

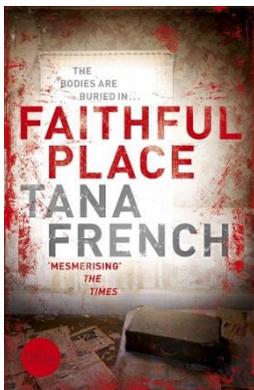
Tana French



Tana French is the author of *In the Woods*, *The Likeness*, *Faithful Place*, *Broken Harbour*, *The Secret Place* and *The Trespasser*. Her books have won the Edgar, Anthony, Macavity and Barry Awards, the *Los Angeles Times* Award for Best Mystery/Thriller, and the Irish Book Award for Crime Fiction. She grew up in Ireland, Italy, the US and Malawi, and now lives in Dublin with her family.



Faithful Place



The course of Frank Mackey's life was set by one defining moment when he was nineteen. The moment his girlfriend, Rosie Daly, failed to turn up for their rendezvous in Faithful Place, failed to run away with him to London as they had planned. Frank never heard from her again. Twenty years on, Frank is still in Dublin, working as an undercover cop. He's cut all ties with his dysfunctional family. Until his sister calls to say that Rosie's suitcase has been found. Frank embarks on a journey into his past that demands he re-evaluate everything he believes to be true.

A conversation with Tana French

Was your early life – God forbid – anything like life in the Mackey household? If it was, how did you survive, and if it wasn't, how do you know these characters so well?

God, no, my childhood couldn't have been less like Frank's! I had an unfashionably happy childhood. But I'm hugely opposed to the tired idea that you should only 'write what you know'. I never write anything that has anything to do with my own life, partly because I'm not all that interesting, but mostly because I believe passionately that it's my job – maybe the most fundamental part of my job – to have the imagination and empathy to write about characters who aren't me or anyone I know.

Tana French

With the Mackeys, the crucial thing I wanted to write about was a family that's very deeply rooted in a specific place. The Mackeys have lived in Faithful Place for generations; their personalities, their actions, their whole lives are shaped by centuries' worth of that street's history. Probably because I moved around so much as a child, I've always been fascinated by people who live their lives with roots that deep. Both as a reader and as a writer, I've always been more interested in characters who are mysterious to me, characters I have to explore and discover as I go – which is a good thing, because I think a mystery writer, in particular, has no choice but to get used to writing characters who are foreign to her. Let's face it: just about every mystery book involves at least one character who's killed someone, and I'm hoping that not every mystery writer grew up surrounded by murderers! So one of the first things you have to do, if you write mystery, is ditch the idea of sticking to what you know, and start relying on imagination and empathy instead.

You've lived lots of places: Italy, Malawi, the United States. Yet your creative imagination has settled in Ireland. Why?

I don't think I could write about anywhere else. Dublin is my home, to the extent that international brats can claim anywhere as home. I've lived here since I was seventeen; this is the only city where I know all the little details, the short cuts, the slang, the sense of humour (nobody comes up with creative insults quite like the Dubs), the various neighbourhood accents and their social connotations, the best places to get a pint and the worst buses to get after dark. It's the only place I know well enough to tune into its rhythms and nuances and offer them to readers. I don't think I could do justice to anywhere else.

Also, crime is shaped by the society where it happens. Every society has murders, but the tensions and fears and priorities of that particular society determine what *kind* of murders they are: what sparks them, how they're carried out, how people respond to them. Dublin is the only place I care about passionately enough to want to explore those underlying layers.

A recurring anxiety in your fiction concerns the intrusion of mass culture into Ireland and the consequent erosion of the country's traditional character and identity. Do you find that there is still a "real" Ireland, or have Burger King and Britney Spears triumphed at last?

I think the Irish sense of identity is a strange, complicated thing that's been shaped, or misshaped, by centuries of poverty and oppression, first under British rule and then under Church rule. We became extreme: there's a sense, almost at a subconscious level, that either you cling to your origins to the point of resisting all change, or else you need to ditch them altogether, pretend they never existed, in order to get ahead. This was very obvious during the economic boom, when a lot of people – mainly in my generation and the one behind us – seemed to run as far and as fast as they could from anything that was identifiably Irish: accent, slang, fashion sense, cultural references, all shifted into some nonspecific mid-Atlantic bland zone. For a lot of people, anything that marked us as Irish was linked to being poor, isolated, provincial and generally inferior. We were like the poor immigrant kid who strikes it rich and instantly changes his name, gets accent lessons, refuses to eat Old Country food and almost dies of embarrassment if his new cool friends run into his parents. The implication was that the past and the future are somehow mutually exclusive: if you want to lay claim to your future, you have to ditch your past.

Tana French

Personally, I think that attitude is insane. It's very possible to transcend your past without forgetting it – I know plenty of people who've done exactly that. But if you try to eliminate it altogether, you're ripping the foundations out of your future. I'm hoping this might be one of the few silver linings to the terrifying recession we're in: an end to the hysterical scramble to turn into the Joneses, and a re-examination of what we have that's worthwhile and unassailably ours. I still believe that there's plenty there, and that there's no reason why we can't find a balance between that and the more global influence.

How fully do you plot a mystery before you write it? Are you yourself ever surprised by the direction that one of your stories takes?

I don't have a clue what I'm doing. Most of the time I don't know whodunit till I'm well into the book. I'm wildly jealous of writers who have the whole plot outlined before they start the actual writing – at least they know there's a book in there! I start with a narrator and a basic premise, maybe just an image, and then I take a deep breath, dive into the book and hope I don't smack my head on the bottom. I started *Faithful Place* with just two things: Frank, who showed up in *The Likeness*, and the image of a battered old suitcase that I saw on a pile of rubbish outside a Georgian house that was being gutted. I started wondering where that suitcase had been – whether it had been hidden somewhere in the house, in a wall, in the attic – how long it had been there, who had put it there and why, what was inside it...

I think the way I work comes from writing very character-driven stuff: I have to start writing and get to know the characters in depth before I get a proper sense of what they would do and why. It does mean I run into surprises along the way, which makes for an awful lot of rewrites, but it's the only way I know how to work.

How has your experience in acting influenced your writing?

I definitely write like an actor. I can't imagine writing in the third person; I always stick with first-person, which is a lot like acting – you're seeing everything through the eyes of your character, filtering all the action through the character's needs and biases and preconceptions, and aiming to draw your audience in so they can see the story from the same angle.

The other thing I picked up from acting: you learn pretty early on, as an actor, that this job isn't about you and your feelings. It's about what you offer the audience. You can be feeling all of your character's emotions, you can be emoting all over the stage and having a wonderful time, but if the audience can't hear your lines because you're so choked up with your own tears, then you're not doing your job. This is an interactive process: the book isn't just meant to live in my head; it needs to live in the space between me and the reader. It doesn't matter if I have a great time writing it. Unless it communicates something to the reader, it doesn't exist.

Tana French

Your plots are often concerned with Achilles heels in the justice system — the perp who gets off on a technicality, for instance, or, in *Faithful Place*, a murderer who may go free because he has been able to manipulate the emotions of a child. Do you see justice in real life as being similarly precarious?

I think justice and truth are both a lot more complex than we'd like to think. Wanting things to be black and white – or wanting to see things as black and white, even when they're not – is a basic human instinct, but it's a treacherous one. The idea that there's a neat division between good guys and bad guys, and the good guys live happily ever after while the bad guys get punished... that's always struck me as a cheap cop-out. The reality is much more interesting: most people are a strange mixture of good and bad, they do things for an almost unfathomably complicated tangle of reasons, and often there's no possible solution, inside or outside the system, that would deliver real justice. I have huge respect for the detectives who know all that and still put themselves on the line, emotionally and physically, in the struggle to come as close to justice as we're capable of doing.

For Frank in *Faithful Place*, the question of justice becomes inextricably bound up with the question of who he is: the tough kid from Faithful Place who's used to finding ways around the edges of the law, or the detective who spends his life trying to enforce the law. By the end of the book, he's forced to choose which kind of justice he's going to rely on, and which of those men he is at heart.

It's a rare writer who can call forth from readers the depth of emotion that you are able to elicit with your mysteries. How would you like a reader to feel after reading one of your novels?

I've had e-mails from readers who say that they feel like they know the characters intimately, miss them, even wonder what they're doing now that the book's over. Those are the e-mails that make my day. If a reader feels like he or she has been drawn into the book and lived through it side by side with the narrator, then I've done my job.

The murder victim in your brilliant first novel, *In the Woods*, was a young girl on the verge of breaking away from a dreary, numbing existence. The same is true of Rosie in *Faithful Place*. What prompted you to return to this subject?

I write a lot about liminal zones – turning points, borderlands. Because these are uncharted territory, they're always dangerous places. When you challenge the status quo, that can stir up a lot of strong emotions in everyone around you, and it means you move away from the status quo's rules and protections, which leaves you very exposed and vulnerable. The victims in both *In the Woods* and *Faithful Place* are attacked as they're in mid-stream between one life and another; the victim in *The Likeness* was trying to live her whole life in No Man's Land. And it's not just the victims: my narrators spend a lot of time dealing with liminality, too. Frank spends the whole of *Faithful Place* balancing on a knife-edge between being a Mackey and being a policeman, Cassie spends much of *The Likeness* on the border between her own identity and Lexie's, Rob spends all of *In the Woods* trying to find a way to go back into the netherworld of the woods and come out on the other side. Moving through these zones is the only way to get anywhere, but it comes with risks.

Tana French

Was there any character in *Faithful Place* who was especially hard for you to bring to life? If so, what did you draw upon to solve the problem?

It's always hard to bring the victim to life. This person is crucial, he or she is the axis around which the whole plot spins, and yet she's usually dead before the book even begins. My only option is to show her reflected through the other characters – by showing their memories of the victim, their reactions to her death, how her life and death changed the lives of people around her. It gets complicated, but it needs doing – partly to make it clear how high the stakes are, and partly because I feel like I have a responsibility to bring out the idea that murder victims aren't just plot devices, they're as real and vivid as every other character.

What do you most struggle against when you are writing?

The temptation to goof off. Writing is a very solitary thing, and I'm not a solitary person, so I'm constantly tempted to spend the day phoning friends till I find someone who can come out and play. Back in college, I had a reputation for only going into the library to get other people out for coffee; some things never change...These days, though, at least I fight the temptation.

Your debut novel brought you more success and acclaim than most first-time authors dare wish for. Have fame and fortune changed the way you write?

On a practical level, absolutely – now I'm lucky enough to be able to write full-time. It's much easier to write a book when you're not trying to juggle a day job, as well as family and friends and all the other facets of life. That was always my definition of success in the arts, both when I was acting and then when I started writing: the chance to get up every morning and spend the day doing something I love. I'm still gobsmacked by my luck.

In terms of what I write, though, nothing's changed. It's impossible to write based on 'what your readers want', for example, because there's no such entity as 'readers' – there are thousands of very different people, each with his or her own tastes and preferences, and if I try to write for all of them I'll end up with word salad. All I can do is the same thing I did when I was writing *In the Woods*: do my absolute utmost to offer readers the best book I'm capable of writing, and hope it works for at least some of them.

Most authors use their last chapters to tie up their narratives in neat little packages. You, on the other hand, are pointedly resistant to what Frank Mackey might contemptuously call "closure." Why?

It's not really deliberate resistance; the books just always come out that way! I think it's just that, if characterisation is one of your top priorities – and it's one of mine – it's very hard to tie up the stories in tidy little bows, because real people don't work that way. The only way to create that kind of ending would be to shoehorn the story and the characters into it by force, whether they fit there naturally or not. I'd rather go with an ending that may be less cut and dried, and may not stick to the genre conventions, but that maintains the book's integrity.

Also, I think a less tidy ending leaves more room for the characters to go on existing in the reader's imagination. If you tie up the strands too neatly, there's an element of 'And they lived happily ever

Tana French

after, the end'. Characters who are still struggling, still moving forward, leave room for the reader's imagination.

When you get down to it, I guess I'm just more interested in messy endings. I'm the same when I'm reading: I love books that leave me wondering.

***Faithful Place* ends with Frank offering his hope that we will "all find our way home." However, much of the novel seems intent on revealing that home is hell. What do you think it is that calls us back to a place that, for many of us, has been so emotionally destructive?**

I don't think it's ever as simple as 'home is hell' – or, for that matter, 'home is heaven'. Home is, for just about everyone, an incredibly complex and highly charged thing. And no matter how far we run, there's no escaping it; it's made us what we are, in one way or another – someone from an abusive home can turn abusive or can grow up into the gentlest person on earth, for example, but either choice is shaped by that home. Its marks are stamped on our bones.

For Frank, home may have been hell in some ways, but it's also the place where he was happiest, back when he and Rosie were in love and planning their escape; it's the only place where people know the boy he used to be before the night that changed everything; and it's the place that holds the answers to the biggest question of his life. All of those are powerful things, and an unanswered question is one of the strongest pulls in the world. It's why we read mystery books, and it's why Frank – like a lot of other people from horribly damaged backgrounds – can't stay away from home.

Your novels have won critical acclaim, a broad public following, and a well-deserved sackful of awards. What would you still like to accomplish as a writer?

I don't have a long-term plan. Actually, I still find it hard to think ahead even as far as the end of the book I'm working on – the idea of writing a *whole book* seems so ridiculously huge that I just focus on the next little section, or I'll freak myself out. Most days, my only goal as a writer is to get that little section right.

On a broader scale, though... I hope someday soon we'll get to the point where 'mystery' and 'literature' are no longer seen as mutually exclusive. They never were, obviously – there have always been crime novels that are every bit as beautifully written and as thematically complex as the finest literary fiction, and there have always been literary novels shaped around a crime framework. But there are still a few people who have real difficulty with the idea of things not fitting neatly under one label, so they still think of genre fiction and literature as utterly separate, unconnected and unconnectable. More and more crime writers are rebelling against that, and I'd love to be a small part of the force that finally crumbles that ridiculous imaginary barrier.