

Book Club Kit

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About Ronan Hession



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Rónán discovered books when he read his way through the Intercert list. He wrote poetry, and articles for the school magazine, but from his mid-teens became immersed in music.

“I released three albums as Mumblin’ Deaf Ro, and I ran a small record label.”

Meanwhile he worked in the Civil Service. In 2012, with the birth of his children, he stepped away from music, but after a few years, realised he needed creativity in his life.

“That led me towards writing. Leonard and Hungry Paul, started in 2017, is the first thing I wrote. I never took a creative writing course. Reading taught me to write.

“It was as if I was pregnant with Leonard. I got a sense of him as he was going through a melancholic phase. I kept noticing people like him, who, when you get to know them, have deep characteristics. The friendship with Hungry Paul was a way of balancing him out. Hungry Paul doesn’t care about fitting in.”

Who is Rónán Hession?

Date of birth: 1975 in Dublin.

Education: O’Connell’s Secondary School, Ballybough. Trinity College Dublin, Economics and Politics.

Home: Dublin.

Family: Wife, Sinéad, sons Thomas, 10, and Jacob 9.

The Day Job: A Civil Servant, working in the Department of Social Protection.

In Another Life: "I'd live abroad and be the outsider; I'd rewire my brain in a different language."

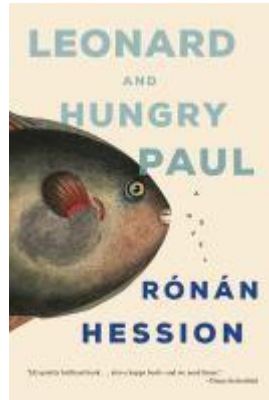
Favourite Writers: Naguib Mahfouz; Yan Lianke; Banana Yoshimoto; Haruki Murakami; Han Kang; Arianna Harwicz; Margarita Garcia Robayo.

Second Novel: Due in Spring 2021. "It's very different."

Top Tip: "Look at your characters as if you're a casting director who has procured the best actors, and be careful not to upstage them. They mustn't be absent from the story for too long."

Source: <https://www.suejeleonard.com/articles/beginners-pluck/ronan-hession/>

Synopsis – Leonard and Hungry Paul



Leonard and Hungry Paul are two friends who see the world differently. They use humour, board games and silence to steer their way through the maelstrom that is the 21st century.

‘The figure in Munch’s painting isn’t actually screaming!’ Hungry Paul said. ‘Really, are you sure?’ Replied Leonard. ‘Absolutely. That’s the whole thing. The figure is actually closing his ears to block out a scream. Isn’t that amazing? A painting can be so misunderstood and still become so famous.’

Leonard and Hungry Paul is the story of two quiet friends trying to find their place in the world. It is about those uncelebrated people who have the ability to change the world, not by effort or force, but through their appreciation of all that is special and overlooked in life.

<https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/4351/>

Interview

Rónán Hession: 'I'm okay with writing books that fit into my life'

Author of Leonard and Hungry Paul talks about music, small publishers and working as a civil servant

Sat, Apr 3, 2021, 06:00

Patrick Freyne

Author Rónán Hession wrote Leonard and Hungry Paul in 2017 in the evenings when his children were in bed. Photograph: Tom Honan / The Irish Times

I meet Rónán Hession at a picnic table looking out to sea in Portmarnock where he lives with his wife, Sinéad, and their two sons. It's on the route he takes during his daily lockdown walk. Hession is author of this year's One Dublin One Book selection, the beautifully kind-hearted Leonard and Hungry Paul. Panenka, a richly melancholic but similarly gentle novel, will be published in May. Hession is also a senior civil servant and I first knew him as Mumblin' Deaf Ro when we were both gigging musicians in Dublin's independent music scene in the 1990s and 2000s.

His novels seem, to me, like a natural progression from his songs. Both are meticulously crafted and incisively observational. His last album, 2012's Dictionary Crimes, is an uncharacteristically autobiographical record about family, children, illness and bereavement. "My mother died, we had a miscarriage, then a couple years later, we had kids," he says. "And it was like I had this big orangutan sitting on my stomach and I was like 'at some stage I'm going to have to acknowledge I have this big orangutan and I'm not being honest as a writer if I'm avoiding things.' ... I kind of thought it was going to be received as a sort of like: 'sorry for your troubles but a bit too personal'. But people were open to it and it was quite cathartic. When I listen back now, I can see why Leonard and Hungry Paul is a lighter book."

The books and albums all start the same way, he says: "You get a surge of creative energy which kind of has instructions coded into it and over the years, I've got an internal radio, and I've got better at tuning and picking up those frequencies. So it hits me and I have a sense of what it wants to look like... And if I've taken shortcuts, or if I've tried to do in a contrived way, it just still feels unresolved... It's a very distinctive sort of surge. I suppose it's probably like the way birds know when it's time to migrate."

A busy father, Hession wrote Leonard and Hungry Paul in 2017 between 10 and 12 in the evenings when his children were in bed. That's still when he writes, when he has the house to himself. It was his first experience writing prose and there aren't any writers in his family. His father, a postal worker, died when Hession was seven leaving his mother, a hospital cleaner, with eight children to raise. Half of his family are in the postal service, he says. "Where the [writing] came from, I don't know. I don't really have a good answer for that except that I grew up without much adult supervision. I always had to be self-taught in things. And I think through my music and writing I have just figured out a way for me to get into that without learning how to do it comprehensively or properly, just seeing if there is an opening that I think I can squeeze in to."

Being chosen for One Dublin One Book has made him realise how rooted he is in the city. He grew up in Beaumont, went to school in O'Connells in the north inner city and was wandering around the city at the age of 12. ("My eldest son is 12 and I haven't let him go to Dunnes yet.") He went to college in Trinity. He now works in the Department of Finance. "I'm probably one of those people who, if you showed the Google Map activity at my funeral, they'll say, 'apart from his holidays he didn't really go far'."

Quiet lives

Leonard and Hungry Paul is a celebration of people who live quiet lives, people who "don't push themselves to the front" and are often either simplified or, worse, rendered grotesque in literature. This is why, in both books, he says, "there's very few physical descriptions, no surnames, no place names... I didn't want shortcuts. I didn't want people to be able to say, 'Oh, yeah, I know this person based on these descriptors'. If you want to take quiet people and put them in the foreground, you need to prune away the things that normally obscure them."

He's very conscious, he says, that those who have made the most difference in his own life are self-effacing people who often go unchampioned. "I'm not naturally like that. My wife is a naturally kind person and she's had a very good influence on me. One of the nice things about One Dublin One Book is that friends of my mother have got in touch and said, 'I didn't know you were a writer,' and I'm able to send them a copy and say, 'This is inspired by kind people like you were to me.'"

What kindnesses is he referring to? "There was a lot of pressure on my mother to keep everything together, and her whole group of friends were a great support to the family," he says. "And neighbours. Leonard is a sort of an adjunct member of Hungry Paul's family and I was a bit like that for other families on the street. They would bring me out on trips in a way that didn't make me self-conscious... I remember there were football managers or parents

of other guys on the [football] team where when I had to go to a trial and when my mother was working they would drive me to Blanchardstown, wait for me to play, then drive me home. If I did that once in my life, I'd be telling everyone about."

Was he a good footballer? He wasn't bad, he says, "but I remember marking Jason Sherlock at one stage, and I was like, yeah, I'm not at that level."

Panenka, his next book, has football in it. It's a moving story about a retired footballer grappling with a sense of failure. What inspired it? "I remember reading *Disgrace* by JM Coetzee," he says. "Disgrace is a really interesting topic and it didn't really deal with it in a way that I was expecting... Also, I had read an interview with Daniel Timofte, the guy who lost a penalty against Ireland for Romania... He hadn't got over it. And people hadn't let him get over it. And though he was a very talented footballer it was still the thing he was known for. The main theme of that book is life's unfixability. I think our mentality at times is trying to fix the things in our life to allow us to move on to try and say, well, how can you move on if they're not fixable?"

Unashamedly optimistic

Part of why I enjoy Hession's books so much is that they're unashamedly kind and optimistic when literary fashion often veers towards the dark and nihilistic. He puts this down to a couple of influences. "Leonard and Hungry Paul in particular, is heavily influenced by coming out of a decade of reading children's books for my kids," he says. "What children's books do a bit better than other fiction is they try to go beyond just saying 'the world is a bad place'... They try and say, 'Is there a way to be in the world, given the world is the way it is? How do I engage with the world without it overwhelming me?'... That's something I think of in my own life and it comes out in the book."

He also rarely reads anglophone literature, he says. "There are a lot of conventions in writing that are purely English conventions, including around characterisation, including around narrative structure. Building a book around conflict, having a narrative where there is an escalation of a problem and a resolution at the end... There's a lot of very good writing from China, Japan, Croatia, Egypt, Sudan where writers are able to give you a full experience and don't do any of that stuff.... I thought the thing people would talk about the most, and nobody has mentioned this, is the omniscient narrator. It's a very 19th century idea... I thought the show-don't-tell police would have me put away for that."

He never expected Leonard and Hungry Paul to be published and so he's very loyal to his independent UK publishers at Bluemoose Books. After the book picked up readers some bigger publishers were interested. "I think it would be hypocritical of me to say, 'Here's a gentle book, now let's sell it to the highest bidder.' [Bluemoose] changed my life. I wouldn't

be a writer without them... Coming from this independent music scene and being into underdog football clubs [he supports Watford], it's kind of natural to be on a small publisher. I can't see myself being with a jet-setting major publishing. I like that sort of outsider thing. Partly because there's a lot of creative control in it... But also, I just like dealing with a small number of people. Kevin [Duffy, co-founder of Bluemoose] talks to me every day almost."

Furthermore, unlike most artists, Hession has never fantasised about leaving his day job, never sat "dreaming of an alternative existence". He points to a rich legacy of civil servants who wrote, people like Egyptian Nobel prize winner Naguib Mahfouz and Flann O'Brien and Thomas Kinsella. "Civil servants are interested in things very close to what writers are interested in," he says. "You're interested in society, and fundamentally, the position of individuals in society... That 'zoom in, zoom out' type perspective of the civil servant feels very natural in novel writing. I've a very interesting job. I love it very much... You're dealing with some of the marginalised people in society. It is quite grounding. But also, you're in a position to do things about it. I believe in my country. I believe in Irish society. My interest in the civil service and my writing is to try and contribute to that... And I'm okay with writing books that fit into my life. I believe in integration of everything. I'm not really one for compartmentalising. I try to be the same in writing as I am in work as I am with my kids. I don't feel I'm playing roles."

He's already working on his next book, currently titled Ghost Mountain. Among the events he's doing as part of One Dublin One Book is a live interview with Leagues O'Toole at which he will also perform music for the first time since 2014. "I was thinking after the next book maybe an album might be a palate-cleanser," he says. "But in terms of gigs and, carrying equipment and tuning guitars, I groan at stuff like that. The thought of sound-checking a drumkit. The sound of a bass drum and a surly engineer who just wants to go get a sandwich and you've just been sitting there with two hours to kill between soundcheck and the gig." He laughs. "I feel very at home in writing and I sort of feel like I'm just getting started."

For information about One Dublin One Book and related events go to onedublinonebook.ie

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/r%C3%B3n%C3%A1n-hession-i-m-okay-with-writing-books-that-fit-into-my-life-1.4514846>

Bookmunch

Books reviews with the occasional interview thrown in for good measure

“It came out without any grand schemes” – An interview with Ronan Hession, author of *Leonard & Hungry Paul*



More often than not, when people start raving about a book, we approach it with bemused chagrin. You have to understand. We don't like standing outside the restaurant window in the rain. We want to belong, really. But more often than not, when we read books that people get all excited about, we're all "Seriously? This is what you're excited about? *This?*" But then when a book comes along that people seem to like *that we like too*, well, we get all giddy. **Leonard & Hungry Paul** is one such book. To paraphrase the Jim Carrey in *Dumb & Dumber: we liked it a lot*. So, like an economy stalker, we approached those nice people at Bluemoose Books (publishers of Ben Myers, among others) and they put us in touch with Ronan.

So, we began. Tell us about **Leonard & Hungry Paul**. "**Leonard & Hungry Paul** is really a novel about gentle people finding their way in the world," Ronan told us. "People who are uncertain about themselves, uncertain about the world, and who have spent a portion of their lives trying to stay out of trouble and stay out of engaging with the wider world – but then their lives change. Leonard is a ghostwriter of children's encyclopaedias and when his mother passes away he has to come to terms with his place in the world. Hungry Paul is his best friend who is happily part of a nice family but the family is going through change – his parents are getting older and his sister is getting married and that raises all sorts of questions for him."

Okay, you might think, doesn't altogether sound like it's going to give John Grisham much competition in the old bestseller stakes, and yet it's generating all kinds of buzz (on Twitter, for example, and in the kinds of places that book buzz is heard, like, say, libraries and book shops and reading groups). We asked if it was all going to Ronan's head. "It's been very exciting, I have to say," Ronan continued. "I mean, it's very healthy to be entirely sceptical about buzz, it's a perfectly natural thing for any sincere reader to try and filter out. A lot of the buzz, though, has just been reader reaction, to be honest with you. The marketing budget at Bluemoose just extends to proof copies and circulating them. We don't have advertising, we don't have people pushing it from a PR perspective. We just have the level of trust that Bluemoose have built up over the last 10 years with readers and so something seems to have clicked. And so it's been librarians and book clubs and people who as a writer you really want to connect with. To be on the receiving end of it is really exciting."

However you cut it, Bluemoose have played a big part in getting **Leonard & Hungry Paul** to where it is today. We asked Ronan how he came to choose them for his debut. "When I was getting to the end of writing the book," Ronan explained, "I started asking myself who would publish a book like this? I didn't have an elevator pitch for it. I didn't really see books like this appealing to agents and so on. And then I read **Man With a Seagull on his Head** by Harriet Paige with was published by Bluemoose and I'd seen an interview with her and I read the book and I thought, ooh, this sounds like it's from the same part of the universe that I'm trying to write in. Then I read a bit more about [Bluemoose] and I liked their whole attitude. So they were the first people I sent it to. I sent three chapters about midnight on a Friday and Kevin at Bluemoose emailed me back at about 7 the next morning and he said he really liked it and to send him the rest. Then two weeks later he tweeted out that he really loved it and he had a quote from the book and he sent me a lovely email while I was on my lunch break in a bookshop offering to publish it and it really was that natural."

One of the things that struck us here at Bookmunch Towers is that Ronan Hession makes it look easy. You pick up **Leonard & Hungry Paul** and you make your way through the book like a hit knife through butter. It's a supremely pleasant experience. We said to Ronan, "There's nothing worse than someone saying this looks easy, we know..." Ronan replied, "I'd never written anything before and it kind of just came out quite naturally and the fact that it was a story about simplicity fit with the way the story came out. It came out without any grand schemes and without any abstract contrivances, the story came out in a way that suited it. And I take that as a symbol that I was doing it in a natural way, being faithful to the inspiration to the book. You try to have an intuitive sense of what the story asks and what makes the story work and sometimes when you get ahead of yourself the story doesn't work and so you strip it back to something better. It's like the original electric charge of inspiration has the instructions in it."

We couldn't believe our ears! Was Ronan Hession telling us that he wrote without a plan, that he ascended to the tightrope of writing a novel without a safety matt below? "I just had a sense of Leonard as a person and I was carrying him around and getting flashes of what he was like," Ronan said. I thought I'll write something about him every day for a few months... Then after the second day I said sod it I'll do a novel. That's more or less what I did. I took the opening sense of melancholy and he didn't really know and he was emotionally restless and went from there. In the second chapter I mentioned that Hungry Paul has a sister who is getting married and I thought why don't I make that the focal point and work towards that? The only real plotting I did was to buy a calendar and mark chapters out against the calendar to make sure I got the passage of time correct. The whole process was quite natural and revealed itself as I went. There'd be times where I'd think, if the next plot development doesn't reveal itself in the next few days I'm going to be stuck but it always did. It always unlocked and moved on. And while stuff is happening, it isn't like careening towards a particular destination in terms of plot development. it's about creating a world and letting people just naturally interact in that world."

We first read **Leonard & Hungry Paul** while travelling back and forth across the country on various trains and – you should know this before you dabble yourself – the book is "proper funny". "Proper funny" is an expression used by my kids to denote that which is actually funny from that which is smile funny or polite funny. Travelling about on trains, I have to tell you there were times in my experience of Leonard & Hungry Paul when I laughed out loud and other passengers looked at me in fright as if I was about to reveal other dangerous aspects of my personality. We asked Ronan if he tried out the book on other people, if he roadtested the jokes at all or if he was just making himself laugh. "Most of the

book was written late at night," Ronan said. "Me on my own, my wife and kids in bed and me on my own chuckling at the laptop, entertaining myself. I wasn't trying to write a funny book as such but the humour came out naturally just in the narrative voice. I like funny books, I like funny writers – not necessarily people who are full of jokes but just I think you have to gamble a little bit when you're writing and humour is a huge gamble. If someone is reading your book and they don't laugh, forget about it. There were a few moments in editing when the editor would say I don't understand this point, is it possibly a joke? You kind of go ok you can take that out, if it's not clear it's a joke take it out. I like understated humour, I like the narrator being a bit more pleasant and I like the balance where they can make jokes and they don't feel like you're talking down to the characters. When I think of funny writers I think of people like Alan Bennett, Spike Milligan's war memoirs are really funny, Japanese novelists like Banana Yoshimoto and there's an American writer based in Edinburgh called Nora Chassler. I've read two of her three books and they're hilarious and very clever. I think it's good to have the confidence to make a joke and there has to be a balance between the characters being funny and the book being funny but you just have to go for it and hope the humour will make it more human."

Now, we're not alone, we're sure, in thinking that the world is going to hell in a handcart (in point of fact, we'd go as far to say that the handcart seems to have been pimped, with small rockets on the side and a passenger intent on throwing landmines and grenades our way as it shuttles us ever closer to – well, who knows?). Reading **Leonard & Hungry Paul** offered us a measure of solace as Trump seems to be getting away with Russian collusion, and Theresa May gets away with ignoring at least half the country, and the IRA raise their heads again and – all of that. In point of fact, we'd go as far to say that a book hasn't struck us with this much warmth since we read George Saunders' **Lincoln in the Bardo** (which you all know we got worked up about). We asked Ronan if he had any hopes for the book come awards season? He was, as you'd expect, a bit saner than perhaps we are. "I think when it comes to awards, no matter what your policy is on awards, you get a surge of adrenaline when you're in the mix. The coolest position to be in is to win loads of awards and then afterwards say they don't mean all that much." We both laugh.

"For a debut novel on a small indie press just to be listed for any of those that would be amazing. But I recognise that the part of me that reacts to that is not the creative part of me. The creative part of me is the part of me that maybe needs to block some of that out and that includes blocking out some of the nice stuff too. It's like you have separate hard drives in your brain. Whenever you open up your laptop there's a blank page there completely unimpressed by whatever feedback you got in the past. But if it happened I'd be excited. I don't know if you ever saw Marco Tardelli when he scored a goal at the World Cup Final, it'd probably be like that."

Ronan has tweeted about two other books, **Panenka**, which he hopes to see published in 2021 and **Ghost Mountain**, which will likely follow in 2023. "I finished **Leonard & Hungry Paul** in summer 2017 and editing took six or eight months and then **Panenka** in summer 2018 and I had to park it. It's hard keeping two books in your head. It can cross over in dialogue and relationships. **Panenka** is really ready to go, with just a little bit of editing. We're well ahead of schedule. **Ghost Mountain** I've plotted and depending on my energy and how **Panenka** goes I'll start that this summer. These are new ideas, I should say. They weren't my plan b and plan c if **Leonard & Hungry Paul** didn't work out. These are ideas I've had since I finished **Leonard & Hungry Paul**. And that's what I want to do. I want to spend the rest of my life writing new stories. I want to keep moving and **Panenka** and **Ghost Mountain** are both different from **Leonard & Hungry Paul** and different from each other."

One thing you should know about Ronan if you don't follow him on Twitter, he reads a lot. A LOT. So, some implicit advice: if you want good book recommendations, follow Ronan Hession on Twitter. But by way of a stopgap, we asked for some recommendations, some books he'd read recently that thought worth shouting about. Ronan launched in without being asked twice: "I've read some really good books lately – Wendy Erskine's **Sweet Home**. She's from Belfast. That's really good, really bright, really lively. I finished a book the other day called **Tokyo Ueno Station** which is by a Japanese writer I haven't read before called You Miri, translated by an American translator called Morgan Giles. That is all about one of the main stations in the centre of Tokyo which has a park besides it where homeless people live and it's really about people who became homeless. You look at homeless people and you think they are poor and unfortunate but they weren't always that way. Right now I'm 150 pages into a book called **Shtetl Love Song** by a Lithuanian writer called Grigory Kanovitch. He's an elder statesman of Lithuanian literature, a holocaust survivor, and he's been writing novels for years and this time he's writing about his grandparents. It's very very funny."

So there you have it. Our chat with Ronan Hession. His debut novel, **Leonard & Hungry Paul**, is out now in all good bookshops and it's published by Bluemoose. And come awards season, when it's scooping up all the big prizes you can say – well, you can't say you heard it here first because of all that buzz we mentioned but you can certainly say Bookmunch jumped on the coattails of all that buzz like the Johnny Come Latelys we usually are.

<https://bookmunch.wordpress.com/2019/03/26/if-someone-is-reading-your-book-and-they-dont-laugh-forget-about-it-an-interview-with-ronan-hession-author-of-leonard-hungry-paul/>

Discussion Questions

<http://www.onedublinonebook.ie/resources/book-club-questions/>

- 1) Do you think the book has a central message?
- 2) What does the book say about the relationships between parents and children over time?
- 3) The book is not set at any specific time or place: did that affect your experience of reading the book?
- 4) What role do you think humour plays in the book?
- 5) A number of the characters grow or change during the book. What is the driving force for that?
- 6) In what way is Hungry Paul different to the other characters?
- 7) There are a number of recurring ideas, for example bird feeders and board games. What part do these play in the narrative?
- 8) Did you think that the narrator seemed like another character in the book? How did you feel about that?
- 9) How important do you think the opening line of the book is?
- 10) What did you think of the book's ending?

Reviews

<https://chireviewofbooks.com/2020/08/24/ronan-hession-leonard-and-hungry-paul/>

“Leonard and Hungry Paul” is a Coming-Of-Age Story for the Already Aged

BY KEITH CONTORNO
AUGUST 24, 2020

You may wish to note the below.

As a hailing, this phrase is eccentric yet disarming. It also shares a description with the two characters that share the book’s title—***Leonard and Hungry Paul***. It is also a variation of Hungry Paul’s entry for the Chamber of Commerce’s sign-off contest, which he doesn’t want the prize money for. The two autodidacts can be found wearing paisley pajama tops to work, making jokes without meaning to be funny, or naming their parents’ house after a French song lyric that they misinterpreted. Eccentric yet disarming.

Rónán Hession’s debut novel is a comedy. In many ways it is one of the most traditional classifications of comedy—it has its roots in Greek New Comedy, centering on a romantic plot with familial affairs, stock characters, and a generally happy ending. As a result, the outline of the book closely follows the type of comedies we have come to recognize from television and film, such as the eleven-year hit show *Frasier* and the movie *Big* (1988), which are two productions that have amusing parallels to Hession’s book.

Leonard and Hungry Paul are in their thirties and have retreated from the world, choosing to live simple and quiet lives. For Leonard, that meant a companionship with his mother, playing board games with Hungry Paul, and writing encyclopedias. For Hungry Paul it meant emergency fill-in mail carryings on Mondays, replenishing the bird feeders, and, of course, board games with Leonard. The two friends, who are adept listeners, begin to hear the universe close in around them, as Leonard loses his mother, and Hungry Paul’s parents start to feel their parental duties coming to a close as his sister Grace’s wedding day nears. Their way of life becomes complicated by their inevitable aloneness. The universe is expanding, but at some unknown point, it will begin to contract until it shrinks back to the nothingness that was before the Big Bang. Hession employs this changing scale as a metaphor for their circumstance, or rather, Leonard’s does. As Leonard and Hungry Paul age, are their lives shrinking or expanding?

With the very white, upper-middle class upbringings and high-mindedness of the two Scrabble buffs creating a comparable effect to the stock comedy character pedants, *Frasier* and Niles Crane, various laughter inducing scenarios arise from their social blunders and erroneous assumptions as they advance from refuge. For example, the two shop together for dress clothes and they both become “smitten” with the days-of-the-week socks near the register. And also when Hungry Paul rides into the supermarket on his high-horse and makes a scene over an expired box of chocolates that turned out to house his mother’s sewing instruments. In this way, much of the comedy results in a habitual, “that was so Leonard,” or “what a Hungry Paul thing to do.” It lands somewhere between endearing and frustrating, and buttresses one of the book’s themes about learning to find a balance across knowledge and experience—both being just as important in an education.

Hession's novel's likeness to *Big* is rendered through the pairs' child-like naivety bumping up against what are considered grown-up scenarios, capturing that Tom Hanks innocence in an adult body feeling. It is not a surprise that while the two are learning to wrestle with their fear over "the bigness of life," they show others that exercising some inner-child is another helpful way to reach equilibrium.

If finding balance is a theme that winds through *Leonard and Hungry Paul*, then, quiet demeanors and expert listening skills are the paramount elements that the comrades bring to the loud and insatiable world. Can these quiet man-children actually contribute? The answer to that question gets at the very heart of the story. And without ruining the finer moments of the novel, it can be said that Hession's work is one for introverts to enjoy and extroverts to marvel at.

Hession's narrative is cheerful and funny. But it is also a meditation on loneliness, fear, and what we fill our lives up with to compensate for them. In more than one way, it is a coming-of-age story for the already aged. It is a reminder that we are scared children, grasping at the answers, often confused about what we should clutch to and what we should throw ourselves at.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/29/leonard-and-hungry-paul-ronan-hession-review>

Leonard and Hungry Paul by Rónán Hession review – a gentle curiosity

An 'evening of darts, dominoes, cards or other prison games'.

Carrie O'Grady

What a curious book this is. You don't often get good novels about ordinary people living tranquil lives almost completely devoid of incident – no shocking discoveries, no crises, no coming to terms with a dark past. The granddaddy of the genre is George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892), and that took malicious pleasure in skewering the pretensions of its bourgeois everyman. Irish debut *Leonard and Hungry Paul* is its opposite: a charming, warm-hearted celebration of all that is treasurable about everyday life, "stories of overlooked people who had simply lived their lives as best they could". It's witty, but the jokes, refreshingly, are never at anyone's expense.

The two title characters are single men in their 30s. Leonard, who writes for children's encyclopedias, yearns to connect with someone and share the awe he feels at the beauty of the universe. Hungry Paul, by contrast, is self-contained: considerate, fond of his family, but perfectly content with "the innate orderliness of things". He is the walking embodiment of mindfulness, living in and for the present moment. A strange choice of main character, you may think, and you'd be right: this is very much a two-hander, and without the low-key dynamism of Leonard as a counterbalance, Hungry Paul's story would go nowhere. (Why "Hungry"? We're never told. As a man who lets the world wash over him, he's low on appetite.)


The leisurely pace flags further when it comes to the subplots, which involve even less remarkable relatives. Here the novel struggles to escape the fate of all books about unexciting people: they're not exciting. That, of course, is the point. We're meant to be appreciating the unappreciated aspects of life. But I defy any author, even one as winning as Hession, to make us savour a detailed discussion of who'll order from the set menu and who'll go for the a la carte.

Nevertheless, this is an appealing book thanks to Hession's engaging style, which flits lightly across the emotional range like a harpist plucking the strings. He is often inventively funny, as when he refers to blokes going to the pub "for an evening of darts, dominoes, cards or other prison games". In the same sentence he can be heart-rending, adding that Leonard chose not to go because "nothing made him feel lonelier these days than the thought of spending time in the company of extroverts". These flashes of wit and poignancy make something exceptional out of what might easily have been humdrum, vindicating WH Auden's assertion that the novelist must learn "how to be / One after whom none think it worth to turn".

Leonard and Hungry Paul is published by *Bluemoose*.

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