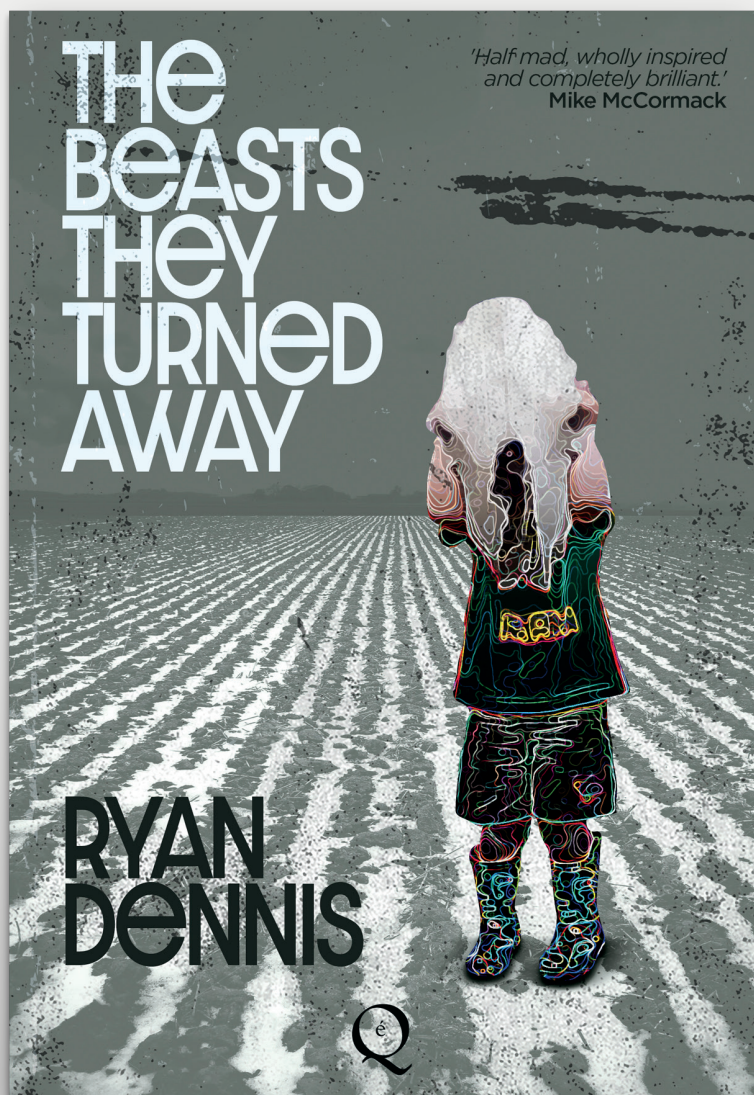


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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A THE BEASTS THEY TURNED AWAY BY RYAN DENNIS



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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?

To me, *The Beasts They Turned Away* is an attempt to find the best way to think about changes that affect a specific group of people, but whose experience is increasingly less explored in literature. Having grown up on a family farm and been a part of that family that struggled to keep it, I was convinced of the value in trying to tell this type of story. Farmers are a group of people with incredible selfhood, and their relationship with a changing world is something worth considering in writing. By doing so, I hope the novel spoke to concerns about the greater rural landscape and its dynamics.

2. What is the significance of the title?

To me, there are various examples of formidable, perhaps parabolic figures that ultimately find a type of end. There's a section called "The Old Man and the Beasts" in which the old man, in a very literal sense, must overpower a bull and direct it towards his cowshed. The novel often returns to readings about Cú Chulainn, the mighty figure found in ancient Irish literature, including the heroic end he meets. However, more significant than all of this, is the suggestion that the old man, and those like him, are finding it more difficult to have a place in the modern world.

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

I think that one of the biggest questions that *The Beasts They Turned Away* deliberates on is the cost of love, and to what extent are we willing to hang onto that love when it takes something from us. The child is hard on the old man, to say the least. I don't think I'm giving anything away by pointing out that the book has allegorical elements, and in that way I think the question is one way to approach the debate between small and large agriculture. The reasons to support smaller farming are not always empirical (although sometimes they are), and as a society it's worth asking ourselves what we're giving up to produce cheap food.

4. Did you decide on a specific style of writing for this book, and if so, why?

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What are you trying to convey through your style? Was the structure and layout of the book an important consideration? If so, why?

I find myself often saying the same thing when talking about this book, and that is: If it is possible, form should reflect content. The reader will quickly notice that there are nonconventional storytelling techniques put into use for this story, including the prose style, section length, and, at times, an aversion to chronology. These authorial decisions were meant to reflect the experience of the old man, who is not only struggling with his place in modernity, but also in keeping his grasp on the world around him.

In *The Beasts They Turned Away* there is also a lot of depersonalisation. Some of the central characters are not given a name, and for others it is seldom used. Many of the townspeople appear in one scene and then not again. One reviewer noted that these choices added to the “eerie haziness” of the book. Again, I wanted the storytelling to be filtered through the old man’s understanding of the world he lives in.

5. 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?

For the old man himself, I think one of the most crucial moments occurs in the section titled “The Storm.” The old man has carried the choice of being a farmer for a long time and he “wants it taken off him.” However, the manner in which he is relieved from this burden is paramount to him, as he doesn’t want to lose his farm to someone else nor be proven not strong enough to carry on. For this reason, being taken away in the storm seems like his perfect end. In fact, not only did he expect it to be the way in which he dies, but so did I as the author. When that didn’t happen, both of us had to face the fact that sometimes the endings waiting for us are more complex.

A scene that is particularly close to me in writing *The Beasts They Turned Away* is the section titled “The Headlands.” For over fifteen years I carried around a similar event in my mind, and I wasn’t sure why. When it came to write this book, I started with the image of a large dog intent on attacking a child in an open field. I began to interrogate this scene that wouldn’t go away, asking why the dog would do that and who was the old man that was trying to prevent it

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

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Both the setting and the time period of the book are left purposefully undefined. Various reviews and readers made assumptions of where the old man's farm was located. However, while obviously taking place in Ireland, I wanted it to be the type of story that could be picked up and transposed over different geographies on the island. Similarly, while a few references help bookend the potential time period of the novel, I meant it to be without an exact date. In this way, I hope the concerns of the book would be seen as more universal.

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

I would like to be at the festival that occurs in the novel, as I would expect to meet the kind of interesting and insightful people that I could listen to all day.

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

I think to really understand the consequences of a shifting rural landscape one has to see it through the eyes of someone who has been affected by those changes. Many readers have said that they know someone like the old man. While the old man does not seek to be understood, nor has interest in being liked, I think that readers' ability to empathize with him is a good sign. Also, while it is a dark book, I hope that the reader can still decipher a happy conclusion to it. To me, the old man got the best ending that was available to him.

9. As an author you are very close to your characters. Reflecting back on the book, which of your characters would you like to meet in real life and why?

Like the townspeople, I would be made a bit nervous by the child, so let's not consider him. Other than the old man, I think I would want to have a pint with the priest. He strikes me as a man who has gathered many stories by this point, and more than that, might even have an understanding of the world that would be interesting to consider.

10. How does this novel differ from other novels set on farms? In what ways might it be in dialogue with those stories?

It's not hard to argue that most "farm novels" written in the English language in the last century have used the pastoral, often presenting the farm as a

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“green space” in which to escape the city. If that was ever true, it certainly isn't now. Instead, trying to keep a small farm alive in modern times can often be a desperate act. For that reason, I think the gothic is the most appropriate form with which to explore agriculture and the people who take it on. In the context of Irish farming, I think writers like John McGahern and Eugene McCabe would write about it differently if they were alive and addressing it today.

Additional questions your book club may wish to consider:

- In what ways is “the mythical” invoked in the book, and why might the author want to do that?
- Why does the natural world, including animals and the landscape, seem to be disrupted by the child?
- In ways are the priest and the old man similar?
- Ultimately, where do you think the child comes from?
- If this novel was instead written twenty years from now, how might it look different?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ryan is a former Fulbright Scholar in Creative Writing and has taught creative writing at several universities.

He has been published in various literary journals, particularly in the US, including The Cimarron Review, The Threepenny Review and Fusion.

In addition to completing a PhD in creative writing at the National University of Ireland, Galway, he is a syndicated columnist for agricultural journals around the world.