

Q&A with Eddie Joyce, author of **SMALL MERCIES**

Staten Island is probably the last borough people think about when New York City comes to mind. What sets Staten Island apart from the other four boroughs? What do you think would surprise people the most about Staten Island?

Staten Island is definitely the fifth of five boroughs in most people's minds. It does stand apart from the rest of the city in a number of ways: geographically, demographically, politically, even architecturally. It is easily the most suburban; parts of the Island are still almost rural, though that's disappearing quickly. There are very few tall buildings, no subways, and there's not much of the hustle and bustle that people associate with city life. Of all the boroughs, it 'feels' the least like New York City.

On the other hand, in terms of the people, you'd be hard pressed to find truer New Yorkers. If you live on Staten Island, chances are you were born there or moved there from Brooklyn. This has changed a bit in the past ten years with the arrival of more immigrants to the Island but it's still largely true. Most people either work in the city or for the city: cops, firemen, teachers. There's a streetwise sensibility that pervades the entire borough. These are mostly working class and middle class people who have lived through the best and worst days of New York City, never getting their full share of the best and taking the brunt of the worst. These are people of contrary qualities: tough but kind-hearted, brusque but neighborly. And despite the rapidly growing population, Staten Island still feels like a small town. Most people still read the *Advance*, Staten Island's local paper. The high schools all play each other. And it is an Island, which heightens the insularity in ways good and bad. So basically it's like a small town filled with sarcastic, streetwise New Yorkers. Heaven.

A quick story may elucidate: for our honeymoon, my wife and I went to New Zealand. We flew 6 hours to LA, then 14 hours to Auckland, then got in a little puddle-hopper and flew another hour to the northern end of the North Island. We then drove another forty five minutes to the first place we were staying. After checking in, we got in a van to take a tour of the property with some other couples. I introduced us and from the back of the van, a guy said, "Eddie Joyce, from Staten Island?" Turns out I'd played basketball against his brother in high school. And that's the way Staten Island is: if you're on the other side of the world and you meet someone from the Rock, chances are you'll know each other or know someone in common.

What was it like growing up on Staten Island and how has it changed since your childhood? What prompted you to set your first novel there? Do you still live on Staten Island?

Growing up on Staten Island was fantastic. I grew up in Tottenville, the southernmost town on the Island. I walked to school through the 8th grade. There were lots of woods to play in, lots of places to get lost in. There was even a ferry graveyard! It changed a lot as I was growing up. A lot of the open spaces got developed (and, arguably, over-developed). The population, particularly on the South Shore, sky-rocketed. Some of the small town feel disappeared. But overall it was wonderful.

And the Island is changing again, as working class immigrants are getting priced out of other parts of the cities and/or seeking a better life for their families. I think the next twenty or thirty years are going to be fascinating for Staten Island.

I no longer live on Staten Island but I'm usually there a couple of times a month: to take the kids to the Staten Island zoo, to play golf or meet a friend for lunch, to pick up ravioli, and, of course, to eat pizza.

I set the book on Staten Island because it was a place whose stories needed to be told. A million books have been written about Manhattan, half a million about Brooklyn. The Bronx has its bards. Even Queens has gotten some love lately. But Staten Island has remained forgotten, silent. I thought that needed to be addressed. Where you're from matters and whether you love it or hate it, you can never escape it.

And I wanted to tell the story from the inside out. Staten Island does not appear in popular culture all that frequently but when it does, the formula is always the same: *City people come to Staten Island, meet misanthropic natives who say racist or anti-Semitic things, city people return to city, shaking their heads.* Staten Island is always the butt of the NYC joke. I wanted to tell a more complete story about the people I grew up with. Yes, they may be flawed—who isn't?—but they have a resiliency and even a kind of grace that is often overlooked. I wanted to show all their beauty, all their pain, all their strengths, all their sins. To give voice to people who are exiles in their own city.

SMALL MERCIES is a story about family, and it doesn't shy away from any of the complications (and joys) that are inherent in family life. How did the Amendolas take shape in your mind? What do you hope readers will take away from this particular family story?

I wanted to show a real family in all its messy glory. Families are wonderful, bizarre, confounding. Every family has its own mythology, about who they are collectively and about the roles that each member occupies in the group. Within the context of our families, I think we all fall into patterns of behavior that we're not entirely aware of. And many positive qualities can stagnate into negative ones within a family. The Amendolas are a very resilient, very loyal family and that's to be admired. But loyalty and resiliency can slide quite easily into dysfunction and I think that happens with the Amendolas as well, particularly with respect to their treatment of Franky and their reception of Wade.

Much of the novel revolves around Gail Amendola, the mother in the story. Why is her voice central?

The Amendola family started with a very simple, almost cliché idea: a middle-aged woman—Gail from the very start—walking on a beach, talking to her dead son. I wrote a short story about that, *Nulla*, which had many of the elements that later ended up in the novel. But it was way too cluttered, way too busy for a short story. So I let it breathe, so to speak, and let Gail take me where I had to go. She brought in Tina and Maria and Michael and Enzo. Even Franky. Every time I got lost, I came back to Gail, doing something mundane: walking on a beach, sitting at a kitchen table, cooking, riding the Ferry. And that's how the structure of the book took shape: Gail has every other chapter, connecting these sometimes disparate souls.

The only character who emerged in a different way was Peter. His chapter is the only one which takes place mostly off of Staten Island. He is the most isolated, the loneliest member of the family. His life is very different from his parents' life. I thought it was important that his chapter have a very distinct feel. So he came from a different place. And even so, Gail is the one who comes into Manhattan to meet him and wrestle the narrative away from him and take it back to Staten Island. She's still the glue that binds everyone else together.

Gail is an amalgam of some of the very strong, smart women I grew up with. My paternal grandmother was widowed when my father was seven. She had to raise him on her own with very little money. My maternal grandmother raised five daughters and had to go back to work in middle age after getting divorced. She never went to college but was the most well-read person I knew. My mother was also very bright but had somewhat limited job opportunities. At the time, intelligent, working-class women had essentially two choices: teaching and nursing. My mom became a teacher (a job she loved), stopped working to stay home with her children and eventually went back to work. She also tutored to make extra money.

When I was growing up on Staten Island, most families conformed to traditional gender roles: husband worked, wife stayed at home to raise the kids. Yet, despite these old-fashioned arrangements, these families were matriarchal at their core: the mother was the heart of the family, sure, but also the head. They were making the key decisions for the family. They were handling the finances. They were probably working as well, at least part time. And I think Gail is representative of that enigma. Without question, she's the center of the Amendola family.

SMALL MERCIES will strike a chord with many Americans, especially those who lost loved ones on 9/11. How did you decide to include this in the book?

It was not a decision I made lightly. I thought about it at the outset and revisited the question many times. A few times, I even considered changing the nature of Bobby's death: maybe he could have died in a random fire, maybe his death could have been purely accidental, entirely unrelated to his job as a firefighter. But those seemed like safe choices, like deliberately ignoring the elephant in the room because it might be difficult to write about.

One of my readers was someone who lost a family member on 9/11 and I occasionally ran things by him to gauge his reaction. I didn't idealize Bobby or his family. They didn't need to be perfect; they needed to be real. I included some of the uglier aspects of the response to 9/11 without demonizing anyone. I tried to walk a very fine line, being respectful but realistic. I hope I succeeded.

I started writing the novel in earnest shortly after I read a Talk of the Town piece in the *New Yorker* about the so-called Ground Zero Mosque. The piece was basically saying that the opposition to the mosque was wrong-headed, and the outcry against it was being led by non-New Yorkers—Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin—who had no stake in a New York issue. I mostly agreed with those points.

But the piece went on to dismiss the concerns of Staten Islanders, who were largely against the mosque, because they were distant, in a geographic sense, from Ground Zero. The piece was essentially lumping Staten Islanders in with non-New Yorkers who were using the issue solely for political purposes. That really, really pissed me off. It evinced a complete lack of understanding about how deeply affected Staten Island (and places like it) was affected by 9/11. I thought to myself, *they don't know*, and that sentiment actually makes its way into the novel.

9/11 is imbedded in the psyche on Staten Island. 274 Staten Island residents were killed on 9/11. I don't think it's hyperbole to say that every person on Staten Island knew someone who was killed on 9/11. Most people knew multiple victims. You cannot walk into a bar or restaurant or shop on Staten Island without seeing a Never Forget sticker or poster. There are memorial races, memorial 3 on 3 basketball tournaments, memorial cookouts, etc. It's part of the fabric of the community. And people who'd never spent significant time on Staten Island didn't seem to understand that.

I've read a lot of the 9/11 novels—a somewhat limiting characterization, to my mind—but the two that resonated the most with me were Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*. And it struck me that both were written by people who came to New York later in life. Both authors were immigrants actually, which is New York through and through. McCann captures one of the great things about New York at the end of his book, which is (and I'm paraphrasing): people are here for ten minutes and they think it belongs to them. And that does make New York great. It's why people come here from all over the country and all over the world. We welcome everyone here. Bring your energy and bring your dreams. That's all you need to be considered a New Yorker.

At the same time, there are actually a lot of people who were born and raised in the New York area, and sometimes these people get marginalized or overlooked or just plain ignored. The bridge and tunnel (and ferry) crowd. People from the outer boroughs or Long Island or New Jersey. People who live in the shadows of the great city. So, when all these 9/11 novels were coming out, I kept waiting for the one that was going to tell the story of those people. I kept waiting and waiting. I was practicing law at the time and I thought, *surely someone is going to tell this story*. And finally, I thought, *maybe I should tell this story*. Which was pure, utter hubris. But that's writing in a nutshell: pure hubris.

You decided to quit your job as a lawyer to stay at home with your twin daughters and pursue a writing career. How do you balance writing with stay-at-home parenting?

First of all, we have help. I could not have written the book and taken care of the kids all the time, especially when they were little. At one point, we had three kids under the age of two. That was crazy. I'm sure some people do it—by writing at night or sneaking in an hour here or there—but I'm not wired that way. Also, my wife is a lawyer and took on the full financial burden of the household while I wrote the book. I'm extremely lucky in that regard. She never pushed me to hurry or to produce something. I felt internal pressure to finish the novel but that was entirely internal. I had the luxury of not having to worry about bringing in money while I was writing it. Taking care of the kids—again, with help—was part of the overall situation.

When you have young kids, a lot of your schedule is out of your control. They get sick, you get sick, they need to go to an appointment and so on. There's always something and sometimes, the writing just got pushed to the side. I didn't get an MFA and when I started writing, I would sometimes look for guidance by reading the advice of established writers. I specifically remember reading one of Richard Ford's rules which was, "Don't have kids." My twin daughters were probably one at the time. And I thought, well, that ship has sailed. Better make my own rules.

I try to take it week by week. If I get a good start on Monday, it usually means I'll have a productive week. But if there's a doctor's appointment or there's no food and I have to go shopping or whatever, it may get off to rocky start and suddenly, it's Wednesday and I've written two sentences.

Probably not gonna get a lot done that week. I try not to let it frustrate me. There are other productive things you can do: You can read or you can go for a long walk and let your subconscious unspool.

If I have a good week, I try to stay in rhythm, stack a few good weeks together. I only really need 2-3 hours a day, preferably in the morning. I tend to burn out after that anyway and I like to end in a good frame of mind so that I'm eager to return the next day, instead of dreading it. And if the writing's going well, there are little problems that I'm working out in my head all day, long after I've left the desk.

It's not the typical, monastic, fully devoted existence that many writers aspire to. But you know what? That's fine. I get to walk my kids to and from school every day. I get to put them to bed most nights. I get to hear the funny things they say. I'm not saying there are no frustrations. I get frustrated, particularly if a good bit of time passes when I'm not being productive. And raising kids can be frustrating. It's wonderful but it's also frustrating. But I try to go with the flow. I try to take the writing seriously without taking myself too seriously.

There's a lot of good Italian food in SMALL MERCIES. Where are some of your favorite places to eat on The Rock?

Oh, boy. This could be a book unto itself. Let's start with a fundamental truth: Denino's is the best pizza in the world. I will countenance no dissent on this subject. But there are many other great pizzerias on the Rock: Lee's, Joe and Pat's, Nunzio's, Brothers. People on Staten Island are very tribal when it comes to pizza. You're either a Denino's person or a Lee's person or a Joe and Pat's person. The truth is they're all fantastic. It's just that Denino's is the best.

You'd be hard pressed to find a bad Italian restaurant on Staten Island. As a good friend of mine has noted, "If the food's not good, it's ovah. You're done." I like the old school joints, places that have been around for a while. Two of my favorites are Trattoria Romano and Basilio's Inn. Growing up, we ordered a lot from Villa Monte, which has a few locations. It's more casual, more of a take-out place. The chicken marsala is to die for. Good pizza, too.

Can't forget Ralph's Italian Ices. The original store is right across the street from Denino's so two birds, one stone. I get the same thing every time: a scoop of lemon ice, a scoop of raspberry. When the weather starts getting nice in the spring, I start fiending for Ralph's.

There's some great, non-Italian food as well: Duffy's has a great burger with waffle fries. Schaffer's Tavern is an institution: great pastrami and corned beef. Killmeyer's has great beer and German food. And Real Madrid is a great throwback Spanish place. Keep it simple: paella and sangria. A great thing about all these places is that they're not expensive. A couple can get a great dinner and a couple beers or a bottle of wine for well under a hundred bucks. A family can eat a great meal and have leftovers, also for under a hundred bucks.

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the newly opened Flagship Brewing Company, Staten Island's own addition to the craft brewing industry. Great beer and it's run by Staten Island guys. They have a very cool tasting room within walking distance of the ferry.

There's a March Madness pool in the novel that is a big tradition for the Amendolas. Is this based on real life? Are you also a basketball fan?

The pool in the book is a thinly veiled version of the well-known Jody's pool, which did shut down a few years back, though not at all in the way portrayed in the book. The Jody's pool was an Island tradition which got bigger and bigger over the years. Since it closed down, other versions have popped up, run out of different bars, but nothing that rivals the original.

I'm a huge basketball fan. I played in high school and played JV in college at Harvard. New York City has such a great basketball tradition and, as with so many other things, Staten Island hoops hardly gets noticed. But that's starting to change as more and more players come off the Island and go to big time Division I programs. Staten Island is still intimate enough that the high school games have a different feel. The rivalries are real. The guys you played against in high school? You see them for the rest of your life. They remember specific games, even specific plays. A lot of "Glory Days" type reminiscing goes on in the bars along Forest Avenue and elsewhere.

My love for basketball comes from my mother. She played in college and she was very involved in the youth league we played in growing up. She started a program for girls. She refereed the games, she coached a team. We watched a lot of basketball in the house. Some of my fondest memories are sitting in the kitchen with my mom, watching college basketball on a small black and white television. She was usually cooking food for my father to put out at the bar and periodically checking in on the game. We were big St. John's fans. I loved Chris Mullin. She loved Mark Jackson.

We had a hoop in the backyard. I would play Around the World or Horse with one of our neighbors, Skip. He would smoke a cigar while he shot. As I got older, I started taking the bus to play at P.S. 8 and later I would take the train down to Cromwell Center. Cromwell was like hoop heaven. It was an old pier that extended out into New York harbor. You walked in and there were weight rooms and offices on either side of a long atrium. At the end of the atrium, there were 5 or 6 courts lined up side to side, extending further out into harbor.

The best players played on the first court. I still remember the first time I played on that court. It was exhilarating. It closed for renovation a few years back and then part of the pier collapsed into the water so they had to demolish the whole thing. I loved everything about that place: the constant creak of wood, the intensity of the games, even the smell of sweat. I wrote a draft chapter that was about one of Bobby's summers playing ball down at Cromwell. It didn't end up making it into the book but I hope to use some of that stuff in a different project.