

Author Spotlight

TANA FRENCH



Tana French was born in 1973 in Vermont. Because of her father’s career and relocating every few years, she grew up in Ireland, Italy, the United States and Malawi (East Africa). As a child she wanted to be an archaeologist but instead she studied drama and English at Trinity College, Dublin, and received a theater studies degree in 1995. Upon graduating, French spent many years acting in the PurpleHeart Theatre Company. Her debut novel, *In the Woods* was published in 2007 and became a *New York Times* best-seller. In 2008 the novel received the Edgar, Anthony, Macavity, and Barry awards for Best First Novel. French lives in Dublin with her family.

French credits acting and archeology with giving her the proper background to write fiction. “It is a very natural progression, from creating a character and a world for an audience to creating one for a reader—it made sense to me,” she explained to Anna Richardson for *The Bookseller* (www.thebookseller.com, May 16, 2008). When acting roles were scarce, French sometimes participated in archaeological digs and it was on such a project in 2003 that she came up with the idea for *In the Woods*. “There was a wood not far from the dig,” French explained to a Penguin Random House interviewer, “and one day I thought, what if three kids went in there to play and only one came out, and he had no memory of what happened?”

In the Woods, the first book in the best-selling *Dublin Murder Squad* series, centers on the murder of a 12 year-old girl, Katy Devlin, who is found at a local excavation site. Detective Rob Ryan investigates the case with his partner and closest friend Cassie Maddox. They find themselves investigating a case chillingly similar to a previous unsolved mystery from Detective Ryan’s past.

Ryan, the story’s narrator, is haunted by the mysterious disappearance of his two best friends after a trip into the woods when they were children. Now, with only snippets of long-buried memories to guide him, Ryan has the chance to uncover both the mystery of the case before him and that of his own shadowy past.

Tana French populates her psychological thriller with deftly drawn, unforgettable characters, from Ryan’s brilliant and magnetic partner, Cassie, to Katy’s overprotective and evasive parents to Mark Hanly, the passionate young archaeologist whose very life is devoted to buried truths. Always at the center of the story, however, is Rob Ryan himself—keenly intelligent, outwardly brash and confident, but far more fundamentally wounded and incomplete than appearances reveal.

In the dark, deceptive world of *In the Woods*, many of the hardest questions depend upon a single query: will Rob’s attempts to regain his inner equilibrium finally throw his life, his friends, and the Devlin investigation out of balance forever?

Prepared by Maureen Socha
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Sources: www.penguinrandomhouse.com and nclive.org



Discussion Questions for *In the Woods*

1. What do the woods represent symbolically in Tana French's novel? Does their significance change as the story progresses?
2. The loss or absence of stable families is a recurring motif in *In the Woods*. How do French's characters, particularly Ryan, attempt to compensate for this absence?
3. Does the Irish setting of *In the Woods* contribute significantly to the telling of the story, or do you find French's novel to be about humanity on a more universal level?
4. How does Ryan's experience *In the Woods* at the age of twelve affect his ability to function as a detective? Is it always a hindrance to him, or are there ways in which it improves and deepens his insights?
5. Cassie Maddox, Ryan's partner, is perhaps the most consistently appealing character in the novel. What are her most attractive qualities? What are the weaker points of her personality? Does Ryan ever fully appreciate her?
6. After sleeping together, Ryan and Cassie cease to be friends. Why do you think the experience of physical intimacy is so damaging to their relationship? Are there other reasons why their friendship falls apart?
7. Ryan states that he both craves truth and tells lies. How reliable to you find him as a narrator? In what ways does the theme of truth and misrepresentation lie at the heart of *In the Woods*?
8. Imagine that you are Ryan's therapist. With what aspects of his personality would you most want to help him come to terms? Do you think there would be any way to lead him out of "the woods"?
9. How convincing is French's explanation of the motivating forces that lead to Katy's murder—forces that come close to a definition of pure evil? Are such events and motivations ever truly explicable?
10. The plan to build the new motorway, trampling as it does on a past that some regard as sacred, is an outrage to the archaeologists who are trying to preserve an ancient legacy. How does this conflict fit thematically with Ryan's own contradictory desires to unearth and to pave over his past?
11. Do you have your own theories about the mysteries that remain unsolved at the end of *In the Woods*? What are they?
12. What were your thoughts and emotions upon finishing *In the Woods*? If this book affected you differently from other mysteries you have read, why do you think this is the case?

Source: www.penguinrandomhouse.com

