

## Irvine Welsh and the kids from 'Trainspotting' before the drugs



PHOTO BY TROND OLA TILSETH

Author Irvine Welsh on a trip back to his hometown, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Now living in Chicago, the Scottish author talks about his new novel, homelessness and drugs

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Speaking to a street paper reporter during a recent outing in Edinburgh, Scotland, author Irvine Welsh described the street paper concept as “one of the great social achievements of the last 20 years.”

High praise from this acclaimed and often controversial author of sometimes unsavory realities.

His novel “Trainspotting,” about the heroin culture of the 1980s, was adapted into a widely acclaimed movie directed by Danny Boyle in 1996. The film has been ranked 10th in the top 100 British films of all time by the British Film Institute. Welsh published “Porno,” a sequel to “Trainspotting,” in 2002, followed by its prequel “Skagboys” in 2012. While originally from Edinburgh, he currently lives in Chicago with his wife.

In this interview for street papers, Welsh talked about his latest novel, “Skagboys,” the prequel to his 1993 classic “Trainspotting,” and Scottish independence. Oh, and of course, a wee bit about drugs.

**Billy Briggs:** When writing “Skagboys” did you find it difficult revisiting the characters in “Trainspotting” after such a long time?

**Irvine Welsh:** Yeah, but I had a lot of source material left over that I always wanted to use. It was kind of strange because I was going back to them (the characters) when they were a couple of years younger than in Trainspotting. When I started writing Trainspotting I was a 28-year-old guy writing about 24-year-old guys. When I started writing Skagboys I was a 50-year-old writing about 22-year-olds.

It was actually a historical novel because things had moved on so much. I had to do a lot of research about the 1980s to get back to it even though I lived through it - all the references - what was on at the cinema and TV at the time.

We know what happens to them (the characters in Trainspotting) so it (Skagboys) was more of an investigation as to why and what the big changes were: the deindustrialization of Britain and Scotland, the dominance of right wing and neo-liberal ideas, the consequences that had for the

communities and families and the pressures that were on them.

It also kind of moved away from a work society to a drug society where the underground economy would be the main source of activity in the schemes that I grew up in. I remember when I was growing up everybody worked. There was only a small amount of people who didn't work, who were on the dole, who lived off the state, who did all the dodgy scams and who dealt anything that was going to be dealt.

When work collapsed and all the apprenticeships collapsed, everyone was suddenly unemployed, and the only thing there was for people was the underground economy - the thieving, the scamming. And most of all drugs because people were miserable and alienated, so there was a massive demand.

**B.B.:** Do Americans get the humor and language of “Trainspotting” and “Skagboys”?

**I.W.:** I'm more culty rather than mainstream (in America). On the West Coast and East Coast I do very well but I don't really do anything in the middle. Some of the best readers I have are from America because they tend to be a very clued-up, culturally aware crowd ... because if you're not used to seeing those types of words on a page it takes a lot to get past them.”

**B.B.:** Are you still as angry with your writing as you were back in 1993?

**I.W.:** I don't know. “Skagboys” is probably the most overtly political book I have ever written. But I always try and have a lot of fun when I write ... to find the kind of spirit of the characters, find the humanity within them. If you put characters in a dark place then you've got to have them groping for the light switch rather than just wallowing in the blackness. This makes them much more interesting dramatically if there's going to be some kind of change, or at least the possibility of change.

**B.B.:** You also had an addiction - how did you get out of it?

**I.W.:** When I look back at this now, being older, I look at it in terms of you have to have things driving the addiction, rather

than just the drug itself. Any kind of addiction has to be fueled by something other than the drug.

I had issues - there were family bereavement issues, there were personal relationship breakdowns. I didn't really have the emotional vocabulary to express feelings about those things. I know now, for example, that if my wife left me the last thing I would be doing is looking for some smack or even going to a bar and drinking myself silly. Back then I didn't really know any other way.

A lot of people who kind of came through it - people like me who had some transitory issue that basically died down - they had to get rid of the physical addiction, which I don't think is the worst part of it. The worst part is having nowhere else to go once you've stopped. No alternative plan of lifestyle, opportunity or employment just to find your place in the world, basically. You are stuck. It's a kind of lonely place to be.

I noticed a big difference between people like myself back then who were fortunate to have other things going on and other people who'd had something happen to them ... (who) maybe just had one skin too few for this world, maybe suffered some kind of abuse or trauma in childhood. You saw a wide range of things and underlying despairs of people. To me it went a lot deeper than the drug issue. The drug issue for me was always an effect rather than a cause.

**B.B.:** What are your views on Scottish independence?

**I.W.:** I live in the States now and have not lived in Scotland for a long time. I feel a bit conflicted about it as I moved to London when I was quite young. I've always had a positive feeling about London and England, but you have to face realities, and the reality for me is that - looking at it objectively - the union is in secular decline and I think, paradoxically, in order to preserve some

kind of British cultural identity, it's essential to end political union between Scotland and England. I'm not a drum-banging patriot. I just think the union is in decline, and if you are for a progressive solution then in my eyes you've got to be in the YES movement.

I also feel no one has articulated the case there is for Unionism in Britain. It's sad that Danny Boyle articulated a more progressive case for the union in 30 minutes of transmission than the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats have done so far, and that shows the poverty of the arguments on the Unionist side.

It's this kind of fear politics which I can't stand because I see so much of it in America. It's horrible. It is manipulating people into being scared of any kind of change. I think that we can't stand still -

the world is such a dynamic and dangerous place. To stand still and do nothing is not an option. We have to keep changing and evolving.

**B.B.:** What is the homelessness situation like in Chicago where you now live?

**I.W.:** It's pretty bad. There's a lot of hidden homelessness in America: people in their 30s and 40s living at home with their parents. That's not really healthy.

It's a Western world phenomenon. Whenever you read of a violent shooting or hammer attack, when you look at it, so much is caused by hidden homelessness. It is caused by family stress as a result of people sharing, multi-occupancy, inter-generational tendencies, where the lifestyles are completely different. There's not enough space.

The right wing argument is that families will absorb all that kind of pressure and all the social costs of change but what happens is they don't. I'm surprised this is not a bigger issue over here in the UK.

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