mind and set up house! I was always very happy to find that they'd done something similar with many of my readers.

This was one of the reasons why, in my second book about them, I moved the family to a nicer home – I knew they'd still be doing dangerous things, but I figured they'd at least earned a little bit of comfort while they were doing them.

