

INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS KENNEDY ON HIS NEW NOVEL, *Five Days*

So let's begin with that most obvious of opening questions: how did *Five Days* start forming in your imagination?

I would love to report that there was that ecstatic moment of instant inspiration when the proverbial electric light bulb was illuminated over my head and the entire novel fell into place in a matter of moments. But if there is one thing I know after writing eleven novels (besides the fact that it never gets easier), it's the fact that inspiration is such a gradual and disparately ordered business. And in the case of *Five Days* an image kick-started the imaginative process.

The image was one that I saw before boarding a transatlantic flight to London in January 2011. I was heading to the security checkpoint at Logan Airport in Boston and passed a woman standing alone by the barrier. She was in her early forties, diminutive, attractive in a reserved sort of way; the sort of austerely beautiful New England woman who, one hundred and fifty years ago, would have been the subject of a John Singer Sargent portrait. But what caught my attention about her was the fact that her face was awash in tears. Something immensely unsettling and downright sad had just befallen her. And being someone always attuned to telling details, I noticed that, as she was fighting the urge to break down, she was simultaneously twisting her wedding ring maniacally. Her inability to move just then - the sense that her grief had rooted her to this one patch of airport linoleum - got my novelistic mind whirring. Had she just said goodbye to a husband who'd announced he was leaving her? Was she seeing off a husband whom she knew she no longer loved, and had just informed him that her departure from the marriage was now imminent? Or had she just said goodbye to the man she'd fallen in love with, yet who had to return to a wife he no longer loved (just as she was returning to a dead marriage)? Or was it something far less dramatic, less profound?

Judging by the woman's tears - and her immobility - I was pretty certain that something momentous had just transpired in her life which had clearly rattled the foundations of whatever she had constructed in terms of her own personal identity (and we all construct an identity as we move through life). And I couldn't help but wonder: what will her next move be?

The more I considered this image of the crying woman - twisting her wedding ring as if it was a symbolic shackle - the more I began to think about the way we often talk ourselves into an existence that we don't want, yet endlessly rationalize why we are staying put.

Is Laura, the narrator of *Five Days*, grappling with a similar dilemma?

Laura is a woman who spends her days looking at other people's potential calamities. She's a technologist in the radiography department of a small coastal Maine hospital, so she is something of an expert when it comes to spotting cancers. But in her domestic life there is also an encroaching malignancy: a marriage that has flat-lined (and which, she is finally beginning to admit, was never truly rooted in passionate love). Still, like so many people - especially those devoted to their children (which most of us are) - the limitations of her marriage have been offset by her considerable personal responsibilities and her fear of the world beyond the domestic one she has created for herself. And even if there has been considerable continental drift between herself and her husband Dan (who has been out of work for eighteen months and is borderline depressed), she has never envisaged a life beyond the one she has made for herself, even with all its attendant flaws.

And then...

The novel does hinge on a chance encounter that Laura has while on a weekend away at a conference in Boston.

All my novels have always grappled with the way so much of life is predicated by

happenstance; the random nature of things that can send the entire trajectory of our lives down an entire different path. So, yes, *Five Days* is, on one level, a classic 'brief encounter' story in which two people in mid-life discover a connection with each other; a connection that arises not out of instant attraction, but from the growing realization that they share so much. Richard may initially seem to Laura like a somewhat drab, grey-ish insurance man. But then she discovers someone who, like herself, loves words, seek consolation in the world of books, and has sold himself so short when it has come to the central decisions of his life. And he is also in a marriage as barren as her own - and who once had a glimpse of potential personal happiness, only to have sidestepped it. So, in one sense, the novel is about the nature of personal connection - and how, if it is absent from our lives, it becomes a longing that only serves to underscore all the sadness that haunts an unhappy marriage.

You sound like you know a thing or two about such things!

Well, my own very long (twenty-three years) and (in the end) rather unhappy first marriage did end in 2008. But around the end of all that, I did meet someone extraordinary. Though nothing happened at the time we kept in tangential contact. And then, over a year ago, out of the blue, she got in contact with me, saying she had never stopped thinking about me. I wrote right back, confirming I'd never stopped thinking about her. We got together shortly thereafter - and were married in September 2012. So I guess you could call that wonderful denouement something outside of my own fictional universe: a proper happy ending.

Now in the novel...

The year 1997 was when your second novel, 'The Big Picture,' was published. It was something of an international sensation, wasn't it?

Yes, it went into twenty-two languages and has sold over 2 million copies worldwide. It was also the basis of an excellent French film starring Romain Duris and Catherine Deneuve. After this novel, I wrote a corporate thriller, *The Job*, which got good reviews

but didn't gain the same commercial traction as *The Big Picture*. And being the sort of writer who has always strived never to do the same thing twice, I completely changed novelistic direction with my third novel, *The Pursuit of Happiness* - a large, sprawling love story set in mid-century Manhattan, under the shadow of McCarthyism. It was also the first time I wrote as a woman - as it had two women narrators. Anyway, the novel became something of a critical and commercial sensation in the UK and France, but it couldn't find a home in the United States. The fact that I had left my psychological thriller niche - coupled with the middling sales for *The Job* - seemed to mitigate against it. And thus began nine years where I was living in two parallel universes - huge success in Europe, publication of my novels in twenty-two languages, and in every English-speaking country - with the exception of my own country, the United States.

How did you respond to this extraordinary period of literary success everywhere but your own country?

Of course it was something of an open wound. Even though I was being feted everywhere else, the fact that I couldn't find a publisher back home in the States... well, it was just a bit maddening and sad. I am, after all, an American - and one whose novels are so bound up in the question of what it means to be an American, and the immense strengths and contradictions of our country.

There is a 'state of the nation' aspect to *Five Days*.

Well, the vast majority of my novels all deal - in one way or another - with the complexities of the American psyche, our body politic, our immense strengths and contradictions. In *Five Days*, I really wanted to also portray life as it is lived now by the struggling middle classes. Laura is the sole breadwinner in a family of four. Since her husband Dan was laid off work she has had to carry the entire family on her salary of \$51,500 per annum. As such you do learn a great deal about the great contemporary American middle class dilemma - how so many people are struggling to simply get by

while holding down very responsible and highly trained jobs. And yes, I am very interested in the cost of things, in domestic economies, in the way someone like Laura really has to consider every dollar spent - and how that has an impact on her personally. As it does for so many today.

There's something very 19th century about this interest in family budgets and the price of living.

Well, I have always said that I have a very 19th century view of the novel. I tell stories which - even when on an intimate level like *Five Days* - have a big narrative sweep, and which also address one of the great central preoccupations of fiction: the way we live now. And yes, having just referenced Trollope, I have been hugely influenced by the way he perceived money to be such an implicit facet of all lives, and how it dictates) so much (even when we try to sidestep its insidious influence). But unlike a heroine from the Trollope era, Laura is a thoroughly modern woman - and one who is trying to balance a career with her role as a wife and mother. The fact is, she is immensely strong and capable, yet also increasingly vulnerable to the inexorable march of time, and the way her marriage has become an increasingly sad construct

Certainly *Five Days* is a novel about the possibility of change in the midst of a life that has become circumscribed.

Self-entrapment has always been one of the key themes running through all my novels - largely because I was raised amidst a classic mid-century marriage where both my father and my mother felt very much shortchanged by the life they had created together. But as I have observed among my friends and acquaintances the majority of times when someone complains about the limitations that life has placed upon them, they are not admitting a fundamental truth: they are the architects of these limitations. They are the ones who have shortchanged themselves.

But I do believe that the majority of people do travel hopefully. And even when they tell themselves that they are in a cul-de-sac from which there is little possibility of escape,

there is always the desire, the hope, for some way out. The truth is (and I know this from personal experience): the desire for change, and the actual ability to trigger such change, are two disparate terrains. To actually leave an unhappy marriage - especially one where there are much-loved children - is nothing less than a major free-fall. But the alternative is stasis. And stasis leads to despair. And as Kierkegaard (one of the most quotable of philosophers) noted: "The sickness unto death is despair".

Is love the antidote to despair?

Love is the biggest challenge we face in life. We idealize love - and with good reason. Because love is the greatest balm we have against life's vicissitudes. It's the bulwark which (we fervently hope) can protect us from that central human dilemma: the fact that we all feel so solitary, so very much alone in a pitiless universe. But love is also so bound up in self-image, in personal need, in the complex pathologies that underscore us all. And never underestimate the way we frequently project our dreams and desires on to someone else without truly seeing who or what that person is. Just as we also have so many expectations from love, coupled with the realization that we so often talk ourselves into lives we secretly know we don't want. And this raises a fundamental question about the human condition: can we accept happiness?

Certainly Laura and Richard never intend to fall in love...

But, over the course of a few days, a chance meeting turns into something potentially transformational. Because they discover that they share so much - especially a love of words, of writing; an intellectual curiosity, and a desperate sense of thwartedness in their own lives. They are both very bright people who have severely underestimated themselves - and begin to quietly, yet profoundly discover that the connection they have made together is a potentially huge one.

But then a larger question arises: having been given this glimpse of potential happiness, can they actually act on it - and, in essence, change the trajectory of their lives?

It's never an easy business, embracing happiness.

You are so right about that. For all of our talk about wanting to be happy, the fact is: we often stay put because we have come to accept sadness as our lot. Or because we simply feel we don't merit a felicitous life.

Do you have any answers to that question?

Hardly! A novelist should have many questions about life's massive contradictions and the complexities inherent in us all. But are there any empirical answers to human existence? And when it comes to that biggie - "what do you want?" - most of us spend a lifetime trying to work that one out. Because it's an ever-changing, ever-mutable question. And because when we have what we think we want, then we begin to wonder if life might just be elsewhere. And love always changes when the business of day-to-day life gets factored into the equation.

But Laura and Richard believe they have found what they wanted.

Absolutely. But having discovered the person who just might allow you to change your life, and then being able to actually redirect your life towards happier terrain... well, that's never simple. You'd think choosing happiness is straightforward. But it never is. And therein lies another essential, endlessly fascinating component of the human condition.

Though the novel contains much sadness there is a quiet optimism underscoring it all.

Five Days is not a story with a happy ending. But it is one with a decidedly thoughtful and perhaps empowering one. By which I mean it embraces the idea that change - though painful and often wounding - is also crucial if we are to somehow find

accommodation with ourselves and live lives that are not wildly compromised or tinged with ongoing regret. I think that disappointment and ruefulness are something that none of us can sidestep. They are essential components of the human emotional palate. To live is to feel, on a certain level, let down - most of all by yourself. But then the question must be posed: can you somehow find a way forward that gets you beyond the place you feel trapped? Or in which you have trapped yourself. I think everyone has, so to speak, a weather system. And it's frequently inclement. But to leave such perpetual overcast when it's the climate you've become accustomed to.... that is such a huge undertaking.

One final question: do you know what you want?

I suppose the only way I could answer that is by saying: like everyone else, I'm a work in progress. But I am also, of recent, a happy man. And that is indeed a change in the weather.