

# O'Donovan draws upon experience as a homicide investigator for novel series

By Derek Holtom

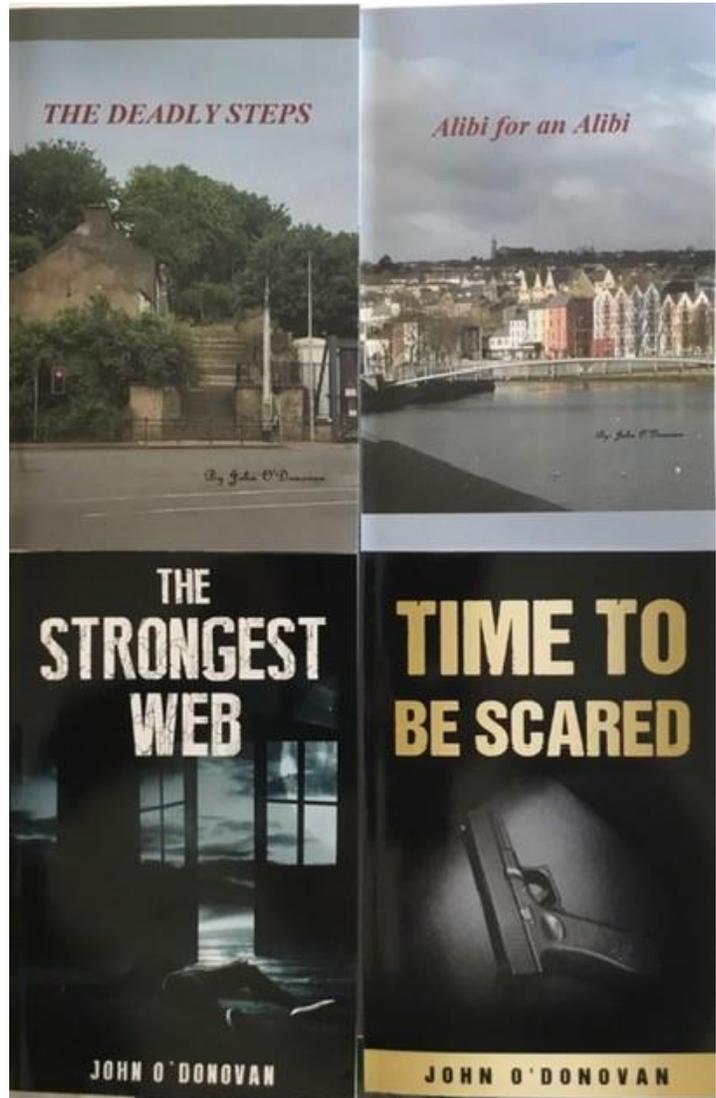
From Mickey Spillane's *Mike Hammer* to Agatha Christie's *Hercule Poirot* to Lee Child's *Jack Reacher*, the public has always seemed to have had a fascination with crime novels. Whether the protagonist is a gritty private detective, and keen-eyed police officer, or a muscular MP officer, readers love a good mystery, trying to figure out 'whodunit' or finding that key bit of evidence to bring down the bad guy one page at a time.

One of the newest additions to the genre is the Detective Inspector John Cahill series of books. The fourth novel in the series, *Time To Be Scared*, is out now. Set in Northern Ireland, the series nonetheless has a distinct Winnipeg flavour. The author is now retired and well respected former Winnipeg Police Service Sergeant John O'Donovan. His latest offering is self-described as "A 320-page Police Procedural set in Ireland and based on true events. The investigative techniques described in this book are authentic and mirror the ebb and flow of a real police investigation."

So, just what is it about true-crime novels that the public can't seem to get enough of?

"I'm not sure what it is, I mean it's usually the worst day of somebody's life - not just a victim of the homicide, but also the family and the friends," says O'Donovan. "But you know it's a lot like a car crash. People just eat it up, and they just want to find out what it's about.

"My books are not your traditional mystery. They're more procedural, you know? A lot of the time, you know who's done the killing. So how do the police find out?" he added. "Everything I write about has



*John O'Donovan now has four novels completed – and a fifth one is in the works.*

been disclosed numerous times in court, so there are no secrets being given away. It's just not out there in paper form for people to say, 'Oh, so that's interesting how they used a wiretap or how they got him to talk.'."

O'Donovan enjoyed an extremely successful career with the Winnipeg Police, investigating such high profile cases as the Keystone Air plane crash on McPhillips Street, the murder of Kevin Tokarchuk, and the death of Brian Sinclair (that and more covered by John Burchill and available to read elsewhere on the Winnipeg Police Museum website). As his career wound down, and with such a wide-ranging career to draw from, perhaps it's only natural that O'Donovan got the idea of putting pen to paper, so to speak.

"I got the writing bug, probably about three or four years before I retired, and it was something that I was thinking about doing, and I just never had the time," says O'Donovan. "I was working in homicide at the time and didn't have the time to do it.

"But you know, I had all these great stories and great people I was working with, and we accomplishing so much," he added. "Just thought that it would be me to write some of the stories and get it out there - even though it's written as a novel."

**A**vailable online and also in book stores (the Winnipeg Police Museum also has copies for sale), they don't have to be read in order, say, like the Harry Potter novels. But there are definitely ties which bind all of O'Donovan's writings together.

"Well, they're all stand-alone stories, but I do give an introduction at the beginning of each one in case it's your first time reading one of them," says O'Donovan "A lot of people have read them from number one up to number four, and number five is being worked on right now.

"But you could pick one up and it would be, you know, just a new book," he added. "But if you were to read them from the one, two, three, four, and five, and so, uh, you would notice that a lot of the characters are the same."

O'Donovan also opted to set the stories in the country of his birth, rather than where he worked as a police officer. It was a conscious choice that freed him up to be a bit more creative with his characters and settings, while also placing the stories in a location he knows extremely well.



*John O'Donovan has turned a lifetime of policing experiences into a series of novels "based on true events."*

“Yeah, with the police ranking structure, I chose to set the stories where I’m from (Ireland),” notes O’Donovan. “I’m very familiar with the city where the books are set in the city of Cork. That’s where I grew up. And so I use the rank of the Police Service there.

“The protagonist ended up joining the police at a later age of 33, which is pretty much my history as well, and he ended up joining the police in Northern Ireland because he was too old to join in the Republic of Ireland,” he added. “So the books just follow him through from the mid ’90s up to around 2020.”

**S**ome of his biggest fans are his former colleagues in the WPS – people who have the same shared experiences and perspective. And while the books are written for the larger audience, those who know his world of policing have high praise for his work.

“The feedback has been really good from people that I very much respect, especially people that I’ve worked with over the years,” said O’Donovan. “Some people have said they couldn’t put them down, and they had to stay up and finish the book.”

“And other people read them on holidays sitting on a deck somewhere or a dock - one person even sent me a picture, and they were reading it on the beach in Portugal.”

O’Donovan’s writing is a passion project, not one driven by dollars and cents. And the public is the beneficiary for his blend of real-life experiences and creative license coming together.

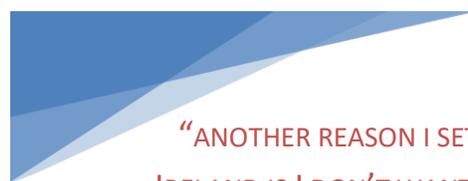
“They’re all self-published - we’re not getting rich out of these things, but it’s a hobby,” he said, “And that’s how I look at it. It keeps me busy, especially in the winter, where you know, we get a lot of rain or a lot of snow depending on where we are.

“We distribute them through a company in the United States, and they handle all the layouts for me as well,” he added. “So, I basically give them a Word document and they turn it into a book.”

He adds a friend of his who is a retired English teacher handles the editing duties.

“We have a good little team going, so it works well,” he said. “It takes a bit of courage to put your words out there. It’s not easy when you’re trying to write a novel and you’re aiming for 80,000 to 90,000 words. And if you don’t have that word count, you got a skinny little book that nobody’s ever going to look at.”

O’Donovan also notes while the stories he writes are inspired by real events he lived himself, his stories remain works of fiction.



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John O’Donovan

“I’m diving back into my own experiences and the characters in the book are built around numerous different characters that I’ve worked with over the years,” he said. “But I would say one character in the book is not one character in real life, but it might be four different people, an amalgamation.

“And another reason that I set these books in Ireland is I don’t want to re-victimize people either.”

Though now retired and living in the more temperate climate of British Columbia, O’Donovan still has strong ties that bring him back to the Winnipeg area several times a year.

“I’m in Winnipeg probably four times five times a year, probably four times a year. I have a son and daughter still there, and a couple of grandchildren still there. So we go back and forth quite a bit,” he said. “Occasionally we’ll meet up with somebody else, or I’ll try to meet up with John Burchill almost every time I get back.”

For more information on *Time To Be Scared* and O’Donovan’s other works, visit <https://shorturl.at/U5YYn> or stop by the Winnipeg Police Museum.

*(Special thanks to John Burchill for his previous feature on John O’Donovan)*