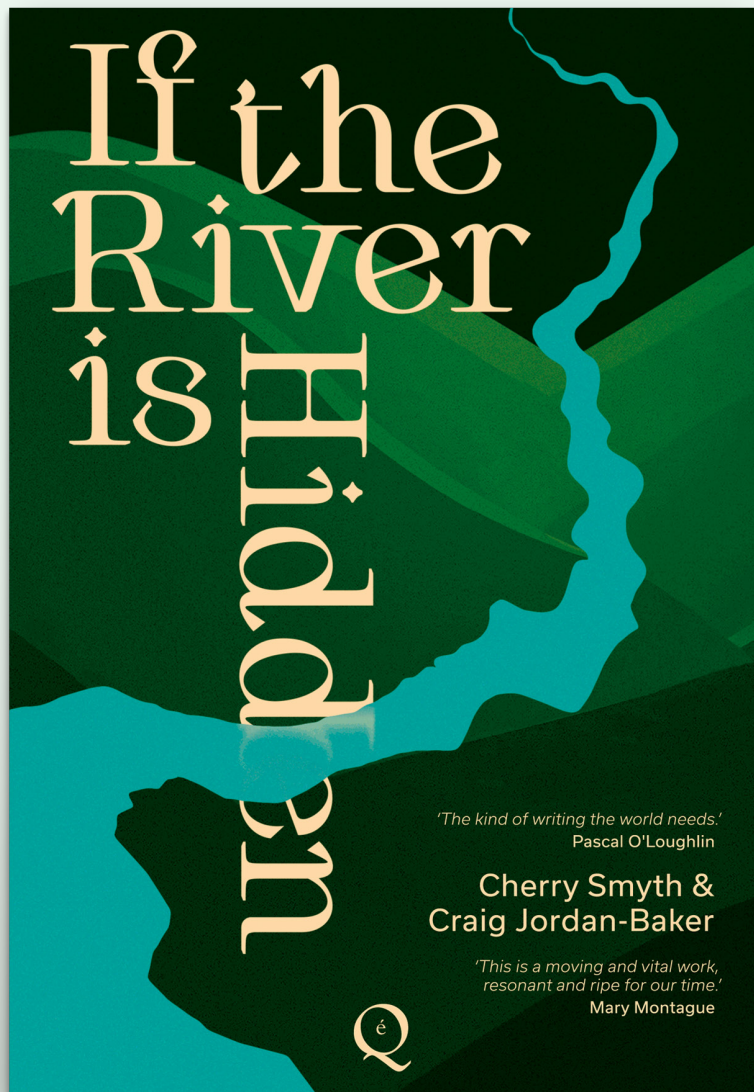


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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A
IF THE RIVER IS HIDDEN BY CHERRY
SMYTH AND CRAIG JORDAN-BAKER



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Please see detailed below some questions and answers provided by the author in relation to their book.

1. How would you summarise the book and your motivations for writing it?

If the River is Hidden charts the journey of two writers from the source to the mouth of the Bann, Northern Ireland's longest river. Through a dialogue of prose and poetry the history, landscape and divisions that have come to define the North are explored and challenged.

The project emerged from conversations about the authors' different relationships with Northern Ireland in terms of class, age, religious background and sexuality. Cherry was born in the North and left 40 years ago, whereas Craig was born in England, but with family connections there. Where Cherry sought to leave the narrowness and conflict, Craig, like many of Irish decent, was inclined to romanticise Ireland and see it as a second home. This tension shapes and deepens this conversation and the significance of the journey.

2. What is the significance of the title?

If the river is hidden, so is what enters it.

3. What are the main themes of the book? What do these themes mean to you as the author?

The book is interested in what is hidden and the consequences of ignoring it. For example, the pagan past and its associations with An Bhanna, the Goddess; the Mesolithic treasures offered to the river; histories of sectarianism and division in towns on the river's course; the pollutants destroying the ecology of our waterways; and how blood-belonging streams through us, even if we no longer live in the North of Ireland, or never did.

4. Did you decide on a specific style of writing for this book, and if so, why? What are you trying to convey through your style?

The formal challenge of the book was to integrate our two main genres of writing; Cherry principally being a poet and Craig a prose writer. The book reflects the shape of Northern Ireland's River Bann in a hybrid form, where long, sinewy poems are bridged by a lyric essay. This hybridity speaks to the

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third space emerging in the North, as well as how belonging starts with the words we inherit.

5. Was the structure and layout of the book an important consideration? If so, why?

We negotiated aspects of the structure, with Craig wanting a more thematic approach and Cherry pushing for more linear, day-by-day structure. Cherry won. The lay-out was guided by conventions of both genres: the poetry is indented and double spaced and the prose is presented in standard paragraphs.

6. What would you highlight as some of the pivotal scenes of the book, what is their importance to the narrative and to you on a personal level?

One pivotal scene was the initial search for the river's source where the reality of not finding it belied our expectations. This mismatch ran throughout the book where expectations and reality diverged. Another pivotal scene focused on the paramilitary graffiti by the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) along the Newry Canal, which disturbed Craig, while Cherry didn't notice it, due to her growing up in the Troubles. Here, the differences in our backgrounds really came to the fore.

7. How important was the time period or the setting to the story? What were you looking to evoke through this?

We walked for eight days in 2021, just as Northern Ireland was celebrating its centenary and it coincided with the end of the Covid pandemic. It took place in the fraught atmosphere of post-Brexit implications for Northern Ireland and its place in the UK and Europe. This context meant that the personal and the political were inextricably linked.

8. Which location in the book would you most like to visit and why?

The source, because we never found it!

9. What emotions are you hoping to evoke in the reader?

The book came out of a longing for home and a gradual acceptance that home is carried with us in words and friendships. One of the most moving

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responses was from a Kenyan reader who said she wanted to return and walk her home river. There is grief and recovery from grief in the book, as well as awareness of ecological peril and the sadness it evokes.

Additional questions your book club may wish to consider:

- How has the book affected or informed your view or understanding of Northern Ireland?
- If this story was told by just one of the authors, how would it be different?
- This book crosses genre and form, drawing on nature writing, writing of place and memoir. Did you feel this was effective?



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Cherry is an Irish writer, living in London. Her first two poetry collections, *When the Lights Go Up*, 2001 and *One Wanted Thing*, 2006 were published by Lagan Press. Her third collection, *Test, Orange*, 2012, and fourth, *Famished*, 2019 were published by Pindrop Press.

Her debut novel, *Hold Still*, Holland Park Press, appeared in 2013. *Famished* tours as a performance in collaboration with vocalist Lauren Kinsella and composer Ed Bennett.

Cherry was nominated as a Fellow for the Royal Society of Literature in 2022 and is also a Hawthornden Fellow. She is Associate Professor in Creative & Critical Writing at the University of Greenwich.

Craig is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at The University of Brighton. He has published fiction in *New Writing*, *Text*, *Firefly Magazine*, *Potluck* and in the *époque press* é-zine.

His drama has been widely performed in the UK, including his adaptation of *Beowulf* and he has had dramatic work commissioned from The National Archives, The Booth Museum of Natural History and the Theatre Royal Brighton.