

NO ALIBIS

On Botanic Avenue there is a small, unassuming shop that is the front for a den of murderers, thieves and crooked policemen. There is no crime so dark, so foul, that it will not be accepted there. Some of the criminals are foreign, imported from Japan or America, while others are home-grown.

The only requirement for entry?

That they tell a cracking good tale.

No Alibis is a small, jewel of a shop on Botanic Avenue. The outside is a mosaic of brilliant blue tiles. I've passed by it often. I studied at Queen's and worked in the area for years. It always reminded me of Death Valley in Nevada. The sky there is the same glazed, turquoise colour. On a dull day, which we get in Belfast more often than not, it is bright and inviting. On a sunny day it glitters.

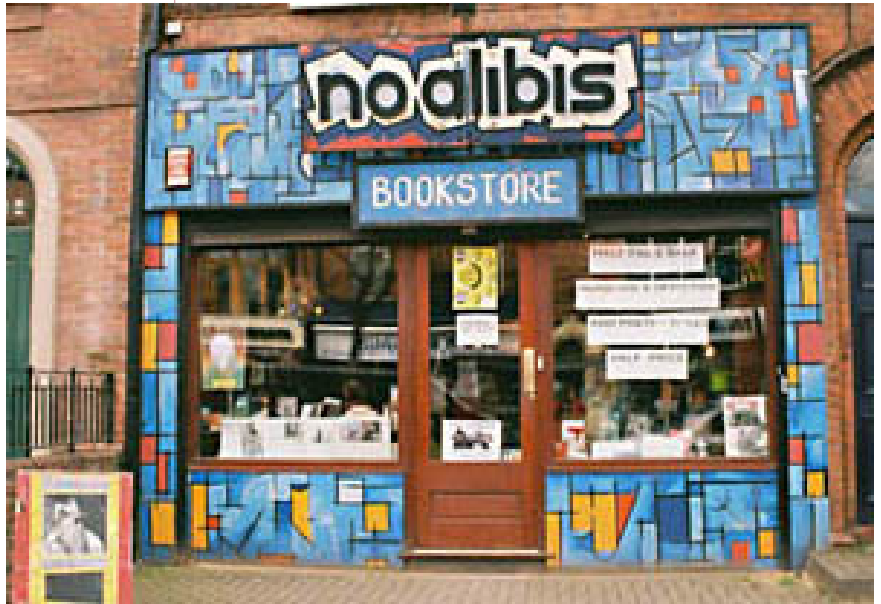
On average, I pass by there at least once a week. Usually, unless I am in a hurry, I pop in just to have a look at what is new.

Inside, the shop is like a library. The noise of the street is muted, the walls are cluttered with books and there are wooden chairs with green velvet cushions to sit on. Whoever is behind the register, frequently the owner, David Torrence, will acknowledge you with a smile and a nod. Behind him Colombo twinkles at you from a mural on the wall. (Okay, so they aren't all villains here.) They let you look around first, before asking if they can help.

It is well organized but doesn't look it. Unlike Waterstones or Easons the books are not regimented on the shelves in blocks of all the one size. They look more like my bookshelves at home. Hardbacks lying on their sides, a few of the larger paperbacks stacked on top of them, while the other books are tucked in to make the most of the space. There are no blank spaces on the shelves. It's a warm, comforting shop. One that you feel you could spend all day looking around.

The books are mostly mysteries, although there are academic and children's books too. Despite their dark subject matter – the mysteries I mean, not the children's books – many of the books are bright and cheerful looking. The covers are all bright and primary coloured. The titles are quirky and clever and, occasionally, odd enough to make you pick it up just to find out what it could be about.

Today, I'm not here to buy books. Although I do have my eye on the new Jeff Lindsey novel, *Dearly Devoted Dexter* which has been imported from America. That, however, can wait till I'm leaving. I'm here to talk to David Torrence, owner of No Alibis.



He's busy when I come in so I do spend a few minutes wandering the store. I wanted to see if he had Stephen King's pulp novel *The Colorado Kid* but I was distracted by *The Pillow Book of Lady Wisteria*, by Laura Joh Rowland. It is intriguing and David is free before I can resume my search for *The Colorado Kid*. Perhaps another day.

David is a soft-spoken, pleasant man with a palpable love for both books and bookshops. We sit down in a small alcove at the back of the shop. We are surrounded by books and framed prints that look like they wouldn't be out of place on one of the books that David sells. I am particularly taken with the picture of the coffee cup and lipstick stained cigarette. All it needs is a title – *The Coffee Moll? Lipstick Confessions?* Catchy titles, I fear, are not my strength.

'Nine years,' David tells me when I ask how long No Alibis has been open. He looks around the shop. 'It was much smaller then. About a third of what it is now.'

I ask what made him want to open the shop. He smiles.

'My first job after I left University was in a bookshop. My first week there, I thought to myself, 'I could do this for the rest of my life.' I worked there for seven years and then I decided it was about time I opened my own shop.

No Alibis.

The phone rings then. His assistant has left and David has to take the call. He ducks away. I doodle down a few notes about the style of the shop and nod politely to the man who has come in to browse. He glances at me curiously – I'm taking notes, remember, and have a giant camera bag at my feet – and says 'G'day.' He wanders around and then leaves.

David comes back. I ask why he wanted to sell



mysteries, was he a fan?

'Yes... no. I liked reading mysteries but I like reading everything,' he explained. 'Crime, fantasy, biographies. I will read anything I can get my hands on. It was a

commercial decision to sell mysteries. If you are going to open an independent bookshop, especially one that sells new books, you need to have a specialist area.'

Nine years, an expansion and another bookshop later it was clearly the right choice.

David laughs and agrees, remembering that when they opened he had looked around and thought 'How am I going to sell all these books?'

Success, however, required some tweaking of the original concept of the store. The alcove we are sitting in, for example, contains some children's book. Soon, the delivery had just arrived, it would be given over entirely to children's book. They are a very a popular seller.

Remembering a phase in my childhood when my reading list consisted entirely of the stories of plucky girl detectives – occasionally with horse or pet companion – I asked whether it was planning to stick to the mystery genre here too. David laughed and said it was an idea, but no. That he hadn't wanted to limit this section.

There is also a large academic section for students and professors. It was this section of David's stock that led to him opening another bookshop in Jordanstown three years ago. Until then the University of Ulster had no on-campus bookstore. Many of the books they used actually came from No Alibis and were delivered directly to the tutors. Eventually the University approached him and asked if would consider opening a library there.

'It was a hard decision to make. There were a lot of painful negotiations,' David said. 'But we decided to go ahead with it. It's academic textbooks primarily, although there are a significant number of general books in the store too. They aren't specific, like here.'

So who, I ask, is your favourite author?

For the first time he looks like I've caught him flat-footed. He pulls the face. Any avid reader knows the face. They've pulled it themselves when someone asks them that question. Favourite author? How can you pick? The author who you've gone back to over and over? The author who wrote one amazing book but never wrote anything else much that you liked? It's impossible. Solomon had it easy compared to having to make that decision.

I rephrase quickly. Your favourite author, at the minute.

'Good question,' he said. Then he thinks about it, seriously. 'Jason Starr. He writes in the tradition of 1950s crime fiction. His work is very pared down with succinct, direct prose. Its literary writing cut down to the bone.'

He clearly knows his stock in trade well. I love

reading but it is plots and storylines I remember. It's not often an author becomes enough of a favourite that I remember them first.

I point this out and David shrugs and gestures at the shop.

'When you have a bookshop you have a responsibility to know about genres and authors, styles and topics,' he says. 'Besides, there is nothing more fun than someone coming in with a vague idea of what they like and you're being able to get them the perfect book.'

It's holiday-goers he enjoys best, the ones who come in and ask him to help them pick out books for their vacation. It gives him satisfaction to be able to find a book, or two or three, that is connected to their holiday in some way. The best, he remembers, was one man who came in and said he was going on holiday to Afghanistan. David was able to find him a book – Mogul Buffet by Cheryl Bernard – based there.

'I don't think he thought I could do it,' David said. 'But I did.'

It's the events though, that he says are the real joy for him. They are the perk of the job. Over the years he has hosted events with Alex Parker, John Connolly and Ruth Edwards among others. One of his biggest coups was when Laurence Block, the Grandmaster of the Crimewriters of America, came over for an event. Ian Rankin is also a frequent visitor.

Kath Stancliffe and Margaret Murphy are attending an event in June and there are more in the pipeline. He also hosts music events too, although that is more recent. On May 12 there was a folk and blues night with Siobhan Skates and James Devlin.

The phone rings again and another customer comes in. I wrap up the interview and take some pictures of the shop. I leave empty-handed, my plans to buy Dearly Devoted Dexter aside, after a traffic warden comes up and peers into the shop window. It reminds me that my ticket is about to expire and I have to leave.

I take one last shot of David at the till, the painting of Columbo peering quizzically over his shoulder, and hurry out. Dexter will have to wait till another day.

Tammy Moore

