



# John Connolly: bells, books and scandals

Article Author:

[Remco van Straten](#) [1]

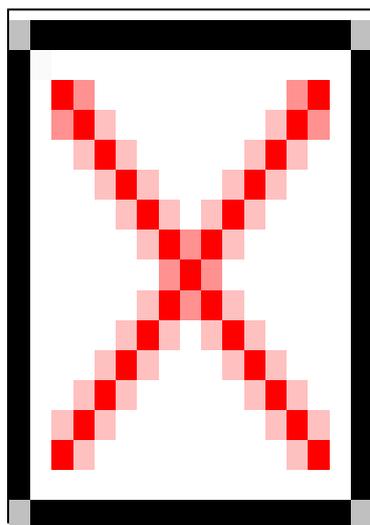
Article Author:

[Angeline B Adams](#) [2]

[204](#) [3]

Byline:

John Connolly on his children's series **Samuel Johnson**



John Connolly is a hard man to get hold of these days. When not writing in his native Dublin or researching the latest Parker novel in the States, he's rushing from one book signing to another. Angeline B. Adams and Remco van Straten managed to catch up with him in Belfast's No Alibis bookshop, just before he took to the stage to promote his **Samuel Johnson** series of children's books, in which Samuel and his dog Boswell struggle against demonic forces accidentally unleashed by the Large Hadron Collider.

Samuel Johnson reveals a talent for fast-moving comical horror, quite distinct from Connolly's **Charlie Parker** crime series, which is unrelentingly grim. That, for him, is the crucial difference between writing for adults and for kids:

?Adults will accept bleak endings; children want to be reassured. They want a young hero or heroine to overcome obstacles and triumph by being smart and clever. That goes all the way back to fairy tales. I love doing the Samuel Johnson books; they're such a change; they allow me to be funny which the adult novels don't; they allow me to give my imagination free rein.?

His books are aimed at kids of twelve or thirteen, an age at which parents are particularly concerned about violence, sex and swearing. Connolly recalls an interview on the Today show suggesting that *The Gates* might be overly frightening, ?My argument was that it's not like the end of **A Clockwork Orange** where they hold the kid's eyes open. That's a misunderstanding of the way people read, especially children. Children are really smart and they have their own filters. They will decide what images are appropriate for them, what images allow them to keep reading. If a kid is reading a book at night, and it gets too scary, the kid will generally put the book down. Jesus, I don't read scary books at night! I'm not a lunatic, you know.?

And it's with books for older adolescents that adults and teenagers clash most powerfully, ?Adults want to keep children children, while kids are always straining towards adulthood, towards an understanding of the world in all its facets. Those are two contradictory impulses, and as kids progress through adolescence, their containment has to cease or be

moderated, so that when writing for sixteen, seventeen year olds, you're really writing for adults.?

He recalls a book-banning furore in the US, over a picture book about two male penguins adopting a chick, but hopes that his own books will influence the social conscience of his young readers. ?You have a duty to teach tolerance to your kids. For a twelve or thirteen year old you could probably touch upon issues of gay or lesbian or bisexual feelings, because that's when these feelings are going to become apparent. I don't think that there's anything that can't be dealt with, though you have to couch it in a very particular way. You can't have scenes of explicit sexuality that you might be able to do in a similar book for sixteen year olds.?

Connolly didn't escape censorship completely though: his American publishers shied away from a book called **Hell's Bells** and retitled it **The Infernals**.

?If they don't want the word Hell in the title, that's fine. Hell's Bells is a decent joke over here, but **The Infernals** may be a better title over all. I learn to pick my battles. If somebody had said: ?Well, we're a bit worried about Roland the Knight having an affection for another male knight - could we take that out?? that would be a battle worth fighting.?

If he doesn't compromise on the topics and themes he writes about, then it's important for Connolly that his books are not burdened with an overt agenda, let alone a wagging finger, ?I think the only thing you have to be very careful about is preaching. That's why, I suppose, all of my books have been genre books; horror fiction in particular is a very good carrier, a metaphorical carrier. Horror fiction allows you to slip a lot of stuff in under the wire, like political or social concerns, definitely personal concerns. It's quite good at touching on issues of sexuality. It allows kids to gently explore what they sense is the darkness and strangeness of the world.?

Connolly is passionate too about engaging children with science. Indeed, adults with **A Brief History of Time** still unread on their bookshelves might best crack open the Samuel Johnson books for a crash course in quantum physics. ?When you're dealing with things like quantum physics, sometimes scientists are the worst people to explain it, because they have no concept of how difficult it all is. One of the great things about coming from a reporting background is that I am not embarrassed to say, ?I don't understand?. And if I don't understand it, the average smart person in the street is not gonna understand it. It's interesting to filter down this information, without reaching the point that it doesn't make any sense to readers; especially the younger readers.?

He shies away from what he describes as ?fifteen pages of Professor Explain-it-all? info-dumps, instead using absurdity and narrative twists to engage his readers. ?This is my own fascination; a genuine fascination for thinking that the universe is quite extraordinary. You put in these little nuggets of information and it's not difficult; you're not putting people off, in fact you're drawing them gently into it. One of the things that children and writers have in common is that they're both magpies by nature; they look for shiny things, and the science in my books is, if anything, shiny information.?

The obvious anticipation of the crowd tell us that time is running out - we can no longer keep Connolly from his eager audience. From a backpack he pulls out postcards, badges and a CD he uses for the promotion of the **Samuel Johnson** books then strides towards the podium, launching into his trademark verbal fireworks, ?Randomness lies at the heart of the universe. Uncertainty lies at the heart of the universe. Science teaches us that we are not alone in the universe, but in fact: the universe is not alone in the universe!?

In quick succession he strings together multiverses, black holes, worm holes, the Large Hadron Collider before moving on to prove Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. ?Any volunteers?? he asks, and a sea of hands goes up!

By Angeline B. Adams and Remco van Straten

**The Creeps (Samuel Johnson V the Devil)**, John Connolly, Hodder and Stoughton, 978-1444751826, £12.99 hbk

**The Gates (Samuel Johnson V the Devil)**, John Connolly, Hodder and Stoughton, 978-1444706741, £6.99 pbk

Page Number:

10

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19):** <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/204/childrens-books/articles/john-connolly-bells-books-and-scandals>

**Links:**

[1] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/remco-van-straten>

[2] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/angeline-b-adams>

[3] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/204>