

32

Author Peter McHugh on using his own unusual childhood to inspire his second book

'I finished my novel set in war-torn Gaza on October 6'

HOLY LAND:
Peter was born in Jerusalem and grew up in the Middle East

By Nicola Byrne

WHEN Dublin author Peter McHugh finished his novel set in war-torn Gaza, Israel and Lebanon on October 6 last, he had no idea of the mayhem about to be unleashed in the Middle East.

The following day, Hamas carried out its terror attack on Israel, an event that precipitated the ongoing devastating war which has resulted in the slaughter of more 33,000 people, most of them Palestinian.

Mr McHugh, like many other observers, was in shock.

'I never saw it coming,' he tells the Irish Mail on Sunday. 'And to be honest it made me uneasy at first about publishing the book at this time. I thought people might think I was jumping on the bandwagon here or that I had an agenda whereas in fact I've been working on my novel for 11 years.'

'But you know, now I think that hopefully it can inform people about that part of the world. So many of the names and places in the book we're hearing about now on the news. All the ingredients for what happened then, and since, were in evidence in the early 1990s when the book plays out and for many years before then.'

Fragmented, which will be launched at a reception in the Dublin Writers Museum next Wednesday, tells the story of the Irish family of a UN peacekeeper stationed in the Middle East.

It's Mr McHugh's second book (his first was non-fiction) and it's a multi-layered family saga – set against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict – that provides historical accuracy and cultural insights.

Spanning 12 tumultuous years, it portrays the trauma of everyday life in war zones and the collateral damage to relationships and mental health from the often-used escapes of drugs and alcohol.

Although Mr McHugh insists it is not autobiographical, it was very much informed by his background growing up with his parents and four sisters in the Middle East where his father Frank was a UN peacekeeper for over 30 years.



HAPPY: Peter's UN identity card

'I was born in Jerusalem and spent my childhood moving around the Middle East, like more than 50 Irish families,' he says.

'On two separate occasions, we lived in Lebanon where the first part of the novel is set and my father was also posted in Israel where the second part is set.'

It was, adds Mr McHugh, 'a very happy childhood and it was extraordinary in many ways. It was very, very interesting and my family are still in contact with many of the Irish families who were out there.'

'They were always saying "there's a book to be written about it", and I thought that as well and that's how the book came about.'

Mr McHugh says his sister Fiona, his wife (also Fiona), and his daughter Holly were his 'final readers' and gave him plenty of good advice.

'They advised me particularly on the emotional side of things. They



said it needed more emotion and I listened to that,' he says.

The family in Fragmented, the Hogans, had an idyllic childhood, full of adventure and excitement as their father moved between UN peacekeeping missions across the Middle East, similar to the McHugh family. But in their 30s, they move back to the region and their lives start to fall apart.

In the book, two of the brothers are war correspondents and a third one is working for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, helping Palestinian refugees in Gaza. However, his marriage is in trouble and his wife has turned to the bottle.

Writing is a second or even third career for Mr McHugh, who's now in his early 60s. After a degree in chemical engineering at UCD, he

CHILDHOOD:

Peter poses with his classmates and teacher, top, and with his family while his father served with the United Nations, above

spent more than 30 years in the technology business.

He published his first book, *How To Make It Big In Software*, in 1999, after which he founded his own business, Covalent Software, which he later sold.

That allowed him to pursue another of his passions – food – which culminated in opening the Rialto Bridge Café in Dublin, just

as the pandemic hit. But the lockdown gave him the chance to finally finish his novel.

'I had been dabbling with writing a novel that drew in part on my unusual back story; they do say "write about what you know".'

nicola.byrne@mailonsunday.ie

■ For more information, visit Pete-mchugh.com

