

My week: In my book, it would have been grave error not to follow heart

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The Wicklow Way

Monday starts with as long a walk as the schedule will allow, through the woodlands and forests near my Co Wicklow home or across the foothills of Djouce mountain and Maulin. I am indifferent to the weather, content to walk in sleet and rain or when the sun is sparkling across Lough Tay.

These walks are vital, not only because they fill my lungs and brain with bracing mountain air but because they give me time to think, to work out any problems I am having with my writing, to tease out whether my words are in keeping with the characters I have created.

I try to work for about five hours in the first half of each weekday. If I am researching I can work for longer, but when I am writing my concentration is more focused, so that I need more breaks. More cups of tea. Only when I am calm, when everything around me is still and ritualised, can I find the creative space I need.

Because I have school-age children, there is a natural structure built into every weekday. Late afternoons are devoted to fetching and carrying and to meeting the demands of everyone's schedule, but we always have dinner together in the evenings, swapping stories and analysing the day's triumphs and disasters. I love that time of day, and greatly appreciate the contrast it brings to the solitude of writing.

Day of the jackal

I have a strong sense of home. I live in Enniskerry, the village of my childhood, of my father's childhood. I spent my teenage years desperate to escape, then travelled much of the world, only to realise how wonderful home was. We have mountains, sea and city on our doorstep, and I thrive on that variety — the isolation of the mountains in the morning, the buzz of the city in the afternoon.

When I was a child in the 1970s, a man moved into the village, into a house on Kilgarron Hill. I became fascinated by him, and in time I learnt his name: Frederick Forsyth. I was in awe of him, this man who turned words into books. For I was a voracious reader in my childhood. I worked through the Enniskerry library, then got on the bus to Bray to work my way through its fiction section. I still love libraries. At the weekend, we often go as a family to the bookshops in Dublin, scattering to the various departments of interest. I love to see children reading. I believe it to be such a gift to the emerging adult. I find online book-buying invaluable for targeted research, but there is nothing like the serendipity of browsing, of going home with something you had not predicted.

Casualties of war

I worked in Waterstones before my years in journalism, and I used to stand in that shop, looking at those shelves, wondering if I might one day be among those writers whose name began with M, whether I could ever be under the same roof as writers I have adored since my teenage years — Marguerite Duras, Samuel Beckett and Heinrich Boll. It took me a while to find the courage to begin a novel that became *The Undertaking*.

I wanted to explore what it was like to have been an ordinary German during the Second World War, a question that fascinated me since I first went to Germany in the

mid-1980s, when there was a shroud of silence over the past.

I wondered what I would have done, how I would have behaved in the face of the Nazi regime.

Maybe, unconsciously, the subject fascinated me for even longer as up in those Wicklow hills is a German military cemetery. I sometimes pass that small quiet space cut into a quarry on a bend in the road at Glenree. Here lie the Luftwaffe crews whose aircraft were shot down, or who lost their way and ran out of fuel over Ireland, and the Kriegsmarine sailors whose bodies were washed up along our coast.

Their memorial stones are simple and for the most part anonymous, and sometimes I sit there and think about their lives and the horrific events that brought them to this