



A Fanatic Heart

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In these selections from twenty years of her best short fiction, Edna O'Brien pulls the reader into a woman's experience. Her stories portray a young Irish girl's view of obsessive love and its often wrenching pain, while tales of contemporary life show women who open themselves to sexuality, to disappointment, to madness. Throughout, there is always O'Brien's voice—wondrous, despairing, moving—examining passionate subjects that lay bare the desire and needs that can be hidden in a woman's heart.

A Fanatic Heart Details

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Nandakishore Varma says

Edna O'Brien is a hallowed name in Irish literature - considered to be the 'doyenne', if one can believe Wikipedia. So it was with positive glee I picked this up cheap at a bookstore two years ago. I started to read it - but then I found I could not get into the groove, and left it for a time, before restarting it a month back. It sometimes happens to me that if a book does not impress me at a certain point of time, I can defer it and return to it later when I am in a different frame of mind. Well, it did not happen with this collection.

Ms. O'Brien writes powerfully. Her prose has a certain style, seemingly made up of flat statements but building to a tremendous crescendo. Even though she does not do inner monologue as such, the workings of the minds of her characters - almost exclusively women - is the mainstay of her stories. These women, who many a time narrate the story in first person, are almost always tortured by inner demons. This seething invisible world permeates the stories.

Many stories set in the Ireland of her childhood (the stories in this section, *Returning*, are almost always exclusively narrated in the first person) contain three themes I have come to associate with the country during the early decades of the last century (based on Frank McCourt's book, to some extent, I must confess): extreme poverty, sickness and squalor and a sense of sin and redemption, engendered by strict Catholicism. These stories are powerful (especially *The Doll* and *Sister Imelda*), but they are on the extreme side of depressing.

Another theme which is recurrent is the longing (often illicit) of a woman for a man (*The Love Object*, *Mrs. Rheinhardt*) - a longing which goes largely unfulfilled. Because what the woman wants or imagines is seldom available in reality. Any idol, looked too closely, will be found to have feet of clay.

However, I must say that these stories had a sameness which palled on me after a time. The themes were so similar that many stories seemed to be different versions of the same thing. I wavered between 2 and 3 stars for a long time - in the end decided to plump for three, just to acknowledge the beautiful prose.

Glen says

I asked the writer Walter Mosley about Edna O'Brien recently, she having tutored him around the time he decided to make a go of writing as a vocation, and he said "I think she is the greatest living writer working in the English language." I have not read her entire corpus, but what I have read of her work has not dissuaded me of the possible, even likely correctness of Mosley's assessment. The stories collected here focus almost exclusively on women, and they are almost all of a melancholy or bleak texture, yet the overall effect I did not find depressing, owing largely to O'Brien's skill as a verbal portrait artist of the human heart. A theme I detect throughout these stories is that for many people the longing for continuity in one's life experiences is more pressing and urgent than the desire for happiness. Of the stories in this volume the one that expresses this most clearly is the little gem "Christmas Roses", but there are many others here that contain the same leitmotiv. O'Brien's women are easily stereotyped from without, but like most great writers she exposes their internality and the complexity thereof with extraordinary skill and compassion.

Josephine Ensign says

Biting stories that are sometimes difficult to read due to the level of domestic violence and bitterness. I was hard-pressed to find a single 'good man' in this collection of short stories. Perhaps that is the point, and I'm glad to read/hear a strong woman's voice, but I found them too limiting in the end. There are enough parts that I like to incline me to read one of her novels, or perhaps her more recent short story collections.

Brandi Declue says

I picked this up on a whim for a buck at powells. I have already finished the first story and I think I may have found a new favorite short story writer...well...next to Cheever and a few others anyway. :)

Elham Nosrati says

One of the best short story collections that I have ever read.

Molly Ferguson says

The stories in this book are gorgeous. I assigned several of them for my class, and the students' favorites were "The Connor Girls" and "Irish Revel". She writes with such depth of emotion, and such restraint. However, what keeps this from 5 stars is that eventually, story after story of disappointed young women and disillusioned mistresses starts to wear on a reader. O'Brien has carved out her niche.

Bobbi says

I don't know why it took me so long to read this collection of short stories. Or maybe I do. Philip Roth raves about O'Brien in its introduction, and since I love Roth I was looking forward to it. O'Brien certainly can write, but these pieces have a depressing sameness to them. It isn't that they're mostly about sex-- that's one of Roth's main subjects, if not THE main one. And Roth has never been afraid of unsympathetic characters. Maybe it takes a genius like Roth to get away with whatever he wants to. The typical O'Brien character is a woman waiting by the phone or at the door or in the bar for a man. She could be the mistress of the man or married to the man, who has a mistress; the waiting is the same. --These women are authentic and sometimes avoid being merely pitiful. I just can't relate to them.

Marla says

I absolutely loved her stories in this book.

Michell says

Beautifully written though it's so depressing I wanted to slit my throat which is why it took me so long to read.

Sophie says

Beautifully written short stories. Two common subjects seem to be having a child narrator who in some way loses innocence and women having affairs with married men. She is very acute on the obsession of women when they are in love. And she gets across the claustrophobia of rural village life wonderfully. Inspiring.

David Layden says

easy to read.....by no means does this mean it is light.....wonderful detail of nature and the inside of homes.....daily life.....the workings of a female heart and what is expected of the male heart.....

Carrie Schindele Cupples says

Every one of O'Brien's stories brings me immense satisfaction as a reader. Every story is so rich, so different from the next. She sets stories in diverse decades and geographies and creates characters with differing moral centers, yet remains convincing in her observations. She is an expert at the art of writing. I recommend this collection to anyone looking to study stories that are well-crafted, yet enormously entertaining. O'Brien illuminates situations so that as a reader, I feel nothing is left out.

Melissa says

read for school and looking forward to going back and reading the rest of the short stories when i have time to read things for myself!! :D

Nicole Bedford says

A lovely collection of stories.

Natanya says

Not nearly as sentimental as the title makes these stories seem; they are quite the opposite, in fact. Though O'Brien's subjects include childhood, the horrible finality of the past, nostalgia, regret, overwhelming grief,

family, and intimacy, she deals with all in ways neither sappy nor gentle. Her stories are devastating. "Wilderness" is one of the best stories I have read about loss.
