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AN INTERVIEW WITH
PETER QUINN



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Dominic Preziosi

'The Biggest Part of Writing Is Showing Up'

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER QUINN

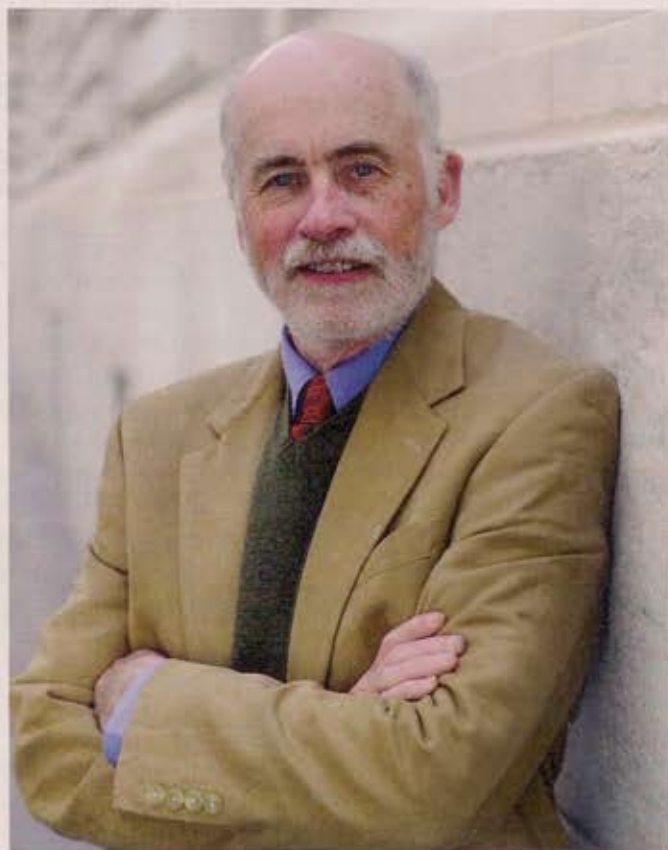
Peter Quinn's newest novel is *Dry Bones*, the third book in a trilogy that also includes *Hour of the Cat* and *The Man Who Never Returned*. His previous works include the novel *Banished Children of Eve*, which won a 1994 American Book Award and is now entering its twentieth year in print, and *Looking for Jimmy: In Search of Irish America*, a collection of nonfiction essays. Quinn, a historian and a former political and corporate speechwriter, has published numerous articles and reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *America*, and *Commonweal*. He recently spoke with *Commonweal's* digital editor, Dominic Preziosi.

DOMINIC PREZIOSI: Your new novel, *Dry Bones*, completes the trilogy that began with *Hour of the Cat*. Did you start out with the intention of writing a series?

PETER QUINN: No. I had written *Banished Children of Eve*, and it took ten years, so I wanted to write a quick book. And because I love Raymond Chandler, I wanted to write a noir detective novel. So then I had an idea that instead of stumbling on a single murder, what if a detective stumbled on the biggest murder plot in history—eugenics and the Holocaust. So my quick book turned into an eight-year book, because of all the research. But I then found that I wasn't finished with this detective and I had another idea. I've always been fascinated with the Judge Crater case, and my publisher said, "We'll put your detective Fintan Dunne on the case and we'll do a trilogy." But I didn't want to be locked into a time schedule—I wanted to be able to skip around. So *Hour of the Cat* is set in 1938, *The Man Who Never Returned* is set in 1955 but goes back to a case from 1930, and the third book is in postwar Slovakia in 1945 and then jumps to Havana in 1958.

DP: Dunne doesn't seem just a throwback to noir detective characters. He's also recognizable as a New York type, like people you might meet from neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Did you know who he would be at the outset, or is he a character who has taken shape the more you've gotten to know him?

PQ: He's taken shape. I think I knew a lot of people like him growing up in the Bronx, working as a court officer, being around cops. The cops I knew weren't interested in seeking out trouble. They worked in New York, they knew it was around every corner. So Dunne—he's wary. William Kennedy has this phrase, to me it's kind of urban Irish-American: "cynical humanist." Dunne knows what



human nature is and knows how easy it is to get in trouble.

You know, I love mysteries—I think part of that is my Catholic background. I loved the word "mystery" as a kid. Everything was a mystery. The joyful mysteries, the glorious mysteries. The mystery of the Trinity. The idea that there's a mystery, like in *The Man Who Never Returned*, that Dunne solves but it never becomes public, because there are things people don't have to know. It's a sin, the desire to know everything. *The Man Who Never Returned* is actually based on *The Divine Comedy*. Dante puts Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of Hell because he took these people in the search for things that didn't have to be known. Fintan Dunne is always coming back home, to the hearth; he doesn't go out looking for these things, he doesn't search for them.

DP: Right—but these things have a way of finding him. Which makes me want to ask about the recurring image of Joan Crawford in *Dry Bones*. Versions of Crawford keep appearing to Dunne: women who look like her, a cross-dresser who appears as her, and then Crawford herself. What is that all about?

PQ: It's my fascination with noir fiction, with what Crawford represented. I think she represented a certain aspect of this glossy, postwar world. She's a symbol of a certain era in American history. But one of the ideas I'm always interested in is the surface of things. She's this glamorous person, and underneath there's this hard-edged person. Dunne always sees the surface of things, as well as what's beneath, so he sees her on both levels. It happens in every one of my books when you first encounter people: Charles Bedford in *Banished Children* is one person when you first meet him, then you realize he's this kid from Long Island and not the great businessman.

DP: I love the fast thinking Charles Bedford exhibits when he has to change the story of his family background, fabricating the tale that his family is Mormon.

PQ: Well, that's a great New York thing. You don't come to stay who you were.

DP: Charles Bedford actually speaks of this, of people coming to New York to establish identities. He says: "The greatest privilege a city could offer is a man's right to decide who he would be. The city gave what no village would. The ability to disappear, to die, and to be born again." Does this reflect your own thinking about cities? Do you think such an opportunity is still possible in cities that are becoming so expensive that it would seem difficult for someone looking to reinvent himself or herself?

PQ: I think it might be more difficult. But maybe we don't realize how difficult it's always been for rural and poor people to come to cities and reinvent themselves. It's the only place to do that. If you want to stay who you are you stay where you were raised. People knew in Ireland you could stay there, but then you would be who your father was or who your grandfather was. "The city will make you free" was the medieval thing. I still think people feel that. The process of urbanization that went on with New York in the nineteenth century is now a worldwide thing. What took place in the world of *Banished Children* is now a worldwide phenomenon. It's rural people without skills coming into cities. It's reached a critical mass—in China people are pouring into cities, in Africa they're pouring into cities. The one opportunity people really have to change is in the city.

DP: There's another recurring image in *Dry Bones*: the cyanide pill, which the characters refer to as "Victor." It takes on the weight of a sanctified gift. Was this intentional?

PQ: Yes, it's the communion of death. The characters think they're going into a rescue mission in Slovakia but what they're really facing is exposure to the death factories, and that's still a hard thing to wrap the mind around. It's like

a descent into the pit of hell. I believe we're a mixture of good and evil but there is really such a thing as evil. It's not just misconduct.

DP: The word "evil" was very much in circulation in the years following the 2001 terrorist attacks, used somewhat casually and without much apparent concern for its meaning or the concept.

PQ: It's a sloppy use of the word, and that's the danger of it. This is part of Fintan Dunne's problem too, because there is evil but it's not always as pure as we like to think—there's always something mixed into it. We like to isolate it by saying if you destroy this one thing, then you destroy evil: you destroy terrorists, you destroy evil. That's not the way it works. Evil is a pervasive part of being human. We have to confront it and to recognize it in ourselves.

DP: You seem to comment in your books on what you take to be the folly of what governments do in the name of expediency—the casual forging of alliances or secretive relationships with bad actors and the unintended consequences. You're commenting on history, it seems, but also on what we see now.

PQ: Absolutely. There's the old line about those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them, but I think we're doomed to repeat them anyway. We learn the lessons but our nature doesn't change.

DP: The way some of the characters in *Dry Bones* manipulate events makes me wonder if in your research you consulted books like Tim Weiner's on the CIA and FBI: *Legacy of Ashes* and *Enemies*.

PQ: Yes, they're right there, in that pile beside you. One of the things I got from *Legacy of Ashes*, from following the footnotes, were these other books about the adoption of German military intelligence techniques, and the freedom they had felt to use torture. It wasn't made up—the American government was bringing these people in. Communism was now the great evil, so that excused this other evil. I was writing *Dry Bones* when the torture of prisoners [at Abu Ghraib] was going on, and I thought, "We're crossing a line here." When you enable people to commit evil, it's harder to stop it than it was to start it.

DP: In an interview I read you recall growing up in the Bronx and thinking, "People don't write about people like us." Was that something you used to motivate yourself? Did that ever come into play with you?

PQ: It did. My family came in 1847, and over a century later when I left New York to be a teacher in the Midwest, I realized I really didn't have a clue about what happened.

I didn't see these people reflected in anything, in books or in films. There was this one book written, when I was a kid in St. Raymond's, *House of Gold* by Elizabeth Cullinan. I didn't read it until years later, but I remember my parents being horrified because she had written about her family; she had uncles who were Jesuits. And this was hush-hush, it was "How could she do this?"

DP: There's the notion of "people don't write about people like us," but also this idea that "people like us don't write"—generally among some folks there's a clannish sort of undermining: "Who are you to think you can write?" Did you encounter this as well?

PQ: Yes, absolutely. "Who do you think you are?" The thing about our education was the practicality of what was expected. I took a civil-service test at one point because my father insisted on it: "Become a court officer." You provide for your family, no big dreams.

DP: You've conducted your writing life even while holding demanding and high-visibility professional and corporate positions. How did you maintain this balance, and did you ever feel it was something that couldn't hold together?

PQ: First of all, when I was a speechwriter, one of the things I learned was I had to have the copy in on time. It was a great realization about writing. You don't wait until you're inspired; it's just work, you sit down and sweat. Somebody once said when they walked by my office, "You don't look very busy." I said, "You know what? Right now I'm in the Garden of Gethsemane sweating blood because I have to have this speech crafted and I don't know where to begin." I also learned as a speechwriter that the people making the speech get the product. So I had to have something of my own. That's when I decided to write *Banished Children*, because I thought if I did speechwriting for the rest of my life no one would know I existed. I just wanted something with my own name on it. I started to get up at five-thirty and get to the office at seven and work for two hours until people came in. I researched *Banished Children* for six-and-a-half years and wrote for three-and-a-half, so that was ten. *Hour of the Cat* took seven or eight. But every day, five days a week, for seventeen years I'd be at that desk. It didn't matter if it was snowing or raining or my back was out. The biggest part of writing is showing up, even when you don't feel like it.

DP: Ten years ago in *Commonweal* you wrote on the Catholic novel. You said at the time: "In my view, truly Catholic novels are immersed in the always untidy, often sordid world. They don't squint at reality." Do you still stand by that characterization?

PQ: Absolutely. I remember there was this big upsurge of

so-called Christian novels, and they were all apocalyptic. Catholic novels are never about the end of the world. If there's such a thing as the Catholic novel, it's usually immersed in the idea of fallen human nature and finding some meaning in that. There's no perfection among us, everyone is flawed. Everyone has the capacity of the Judas. It's human nature. A big part of Fintan Dunne is his need to be forgiven.

DP: Is there a place today for the Catholic novel? Is there anyone producing it?

PQ: I think there are people who write out of Catholic backgrounds. But the Catholic novel is not this didactic idea. Writers I really admire, like William Kennedy or Alice McDermott, don't necessarily classify themselves as Catholic writers. But their background and training and ethos come through in the novels. When Alice McDermott wrote *After This* her editor said no one would understand that title, and she said, "Well, Peter Quinn will." Because it's from the *Salve Regina*, along with "banished children of Eve." She has that prayer in her head, William Kennedy has it, I have it—it's a prayer I've said every day of my life. It's a mind-frame that's shaped by Catholicism. I'm not a Catholic writer, I don't write from there specifically, but I write out of sixteen years of Catholic education. I believe in original sin, free will, grace. As a novelist I believe these are operative forces in the world. But I don't want to be an advocate for any official church stance, that's for sure.

DP: Were you ever a journalist?

PQ: No. I thought I'd do speechwriting and go back to history. After *Banished Children*, I did a book of essays, *Looking for Jimmy*—history and family reflections. I never thought of my family as part of some great epic. There were very few facts I could get about my family. A hundred years before, we were part of this catastrophe in rural Europe. And there were all these people whose names I found out later on who didn't make it. Uncles who went to prison or who were killed or were drunks. My mother was a great Stalinist when it came to family history, a real cleaner of records. When my father died he had a drawer filled with family stuff and I went to look for it. I asked my mother where it was and she said she threw it out—it was baggage.

The idea of romantic Ireland obsessed with the past was not my experience. They couldn't get away from it fast enough. From a thousand generations or whatever of tenant farmers, and no one ever said a nice word about the land. Fintan Dunne is a reflection of that: he's totally comfortable in the city. Loves it, it's his natural habitat. When I read Chandler I thought Philip Marlowe didn't belong in Los Angeles, he belonged in New York. And he should have been an Irish Catholic. Now—at least for my own purposes—in the person of Fintan Dunne, he is. ■