

# What makes boys go to war

Mark Mulholland taught himself to write by reading his big five — Camus, Steinbeck, Kavanagh, McGahern and Hemingway. He tells **Caroline O'Doherty** about the experience and his new novel which is based on his family's utterly unexpected story

**W**HEN Mark Mulholland read an early draft of his debut novel to his little brother, he had no idea that he had scripted his young sibling's future.

It was the early 1990s and Dundalk native Mulholland had started writing the book it would take him 23 years to complete, about a fictional youth from the town who is popular, bright, well-read and well-behaved — but leads a secret life as an IRA volunteer.

Some years later, Mulholland had his popular, very bright, well-read, well-behaved university student brother, Darren, working for him during the

summer holiday when Darren out of the blue asked for a day off.

"The next day, it was a Friday, and I saw it on the television that IRA bombers had been arrested in London.

"Then the phone rang and a neighbour told me that army and police were surrounding my parents' house and threatening to go in the window.

"I thought it had something to do with drugs. I thought — he's young, he's in university — that kind of thing.

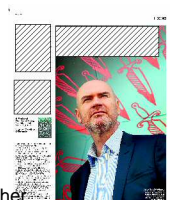
"But then when I thought about it — bombers arrested in London, one from Queens, armed police going in through the windows — I knew it wasn't."

It was July 1998 and Darren, who was studying theoretical physics at Queens, had been arrested with two other students in possession of semtex and other bomb-making equipment.

They were charged with conspiracy to cause explosions, accused of being in the Real IRA and of trying to derail the Good Friday Agreement.

Darren declined legal representation, would not acknowledge the legitimacy of the court, and got 22 years in jail. He was just 19.

"The world kind of fell apart for everybody," Mulholland said. >>>



My family wouldn't know an IRA man from the milkman. My parents' only political thing would be — vote Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael? "It was a shock like a death."

Their reaction was understandable as they had reared six children in a border town at the height of the Troubles without incident before Darren, the youngest, arrived after an 11-year gap.

In fact, it might have been Mark they would have expected to cause them worry as he bounced from career to career without any apparent care for stability.

Mark had left school at 16 and gone into the local S&S Engineering Works where, like generations before him, he could have expected a lifelong job. But he had other ideas.

"I was working beside a lovely man called Paddy Murphy. He was 64 and he'd been there since he was 14. That's 50 years but he might as well have said to me that he was there 500 years.

"Paddy died walking home from work one day. He dropped dead. It had a very dramatic effect on me because I swore immediately I would never, ever stay in a career

more than five years and I have stuck with that."

He moved from engineering to aerospace to manufacturing and then to local development work with county councils and enterprise boards, ending up working for the European Commission.

He then did another about-turn and, with friends and wife, Veronica, renovated an old pub and turned it into The Spirit Store, Dundalk's successful live music venue.

He opened a second pub before selling up 10 years ago and moving with Veronica and their four children to France where they renovated an old farmstead in which they now host residential English language courses.

Throughout all these changes, one thing remained constant. He was writing and, just as importantly, reading to learn how to write.

"I'm an early school-leaver and I've never studied literature but I was always reading. I read books that I came to mostly by cover or title — that's how I came to Camus, Steinbeck, Kavanagh, McGahern, Hemingway. They're my big five — the ones who taught me how to write."



The story he wanted to write was about cause. "I wanted to write about why boys — and it's nearly always boys — go to war."

The idea was inspired by some of the men at the engineering works who he came to learn had been in the IRA. "I met men who were kind, considerate, charming, endearing, normal men but I knew these were actually the serious players. It was the purists I wanted to write about."

In *A Mad and Wonderful Thing*, we meet Johnny Donnelly, an outwardly well-rounded young man who harbours a secret yearning to avenge the cruel humiliation of his father at the hands of British soldiers when Johnny was a young boy.

He becomes an IRA sniper, killing on command before gradually beginning to question whether he's made the right choice.

For Mulholland, the debate in Johnny's mind reflects the conflict of views in Ireland as a whole.

"Johnny's journey is the journey of Ireland in the last 30 years of the last century when we had this great debate as a nation, but particularly within the Republican movement, about how we deal with conflict.

The story of what happens to boys when they leave the war will play out in Mulholland's family later this year or early next year when, Darren will finish his sentence.

"I was working beside a lovely man called Paddy Murphy. He was 64 and he'd been there since he was 14 ... he died walking home from work one day. He was going round the corner and he dropped down dead ... I swore I would never, ever stay in a career more than five years and I have stuck with that."

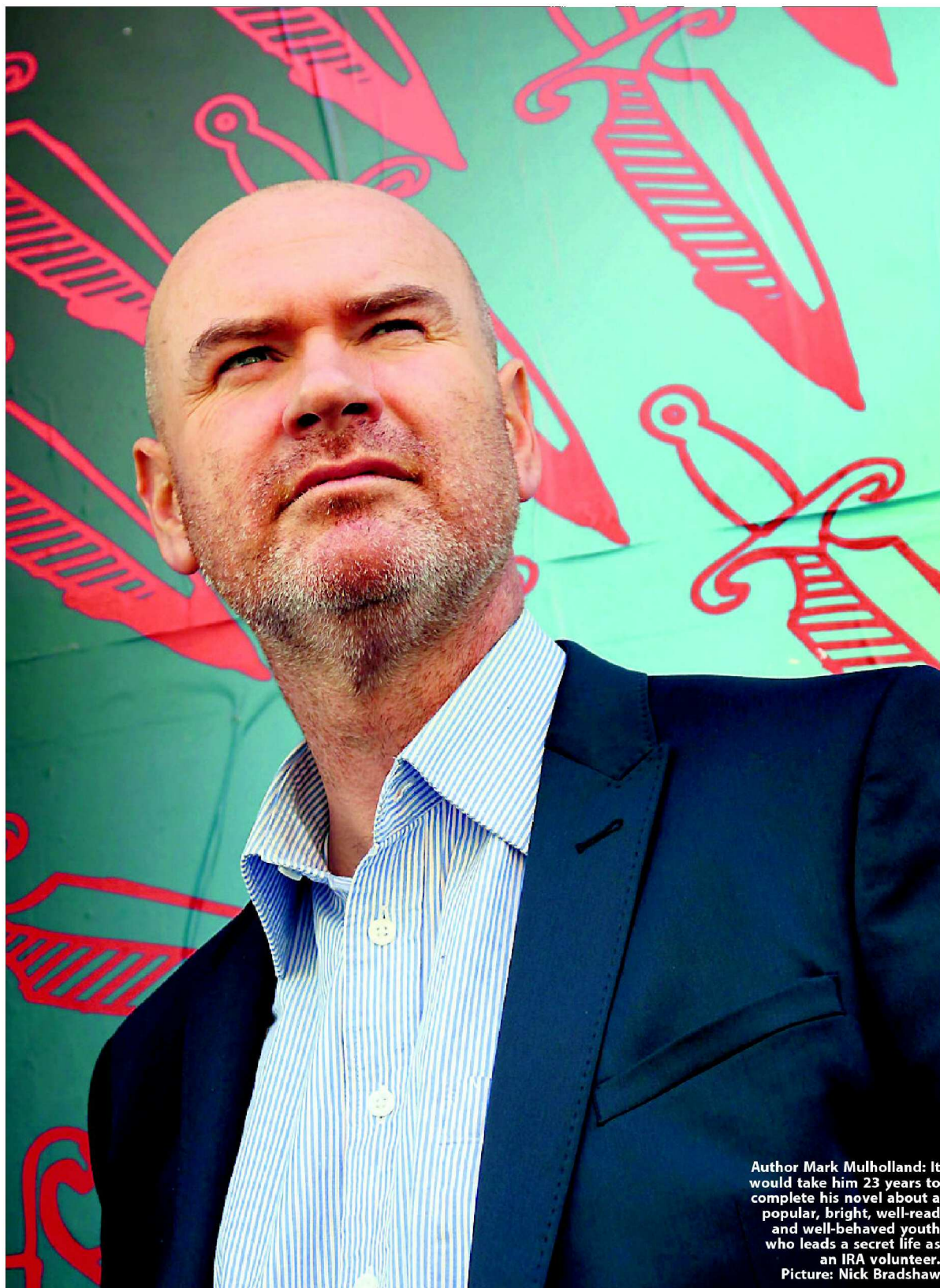
### **A Mad and Wonderful Thing**

Mark Mulholland  
Scribe, Stg£12.99

Interview: **Caroline O'Doherty**



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Picture: Nick Bradshaw