





## INTERVIEW

Words Eamonn O'Neill  
Photographs Chris Blott

# In the US he's a literary legend: an action hero in the mould of Hemingway. But take Paul Watkins on a journey back to Eton and he's a little boy lost

**P**aul Watkins rarely returns to Eton. He has no real reason to. As a novelist he can always haul out a file full of memories and scan them. And anyway, he knows the bricks-and-mortar reality will never match the version he's constructed in his psyche.

But he's making an exception today.

His train pulls into Windsor Central station at precisely 1.09pm. It's a sunny afternoon and a wash of Japanese tourists flows by him, following a woman with a Prince William umbrella held aloft. As Watkins strides by he doesn't notice some of the tourists glancing back at him; nor does he see a pretty waitress at a coffee shop do the same; and he doesn't spot a young American couple stare straight at him as he checks the time on his expensive Italian pilot's watch. None of them know who he is, yet they're clearly intrigued. Dressed in a black T-shirt and khakis, wearing a green Gore-Tex mountaineer's jacket and carrying a black rucksack, he looks like a 6ft 4in tanned visitor from another planet. He's one of those rare people who simply fill a space bigger than their bodies take up.

This isn't the first time I've witnessed Paul Watkins's unerring ability to make such an entrance. Press reverse and spin back almost

**Paul Watkins's reluctance to speak about his life has served only to make him more of an enigma**

24 months: I'm sitting in the foyer of a hotel near Princeton University in New Jersey. At exactly the allotted time of 7pm, Watkins strides into the lobby. "Pleased to meet you," he says in a curious mix of American, Welsh and clipped English accents. "Not late, am I?" Behind him a shuffling line of tired businessmen and women waiting at reception swivel their collective heads to see who's speaking. They eye up the gleaming white shirt, pressed khaki trousers, polished English tan brogues and Harris Tweed jacket: he looks like a young Victorian explorer blown in from Timbuktu.

Two years on he creates the same impact in Windsor, a town he knows well. This time he has arrived from Norway: 48 hours ago he was sleeping in a cave. He'd hiked there while taking a break from cross-promoting two books, one a novel, the other a travelogue, both of which are set largely in Norway.

Pinning down this 40-year-old novelist for an interview is a minor miracle. While some authors are attracted to publicity like moths to lights, Watkins is entirely the reverse. This attitude has added curious layers to his backstory and has enshrouded his life in coatings of myth. Although he's got a healthy readership in the UK, the fact is he's much better known in America – and commands hefty advances for his novels. The American version of Esquire magazine, for example, which prides itself on being the spiritual home of the likes of

Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Mailer and Hunter S Thompson, stated recently that: "Amongst the New York literati Paul Watkins is already a legend." Vogue commented knowingly that: "Watkins leaves us practically breathless." Reviews like that can be a curse or a blessing: Watkins's reaction has been, and remains, to ignore them and steam straight ahead with his latest project. And he's known to pull vanishing tricks like you can hardly imagine.

Yet here he is, in the flesh, sitting in front of me and sipping a coffee. He attended the nearby Eton College during the late seventies and early eighties. For someone born in California in 1964 it was a tricky schooling; he recalled his experiences in his bestselling memoir *Stand Before Your God*. Read this and you soon realise that to understand Watkins you also have to make a stab at appreciating where the famous school fits into his psyche: hence the reason for dragging him back here, a place he's only revisited once in the last decade. "You're confronted with your own life and mortality when you come back to a place like this," he admits. "You realise that the memory of a school is only four years and unless you sit down and try to write about it or try to make your peace some other way, the school has no memory [of you] beyond the years that you were there." In other words, it can go on without you for ever.

As he speaks, he closes his eyes. One American magazine profiler noted that Watkins ▶