

Excerpts from Margaret McGoverne's upcoming debut  
novel, *And The Buntings Flew*



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The following selected excerpts are from chapter 1 of my  
upcoming novel, *And The Buntings Flew*.

## Novel Synopsis

*It is 1975, and shy, thoughtful eight-year-old Purdey (short for Perdita) is a mongrel – half Catholic, half Protestant. She loves to leave behind the painted kerbs, Union flags, and street murals of her Belfast home to visit the nearby shore of Belfast Lough, but her parents don't take her often enough. Her mother has told her stories of her own youth spent by the Antrim coast, and has promised to take her to see the birds this summer, both residents and migrants, that nest in the reeds and bushes of the mud flats and lagoons of Belfast Lough.*

*Purdey and her family's lives are shattered that fateful summer when she is an unseen witness to what appears to be a terrorist attempt on her father's life following a standoff with the IRA. His crime? He refuses to hand over his young Catholic assistant for "punishment" after an unspoken transgression. Unknown to anyone else, Purdey catches a glimpse of the uncovered faces of the gunmen, and recognizes one of them.*

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*Not long after, Purdey's mother is also struck down by a catastrophic brain haemorrhage, leaving her comatose in the city hospital, deep in the Republican part of town where Protestants fear to tread.*

*With both her parents afflicted by misfortune, Purdey faces an overwhelming dilemma: tell the grownups that she knows who shot and injured her father, or say nothing and live with the terrible knowledge. Either way, her life and the lives of those close to her are in danger.*

*The violence surrounding Purdey's family and community escalates, culminating in the senseless double murder of a pair of young Catholic brothers, shocking even the battle weary Loyalist residents of Troubles torn Ulster.*

*Together with help from some unlikely allies, Purdey must find her way through the fear and hatred in her community, and the betrayals by those closest to her. All is not as it seems, and loyalty is no longer a word upon which anyone can rely, on either side of the political and religious divide.*

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**Chapter 1**

Belfast Telegraph, Friday 24th October 1975

**Man hurt in Belfast shooting**

*A man was shot in the leg when two men burst into a motor repair garage on Old Shore Road. A search was made of the area, but the gunmen escaped on foot towards Antrim Road.*

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My father was thirty-seven when he lost his left shinbone, or, rather, when he had it taken from him. The surgeons who treated his wounds were kind, but wasted no time shattering any illusions of full recovery; he had suffered multiple fractures of the left tibia, and would limp with a leg two inches shorter than its counterpart, for the rest of his days.

He was swathed in a plaster cast, toes to groin, for nearly a year. Upon his return home, he would sit by the fireplace, leg elevated on a stool, and carefully slide one of my mother's knitting needles inside his cast, trying, but always failing, to reach the maddening healing itch on his torn and shrunken calf. When the irritation became unbearable, he would scratch the cast itself, his fingers rasping the bumpy surface, earning him a chalky white residue under his fingernails, but no relief. Upon leaving the hospital, the cast had been fitted with a metal walking heel, and I would hear its ringing tones when, on the nights he couldn't sleep, and driven to movement by the gnawing pain of deep tissue healing and his body's attempts to assimilate the metal plates between his ankle and knee, he would slowly pace the kitchen and hallway beneath my bedroom.

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Strictly speaking the real trouble could be traced back to the Partition of Ireland in 1920, or if you really wanted to dredge up ancient history (a popular but not very peaceable Northern Irish pastime), then why not the Battle of the Boyne in 1690? William of Orange's defeat of the Jacobites had reinforced the Protestant Ascendancy of Ireland, but had also cemented the cause of the mostly, Roman Catholic and Gaelic Irish nationalist movement, following as it did the body blow dealt to Irish nationalism by the Plantation of Ulster from Scotland and England.

Being Scots Irish Protestants with a surname originating in the Hebrides, this was not how the McDowells understood the Irish Question. All four of my great grandfathers were proud signatories of the Ulster Covenant of 1912; in North Antrim Orange Halls along the Causeway cliff path, where the equally obdurate Finn McCool had laid the Giant's Causeway to defend the honour of his wife Oonagh, nearly fifteen thousand signatories had solemnly declared that God was on their side; they would never accept a Home Rule Parliament in Dublin.

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All four of my grandparents were born along the North Antrim coast - my father's mother and father in rural townlands of Billy Parish separated only by the Giant's Causeway, and my mother's parents in nearby Ballycastle, a bustling seaside resort and harbour with a ferry service to the nearby Rathlin Island, and further afield to the Mull of Kintyre, hazy but visible on clear calm days across the North Channel strait.

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Although the parish church at Billy boasted a venerable pile of my progenitors' bones, my grandparents didn't stay to join them - by the time Willie McDowell Junior married Miss Elsa Purcell of Bushmills in 1934, they had travelled across the glens, leaving rural Antrim for the bright lights of Belfast City. Their sojourn there was brief, followed by a series of moves until they settled down and raised a family of eight in the village of Annahilt County Down, fifteen miles southwest of Belfast.

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Their eldest son, and my father, Iain - apple of his mother's dotting eye and her jetty haired, olive skinned double - was born in 1938, the first of four sons. Unlike the typical Gaelic - Celtic complexion of her husband - dark hair, pale skin and blue eyes - Elsa passed on to most of her children her tanned colouring. Whether it originated with the first inhabitants of Ireland, or was passed on by invading waves of Galatians or Celts, possibly even those Spaniard sailors, Elsa was both feted and pitied for her "Black Irish" good looks.

As the family grew in quick succession, with each new arrival able to wear the outgrown cast-offs of its nearest sibling, Elsa had less time to supplement the family income with home grown produce. The opportunities for work in thriving Belfast were much greater than in a Lisburn backwater, so in 1954 the family moved to the capital, and settled in a three bed Edwardian villa on the Old Shore Road in North Belfast. Number 265 was one of two houses which stood apart, on a corner in a break between two terraces, with a gated yard and garage between. The house marked the furthest edge of the row of shops that lined the Fortlambert stretch of the Old Shore Road. It was a handsome red brick house stranded in a low tide of urban spread; caught between the main



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arterial route into the City Centre and the Docks a mile or two away, and the Belfast to Larne railway line and soon-to-be-completed M2 motorway 50 yards behind. Short Street, a lone dead end terrace at the rear of the yard buffered the industrial hinterland beyond.

And yet beyond the unsightly blend of the down at heel, formerly elegant residences and utilitarian light industry, the inner shore of Belfast Lough was no more than a quarter of a mile beyond the M2 motorway, stretching from the city centre docks up to Newtownabbey, an oasis of mud flats and lagoons and home to multitudes of birds, where finally the salt tang could be tasted, mingled though it was with the low water sulphur reek of the mud and the nearby Tip Head city dump.

My grandfather rented number the yard adjoining 265, and set up shop as a motor repair mechanic, naming the business Loughside Garage. His sons, with only eight years between eldest and youngest were a ready source of help, and all four served informal apprenticeships under the bonnets of cars. My father continued the business at Loughside after his father's death, when most of his siblings had migrated to England and Scotland.

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Iain was a good motor mechanic; competent, trusted by his customers. He had also been prepared to return to Northern Ireland to run the garage when Willie died. Gregarious and popular, many of these customers were also neighbours and friends, or at least, drinking partners, who appreciated his easy generosity towards buying a round or two. He married Izzie Norton, middle daughter of a neighbouring Old Shore Road family, and I was born in 1967, my sister Belle six years later. No sons followed to continue the family business, but some of my earliest memories are of lingering around the garage, fascinated by the racks of tools, the smell of petrol and its iridescent rainbow stains on the workshop floor, the siren call of the inspection pit, and most of all the steady flow of customers, associates and friends of my father.

One autumn afternoon, a week or so before my eighth birthday, my mother shooed me from under her feet; my sister was teething and fractious, and my accompanying the songs on the radio with my tambourine was unwelcome. The day was calm and damp, the sky leaden. The faint breeze along the pavement was just enough to stir the pungent smell of the unseen mud flats and the nearby tip. Wet leaves had gathered behind the yard gates and I kicked them around until my mother tapped on

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the window pane and jerked her thumb, my sister perched on her other arm, drooling and angry cheeked as she crammed a Farley's rusk against, rather than into, her mouth.

My boundaries were clear that autumn - the small, unadorned backyard of our house, and through the high brick wall gap into the wider yard of the garage forecourt; outside the front door, within hailing distance in either direction, but not on any account across the busy main road. I sat for a while on the corner of Short Street, its kerbstones painted alternately in red, white and blue, and with my chin in my hands considered the zig zag of faded buntings fluttering between the lampposts on either side of the road. Each lamppost was topped with either a Union flag or the Ulster Banner; a red cross on white background, with a red hand at its centre. Some, but not all, of the red brick houses along the terrace also had flags hanging limply in the moist air, from brackets midway up the walls.

The flags gave the streets a festive, holiday look, but I waited in vain for something exciting to happen along our stretch of the road. Something had happened, a few months ago on a bright Saturday morning; bands of marching men, playing

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rousing tunes on drums and pipes and followed by a rag tag of boys and girls had filed in a disorderly fashion along the road, some twirling batons high into the air and mostly, but not always catching them cleanly. I didn't have long to enjoy the spectacle, however, as my mother had hustled me indoors and refused to answer my pleas to join in or follow the band; I felt the side of her hand across my legs for refusing to drop the subject.

"Why can't we watch the bands?" I had asked my father, running to him in tears, while rubbing my leg to exaggerate the damage inflicted by my mother.

"Because", he said, "You're a wee mongrel."

His reply raised more questions than it resolved, but I was in luck; my father was in an unusually communicative mood that day, or maybe he thought the time was ripe for my first lesson in elementary Northern Irish politico-religious affairs.

"A mongrel, before you ask, is someone who has one

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Catholic parent, and one Prod. And that's you."

"What's a parent?" I asked, glad to be able to clear this up - the word cropped up quite often in the comics I read, and I had no idea yet what it meant.

"Your ma and your da."

"And what are you daddy?"

"I'm the Prod."

I considered this briefly, feeling strongly that my mother must be a Prod, if her bony-fingered skills in chivvying, hair brushing and smacking were anything to go by, but I held my peace on that subject.

"Why can't mongrels watch the bands?" I asked, instead. Iain was not an affectionate or tactile man, and I have few memories of being hugged or carried by him, but he hoisted me

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up and deposited me on to his workbench as he said,

"Because", when you're a Catholic or a Prod, you'll have half the town hating you, and half of them cheering you on. When you're both, you're neither, and no one will want to own you.

"Ach, but that's not a bad thing either", he said as he swung me back to the floor, "And don't ever think being a mongrel is a bad thing Purdey; if there were more like you, we'd all live a lot easier together. If this place has a future, it looks like you."

And with that I had to be content, as he refused to be drawn further. He told me to clear off out of the garage, and go see if my ma needed any help with the baby.

So on that October day, when I was already bored of the half term holiday and looked forward to school again on Monday, I didn't look out for bands. I contented myself with a circuit of the house, yard and garage, being moved on when I became an obvious annoyance. My mother had taken my sister to

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bed for a nap, both tired out by my sister's crying in the night, which had woken me once or twice. The house was off limits to any noisy activity, and when I became a liability in the yard my father sent me off for a dander to the sweet shop a few houses up the road, with a note for a packet of cigarettes for him, and two pee of sweets for me, to be paid for on Friday.

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McCleod's was cramped, crammed and dimly lit, with a pungent resinous smell of newspaper print, tobacco leaf, and the aniseed aroma of cough candy and liquorice all-sorts. A glass-topped and fronted counter ran the length of one wall; racks of newspapers and a bewildering array of magazines and comics covered the wall opposite. A bulky Lyons Maid ice cream chest filled what space was left on the back wall. Rows of jars with a tantalising selection of sweets lined the shelves behind the counter, book-ending a central section for cigarettes, tobacco, matches and rolling papers.

My eyes were always torn between the sweets and the comics; both offered a cornucopia of pleasure, but my weekly reward for shop-running duties never stretched to both, and my

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gaze always swivelled between the displays in an agony of indecision. Should I buy two ounces of acid drops, or plump instead for this week's copy of Tammy, and read all about the plucky young girls who faced all sorts of bewildering adventures, or maybe Bunty, so I could dress up the cut out fashion doll in her paper skirts and matching knitwear?

The Dandy and Beano I didn't have to worry about; I had a weekly subscription to both, paid for by my mother, proud of my reading skills that outstripped the rest of my class ("She could skip up a year or two!", Mrs. Greer, my teacher had said), and eagerly consumed every Tuesday and Thursday respectively.

"Good afternoon Purdey, what about ye?" Hughie McCleod greeted me as I pushed through the door, ringing the bell.

"Afternoon Mr McCleod, I've got a wee note from my da," I said, handing him the slip of paper, now warm and crumpled, despite its short journey from the garage.

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Sucking my Curly Wurly as I walked back along the road I savoured the melting sweetness of the chocolate and caramel, but despite my immersion in sugar, I felt colder than I had on the way to the shop; clouds scudded across the sky and I wished I had my cardigan. As I came up to the corner where I had to cross Short Street, I heard two quick and muffled cracking sounds up ahead, like a rapid double knock at a door. As I wondered where the noise had come from, a burst of frenzied shouting from the garage gates made me stop at the corner and turn instead into Short Street. I waited to see what would happen.

For a second or two nothing happened; the occasional car whooshed past on the main road, but otherwise I was alone. No one came out of their doors or gates to see what the commotion was all about. I couldn't get to our front door without walking past the yard gateway, and I had decided to run back to McCleods when two men burst out of the open gates, bizarrely, to my eyes, running half backwards, their arms raised to their shoulders, held straight out, their hands jerking as they fired the gun they each held, the crack now a car backfiring, now a cannon, now a bomb.

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Unconscious of having moved, I lurched backwards and would have fallen, dreamlike, to the floor if the back of my knees had not come into contact with the garden wall of the house on the corner. My body sat down on the protruding lower edge of the wall while my eyes devoured the two men, their nightmare insect heads covered closely with black material, two fly-like eye holes, their arms still pointed towards the gates until they turned away and ran across the main road, where they paused and tore off their strange mask-hats, (I had never seen a balaclava before and didn't have a name for one) before slowing to a fast walk up the hill towards Fortlambert Park Road.

They still didn't appear to notice me as they scanned the scene one last time, and if they noticed me they didn't recognise me. I couldn't see their faces from across the road, but one had dark short hair, and the taller one was taller, thinner and had wavy blonde hair. Both looked old to me, but not as old as my parents. Their figures danced in front of my eyes, alternating insect and human heads, long after their bodies disappeared from view.

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I knew that the front door and the inner lobby door were both on the snib, and I made my way to the porch where I listened for a minute for any noise in the house, apart from the baby's crying. Hearing nothing else, I pushed the door open as quietly as possible and quickly pulled it behind me. I was now in the lobby between the two doors and I took a huge breath. I hadn't realised I'd been holding it since I saw the men run out of the yard.

"Mummy? Dad?"

No one answered, and no one came.

Closing the inner hall door behind me, I crossed the hall and made my way up the stairs to my bedroom, which was the first room on the landing. The noises were louder as I crept into my room and up to the window overlooking the yard and garage, although I didn't dare look out; the sash was up a few inches, and I could hear a terrible puffing noise, like a man who had run a deadly sprint, and the sound of my mother's cries receding as the staccato of her heels rang across the forecourt.

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After a moment or two the puffing noise stopped, or moved out of the range of my hearing, and I took another breath. Steadying myself against my bed, for I had taken only two breaths in as many minutes, I looked down at the comic I was clutching, forgotten, and forever creased, Dennis the Menace imprinted on my hot and trembling palm.

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Simultaneously, sounds amplified, both inside the house, and outside. The screams of my sister joined with the two tone air horn of the police car or ambulance that was pulling into the yard, alternate blue lights strobing against my window pane. Other sounds stepped forward, became distinct from the milieu of noise assailing me; below my window I heard people running into the back sitting room from the yard, my mother among them; I hadn't realised until now that she was screaming my name distractedly, repeatedly.

Quickly standing up and slipping from my bedroom, I padded silently over to my parents room; I scooped my sister's

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convulsive little body from her cot and climbed onto the bed with her, trying to hush her as she shuddered to a sobbing halt. As we lay there together, like discarded dolls in the middle of the large old bedstead, my mother burst through the door, almost falling onto the bed, followed by a man in a Royal Ulster Constabulary uniform; the first of many strangers to overrun our home that day.

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## About Margaret



Margaret was born in East London, the daughter of parents and grandparents (as far back as she has traced) from Northern Ireland, most of whom originated from counties Antrim and Down.

Margaret studied for a Law degree and MBA while working for a London based utility company, where she still works.

Margaret has always had a love of writing, and cherishes her first encouragement, at age 12 from her English teacher Mr. Church, who inspired her to read widely and “nurture her talent.” Thank you Mr. Church, your words have resonated for more than 30 years, and helped embolden me to concentrate now on writing as fully as possible, after thinking that my dream of being an author was just that, a dream.

Margaret is married with one son, two cats, and in her spare time loves reading voraciously, and on as many platforms as she can (tablet, phone, Kindle, online and good old paper), making things grow, travelling to new places, swimming, and walking. Making preserves and cordials from the good things she grows and find in hedgerows is a pleasant way to combine several of these interests!

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You can sign up for Margaret's regular newsletter and find out more about  
this and other works at her website and blog:

<http://margaretmcgoverne.com/>

You can also connect with Margaret online at:

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