



The Ninth Hour

Alice McDermott

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A magnificent new novel from one of America's finest writers—a powerfully affecting story spanning the twentieth century of a widow and her daughter and the nuns who serve their Irish-American community in Brooklyn.

On a dim winter afternoon, a young Irish immigrant opens the gas taps in his Brooklyn tenement. He is determined to prove—to the subway bosses who have recently fired him, to his badgering, pregnant wife—“that the hours of his life belong to himself alone.” In the aftermath of the fire that follows, Sister St. Savior, an aging nun, appears, unbidden, to direct the way forward for his widow and his unborn child.

We begin deep inside Catholic Brooklyn, in the early part of the twentieth century. Decorum, superstition, and shame collude to erase the man's brief existence. Yet his suicide, although never spoken of, reverberates through many lives and over the decades—testing the limits and the demands of love and sacrifice, of forgiveness and forgetfulness, even through multiple generations.

The characters we meet, from Sally, the unborn baby at the beginning of the novel, who becomes the center of the story, to the nuns whose personalities we come to know and love, to the neighborhood families with whose lives they are entwined, are all rendered with extraordinary sympathy and McDermott's trademark lucidity and intelligence.

Alice McDermott's *The Ninth Hour* is a crowning achievement by one of the premiere writers at work in America today.

The Ninth Hour Details

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From Reader Review The Ninth Hour for online ebook

Diane Barnes says

Oh, how I loved these nuns! The Little Sisters of the Sick Poor, spending their lives nursing and providing for the needs of poor people in turn of the century Brooklyn, NY. It wasn't easy, but they did what they could, given the bounds of the Catholic Church, the Priests, lack of money, and human nature. Of course, that meant that sometimes rules had to be broken.

Sister St. Savior has no problem with this. She even has a ledger where she keeps a list of the sins she committed in her quest to give aid and succor. "Hold it against the good I've done, she prayed. We'll sort it out when I see you."

How to do what you know is right, and best, when it contradicts the rules of God? God can be awfully slow sometimes, while people suffer waiting for him to make up his mind. Keeping your mouth shut, when you know certain things, is one way around it. Actively participating in some practices gets a little trickier, but absolution and atonement can help with that. Do what you can to make lives better, because maybe God doesn't see, or care, the way you do.

Sister Jeanne, Sister Immaculata, Sister Lucy, are the nuns we get to know here, along with Annie and her daughter Sally, who are direct beneficiaries of their goodness. The writing style is quiet and hushed, no earth shattering events. Life and death are dealt with matter-of-factly, things happen, life goes on. As it does outside of novels.

I love Alice McDermott, and have never read a bad novel by her. There is always a first time, I suppose, but not this time. Excellent by my standards in every way, "The Ninth Hour" goes on my favorites list.

Diane S ? says

I absolutely adore this author, and have been waiting for a few years for this her next offering. Her novels aren't suspense filled, no thrill a minute, no car chases or knife wielding psychopaths, just slices of life in all it's messy permutations. Early twentieth century, Brooklyn, a neighborhood of Irish Catholics during a time period when most medical care was performed by nuns, in this case the Little Nursing Sisters of the sick poor, the only recourse for those who cannot afford a physician.

A young man commits suicide, leaving a young pregnant wife, enter Sister St. Savior who will be this woman's guardian angel. Providing her with a job in the convent laundry as well as finding her needed baby things and even a new friend with children of her own. Sally is born and is raised with the help of the good sisters in the convent laundry.

We come to know some of these sisters, travel with them as they visit the elderly, and the ill in their homes. The sisters very much present in the lives of these families. We watch as a young woman struggles with a decision regarding her vocation and her mother tries to find a new path to happiness, one in which the sisters very much disapprove. In a unique twist we also hear from voices from the future about forthcoming events, second and third generations. A wonderfully told story about a time long past, about love and morals and the many places and times these same circumstances repeat.

McDermott's novels are so realistic, her writing simple but heartfelt, her characters flawed but for the most part good intentioned. People just doing the best they can in the lives they find themselves and in the paths they have chosen whether this is married life or a life dedicated to the church. Struggling with many of the

same things we struggle with today.

If you enjoy Call of the Midwives I think you will enjoy this.

ARC from Netgalley.

Elyse says

Wow....so this was kinda A M A Z I N G.....

Beginning with a grim suicide - this book grabs our heart and won't let go.

The Jewish religion shared something in common with the Irish Catholic in the early 1900's — there was a stigma - a dire sin - against a proper burial for those who committed suicide. I know things have changed since then in the Jewish religion- but I don't know about the Irish Catholic today.

However — in this story at the start of the 20th century— when Annie's husband takes his life - and pregnant with his child - it's one of the Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor, Sister St. Saviour who takes her in.

After Annie delivers her child - the infant named Sally is baptized.

This story is so beautifully written —weaved around the life of Sally --and stories of the Civil War to the present day. Death, dying, grief, struggles, and sin are explored —while principles and faith and forgiveness are too. It's incredible how much is packed into this slim book. So much beauty - thought - compassion - and wisdom.

The writing is outstanding.

Alice McDermott's portrayal of the sisters was a deserving tribute to nuns for the service they do....in taking care of the sick, disabled, and impoverished.

A Magnificent treasure!

Colleen Fauchelle says

I know I have other books I should have been reading. But this one caught my eye at work last thursday, so I brought it and have been reading it when I have had time.

I loved this book. I have given a few books 5 stars this year but I would have to say this is my favorite. You see I went to a catholic primary school and when I was ill the Nuns would take me to their home and take care of me. That is what this story is about, the Nuns taking care of the people in the Brooklyn area and in reading it I found myself comforted (some health issues and other things).

This story is also about a young woman pregnant with her first child when her husband commits suicide and a lovely Nun on her way home coming in and taking care of things. The story follows the Mother and Child growing through life and also we get into the minds of some of the Nuns.

A beautiful story with a surprising ending. For me it was perfect.

Karen says

4.5 from me for this book written by an author whose work I have never read before. I thoroughly enjoyed the story and the writing!

This book starts off with the suicide of a man who leaves behind a pregnant wife. The story is a coming of age story of the girl born to this woman, much of their time spent inside an Irish Catholic convent in Brooklyn, with The Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor. The Ninth Hour is the afternoon hour of prayer. Illness, loss, faith and sacrifice are running themes in this story.

Linda says

"Fairness demanded that grief should find succor, that wounds should heal, insult and confusion find recompense and certainty, that every living person God had made should not, willy-nilly, be forever unmade."

And when the suffocating weight of despair visits upon the souls of the hopeless, choices will fit into the maze of forever. Jim sends his young wife, Annie, out the door of their delapidated Brooklyn tenement in order to do the weekly shopping. The turn of that knob clicks off something within him. Like the closing of this door, Jim chooses to shutter any ray of light remaining in his self-perceived worthless life. He turns the switch slowly on the gas stove and snuffs out the future in a single gesture. The lives of Annie and his unborn child will be chiseled with anguish and desperation.

But when sorrow visits the doorsteps of these tenements, it ushers in the Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor. The bend and the turn of the 20th Century reveals the fate of the recent immigrants and the destitute who live on the streets of Brooklyn. We will come to know Alice McDermott's chosen characters who reveal a stamina and a resilience reflecting life choices that will leave a darkening stain upon themselves and those who follow in the future. "She saw how the skim of filth, which was despair, which was hopelessness, fell like soot on the lives of the poor."

Annie is offered an opportunity to work in the convent's basement laundry. The labor is hard, but Annie has her little daughter, Sally, in a basket by her side and is able to stay in her apartment. We will focus on these two characters who were handed the roughest end of the stick. It will be Sally's future that will turn the wheels on this brilliant novel.

Alice McDermott crafts this novel with words hitting bone upon bone. Lives are complicated. Period. Nothing fits perfectly into boxes labeled good and bad. And does fate seal the deal? McDermott hones her characters with the uneven curves of simple humanity. She has been given a fine talent for allowing the readers to feel, to the core, every profound action within these pages. This will be a novel that you won't be forgetting any time soon. A Brooklyn Guarantee.

Annet says

But it was at this hour, when the sun was a humming gold at the horizon, or a pale peach, or even just, as now, a gray pearl, that she felt the breath of God warm on her neck. It was at this hour that the whole city smelled to her like the inside of a cathedral - damp stone and cold water and candle wax - and the sound of her steps on the sidewalk and over the five cross streets made her think of a priest approaching the altar in shined shoes. Or of a bridegroom, perhaps, out of one of the romances she had read as a girl, all love and anticipation...

Impressive...Rather dark and rather hopeful. And oh.... those Sisters... need to read more of this author.

On a gloomy February afternoon in Brooklyn, Jim sends his wife Annie out to do the shopping before dark falls. He seals their meagre apartment, unhooks the gas tube inside the oven and inhales...

Sister St. Saviour, a Little Nursing Sister of the Sick Poor, catches the scent of fire foused with water and hurries to the scene: a gathered crowd, firemen, and a distraught young widow. Moved by the girl's plight, and her unborn child, the nun finds Annie work in the convent's laundry - where, in turn, her daughter Sally will grow up....

Not a happy story...rather grim actually, but beautifully told. Beautiful insights too into the lives and thoughts of a number of nuns in the convent, who guide and guard Annie and Sally. About McDermott's prose: "Her endearing details and graceful sentences value the ordinary confusions of day-to-day lives" (Times Literary Supplement).

Perry says

My Best Novel of 2017, and a New All-Time Favorite

In the middle of something at work, I will not have time to put into writing a full review until the weekend. Yet, I'm bursting to rave about this novel and recommend it as a must.

The book is named for the hour of afternoon prayer, and God is a prevalent presence. Yet, this parochial novel's reach is as universal as Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, and Joyce's *Dubliners*. I'd rank it with these books in terms of how it evoked a time and place (here, a bygone Brooklyn) and seemingly irreconcilable moral conflicts, and the way it stirred my soul.

For the moment, I'll rely on a few short words of two reviewers whose rave reviews convinced me to read this novel:

Lily King, *The Washington Post*: "*superb and masterful...[t]here are so many ways to read this beautiful novel: as a Greek tragedy with its narrative chorus and the sins of the fathers; as a Faulknerian tale out to prove once more that the 'past is not even past'; as a gothic tale wrestling with faith, punishment and redemption a la Flannery O'Connor; or as an Irish novel in the tradition of Anne Enright and Colm Tóibín, whose sentences, like hers, burn on the page. But [it's] also a love story, told at a languid, desultory pace and fulfilled most satisfyingly at the end.*"

Rebecca Steinitz, *The Boston Globe*: "*[McDermott] reminds us of the pleasures of literary fiction and its power to illuminate lives and worlds.... [she] is a virtuoso of language and image, allusion and reflection, reference and symbol....*"

Jeanette says

Perfect.

Alice McDermott captures it exactly.

Been there, done that. St. Thomas More parish 1948-1966 predominately Irish-Americans. Sisters of Mercy in Chicago where Sally was heading. Novitiate / Mother McAuley H.S. This is the first novel I've ever read that even begins to capture my Chicago neighborhood- it's tone especially. Although most women had TWICE as many kids as Mrs. Tierney and nearly every family had a elder stuck up in the loft spaces.

All of the characters were finely drawn to an extent that is rarely accomplished within fiction prose. Perfect for the period, perfect for the tone, perfect for the context of worldview. Fully as good as her last book and I'll read all she writes.

Loved it. Especially the train ride parts. Oh did it bring back memories!

Cheri says

“It was a dark and dank day altogether: cold spitting rain in the morning and a low, steel gray sky the rest of the afternoon.”

Two weeks ago, Jim was working as a trainman for the BRT. But he felt he should be the master of his own time, and so he took that liberty, so convinced was he of his inalienable right to refuse the constraints of time.

“Sometimes just the pleasure of being an hour or two late was enough to remind him that he, at least, was his own man, that the hours of his life—and what more precious commodity did he own? —belonged to himself alone.”

And so, he was discharged from his job, they claimed he was unreliable and defiant, unwilling to follow the rules.

His wife, Annie, cried when he shared his news, and then she shared hers: there was a baby on the way.

Jim had sent his wife to do the shopping at four, so she would be back before dark. That would give him enough time to prepare and finish his plan.

On the streets below, Sister St. Saviour, a Little Nursing Sister of the Sick Poor was on her way back to the convent after collecting alms for the poor in her basket. Despite the needs of her body, she is drawn to another building on the way, feeling called there.

“Despair had weighted the day. God Himself was helpless against it—Sister St. Saviour believed this. She believed that God held His head in His hands all the while a young man in the apartment above slipped off this gray life—collar and yoke—not for lack of love, but for the utter inability to go on, to climb, once again, out of the depths of a cold February day, a dark and waning afternoon. God wept, she believed this, even as she had gotten off her chair in the lobby of Woolworth’s an hour before her usual time, had turned onto the street where there was a fire truck, a dispersing crowd, the lamplight caught in shallow puddles, even as she had climbed the stone steps—footsore and weary and needing a toilet, but going up anyway, although no one had sent for her.”

Ordinary people, mistakes are made, their flaws are shown, but never flaunted. There’s a subtle, gentle, delicate approach to this story that sometimes made me feel as though it was being told in a whisper – but not as a secret. More as if to imbue a sense of reverence for these people, their humble lives, an aura of “there but for the grace of God go I.”

These nuns embrace them as a part of their family, Sister Saviour, Sister Illuminata, Sister Jeanne, Sister Lucy become as much a part of Sally's life as if they were family. She sees their kindness, their desire to help others, their inner strength and their calm. Eventually, she decides she wants to be like them, to be one of them.

While this is a religious setting beginning in the early days of the 20th century, partially set in a convent, with Irish-Catholic characters in an Irish-Catholic Brooklyn neighborhood, there is more about the way of life in caring for those in need, lending aid to the indigent and needy, and very little beyond the basic concept of showing love to God by giving love to, and trying to help eliminate the suffering of, our fellow man.

This is the first Alice McDermott book I've read, but it won't be my last. I loved her simple prose that contains such a sense of grace; it feels almost like a prayer for more kindness in the world.

Lisa says

The Ninth Hour
Alice McDermott

A dark, thought-provoking and moving story about an Irish immigrant family and a community of nuns who thanklessly care for the sick and the poor.

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SUMMARY

Late one winter afternoon, Jim ushered his wife out the door to do some shopping. After she leaves, this Irish immigrant subway worker blocked the door, covered the windows and opened up the gas taps in their Brooklyn tenement. His suicide would forever alter the lives of his wife, Annie, and his unborn daughter, Sally. Despite being aided and shepherded by a community of nursing nuns, Annie and Sally struggle with life decisions and their moral compass in years following Jim's death. The story is narrated by one of Sally's children, with the focus on Sally's life, as well as the lives and works of the nuns who administer to the need of the Brooklyn Irish immigrant community.

"Fairness demanded that grief should find succor, that wounds should heal, insults and confusion find recompense and certainty, that every living person God has made should not, willy-nilly, be forever unmade."

REVIEW

The Ninth Hour is the time for afternoon prayers for the nursing nuns. It's a time to ask for God's mercy for the ills and sins of their community. Annie and Sallie needed the nuns prayers, as did so many others in their Brooklyn neighborhood. Set in the first half of the twentieth century, THE NINTH HOUR is dark and affecting. The prose was masterfully descriptive, evocative and emotional. The detailed descriptions of the grim aspects of illnesses and death that the nuns experienced, among the poor were gritty. One of the most poignant chapters in the book was innocent Sally's dramatic train trip to Chicago. She was going to Chicago to join a convent, but the shocking experiences with the coarse people she encountered on the train caused her to change her mind. She immediately returned to Brooklyn, only to find that things had changed there in her brief absence.

The characters were complex and plentiful. Issues of death, depression, sin, reparations, secrets and guilt are explored. Lovers of dark and affecting literary fiction will appreciate THE NINTH HOUR. This is

McDermott's eight novel. She has received The National Book (2017), the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Fiction (2018), and the Kirkus Prize for Fiction (2017), for this book.

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Narrated Euan Morton

"She saw how the skim of filth, which was despair, which was hopelessness, fell like soot on the lives of the poor."

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Jen says

I went into this blind - having only skimmed over some reviews but trusting my GR friend's high ratings. So, little did I know that as dark as this starts off and moments during, McDermott's prose rubs off like a balm for both the spirit and the soul.

It starts with a suicide in the early 20th century. The darkness just before death and that which immediately follows. Nuns are brought in to help those grieving; those dying.

This is mostly Sally's story -the path her life took after her father committed suicide leaving her mother pregnant with her. How the nuns stepped in and provided her with a job to help sustain both. Sally's early years in the convent while her mother worked; The relationships that developed and the decision to take the habit, become a nurse and take on a calling to help others in their time of need. However, things take a turn early on in her journey and things she thought clear, became muddled. But the nuns never waived- or when they did, they did so with the best intentions.

Loved the way McDermott tells a story - what starts in one direction turns you around on your head in a completely different one. I didn't know until the very end how much I took to the one nun, Jeannie.

Did I love this? Close, but no cigar. It took me quite a few pages to get into and I wasn't sure of the nun angle (growing up in the catholic school system, nuns were already a dying vocation. The closest I got to them - sadly, but with much joy- were *The Trouble with Angels* and its sequel. I love me a Hayley Mills film). Overall, it was worthy read and I will definitely check out her other works. 4??

Dem says

The Ninth Hour a story by Alice McDermott is well written vivid and an interesting insight into 20th Century Irish Catholic Brooklyn and while I found the book well written prose wise I did find the novel quite disjointed and at times difficult to follow.

The Story starts out quite strong with Jim a young Irish immigrant recently fired from his job as a subway motorman takes his own life in the Brooklyn apartment he rents with his pregnant wife Annie. Sister St. Saviour from the Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick appears on the scene and takes the young widow under her wing.

The life of the Little Nursing Sisters was to go out in the very Catholic Brooklyn community and nurse those who were sick or suffering and I found this really interesting and informative in the book. Their nursing went far and beyond what was normal duties for a nurse as the sisters would also cook, clean, take in laundry, provide company, and sustenance for people in need. The sisters contributed immensely to the community they worked in and it was nice to see that portrayed in this story as there are many wonderful caring nuns who dedicate and have dedicated their lives to the poor and suffering.

There is much to like about this novel and I could possibly rate the writing 5 star as the scenes were vivid and so well written and yet the book dragged for me and became a little bit of a chore. I liked the characters and yet I never felt I got to know them or connected with them. A short novel and yet a book that became a long read and therefore a 3 star rating from me.

Jill says

During this cynical point of time when the words “sacrifice” and “service” have become quaint and puzzling, *The Ninth Hour* seems a bit of an anachronism or at the very least, historical curiosity.

Alice McDermott, however, in exquisite prose, captures the world of early twentieth century Catholic Brooklyn, with its lens on the Little Sisters of the Sick Poor, their laundress Annie and her daughter Sally.

The beauty of the novel is that it doesn't judge, providing the nuns with humanity without elevating them to martyrdom or turning them into figures of scorn or pity. One of the most powerful passages I've read this year occurs when Sally, a young girl who flirts with joining them, travels to Chicago to meet with the order on a train. There, she is forced to learn “the truth of the dirty world (showing) her that her own impulse was to meet its filthy citizens not with a consoling cloth, but with a curse, a punch in the face.” She makes her decision knowing she is flawed too, and with a greater sense of self.

Is it better to elect chaos busyness, bustling...rambunctious kids, overflowing ashtrays, cloudy classes? Or is the serenity of religion, the focus on purity and sacrifice and eternal rules the more appealing way? As a non-believer, there were times while reading the book that I chafed—the pressure on an idealistic and naïve young girl to become a novice and give up the comfort of married life, for example, or the equating of lovemaking with sin. But still, Alice McDermott's goal is not to judge but instead, to test the limits of love and sacrifice. She does a darn good job of it.

Angela M says

Alice McDermott is one of my very favorite writers. I found in her new novel the same subtle, quiet storytelling with simple prose, descriptions that defy you to stay in your present place and send you to this place, this Catholic, Irish-American Brooklyn in the early twentieth century. She invites you through her ordinary characters living their everyday lives in spite of their flaws, to see the extraordinary things of our humanity. This is a story of a family beginning with life before Sally is born to Anne and narrated by Sally's

children. It begins with the fate of Sally's father as he commits suicide and the nuns enter their lives . In a time when the nuns cared for the poor and the sick and the orphans and then taking under their wings a widow and her infant daughter even before she is born. They will impact Anne and Sally throughout their lives.

So this is a story as much about these nuns as it is about this family. The Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor - Sister St. Saviour, Sister Illuminata, Sister Jeanne , Sister Lucy - I couldn't help but love these nuns. I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic school so found a real affinity to them. There was something about being near to them that made you want to be like them so it was understandable to me why Sally as a young woman thinks she wants to join the convent. Is this about the Catholic Church? Sure in some ways. Is it about people's relationship with God? Sure in some ways. But it's also about life , so of course there is death . It's about family, not just mothers and fathers and children but about how those who care for each other are family and so it is about love. I enjoyed this as much as I have several of McDermott's novels because she has such command of the language and it through the simplicity of her prose that she gives us these beautiful stories. Highly recommended to any McDermott fan and to anyone else who hasn't read her work - she's an amazing talent.
