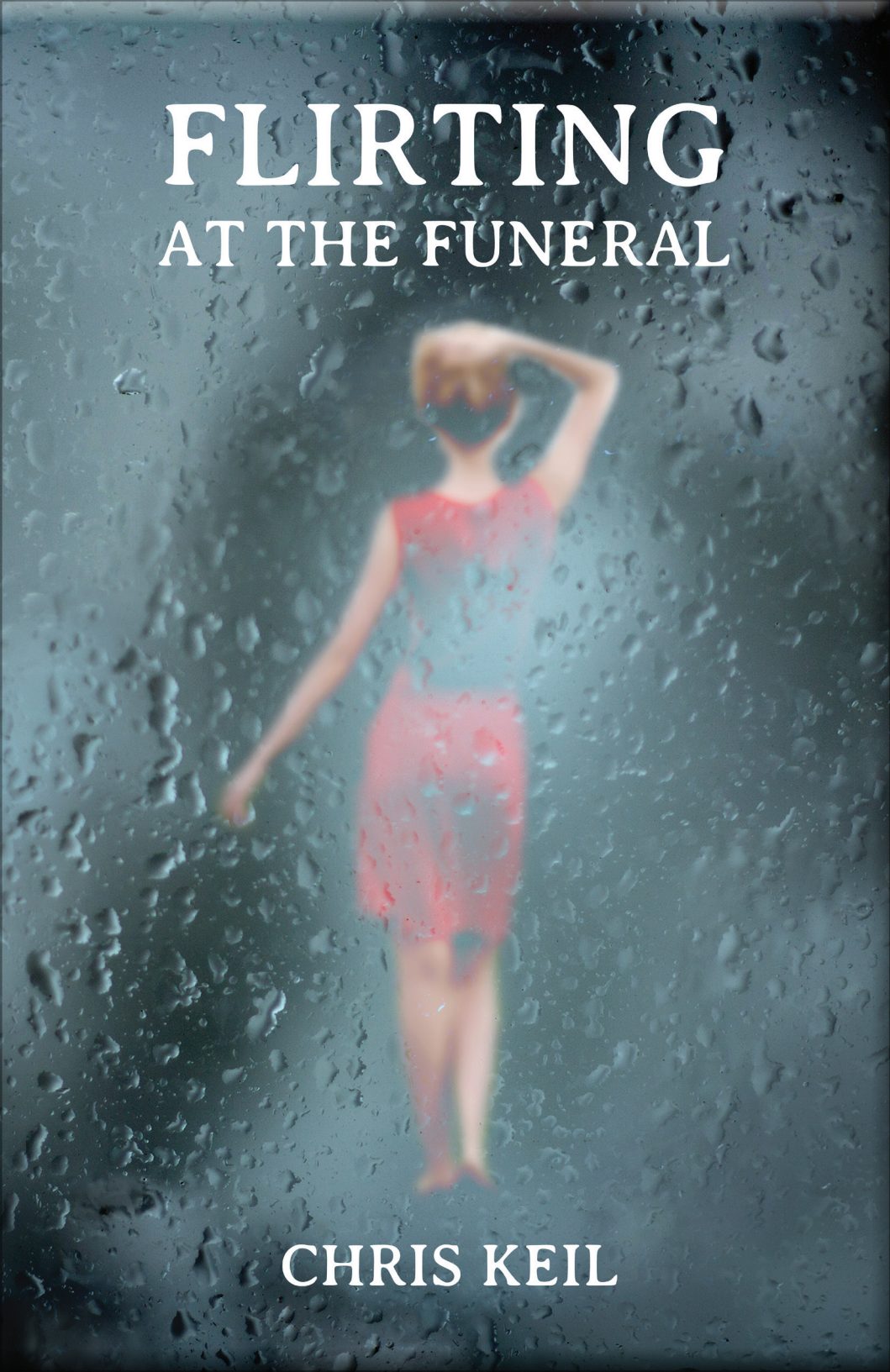
FLIRTING
AT THE FUNERAL



CHRIS KEIL

Flirting at the Funeral

Chris Keil

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Extract from the book

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Chapter Four

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In 1904, the artist Eric Gill was living at No 13, Battersea Bridge Buildings, and some time during the summer of that year he painted a view across the Thames, a pen and watercolour study of Lots Road Power Station. It's a strange little picture, only eight inches by five, but lit with an extraordinary intensity, somehow dark and lurid at the same time. The foreground is taken up with rooftops and red-brick chimneys, almost close enough to reach out and touch, as though seen from an upstairs window. Then a glimpse of the river, where a tug and a barge sit motionless on the flat, opaque surface of the water. On the far side of the Thames the power station rises up, gleaming with a dim radiance, heated from within but softened and obscured by fog, or distance, or river-mist. The sky, framing and filling half the picture, is a swirling wash of nearly-solid black, as black as the coal which fired the station's boilers.

Lots Road was pink with newness, flesh-coloured, when Gill painted it - a triumphant product of industrialism, numinous with *the living sense that beauty is power made visible.* But the picture is haunted, chthonic; Gill's celebration of the age of iron and steel is deeply troubled and ambiguous. The scene is empty of movement or activity; no smoke rises from the power station's chimneys, nor from the funnel of the tug. The river is flat and still, without tide or flow, the colour of a bone; the colour of a lake in Hell. As you stand in the upstairs window you are the only human presence there, but something is looking back at you; something William Blake, who was married at St Mary's Battersea, almost directly opposite Lots Road across the river, would have recognised.

Now, a hundred years later, the power station is a hulk, partly dismasted, a prison ship beached on the shore, sinking into dereliction. It has lost two of its chimneys, and a section of the turbine-hall has been sliced off and removed, like a supertanker reduced to scrap in a Bangladeshi breaking-yard; a gaping, severed gable-end exposing ruptured conduits and passageways.

The building's relationship to its surroundings has been inverted: from being the biggest and brightest object in the landscape, it's become residual, shabby, half-demolished, overshadowed. Across the river, the water chopping brightly in the breeze, ziggurats, step-pyramids, towers and wedges of super-luxury apartment-blocks rise to twice the height of the power station chimneys, floor after floor of stainless steel and armoured glass.

But the power station is still vast, and on its own side of the river, in the little narrow streets of red-brick terraced housing, it rears up round every corner, filling half the sky. In Lots Road itself it blocks out the light; the street is a sunless alley, punctuated by stunted trees, the south side formed entirely by a towering, endless, empty colonnade of blackened glass and brick, the side wall of the turbine hall.

Luisa paid the cab off just before Battersea Bridge, dodged through the traffic and set off down Cheyne Walk. A breeze was coming off the Thames, the house-boats restless, the lap and slop of water on the hulls, the rigging musical. She found the road she was looking for, a little street like a canyon, shadowed by the enormous bulk of some derelict industrial building. High up in the dark facade a window stood open, a pigeon patrolling the ledge.

She counted house-numbers on the other side of the street, arriving at a yellow-brick archway in a blank wall, under a rusting metal sign: *909 Jazz Club*. A flight of concrete steps led steeply down into a basement. A boy behind the bar looked up as she pushed the door open.

"I'm looking for my mother," Luisa said. "Matty James? She's singing here tonight?"

The band doodled for half an hour or so, warming up - piano, bass and drums. The place wasn't full, but there were people at most of the tables, and the bar was busy all evening. Matty slid on, leaning over the piano-player, whispering in his ear. She took the mike off its stand and slipped into the golden column of the spotlight as though standing under a shower, sparks and embers flashing on her dress. She did *Autumn in New York,* and *Broken Telephone,* and *The Dark End of the Street.* Luisa sat at a table to the left of the

stage, under a publicity shot that must have been done in the 90s: sunset on the beach, the light exploding through the golden halo of her hair. A sticker cut diagonally across the image: *Matty James - For One Night Only.*

Watching her mother, she could see a sort of animating spirit enter and leave, from one song to another, even within a song. This is what soul is; it comes to you and lights you up, and then it goes away, leaving a flatness, an absence of resonance, an emptiness. People began to talk over the music then, or went up to the bar. Once or twice, though, she really connected. She did *Perfect Ten*, duetting with the bass-player, her voice full of laughter. When she sang the lines: *and if he's kinda big, well you know I dig, every little move he makes,* something travelled right around the room, translucent, like a movement in water, drawing a ripple of applause behind it, like a fin.

She took a break half-way through the set and came to sit with Luisa, calling one of the barmen over to the table.

"Sweetheart," she said. "Be an angel, get me some herb tea, camomile if you have it. How did you get here baby?"

"Cabbed it from college."

"Bad girl, what's wrong with a bus?"

"I like your dress," Luisa said.

"You don't think it's too tight?"

"I love it. Is it Chinese? How do you walk in those heels though, mother?"

The boy set the tea down carefully, smiling, glancing back at them as he walked away. Luisa patted her mother's hand. "Look, he's fallen in love with you," she said.

"Don't be silly. He was looking at you, not an old has-been like me."

"You know he wasn't. When we're out together men look at you, not at me. I ought to mind that, but I don't."

"That's ridiculous. You're beautiful."

"I know, that's why I don't mind. Anyway, I'm proud of you."

Matty breathed into the microphone.

"I'm back," she said. "Hello again." The piano player ran a scuttling riff up the keyboard, watching her. "This next song has been very good to me," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I'll try and return the favour."

At the end of the set the owner of the club bounced on to the stage, bigging it up: "Matty *James*, ladies and gentlemen! Matty *James*!" He got a burst of noise out of the audience, whistles and whoops rising briefly above the

returning buzz and clatter of the crowd: laughter, the scrape of chairs pushed back, someone's phone ringing shrilly. They didn't call for an encore.

"I shouldn't have done *Flirting at the Funeral,"* Matty said, as the taxi rattled and shook, turning into Kings Road. "It doesn't mean anything to people here, and the band didn't get it either. Did you see how they were struggling?"

"Mum, they loved you," Luisa said.

"And Jack never sent the CDs round, they should have been on sale, the idiot. Can you believe that?""

"People will get it on iTunes," Luisa said.

"And fine, lay on champagne in the dressing-room, but you'd think they could have chilled it properly."

"It's so exciting, seeing you here in London."

"This gig, and one next week - it's not exactly: *Matty James - The UK Tour.*"

The cab pulled up outside the hotel, the driver twisting round to say something into the grille.

"This is pretty smart," Luisa said, looking up at floodlights, marble, polished brass.

"Baby, I'm shattered, and we haven't had a chance to talk. We've got so much catching up to do. I want to hear about your course, I want to hear about everything. Call me tomorrow, promise, first thing. We'll have lunch, we'll do everything together, just the two of us."

Luisa watched her mother tripping up the flight of steps, pausing to say something to the doorman, who waved her in with an expansive gesture. She paid the taxi, and walked around the corner to the tube station.

It turned out Matty needed to spend most of the morning with her agent. Luisa had a coffee with Sam, typed up her lecture notes, and walked from the Film School to Hungerford Bridge. At Charing Cross, she heard a girl's voice quite clearly as she passed, a slight figure talking with an older man, noticing the two of them as they stood close together, the crowds eddying around them.

"Dad," the girl was saying. "Wait, Dad, please." She was fourteen or fifteen. The two of them leaned into each other as he took their photo on his phone with an outstretched arm, then showed it to her. They looked so sad. Then he brushed her shoulder with a goodbye gesture and walked away up the Strand while she stood by herself in the hurrying, indifferent street, watching

and watching until he had disappeared.

She saw her mother from halfway across Trafalgar Square, framed between the columns of the National Gallery in a bright red coat, knowing it was her before she could see any details: sunglasses, a mop of blonde hair. There was some sort of demonstration beginning to form - red banners, black Anarchist flags, disconnected groups of people gathering and dispersing, standing on the edges of the fountains or chatting between the paws of the lions, amiably rearranging themselves as though waiting for some orchestrating purpose to reveal itself.

Luisa worked her way through the murmurous, shuffling crowds and trotted up the steps. Someone handed her a leaflet: *Smash Capitalism Now!* She and her mother exchanged a series of quick kisses, bobbing their heads left and right, brushing cold cheeks in the bright air.

"I'd love to be filming this," Luisa said. "Look at the red of that banner there - with the hammer and sickle - isn't that beautiful?"

"This takes me back," Matty said. "All those red flags. A hundred thousand people marching down the Avenida de Liberdade. You can't imagine how exciting it all was."

"So many stories," Luisa said. "You could zoom in on anyone, and start to follow them, and you'd realise that they're in the middle of a narrative. They're falling in love, or getting dumped, or they've lost their job, or they've just heard from someone they thought they'd never see again."

"You're such a romantic, baby. It all looks rather aimless to me. What are they demonstrating about?"

"I have to make a short film this summer," Luisa said. "Did I tell you that? For my final-year project. I want to do something political."

"What's happening down there?" Matty said, pointing. "Something's going on down there."

"It won't be a documentary," Luisa said. "I want to make a feature-film, but with a political focus. I thought: terrorism, nothing cheesy like al-Quaida, but maybe Baader-Meinhof, something like that. What do you think?"

"Down there," Matty said. "Look."

Below South Africa House, a section of the crowd had become congested, bunching into a dense mass, pushed and swaying. They heard the whoop of a siren, abruptly cut off, and the metallic braying of a loud-hailer. As they watched, a squad of ten or twelve police in black and yellow riot gear, bulbous

with body armour, appeared from behind the building and ran around the edge of the crowd in a furious, concentrated rush, shoulder to shoulder, boots hammering down on the pavement.

At an unseen signal they turned in a single, yelling phalanx and drove into the centre of the crowd. A palpable, collective gasp rose up out of the mass of bodies, as if a bubble of air had been forced out of them. Matty and Luisa could see the crowd swell and break open as though some lethal embolism was forcing its way through the flinching blood. The surge of sound that blew out across the square was scored with individual notes: screams, the dead thud of stamping boots, the sharper crack of the police batons.

Under the attack, the crowd were hacked and pushed towards the top of the square. As the main group were herded on they left broken pieces of themselves behind, bits of clothing, trampled banners, injured bodies lying on the pavement. They watched as one of these figures, crouched on hands and knees, was set on by three of the riot police; they danced around him, batons rising and falling.

Matty and Luisa found themselves backing away along the pavement. The crowd was starting to thicken around them, coagulating into an organism with a beating heart, fed by a spreading web of capillaries, forming a nervous system as synapses of rage and fear fired wordlessly between them. You could feel the shouts and screams from the base of the steps, where the riot police were tearing into the crowd, converted into physical signals, shocks and tremors that ran through the bodies around them.

"Come on, Mum," Luisa said. "I think we should get off the street."

"Who are those people?" Matty said.

"Tactical Support Group," Luisa said. "It's the latest thing: recruit violent criminals into the police - how can you lose?" Someone bumped her heavily from behind as a group of boys ran past, heads low and hooded, dodging through the crowd. One of them tripped and nearly fell as they passed a pavement artist, his foot catching a box of coloured chalks-stubs and sending them scattering into the air like fragments of mosaic rainbow. Luisa took her mother's arm. "Let's go in here," she said, and they stepped out of the crowd and into the cool recesses of the Sainsbury Wing.

At the top of the stairs, room after room opened out in front of them through tall archways, pale and airy, dove-grey, lit from above by high rooflights. On the walls, the long and melancholy faces of angels, saints, madonnas, martyrs,

bishops, hermits, framed in radiant settings of blue and gold, watched them as they passed.

"I wish I'd had a film-crew out there," Luisa said.

"This country is changing," Matty said. "I've never seen anything like that before."

"All the more reason to film it."

Above them, under an arc of gilded wood, a Duccio Madonna looked down at her baby, blue-robed, surrounded by angels, her haloed head tilted in sadness or premonition.

"I want to hear about film-school," Matty said. "And your new flat; and Sam, tell me about him. Is he nice?" Luisa shrugged.

"He's a boy," she said. "He's an actor; he might be in our final-year project." Under their feet, pools of pale afternoon light glowed on the blonde oak of the floorboards. John the Baptist watched them pass, dark-eyed, emaciated and intense, his right hand held out towards them, pointing with an enigmatic gesture. A little further on, a Filippo Lippi angel of the Annunciation, delicate, peacock-winged, carrying white lilies, was kneeling before Mary in a walled garden, the symbol of perpetual virginity, the two of them as beautiful as lovers.

"That Jack has got a nerve," Matty said. "I'm really thinking about sacking him. Never mind forgetting to send the CDs last night, do you know what he suggested today?" Luisa shook her head. "A gig in a pub in Oxford; not a club, baby, a pub. *Always full of students,* he said. Can you imagine?" She glanced back at the golden-haired angel, kneeling in the garden. "We should have one of those audio-guides," she said. "Tell us what all these paintings are."

"My film is going to be about people," Luisa said. "About what happens when things start changing too fast, like out there."

"There's something I need to talk to you about," Matty said.

"I'm going to need some money," Luisa said. "Quite a bit, actually."

"Sweetheart, listen to me a minute. You need to hear this." Luisa looked at her. "I'm selling the flat."

"I don't understand, mother. What flat?"

"Don't be silly, baby. The flat on Conde de Redondo, I've decided to sell it."

"*Our* flat," Luisa said. "Where we live. Our *home.* Is that the flat you're

talking about?" Two burly, half-naked men were stooped over, bent double, muscles bulging as they reloaded their crossbows. Around them, three or four other archers were firing arrows at point-blank range into St Sebastian's white flesh. Matty walked on into the next gallery.

"Don't be like that," she said. Luisa turned away from the painting and caught up with her mother.

"Are you serious? What, so we don't live in Lisbon any more? Just like that?"

"Of course we do. Perhaps we'll get a smaller place or something."

"How can you do this to me?"

"Sweetheart, you're never there any more."

"It's my home," Luisa said.

"All that time in New York, and now here."

"It's where I come back to," Luisa said. "I need to know it's there."

"We have to be more careful," Matty said. "I have debts to pay, I have obligations. *Debts and obligations* - it sounds like the chorus-line of a song."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Luisa said.

"I didn't want to do it," Matty said. "I really didn't have a choice."

"So when is this going to happen? When am I going to be made homeless?"

"It's done, baby," Matty said. "It's already done."

"And where's my stuff? What have you done with all my stuff?"

"It's in store, sweetheart. You can get it any time you want."

Luisa turned away and walked through to the next room. Ahead of her a group of grotesque old men were crowding around the figure of Christ, tormenting him. One of them raised the crown of thorns over his head while another was tearing at his clothes.

"Where am I going to live?" she asked, as her mother caught up with her. "Where will I put my stuff? Where are *you* living?"

"Here and there," Matty said. "In the Algarve, quite a bit. I might line up a couple of gigs in the golf-hotels. All a bit naff, but they pay. I really want to get into the Lisbon clubs."

"Are you living with Arno?"

"I'm living at Arno's place."

"Is there a difference?"

"Don't be rude, baby. That's not fair." Luisa sighed.

"And how is Arno?"

"How do you manage to get so much disapproval into that question?"

"Dr. Bendt, then. How is Dr. Bendt? Is that better?" Both women started to laugh. "It's not, is it?"

"He can't help being German, sweetheart!" Matty said.

In the Bosch painting, a hideous old man is pawing at Christ's robe. Age has reduced his profile to a reptilian beak, his neck to strings of wattle. His lipless mouth is fringed with wisps of beard as white and wet as spittle, but his eyes are intensely, lasciviously bright.

"Mother, he's so old."

"He's a friend," Matty said. "He's been a good friend. There are times in your life when that's what you need, when that's the only thing that matters."

"And so creepy."

"We owe him a lot."

"*We* owe him?"

"More than you know, sweetheart."

"I don't even want to know what you mean by that."

"I want the two of you to get on," Matty said. "That's what I mean."

From within the circle of brutal faces and grasping hands, Christ looked back at her, his eyes untroubled, mild, benign and faraway.

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"And if that isn't romance," Matty sang, *"it'll have to do, until the next one comes along."* She bobbed at the audience, her little-girl ballet-school curtsey, getting it just right, drawing out a rustle of amused applause. The crowd at Jimmy's Place was livelier than at the 909, younger, noisier, not so knowledgeable, but more fun. She picked out Luisa and Sam sitting together near the bar and gave them a smile, thinking how darkly elegant the two of them looked. The band were quick and attentive, the piano player bouncing with energy, watching her across the top of a little dusty-pink upright, his style abrupt, percussive, heavy on the left pedal.

Matty found herself going deeper into the music; jazz will look after you, so long as you treat it right. She did *Every Time We Say Goodbye,* drawing out the changes, bending the notes until she could sense a sort of hunger in the audience. She did *Lovin' Arms,* and *I Can't Stand the Rain,* the drummer hitting rim-shots off the beat, and *Where or When.* She did *The Dark End of the Street,* her voice cracking on the high notes - *They'll never find us, they'll never find us* - and felt that shiver in the room, the thing that singing is for.

In the break she took a quick decision, and showed *Flirting at the Funeral* to the piano player, tapping her feet and humming a couple of bars. He doodled a few notes, nodding, getting the bass-player's attention, and they started in. She'd been working on it, and they took it in waltz-time, a kind of lilting, melancholy swing. She glanced at the piano-player and he smiled back, dropping his shoulders, leaning into the music. "*Am I still here when you shut your eyes? Am I still here, are you still in me?"*

Deep in the audience she saw Luisa blow an extravagant kiss at her, and Sam raise his glass. Beyond them, a man was standing in a pool of light at the bar, and something made her falter, skipping a beat. She picked it back up, scatting through the hesitation, pulling a face at the piano player.

"*I'm looking through your eyes," she* sang.

"Am I still in you, are you still in me?"

About the Author:

Chris Keil has worked as a sheep-farmer, a journalist, and a tour-guide in a number of European cities. In academic life he has published and lectured widely on traumatic memory and representations of the Holocaust, and currently lectures at the University of Wales.

He has held literary residencies, workshops and masterclasses in Europe and the United States. He is the author of two acclaimed novels: *The French Thing* (Carreg Gwalch, 2002) and *Liminal* (Alcemi, 2007). His third novel, *Flirting at the Funeral*, is published by Cillian Press.

"A sophisticated, deeply mature work, shot through with oodles of lovely writing and shored up by many insights and ideas. There were so many sentences I read with genuine envy, or respect, or simple out-and-out delight, and so many brilliant images. Real, abundant gifts as a writer - this is urbane, serious, but also seriously entertaining writing."

Jon Gower, Parthian Books

"Flirting at the Funeral is a philosophical novel in the best sense, beautifully written, as if G.M. Hopkins had turned to prose and lived to see the modern age… a very good novel - the product of a formidable and original mind."

Ben Shephard Author of:
A War of Nerves; After Daybreak; The Long Road Home

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Twitter:	@cillianpress

Author:	Chris Keil
Web:	www.chriskeil.eu
Facebook:	http://www.facebook.com/ChrisKeilAuthor
Twitter:	@chriskeilauthor
Blog:	http://chriskeil.wordpress.com/