RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Priest

KEN BRUEN


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Acclaim for *Priest*

‘Grim and elegiac by turns, Bruen is a distinctive talent who has integrated his inner fury and American noir influences to establish a powerful, original and controversial presence’
Guardian

‘Bruen writes tight, urgent, powerful prose, his dialogue is harsh and authentic and Jack Taylor has become one of today’s most interesting shamuses’
The Times

‘Ken Bruen’s novel takes us down some dark and mysterious roads where Irish angst meets 21st-century reality in a gripping story of guilt and redemption’
Independent on Sunday

‘Tightly structured, compelling . . . You don’t want to meet Jack Taylor in person, ever, but if you’re a big crime fan, you do want to read every book he features in’
Irish Times

‘Ken Bruen is finally getting his due . . . *Priest* is grimy, brooding, pawkily funny and wholly original. Great’
Observer

‘Priest has all the hallmarks of Ken Bruen’s writing; its narrative style is crisp and minimalist, its social commentary addresses aspects of modern Ireland . . . And its portrait of a broken, defensive, sensitive and compellingly human Jack Taylor is superbly captured’
The Irish Book Review

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For more information on Ken Bruen and his books, see his website at www.kenbruen.com

KEN
BRUEN

Priest

CORGI BOOKS

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For
Duane and Meredith Swierczynski, the
soul of Philadelphia,
and Tom and Des Kenny, the heart of the tribes.

An Sagart

. . . Priest

Those Blessed Hands
Anointed with the oil
Of final healing
The mystery of faith
Through decades now
Of pious full belief
Believed in you
Your fingers touching flesh
Of innocents
Who put their trust
In words no longer meaning anything but
    rape
And sodomizing
Sermonizing
Far beyond the Mount
Of any kind of ritual
You preyed upon
The bodies of the yet
Unformed
To desecrate
The temples of the barely grown
A predator in piety
Defiler from
The cross
To the very flock

You tended
Unholy is the writ
You‘ve
Handed us in
Dust
The first initial of your name
Invokes the title of vocation
Torn in sacred text
Red blast across your mouth
To vomit
P . . . paedo—

1

‘What’s wasted
isn’t always
the worst
that’s left behind.’

KB

What I remember most about the mental hospital

The madhouse

The loony bin

The home for the bewildered

is a black man may have saved my life.

In Ireland? . . . A black saves your life, I how likely is that? Sign of the New Ireland and perhaps, just perhaps, indication of the death of the old Jack Taylor. As I'd been for five months, slumped in a chair, a rug over my knees, staring at the wall. Awaiting my medication, dead but for the formalities.

Gone but to wash me.

The black man leaned over me, tapped my head gently, asked,

'Yo bro, anybody in there?'

I didn't answer, as I hadn't answered for the last months. He put his hand on my shoulder, whispered,

'Nelson be in Galway this day, mon.'

Mon!

My mouth was dry, always, from the heavy dosage. I croaked,

'Nelson who?'

He gave me a look, as if I was worse than he'd thought, answered,

'Mandela, mon.'

I struggled to lift my mind from the pit of snakes I knew were waiting, tried,

‘Why should . . . I . . . give a shit?’

He lifted his T-shirt – it had the Cameroon team on it – and I recoiled, the first stab of reality, a reality I was fleeing. His chest was raw, ugly, with the angry welts of skin grafts. White, yes, white lacerations laced his torso. I gasped, making human contact in spite of myself. He smiled, said,

‘They was going to deport me, mon, so I set my own self on fire.’

He reached in his jeans, got out a ten-pack of Blue Silk Cut and a lighter, put a cig between my lips, fired me up, said,

‘Now you be smoking too, bro.’

Bro.

That reached in and touched me deeply. Began the process of coming back. He touched my shoulder, went,

‘You stay with me, mon, hear?’

I heard.

The tea trolley came and he got two cups, said,

‘I put in de heavy sugar, get you cranking, fire your mojo.’

I wrapped my hands round the cup, felt the dull warmth, risked a sip. It was good, sweet but comforting. He was eyeing me closely, asked,

‘You coming, bro? You coming on out of there?’

The nicotine was racing in my blood. I asked,

‘Why? Why should I?’

A huge smile, his teeth impossibly white against the black skin. He said,

‘Mon, you be sitting there, dat a slow burn.’

So it started.

I even went to the hospital library. It was tended by a man in his late sixties, wearing black pants and black sweatshirt. At first I thought the shirt had a white collar but to my horror saw it was dandruff. He had a clerical air, an

expression of gravitas, as if he'd read the manual on librarians and went for the image. It was the one area in the whole place that was quiet, you couldn't hear the quiet anguish so evident in the other rooms.

I thought he was a priest and he stared at me, said,

'You think I'm a priest.'

He had a Dublin accent, which always has that tone of aggression, as if they can't be bothered with culchies (country yokels) and are prepared to battle with any peasant who challenges them. A question to a Dublin person is always interpreted as a challenge. I still wasn't used to speaking. You are silent for months, listening only to white noise, you have to struggle to actually make words. I wasn't intimidated, though, after what I'd endured, I wasn't about to allow some gobshite to bully me. Snapped,

'Hey, I didn't give you a whole lot of thought, fella.'

Let some Galway edge in there. What I wanted to say was, *Jeez, get some anti-dandruff shampoo*, but let it slide. He gave a cackle, like some muted banshee, said,

'I'm a paranoid schizophrenic, but don't worry, I'm taking my meds so you should be reasonably safe.'

The *reasonably* was a word to watch. He looked at his wrist, which was bare, and said,

'Is it that time already? Got to go get my caffeine fix. Don't steal anything – I'll know, I've counted the books twice.'

Stealing a book was truly the last thing on my mind, but if a Dubliner threatens you? The books were a mix of Agatha Christie, Condensed Reader's Digests, Sidney Sheldon and three Jackie Collins. A very old volume stood on its lonesome, like a boy who hasn't been selected for the team. I picked it up. Pascal, *Pensées*.

Stole that.

Didn't think I'd ever open it.

I was wrong.

I refused further medication, began to move around, my old limp hurting from the months of inactivity. I felt my eyes retreat from the nine-yard stare, move away from the dead place. After a few days, I was summoned to the psychiatrist's office, a woman in her late fifties named Joan Murray. She was heavily built but able to carry it, her hands were raw boned. A Claddagh ring on her wedding finger, heart turned in. She said,

'You've astounded me, Jack.'

I managed a tight smile, the one you attain when you first don the uniform of the Guards. It has no relation to humour or warmth but is connected to hostility. She leaned back, flexed her fingers, continued,

'We don't see many miracles here. Don't quote me, but this is where miracles die. In all my years, I've never witnessed a restoration like yours. What happened?'

I didn't want to share the truth, afraid if I articulated it, it might revert. Said,

'They told me David Beckham was sold.'

She laughed out loud, said,

'That would do it. I've contacted Ban Garda Ni Iomaire – she brought you here, has stayed in touch about your condition.'

Ni Iomaire. Or Ridge, to use the English form. Daughter of an old friend, we'd been unwilling allies on a number of cases. Our relationship was barbed, angry, confrontational but inexplicably lasting. Like marriage. We fought like trapped rats, always biting and snarling at each other. How to explain the dynamics or disfunction of our alliance? Perhaps her uncle, Brendan Smith, had something to do with it. He'd been my sometimes friend, definite source of information and one-time Guard. His suicide had rocked us both. Against her inclinations, she'd become the source now. I'd helped her look good to her superiors, and maybe

my being in her life kept his spirit alive. She was a loner too, isolated by her sexual orientation and on the edge. Lacking others, we clung to each other, not the partnership either of us wanted. Or what the hell, could be we were both so odd, so different that no one else would suffer us.

The doctor asked,

'Do you remember how you got here?'

I shook my head, asked,

'Can I have a cigarette?'

She stood, moved to a cabinet, got a heavy key chain and opened it. You want to know the soundtrack of an asylum, it's the sound of keys. That and a low-toned moaning of the human spirit in meltdown, punctuated with the sighs of the lost. She took out a pack of B 'n' H, got the cellophane off, asked,

'These OK?'

I'd a choice? Said,

'They make you cough.'

And she laughed again. Took her a time to locate matches but she finally got me going, said,

'You're an alcoholic, Jack, and have been here before.'

I didn't answer.

What is there to say? She nodded as if that was affirmation enough, continued,

'But you didn't drink this time. Surprised? According to Garda Ni lomaire, you'd been sober for some time. After the child's death …'

I bit down on the filter, froze her words.

After the child's death.

I could see the scene in all its awful clarity. I was supposed to be minding Serena May, the Down Syndrome child of my friends Jeff and Cathy. That child, the only real value in my life. We'd become close; the little girl loved me to read to her. It was a sweltering hot day, I'd opened the window of the second-floor room we were in. I'd been brutalized by a recent case and my focus was all over the

place. The child went out the window. Just a tiny cry and she was gone. My mind just shut down after that.

I looked across the desk. She added,

‘You were going into pubs, ordering shots of whiskey, pints of Guinness, arranging them neatly and simply staring at the glasses.’

She paused, to let the fact that I hadn’t actually drank sink in, then,

‘Your Ban Garda brought you here.’

She waited, so I said,

‘Fierce waste of drink.’

No laughter, not even a smile. She asked,

‘What is the nature of your . . . friendship? With her.’

I nearly laughed, wanted to say *confron-fucking-tational*. But not an easy word to get your tongue round. When I said nothing, she said,

‘You’re leaving us tomorrow. Garda Ni Iomaire is coming to collect you. Do you feel you’re ready to leave?’

Did I?

I stubbed out the cigarette in a brass ashtray. It had a hurler in the centre, the words

G.A.A. ANNUAL CONVENTION.

I said,

‘I’m ready.’

She gauged me, then,

‘I’m going to give you my phone number and a prescription for some mild tranquillizers, to help you through the first few days. Don’t underestimate the difficulty of returning to the world.’

‘I won’t.’

She fiddled with her ring, said,

‘You should attend AA.’

‘Right.’

‘And stay out of pubs.’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’
A small smile. She stood, reached out her hand, said,
‘Good luck, Jack.’
I took her hand, said,
‘Thank you.’
I was at the door when she added,
‘I’m a Liverpool supporter.’
I nearly smiled.

That evening, I had my first real meal with the general population. The atmosphere in the canteen was muted, almost religious. Long tables with near a hundred patients gathered. The joys of medication. I got a plate of sausages, mashed spuds and black pudding. I could taste the food, nearly enjoy it, till the TV was turned on. It stood above the room, attached to steel girders, locked down. What? Someone was going to steal it? The opening ceremony of Ireland’s hosting of the Special Olympics. A wave of dizziness hit as the face of a special-needs child filled the screen. The reason I was here. Moving back from the table, I stood up. A woman with tangled black hair, nails bitten till blood had come, asked,

‘Can I have your grub?’

Palpitations in my chest. A line of sweat coursed down my back, drenching my shirt. Serena May, the only light in an increasingly darkening life.

Dead.

Three years of age and gone because I lost my grip, wasn’t paying attention. As I bolted from the refectory, a patient shouted,

‘Yo, chow down.’

In my terror, I thought he said, ‘Child down.’

Next morning I was packed, ready to leave. My holdall held trousers, one shirt and rosary beads.

The Irish survival kit.

Oh, and Pascal.

I went to find the black man, thank him for his help. I'd a pack of twenty cigs to give him. The doctor had included them with my tranquillizers. The black man was standing in the day room, staring at a newspaper. I mean staring as opposed to reading because the paper was upside-down. I'd learned his name was Solomon, went,

'Solomon.'

No reply.

I hunkered down, tried again. He had slid down along the wall. Slowly, his eyes reached up and he asked,

'I know you?'

'Yes, you pulled me back, remember?'

I offered the cigs and he gave me a petulant look, said,

'Don't smoke, boss.'

I wanted to touch his hand, but he suddenly emitted a piercing scream, then said,

'Fuck off, whitey.'

Later, months on, I rang the hospital to ask if maybe I might visit him, was told his deportation orders came through – the government was deporting eighty non-nationals a day. Using two wet sheets, freshly starched that morning, he hung himself in the laundry.

The new Ireland.

2

‘Respect means, “Put yourself out.”’

Pascal, *Pensées*, 317

1953. The rectory of a Catholic church in Galway.

The priest was removing his vestments, the altar boy assisting him. The priest lifted the glass of wine, said,

‘Try this, you’ve been a good boy.’

The boy, seven years old, was afraid to refuse. It tasted sweet but put a warm glow in his stomach.

His bum hurt and the priest had given him half a crown. Later, leaving the church, the priest whispered,

‘Remember now, it’s our little secret.’

The nun was gathering up the song sheets. She loved this time of the morning, the sun streaming through the stained glass. Her habit felt heavy but she offered it for the souls in Purgatory. She found a ten-euro note in the end pew, was tempted to pocket it, buy a feast of ice cream. But blessing herself, she shoved it in the poor box. It slid in easily as the box was empty – who gave alms any more?

She noticed the door to the confessional ajar. Tut-tutting, she felt a tremor of annoyance. Father Joyce would have a fit if he saw that. He was a holy terror for order, ran the church like an army, God’s army. Moving quickly, she gently pulled the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Getting seriously irritated, she scuttled round to the other door and peered through the grille. Her scream could be heard all the way to Eyre Square.

Father Joyce’s severed head was placed on the floor of the confessional.

The land of saints and scholars was long gone. In an era of fading prosperity, the mugging of priests, rape of nuns was no longer a national horror. It was on the increase. The deluge of scandal enveloping the Church had caused the people to lose faith in the one institution that had seemed invulnerable.

But the decapitation of Father Joyce brought a gasp from the most hardened cynics. The *Irish Times* editorial began with,

'We have been plunged into darkness.'

A leading Dublin drug lord offered a bounty for the capture of the killer. The Taoiseach gave a press conference asking for calm and understanding.

As if . . .

Ridge arrived in a yellow Datsun. Seeing my expression, she went,

'What?'

And we were back to our usual antagonistic relationship. The rare moments of warmth between us could be counted on the fingers of one hand, yet we continued to be joined together, our fates inexplicably bound despite our personal feelings. I smiled, wondering what had happened to basic civility, to a simple *How you doing?* gig. I said,

'The car . . . is it new?'

She was wearing tiny pearl earrings, a feature of Ban Gardai. Her face up close was plain but the vivacity of her eyes lent an allure. As usual, she was dressed a step above trailer trash, a small step. Penny's most loyal customer. White cotton jeans and a red T-shirt, the number 7 above the left breast. I wondered briefly if it was a sign, a sign to back one number in the lottery. Usually you got 5:1 on a single number. Dismissed it – superstition, the curse of my race.

You will never, and I mean *never*, catch an Irish person walking under a ladder or not crossing their fingers during a hurling match. Doesn't matter what you believe, it's as genetic, as casual as the use of the Lord's name. Sure it's bollocks but it's inevitable. She was instantly angry, shot back,

'Is that a dig?'

Meaning her sexual orientation. She was gay. I sighed, put my holdall on my shoulder, said,

'Fuck it, I'll hitch.'

'Don't you curse at me, Jack Taylor. Now get in the car.'

I did.

We drove in silence for almost ten minutes. She ground through the gear changes with ferocity, then,

'I've been wondering . . . After the . . . events . . . am, you went to the pub . . . ?'

She paused as she let a trailer enter a side road, continued,

'But you didn't actually drink?'

I checked my seatbelt, asked,

'So, what's your point?'

'Well, terrible things had happened, you'd ordered all those drinks . . . why didn't you actually lift a glass?'

I stared at the windscreen, took my time, then,

'I don't know.'

And I didn't.

If the answer satisfied her, the expression on her face wasn't reflecting it. Then,

'That means you're a success.'

'What?'

'You didn't drink. You're an alcoholic – not drinking makes you a success.'

I was flabbergasted, couldn't credit what she said.

'Bollocks.'

She glared through the windscreen, said,

‘I told you, don’t use that language. In AA they say if you don’t pick up a drink, you’re a winner.’

I let that simmer, hang over us a bit, noticed she had a St Bridget’s Cross on the dash, asked,

‘You’re in AA?’

I’d never seen her really drink. Usually she had an orange, and one memorable time, a wine spritzer, whatever the hell that is. Course, I’d known nuns who turned out to be alcoholics and they were in enclosed orders!! Proving that, whatever else, alcoholics have some tenacity.

Her mouth turned down, a very bad sign, and she scoffed,

‘I don’t believe you, Jack Taylor, you are the densest man I ever met. No, I’m not in AA . . . do you know anything?’

I lit a cig, despite the huge decal on the dash proclaiming,

DONT SMOKE

Not,

Please refrain from smoking.

An out-and-out command.

In response, she opened the windows, letting a force nine blow in, turned on the air and froze us instantly. I smoked on, whined,

‘I’ve been in hospital. Cut me some bloody slack,’ then chucked the cig out the window.

She didn’t close them, said,

‘My mother is in AA . . . and you already know my uncle had the disease . . . It has decimated generations of us. Still does.’

I was surprised, understood her a little more. Children of alcoholics grow up fast – fast and angry.

Not that they have a whole lot of choice.

We were coming into Oranmore and she asked,

‘Want some coffee?’

‘Yeah, that’d be good.’

If I thought she was softening, I was soon corrected as she said,

‘You buy your own.’

Irish women, nine ways to Sunday, they’ll bust your balls. She headed for the big pub on the corner, which I thought was a bit rich in light of our conversation. The lounge was spacious and posters on the walls advertised coming attractions:

Micky Joe Harte

The Wolfe Tones

Abba tribute band.

I shuddered.

We took a table at the window, sunlight full on in our faces. A black ashtray proclaimed,

Craven A.

How old is that?

A heavy man in his sixties approached, breezed,

‘Good morning to ye.’

Ridge gave him a tight smile and I nodded. She said,

‘Do you have herbal tea?’

I wanted to hide. The man gave her a full look . . . like . . . was she serious, playing with a full deck?

‘We have Liptons.’

‘Decaffeinated?’

The poor bastard glanced at me. I had no help to offer. He sighed, said,

‘I could give it a good squeeze – the tea bag, that is.’

Ridge didn’t smile, went,

‘I’d like it in a glass, slice of lemon.’

I said,

‘I’ll have a coffee, caffeinated, in a cup . . . please.’

He gave a large grin, ambled off. Ridge was suspicious, asked,

‘What was that about?’

I decided to simply annoy her, said,

‘It’s a guy thing.’

She raised her eyes, went,

‘Isn’t everything?’

As is usual for Irish pubs, sentries sat at the counter – men in their sixties with worn caps, worn eyes, nursing half-empty pints. They rarely talked to each other and began their vigil right after opening time. I’d never asked what they were waiting for, lest they told me. If the sentries ever depart, like the monkeys on Gibraltar, the pubs will fold. The radio was on and we heard of a massive Garda drug sting in Dublin. For months they’d been scoring from dealers, now it was round-up time. There had been a public outcry when a TV camera filmed dealers selling openly on the streets and it was like a kasbah in Temple Bar. A junkie shooting up in front of a uniformed Guard. Crack cocaine was being sold widely. I said,

‘Jeez, when crack arrives, the country is gone.’ Some irony for a nation that had given the word *crack* to the world – we now had crack of a whole more sinister hue.

She seemed not to have heard, then,

‘Galway is as bad.’

‘As if I didn’t know.’

She was fiddling with a silver ring on her right hand, appeared nervous, asked,

‘Did you hear about the priest?’

The question hung there, like an omen.

Like a sign of the times.

Ireland is a land of questions and very, very few answers. We’re notorious for replying to a direct question with a question. It’s like an inbred caution: never commit yourself.