

'I think things are really bad. They're dire. And I don't see a correction coming soon'

As a new anthology of his best pieces is published, the acclaimed New Yorker magazine writer Patrick Radden Keefe reflects on turbulent times in the US, the chilly charisma of Gerry Adams, and why he strives to avoid turning politics into entertainment.

Interview: **Marion McKeone**

Interview

About two weeks ago, I was driving 50 miles from Los Angeles to the Ronald Reagan Library, where Liz Cheney was delivering a speech in the aftermath of Cassidy Hutchinson's seismic testimony before the January 6 Committee.

As Los Angeles and its exurbs fell away to reveal the Simi Valley, National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast a segment featuring journalist and author Patrick Radden Keefe. His recounting of the story of Astrid Holleeder, a Dutch lawyer living in fear of assassination by her mob boss brother, was so riveting I pulled in on a stretch of road leading to the library to follow the hypnotic tale to its unsettling end.

I was so absorbed in its final moments, I failed to notice a handful of anti-Cheney protesters advance on my car. When one of them screamed: "Read the Constitution, traitor!" at a decibel-shattering level through the window, I had completely forgotten where I was. My reaction was one of disorientation, then irritation. "For Christ's sake, shut up," I wanted to yell back. "I'm listening to this."

Few writers can transport you into their world with the skill of Radden Keefe. He has written five books which, combined with his longform investigative journalism articles, have landed him just about every journalistic and literary non-fiction award in the US.

Still boyish at 46, he has those clean-cut all-American good looks. He's almost impossibly disarming, exuding affability and a piercing intelligence. If you weren't aware of his penchant for plumbing the darkest recesses of humanity, you might assume he was a high school teacher or a paediatric doctor straight from Central Casting. Or even a therapist.

He's probably best known in these parts for his 2019 book *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*. It's a riveting, meticulously researched account of the brutal 30-year conflict. The story, distilled to its essence, focuses on a single victim and perpetrator.

The victim is Jean McConville, the 38-year-old widow and mother of ten who was dragged from her home in the Divis Flats complex on a December night in 1972 as her terrified children watched helplessly. She was never seen again. Her remains were discovered more than 30 years later on a beach near Dundalk.

The perpetrator, in Radden Keefe's account, is the late Dolours Price, who along with her sister Marian played an active role in the IRA's terror campaign of the 1970s. (Marian denies the allegations.)

Countless books have been written about the Troubles. But Radden Keefe's award-winning account is like a punch to the heart as it homes in on the human cost, the agony of families ripped apart in the crossfire. Like any great storyteller, he knows that building a vivid story is about the details. When McConville was kidnapped, she had a nappy pin clipped onto the front of her clothing – a common accessory for young mothers of that era. The pin is more than a humanising detail: it is a storytelling device that delivers its heartbreaking payoff in the book's final pages.

What makes Radden Keefe's writing so compelling, aside from the meticulous research and the dogged determination to reveal the truth, is his gift for empathy without sentimentality and his ability to reveal the bruised humanity of his subjects.

Unsurprisingly, as the title suggests, he was initially met with a wall of silence. It took four years and seven trips to the North to excavate the materials he needed and to gain the trust of those willing to talk to him.

Adams refused to be interviewed but he's used to employing the 'write around', where he will interview as many friends, enemies, family members and associates of the main characters as will talk and corroborate their accounts with official records, police and court transcripts and verified documents.

"I was sorry that he didn't speak with me," he says of Adams. "He is so careful. He is so disciplined in his message. And I think he also lives in a . . . in a kind of cone of denial, an atmosphere of mythology. So, I

don't know that I ever would've got anything all that startling or sincere out of him."

High-wire act

While Radden Keefe has Irish ancestry on his father's side and grew up in Boston when the violence in Northern Ireland was at its peak, there is no trace of Irish-American sentimentalism about him. He concedes that *Say Nothing* is "an uncomfortable book for people who are great supporters of Adams". But he adds: "It's also quite uncomfortable for people who hate him, because if you get to the end of the book, you see that, while I find him to be a bit chilly, I also think that he was a bit of a visionary.

"He could see around the corner, he could see that there was going to have to be a political resolution to the conflict. And then he did this incredible high-wire act of helping steer the IRA to that outcome and not getting killed along the way, and then helping to preserve the peace."

Adams isn't Radden Keefe's only reticent subject. The Sackler family spent a fortune on lawyers in an attempt to derail the publication of *Empire of Pain*, his award-winning deep dive into the billionaire clan and their development and marketing of the synthetic opioid Oxycontin, which devastated huge swathes of the US, creating tens of millions of addicts in impoverished communities.

A graduate of Columbia University and Yale Law School, he picked up a couple of Master's degrees at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, en route to becoming a writer. There was also a fellowship at the Pentagon, which he compared to working at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and a brief stint in Hollywood writing pilots for HBO that never got made.

A decade ago, the New Yorker magazine offered Radden Keefe a staff job, providing him with the time and resources to spend a year or more researching and writing a single story. Add the twin traits of patience and

Patrick Radden Keefe: 'We're all living with the consequences of the idea that politics is just entertainment' SHUTTERSTOCK

tenacity and it's a safe bet that if he starts digging, he won't stop.

"One of the great luxuries of writing for the New Yorker is that I'll tell people: 'I'm going to spend six months on this or eight months or a year,'" he says. "I tell people upfront, 'I'd prefer to speak with you. I want to hear your side of the story. But if for one reason or another, you choose to sit it out. I'm not going to go away.' And that, by itself, sometimes persuades people to talk because they realise: 'I can't stop this thing.' People know it's not a drive-by. I'm going to take the time and dig."

Mobsters, mass killers, drug overlords and black-market arms dealers are among those who have found themselves at the sharp end of Radden Keefe's shovel. His latest book, *Rogues: True Stories of Grifters, Killers, Rebels and Crooks* is an anthology that features a dozen articles culled from his investigative journalism with the New Yorker, and it's a masterful collection.

By Radden Keefe's own account, he mines dark psychic crevices in his search for material. The crime exposé is not the point of the story, but rather the point of entry, the lever that he uses to prise open the door to corrupt boardrooms and chilling underworlds.

The book includes a 2014 feature he wrote about the capture of El Chapo, the notorious Mexican drug lord who was at the time languishing in a Mexican prison and feeling disinclined to talk to the media. Included in the piece is a riveting and occasionally hilarious account of the logistics involved in ensuring El Chapo didn't run out of Viagra, a narrative in which the Mexican media subsequently revelled.

The collection concludes with Radden Keefe's evocative account of a trip to Vietnam with the writer and presenter Anthony Bourdain – an odd choice, perhaps, given his bedfellows in this collection, but one who fits squarely under the "rebels" heading. Bourdain's 2018 death by suicide affected Radden Keefe deeply. "We had stayed in touch and did a few events together," he says. "There was a wonderful night, not too long before he died, where we went out late. There's a great bar in Manhattan called the Old Town Bar and we closed it down – him and my wife and me.

"I was shocked. I didn't see it coming. I knew he was in a very dark place, but I didn't quite appreciate how bad it was. It was very upsetting. I still think about him all the time, which I think is a testament to the sheer life force of the guy."

Like any 'greatest hits' collection, readers will quibble about the ones that didn't make the cut: Radden Keefe's profile, for example, of HR McMaster, Trump's former national security adviser, or his mesmerising portrait of Boston mobster Whitey Bulger. And then, of course, there's his devastating takedown of the Sackler family and unveiling of the Oxycontin scandal, his account of which was first published in the New Yorker in 2017. His subsequent book *Empire of Pain* dominated almost every critic's list of top ten non-fiction books when it was published last year.

It's not surprising that Netflix, Hulu and HBO have all come calling, looking to adapt his stories into films and mini-series. *Say Nothing* was optioned by Hollywood before the print had dried on the first edition by the Emmy-winning producers of *American Crime Story*.

Grim prognosis

Until now, Radden Keefe has steered away from the well-ploughed furrows of Donald Trump, although he's written about several of the characters on the periphery of Trumpworld, including Mark Burnett, the creator of *The Apprentice*, the vehicle that transformed Trump from a failed property developer into an illusory mogul with the Midas touch.

Radden Keefe's curiosity was piqued by the East London former British army recruit, who arrived in the US as an illegal immigrant, and parlayed a brief marriage to a wealthy Californian (he's now married to Irish actress Roma Downey) into a career as one of the most successful reality TV producers in the world and head of MGM Television.

The Apprentice was Trump's springboard into presidential politics. That is Burnett's real legacy, Radden Keefe says. "It was this idea that politics is just entertainment. We're all living with the consequences of that. To some extent, I think Boris Johnson is emblematic of that as well."

After Burnett, he had intended to write a profile of Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. But he said he ditched the project after realising that he'd be contributing to the "politics as entertainment" industry. "If I'm not adding value, then it just becomes entertainment. And if it's just entertainment, then how am I any better than Mark Burnett?"

So, what's next? Of the cast of characters that has been arrayed before the January 6 Committee, Radden Keefe would most like to write about Stewart Rhodes, his Yale Law School classmate and founder of the Oath-keepers, the right-wing militia whose connection to Trump is currently under scrutiny.

The conversation segues into America's future as a functioning democracy. His prognosis is grim. "With the caveat that I'm a glass-half-empty kind of person, I think we are in Humpty Dumpty territory," he says. "I think things are really bad. They're dire. And the worst of it is, I don't see a correction coming soon."

He loves this country, he concludes, "but I might be in the market for an Irish passport soon" ■

Patrick Radden Keefe will be part of First Thought Talks at Galway International Arts Festival, in conversation with Caitriona Crowe at 4pm on July 23, O'Donoghue Theatre, NUI Galway. See giaf.ie



The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) hold a rally in LA to draw attention to their demands
Getty

No sign of credits rolling on Hollywood strike as Universal makes unkindest cut

Morale remains high on the picket lines despite the scorching temperatures in LA



Marion McKeone
in the US

In 2006, Alan Smyth went to Hollywood. The Irish actor, whose credits included productions in the Gate and Abbey theatres, *Ballykissangel*, *The Clinic* and a five-year stint on *Fair City*, was cast in a 2002 Showtime movie that was filmed in Ireland.

The producers and director were so impressed by the actor that they urged him to move Stateside and sponsored his visa application. The move played out like Smyth's very own Hollywood movie - initially at least.

His first audition landed him a role on CBS's hugely successful *CSI New York* series, the actor's equivalent of winning the lottery. From then he worked pretty much non-stop. "CBS cast me in a lot of other stuff they were producing," Smyth says.

Over the next decade he landed roles in some of the most popular shows on American television including *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds* and *Leverage*, where he acted alongside Oscar winner Timothy Hutton. Most recently, he appeared in the Emmy-winning series *Better Things*.

He describes himself as a jobbing actor who tends to get cast as "the villain or the weird guy". It wasn't going to buy him a mansion in Bel-Air but it was well-paid, steady work.

He remembers receiving his first residual cheque for \$3,000 in 2007 for one episode of *CSI*. "I said to my mate who worked full-time at CBS, 'I've already been paid for this', and he said 'that's just your residual'. I remember saying to him, 'can I actually spend this?' and he laughed," Smyth says.

The disappearance of residual money, the bread and butter for jobbing actors, is one of the main bones of contention in the actors and writers' strike that has ground Hollywood to a standstill.

Before Covid - and before streaming all but obliterated residual payments - Smyth was receiving around \$60,000 a year in residual cheques alone. Last year, he made just \$1,400.

Still, he said he's better off than the vast majority of actors that he currently pounds the pavement with on picket lines outside Los Angeles' major studios. He's in demand as an audio book reader, and he occasionally works as a production coordinator on photo shoots and commercials.

The vast majority of actors supplement their incomes as Uber drivers or waiters. Some 87 per cent of SAG-AFTRA's 160,000 members don't make enough money to qualify for the union's health insurance programme, which requires a minimum yearly income of \$26,470.

The one thing the strike has done so far, Smyth said, is disabuse the public of the notion that actors are pampered elites who can command \$20 million for a few weeks' work.



Cynthia Nixon joins SAG-AFTRA members on the picket line outside Netflix and Warner Bros: public opinion is on the side of the actors and writers
Getty

At a SAG-AFTRA press conference ten days ago, Fran Drescher, star of the hit series *The Nanny* and president of the union, laid out the issues in stark terms, and launched a blistering attack on studio bosses.

The mood in the room was one of anger and steely determination, and it's a sentiment that has been replicated at picket lines around Los Angeles, from the CBS studios at Beverly Boulevard to the Universal Studios on Barham Boulevard.

Visits to half a dozen picket lines over the past week suggest that morale is high, temperatures notwithstanding. The broiling heatwave that continues to plague Los Angeles has done little to deter the tens of thousands of actors and writers on picket lines.

Their placards make for entertaining reading. The 160,000 striking actors have joined forces with the 11,500 Writers Guild of America members who have been on strike since early May.

The mood is summed up by David Simon, creator and show-runner of the acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*, who quipped: "Now that actors are striking with me, we're going to workshop the hell out of my rage and entertain picket lines with exquisitely profane one-act plays."

This *Land Is Your Land*, the Woody Guthrie song that has become the anthem of American unions, blares from speakers outside Amazon's Culver City studios, then segues to Snoop Dogg and Dr Dre. This is Los Angeles, after all.

The incessant traffic provides a non-stop cacophony of hooting horns in support. Los Angeles public opinion is, for now at least, very much on the

side of the actors and writers.

But the strikes have seen dozens of ancillary businesses grind to a standstill. Hundreds of small businesses and sole traders make their livings from servicing the industry, but the coffee shops, dry cleaners, drivers, caterers, prop shops and florists who rely on the studios have seen their incomes plummet.

"It's like Covid, only worse, because at least then we had some government assistance," the manager of Belli Fratelli Roasters, a coffee shop across the road from the massive Disney studio complex in Burbank, tells me. "I honestly don't know if we're going to get through this."

Still, she's firmly on the side of the actors and writers. "Something's got to give here... [the studios and streamers] can't keep making more and more and paying less and less," she says.

Universal Studios triggered a furious response when it pruned rows of ficus trees, whose dense foliage had been providing picketers outside its Barham Boulevard entrance with shelter from the blistering heat, back to their barks and branches.

A Universal spokeswoman said the pruning, which was carried out without the necessary permit according to a spokesman for LA's city controller Ken Mejia, wasn't intended to target the picketers. But the move has prompted an investiga-



Universal pruned rows of ficus trees which had provided shelter from the blistering heat

tion; the trees, which are outside the Universal perimeter, belong to the City of Los Angeles.

The studios' perspective is very different to the unions. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) which represents entertainment giants such as Disney, Paramount, Netflix and Warner Bros Discovery claims SAG-AFTRA and the WGA have distorted the offers it has made to the unions.

In an emailed statement, it claimed to have offered more than \$1 billion in concessions, including an 11 per cent pay increase for background actors, stand-ins and doubles, limitations on studio demands that actors underwrite the cost of audition tapes, and a partial return to in-person auditions.

It said it also tabled an AI proposal that it claims would protect actors' likenesses, and a substantial increase in High-Budget Subscription Video on Demand (HBSVOD) foreign residuals. HBSVOD programmes are essentially streaming or online derivatives of an existing film or TV series.

The AMPTP has denied SAG-AFTRA's claims that it intends to require background actors to sign over their likeness for use in perpetuity, meaning that an extra who is paid for one day's work could have his or her image rep-

licated by AI and used in an unlimited number of background scenes in future movies.

At the time of writing, it hadn't responded to a Business Post request for clarity on the issue.

But the terms that are on offer do little to address the issue of residuals. Until recently, actors who had one-off or recurring roles in television series like *Friends* or *Law & Order* received a payment for every rerun or broadcast in overseas territories.

The success of a show was easy to gauge because of the Nielsen ratings system. But streaming giants like Netflix are not required to provide numbers for their shows, or pay residuals according to how many times they are watched.

It's difficult to feel sympathy for A-listers like Jennifer Aniston, who received \$20 million a year for the old rope of residuals on top of \$1 million per episode of *Friends*. But the cast of the sitcom represents the upper 0.001 per cent of Hollywood actors. For the 135,000 or so who make less than \$26,450 a year, residuals are an economic lifeline that has been cut.

Streaming giants pay the lead actors on mega hit shows like *Game of Thrones* up to \$1 million per episode, ensuring they're less likely to fret about residuals. But support and guest actors make the SAG-AFTRA minimum of around \$7,000 to \$9,000 per episode.

They routinely made at least that amount again when the show was re-broadcast on television. But streaming has slashed the residual rate to two cents on every dollar an actor would receive for residuals.

Orange is the New Black, one of Netflix's first mega hits, is cited by many of the actors on the Sunset Boulevard picket line as representing the beginning of the end.

Kimiko Glenn, who played Brook Soso in the award-winning comedy ensemble, says she received just \$27.34 for a year's worth of residuals.

The series, which ran from 2013 to 2019, surpassed *Game of Thrones* in terms of viewership at its peak, paid its actors, mostly women of colour, a fraction what the lead actors in *Thrones* were receiving.

Netflix refuses to release viewership data for any of its shows.

Analysts, studios and negotiators agree on one thing; there's no end in sight. Television studios believe it could be 2024 before shows like CBS's *The Stephen Colbert Show* or NBC's *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* are back on air.

The 2023 Emmy awards are unlikely to happen on schedule, and film and streamer studios in the US likewise say it could be next year before cameras start rolling again. Meanwhile, actors are refusing to promote new releases, although it hasn't dampened enthusiasm for summer blockbusters like *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*.

This weekend's annual ComicCon gathering in San Diego, which draws more than 150,000 fans of Marvel and other franchises, many of them kitted out like their action heroes, will take place without Hugh Jackman, Ryan Gosling or the other franchise stars for whom it is usually a mandatory date in the marketing calendar.

Moody's has predicted that eventually the studios will provide new contracts at a cost of around \$600 million a year. Meanwhile, stocks in Netflix, which generates much of its original content in other territories, have soared.



Alan Smyth: the Irish actor made just \$1,400 in residual payments