

The Irish Times: The Joy Luck Club

by Katie O'Donovan

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Des Kenny of Kenny's Bookshop in Galway regularly sends packages of books to 1,400 people all over of world - sometimes picking all the contents himself. Katie Donovan talked to him about his global book club.

Tanya Cassidy is one of 1,400 people in 45 countries - from Korea and Japan to all over the US - who receive regular packages of books from Kenny's bookshop in Galway. "They all love the personal care involved," says Des Kenny, who runs what is now known as the Book Club. Every day he receives letters, faxes, emails and presents from members: "I get confessions all the time," he adds. "I hear all about their marital and job problems, their court cases, their health, their aspirations." Most of his correspondence is by email: he receives about 20 a day. Kenny's, he is proud to claim, was the second bookshop in the world to go on the Internet, back in 1992.

Book Club members have various requests, from a man wanting fiction so that his pregnant wife, confined to bed, will have plenty to read; to the woman who wanted everything he had on Michael Collins. "There is one man who never told me what he wanted, other than 'books'. I have never met him, but I must be doing something right because I'm still sending the books four years later." Another woman only wants books on Irish archaeology under the sea.

For those whose instructions are vague, Des relies on "raw instinct, like a hurler."

He will send a selection of fiction, poetry, history and biography, including books by the likes of Seamus Heaney, John McGahern, William Trevor, David Thomson's Woodbrook, Thomas Pakenham's The Year of Liberty and Mary Carbery's West Cork Journal (published by Lilliput).

He likes to challenge people, too, and regularly sends books that are not within their usual sphere of interest: "I try to persuade, for example, the men to read something by a woman. I think every man who is getting married and starting a family should read Edna O'Brien's novel, Down by the River. It's a scarifying book about child abuse." He gets a variety of responses to these experiments: "I warn them when they join: Every so often you're going to get a book from me and you won't know what to make of it, but I want you to read that book.' Some people will say they read it and they didn't like it. Others will give it away to friends. But they know what I'm doing, trying to broaden their horizons, and they respect that."

Des was initiated into the art of selecting books by his late father, Des Kenny senior: "In his later years, I would get a call from my father's desk: 'Select three books for me.' I would do so. Initially, the next morning, the three books re-appeared on my desk. Rubbish'." Eventually I was told he had actually enjoyed one of the selections and, as this scenario developed, I realised I was beginning to enjoy the challenge and actually cheered the morning only one book came back." He also pays tribute to his aunt Peggy, the widow of writer Walter Macken, for sharpening his instincts.

The idea for the Book Club was born back in 1986, when an American lawyer of Irish extraction, a regular visitor to the shop, began to curse audibly as he scanned the well-stocked shelves full of Irish books he couldn't get back home in Boston: "My mother [Maureen Kenny] suggested sending him a package every so often. I told him it would be easy, because I knew what he liked. He handed me his credit card and that was that."

The average member of the Book Club receives four packages a year at a cost of £200. They are charged the price of the books (in punts) plus the cost of post and packaging. There is no commission charged. Ninety-five per cent of the time, people are happy with the contents of their package. If they want, they can return any book: "I send out 200 packages a week and if I get 10 books back it's a bad week. It all operates on trust."

When he is choosing the contents of his packages, he stays away from mainstream books: "The likes of Maeve Binchy or Roddy Doyle are already very available so they aren't much use to me. I'm interested in books by small publishers like New Island, who don't have a big distribution network worldwide." New Island has just published the memoirs of Noel Browne's widow, Phyllis, called Thanks for the Tea, Mrs Browne: "This book may be accessible in Ireland, but people abroad won't be able to get it. It's an important record of life as a politician's wife. Nearly half of the members of the Book Club are women. They'll love it."

He is also currently very enthusiastic about a book called A Year in Connemara by Guy St John Williams, the grandson of Oliver St John Gogarty: "This book is grist to my mill. The author has a sharp little razor of a pen, he's very witty." Des is not at all put off by the fact that Williams published the book himself: "A good book is a good book."

The Book Club has "radically changed my orders to publishers," notes Des: "I will sell at least 500 copies of at least five books this year. These are not popular' books. They are well-written, good books. Next year I'll sell even more." The vast majority of his Book Club members live outside Ireland but have strong links with the country. Some are ex-pats; others are students. Luc Bitoun, a 30-year-old human resources manager with Total, the French oil company, who lives near Lille, is an Irish poetry enthusiast.

"May I take this opportunity to congratulate you for your service," he wrote to Des in March 1995. "Reading Irish poetry is a pleasure during this French presidential campaign. When each candidate is very mediocre. When De Gaulle (who had Irish ancestors) was president, France was a wealthy country. Now, these days belong to the past and enjoying your poetry allows me to escape from this domestic mediocrity." Luc joined the Book Club in 1992 and now spends £150 a month on Irish poetry and history: "The books arrive to my home," Luc explains. "I usually get about a dozen, or maybe, if it is an antiquarian book, only one. I have between 1,000 and 2,000 books now, mostly Irish poetry. My favourite Irish poet is Austin Clarke. Being in the Book Club is a nice hobby. How long will I stay a member? Until I die. Irish poetry is a delight in this tumultuous world."

The Book Club takes up a great deal of Des Kenny's time (he only has one assistant), but he feels it's worth it: "If a customer comes into the shop, I might spend half an hour with him and sell nothing. With the Book Club, I spend 20 minutes and I'll sell at least four books to each member. And later, I'll sell more."

Lynn Hughes came into the shop with her husband Tony on their first visit to Ireland in 1991: "After we had spent several hours sitting on the floor looking at books, Des said you look like people who might like to join the Book Club'." Lynn, a schoolteacher who lives "half-way between New York and Philadelphia" now receives five packages a year, containing books on music, history, Irish language books ("we're hoping to learn") and children's books (which she uses with her pupils). She and Tony have also been introduced to contemporary Irish fiction through the Book Club: "It's always an impressive little stack of books. Des has a very good sense of what we like. In the US all the small bookshops have been crowded out by the big chains. Nobody gets to know you. We come to Ireland every year now, and we always drop in to see Des and talk about books."

Des writes a monthly diary on the Internet called "Dessy's Diary" to which people all over the world tune in, including, he notes proudly, Mary Robinson. The "Diary", which is personal, atmospheric and jovial, can also include details of (and quotes from) new Irish books that might be otherwise difficult to locate.

Another service is the Book Hamper, an even bigger challenge to Des Kenny's instinct than the Book Club:

"I have to get your opinion of what your sister would like to read, and then see past that. My mother says every book in the shop has a customer. You just have to find the customer."