



# Straight from the factory

Why Solzhenitsyn and dead chickens are great inspiration. By *Melissa McClements*

## INTERVIEW

Mark McNay

In 1986 Mark McNay got a job in a chicken factory. Within three months he'd been sacked (for "carrying on ringing the bell and flicking the Vs" on the workers' bus). Despite the brevity of the experience, however, it made a lasting impression. More than two decades later, he is now bringing out *Fresh*, his page-turning debut novel set in a chicken processing plant near Glasgow.

McNay, 41, grew up in the mining village of Twechar, East Dunbartonshire. But he hasn't lived in Scotland since the mid-1980s and resides in Norwich. He arrives by bike at a pub in the city centre to be interviewed about his fowl-inspired first foray into fiction. With unruly black curly hair, ginger sideburns and small glasses – which he claims to hope make him look "f—ing brainy" – he is a friendly and funny, if slightly shambolic, figure.

The new author does not hold back on the stomach-churning detail of mass meat production in his novel. But despite close acquaintance with the sores and cankers on the birds, McNay still happily eats chicken. In person he remains philosophical – and characteristically comedic – about his time amid the nuggets and drumsticks:

"Everyone should spend some time

working in a chicken factory. I would recommend it as a study of life. In fact it should be like national service – you should have to do it. It would make the rest of your life sparkle in comparison," he says in a broad west coast accent that hasn't been blunted by his years south of the border.

*Fresh* focuses on a pivotal day in the life of factory worker Sean O'Grady. It starts as usual, with early morning banter on the bus with his Uncle Albert and cousin Rab. But he then he learns his psychotic big brother, Archie, has been released early from prison. "The jammy c – got six months knocked off coz he agreed to come out on a tag," as the hard man's sidekick Sammy explains.

The problem is that Sean has spent most of the money he was meant to be safeguarding for his brutal elder sibling. Before Archie's train arrives from Edinburgh he somehow has to scrape the cash together while completing his shift hanging up bird carcasses on a production line.

But McNay's motivation was not primarily to write a fictionalised exposé of factory food production. He wanted to depict a difficult, working-class way of life that is not often found in literature: "I just thought about when I was young in the eighties and I couldn't get a job and how



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pleased I was to get the job at the chicken factory – and how p – that is,” he explains. “Sean is basically a decent guy, who’s living under difficult circumstances. He’s funny and interesting – not just this numpty who puts on his overalls for work every day.”

The novel is written in colourful Glaswegian colloquialisms (everyone is generally addressed as “big man”, “wee man”, “doll” or “ya stupid c—), and packed with expletives – which the author’s mother disproved of when she, albeit proudly, read it. Featuring urban deprivation, violence and drug use, the influence of certain other contemporary Scottish authors appear obvious. “The stories I was brought up with were English and there was part of me that thought ‘I canny do that’... then I read Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* and I thought, ‘I could write like this’. It was inspirational. It paved the way for me linguistically. But the biggest inspiration for me was *How Late* it was, *How Late* by James Kelman.”

But, like Welsh and Kelman, there is much more to McNay’s work than just stabbing and swearing. The one-day format of his novel, for example, was inspired by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. And the magic realist English novelist Angela Carter was the influence behind Sean’s intermittent fantasies – such as when he imagines he’s an emperor and his wife Maggie is his grape-providing concubine.

McNay’s own long and difficult route into writing is as good a story as *Fresh*. Describing himself as a former drop out, he spent years drifting through protracted periods of unemployment and temporary jobs. He mocks his younger self as “alienated” and a “troubled young man”. A trace of seriousness, however, seems to lurk beneath this self-derision. At one point he admits: “I found it hard to get to know people, to sustain relationships and to keep a job. I’d either leave or get the sack. I never felt like I fitted in. Even the fact I’ve kept my accent is a refusal to be assimilated. It’s part of my alienation narrative.”

The son of an electrician, McNay attended Kirkintilloch High School with his two younger brothers. He had vague

aspirations to become a writer – but never dreamt they could be realised. He wrote the odd bit of poetry, but says it was

“full of teenage angst, about some lassie dumping me”. He also wrote diaries, but burned them in the early 1990s because he didn’t want anyone finding out his

“mucky little secrets”.

After school he went on to Paisley College to study electronics. Much to his parents’ “disgust and shock” he failed the course and joined the mass of the unemployed. In 1984 he then decided to do what he calls “the Costa del Dole thing” – to move to the milder climate of southern England and sign on there. He spent time

in Folkstone and Brighton, where he hung out with “hippy travellers and smoked pot while listening to Patti Smith and the Velvet Underground”. He lived in B&Bs and even spent some time sleeping rough – something he obviously didn’t enjoy but maintains was “good experience”.

A year later parental concern brought him back home to try to settle down and find a job. He applied for a government-subsidised scheme for the unemployed to work on cleaning up the Forth and Clyde canal. The pay was £45 per week, but there were six applicants for each place. Neither Mark nor his brothers managed to secure one. Their father decided to relocate the family to Norwich, as he had heard there was ample work there. Mark got the job at the chicken factory shortly afterwards, but his bus capering soon put an end to it.

McNay then worked on building sites in Paris and London, lived on a kibbutz in Israel and worked as a window cleaner back in Norwich before coming to the conclusion in the late 1990s that, as he was “not unintelligent”, things had to change. He did a university access course and then studied English Literature at the University of East Anglia – graduating with a First in 2003. He went on to do the university’s prestigious creative writing MA – like Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro before him.

Writing is something he patently enjoys, but he remains self-effacing about his abilities: “Writing is like playing the guitar. You’ve

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got to keep practising it. What a lot of people think is that you just need talent. And, of course, you do need a bit of talent. But, at the same time, you need to work."

And, thanks to his advance for *Fresh* and an award he won in January, work at it he now most definitely does. He treats his writing like a "proper job". After an espresso and porridge ("... tell the Scots I still eat porridge" he says "they'll like that" ...) he sits down to his computer and types through the day. He has nearly finished his second novel, which concerns

a mental health social worker who has a relationship with a prostitute. If the promise of his debut is anything to go by, it should be an imaginative and lively read. ■

*Fresh* is published by Canongate, £10.99.

*Mark McNay will perform readings at HMP Glenochil and HMP Edinburgh during April in conjunction with the Scottish National Book Trust.*



**Nuggets of truth:** Mark McNay was sacked from his job in a chicken factory, but 20 years later it has inspired his fiery debut novel