

Scarlet Feather

by Maeve Binchy

About the Book

They met in cooking school and became fast friends with a common dream. Now Cathy Scarlet and Tom Feather hope to take Dublin by storm with their newly formed catering company, aptly dubbed "Scarlet Feather." Not everyone, however, shares their optimism. Cathy's mother-in-law disapproves of both Cathy and her new "hobby," while Cathy's husband, Neil, pays no mind to anything- except his work as a civil rights lawyer. And then there's Tom's family, who expect him to follow in his father's footsteps, and an ambitious girlfriend who's struggling with career dreams of her own. Between friends and families, ups and downs, heartaches and joys, Cathy and Tom are about to embark on the most maddening-and exhilarating-year of their lives...

Praise for the Book

“In **Scarlet Feather**, Binchy again proves herself a master storyteller.... A great read.”

—*USA Today*

“The dialogue crackles with wit and authentic Irish style...It takes a huge amount of talent, insight, and compassion to create a ‘simple’ good story, and Maeve Binchy has it all.”

—*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Binchy has a masterful grip on the ins and outs of her plots, and weaves together each strand into an artful display of devotion and dedication, family and friendship.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

“Binchy’s latest novel is as welcome as a hearthside armchair in the middle of a blizzard, and reading *Scarlet Feather* is a lot like sitting in that chair while sharing tea with a special friend.”

—*The Denver Post*

“Luscious and satisfying...[readers] will be sorry for this warm and charming tale to end.”

—*Chattanooga Times*

Courtesy of Penguin

About the Author

Maeve Binchy

Source: Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2008. From Literature Resource Center.

Document Type: Biography

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Updated:04/10/2009

Personal Information

Born May 28, 1940, in Dalkey, Ireland; daughter of William T. (a lawyer) and Maureen (a nurse) Binchy; married Gordon Thomas Snell (a writer and broadcaster), January 29, 1977. Education: University College, Dublin, B.A., 1960. Addresses: Home: Dublin, Ireland. Agent: Christine Green, 2 Barbon Close, Great Ormond St., London WC1 N3JX, England.

Career

Writer. Zion Schools, Dublin, Ireland, French teacher; Pembroke School for Girls, Dublin, history and Latin teacher, 1961- 68; Irish Times, Dublin, columnist, 1968-2000; writer.

Awards

International Television Festival Golden Prague Award, Czechoslovak Television, Prague, and Jacobs Award, both 1979, both for *Deeply Regretted By*; Lifetime Achievement Award, British Book Awards, 1999; W.H. Smith Fiction Award, 2001, for *Scarlet Feather*; PEN/A.T. Cross Award for Literature, Ireland, 2007.

Works

Novels

Light a Penny Candle, Century (London, England), 1982, Viking (New York, NY), 1983.

Echoes, Century (London, England), 1985, Viking (New York, NY), 1986.

Firefly Summer, Century (London, England), 1987, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1988.

Silver Wedding, Century (London, England), 1988, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1989.

Circle of Friends, Franklin Library (Franklin Center, PA), 1990.

The Copper Beech, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1992.

The Glass Lake, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1995.

Evening Class, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1996.

Tara Road, illustrated by Wendy Shea, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1999.

Scarlet Feather, Orion (London, England), 2000, Dutton (New York, NY), 2001.

Quentins, Dutton (New York, NY), 2002.

Two Complete Novels (includes *Circle of Friends* and *The Copper Beech*), Wings Books (New York, NY), 2003.

Nights of Rain and Stars, Dutton (New York, NY), 2004.

Star Sullivan, Orion (London, England), 2006.

Whitethorn Woods, Knopf (New York, NY), 2007.

(Author of afterward) W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*, Signet (New York, NY), 2007.

Heart and Soul, Knopf (New York, NY), 2009.

Story Collections

The Central Line: Stories of Big City Life (also see below), *Quartet* (London, England), 1978.
Victoria Line (also see below), *Quartet* (London, England), 1980.

Maeve Binchy's Dublin Four, Ward River Press (Swords, Ireland), 1982, published as *Dublin Four*, Century (London, England), 1983.

London Transports (contains *The Central Line: Stories of Big City Life* and *Victoria Line*), Century (London, England), 1983.

The Lilac Bus: Stories, Ward River Press (Swords, Ireland), 1984, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1991.

This Year It Will Be Different and Other Stories: A Christmas Treasury, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1996.

The Return Journey, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1998.

Ladies' Night at Finbar's Hotel, edited by Dermot Bolger, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2000.

Other

My First Book (journalism), *Irish Times* (Dublin, Ireland), 1976.

End of Term (one-act play), produced in Dublin, Ireland, at the Abbey Theatre, 1976.

The Half Promised Land (play), produced in Dublin, Ireland, 1979, produced in Philadelphia, PA, at Society Hill Playhouse, 1980.

Deeply Regretted By (television screenplay), Radio Telefis Eireann, 1979, also published as *Deeply Regretted By ...*, Arlen House (Galway, Ireland), 2005.

Maeve's Diary (nonfiction), *Irish Times* (Dublin, Ireland), 1979.

Ireland of the Welcomes (television screenplay), Radio Telefis Eireann, 1980.

Aches & Pains, illustrations by Wendy Shea, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 2000.

Healing Hands: People Remember Nurses, photographs by Ann Henrick, New Island (Dublin, Ireland), 2004.

A Time to Dance, photographs by Ann Henrick, New Island (Dublin, Ireland), 2006.

Contributor to books, including *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Girl*, edited by John Quinn, Methuen (London, England), 1986; *Territories of the Voice: Contemporary Stories by Irish Women Writers*, edited by Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy, and Katherine Hogan, Beacon Press (Boston, MA), 1989; and *In Sunshine or in Shadow*, edited by Kate Cruise O'Brien and Mary Maher, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 1998. Some of her plays have been produced by the Peacock Theater in Dublin, Ireland.

Media Adaptations

Echoes was made into a miniseries, televised in Great Britain in 1988 and in the United States on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1990; *Circle of Friends* was made into a film, produced by Savory Pictures, starring Chris O'Donnell and Minnie Driver; *Tara Road* was made into a film directed by Gillies McKinnon and produced by Noel Pearson.

Sidelights

Maeve Binchy is a versatile Irish writer who once reported on daily life in London for the Irish Times. She lived in London for almost fifteen years before taking up residence outside Dublin with husband and fellow writer Gordon Snell. "We have a lovely room with a long, long desk and two word processors," the novelist once said when asked about living with another writer. "We get on perfectly well sitting beside each other. Just the sound of the keyboard and the printer is all we hear. If one of us doesn't like what the other has said, the rule is ten minutes of sulking time ... After that the sulks can be construed as being moody or difficult ... We're not perfect in our judgment of each other's work, but at least we're honest. And normally we're praising--but if we don't like something, we say it straight out."

Binchy's novels, many of them best sellers, have won her critical acclaim and an international following. Set most frequently in rural Ireland, her stories of family life and intimate friendships appeal to a predominantly female audience. She has been praised as thorough in her storytelling and both astute and affectionate in her characterizations. Many of her female protagonists are women who take control of their lives in the midst of coping with such societal ills as alcoholism, adultery, and divorce. Binchy told a People magazine reporter that the message within her novels and short stories is that once people take charge of their lives, they can make things work out for the best. "And maybe that's a reassuring idea," she added. "I wouldn't like to be thought of as patting people on the head, but I wouldn't be at all offended by people who think my books are comforting." Critics have noted that although her writing sometimes lacks profundity, it transcends the superficiality frequently featured in popular romance novels through such subtle feminist undertones. "In 1963 we all played by the rules," commented Binchy to Cathy Edwards of the San Francisco Review of Books. "I want to write about people who make their own decisions. Women of my generation were fooled a bit--maybe all women are." "Binchy's work, though marketed as romances, by no means fits that category precisely," noted a contributor to Contemporary Novelists. "Binchy, a longstanding columnist for the Irish Times, presents a realistic picture of the lives of women ordered within the rigidities of Catholic orthodoxy that forbid divorce and abortion. In her work, women's survival is predicated on the creation of powerful, though informal, networks of alliance and friendships that survive the vicissitudes of pregnancy, forced marriage, and alcoholism." As a writer for Contemporary Popular Writers elaborated, "Her sprawling narratives express a moral but tolerant sensibility." Critics either dismiss or applaud her particular genre as "women's fiction," or even, as Helen Birch of the Independent wrote, "600-page doorstoppers, beach books, fireside books." Most reviewers believe Binchy's work transcends these labels. Her accomplished prose contains shrewd, albeit sentimental, social analysis of Irish women's lives in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Though best known for her novels, Binchy began her fiction-writing career with short stories and plays. As she once commented: "Because the kind of stories I used to write for the Irish Times had a fictional or almost dramatic element to them, sometimes I was approached by people in theater or television asking why didn't I try my hand at writing plays. And because I started everything in life a little bit later than everybody else (to be a cub journalist at twenty-eight was very old), I felt, OK, maybe at thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven I could start to write plays as well." Dublin's Abbey Theatre encouraged new talent and produced Binchy's *End of Term* in 1976.

Although one of her plays, *The Half Promised Land*, was eventually staged as far away as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Binchy fared far better with her efforts at writing short fiction. Her collections *London Transports* --originally published in two volumes as *The Central Line* and *Victoria Line* --and Maeve Binchy's *Dublin Four* focus on the tedium of city life and the individual plights of female protagonists. In *London Transports*, for example, the women are often dissatisfied with their relationships with men and drawn into the corruption of Binchy's seedy London. *Times Literary Supplement* contributor Helen Harris pointed out that though the themes of *London Transports* are often bleak, Binchy writes with "ease and buoyancy." Harris also declared that the author's "portrayal of the small skirmishes of day-to-day urban survival is enjoyable; her wry observation of the different layers of London life is uncomfortably acute." Binchy's 1996 collection, *This Year It Will Be Different and Other Stories: A Christmas Treasury*, received mixed assessments. A *Publishers Weekly* critic appraised the volume's stories as "formulaic and superficial." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor was more positive, however, recommending the "collection of Christmas-centered feel-good tales" as a "bit of sentimentality and a touch of romance, along with humor and hopeful turns to treat ... the holiday blues." *The Return Journey*, Binchy's 1998 volume, also received uneven, if not unflattering, reviews. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer declared the work "unimpressive," faulting Binchy for, among other things, "predictable plot mechanisms" and "conclusions [that] are socked home, often in a chirpy manner." "Too many of these finely wrought tales reach their blissful destinations without hitting a single bump in the road," commented Erica Saunders in *People*.

A small rural town is the primary setting of Binchy's first novel, *Light a Penny Candle*. In this work, she depicts the twenty-year friendship of Elizabeth White and Aisling O'Connor. The girls meet when Elizabeth, a ten-year-old Londoner, is sent by her parents to live with the O'Connor family in Ireland at the start of World War II. Together the two friends experience the joys and hardships of growing up, and their close relationship endures despite such ordeals as Elizabeth's difficulties with her uncaring parents once back in London, Aisling's love affair with a onetime boyfriend of Elizabeth's, and both women's failed marriages. As in many of Binchy's stories, the book's male characters are often presented as insensitive, noncommittal, and the source of the women's problems. "It's been a while since I've enjoyed such a loutish, incompetent, drunken, selfish collection of men in one novel," remarked Carol Sternhell in the *Village Voice*. On the other hand, Sternhell found most of the female characters "practical, competent, and loving." Although some critics complained about what one reviewer, writing in *Harper's*, termed a "too heavy-handed and contrived" ending in which "one disaster after another comes crashing down too quickly," the novel received praise. "With its barreling plot and clamorous characters, *Light a Penny Candle* is a lilting book," asserted Dennis Drabelle in the *Washington Post Book World*. Sternhell called the author's effort an "impressive first novel" and proclaimed that "Binchy's strength is in her honesty: she refuses to trim all edges to get us drunk on easy answers." In *Firefly Summer* Binchy, observed *New York Times Book Review* contributor Michele Slung, "once again gives us rural Ireland, a frequently maddening yet ultimately seductive place that can render problems only in contrasting shades of old and new, past and present, strange and familiar." Patrick O'Neill, the story's main character, is an American millionaire who comes to the Irish town of Mountfern in the 1960s with the goal of converting a dilapidated manor house into a luxury hotel. His experience in a town made up of people who are either eager or reluctant to accept his business venture is the subject of the novel. Slung thought that *Firefly Summer* "is

the best Binchy yet ... Here she does what she does best, which is to manufacture experience in which we fully share."

"With *Silver Wedding*, " noted Robert Plunket in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Binchy tries something a little bit different, and as she does so you can sense a remarkably gifted writer beginning to flex her muscles." Instead of focusing on the dynamics of small-town life, in her fourth novel, Binchy examines the personal conflicts of the members of one family and their friends. In the last chapter of the book, all of the characters unite for Deidre and Desmond Doyle's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party. The author devotes each of the previous chapters to one individual in the story, ultimately revealing the emotions, resentments, and ambitions of a cast of characters whose lives are all connected in some way. Plunket pointed out that the author's choice of "guilty secrets" as one theme of *Silver Wedding* left him "wish[ing] she'd come up with something a bit more clever," but he acknowledged that "Binchy is a wonderful student of human nature" and described the book as "an effortless pleasure to read." The importance that Binchy places on a writer's careful observation of people and places was expressed in a "how-to" article the author wrote for the *Writer*. "To get dialogue right, listen to everyone, everywhere--eavesdrop, follow people so you can hear what they are saying. To get a scene right for *Tara Road*, I spent two days watching mothers and teenage daughters buying clothes in a store. Never hang up on a crossed telephone line, watch people in planes and trains, and be vigilant the whole time." Binchy instructs writers to outline and adhere to a general time schedule for each of their books; to think through the story and the characters, making note cards for each; to plan goals for each chapter; and then to begin writing, and when writing to do so at a quick pace. "Don't pause for breath, punctuation, too much analysis," stated Binchy. She advises writers to fully imagine their characters, their appearance, their actions, and reactions: "If you pretend they are real people, they will become so," she said. Among other pointers, Binchy told writers to refrain from analyzing the worth of their writing. "Just keep going," she urged, advocating a style in the manner of a writer's own speech: "I write exactly as I speak; I don't roll each sentence around and examine it carefully before letting it loose. If you speak in your own voice, you can never be accused of being pretentious or showing off; you can just be yourself, and that's a huge advantage in anybody."

Asked by *Writer* interviewer Lewis Burke Frumkes to explain her theory on her wide appeal--Binchy's writing has been translated into numerous languages and her books have outsold literary giants such as James Joyce and William Butler Yeats--Binchy stated that her writing is geared for a mass audience, unlike Joyce and Yeats: "The thing is, if you were going on a journey and you were thinking, I must read something on the plane, and if you had read any of my books before you would think, well, she tells a good story. ... For some reason I have hit upon a form of story telling that appeals to people in different languages. I suppose they have also felt love and hope and pain, and they have had dreams and had the delight of close families and the more irritating aspects of close families. They have, perhaps, also loved people who haven't loved them in return and also might have wanted to go up to the bright lights of a big city ... but the principle is the same. You have people who are young and enthusiastic and want to try to achieve their dream, and I think that is why people everywhere like [the characters]."

Circle of Friends also became a best seller. Set in the 1950s, the book revolves around three young women with contrasting personalities who come of age and develop a close friendship while attending University College in Dublin. Although Susan Isaacs suggested in the *New York Times Book Review* that "a cynical reader might reflect [that] this sort of fiction is so

commonplace that the characters will be completely fungible," she lauded Binchy for portraying her protagonists as "modern women, each, in her own way, ambitious, intelligent, perceptive." Isaacs summed up the reason for Binchy's immense popularity when she declared that "the author doesn't daze the reader with narrative bombshells (or, for that matter, with brilliant language), but recounts ordinary events ... with extraordinary straightforwardness and insight." *The Copper Beech*, a set of interlinking stories set in a small Irish village during the 1940s and 1950s, "has its share of murder, adultery, alcoholism, unwanted pregnancies and lots more," Anne Tolstoi Wallach commented in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people, but because this is the new Maeve Binchy it all comes right in the end." Of *Evening Class*, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote: "Fans of Binchy's nimble story telling skills, and of her characters, who are always decent without being dull, won't want to change a thing." Jan Blodgett, writing for *Library Journal*, called the book "a complex tale of loves lost, betrayal, loyalty, and renewed courage." For the type of story it is, *Evening Class* is "satisfying," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* critic, who described the characters as "a flock of middle-and lower-middle [class] worriers, loners, and groaners, all brooding on their peculiar miseries, until an updraft of love or happy coincidences set them free."

Tara Road revolves around two women who swap houses, and to some extent lives, for a summer. Both are mothers: Marilyn is an American living in New England and mourning the death of her teenaged son; Ria is a resident of Dublin who is completely shocked when her husband leaves her for another woman whom he impregnated. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor declared *Tara Road* "one of Binchy's best." "Once again, Binchy ... memorably limns the lives of ordinary people caught in the traps sprung by life and loving hearts," stated the critic. Through the course of the story, the women learn about each other as well as themselves. In a *Booklist* review, Brad Hooper called Binchy "a careful writer and a conscientious plotter."

Scarlet Feather was greeted with critical praise and, according to a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, "Binchy's gift for creating a wide range of characters whose foibles and challenges make them lovable and real, coupled with her theme that genuine love can transform lives, add up to another crowd-pleaser." Hooper commented: "Binchy writes domestic drama at its most realistic and moving, and her adoring fans will appreciate her latest work." Her fans might have appreciated it more had Binchy not announced that *Scarlet Feather* would be her last novel. According to Christina Cheakalos writing for *People*, after reading the announcement in Binchy's *Irish Times* column, "More than 800 readers wrote in to say don't go." Writing in *Chatelaine*, reviewer Bonnie Schiedel commented: "She's going out on a proverbial high note," calling *Scarlet Feather* "a delicious read."

Regardless of her announcement, Binchy made a surprise return and produced another novel, *Quentins*, which continued with the modern Dublin theme she used in *Tara Road* and *Scarlet Feather*. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented: "Fans of the bestselling Binchy will be grateful that the basic formula is still intact--decent people pulling through hard times--and that some favorite characters from previous novels reappear." This is a story in which the inhabitants are proud of their cosmopolitan attitudes and, as Christine C. Menefee pointed out in *School Library Journal*, "underlying [the characters'] lives and choices are strengths of family and friendship, and a loving kindness, that still confirm the outsider's hopeful expectations about traditional Irish culture."

Binchy delighted readers again with yet another post-retirement novel in 2004. In *Nights of Rain and Stars* a boating accident brings together four vacationing strangers who have arrived in

Greece to distance themselves from difficult family situations at home. Carol Haggas, writing for Booklist, called the novel "a rich homage to meaningful relationships."

A local shrine comes under threat of a highway bulldozer in Binchy's 2007 offering, *Whitethorn Woods*. Set in the town of Rossmore, the novel revolves around the attempts by villagers, including the local priest, Father Flynn, and the local "simpleton," Neddy Nolan, to forestall construction of a proposed highway that would destroy St. Ann's Well, a shrine to which local legend ascribes the power of miracles. Binchy also includes many more first-person narrators for this novel that the author "orchestrates ... masterfully," as a Publishers Weekly critic noted.

Laurie A. Cavanagh, writing in *Library Journal*, also had praise for the novel, terming it an "enjoyable peek into other people's thoughts." Similarly, Kate Ayers, writing on the *Bookreporter.com* Web site, observed that reading *Whitethorn Woods* is "like eavesdropping at the town meeting." Ayers added that "Binchy's endearing style shines through."

Further Readings About the Author

Books

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Source Citation: "Maeve Binchy." Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2008. Literature Resource Center. Gale. KENT DISTRICT LIBRARY. 14 July 2009
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Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000008648

Author Interview

Maeve Binchy

BIO

Maeve Binchy is the author of numerous best-selling books, including her most recent novel, *Whitethorn Woods*, in addition to *Night of Rain and Stars*, *Quentins*, *Scarlet Feather*, *Circle of Friends*, and *Tara Road*, which was an Oprah's Book Club selection. She has written for *Gourmet*; *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*; *Modern Maturity*; and *Good Housekeeping*, among other publications. She and her husband, Gordon Snell, live in Dalkey, Ireland, and London.

INTERVIEW

Maeve Binchy, the best-selling author of *TARA ROAD*, *EVENING CLASS*, and *CIRCLE OF FRIENDS*, is back to claim her rightful spot atop the bestseller list with her latest novel *SCARLET FEATHER*. Join Senior Writer Jana Siciliano as she chats with Binchy about the inspiration behind *SCARLET FEATHER*, the changing face of Ireland, Oprah and, of course, potatoes.

BRC: The Daily Telegraph announced that "the greats of Irish literature - including Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, W.B. Yeats, and Oscar Wilde --- have been outsold in their homeland by the popular novelist Maeve Binchy." How has this success affected your lifestyle and your work style? How did being an Oprah author change your life?

MB: I was very pleased, obviously, to have outsold such great writers. But I'm not insane...I do realize that I am a popular writer who people buy to take on vacation. I'm an escapist kind of writer. I didn't think for a moment that I was better than any of these people, I was just lucky I lived in this time of mass-market paperback. After all, if you were going on a long plane journey and you had a choice between one of my books and *ULYSSES*, you'd probably opt for one of my books!

Being picked as an Oprah author was huge; it was extraordinary. The day she called to tell me that I had been chosen, I assumed it was one of my friends having a joke and I kept saying, "Who is this really?" She said, "It is Oprah," in such a firm voice I suddenly knew there was no messing about here. I knew it was going to make a huge difference because it was going to bring my stories to a public that might never have read them before because people trust her. She has taken the seriousness out of reading and brought it back to the kind of writing and reading I love: the "Come here, and I'll tell you a story" kind of reading. I can't ever thank her enough.

But being an Oprah author didn't change my lifestyle at all. I became famous when I was 43, and I've led the same kind of life since then. I've lived in the same house, only fixed up a bit.

Needless to say, I didn't go and buy a mansion. I was too old to let it get to my head...perhaps if I had been 23!

BRC: The plot of SCARLET FEATHER wraps itself a great deal around food. How important is the subject of food in Irish culture?

MB: Everybody has always loved eating in Ireland and the family always gathered around the table - which was also where all the stories were told. It's a bit like the Jewish culture in a sense. But because we were not a rich country, we were not very good cooks in Ireland for years. We did lots of interesting things with potatoes, but that was about it!

And because most of Ireland is Roman Catholic and not allowed to eat meat on Fridays, we always regarded fish as a penitential thing, as second rate. However, nowadays we all absolutely love fish. I hardly eat anything else besides fish now. Also, Ireland has become much richer because of the European Union, so nowadays we can actually afford things like caterers! Now people are really interested in food. It's quite lovely really.

BRC: What are some of the themes of SCARLET FEATHER that can be linked to the great traditions of Irish literature?

MB: The theme of the huge importance of family. In Irish culture, people care very much about their families. And the family that doesn't care about each other --- the Mitchells --- they're real losers. All the other families have a strength that comes from caring about one another.

I also wanted to bring in the question of class-consciousness and inequality of position. The people of Ireland have no right to be class conscious. Well, no one does, but we have less right than anybody because almost everybody in Ireland was a peasant at some point; and it just took some of us longer to get out of that situation. We've always admired America for having a classless society. It's unlike, say, Britain or France, where people really care about how old your family is. Basically, I wanted to point out that Ireland's young people are so full of courage and guts that they don't take any notice of silly snobberies.

I also wanted to embrace the notion that courage is what makes people win. It's not beauty or wealth, but simply people being courageous and strong in the face of adversity. That's really the main theme of an awful lot of my books...and I think that's why people seem to like them.

BRC: Why does SCARLET FEATHER occur over the course of one single year in the life of its protagonists? What did this time stricture help you to do with the telling of the story?

MB: Knowing that I had to finish the story within one year disciplined the plot for me much more because I then knew when things would have to happen (though sometimes it was difficult to keep all the dates straight in my head so they made sense in the story.) When you let things go on for days and weeks and months, the story can often become drifty. I like that the time stricture sped things up for me.

BRC: TARA ROAD has been published in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, and Sweden. What was the response to its overseas publications?

MB: Everybody has liked it very much. They all see it --- much more than any of my other books --- as a movie. The reason I wrote the book was because I did a home exchange myself with a woman in Australia. We had a very uneventful home exchange in comparison to TARA ROAD, but what did happen was I found I knew her very well because I was living amongst her things. I knew her secrets; I knew the bills she didn't pay; I knew the neighbors that didn't like her; I knew that her husband used a hair-restorer. And she knew all those things about me. We met two years later and it was, really, like meeting an old friend. It was at that point that I said, " I think I'm going to write a book about this." It was an incredibly intense relationship.

BRC: How has the changing face and attitude of Ireland opened you up to new ways of telling the stories of its inhabitants?

MB: The most important thing has been the huge youth revolution --- the young people are not afraid anymore of what people will say, or hurting their reputation, or of the church like we all were. We were all terrified of sin when we were young and sex was explained to us very, very badly. Many girls I knew lived in fear of getting pregnant...and they were all virgins! The greatest evil that could befall a family was getting pregnant without being married. It's nice to see that nowadays this is not the case --- that little babies are loved by the community, despite their mothers being married or not. The secrecy and the hypocrisy are gone. Also, Ireland is a very young country --- there is a huge under-30 population. So, all of these things I had to reflect in my book.

BRC: Ria and her best friend Rosemary are two career girls who embark on the path of adult life. What advice might you give to young women like them today, on the cusp of adulthood?

MB: The same advice I would give to everybody: We only have one go at this; we are only dealt one hand of cards. Whatever hand you are dealt, that's the one you must play. You must spend no time wishing you were dealt a different hand. I feel very sorry for those young people who are convinced that the whole world is looking at them because, quite simply, the world is not looking at them.

BRC: You were once a teacher and Signora in EVENING CLASS is a perfect example of how important you feel teachers are in this world. What was your most winning trait as a teacher?

MB: I suppose the best thing I did as a teacher was to try and instill confidence in the children. I once had a teacher --- she's still alive at 90 and still a nun --- who always found something to admire in each child. Everybody loved her and, more importantly, we learned in her class. So, I tried to do that as well. And in the end, you get more out of children when you praise them. My large and imposing stature was also quite helpful in gaining respect!

BRC: How do you react to the film adaptations of your books? Did you mind that they changed the ending of CIRCLE OF FRIENDS?

MB: I didn't mind that they changed the ending because I knew that they were going to --- it wasn't a question of them stealing it away from me and secretly changing the end. I said it was okay if the girl and the guy had to get back together in the end, just as long as she didn't take him back too easily. Although I think it would have been a better and a stronger ending if she didn't take him back, because it would send out a message to girls everywhere that you don't have to go along with behavior you don't approve of. It wasn't just because she was a plump girl that she had to settle for less and let her guy do anything. But, truth be told, in real life none of us would have given him up because Jack was so gorgeous. The movie was so sweet and they both were so beautiful, I think they were able to get away with the ending change.

BRC: Why is the theme of love so important for you? How do you find new ways of dealing with such a well-worn topic?

MB: We're nothing if we're not loved. When you meet somebody who is more important to you than yourself, that has to be the most important thing in life, really. And I think we are all striving for it in different ways. I also believe very, very strongly that everybody is the hero/heroine of his/her own life. I try to make my characters kind of ordinary, somebody that anybody could be. Because we've all had loves, perhaps love and loss, people can relate to my characters.

BRC: There seems to be group or core of Irish authors making their mark on literature today: you, Roddy Doyle, Jennifer Johnston, Pat McCabe, to name a few. Why is it, do you think, that the Irish have seen something of a renaissance in the literary world?

MB: The Irish have always been great storytellers. We've always admired people who talk a lot -- whether or not they have something of importance to say! The Irish don't like listeners...they love talkers, people who come in and interrupt and take part. As far as the renaissance, I think it has all got to do with a renewed sense of confidence in Ireland now. For the first time we are realizing that we're not just a little island off a little island.

BRC: You published two books of short stories before TARA ROAD. Do you enjoy writing short stories or novels more?

MB: I prefer writing short stories actually. The fact that you have to have a story finished in ten pages or so makes it a much better story because, if I have 500 pages to finish a story in, it could become too sprawling and unwieldy. In fact, right now I'm writing a book of short stories of Quinlans, which is a restaurant that appears in EVENING CLASS, TARA ROAD, and SCARLET FEATHER --- all the stories take place in this restaurant.

BRC: In TARA ROAD, the bitter deception of a woman who believes she has a happy marriage and the inability of another woman to cope with bereavement make for curious bedfellows. Do you think that TARA ROAD struck a chord with readers because it harkens to such core issues about the way humans approach life?

MB: I think there are two things in there that we've all come across in our lives: (1) People's inability to grieve properly --- as in Marilyn's inability to accept her son's death, (2) Marriage is such a strange and fragile thing...no one really understands how it works or, on the flip side, how it could fall apart so unexpectedly. I've gotten thousands of letters from women who simply could not understand how their seemingly happy marriage could fall apart so easily. I had no idea, until after I wrote TARA ROAD, how often that happens.

BRC: Your father was an attorney and he told you to never base a character on a real person or you would be paying litigation for the rest of your life. What other advice did he have for your career and did he support your choice of endeavors?

MB: Yes, he always told all of us --- I was the eldest of four --- "you will never be rich when I die...I won't be able to leave you much money because I will put every penny I have into educating you." Of my family, I'm actually the least educated. I thought it was about time for one of us to leave school and get a job because our father was working so hard! We were all told that education was the most important thing. My father had this theory that the word education was derived from the Latin word "educere," which means to lead out. Education led you out into things, into the light and information.

My mother gave me my confidence. On the night I was going to my first dance she said to me, "You look so beautiful, you'll take the sight right out of their eyes." I mean, that was so patently not true! I can tell you it was not true --- I've seen pictures of myself! But I went there with such happiness because I thought I looked so beautiful that I would take the sight right from their eyes.

More than anything, I really, really wish they had lived long enough to benefit from my success.

BRC: Your husband is also an author. What sort of books does he write, and what is it like to live with another writer?

MB: He often writes children's books. He also writes various humorous books --- like THE RHYMING IRISH COOKBOOK, which people all buy when they come to Ireland. It's such a funny and clever book. He's also edited an anthology of young adult short stories called THICKER THAN WATER. He's English, but I always tell him I think maybe his mother brought the wrong baby home from the hospital and, in fact, he's really Irish.

We both sit at a big, long desk --- he at one end, me the other. We get on extremely well. When either of us finishes a book, we go out and celebrate. We're very celebratory.

BRC: Do you feel your writing style has changed over the years? How?

MB: Not really, I write exactly the same way I speak. I speak quickly and I write quickly, without many flourishes (or punctuation marks!) However, as Ireland has changed, the topic I address in my books has changed.

BRC: Did you have an author or authors who influenced you in your formative years prior to launching your own career as a writer?

MB: No, I never wrote like anybody. This is absolutely true. The authors I like write so differently from me. I write as if I'm writing a letter. It's all "come here and I'll tell you" --- that's always been my style of writing. But I admire other authors. I love Anne Tyler --- she's a terrific writer. I love a Canadian writer named Alice Munro. And I love an English writer, Fay Weldon.

BRC: What is your writing schedule like? Do you write every day? Do you set goals for yourself?

MB: I do write every day. I write early in the morning, from about half-past seven in the morning until about half-past one in the afternoon. Then I answer my mail and such in the afternoon --- I don't usually do creative writing in the afternoon.

BRC: If you met a person who had never read any of your books, which of your books would you recommend as their first read and why?

MB: I would tell them to read SCARLET FEATHER. It really does tell people about Ireland in this millennium. It tells you about the way young people are confident, the way they feel and grow. It tells you about the hopes and fears and anxieties of families. I think I've gotten a bit wiser as I've grown older, and I've never had any real villains or absolutely startling heroines. There is always a little bit of bad in the good people, and a little bit of good in the bad. I feel I've done it all best in the SCARLET FEATHER. It's my favorite book.

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Discussion Questions

1. The circumstance that sets the book in motion is called the inciting moment. What was the inciting moment of this book?
2. Describe the character development. Who did you identify with? Did your opinions about any of the characters change over the course of the novel?
3. How does the author use language and imagery to bring the characters to life? Did the book's characters or style in any way remind you of another book?
4. What do you believe is the message the author is trying to convey to the reader? What did you learn from this book? Was it educational in any way?
5. Why do you think the author chose the title? Is there a significant meaning behind it?
6. Is there a part of the novel you didn't understand? Are you confused by a character's actions or the outcome of an event?
7. Do you think the setting, both time and location, played a large roll in this novel? Could it have happened anywhere, at anytime? If so, how would the novel have changed?
8. In your opinion, is the book entertaining? Explain why or why not.
9. What is your favorite passage?
10. How did this book touch your life? Can you relate to it on any level?

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