

# Bathing in history to produce top-notch novels

BY BELINDA GOLDSMITH

**I**rish writer JOHN BOYNE set out to write contemporary novels, but his fascination with history kept taking him back in time to produce seven novels, including best-seller "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas."

Boyne's latest novel, "The House of Special Purpose," centres on Nicholas and Alexandra Romanov, the last royals of Russia, and the events that led to the collapse of autocracy.

Boyne, who was born in Ireland in 1971 and studied English literature and creative writing, spoke to REUTERS.

**"The House of Special Purpose" deals with the Romanovs. What got you writing about this time in history?**

A fascination with the Romanovs and the way it all ended so dramatically in a hail of fire. Russia is a fascinating country, and we know so little about it. When you are writing historical novels you spend a long time reading and researching. It has to be a place you want to know about yourself.

**Did you set out to write historical novels?**

No, it is something that I seem to have fallen into by chance. When



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I was younger I never imagined I would write seven books set in different times of history, but just because you are writing a book set in the past doesn't mean you can't write about contemporary themes.

I find, to my surprise, that I love the colour and the drama of the past, and reading and writing about it and trying to understand it and its effect on the present.

**How long does the research take?**

I read for about six months. I start with

fiction, to get into the style and voice of that time, and then with nonfiction. For this book I went to St Petersburg and I wrote a large portion of the novel there. The Winter Palace is open to the public, and I would go down every day with my laptop and sit in the corner of a room to try to get the ghosts of those times onto the pages."

**Did "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" change your life?**

Considerably. Before that book came out I had been published for a number

of years and been a writer since I was a teenager, but my books had not been successful in a commercial sense. All those years I had wanted to reach a readership and wanted to prove myself, and this gave me some authorization. So many readers were moved by it and had an emotional response to it, and it made me more ambitious.

**Are you now writing full-time?**

Yes, there is also the freedom that a book like that gives you, being able to devote yourself entirely to writing so that you can become a focused writer. I worked in a bookshop for seven years, when I used to write in the morning before going to work. About a year before "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" came out, I decided to go full-time as a writer as I needed to focus and take my chances. I moved out of Dublin to a small village on the coast of Ireland where it was cheaper to live."

**Are you back in Dublin now?**

Yes. I am a bit of a homebody.

**Did you like the film of "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas"?**

I liked it very much. They involved me all the way through, which I think is very unusual... The novel is from the boy's point of view and the movie

from the family's. I think that was a good idea, as an adoption cannot be literal.

**Writing about the Holocaust can be controversial. Have you had a lot of feedback?**

Sure. It is not a universally loved book. It seems to be a book that divides people, which I don't mind because a good book should make you think. I've had my share of aggressive letters, with most of the criticism focusing on historical inaccuracies. But in a work of fiction that is subtitled a fable I am not suggesting that specific events have taken place.

**What are you working on now?**

I'm working on a new children's book. It is sort of an old-fashioned fairy tale not set in any place or time but in a forest. It was a story, a funny idea that I had, and I thought it would make an interesting novel. We will see what happens.

**Any advice for aspiring writers?**

Join a writers' group. Writing classes give you an audience, and that is what you really need. You have to be strong going into them and listen, and take on board what people say. You have to be able to take criticism.

## Don't hire PR specialists yet we cannot uphold our image



RICKY'S MYTHS  
RICHARD GITONGA



**O**ver the past couple of months, my family has been planning for a holiday down at the coast and early this week the planning came to fruition when we hopped into our vehicle and drove down to our globally acclaimed tourist destination.

Having last driven down to Mombasa about four years ago, the improvement in the quality of the road was somewhat profound and very impressive. The standard of finish in some sections could stand up to comparison to those found in the first world.

Without a doubt, Kenyans who have over the years made it habitual to fly down to the coast due to the appalling state of the Mombasa highway may very well consider changing their mode of transport once again and enjoy the beautiful scenery and wide open spaces along the way. It may also be comparatively cheaper.

Unfortunately, not all things have changed. A brief stop-over at a restaurant that is located at the traditional "midway point" between Nairobi and

Mombasa was testament to the fact that we are still a few light years away from embracing first class standards across the board. After cruising for two and a half hours on a first class road, our expectations were high when we dropped into this midway pit stop.

As is customary, a visit to the washrooms was on the agenda and once inside, I was appalled to find them in a most deplorable and filthy state. To add insult to injury, a peek outside through the washroom window gave one a perfect view of the kitchen where chefs who looked more like mechanics were busy frying entrées.

Meanwhile, local customers in the restaurant seemed least bothered and immune to the environment they were eating in.

This scenario is somewhat analogous to our conflicting social-cultural nuances that send paradoxical messages to any keen observer. If it is not the well dressed businessman donned in the latest Italian suits, who can barely hold a fork and a knife, it is the corpo-



The effort that has gone into reconstructing Mombasa Road should also be directed towards improving hospitality centres along the way to boost Kenya's image. FILE

rate employee who drives the latest expensive SUV but stays in a modest neighbourhood. Or maybe it is the Corporate CEO who is providing leadership for a recognized brand but still has a strong preference for "nyama choma" every Friday at a stall at the popular Kenyatta Market. As we mull the intent to move into the first world, we are still strongly anchored in third world habits, mannerisms and preferences.

Despite the large investment that has gone into rehabilitating and modernising the Mombasa highway, it ob-

viously did not come to the attention of the officials behind the planning of the project that it may have been a great idea to facilitate the upgrading of all the hospitality centres along the road.

With all the publicly funded trips that local officials take to developed countries for "fact finding missions", one would have at least expected someone in the bureaucracy to point out that countries such as the US and others have developed a highway system that sustains itself to a large degree through Public-Private Partnerships.

What does this mean? In essence, it may have been a great idea for the planners of the project to invite suitable and qualified individuals and firms from the private sector to tender for provision of various services along the highway including restaurants, washrooms, shops and rest areas within well established standards.

This would ensure that any traveller, be it a Kenyan or a foreigner, would expect to get consistent and reliable service at every stop. Greater traveller satisfaction will result in greater profits for roadside entrepreneurs resulting in greater contributions toward the continuous upkeep and upgrade of the highway system.

It is therefore a somewhat pathetic gesture if not a contradiction of sorts for Kenya as a country to seek out and contract reputable international public relations firms to help repair Kenya's image problem. No amount of consultation from the outside will help sort out our fundamental internal problems which revolve around poor planning and execution.

If our public health enforcement system was working, there is absolutely no way the restaurant I walked into should have been operating at all with those kind of deplorable hygiene standards in the first place. It should have been shut down a long time ago.