

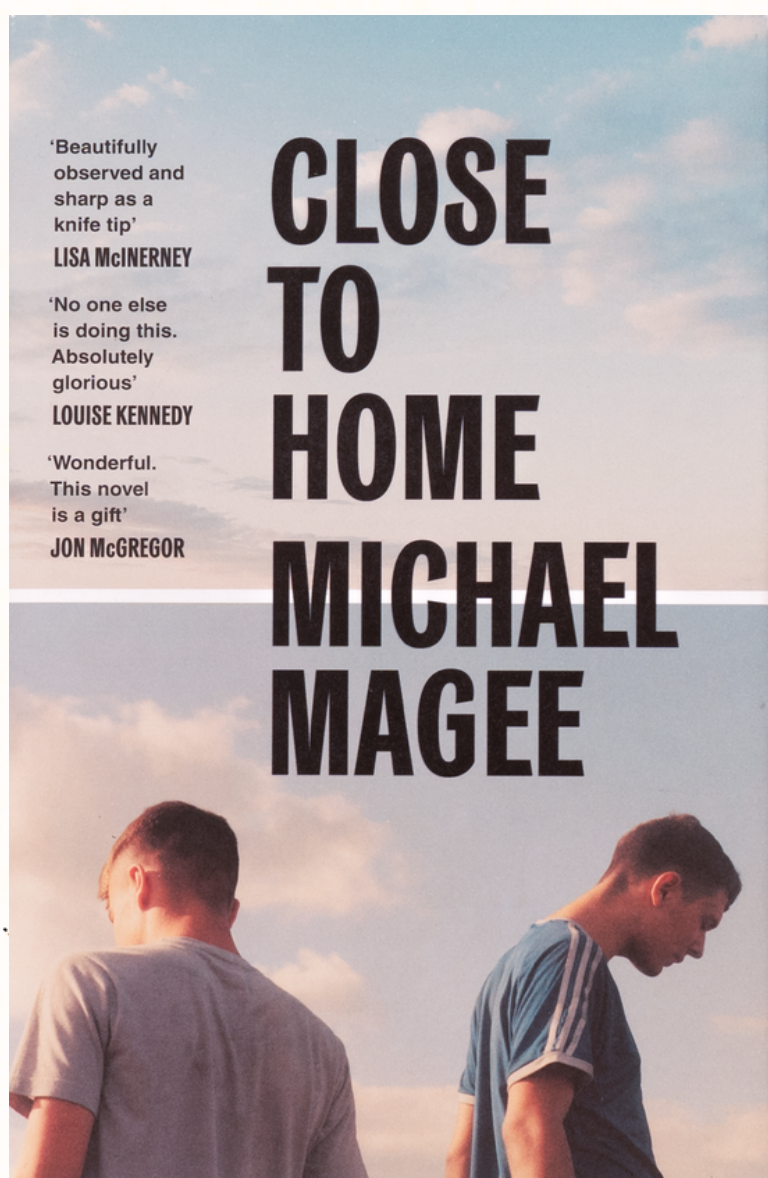
NERO

BOOK AWARDS

Reading Guides

Debut Fiction Shortlist

Close To Home by Michael Magee



Michael Magee is the fiction editor of the *Tangerine* and a graduate of the creative writing PhD programme at Queen's University, Belfast. His writing has appeared in *Winter Papers*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Lifeboat* and *The 32: The Anthology of Irish Working-Class Voices*. *Close to Home* is the Waterstones Irish Book of the Year 2023 and won the Rooney Prize for Literature 2023. The novel was also shortlisted for the Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize 2023 and Irish Book Awards Newcomer of the Year 2023. Michael lives in Belfast.

'What sets this apart is the voice, which perfectly evokes a character and a community straining so hard against the systemic clamps of poverty, disillusionment, and ennui that the effort crackles off the page.' - **Debut Fiction judges, 2023 Nero Book Awards**

'It was daft, but I had begun to think that working in a place like that would open my life up in some way, that I might be able to have something like Mairéad had with her mates from Queen's. A group of people who were into the things I was into, who went to events and knew how that world worked. Turns out, no. That wasn't going to happen. The doors into those worlds were bolted shut.'

2013. Sean is back in Belfast after university. He is the first in his family to attend, but the life-changing opportunities his degree promised have not materialised: he can't find a job, he's living hand to mouth and when he assaults a stranger at a party one night, his hopes for a different kind of life are jeopardised forever.

Told from Sean's perspective and written in Belfast dialect, *Close to Home* immerses readers in Nationalist, working-class Belfast life where the collective, generational trauma of 'The Troubles' still casts its shadow, and poverty and addiction feel as permanent as the mountains visible from Sean's window.

Intense and urgent, Sean's deadpan humour and Magee's tenderness for his characters cut

through the bleak circumstances to offer hope and redemption. *Close to Home* is strongly rooted in a particular place and time but Sean's attempts to make sense of how and even if he still belongs in the community that raised him, and to discover what it means to be a man, are themes that resonate across cultures.

Discussion Points:

- Do you agree that by the end of the novel Sean has taken accountability for the assault he commits at the beginning?
- One of the strongest themes in the book is that of masculinity and the ways in which our culture prevents young men from expressing themselves in healthy ways. In contrast, what do you think of the author's portrayal of the two main female characters, Sean's mum and his old girlfriend, Mairead?
- The book is written from Sean's perspective, and in the dialect of working-class, West Belfast. Did this impact your engagement with the story and why?