

The O'Reilly factor

In dazzling literary debut, author pushes his character to the limits

By Stephen Camelio
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No matter which religious or political affiliation a Northern Irishman is born into, there are certain expectations that come with that allegiance. Those expectations can cause the personal freedoms of all Northerners to be compromised in some way or another. Maybe that is why Derry-born author Sean O'Reilly, whose first novel, "Love and Sleep: A Romance" (Carroll & Graf, \$13) is being released in the U.S. this month, is always battling to push boundaries in his writing and defy convention in his art and his life.

Though it is set in Derry, "Love and Sleep" is not your standard Troubles novel centered on philosophical divisions or forbidden love. Instead "Love and Sleep" focuses on Niall, a troubled young writer who returns home to the North after traveling and living in Europe. Adrift in the city of his youth, Niall begins an affair with a budding socialist, Lorna, but as their relationship unfolds, it quickly becomes apparent that his mind is as damaged as the beleaguered city he calls home.

Though O'Reilly, who now lives in Dublin, says he based the story on a friend who "moved back to Derry and had a bit of a nervous breakdown," there are more than a few similarities between the novel's main character and the author, who, like Niall, knows a thing or two about leaving and returning.

Growing up in Derry during the worst of the Troubles and going to the funerals of the hunger strikers in 1981, O'Reilly experienced two distinct aspects of Northern life.

"Some nights, with the bombs and the gunfire, were just horrifying," he said. "But there was so much chaos that we had an incredible amount of freedom. It was an emotional and confusing time but also quite wonderful in some ways."

As O'Reilly got older, his freedom to do what he liked disappeared little by little. At the age of 17, his desire to follow his own path met head-on with his

Catholic school's insistence that he go to college so that he could get a civil service job.

"They wanted everyone to follow a particular path: go to university, study history or geography, and then return home," he said. "I was into poetry and film and wanted to find some way to combine the two, but the school I was in wouldn't allow any movement on that at all."

Deciding to not let anyone else determine his future, O'Reilly dropped out of school and headed to London. There, working as an actor, musician, laborer and store clerk, he had the type of bohemian experiences that young writers dream about.

"I was trying everything," he said. "Nobody had any money but it was loads of fun."

After six months in London, O'Reilly, always on the lookout for a change, headed to Paris. Then, after bouncing back and forth between London and Paris for a couple months, he headed out to explore the rest of Europe. During stops in the south of France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Sweden, O'Reilly employed himself as a jack-of-all-trades, doing stints as an English teacher, bar-

decided it was time to put his travel experiences to good use.

"I went into some extreme isolation in a house up in the mountains and sat down and wrote a novel, actually a novel and a half," he said.

Though he deemed the work he finished in Norway too "conventional," he believes the time was not misspent.

"I think there are a lot of traditional ways of trying to depict the kind of conflict situations that I came out of in the North and the stuff I wrote in Norway was written in that style," O'Reilly said. "I realized my novel was another series of conventions and that revelation allowed me to try to experiment with a lot of different types of writing."

Wanting to experiment with another place to live, O'Reilly headed off to Dublin, one of the few cities in Europe he had never set foot in. Once settled in the city that gave birth to so many great Irish writers, O'Reilly once again gave himself an ultimatum: one year to do a book of short stories. This time his determination paid off with "Curfew and Other Stories," a collection that was published in the UK and Ireland in 2000 (and will be released by

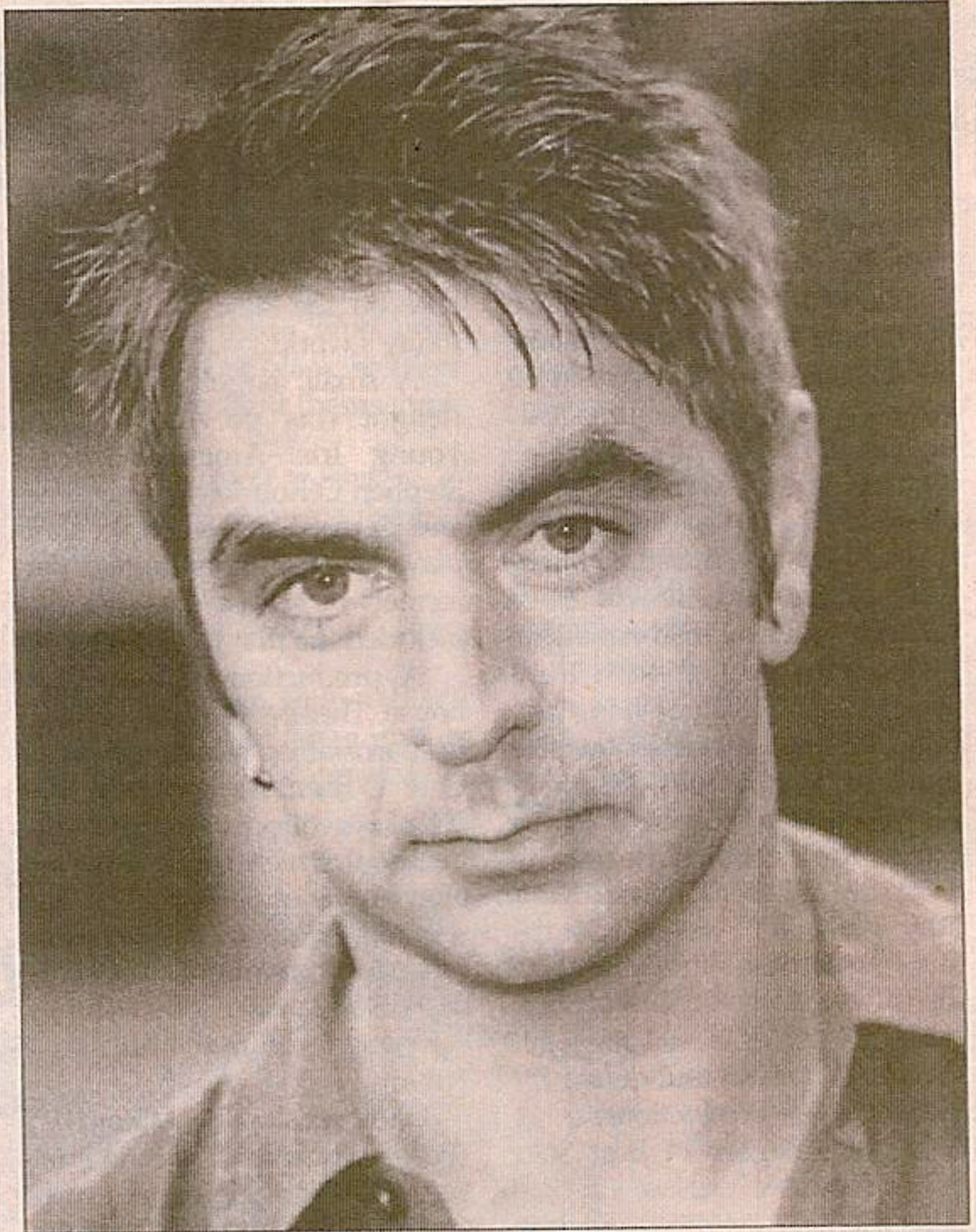
Carroll & Graf in the U.S. next year), which was lauded by such Irish writers as Patrick McCabe, Colum McCann, Eoin McNamee and Seamus Deane.

Though it is a common practice for Irish writers to debut with a book of short stories, O'Reilly, as usual, didn't completely give in to tradition.

"The short stories I did were quite unconventional in that many were very long," he said. "One of the themes I was trying to work through was the idea of excess, of being out of control."

That theme of being out of control carried over into "Love and Sleep," in which Niall has no restraint over his displays of emotion or the ability to regulate his thoughts or actions.

"I wanted to push this character to the limits of where the first person starts to break down and fall apart," O'Reilly said. "The



Sean O'Reilly's extensive travels through Europe helped him reconnect with his Derry roots.

character tries to come to grips with himself, tries to make contact with others, but keeps failing and failing."

Compared to works by Sartre and Dostoyevsky by the Irish Times, "Love and Sleep" has a deep psychological and philosophical subtext that reflects both O'Reilly's desire to take chances with his writing and the

speaking his mind, especially when it comes to the topic of Irish writers writing for British publishers. He is quick to point out that British readers have a certain perception of Ireland and London publishing houses expect that perception to be upheld by Irish writers. O'Reilly is especially worried that young Irish writers won't get the start they should or that they will change their writing style or themes to appease non-Irish readers.

"My publishers have been great, but Irish writers are at the mercy of a London publishing scene that wants

Booker Prize-winning author James Kelman "is constantly saying, 'Your voice is worthy. Think about the language you were given and where you come from, and use it. Don't let London intimidate you.'"

SEAN O'REILLY

diverse nature of his literary and scholarly influences.

"While in all the countries I went to I read a lot, so my influences don't necessarily come from an Irish perspective," he said. "I've picked up quite a bit of French and am really into French literature and French philosophers like George Bataille."

That isn't to say "Love and Sleep" doesn't capture the spirit of Derry and what it means to be from the North. Another one of O'Reilly's influences, Scottish Booker Prize-winning author James Kelman, inspired O'Reilly to connect with his roots and convey the dialect, speech patterns, and community intricacies that make Derry and Northern Ireland unique.

"Kelman is constantly saying, 'Your voice is worthy. Think about the language you were given and where you come from, and use it. Don't let London intimidate you,'" O'Reilly said.

Just as he won't be intimidated in the way he writes and the topics he writes about, O'Reilly also hasn't shied away from

books in which Ireland comes across as this enchanting, wild place where everyone is drinking and everything is great," he said. "We write in Dublin, live in Dublin, but there isn't a publishing house within sight. If you think about [all the great writers that are from Ireland], it's bizarre."

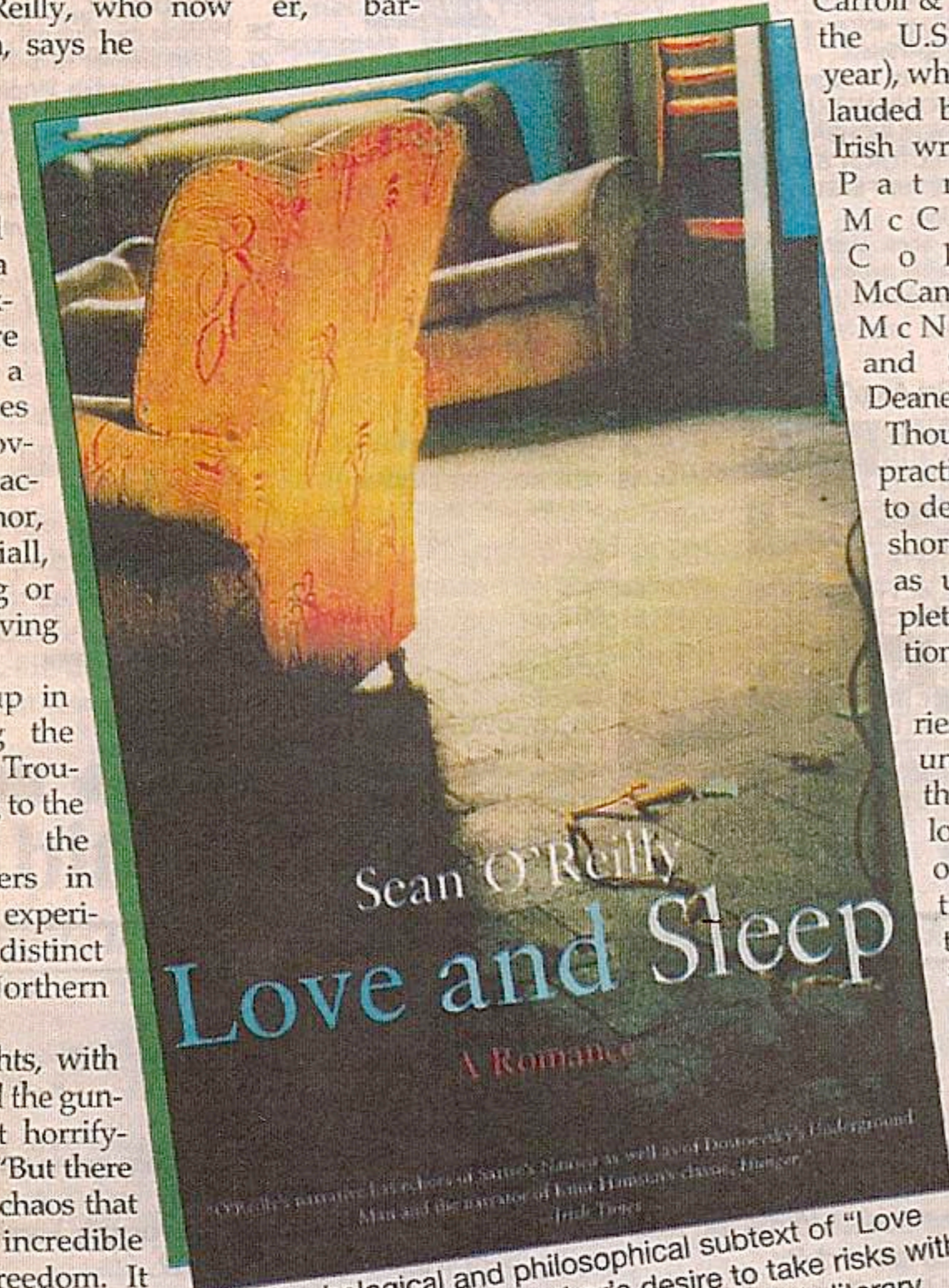
Though many of those same Irish writers have had a great deal of success in the U.S., O'Reilly isn't sure what to expect when "Love and Sleep" becomes available in the States this month.

"I know nothing about the American market," he said.

That's probably because the U.S. is one of the few places he hasn't made it to in his far-flung travels.

"I've had loads of friends who have been to the States, but I've always been afraid that if I went over to New York City, I'd never leave," O'Reilly said. "It might just be the one place that has everything I want."

Staying in one place? It's so unconventional for O'Reilly that he just might do it.



The psychological and philosophical subtext of "Love and Sleep" reflects the author's desire to take risks with his writing as well as the diverse nature of his literary and scholarly influences.

ten-der, olive farmer and roadie. Finally he made his way to Norway, where, after working as a painter and decorator, he