Books

# Review: *Nora Webster*

By Colm Tóibín (Scribner)

By
Kelly McMasters '05SOA
|
Winter 2014-15



Monastery in Wexford, Ireland (Richard Cummins / Corbis)

In the opening pages of Colm Tóibín's crushing new novel, *Nora Webster*, we find the title character in her small house in Wexford, Ireland, trapped by grief. Her husband, Maurice, has recently died, and she is beset by emotional pressures: by her neighbor

across the street, who wants to know if Nora will be selling her beach house; by the weight of responsibility for her two adult daughters far away and her two small sons in the next room; by her quickly emptying bank account; and by her loneliness.

Every evening Nora endures formal condolence visits from neighbors, which Tóibín captures in the unadorned style that is his trademark: “Nora said nothing. She wanted May to leave.” This is grief rendered not in Technicolor but in the muted grays familiar to those of us who have experienced such loss.

For most of the book, Nora walks as if in mist, moving through denial, anger, nostalgia, and acceptance, sometimes within a single day. The intensity of Tóibín’s gaze is astounding, and under his scrutiny we watch Nora’s emotional repression stretch and buckle until she caves.

Before that cathartic moment, though, we watch as Nora struggles to take care of her family and remain in the world, alone. Maurice had been a schoolteacher, a gentle and intelligent man. His partnership with Nora was solid, their roles clear, but everything has been blown to oblivion in his death, and with it Nora’s own identity. At one point, she reflects that she is often happy to keep her thoughts to herself, but “she wondered now that Maurice was dead if this would change, if she would have to start saying more.” Nora clearly misses Maurice, but more than that she misses the world with Maurice in it; staying over at her sister’s one night, she muses, “It was a mistake to lie here in a strange bed when her own bed at home was strange, too.” Nora had had her perfect life — a learned man for a husband, a home full of children’s voices, even a beach house. Now all she has is longing.

After losing her husband and, shortly thereafter, the beach house, next to go is her independence, when she gets a job offer from her former employer, the towns biggest flour mill. “Never once, in the twenty-one years she had run this household, had she felt a moment of boredom or frustration. Now her day was to be taken from her . . . Her years of freedom had come to an end; it was as simple as that.” She needs the money and takes the job, leaving her two sons to look after one another between the time they get out of school and the time she returns home from work. The way she handles this gap in their supervision is akin to the way she’s been handling the subject of their father’s death: she is vaguely aware that she should be there for her sons, but she simply cannot make herself available. For much of the book she remains a prisoner to her sadness, and it is only when she sees her sons beginning to seal themselves off in the same way that she begins to rouse.

Those who've read Tóibín's work will recognize his Wexford, and there is something in Nora's quietly combative nature that is reminiscent of his portrayal of the mother of Christ in his most recent novella, *The Testament of Mary*. But there is also something new here: written over the course of more than ten years, *Nora Webster* is Tóibín's most personal novel. His own father died when he was a child, leaving behind a household aching with his absence, and the complex intimacy with which Tóibín considers Nora is deeply moving.

Nora's older son, the cerebral and sensitive Donal, who manages his grief by losing himself in photography and the moon landing (the book takes place in the 1960s), is Tóibín's surrogate. Donal develops a debilitating stutter after his father's death, after his mother leaves his brother and him at her aunt's for months as his father is dying, never bothering to call or check in until he has died. And it takes a painfully long time — indeed, nearly till the end of the book — for Nora to finally reach out to Donal. When she does, on a walk to discuss his changing of schools, his complete devastation is revealed. Nora asks of his current school:

> "Has it been bad?"
>
> "The rooms are all the rooms he taught in. I sit in the classroom he came into every day."
>
> His tone was direct and hard; he did not stammer.
>
> She held him as he began to cry.

And then the walk was finished.

When Nora finally reaches her own emotional peak, it is in response to her unreasonable and shrill boss at the mill. After the altercation, she leaves clutching a pair of scissors. She finds herself in her car on her way to the sea, close to the family's old beach house. Suddenly she realizes that she is trying to get to Maurice.

> It was the world filled with absences. There was merely the hushed sound of the water and stray cries of seabirds flying close to the surface of the calm sea. She could make out the sun as it glowed through the curtain of haze. It was unlikely that Maurice was anywhere except buried in the graveyard where she had left him. But

> nonetheless, the idea lingered that if he, or his spirit, was anywhere in the world, then he would be here.

Only when Nora is confronted on that shore by salty Sister Thomas, a longtime family acquaintance, do we understand that we've been submerged deeply within her experience, forgetting what she must look like to the rest of the world: a woman mad with grief, staring at the shore with scissors in hand. Sister Thomas sees her all too clearly, and counsels her: "So turn back now before the fog comes down so hard that you won't be able to drive home." Nora's anger flashes, her real feelings bubbling up, even if just for a moment.

Sister Thomas accepts the rage, recognizes it, and gives Nora the rough push back into life that she needs.

*Nora Webster* is spare and subtle, but ruthless in its depths. Tóibín renders the experience of one woman so intensely, so convincingly, and with such heartbreaking beauty, that stepping back out of this world is like walking out of a sea with the undertow pulling at your feet. It is Donal who unlocks the novel's simplicity and possibility early on when Nora first suggests the boys watch a film with her.

> "What's the film?" Conor asked when he heard about it.
>
> "It's about a woman in a house," she said.
>
> "Is that all?"
>
> "Maybe something h-happens to h-her in the h-house," Donal said.

*Read more from* ***Kelly McMasters '05SOA***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from* ***Kelly McMasters '05SOA***