

British writer Graham Masterton has covered an eclectic range of genres from horror to sex manuals. In his latest Katie Maguire crime novel he turns his attention to the competitive world of Irish dancing, writes **Catherine Healy**

SEX AND THE CRIME WRITER

Sitting comfortably in a Dublin hotel lounge, Graham Masterton is quite unlike what you might expect from a once prolific writer of sex manuals. The British author – a mild-mannered, gentlemanly chap who considers himself a devotee of women's lib – has published over two dozen such guides, including one, *How To Drive Your Man Wild in Bed*, which is still listed on Ireland's Register of Prohibited Publications.

The ban has nothing to do with explicit or violent content, however. The book was instead barred in 1985 under legislation preventing publications from advocating the procurement of abortion. "On page 200 and something," Masterton says, "I suggested that a girl might consider seeking one if she were to accidentally become pregnant."

Masterton has played many roles in his 70-odd years – journalist, magazine editor, horror writer and sexual adviser, as well as family man and husband to Wiescka, his late wife and agent. While his focus is now on crime fiction, Masterton's latest book features many of the hallmarks of his previous writings.

Dead Girls Dancing, the eighth instalment in his Katie Maguire series, follows the detective superintendent as she investigates a gruesome fire at a dance studio. Where others see tragedy, Maguire begins building a picture of a ruthless killer, set against the obsessive world of Irish folk dancing.

There's plenty of sex too, with one rather elaborate threesome taking over six pages, but Masterton says he takes no notice of critics who sniff at the series' explicit scenes.

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"I wanted to be upfront about the challenges faced by police officers. It does affect their marriages, their sexual relationships, and there have been many incidents, especially in Britain, where police have had inappropriate affairs with colleagues or victims."

This latest book is set in Cork, where Masterton once lived for five years with his wife. They relocated to Ireland for tax reasons, but ended up falling in love with the place, he says. "We just wanted a change of

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FERGAL PHILLIPS

scenery. We looked at Dublin, which is very lively, of course, but also quite expensive in the sort of areas we liked, like Blackrock. Cork is a different planet, but we got on well there. After about six months, I'd say we finally began to understand what people were talking about."

Masterton adds that he found Irish people to be "incredibly tolerant" of British expats. "In some pubs, you'd order a glass of white wine in an English accent and they'd look at you as if you stepped on their shoes, which is fair enough, but I think it's astonishing that you put up with us, given what the English did to the Irish.

"We always felt welcome – we were often invited to weddings and parties, and we made lots of good friends – and yet, in the end, we were blow-ins, as a woman down the road used to say. Cork is a tribe and if you're not born into the tribe, as the saying goes, you can never quite get past the gate of mystery."

Despite being strongly anchored in Ireland, the Katie Maguire series has sold well as e-books in eastern Europe. "How on earth they translate Corkonese into Polish, I don't know," he quips. Joking aside, he says the digital revolution has brought him a wider audience than ever. "Now, instead of selling a book to 2,000 readers, you could sell it to 200,000 readers."

Masterton also keeps in touch with fans online, beginning each work day with a scan of social media. "I have 5,000 friends on Facebook – you can't have any more than that! People also leave comments on my website's message board."

He still follows news from Cork, and some of the vignettes in *Dead Girls Dancing* are inspired by real

stories – IRA splinter groups and Brexit politics all feature.

As for the Irish dancing? "I had been reading about how competitive the industry has become since *Riverdance*," Masterton says. "There are troupes all over the world and the rivalries can get quite vicious, so I thought that would make for an interesting backdrop."

Born in Edinburgh, Masterton edited men's magazine *Mayfair* and the British edition of *Penthouse* before devoting himself full time to fiction.

With more than 100 books to his name, he still writes at journalist pace – *Dead Girls Dancing* was completed in three months. "I used to think that writer's block was an apartment building filled with people staring at typewriters that they couldn't type on," he jokes.

"I always wrote as a small boy and I got into horror after reading Edgar Allan Poe. I was expelled from school at 17 – I paid more attention to the girls in my class than the work – but I got a job as a trainee newspaper reporter and got into the habit of meeting deadlines."

Speaking of deadlines, I finish by asking for his opinion of looming Brexit talks. "Oh, I voted for it," Masterton exclaims. "I'm not being told what to do by drunken, sclerotic Belgians in unelected positions and grey suits." Then, bidding me farewell with a kiss on either cheek, he gets up to have his photo taken. ■

Dead Girls Dancing, by Graham Masterton, is published by *Head of Zeus*. For more, see katiemaguire.co.uk