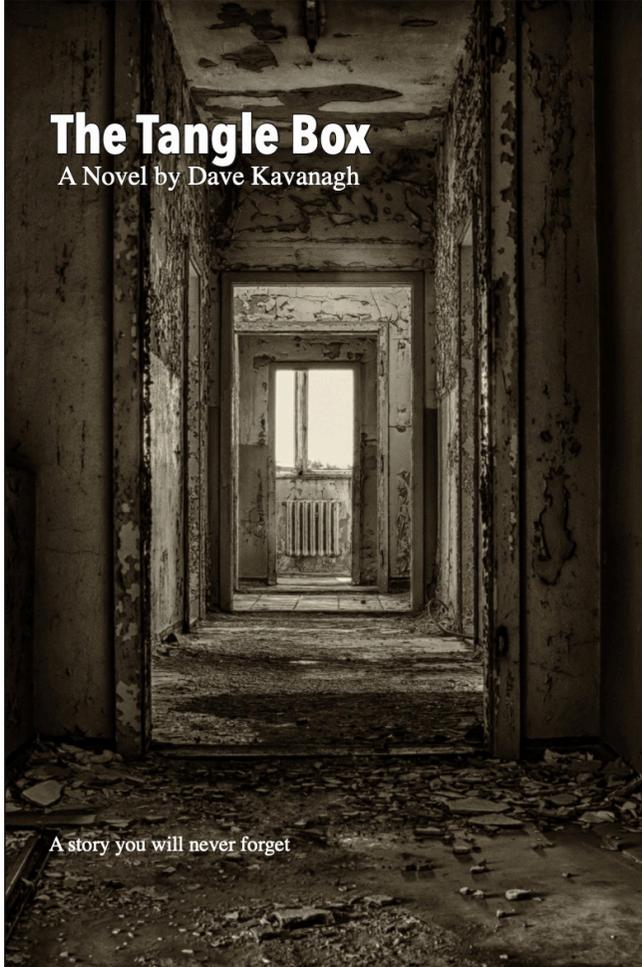


The Tangle Box

A Novel by Dave Kavanagh

Coming July 6th from Chaffinch Press

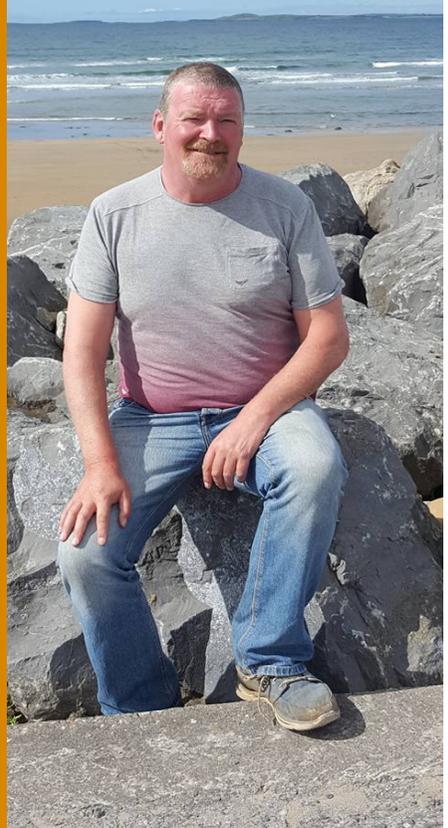


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Author Bio

Dave Kavanagh

Dave Kavanagh is a writer and publisher based in North Dublin. His work is widely published both in print and online. As well as writing, Kavanagh is passionate about growing food in a sustainable manner and when he is not at his desk writing, he manages a large home garden where he grows vegetables and fruit for his extended family.



The Tangle Box is his first novel. He is feverishly working on a second.

About The Tangle Box

At the centre of The Tangle Box lies a suppressed memory of a day when Dan O'Neill's mother and sister disappeared. In returning to his childhood home, Dan attempts to recall what happened there and the consequences that followed.

He recounts his experiences to Cathryn Ryan, relating the story of a mother, Caroline, who was abusive, a father, Tommy who despite his love for his children was an enabler and ultimately, about a community that closed ranks around their own. He tells Cathryn of his later life and how his childhood experiences impact his ability to form relationships and process experiences.

At its heart, The Tangle Box is a story of hope and triumph, that has captivated its early readers.

Chaffinch Press

Chaffinch Press is an independent hybrid publishing imprint of poetry and literary fiction, based in Dublin. The press publishes a limited number of titles each year and grew out of The Blue Nib, an online magazine established in 2015 as an alternative platform offering a voice for talented writers, both established and emerging, across the globe.

What early readers said About The Tangle Box

The Tangle Box is a riveting read; we imagine. Kavanagh confidently paces his narrative, as memories are teased out, and the adult Daniel returns to face a turbulent past, a past which still holds him in its grip. Revelations come upon the reader suddenly, adding surprising intrigue to the telling. Descriptions of the Irish landscape sometimes suggest an unholy alliance with the mental and physical torments of the narrator and at other times expose the vulnerability of children: 'I lay on Maria's bed, never wanting to leave, and clinging to the images of how we fought back . Memories of rebellion, our weapons - apples, pears and toffee'. An unsettling story, realistically lifting the lid on what can go on behind closed doors. Once started, I couldn't put this book down.

- Maggie Harris.

Guyana Prize and Commonwealth Short Story Prize Winner.

Dave Kavanagh's The Tangle Box is a powerful story of a broken man, immediate in its first person perspective. Evocative in its opening, compelling in its closing. It's a tale of unlikely monsters, disquieting in its honesty, brutal in its secrets. You won't forget it in a hurry. -

- Eugen Bacon, award-winning author of Claiming T-Mo and Writing Speculative Fiction.

Sample

I crawl back, like an injured animal seeking its lair. And when I close the door behind me, there is no relief. It clings to me. The house, the mire. The stench on my clothes, in my hair, and the dirt and dust in my body and lungs make me retch.

I strip naked, throwing my clothes into the basket, then taking them out again, I get a sack from under the sink and bundle them into that, replacing them in the basket. Tomorrow I will take them to the laundromat and wash the ichor of the house from them.

My hands are filthy, palms black and sticky from the shit and piss of vermin, and something worse — the residue of damaged lives, greasy beneath my nails. My skin is itchy from the dust and grime, but I'm afraid to scratch.

The water cascades over me and I turn the handle until I burn and still it's not enough. I shampoo my hair once, and then again, lather running down my body. I use a nail brush, scrubbing my fingers until the quicks bleed but still, when I lift my hands to my nose, it's there, beneath the soap and scent of sandalwood ... the stench of the house. I douse my body with shower gel and scrub every inch of my skin, rubbing my scars raw. The water cools but I still feel it, like the rasp of a blade. I scrub more. The water goes cold and my body grows pink from scrubbing, but I can still smell it, taste it.

I get out of the shower and towel myself dry, rubbing it over my hair, working it between my fingers and my toes. I apply deodorant everywhere, desperate to rid myself of the stink of decay, of the things that brushed against my face like fingers reaching out for me. I brush my teeth so hard they bleed.

I pull pyjamas from my small closet. It's cold now. Outside it's dark, and the wind has picked up and sings through the park railings. I'm tired and my leg is throbbing; I want to ring Maria but I have nothing to tell her. There was nothing in the house that I didn't already know. I look at the green LED on the radio: it's ten minutes to midnight. I only have a few hours before I need to be up. Tomorrow I will see Cathryn; perhaps she can tell me what it was I missed.

Cathryn sits back, hands steepled, index fingers tapping her chin.

‘Tell me from the start.’ Her voice is soft, and flows over me like balm.

She’s staring at me. Her eyes are the lightest smokey grey, and when the sun glints I see shades of gold .

I grunt and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, not thinking. The pain shoots through my right thigh. I sit back up and reach for the pills in my pocket but her eyes still my hand.

She’s waiting. Waiting for me to tell her a story.

But where to begin? Not at the start, to go there would be to expose too much of myself, but I can’t go to the end either, because the story is still unfolding. So I start at the place she sent me to.

*

‘A phrase kept repeating. A quote. Or rather the tail end of a quote.’

She’s watching me, waiting. And now I’m sorry I started here. ‘What was the quote?’

‘And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.’

‘Nietzsche?’ She smiles at me and leans forward to scribble something on her pad. ‘Why that quote?’

‘You’re the psychiatrist.’ I raise an eyebrow, and she nods for me to go on.

I continue and, as I do, she closes her eyes.

‘So, I hummed the lyrics of a song, that just an hour ago

I could not dislodge from my head, but it won’t settle. I tried repeating a stanza of a poem. But Nietzsche, the bastard, was still whispering in my ear.’

It’s Cathryn’s turn to raise an eyebrow. She doesn’t like me swearing when I come to see her; I shrug in apology.

‘My leg was aching, I did too much on Saturday, so I focused on the pain.’
‘Good.’

The pain in my leg is healing, but the past few days have seen it throb again. I recall leaving the hospital; it was April, the cherries along Eccles Street were shedding pink petals that blew in swirls along lines of sun and shadow. Now it’s September and the promise of that spring day is replaced by lacklustre trees and muggy heat. A line of sweat forms between my shoulders and my eyes feel scratchy and sore.

‘Did you drive out on your own?’ She writes on her pad again, waiting for me to answer.

‘Yes. I thought it would be ok, it only took an hour.’

‘How did you feel, seeing it all again?’

‘It was ok. It’s changed, the road is a proper street now, they’ve removed old toe-paths, and hedges too. There are footpaths, you know — pavement, tarmac and kerbstones.’

I don’t tell her how I deluded myself on the journey out. And how, despite Nietzsche and my leg flexing and throbbing, I’d hoodwinked myself into believing that I was going nowhere in particular, that my journey was one I chose to make. But who drives to the edge of the map by choice?

I recall my hands clasping the wheel just before I reached the crossroads, my fingernails biting into my palms, the pain reassuring me that I was still in control, that I could drive on, follow the road to the next town and the one after that and never look back.

She tuts. ‘I don’t need those details, Dan. I’d rather know how you felt, and what your first impressions were. And please relate it in the way I asked you to.’

Cathryn wants me to relive each detail as I speak, to put myself back in the scene and describe it as if it is happening now.

I close my eyes.

‘As I entered the village, the sun came out from behind a cloud — like a holy thing, a revelation. The light and shadow paint a shimmering grey and black fresco on the wall of a white house that crouches on the right corner of the crossroad. Between the light and dark, men shimmered; they were not real, but shadows — only for a moment, but I recognised them, the ghosts of garrulous old men, fuckers, men who knew too much and admitted too little. Then I blinked and they dissolved. How’s that for crazy?’

I open my eyes and she is still sitting back. She doesn’t bother chiding me for swearing this time.

‘There were changes,’ I continued, without being asked. ‘Like the roads, a new footpath, lots of new houses. They take up most of the road frontage.’

‘So did you go to the house?’

‘Not straightaway. I wasn’t ready. I drove past and went to the harbour first.’

‘The boat?’ I don’t answer.

‘Was it there?’

I still don’t reply. I think of the sea heaving, the dark slate grey under a mackerel sky, its mass and solidity throwing back light that made me squint. A part of me was still convinced that I had a choice, that I might return to the city, have lunch on Grafton Street, and later walk through St Stephen’s Green.

‘Tell me about the old men.’ She looks at the pad, reading her own notes. ‘What did you mean when you said they knew too much but admitted to too little?’

I curse myself for not sticking to the facts. She wants details, feelings,

words and deeds, scents and tastes. I have become accustomed to talking to her in a certain way, and now I've trapped myself.

'Where did you grow up?' I asked.

'Lincoln. But, we're not here to talk about me, Dan.' She grins, looking suddenly younger.

'Is that a big town?' 'Yes.'

'Well then, you won't understand.'

She smiles at this. 'Tell me anyway.'

And so I try.

'Small villages have a way of not doing or seeing a thing, not talking about them either, while still seeing and doing and talking.'

'Like what? What sort of things?'

The sun is visible through the window behind her, colouring the sky pink and red; soon it will rise over the buildings and shine straight down on me. She'd come in at 5.00 am to see me, and scheduled three hours instead of our normal one.

'Like anything that shames them,' I answer.

I look away. She scowls, but she's clever, and knows if she waits that I'll feel compelled to fill the silence. She knows so much about me and yet beyond the fact that she is from a large town, English and married with a daughter, I know so little about her.

Her face remains impassive.

'They, all of them ... covered things up. Things that are meant to be secret, but really aren't ... but they might just as well be, because nobody acknowledges them.'

She is about to speak, and I know I am procrastinating, avoiding her question.

'Rape, incest, pedophilia. You name it, Cathryn. Child abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, all the things that happen behind closed doors, things that no one reports, because how can you report your brother or your cousin? It's all plastered over with platitudes.'

'Ok, I see. Go on, you drove through the village?'

'I drove past the old school.' I visualise the white pebble dash with a sooty stained patina, its grey slate roof greened with moss. Its windows, like blank eyes staring out at a yard of grass, and the indelible scuff marks of students carved about its edge. Children once played there, kicked balls and fought with fists and kicked with boots and sandals and pointy brogues, and dirty fingernails scratched and cut and drew blood. Inside, boys sat in one row, girls in another, all learning by rote:

4. Honour thy father and thy mother.

5. Thou shalt not kill.

I shudder.

‘It was abandoned,’ is all I say.

I don’t tell her about the new school. The redbrick, multi-gabled building, flanked by two play areas, black tarmac to the left, and soft green and ocher surface that doesn’t scratch knees or draw blood to the right. A lawn stretched from the brick walls of the school, to the fence that fronts to the road. Hypericum lined the path from the gate to the twin entry doors, their large cupped flowers of a deep glistening yellow, absorbing the early light and returning it brighter.

Nor do I tell her that at the farthest corner of the children’s playground, where goalposts stood, the shadow of the old building crept across the asphalt, a dark malignant stain, the old stretching towards the new.

‘And the harbour?’ she asks.

‘It’s still the same. Only at the end of the road did I see any real difference. There used to be open fields, and fishermen’s houses there but they’re gone. There are new houses — two large ugly ones, all white and blue and glowing steel, ultramodern.’

I think of their walls, built at odd angles to track the sun, and windows, octagonal and hexagonal, trims painted Mediterranean blue.

‘They were discordant,’ I say, and grimace at my choice of words. ‘Out of place, like they were trying to be better than those around them.’

‘The houses, or the people who live in them?’

‘Neither. It was a silly thing to say, they seemed ... I don’t know, pretentious.’

Cathryn lifts the pen again and scribbles a note. I’ve said something to cause her pause.

‘There’s a new carpark, and the harbour has a gate ... no, not a gate, one of those barriers that you need a swipe card or keypad so it lifts.’

‘But you can still walk to it?’

‘Yes. But I didn’t. I sat in the car and looked out at the beach.’

‘Can you see the harbour from the beach?’

She is unrelenting. She will not ask directly, but she will lead me until I get to where I need to go.

I think about the beach, the tide ebbing and the sand stretching towards it like the wet hide of some dead creature, laid out to dry. ‘Just the furthest extent,’ I answer. ‘It bends or rather curls, like the upper part of a question mark.’ My right hand draws the shape in the air. ‘It stretches out across the mouth of the bay, and

the inner wall is where the boats tie up.’

I recall the line of trawlers rising and falling, tethered on the end of blue and orange painter ropes.

The sun rises over the buildings behind Cathryn, a low cloud blunting its light, but soon she will have to draw the shades. ‘Tell me what you saw as you sat in your car.’

I told her about the beach, the sea, and harbour.

‘There were men moving about a boat, all of them dressed in orange and yellow oilskins.’

‘Did you speak to them?’

She pulls her notebook closer and gestures for me to answer. ‘I didn’t want to see them, not then. Maybe never.’

I couldn’t explain this part to her, but as I sat watching them, a dark cloud moved across the sun and I caught my own reflection in the windscreen. My face was long and gaunt, my jaw jagged and my eyes deep wells of darkness, shadows that looked like bruises. I looked like Da; I wanted to turn away from them and in doing so, from myself.

I give her something in place of honesty.

‘The Mary J was close to the top of the harbour. I only saw a part of her ... her stern.’

‘Did you want to go nearer, to look at her up close?’ ‘No.’ I shake my head.

‘You weren’t at all curious?’

‘No. I wasn’t.’ I sound gruff.

She hesitates; she knows I’m lying, and she knows I know it. She exhales.

‘So what did you do next?’

‘I drove to the house.’

The sun has cleared the clouds and is now dazzling. She stands and moves towards the window to adjust the shade. Her suit today is grey and white pinstripe, the jacket of a light material that crackles with static as she moves; it clings to her, the skirt hugging her hips. Her hair from behind is a froth of loose curls that glisten like embers in the light.

I’ve told her part of the story; I left out the school. I left out the phone call too, though for no good reason.

*

When I turn to leave the carpark, the phone vibrates in my pocket. I had to dig for it, stretching my hand into my jeans pocket. A jolt of pain runs up my leg. I’m breathless by the time I answer. It’s Maria.

‘Danny, are you there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you gone to the house yet?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Will you?’

Would I? I still don’t know, but that isn’t what she wants to hear.

‘Yes, I will, but I drove to the harbour first.’

‘What’s it like, the village? Has it changed much?’

‘No, it’s the same as it ever was,’ I answer impatiently, and in pain, but I know that she would have noticed the changes.

I hang up and take the pills from my pocket. I dry swallow two and sit back for a moment, my pulse as loud as the waves washing over the wet sand. The Mary J is visible in my rearview mirror, her nose buried in the mud of the shallows.

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