



## Once Were Cops

*Ken Bruen*

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Michael O'Shea is a member of Ireland's police force, known as The Guards. He's also a sociopath who walks a knife edge between sanity and all-out mayhem. When an exchange program is initiated and twenty Guards come to America and twenty cops from the States go to Ireland, Shay, as he's known, has his lifelong dream come true--he becomes a member of the NYPD. But Shay's dream is about to become New York's nightmare.

Paired with an unstable cop nicknamed Kebar for his liberal use of a short, lethal metal stick called a K-bar, the two unlikely partners become a devastatingly effective force in the war against crime.

But Kebar harbors a dangerous secret: he's sold out to the mob to help his sister. Her rape and beating leaves her in a coma and pushes an already unstable Kebar over the edge just as Shea's dark secrets threaten boil over and into the streets of New York.

*Once Were Cops* melds the street poetry of Brooklyn and Dublin into a fast-paced, incomparable hard-boiled novel. This is Ken Bruen at his best.

## Once Were Cops Details

Date : Published October 28th 2008 by Minotaur Books

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Author : Ken Bruen

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# From Reader Review Once Were Cops for online ebook

## Ritchie says

oh my this is terrible. Horrible cliches. The characters are badly written and the dialogue is terrible

"The young guy, though, he was kinda cute, first thing after her shift was done, she'd ring Joe, her brother, tell him that just maybe. . . there might be a guy on the horizon"

what? Nobody would actually do that would they?

The ending actually leaves this mess open to a sequel, i really hope Ken Bruen does not inflict the world with any more of this drivel.

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## Jarl Olsen says

Three stars, but only because giving Ken Bruen any less would deny the fact that at his worst, as I think he is here, you sense he's still aiming for greatness.

Like many, I've come to love the Jack Taylor detective books that take place in Galway, Ireland. Taylor does a cameo appearance in *Once Were Cops*, which only makes it painfully clear that the protagonist for the first chunk of the book, while a fellow Galwegian, does not have Taylor's acid tongue or morbid worldview. OWC's protagonist is a psychotic cop who ends up going to America, which, from the sound of it, is the land of milk and honey for psychos as the lowly Irish beat cop is able to turn the NYPD into his private fiefdom in short order. (Sorry, in jig time.) When the 2nd protagonist (any warning bells going off?) is introduced, I found it hard to keep reading to the deliberately ambiguous end. The Jack Taylor books have fine ends. They do not try and tie everything up in a bow. Usually, they end with some new horror visited upon the protagonist that he will have to deal with in the next installment. That "*Once Were Cops*" ends with the bad guy neutralized, but the bad guy's crimes resuming after an interval, just made me want to spit chocolate milk through my nose. Perhaps the last frame of "*Howard the Duck*" said, "To be continued..." No one remembers, probably because everyone was in the parking lot, trying to put the experience out of their minds and get home before M\*A\*S\*H\* was over. I see that a movie version of *Once Were Cops* was announced in 2009. Hmm. Maybe still in development. Like *Howard the Duck II*.

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## Johnny says

A quick read. Basically a novella in the form of a novel, but in much the same way as the best of James Cain. All the story of a novel is there with multiple lines and complexity of character, but stripped down to the bare essentials.

That said, the story feels a bit rushed. Not the prose, but the actual structure of the story. At about the halfway point, the I'm-making-it-up-as-I-go shows through a little. It feels like an early draft, ideas introduced but not always fully explored. New characters taking over late in the story. But an early Bruen draft is still Bruen, and there's a lot to like here.

Dark. Lightning fast. Solid.

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## **Paul says**

In "Once Were Cops", Michael O'Shea - an officer in Ireland's police force, the Guards - comes to New York City as part of a law enforcement exchange program. Shea, as he's known, isn't just an ambitious cop, however, he's also a serial sex killer.

It doesn't take long for Shea to be partnered with Kebar, a vicious brute among New York's Finest, and soon, the two are making arrests and bulldozing their way through the city's criminal class. Shea even manages to begin suppressing his homicidal urges, and settles into a steady relationship with an Irish-American girl.

But there are problems. Internal Affairs has taken a strong interest in the pair, Kebar is deeply into a loan shark in order to pay for his handicapped sister's care, the loan shark is bringing pressure, and Shea can't stop thinking about wrapping his fingers around the sisters neck. Violence and betrayal ensue...

This is my first Ken Bruen novel. I came to it on the strong reviews of his other works, and chose it because it is a standalone effort. To be succinct, I was deeply disappointed.

To call the writing "staccato" barely begins to describe the extremely terse style the author employs; each paragraph is only a sentence or two long. This is amplified by the publisher's decision to leave enormous amounts of white space on the page, both between and around each paragraph.

All of this is not a bad thing in and of itself - Bruen fashions his story out of little more than outlines, creating almost a charcoal sketch of his characters and the plot through which they move. Unfortunately, however, it means that there is only so deep the author can go with each character, and while "showing rather than telling" closes some of the gaps, it still leaves each member of the cast as little more than a caricature.

Worse, the pacing is extremely uneven, as the point of view moves from person to person, and the ending comes hurtling toward the reader in a very predictable way that left me thinking, "Really? That's it? Couldn't this have been accomplished a lot earlier and more easily?"

I still intend to check out some of Ken Bruen's other books - I have to believe there is something there based on the enthusiasm his fans evince - but "Once Were Cops" is one to skip.

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## **LJ says**

First Sentence: "Where do I begin?"

Matthew Patrick O'Shea, known as Shea, lives in Glasgow and is a member of the Garda. He always wanted to be a decent human being and a cop. But he has a dark side that keeps him from being that decent human; a long way from it.

He transfers to New York City as part of a police exchange and partners with Kebar, someone almost as out of control as Shea. They go from being partners and almost friends to enemies, with innocents damaged

along the way.

Bruen is an exceptional writer. His writing is crisp and spare. Full paragraphs are the exception rather than the rule. Not a word is wasted or superfluous. He conveys more in a sentence that others do in a chapter.

He is the only author I know who can write a book about thoroughly despicable characters and make me love the book. And Shea is a thoroughly despicable character. It was, however, nice to have Jack Taylor put in a cameo appearance and there be a link to a Jack Taylor book.

This book is definitely not for everyone. It is dark, profane and brutal. It is also excellent.

ONCE WERE COPS (Noir-Patrick O'Shea-NYC-Cont) – Ex

Bruen, Ken – Standalone

St. Martin's Minotaur, 2008, US Hardcover – ISBN: 9780312384401

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## **Bob says**

Reading a book by Ken Bruen is like standing on the street corner watching two cars that are about to collide head on. You know it's gonna be fast and you know it's gonna be violent, but you just can't take your eyes off it. I am new to this author and had read only the first 2 Jack Taylor books before I found this on the remainder cart at my local bookstore.

First of all if you single spaced this book on college paper it would be about 20 pages. I can't say I am huge fan of Bruen's writing style, although I appreciate it more in the Jack Taylor books. I didn't think there was a single believable character in this book. Probably Kebar was the most realistic. I just thought O'Shea was just annoying.

I don't know if I'll even bother with any stand-alone books from Bruen anymore.

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## **Kitty Myers says**

I've read the first 9 books in Bruen's excellent Jack Taylor series. While I'm waiting for #10 to arrive in the mail, I began reading ONCE WERE COPS (a stand-alone book). I rarely abandon a book once I begin reading it, but stopped reading more than halfway through because I didn't like any of the characters. They're ugly. The main character, Michael O'Shea is particularly loathsome. I have to like at least one character, and no one in this book, other than the helpless Lucia whom O'Shea brutalized, is likeable. After the excellent Jack Taylor series, I wonder why Bruen wrote this one.

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## **Stephanie says**

**The One Sentence Summary:** An Irish cop, who is also a serial killer, gets transferred to the NYPD in an exchange program and is partnered up with an unstable cop under the thumb of the mob.

**The Meat and Potatoes:** Matthew Patrick O'Shea has a violent personality and dreams of more action than

he can find as a member of Ireland's police force, patrolling the streets of Galway. Less than innocently, he finagles his way into an exchange program with the United States and is assigned to New York City. Shea is partnered with Kebar (known as such for his excessive use of a k-bar in subduing criminals), an unstable cop taking bribes to keep his mentally retarded sister in a nice nursing home. His unsavory ties disgust Shea, who is determined to let no one stop him from becoming a New York City Detective. But Kebar's sister... so gorgeous, sweet, and innocent...

After spending all day reading *Once Were Cops*, I find myself beginning to write with a bit of a Bruen-esque flair. That is to say, in not-quite-complete sentences, and bordering on stream-of-consciousness. Bruen has an interesting and truly refreshing writing style. The novel is presented in the past tense, varying between the first person (those sections from Shea's perspective) and the third person omniscient. His sentences are short and clipped, and his paragraphs rarely contain more than a single fragment or sentence. For example:

Kebar said,  
"You wanna stop doing that, sir?"  
He didn't.

This creates a fast flowing and frank narrative. Descriptions are minimalist and details are rarely given unless essential to the plot. Though unusual, Bruen uses this style well, and it comes across as very natural for the gruff, no-nonsense personalities of the characters.

Another curiosity is Bruen's rejection of the traditional novel formatting. Instead of beginning each paragraph with a first line indent, he uses a hanging indent, separating each by a blank line. Though odd on the surface, this is a very practical decision for the short (often single line) paragraphs he employs. Rather than awkward indents on every line, indents only come in the few long paragraphs. As an aesthetic choice, it works well.

The writing in *Once Were Cops* is straightforward and clear. Both dialogue and thoughts are presented inside double quotation marks, and the frequent tags are used to distinguish between the two:

Lonnie thought,  
"Oh sweet f\*\*\*."

Kebar smiled, said,  
"Be seeing you."

Though the constant use of the dialogue tag "said" keeps us on track with which character we're following and is consistent throughout, there were a number of times when not only could the tag have been omitted, it would have read much better if Bruen had done so. Take the following section, in which I have struck-through the unnecessary tag:

"Would you like to visit?"  
F\*\*\*... no.  
~~I said,~~  
"Yes."

Without the "I said," the contrast between Shea thinking "f\*\*\* no" (which is presented as narration since his chapters are in the first person) and his answering "yes" is much more striking.

The writing in *Once Were Cops* is terrific and although the narration often contains run-ons, mispunctuation,

and sentences that jump around with the speed of thought, it is obvious that this was by conscious decision. In employing this style, Bruen keeps us in the characters' heads, even when the narration is in the third person.

*Once Were Cops* also contains subtle and delightful instances of foreshadowing:

Much as I loved Nora's neck, and Jesus, I did, somewhere in me, I thought... no... not her, she might be my salvation.

She wasn't.

This doesn't tell us much about what is to come other than to give a heads up that 1) some major event is coming, and 2) the narration is being presented from some time distant to that event. I always enjoy picking up these little hints as they come along, and Bruen does a good job of giving us bits of information without overdoing it.

Bruen also surprised me by introducing a new protagonist almost halfway through the novel. (view spoiler)

**The Praiseworthy:** As discussed above, *Once Were Cops* is written in a fresh and unusual style. The short paragraphs allow the reader to fly through the novel, but still allow for the insertion of the details necessary to connect with the characters. In *Once Were Cops*, Bruen has also created a unique and compelling story. He twists the usual cop tale by informing the reader, basically up front, that the main character is both a cop and a serial killer (we get this information in the synopsis on the back of the book, and are told that something is off with Shea in the first few pages). Within a few chapters we're both intrigued and repulsed by Shea. The presentation of the dark side of law enforcement continues when we meet Shea's NYPD partner, Kebar, a b\*stard of a cop being paid off by organized crime. Bruen manages to incorporate flashes of humanity in even these two seemingly unredeemable characters, making the readers care about their fate and want to read on.

**The Shortcomings:** The ending is unsatisfying. (view spoiler)

**The Verdict:** I would recommend *Once Were Cops* to readers who enjoy crime stories, especially with a psychological slant, and those who aren't distracted by unconventional formatting and writing.

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## Josh says

A multi dimensional look at the hidden desires of a sociopath and the coping mechanisms employed to contain (perhaps more apt, cover-up) the insatiable urges.

O'Shea a former Guard is transferred to NY where he quickly rises to prominence on the force after saving

his partners life during a domestic abuse call-out. O'Shea's partner Kabar forever in his debt tries to buddy up with O'Shea and accidentally gets him caught up in his extra circular activities with a mob boss. Short lived, Kabar tries to justify his 'take' by introducing O'Shea to his institutionalised sister, Lucia, a 30yr old woman with the mind of a child. O'Shea's darker side takes an instant liking to Lucia and its all green rosary beads and Internal Affairs from there.

'Once Were Cops' is a two sided tale of cause and effect with O'Shea consuming the first half and a journalist looking for answers, the second. Bruen's style is poetic, lean and concise – conveying oh so much with very little, it suited the theme of the novel. I enjoyed this much more the second time around for some reason, having previously given it 3 stars, while the re-read garners 4.5.

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### **John of Canada says**

I like Ken Bruen's work usually and to a point I liked this. However...he certainly wasn't filled with the milk of human kindness when he wrote this. Two too many innocent victims, and a crummy ending, one of those Deus Ex Machina things that I hate, also "STAY TUNED FOR THE STUNNING SEQUEL(s)" to this.

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### **Michael Martz says**

'Once Were Cops' isn't a typical police novel. Heck it's not even a typical novel. Most paragraphs are exactly one sentence long and, clocking in at 293 pages of a lot of white space, it's either a novella or a really long short story. That being said, it'll grab your interest quickly and propel you forward as the action picks up. And there's a lot of action in those short paragraphs.

Michael O' Shea is a young Irish cop who wrangles himself, using some pretty tough negotiating skills, into an exchange program that places him on the NYPD for a year. He also has a secret that he'll carry over to the US with him. In his new role he's paired with a psycho cop who's on the take, which quickly leads to many confrontations that expose Shea, as he's known, as not quite the cute lad with the adorable Irish accent everyone assumes he is. He battles the mob, his superiors, other cops, Internal Affairs, and his demons and manages to win, at least until he doesn't.

This is my initial foray into Ken Bruen's catalog and I'd have to say I'm intrigued. This book was very short but chock full of action, violence, and tricky plotting. I know he has a couple series out there and I suppose I'll try to get into them. I can't say I'm a fan of the single-sentence paragraph but I'm a sucker for Ireland-informed writing so we'll see what happens. Once Were Cops is definitely a quick, intense read by a writer who knows his territory.

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### **Jennifer says**

Bruen's got a hell of a voice for noir, it's true, but whoever did the page layout should be taken out and shot. Between Bruen's telegraphic style - which calls from a hard carriage return at the end of each line - and the designer's ridiculously wide-ass leading, I was ready to shoot something myself by the end of this one.



Maybe the conceit was deliberate, meant to disguise just how truly short this book actually is. One almost gets the feel that Bruen couldn't stand to be around his characters any longer, and for good reason -none of them are particularly nice people. Yet for a man who chooses a sociopath for his protagonist, Bruen's awfully nancy about his ending: unwilling to commit to happily ever after, but apparently unable to come up with a truly dismal final note. Odd, yet still somehow compelling. (Except for the damn leading.)

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### **Elli says**

This book was a "Something Else." Dark side is the understatement. Basically a sociopath tells his own story, and through his own eyes, although there are a few other first person narratives which not only tell another person's story, it gives a fuller perspective to the whole setting and characters involved. It's hard to say anything detailed about it without giving spoilers. It starts off rather slowly, although the sociopath doesn't hesitate to talk about his "zoning out." There are chances to stop him, but nobody really wants to do it, including the priest of the hurley team who doesn't want to lose his best player. Then he goes on a Guards-Policeman exchange program in New York city for a year and teams up with an embittered rather violent policeman, and they do well together. Justice is served well, so they like to say. The format of the style is double spaced short line paragraphs, like giving essence and little else. It's like a slow, very long, musical crescendo building up very surely, heavily, and gradually to a very dramatic, sharp, heavy climax about 300 pages later. And it's a hanger at the end. You feel like you know there's a copycat out there, and you're pretty sure you know who it is! But no one will get that one!

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### **Tony says**

Bruen, Ken. *ONCE WERE COPS*. (2008). \*\*1/2. Bruen is often hailed as the "King of Noir." That may have been true of most of his earlier books, but this novel falls under the heading of "King of Noir Comic Books." Instead of using his talent to really write, he has come up with a book that collects fillers for those balloons that go over comic-book characters' heads. Or, maybe, he watched a video game called "Cop vs. Cop," and put it down on paper. Bruen really has talent. It's just that it doesn't show in this, his latest contribution. The story starts out with an exchange of twenty guards (from Ireland, of course) with twenty cops from the U.S. Each of these exchange men will spend a certain amount of time in the other's country, serving on their respective forces. Michael O' Shea got on the list, and finagled his way into New York. He is teamed up with an unstable cop called K-bar, because of his use of one as a weapon. Michael has his problems, too. He blacks out on occasion and kills women by strangling them with green rosary beads. He's already done a few in Ireland, but finds that America offers much more opportunity and a better selection. He likes them with long swan-like necks. The two cops wreak havoc in the city and are put under investigation by IA. This spurs K-bar to get even more dirty and chummy with members of the underworld in return for the cash he needs to keep his retarded sister in a nursing home where she can be properly looked after. Lots of killings, lots of mayhem, lots of meaningless chapter quotes later, the final killing takes place and sets us up for a sequel. I hope not. The author provides a suitable summary of this novel for us on page 251: "A ton of data, but no substance." Skip this one.

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### **Patricia says**

I found *Once Were Cops* to be a story that kept me reading without stop to the last page. Then I went back

and read parts again. Next I wanted someone to discuss the book with but no one was available.

Matthew Patrick O'Shea arrives in New York from Ireland by virtue of an exchange program whereby police officers in New York would exchange with Ireland. O'Shea or Shea as he is known did not come by this assignment honestly. But then Shea very seldom comes by anything honestly. His outward appearance is impressive but the person that lurks beneath the outside veneer is ruthless, cold-blooded and someone that is to be feared.

The NYPD teams Shea with Kurt Browksi a/k/a Kebar. Kebar is not well liked and with good reason. Kebar is known for his violence. His one soft spot is Lucia, his sister. Lucia is a beautiful woman with a child's mind. Kebar pays for her care with money he earns by dealing with the mob.

Shea has moments of "zoning out" and violence against women seems to always occur during one of these periods but Shea manages to avoid suspicion.

Although Kebar starts out disliking Shea they come to an understanding and Kebar feels he finally has a partner that he can depend on. Little does Kebar realize that Shea has no feelings for anyone other than Shea.

This is a novel full of violence and leaves a lot for the reader to puzzle over after the last page is turned. Once Were Cops is a novel that is sure to be the subject of discussion on various mystery newsgroups.

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