

books

Irish revolutionary

Author Jamie O'Neill talks about being thrown out on the streets after the death of a famous love, the decade it took to write *At Swim, Two Boys*, and earning a place on his mother's wall **By Michael Giltz**

Irish author Jamie O'Neill keeps making headlines. His rapturously received new novel, *At Swim, Two Boys* (Scribner, \$28), first made a media splash in the United Kingdom when the book snagged what was reportedly the largest advance in history for a debut Irish novel. Once overseas rights and film rights were sold, the tabloids breathlessly announced, O'Neill stood to garner some \$1.5 million.

"It does give you confidence," O'Neill remarks, and he's actually sincere. His story is wonderfully rags-to-riches: He'd spent 10 years crafting *At Swim*—his 200,000-word epic about Ireland's 1916 Easter rebellion—while working in a psychiatric hospital. "Night Porter Strikes It Rich" was a typical headline, and amid the reporting on his success, no one seemed to care that the heart of *At Swim*'s story was the growing love between two teenage lads.

Sitting down to talk in New York, O'Neill turns out to be a genial man who can trace a word's Latin roots and quote Wilde—but insists he isn't very learned or well-read. He's more convincing when he claims no knowledge of current pop culture; questions about the in-the-works movie version of *At Swim* don't interest him. (The U.K. company making the film reportedly plans to cast Jamie Bell of *Billy Elliot* as one of the leads.) I mention the actor Jude Law as perfect for another role, and he says, "Jude Law? I don't know Jude Law. It sounds like a book in the Bible."

But *At Swim, Two Boys* puts to rest



O'Neill's novel links the birth of modern Ireland to the love of two young men.

any notion that O'Neill is unlettered. It's a grand novel filled with allusions, a rollicking, language-rich stew bursting with delight over the friendship of uptight, well-schooled Jim Mack and the randier Doyler Doyle, a smart but poor kid with a useless dad. Doyle fools around with older men to make a little cash and fuel his campaigns against the hated British. Sweeping and ambitious, the novel does nothing less than link the love of two young men and their growing sense of a gay identity with the birth of modern Ireland.

O'Neill says he's determined that the

role of gays be reflected in stories of Irish history—even if he's pessimistic about his countrymen's ability to get the point. "There's so much that could be learned from the gay experience, but they won't," he comments. "Among gays there's no division between Catholics and Protestants. They all get along and go to the same pubs and clubs. You would think someone like Sinn Féin, instead of saying, 'Yeah, we'll tolerate [homosexuality],' would say, 'We've got to learn from this.'"

In O'Neill's own gay life, the lessons have come hard. During the press frenzy over *At Swim, Two Boys*, a sharp-▶

eyed U.K. reporter realized O'Neill had been in the national news before: In 1988, O'Neill was hounded by the press after the death of his partner, BBC talk-show host Russell Harty. O'Neill's picture was splashed across every newspaper as Harty's lover—that's the unimaginably awkward way he came out to his family—and callous reporters offered him \$50,000 for an interview.

Worse still, O'Neill says, he was treated horrendously by Harty's relatives, who immediately threw him out of the home the couple had shared for years. "I was actually living on the streets of London," says O'Neill. "I had nothing. They burnt my clothes. They stole my car. They even wanted my dog."

O'Neill sank into depression for years. To his credit, he resisted all the dirty money tossed at him, and when his novel hit, he hoped the link to his tabloid past would never come up. He worried people would think he wanted to capitalize on his celebrity connection. He even allowed a couple of mistaken impressions. Although the press widely reported that *At Swim, Two Boys* is O'Neill's debut, the fact is that Harty, an older mentor figure, had encouraged him to write two earlier, far less successful novels. "I don't consider them to be mine," says O'Neill. "They're from what I would consider a previous incarnation."

But *At Swim* is a book he proudly claims. And its success has changed one person in particular: O'Neill's mum, who didn't post a picture of her son among the family photos for many years for fear of being asked when he'd be marrying a woman.

O'Neill's current partner, a French dancer-turned-masseur named Julien Joly, tried to mend the situation after their first visit. "When we got home, he sent a picture of me," says O'Neill. "The next time we went there, still no picture of me. Then when all this [the fanfare over the book] happened, my mother started showing the newspaper clippings to the neighbors."

O'Neill laughs: "They all said, 'God, she's got Alzheimer's. She's inventing this new son,' because they'd never heard she had another one." ■

Giltz writes for publications including the New York Post.