

Award-winning author Peter Behrens has written a well-crafted sequel to his first book, *The Law of Dreams*. Tim Fraser for Postmedia News

Canadian saga flows on a grand scale

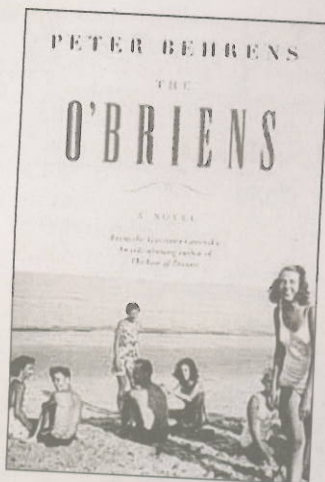
Characters come to the fore in *The O'Briens*

TRACY SHERLOCK
POSTMEDIA NEWS

The *O'Briens* follows the family Peter Behrens created for *The Law of Dreams* in 2006, but two generations have passed and the Irish family has immigrated to Canada. What the Governor General's Award-winning *Dreams* did for the Irish famine of 1847, *The O'Briens* does for the first half of the 20th century in Canada.

In *The Law of Dreams*, Fergus O'Brien's family is burned alive on their farm in Ireland after the potato blight hits. Fergus lands in a workhouse, but soon escapes and survives a horrific life that includes living in a whorehouse and working the railroads. Throughout, O'Brien dreams of America — the land of opportunity.

Two generations later, Fergus's descendant, Joe O'Brien, is coming of age in



REVIEW *The O'Briens*

by Peter Behrens (Anansi, 432 pages, \$32.95)

Pontiac County, Que., with his two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Their father has died in the South African War, and their mother has remarried a drunken, lecherous man. After their mother dies, Joe deals with their stepfather, and all of the children set off into the new home their forefather could only dream about.

Joe is the central character of this novel and he is definitely an empire builder, but one who is always slightly dark and

troubled. He marries Iseult, and the story is told through Joe, Iseult and their children.

Behrens is a natural storyteller, and his scope is vast: the tale begins in Quebec and includes settings ranging from Vancouver and remote areas of B.C. to Venice, Calif., a beachside resort town with canals, built in the early 20th century in a style reminiscent of its Italian namesake.

The story is a Canadian one, following the railroad construction westward to B.C. As the tale progresses, characters are swept up in both the First and Second World Wars, with tragic and familiar repercussions.

In *The Law of Dreams*, the action occurred at a breakneck speed. It was a page-turner, a train wreck in which events happening to Fergus O'Brien were so catastrophic, readers could not help but keep reading to see what horrific event could possibly happen next.

This novel is slower, its protagonist more of a brooder than a man of action. Nonetheless, there is still a lot going on, and Behrens' fine writing moves readers from one decade to the next, and we become

more attached to each of the characters with each passing year.

Whereas the tragedies and action are what I remember from *Dreams* five years after reading the novel, with *The O'Briens* I have a feeling I'm going to remember the well-crafted characters, whose flaws and strengths make them all too human, lovable and familiar.

Joe is the patriarch, who is responsible, yet troubled. Iseult is a strong, independent woman, but she is permanently damaged when she miscarries, alone and violently, during her first pregnancy. Their marriage is strong, yet seriously vulnerable. The pair goes on to have three children, Mike, Margo and Frankie, who are all young adults deeply affected by the Second World War.

Behrens has written a sweeping Canadian saga that will carry readers along through *The O'Brien* family tragedies and triumphs.

Behrens is a native of Montreal and was educated at Lower Canada College, Concordia University and McGill. He lives in Maine and Texas.