



West Roxbury's Cullen delivers mystery with first novel

By **Reginald Zimmerman**

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West Roxbury —

“The Ranks of Jody Brae” is a new mystery novel set against the backdrop of 1964 Boston. The titular character, Jody Brae, is a Boston police detective tasked with investigating a series of building fires plaguing Roxbury.

What starts out as a routine investigation turns into “a spiraling journey of political corruption, brutal murder and personal vengeance in the dark streets of Boston’s underworld.”

The book’s author, Jonathan Michael Cullen, grew up in Boston. After graduating from Boston College in 1995 with a degree in English literature, Cullen taught in Ireland. He also lived in Mexico, worked as a prison librarian and spent time in Kenya.

The 39-year-old currently lives in West Roxbury with his wife, Heidi, and 2-year-old daughter, Maeve.

“The Ranks of Jody Brae” is Cullen’s first novel.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the book.

A: It takes place in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan, basically along Blue Hill Avenue in the early '60s. That area's always fascinated me. I thought “What a cool setting for a crime novel in Boston” — sort of this edgy no-man’s land. You still had this old Jewish community and you had a new black community moving in. There was racial tension, the area had been in decline for years, and it was kind of run-down.

I came with an idea: What if there was a rash of building fires in the city and it was an epidemic? I had actually heard this happened in the '60s. Landlords would burn down their buildings to collect the insurance money in areas that were undergoing change or deteriorating.

Q: Why did you choose the setting of Boston in the 1960s?

A: Recent Boston history is fascinating to me. I caught the tail end of busing. It was a real pivotal point in Boston history. It was a real ugly period in Boston history. That was the late '60s, but what was it like right before? The city had been in decline since right after World War II. There was a lot of crime and there was a lot of dilapidation in the city. I haven’t read much, fiction or nonfiction, that really talks about that era.

Q: What kind of research and how much research did you do for the novel?

A: I tried to stay vague on the historical stuff. I think I know the cultural history of the city, so I felt pretty grounded in that sense. Now when it came to things like street names and buildings, which actually exist, I cross-referenced them on Google (laughs). When I wrote the first draft I did everything from memory, even some of the street names I made up, and then I went back and I put the correct street names.

Q: Why write a mystery novel?

A: I think the cool thing about mystery is that it’s got to be plot-oriented. The crime has to be solved, or at least be discussed throughout the entire novel. In Boston in the last decade or so, there have been some fantastic mystery writers: Dennis Lehane, Robert Parker and Chuck Hogan. There’s sort of a history and heritage in Boston literature with this genre.

Q: What were some of your influences?

A: My literary influences really run the gamut. I read a lot of Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. I also was exposed to a lot 19th-century American and European literature. At BC, I studied Irish literature, so I spent a lot of time reading Yeats, Friel, Synge, James Joyce and John Banville. I read a lot of Graham Greene.

Q: How did you come up with the character of Jody Brae? Is he based on anyone?

A: He’s not based on anyone consciously. Friends and family that have read this have tried to find traits or characteristics of me, and they really can’t. He drinks tea and he smokes, I don’t. He may be a composite of different cantankerous characters that I’ve known growing up, or how I envisioned a cynical war-wounded cop from that period.

Q: What do you think is the appeal of Jody Brae?

A: He’s the 20th-century everyman. He’s a dark character. There’s just a piece of his soul that’s missing. He’s been to war. He’s had a very troubled upbringing, but he gets on the police force. He’s mid-life at the time, and he feels so dissatisfied in so many parts of his

life. What happens in this book is the culmination of a lifetime of dissatisfaction. I like his ability to persevere despite all the opposition.

Q: What made you choose the first person narrative?

A: For me to get inside his mind and to express viscerally the feelings and the emotions the first person narrative was the only thing that could do it justice.

Q: Are there plans for a sequel?

A: I'm in the process of writing the sequel to "The Ranks of Jody Brae." The sequel takes place two years after this entire episode. I sort of envision this being a trilogy about the life of this character. I like the character, but I imagine he's going to get to a point in his career, and his life, where he may run out of steam.

Q: If a studio came to you with an idea to do a movie based on the book how would you react?

A: I'd be ecstatic. I don't write cinematically — at least I don't think I do. Some of the feedback I've gotten was that this would make a great movie. I don't know if people say that about every book they read, but I never thought of that. Primarily I'm a reader and a writer, but I also love film.

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