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| **BOOKS**

# Say **nothing** – and **everything**

Brilliant magazine writer **pursued his curiosity** to create a celebrated examination of the Troubles

**February 2025 marks exactly 100 years** since the first edition of *The New Yorker* was published. To celebrate this milestone, it's worth exploring the work of Patrick Radden Keefe – one of its accomplished writers – and his book *Say Nothing*.

The inspiration for *Say Nothing* struck Keefe in 2013 when he read an obituary for Dolours Price, a former member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. He was intrigued by the story of a revolutionary who had lived into old age, rather than dying young as a martyr as so many of her compatriots had. The obituary also mentioned the 1972 disappearance of Jean McConville, a mother of 10 from Belfast, and suggested Price's involvement in her murder.

This connection between two very different women – one a perpetrator, the other a victim – linked by a single act decades before fascinated Keefe. It raised questions about what happens when the passionate idealism and fierce ambition of youth collides with the realities of a long life and changed circumstances. These themes, along with the real-life mystery of McConville's disappearance, would become the core of *Say Nothing*.

Keefe's interest in the Troubles actually predated his work on *Say Nothing* by many years. As a student, he had found the history of the Northern Ireland conflict confusing, with its dizzying array of factions, acronyms and interwoven events. The books available on the subject tended to assume a high level of background knowledge, making it difficult for a general reader to find a way into the story. Keefe wished for an accessible, narrative account of this important history that could engage readers who were not already experts. With *Say Nothing*, he set out to write the book he had wanted to read, one that would invite a broad audience into the story while still ringing true to those who had lived through the events.

#### **State the truth**

To write the book, Keefe made seven research trips



to Northern Ireland over the course of four years. Though his Irish-American background initially seemed like it would be an advantage in talking to people there, he soon realised that being perceived as an outsider was actually a benefit. Interview subjects couldn't easily categorise him as belonging to one side or the other based on his accent, appearance



or background. As a result, they were more inclined to explain things thoroughly rather than assuming prior knowledge.

Some of the key figures in the story, like Dolours Price, had already died by the time Keefe began his research, so he had to seek out the people around them to piece together a picture of who they had been.



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The number of Uranus's moons named after characters from Shakespeare's plays.

He sometimes found himself talking with people who had ended up friendly despite being on opposite sides of lethal violence in the past.

Keefe's approach to writing about his subjects, many of whom are still living, is to not let concerns over their potential reactions sway his commitment to the truth. He feels he owes his readers an honest account of what his reporting revealed, not a story carefully manicured to avoid ruffling any feathers. With a divisive figure like Gerry Adams, who comes across negatively at times in the book, Keefe simply wrote what his research showed and let the chips fall where they may. He applies this same philosophy to his portrayal of victims' families. While Keefe felt great empathy for the McConville children and understood their desire for definitive answers about their mother's fate, he couldn't state conclusively that she had not been an informer to the British authorities, since his own investigation of that question was ultimately inconclusive. Though emotionally difficult, Keefe saw directly addressing what he did and didn't know as essential to maintaining his credibility.

#### Access and accolades

Keefe contrasted the research process for *Say Nothing* with some of his other high-profile projects. Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, the notorious Mexican drug kingpin, never agreed to speak with Keefe for the article he wrote about him and the Sinaloa Cartel. After it was published though, Keefe received the surprising request to ghostwrite El Chapo's memoirs, which he promptly refused, only revealing the request later once Sean Penn's interview with Guzmán became public. On the other hand, the prominent art dealer Larry Gagosian granted Keefe extensive access for a profile, sitting for lengthy interviews and encouraging his inner circle to participate as well. Keefe says he felt a bit of vertigo at receiving such co-operation from a subject he was used to being more elusive. Still, he strove to write an honest, unvarnished account, aiming not to be swayed from his mission of capturing the truth even by extensive access.

Upon its release in 2019, *Say Nothing* garnered widespread acclaim from critics and readers alike. Glowing reviews appeared in esteemed publications like *The New York Times*, *NPR* and *The Washington Post*, celebrating Keefe's gripping writing and extensive research. It was named one of the top 10 books of the year by the *Times* and the *Post*. The book achieved commercial success as well, debuting at number five on the *New York Times*' Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction Bestseller List and remaining there for six weeks. In recognition of his achievement, Keefe was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction in 2019.

Text | **Eugene Yiga** Photography | **Supplied**

Read more of Patrick Radden Keefe's work at [Longform.org](https://www.longform.org) and watch his talk on *Fragile Truths* from the CCCB on YouTube.