

ST PATRICKS SPEECH

Good morning staff and students and thank you so much for having us here today.

Whenever I speak with people about being a writer, a number of common questions crop up. Typically, these are questions such as: how long does it take to write a book, how much money do you earn and what made you write that particular story?

Let's sort these out straightaway. My answers, in order, are: one, the writing takes up to a year but the thinking takes much longer than that; two, it's not about the money, you liberalist ratbag; and three, I couldn't not write that story because it was so irresistibly in my heart.

Another common question is: what made you become a writer? It sounds clichéd but I rather think the profession chose me. I loved words from a very young age, so much so that I once wrote the word 'ocean' in permanent marker several times across my bedroom walls. Most kids would've drawn fish; I did a not-so-elaborate word picture that my exasperated parents eventually covered with wallpaper.

I also loved discovering how stories aren't just stories but things with shape and structure and purpose. As a six-year-old wanting to show off this knowledge, I wrote a three-sentence story about kangaroos. It went like this:

Kangaroos hop. (Straight into character and action).

Kangaroos have powerful legs and claws. (Description, expansion, depth).

Kangaroos kill people. (You've got to have a wham-bam ending).

In Primary School, I used to wait with great anticipation for the arrival of the Scholastic Book Club magazine. My parents let me order three books each time it came out. When the books arrived, I used to hold them like the sacred objects that they were and stare at the front cover, trying to work out the subliminal

messages within the image. Then, like some kind of literary psychic / stalker, I'd stare at the name of the author, wondering who that person was and how on earth they'd managed to do something as big and wonderful as write a novel.

So, it's a neat and highly pleasurable piece of serendipity that I am now one of those people, a Scholastic author. To that end, my great hope is that you, a new generation of readers, will feel the same electric thrill and empowerment that I felt and still feel every time I open a book and begin reading. Human beings have a remarkable energy for imagining and arguing about our differences rather than recognising and embracing our similarities. It seems to me that the best way of overcoming such misguided thinking is to redirect that same energy into discovering our common cultural capital through stories – because these are where our collective humanity is most fully and potently defined.

Which brings me in a roundabout way to my latest novel, entitled *A New Kind of Everything*. This is the story of two brothers, Carl and Dinny, and, to quote a recent review, 'the choices we make that make us who we are.' Carl and Dinny have undeniable difficulties in their lives. They've lost their dad. Their mum is grieving. Carl is angry and wants to strike out on his own. Dinny is lonely and wondering what his life will now become. They're at one of those tipping points with which we are all presented in our lives, where we can choose, consciously or otherwise, between selfishness or selflessness, between recklessness or responsibility, between individual or family and community.

In my novel, the boys make different decisions with understandably different consequences. Readers will judge the rights and wrongs of those decisions however I hope that they also recognise the thread that binds the story, and that is the mutual love of the two brothers. When I began to think about, and write scenes for, *A New Kind of Everything*, my primary interest was in exploring how brotherly love, family love, can endure even the direst of circumstances. It's a familiar theme to me because of events in my own upbringing, but also in literature – and it's familiar because it's true. It's difficult to argue against the

idea that we grow into better, stronger people when we are prepared to both give and acknowledge love, especially when it is least expected or warranted. With respect to the brothers from my novel, Carl, I think it is fair to say, treats Dinny poorly. He abuses him, assaults him, rejects him, disappoints him time and time again – yet there is never any doubt throughout the story that Carl loves Dinny, and that Dinny returns that love unconditionally, and often with significant amounts of forgiveness. Which I guess is one way of coming to another common question: what do I, as the writer, want you, as potential readers, to get from this story?

My answer: while I do not, of course, have any control over reader response or reaction, I am vain enough to hope that the readers of *A New Kind Of Everything* will consider the idea that good choices – those based on selflessness, responsibility and family-community – do in all probability lead to better consequences – however one of those good choices should always be the offer of love to those who make poor choices. I'm not saying that Dinny is a Jesus-figure, not at all, but I am suggesting that he is consistently decent and compassionate in his judgments about others, and I'm also saying that the more of us who adopt that simple and achievable kind of approach to our relationships, the better off ourselves, our communities and our greater world will be.

I hope you get the chance to read *A New Kind of Everything* and enjoy the story of Carl and Dinny. I also hope that you keep writing and reading with great energy and commitment. Being a writer offers the wonderful privilege of inviting yourself and your creations into the mind of the reader. Being a reader offers new worlds but also, more critically, the chance to better understand your own world – and therefore the chance to better negotiate the complex spaces in which we live. I wish you the very best of luck with both endeavours, and I thank you for listening.