

FICTION
NICK KELLY

AND THE BEATINGS WILL CONTINUE...



A well-respected man in the music industry since the early 1990s, Keith Cullen signed many a fine Irish band to his London-based independent label Setanta Records over the years, from the Divine Comedy to A House and The Frank And Walters, and also tasted international success with Edwyn Collins's *A Girl Like You*.

Now the 40-year-old Dubliner has self-published his first novel (it also comes from his Setanta company). It's a powerful, at times, shocking kitchen sink drama set in Barking, a working class enclave of East London, telling the tale of the unravelling of a rocky marriage and its dire consequences.

The story begins in 1964 when a young Irish teenage emigrant, Phyllis Noonan, newly off the boat after fleeing the boredom of life on the family farm in Connemara, hooks up with Bill Knighton, a Cockney wide boy who loves The Kinks, going to see West Ham United FC at Upton Park and getting drunk with his mates in the local boozer The Spotted Dog.

The blossoming of their romance, soundtracked by the music of The Kinks (whose seminal 1960s album *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* inspired the book's title) is brilliantly rendered by Cullen in crisp but unsentimental prose — as are the complications that set in when Phyllis falls pregnant.

A shotgun marriage in a registry office is followed soon after by the birth of baby Arnold.



Change of tune: Music impresario Keith Cullen has written a gutsy first novel about the corrosive effects of domestic violence in a London-Irish family

But all is not well — Bill's dad (Old Bill) is a spiteful, sour-faced Little Englander of the Alf Garnett variety, whose reaction to hearing that Phyllis is pregnant is: "Serves you right for courting a paddy. They might all be God-fearing Catholics, but all those years kneeling on that altar, eyes closed, waiting for the body and blood of Christ to be slipped into their gobs by some bent bald priest with cum stains on his robe... And don't go telling me she doesn't believe in contraception. They won't need the six counties back at the rate you're going."

Initially a doting father and husband, Bill junior is desperate to escape the corrosive malevolence of his father but when a second baby, a girl called Bobbie, (named after West Ham legend Bobby Moore) arrives, soon the tension is ratcheted up to breaking point and it soon becomes apparent that Bill jun-

ior is really just a nasty chip off the old block, as domestic violence rears its ugly head.

Then tragedy strikes when a cot death takes baby Bobbie away and Phyllis is consumed with grief and guilt. We flash forward to 1980 and Arnold has become a teenage tear-away — bunking school to sell drugs for the nefarious Mr Matthews, who lives across the road. But a third child — the quiet, sensitive art-loving Walter (also named for a Kinks song) has since come along. Walter is the moral centre of the second part of the novel, a bright light amidst all the bleakness.

Like the missing link between *Angela's Ashes*, *EastEnders* and *Trainspotting*, *God Save The Village Green* is a highly compelling account of how a dream of romance and a better life can turn depressingly sour. All families are dysfunctional, Cullen seems to be saying, but some are more dysfunctional than others.

Crisps, minerals and the horsey heritage that reins me back in



I discovered this week that I have a genetic disposition towards backing horses. It joins a long list of others, such as baldness, a propensity to put on weight around the middle, and a fondness for pale-coloured chinos.

It should not have come as a surprise to me, I suppose. My father was a racing journalist all his life, and could not resist putting his money where his mouth was, or celebrating when he turned out to be right.

He was editor of the *Irish Field* newspaper at the age of 19. I don't know about any editorial innovations he introduced, but I do know about a headline he put on the report from Mallow racecourse where the going was extremely heavy: Marsh Mallow.

My dad was involved in setting up the Irish Sweeps Derby, and he loved the company of racing folk. The only lullaby I can recall him singing to me and my brother was the Bing Crosby number "The Horse Told Me".

My memory of going to the races is of an eternity of waiting around. In those days the standard parental response to whining children was to shove a pack of crisps and a mineral at them, and in this respect at least, my father was dutiful.

Sometimes we didn't go to the big, organised race meets, but to smaller, local events called point-to-points. I suppose they were closer to the origins of horse racing, when the course was from one church steeple to another — races which became known as steeplechases.

Because I hated all the waiting (despite all the crisps and minerals), and because I was shy of all the horsey folk I was presented to, and because I didn't like to see my dad if he had celebrated his winnings a little too freely, I was determined to hate horse racing.

I was in a small minority, for my mother's family were fond of a flutter too. My grandmother, who gloried in the name of Honoria, was housebound by the time I came to know her, but she had a network of bookies' runners putting on cross-doubles and trebles for her all over the city.

There is a photograph of Honoria and her eldest daughter Annie at a posh race meeting in the 1960s. They are dressed to the nines, both with fox furs draped over their shoulders and complicated-looking hats.

My brother was more accepting of his racing heritage, and took a summer job with the Tote. Even now, he keeps up with the form and has the odd punt on a big race. But I never got over those early racing memories, and stayed away.

Until this week that is, when I

found myself at Omev Races in Connemara, at a bookie's stand, with a tenner in my hand, my eyes drawn to the words "No 3 Joe's Girl 3/1" on the board. I found myself saying "€10 to win, No 3".

Omev is actually an island near Claddaghduff and Cleggan in the far west of Connemara. But at low tide, a wide sandy causeway is uncovered, and it is here that the races are held in late July.

The course is marked by driving stakes into the sand. The horse boxes and cars drive out onto the sand too, and there are hucksters, food stalls, a bar and a couple of bouncy castles, all operated with one eye on the customers and the other on the tide.

I got a programme, only to find that, although the races and prize money were listed, there were no runners and riders. I learned that entries for the races were accepted on the day, so it wasn't possible to print a proper programme in advance.

Betting, for the novice, was even more of a lottery than usual. Only

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the bookies knew the field for each race, and there wasn't much chance to see the horses before the off, or to study the form, but it seemed all the purer for that.

You could see the jockeys though, for they were given the numbers for their horses before the race, and weighed in afterwards, in the back of a horse box by the bookies' ring. They all seemed about 11.

The horses were lined up roughly for the start, and they were off. The sand flew, and the horses' hooves slapped on the wet surface. One took the first bend very wide, and I hoped it wasn't Joe's Girl.

On the far side of the track, the small boy on Joe's Girl made his move. She powered ahead on the last bend, and won by a couple of lengths. "Well done," said the bookie generously.

I wanted to share my triumph with my daughter, who had watched the race on my shoulder. "Would you like some crisps and a mineral?" I said.

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TOP 10 BESTSELLING BOOKS



Melissa Hill created her own niche combining chicklit with elements of the thriller and this resulted in a string of bestsellers for her. Her new one (reviewed on page 18) is more straight forward romantic fiction but there's still a twist at the end. It's in at Number 3 this week.

1. **MY SISTER'S KEEPER (PB)**, Jodi Picoult, Hodder
2. **HELLO HEARTBREAK (OF)**, Amy

3. **PLEASE FORGIVE ME (OF)**, Melissa Hill, Hodder
4. **TWENTIES GIRL (OF)**, Sophie Kinsella, Transworld
5. **NEW MOON (CH)**, Stephenie Meyer, Little, Brown
6. **THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE (PB)**, Stieg Larsson, Quercus
7. **HEART AND SOUL (PB)**, Maeve Binchy, Orion
8. **BREAKING DAWN (CH)**, Stephenie Meyer, Little, Brown

9. **GENESIS (OF)**, Karin Stlaughter, Random
10. **CHAMPAGNE BABES (OF)**, Amanda Brunker, Transworld Irl

This bestseller list covering books in all formats both paperback and hardback is compiled by Eason, Ireland's leading wholesale and retail booksellers, and is based on sales figures from Eason stores nationwide for the week ending 26th July 2009 OF: Original Fiction. PB: Paperback. NF: Non-Fiction. CH: Children's