

TLC Showcase

FINN DERVAN

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Introduction to *Serenity Song*

Serenity Song was inspired by the discovery of a family secret that had lain buried for two generations. I was born and raised in England, but my mother hails from County Galway in the Republic of Ireland. As a child, I had been told my great-grandfather, a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary, had been gunned down on his front doorstep sometime during the Irish War of Independence that stuttered and flared through the years 1919-21. The family fable was that Sergeant James King, a staunch Catholic, was on his way to mass when he was waylaid and murdered by a rogue IRA operative for no other reason than the uniform he wore. The facts were unclear; the history hazy. However in 2016, in the wake of the centennial commemorations of the Easter Rising in Dublin, a whole host of documents surfaced online. To the family's horror, Sergeant King was accused of being the ring-leader of a Police Murder Squad who terrorised the rural areas of County Roscommon. His assassination, only an hour before the truce that ended two years of vicious guerrilla war, was a last ditch attempt by the Republican forces in that County to have their revenge. With many members of the family refusing to believe the accusations, I decided to investigate. Travelling to the National Archives in Kew to study the original documentation, then on to Dublin, Belfast, Derry and Glasgow, I discovered a history so twisted, I was dumbfounded. What I uncovered wasn't enough to exonerate Sergeant King, but was more than enough to inspire me to write *Serenity Song*.

The novel follows James Lucas as he embarks on a similar quest to my own. But very soon, he learns that in small town Ireland, there is a reason the past remains buried. Modern day sectarianism on the streets of Northern Ireland and Scotland is put under the microscope as James stumbles across clandestine Republican splinter groups and shady members of the Orange Order. Slowly he begins to uncover a backstory to the assassination that's even darker than he could have imagined. Faced with a very real threat to all those he loves, James must decide how far he is prepared to go to reveal the truth.

A year and a half after sending my manuscript to TLC, I have enjoyed successful launch events in both the UK and Ireland where the book sold out. There has been extensive press coverage and huge interest on both sides of the Irish Sea. However, I genuinely believe that if I hadn't used TLC's manuscript assessment service, the novel would still be haunting literary agent's inboxes - half-formed and incorporeal. Much of this is down to TLC reader and bestselling historical author, Imogen Robertson.

When I heard that she was to assess my manuscript, I was heartened that I had been paired with somebody who wrote within the same genre as I; somebody whom I had the utmost respect for as a writer. Imogen's analysis of my manuscript was perceptive and helpful; it was detailed down to individual words and phrases, but she also stepped back and evaluated the big themes of the novel. She recommended authors for me to read and works on the art of writing to study. She was fulsome in her praise of certain characters and set-pieces and engendered in me a confidence to follow the journey through. However, she was also able to spot the deficiencies in parts of my plot and the motivation of one key character. She offered some frank advice that I could choose to take or leave; give your protagonist demons! I realised that a central figure in the novel came across as too 'vanilla' and if the reader were to truly believe in why he was putting himself in so much danger, he had to be driven by something more than an abstract desire to uncover the truth. That one piece of advice led me to deconstruct the character of James Lucas and create an entirely new backstory that reveals itself as the novel progresses, mirroring the central themes of guilt and redemption. Imogen's feedback transformed the plot entirely and *Serenity Song* is a far better novel than it would have been had I not used TLC's services.

Extract from *Serenity Song* by Finn Dervan

Prologue

11th July, 1921

Birr, King's County, Ireland

The curve of orange sun nudged the horizon and inched its way above the pea-green fields that quilted King's County. Silhouetted against it, a young man crouched on a turn of track that emerged from the woods. The flat of his hand lay buried beneath the grass bordering the roadside. With eyes closed and head bowed, he whispered three words to the dark earth that cooled his palm. "For you, Micheál."

Ciaran Fahy walked past Craughwells' Bar and turned his push-bike onto Main Street. Looking up the road towards the lonely column on Cumberland Square, he could see that the town of Birr was as still as an oil painting. The only sign of life was a dray-horse pawing the cobbles outside Dooly's Hotel; two men grunting in unison as they hefted barrels of beer from the cart and rolled them into the cellar below. Thin tendrils of smoke curled from chimneys and the peaty aroma of burning turf already permeated the morning air. Ciaran walked halfway up the road and very deliberately turned and leant his bicycle to point the way he had come. He crossed the cobbles and stepped through the open door of Skelly's General Store. Declan Skelly stood behind the counter poring over the headlines of the *Midland Tribune*, a cup of tea steaming beside him. He looked up and nodded but continued reading as he used a grubby towel to dry a set of tumblers.

Ciaran asked for a lemonade. Declan shuffled to the rear of the shop and returned from the ice-room holding a bottle, dusted with a dandruff of frost. Ciaran thanked the old man, turned his back to the counter and fixed his gaze through the shopfront window onto the red front door across the street.

By now the sun had edged over the roofline opposite and shone directly into the store. The frosted bottleneck began to melt and rivulets of icy water trickled through Ciaran's fingers, collecting and carrying particles of dried mud from his roadside prayer to the bottle's heel where they hung in cloudy pearls before dropping, one by one, to the floorboards.

Ciaran lifted his face upwards, closed his eyes and let the warm light bathe his inner eyelids in kaleidoscopic hues of pink, purple and gold. Taking a long swig, he savoured the tickle of bubbles on his palate and the slow chill that spread down his throat. Opening them again, he saw the sun had caught the bottle in such a way that a pool of flickering light had appeared above the door frame, hovering just below the ceiling.

He smiled, as with the slightest movement, he could send the light sprite dancing back and forth across the length of the shop. Ciaran manoeuvred the bottle so that the bright pin flew outside and across the street where it circled the bronze knocker of the door opposite. Taking another sip of lemonade, he found he couldn't recreate the angle that had given birth to the shimmering pool of sunbeam, and he felt a momentary twinge of irrational loss.

Declan Skelly continued drying glass-ware as he regarded the young man propped against his counter. The flat cap pulled low over brow and the threadbare jacket indicated that the boy he had known since childhood, whom had been hand-picked by the clergy and primed for the priesthood or professional life, had neither taken his vows nor attained the financial success his education should have afforded him. Declan assumed that like so many, he'd been somehow sucked into this wretched conflict. He knew the Fahy family were zealous supporters of an Irish Republic – indeed Declan had been on the wrong end of many a tongue lashing from Ciaran's sisters for continuing to serve soldiers, policemen and their kin – but he'd hoped that Ciaran might have escaped all that when he left to study in Galway years earlier.

As far as the ageing shopkeeper was concerned, this war was like none that he'd read about. He was terrified of what both sides were prepared to do – to each other and to anyone who came between them. The IRA were just as likely to put a bullet in the back of your head as the Black and Tans. The Great War had stirred up unreasonable passions in men and unrealistic notions of freedom: life in Birr had been improving for the working man before all this madness – folk today didn't appreciate how

lucky they were. Declan would never forget the raw, gnawing poverty of his youth as droves died in ditches with only nettles in their bellies or fought for air in coffinships escaping the Famine: *that* was the time to take up arms and hurl yourself into revolution – and he might have done so too, if only he'd not been so feckin' hungry. Thus he resented that, as peace spread across the rest of Europe, his contrary countrymen had decided to declare war on the British; a war that had ensnared them all in its malicious, vindictive small-mindedness. The papers chronicled an endless litany of assassination, ambush and revenge killings. And always in the background, the insidious drip feed of propaganda that leached from both sides.

However, Declan hoped that today could be the beginning of the end – the headline on the counter proclaimed as much:

**12PM TRUCE ENDS HOSTILITIES BETWEEN CROWN FORCES AND
REPUBLICAN REBELS.**

**BRITISH PRIME MINISTER LLOYD GEORGE TO OPEN NEGOTIATIONS WITH
SINN FEIN LEADERS**

Cautiously, he coughed. "Have ye seen the news? Can it be true? Two years of bloody murder over at last. I'll drink to that, so I will."

Ciaran continued to stare out the window and across the road.

Belatedly the old man realised his mistake – how could he have been so insensitive – was it not Ciaran's younger brother, Micheál, who had been found beaten and broken, like a sack of snapped bones on the Riverstown Road? Declan had heard the poor boy carried on breathing for hours after they found him, but he never spoke another word – he just moaned quietly, his mother clasping his hand until the film of his eyes glassed over, his moans became erratic whistles and then stopped altogether.

"I'm sorry, Ciaran. I forgot myself – I don't mean any offence."

"None taken, Declan. You're right – I'll raise a glass tonight, for sure."

Across the road the door opened and from the shadows within, a uniformed man stepped out. He glanced up and down the street and turned back towards a woman with coal-black hair who had followed him from the house holding the hand of a child. He bent to kiss the girl on the head and whispered something to the woman

that made her blush. Gently tracing the curve of her stomach with a finger, he brushed her lips with his and began to walk up Main Street, a battered attaché case arcing alongside him.

Ciaran slammed the bottle on the counter with such force that the lemonade fizzed from the neck, spilling over and blurring the ink of the front page banner. As he strode from the shop without a word, a shocked Declan Skelly haplessly called after him to remind him he wanted paying; but Ciaran couldn't turn back now.

Six strides, right hand in jacket pocket, his heart threatening to burst from his ribcage, he grabbed the shoulder of the policeman with his left, whirled him round and raised the gun to his chest.

A second of utter silence.

"This is for Micheál."

The eyes looking back at him widened in surprise then focused over his shoulder on the woman and child.

Ciaran pulled the trigger twice.

The bullets rent through the rifle-green uniform and the policeman fell, crying words that were forever stolen by the twin cracks of gunfire. The briefcase hit the pavement and burst open sending sheaves of paper twisting through the air like giant confetti. As they settled in the growing puddle of crimson that welled from beneath the stricken man, Ciaran stepped forwards, aimed the gun at the policeman's temple and fired once more.

With the bitter taste of gunpowder catching the back of his throat, his ears ringing and the revolver leaden in his trembling hand, he looked down at the mess of shattered bone and succulent tissue and then at his shoes; black as sin in a pool of sticky red. Ciaran stood statuesque for a heartbeat, transfixed by the spreading tide, so similar in colour to the door behind him.

Screams. A voice yelling his name; the rattling of bicycle chains.

Stabilising a push-bike with each hand, Padraig Nolan hurtled across the cobblestones. "Get on Ciaran! For Christ's sake, get on the feckin' bicycle!"

A frenzied grappling. A metal pedal painfully raking shin. Four unbearably slow thrusts downwards and finally Ciaran generated some momentum.

Gulping air, pumping pedals and gripping handlebars, Ciaran Fahy left Sergeant Joseph Conlon behind him, staring facelessly at the space that would soon be filled by the midday sun and a ceasefire across all Ireland.

However, even as he put distance between himself and his deed, the keening of his first-cousin as she buried her daughter's head in the folds of her skirt only seemed to get louder, and Ciaran realised that fat tears mingled with the stinging sweat that streamed down his face.

About the Writer

Finn Dervan was born in London but grew up in the northeast of England. After completing a degree in History at the University of Leeds, he found it impossible to leave God's Own Country and settled in Yorkshire.

Years of teaching Irish History to sixth form students spurred him to explore his own Anglo-Irish heritage. What he discovered posed uncomfortable questions about nationalism, religion and cultural identity. In coming to terms with these fundamental contradictions, *Serenity Song* was conceived: what began as a personal investigation into his own past soon transformed into a nail-biting thriller that couldn't be more relevant in the current climate of resurgent extremism and confusion over the Irish border.

Finn lives in York, but spends as much time as he can on the West Coast of Ireland where he feels morally obliged to drink too much and tell stories into the early hours. His Irish family are glad that he is based in York.

You can purchase 'Serenity Song' [here](#).

