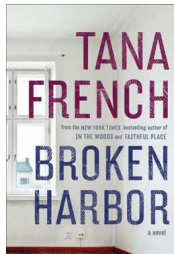


Modern Horror Story: Tana French brings 'Broken Harbor' to full fright

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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With the release of her fourth book, Tana French has given her readers a modern horror story worthy of Steven King, Dean Koontz or Anne Rice.

Patrick Spain and Jenny Spain, along with their two young children, Emma and Jack, live in a new home in Brianstown, a suburb outside of Dublin. Childhood sweethearts who married young and set about living a perfect life, Patrick and Jenny seem to have it all.

"Things work out for her," Jenny's sister, Fiona says. "Some people, they're just good at life. They do it right, without even thinking about it. Jenny always had the knack."

However, when Fiona shows up at the Spain house one morning, she finds Patrick lying on the den floor, stabbed to death, with Jenny also attacked, barely clinging to life. Later, officers find Emma and Jack smothered in their beds upstairs.

Enter Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy, Dublin's top murder squad detective, and his rookie partner, Richie Curran. Superintendent O'Kelly assigns the case to the duo.

As we learn in the opening of the book, Kennedy is just a little full of himself.

Let's get one thing straight: I was the perfect man for this case. You'd be amazed how many of the lads would have run a mile, given the choice – and I had a choice, at least at the start. A couple of them said it to my face: Sooner you than me, man. It didn't bother me, not for a second. All I felt was sorry for them.

That's the setup for "Broken Harbor," written by American-born Dublin resident Tana French.

The puzzling case gives officers Kennedy and Curran fits.

First, there's the housing development called Brianstown. The recent financial collapse halted all new construction, leaving the neighborhood full of half-finished shells, a virtual ghost town save the few houses finished before the builders went belly up.

Fiona claims Patrick and Jenny were madly in love and had no enemies. Sure, Patrick had been laid off recently, but nothing would come between the two. For all their lives, it had always been Patrick and Jenny.

The Spain house, like their relationship, looks OK on the outside, but once inside, Kennedy and Curran find holes in the walls, an enormous animal trap in the attic and baby monitors everywhere.

At one time, the area now known as Brianstown was called Broken Harbor, a summer resort where locals came to spend a few weeks, where local kids hung out, made out and ate ice

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cream. Broken Harbor holds harsh memories for Kennedy and his two sisters. Going back won't be easy, but it's his job to solve the murders, and he dives in head first.

As Kennedy and Curran began to fit the pieces of this puzzle together, a picture comes into focus, but it is not the one Fiona would have them believe.

The officers find someone had broken into the family's home, stealing odd items like a pencil and a piece of ham. Someone stripped the family's computer clean the night of the murders. Kennedy and Curran set a trap for the murderer, but when they catch a suspect, their instincts tell them they have the wrong person, in spite of a signed confession.

Kennedy knows something is wrong.

When I think about the Spain case, from deep inside endless nights, this is the moment I remember. Everything else, every other slip and stumble along the way, could have been redeemed. This is the one I clench tight because of how sharp it slices. Cold, still air, a weak ray of sun glowing on the wall outside the window, smell of stale bread and apples.

As if Kennedy didn't have enough to deal with, his crazy sister, Dina, shows up, threatening to go off the rails yet again unless he drops everything to stay with her. As the older brother, Kennedy feels responsible for Dina, who survived a childhood trauma at Broken Harbor.

There is more horror at Broken Harbor than just the brutal murder of three people.

For the first time in my life, I saw the place for what it was: lethal, shaped and honed for destruction as expertly as the trap lurking in the Spain's attic. The menace of it left me blinded, sang like hornets in the bones of my skull.

As I dove deeper and deeper into the plot, I began double-checking the locks on our doors just in case. The slightest creak in the floorboards of our old house made me jump out of my skin. I was skittish and wary for weeks after I finished the book. That's how well French develops her characters, drives the plot and sets the mood. She uses detail to her advantage, forcing the reader to slow down and pay attention or risk missing an important clue, flashback or tidbit of information critical to the plot. In the process, she scared the beetlejuice outta me.

At 39, French is in the prime of her career. I look forward to many, many more stories from her.

Other French books include "In the Woods" (2007), "The Likeness" (2008) and "Faithful Place" (2010). All of the plots revolve around the Dublin police station and the characters are connected, but it is not necessary to read the books in order to enjoy the loosely-woven series.

For more information, visit www.tanafrench.com

Editor's note: It's impossible not to recognize the homage French pays to John Banville's book "The Sea." The early events in Kennedy's life are clearly meant to remind the reader of early events in main character Max Morden's life.