

Charming Billy

by Alice McDermott

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About This Book

Billy Lynch's family and friends have gathered at a small Bronx bar. They have come to comfort his widow and to eulogize one of the last great romantics, trading tales of his famous humor, immense charm, and unfathomable sorrow. As they linger on into this extraordinary night, their voices form Billy's tragic story and their mourning becomes a gentle homage to all the lives in their small community fractured by grief, shattered by secrets, and sustained by the simple dream of love.

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Discussion Questions

1. If Billy's wife had been beautiful, observes the narrator, "then the story of his life, or the story they would begin to re-create for him this afternoon, would have to take another turn" (p. 3). What is the accepted story of Billy's life as presented by the mourners assembled at the funeral lunch? Which aspects of that story turn out to be false?
2. Rosemary says that Billy's alcoholism was "a disease" (p. 19): Dan Lynch says that "maybe for some people it's a disease . . . Maybe for some it's a sadness they can't get rid of or a disappointment that won't go away . . . They're loyal to their own feelings" (pp. 20-21). Dennis says that "an alcoholic can always find a reason but never needs one" (p. 35). When it comes to Billy, which of them is right?
3. When Dennis decides to tell Billy that Eva is dead, he thinks, "Better he be brokenhearted than trailed all the rest of his life by a sense of his own foolishness" (p. 31). Does Dennis come to change his mind later in life, to regret having told a lie? What other lies does Dennis tell Billy, and what illusions does he allow Billy to entertain?
4. Dennis says, "When Billy sets his heart on something there's no changing him. He's loyal. He's got this faith--which is probably why he drinks" (pp. 35-

36). Why does Dennis link drinking with faith? What does Dennis mean when he says Billy has faith? Is this faith connected with religious faith? "Redemption" is a favorite word of Billy's (p. 187). What does it mean to him? What does the narrator mean when she contrasts Billy's type of faith with Dennis's (p. 242)?

5. What does the demeanor of the priest who visits Maeve and the way the assembled mourners react to him tell us about the author's attitude toward the Church and its dogmas about life and death? What are Billy's feelings toward these dogmas? What are Dennis's, and what about the narrator's?

6. Why does Billy love the sight of the large houses in East Hampton, and what does that say about his character and circumstances? What class attitudes are held in common by this large extended family? Kate feels she has escaped her working-class background. Has she really? In what ways has she taken on the characteristics of the upper middle class, and in what ways is she rooted in her origins?

7. Dennis says of Billy, "It's hard to be a liar and a believer yourself" (p. 36). What does he mean by this?

8. In what ways have the life experiences of Dennis's mother, Sheila, helped to form her character? What is her real opinion of both her husbands? When the narrator says that Sheila's first husband "had been, without question, Holy Father to the entire clan" (p. 97), what is she implying?

9. Dennis seems, on the surface, to be an easygoing and simple man. What events show him to be a far more complex and sophisticated person than he might appear? How would you describe Dennis? How does his character contrast with Billy's?

10. The narrator says that regarding Maeve's relationship with her elderly father, hers "was not an unusual case . . . It was, I suppose, the very image I'd fought against myself" (p. 132). But times have changed, "self-sacrifice having been recognized as a delusion by then, not a virtue. Self-consciousness more the vogue" (p. 132). In what other ways have manners and mores noticeably changed in the years between Dennis's youth and his daughter's?

11. Dorothy says that Billy was "maybe too sensitive for this world, if you know what I mean" (p. 168). Do you agree with her?

12. What does Billy's conversation with Eva at the Clonmel gas station tell the reader about Eva's character? Do you think that Billy gets the same message--in other words, does he leave Ireland with a realistic picture of who and what she is?

13. Why does Billy write the message "Beautiful friend" (p. 232) to Maeve after his return from Ireland? Does it mean that he has begun to love and appreciate her for herself, without the ideal of Eva to compare her with? If so, why does his drinking intensify?

14. Why do you think Dennis marries Maeve after Billy's death? Does this marriage come as a surprise to you?

15. In an interview about one of her earlier novels, Alice McDermott stated:

"You don't look at the past just once, and you look at it with the knowledge of the present, which was the future. I like that going over, seeing an event through other events that have occurred since, seeing it again and seeing it in a different way, from a different perspective as time goes on" (Publishers Weekly, March 30, 1992). Is this an accurate way of describing McDermott's narrative technique in *Charming Billy*? Which, in your opinion, are the key events of the novel, and from how many different angles and points of view are they described?

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Critical Praise

"Eloquent...heartbreaking...McDermott is brilliant."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"There's no one like Alice McDermott for catching the ebullient particulars of the Irish-American sensibility, and in this superbly drawn, bittersweet tale of a captivating alcoholic, **Charming Billy**, her touch is light as a feather, her perceptions purely accurate."

—*Elle*

"An astoundingly beautiful novel about the persistence of love, the perseverance of grief, and all-but-unbearable loneliness, as well as faith, loyalty and redemption."

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Magical...In **Charming Billy**, Ms. McDermott writes...with wisdom and grace, refusing to sentimentalize her characters even as she forces us to recognize their decency and goodness. She has written a luminous and affecting novel."

—*Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times*

Biography Resource Center

Alice McDermott

Birth: June 27, 1953 in Brooklyn, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer, Novelist

Source: *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th ed. St. James Press, 2001.

Updated: 04/24/2007

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Alice McDermott approaches each novel as if she were a novice writer since each, she says, is "a new story and you have to find a new way to tell it and it makes its own demands." Nevertheless, her first novel, *A Bigamist's Daughter*, hints at topics and nascent stories which spill into future novels as well as introduces her characteristic style which critics describe as "prismatic." Interested in seeing "ordinary things, ordinary moments, in a variety of ways," McDermott achieves this variety by manipulating time and chronology. Her fiction aims not just to narrate the events, but to validate what one says about events. Thus, her characters tell or embellish their stories using hindsight refracted through new experiences. Their storytelling, and by extension ours, closely imitates the way memory works; one event spinning off another, not necessarily chronologically, but revealing much about the characters' inner lives.

In writing her first novel, McDermott's approach was "to learn to write a novel." Storytelling, therefore, is the basis of *A Bigamist's Daughter*. Elizabeth Connelly, a twenty-something, cynical vanity press editor in New York meets Tupper, a wealthy southern writer with an unfinished novel about a bigamist. Caught in an attempt to help Tupper, now her lover, find an ending to his novel, Elizabeth tells Tupper personal stories while inevitably meditating upon others. Through these interwoven flashbacks, we learn about Elizabeth's mysterious father whose frequent disappearances were "explained" by stories--he was on secret government business. Elizabeth remembers her mother Dolores telling her yet one more time how she met her father, or Elizabeth remembers discovering how Dolores refashioned herself after widowhood and her death and funeral. In exchange, Tupper relates a family tradition of birth and death. Together, they finish her father's story, which Tupper appropriates, in front of an aunt's newly discovered tombstone. Finally, Elizabeth narrates her love for Bill, with whom she lived for two years, but provides multiple answers only for herself as to why, despite his charm, she left him.

McDermott continues the theme of separated couples and the technique of time manipulation in her second novel as well as a movie, the highly acclaimed *That Night*, a rite of passage story which, McDermott knew, demanded a strong voice. Here, through layer upon layer of memory, a first person narrator looks back trying to make sense of events she witnessed as a ten-year-old child. Through the prism of adulthood, she remembers a hot summer night in a 1960s Long Island suburbia not unlike those of John Cheever or John Updike, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Teenager Rick attempts to find his sweetheart, Sheryl, who is pregnant and, unknown to him, has been sent away by her mother. When he and his neighborhood buddies pull her mother from the house, neighborhood men rescue her and Rick is jailed. The familiar bittersweet tale of lost young love introduces the narrator to the adult world; her narration captures the raw, wild emotions of the neighborhood upheaval achieved through McDermott's strong words and rich, complex sentence structure, described as baroque by critic David Levitt.

When McDermott began *At Weddings and Wakes*, she was most interested in the family theme of "what goes on between and among generations," especially what does not get passed on, what invents a family's heritage. First, she created a world she knows well, Irish Americans in Brooklyn during the 1950s; then the three spinster sisters who live with "Momma" and married sister Lucy grew organically to populate her narrative, for, McDermott says, "the writing itself generates stories for me."

McDermott excels at spotlighting individuals within large gatherings, such as the festive wedding of sister May, an ex-nun who is marrying Fred, the mailman, or the tragedy of May's wake quickly following. McDermott allows the stock characters to play out their roles so that gradually they coalesce to form a picture of the Townes family, a prototypical dysfunctional Catholic clan. Simultaneously, the novel's theme of familial love, despite all the quarrels and closed doors, strengthens amidst heartbreak and emerges through the observations of Lucy's three children. Compared to the Anglo-Irish writer William Trevor in *Kirkus Reviews*, McDermott also dignifies, to use her word, "ordinary" people whose "ordinary" lives are infused with an elegiac eloquence, the tone which dominates her next novel.

Charming Billy, McDermott's fourth novel, opens at a wake; nearly fifty Irish-American Catholic friends and relatives have gathered at a musty Bronx bar to eulogize the eponymous title character Billy Lynch. McDermott describes him as "that stereotypical, lovable Irishman, drinks too much, talks too much, puts his arm around you at 3 AM, when everybody else has gone home and with tears in his eyes tells you how much he loves you." But no one could stop Billy from drinking himself to death. The novel exists because McDermott found this easily recognizable character appealing.

Everyone at the wake has been affected by Billy's alcoholism, especially Maevie, his long-suffering wife, and Dennis, his cousin and best friend. Using her prismatic approach, McDermott actually resurrects Billy through the stories each lovingly offers and which she filters through the unsentimental memory of Dennis's daughter, thereby adroitly avoiding Billy as cliché and again making each of the group essential. The story involves three generations of this tightly knit group and through their stories McDermott moves back and forth between present and past going as far back as World War II. Almost all their stories refer to "the Irish girl," Eva, the love of Billy's life whom he met the summer after military duty at Dennis's small East Hampton cottage. Eva returns to Ireland, accepts Billy's hard earned money for her eventual return, yet marries another. In order to protect Billy, just one among many such efforts, Dennis tells him Eva has died of pneumonia, and so commences the "Big Lie" which perhaps ruins Billy's life.

In her own evaluation of *Charming Billy*, McDermott, a practicing Catholic, believes that faith as well as storytelling play key roles in the novel. As her Irish-American characters tell their stories about Billy they believe they can make his wasted life important. But their stories are also about themselves, for they believe they can make all their lives meaningful.

McDermott's 2002 novel *Child of My Heart* was told from the point of view of Theresa, a 15-year-old living on Long Island and spending a summer as a babysitter of several young children and animals. She returned to Long Island for her 2006 novel, *After This*. It followed the Keanes, an Irish Catholic family, through several decades, through births, marriage, and wars.

UPDATES

April 16, 2007: McDermott's novel *After This* was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in fiction. **Source:** *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com>>, April 17, 2007.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Nationality: American. **Born:** Brooklyn, New York, 27 June 1953. **Education:** State University of New York, B.A. 1975; University of New Hampshire, M.A. 1978. **Family:** Married David M. Armstrong in 1979. **Career:** Lecturer in English, University of New Hampshire, Durham, 1978-79; fiction reader for *Redbook* and *Esquire*, 1979-80; lecturer in writing, University of California, San Diego. **Awards:** Whiting Writers award, 1987. **Agent:** Harriet Wasserman Literary Agency, 137 East 36th Street, New York, New York 10016, U.S.A. **Address:** 8674-3 Villa La Jolla Drive, La Jolla, California 92037, U.S.A.

WORKS

• Publications

• Novels

- *A Bigamist's Daughter*. New York, Random House, 1982 .

- *That Night*. New York, Farrar, Straus, 1987 .
- *At Weddings and Wakes*. New York, Farrar, Straus, 1991 .
- *Charming Billy*. New York, Farrar, Straus, 1998 .
- *Child of My Heart*. New York, Farrar, Straus, 2002 .
- *After This*. New York, Farrar, Straus, 2006 .

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Alice McDermott's celebrated novel, *Charming Billy* opens at a funeral luncheon, where forty-seven friends and relatives gather to mourn and to reminisce about Billy Lynch in a Bronx restaurant that could have been taken from a scene in an Irish play by John Millington Synge. The setting, however, is not the only touch of the Irish in the novel. The particular sensibility that Alice McDermott infuses throughout *Charming Billy* reflects what John Millington Synge calls in his preface to his play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, a "popular [Irish] imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender." The Irish penchant for employing the imagination in the telling of stories becomes the focus of the novel as McDermott explores the lure of the creative rendering of experience as well as its inevitable clash with reality.

The portrait that emerges most clearly of Billy in the narrative is that of a fragile romantic, ultimately destroyed by his unrequited love for a young Irish girl.

As Billy's friends and relatives gather together at his funeral, each of them feels compelled to tell "the story of his life, or the story they would begin to re-create for him this afternoon." Their versions often conflict with each other, as they focus on love and loss, delusion, and reality. Thrown out of focus by time and private agendas, their colorful stories ask a central question that examines the book's title. Was Billy a charming personality or is the portrait that is created a charming recreation of him? McDermott delineates this tension between imagination and reality when, at the end of the first chapter, after she has given voice to several of these stories, she ends with the truth about the central lie of the book--Eva, the love of Billy's life, never died.

Rand Richards Cooper in his article for *Commonweal* writes: "McDermott frames Billy's life story in ironies, stinting neither the cost nor the complexity of his romanticism." Billy's cousin, Dennis reveals the irony that sets the tone for the entire book when he tells the others about his first view of Billy's corpse. He notes that Billy's face was "bloated to twice its size and his skin was [so] dark brown" from alcoholism that Dennis could not recognize him at first, insisting when he saw the body, "But this is a colored man." This amalgam of illusion and reality begins the novel's examination of Billy and its illustration of the difficulties inherent in the attempt to gain an objective view of reality.

Much of the talk at the funeral focuses on Billy's drinking and its cause. The guests argue over whether Billy's alcoholism was inevitable, springing from an Irish propensity for drink or from his tragic love for Eva. Dennis and his daughter, who as the central narrator tries to weave together all of the stories about Billy into an accurate portrait of him, wrestle with a more complex issue concerning Billy's love for Eva. Was Billy destroyed by Eva's failure to return from Ireland or by Dennis's lie about her having died? Would Billy have been able to accept Eva's rejection more readily than her untimely demise? As Dennis and his daughter struggle to find answers to these questions, they explore the complex nature of illusion and truth and ultimately the vagaries of human destiny.

The question about the effect of the lie becomes central as McDermott dismisses the insistence that Billy's fate was determined by his heritage. Billy's sister Rosemary argues that "Billy would have had the disease whether he married the Irish girl or Maeve," concluding "[e]very alcoholic's life is pretty much the same." Cooper notes, however, that those characters such as Rosemary who blame genetics "come off as pinched and zealous proponents of our era's mistaken urge to collapse tragedy into (mere) pathology: a reductively pragmatic approach, McDermott clearly believes, to the mysteries of human existence."

McDermott adds a nice ironic touch to the discussion the members of the funeral party have of Billy's drinking when she notes the connection between "the drinks in their hands and the drink that had killed him." Yet, she concludes, the enjoyment of the drinks is redeemed "in the company of old friends, from the miserable thing that a drink had become in his life." The gathering of these friends helps redeem "the affection they had felt for him, once torn apart by his willfulness, his indifference, making something worthwhile of it, something valuable that had been well spent, after all." This then becomes the motive of McDermott's storytellers, to discover that valuable essence to Billy, which will

prove that his time and theirs "had been well spent, after all."

The portrait that emerges most clearly of Billy in the narrative is that of a fragile romantic, ultimately destroyed by his unrequited love for a young Irish girl, which he claimed to his cousin Dan, was every year, every hour "a weight on his shoulders." Dennis explains to his daughter that he decided to lie about Eva's fate to try to ease Billy's suffering, claiming, "better he be brokenhearted than trailed all the rest of his life by a sense of his own foolishness." Yet, Dennis remains conflicted about what he has done. Noting the fine line between illusion and reality that was walked by his community, he notes the "audacious, outlandish" nature of the lie and concludes that "the workaday world, the world without illusion (except Church-sanctioned) or nonsense (except alcohol-bred)," the world of the Irish Catholics in Queens, "didn't much abide audacious and outlandish. Not for long, anyway."

Dennis's lie caused Billy to maintain a romantic vision of Eva, one that was constructed by him from the first moment he met her. While the relatives at the funeral cannot agree on whether she was beautiful, and his sister Kate claims that she was "a little chubby," to Billy, she was an angel. The first time he saw her, his nearsightedness caused him to see "her as a mirage of smeared color ... a mirage that perhaps only wild hope and great imagination could form into a solid woman." He fell in love with her "before she had even come clearly into his view." That afternoon "he fell in love with the rest of his life," which he envisioned now as a "golden future," an "Eden." Billy could not recognize that "adrift in the same world that held their fine future there was accident and disappointment, a sickening sense of false hope and false promise that required all of God's grace to keep at bay."

McDermott refuses to provide a clear, objective portrait of Billy, including any answers concerning the consequences of his devotion to his romanticized image of Eva. Dennis recognized the need to devote oneself to an imaginative vision of reality when he gave Billy the money to send for Eva. He understood then "what Billy's fine dream, Billy's faith, was going to come to. But he also saw, in his own ... romantic heart, that its consummation would become a small redemption for them all." Yet later, Dennis insists that it was better for Billy to discover the truth about Eva so that he "didn't go through his whole life deceived about it. Didn't die thinking about some lovely reunion in the sweet hereafter." Ultimately, McDermott leaves open the question of whether the truth or the illusion about Eva caused Billy to drink himself to death.

McDermott also refuses to take a definitive stance on the effect that Maeve had on Billy's life. At one point, the narrator insists that "her presence in the shoe store was Billy's salvation, or at least his second chance," but by the end of the paragraph, after an attempt to analyze whether the clearly plain Maeve had perhaps a "certain beauty," she concludes that "Maeve was only a faint consolation, a futile attempt to mend an irreparably broken heart. A moment's grace, a flash of optimism, not enough for a lifetime."

The narrator does, however, come to some conclusions. She recognizes the human capacity to believe and to be deceived, and determines, "you can't have one without the other, each one side of the other." In her final assessment of Billy and ultimately of human nature, she concludes that, as with all those gathered together to remember Billy, their faith "was no less keen than their suspicion that in the end they might be proven wrong. And their certainty that they would continue to believe anyway." Billy becomes for them an almost mythical emblem of human frailty as well as a courageous romantic who refused to give up his dreams.

In *Charming Billy*, McDermott deftly illuminates the interpretive gifts of the Irish and the subsequent tension they can produce between imagination and truth. Ultimately, the lure of the dream cannot be reconciled with objective reality, yet, she suggests, we can recognize its ephemeral nature and still persist in reaching out for it, as if "what was actual, as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed, made, when you got right down to it, any difference at all."

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Between the lines.(Alice McDermott)(Interview).Maureen Abood. *U.S. Catholic* 72.3 (March 2007): p24(5). (2920 words)

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Alice McDermott is a writer who likes to get to the heart of things. With her captivating prose and her ability to walk the fine line between nostalgia and the eternal call to "make it new," McDermott explores the impulses that lead us back again and again to family, to faith, to ourselves. Ultimately her stories offer an opportunity for hope. We can't help but fall in love with her characters, even as we long for more of the details of the story than McDermott is compelled to give. She leaves us haunted as much by what she says as by what she doesn't say, which offers us a remarkably imaginative experience and keeps us coming back for more.

In her latest novel, *After This* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), McDermott charms her readers again with her masterful rendering of an Irish American family and its inner workings set during the Vietnam War and Vatican II. Her novels have been finalists for the Pulitzer Prize, and *Charming Billy* (Dial Press Trade Paperback, 1998) won the National Book Award.

A few hours spent getting lost in the words and worlds Alice McDermott creates is not just time well spent; it is in itself a call to growth.

An interview with Alice McDermott

When and why did you start writing?

I always wrote from a young age. It's a very accessible way for people who are powerless, such as children, to take control of their world. That was my way of taking control as a child, writing a lot. Pursuing the career, the novel, is something that only occurred to me when I was in college and studied literature as an English major. I had a wonderful teacher who encouraged my fiction writing.



I write because nothing else satisfies. There is no other way that I could spend my days that would give me the sense of doing what I should be doing as much as writing fiction does.

Would you say it's a vocation?

Yes. There were a number of other careers I was capable of doing, but there was no other career that I either tried or considered trying that held off that existential dread as much as spending a day working with words.

What about that is so gratifying?

It's very similar to the gratification I get as a reader. It doesn't feel so much like personal gratification as much as the work before you has found itself, and you simply have been a conduit for it.

Is there anything in that experience of writing that relates to your sense of spirituality?

I suppose I don't initially think of it in those terms because I don't think of the success of any given work so much as a personal success but as the work itself finding its true form.

But prior to that is the sense, which must be a personal sense, that true forms do exist and that they are there to be discovered. This is very much a part of what my last novel, *After This*, is about: when those moments are discovered. When the work seems to come together, when it finds its true form, it feels like a moment of grace. In any of our experiences those moments can come through, and they don't feel as if they're coming from us. There is some sense that they're provided to us. As a Catholic, the vocabulary I use for it obviously is the Christian vocabulary. But I think all of us are aware of that even if we don't quite have language for it.

Would you call it holy or sacred?

It's not simply individual or personal. It's about the mystery of what it is to be alive. I'm not original in this. Leo Tolstoy talks about true impressions, those moments when we seem to comprehend something but only fleetingly. That's the wonder and the beauty of it. If we try to comprehend it fully and count it in a philosophy, language is inadequate and it begins to break down.

Grace arrives in many forms. It's not permanent. It comes and we're sure, and then it leaves and we're in doubt again.

You seem to capture these notions in your work by not telling everything. Why do you do this?

There have been a lot of readers who ask, why didn't you tell us? Or why didn't you show us that funeral? I consider a novel a kind of collaboration between reader and writer. I don't want to have to lead a reader to a conclusion I've already come to. We get enough of that in popular culture, where subtlety is a long lost art.

It comes back to the sense that language can't quite get it. We can't quite put our finger on what this experience is, so we have to find other ways to look at it, and sometimes the silence speaks more eloquently than any words could. We can't get beyond the limitations of words if we feel everything has to be dramatized, laid out, and defined. Then we're back to dogma, to someone saying this is how the universe runs. We recognize our common experience and yet, as soon as we try to define it, it no longer seems to be a common experience.

Does attempting to describe loss of such magnitude, like the loss that takes place in the face of war in *After This*, diminish it?

My impulse then is to leave such subjects alone and point to them without dramatizing them. We can't abandon those subjects--we simply need to find another way to encounter them and to make them new again.

When I was writing *After This*, I went back and reread every war novel I have read in my career. I went back to *The Red Badge of Courage*. I went back to Wilfred Owens and Siegfried Sassoon and Ernest Hemingway. I wasn't so much looking to see how to deal with this subject, but to reassure myself that it's already been said, so I don't have to write about it.

Were you thinking about our present situation in Iraq and elsewhere?

As I was writing this, bodies were being returned to our shores. The world was telling me: We need to hear it again. We need to find another way to confront the awfulness and the sorrows. Unfortunately there was no getting around it for me. War was something that this novel had to be about. The challenge is, how do you make us hear again what we already know--that this is a great tragedy?

The book starts in World War II, and then we're taken through Vietnam.

How do you make that relevant for readers today?

There's the risk of the appeal of nostalgia. There's the risk of the appeal of a period piece that only takes us back to a lost time and does no more. That certainly is something that keeps me awake at night when I'm thinking about my work. The point is not to simply recreate or bring back a time, but to use that as a means to get beyond, to what feels always true. That's where you need that idea of looking back, with a certain distance between the reader and the events that are being narrated.

So much drama is about the details of what happened and that's the end of the story, rather than the idea that something happened and then we went on.

The worst thing that can happen to a family happens to the Keane family in *After This*, and the story is about the fact that they go on.

You set your stories firmly in the family unit, with all of the flaws and the beauty of family life. Why do you do that?

My original idea for this novel was very much that sense of family as shelter. It's the first place we gather, no matter what's going on around us. The family is the first place of safety and comfort, flawed as it is.

The beauty, irony, and sorrow of it is that families need to break apart in order for other families to be formed. It's like life: There's no life without death. There are no families without the destruction of the family. But the family is where we first felt it, together, and then we have to learn to leave it. Yet we may find family inadequate and often it doesn't provide the shelter that we had sought. Family members fail each other.

What interests me as a writer is that impulse to gather, to believe that we can keep each other safe. We want to be good to a person who perhaps is not so good to us in return. We turn to prayer, whether those prayers are ever answered. Still the impulse is there.

There's a steady thread of Catholicism woven into your stories, and ultimately it seems to play a big role for you as a writer. You once said that the church is like a lovable old Irish uncle who might have a lot of flaws, terrible flaws like bigotry, but we love him anyway.

[laughing] And he's a good person. In *After This* you get this blatantly, with the tearing down of the old dilapidated church and then the building of this monstrosity, which was very much of its time and immediately became dated. It was not what the people wanted. Yet the intention for it, the goal for it, was noble. The monsignor was preparing his people for the future. It was just the wrong future. But his intention was good.

I don't find any news in being told that institutions like the church fail. Of course they fail. What interests me is the urge to build the church in the first place. It is the understanding that Jacob, in *After This*, has and tells his brother Michael: People need a place to go to. Jacob understands that in a very simple way. He's right, they do need a church, but do they need it in the round with no statues? That was just wrong-headedness. But the basic impulse is so right and that endures.

How would you feel if someone called you a Catholic writer?

[laughing] I'm OK with that. I remember when I was a new English major, it took me a long time to figure out how Flannery O'Connor was a Catholic writer. She's got this guy blowing away this old lady on the side of the road, and yet she's a Catholic writer. I didn't get it.

Would your writing be different if you weren't Catholic?

I think if I weren't Catholic, my language would be different. It's not so much the institution itself

that interests me as a writer, but the impulse that gives rise to the institution. And it's the language.

There's a benefit for the kind of writer that I am to write about characters who are Catholic, because I tend to write about characters who are not particularly articulate about their inner workings. They're not people who would sit around and talk about existential dread over corned beef and cabbage. The church gives them language for those things.

Still, it's not the particulars of the language that interests me; it's that this language speaks to their deepest hopes and longings for which they have no language.

Does the Catholic imagination help you go deeper into your subject?

Very much so. What seems always true is our longing for something transcendent, no matter what vocabulary we give to that.

Our editor, Father John Molyneux, C.M.F., is a huge fan of yours. He grew up in Queens in an Irish Catholic family, and the idea of place in *Charming Billy* was quite evocative for him. He wants to know if you grew up in Queens, too, since your sense of local color there is so clear.

I actually grew up on Long Island, but I visited Queens a lot. The easy answer is that it is a place I'm familiar with, so I don't have to do a lot of research to hone the details that I need. But also metaphorically it works. That place provides something for the characters, speaking to the characters' longings and inner lives.



If I can make use of place in order to do that, then I have justified using a place simply because I know it. In *Charming Billy* it seemed to me that the geography of that 100-mile stretch is really a metaphor for longing, striving for what we want for our children and their children.

You make quite a few references to literature in your books. Why do you do that?

It's equivalent to the language that the church provides. Poetry or a novel might give a character access to his or her own inner life.

Certainly in *Charming Billy*, the fact that Billy reads the poetry of William Butler Yeats is unusual for his milieu. None of his other relatives read; they think that since he read Yeats, they didn't have to. Just to know somebody who read poetry--you were covered. You bask in the glow of knowing somebody who reads poetry!

Here we're speaking to something that the characters don't have their own language for. All the arts, for example, are represented in *After This*. There's music, art, reading, film, and comedy--these are the ways that in which grace is revealed to us.

As a college professor, you spend plenty of time with young people. What do you see in their reading tastes and their writing abilities?

I probably have more optimism about the world when I'm with my writing students than I do at any other time of the week. My students are reading avidly. They're also reading skeptically. They're looking for a way of understanding the world, which is exactly what they should be doing.

There's a real sincerity, especially among my graduate students, who have already gotten their first degrees from good institutions and who are resisting the call to become stockbrokers. They are embarking on this career that's not about making the New York Times bestseller list. It's about writing what they feel compelled to write and giving voice to their experience and what it is to be human--all so that we can see it anew.

That's how I see their motivation, and it's thrilling. There is a wonderful belief in the power of the written word among these young writers. They haven't lost their faith in that.

What do you think your own readers are hungry for?

I can only extrapolate from my own experience as a reader. I want to be shaken out of the doldrums, to be arrested in time and forget that I'm mortal and that I'm me as I enter into another person's experience. I seek glimpses of grace, when we seem to connect with something larger than ourselves, something benevolent that wants us to see and to understand.

On the Web

For a list of Alice McDermott's books, visit usatholic.org

Left unspoken an excerpt from *After This*

This charged scene synthesizes many years of a strained friendship between Mary Keane and her office friend Pauline.

"You've been sick," Mary said, gently. "That fall ..." and would have said more, but Pauline held up her hand and said, "I know all about it." And then added, with a tremor to her jaw, "I know where I've been."

Mary Keane touched her throat. "And do you know," she asked, "what we've been through?"

Slowly, Pauline nodded. Her pale, plain features might have been carved of stone. "Sam told me," she said. "I'm sorry for you."

Mary would have put her arms around her then, might have broken down herself and wept with Pauline for what they had both been through. But that had never been their way. They were not sisters, after all, they were friends, office friends. And what had bound them all these years had more to do with how their acquaintance had begun (for how could you pray with sincerity if you were also hoping to ditch the annoying girl at your side?), with habit and circumstance, obligation and guilt, than it had ever had to do with affection, commiseration. There had been a trick in it too, their friendship, something far more complicated than "feed my lambs."

There had been the trick of living well, living happily in her ordinary life under Pauline's watchful eye. Of living well, living happily, even under the eye of a woman who always saw the dashed tear, the torn seam, who remembered the cruel word, the failed gesture, who knew that none of them would get by on good intentions alone, or on the aspirations of their pretty faith.

"I'll never get over it," Mary said. It was a phrase she had kept to herself, until now.

The boys' room was small and narrow. She and her husband had taken the pinups and posters from the walls in preparation for Pauline's coming, they had moved the desk and the old hi-fi to the

basement where Michael would sleep when he came home to visit, but they had left both beds here.

Pauline turned an impassive face to her, standing between the two beds.

"I don't expect you will," she said.

An excerpt from *After This* by Alice McDermott, published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, [C]2006, all rights reserved.

This interview was conducted by MAUREEN ABOOD, chief communications officer for the Claretians.

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One of the pleasures of going back to a talented writer's early work is finding the promising failure, the intriguingly bad book.

Alice McDermott's first novel, *A Bigamist's Daughter* (1982), told the story of a Manhattan vanity press editor romantically involved with one of her luckless writers. Burdened with backstory, plot contrivances, and stilted dialogue ("Some love goes even beyond the lover himself.... Love that's like a spiritual life, like pure faith...."), the novel was a classic case of a writer fighting her own strengths. It was bad in the way some clothing is bad: it just didn't fit. Bent on a single point-of-view protagonist, McDermott restrained a powerful storytelling impulse and ended up making her characters speak her own themes. She used awkward plot moves to steer the novel toward what she really wanted to write about, namely, not her heroine's present but her past - a child's perception of the physical world and the stubborn mysteries of adulthood. *A Bigamist's Daughter* was ostensibly a smart '80s novel about a woman finding her strength. But trapped inside it was very different book, less breezy and ironic, more lyrical and backward-looking, and far less narratively conventional.

McDermott's subsequent career has been a matter of setting this trapped book free. *That Night* (1987), a sparkling, swooning evocation of a lost era, related the events of a summer evening in a 1960s Long Island suburb, when a gang of hot-rodding town toughs, attempting to steal away their leader's girlfriend, does battle with the fathers of the neighborhood. The story is told, retrospectively, by a nameless narrator who watched the rumble as a ten-year-old, and whose own adult identity is subordinated to her role as witness to the past - in effect, a stand-in omniscient narrator, telling the story and its ramifications from all angles. The close focus on one event enabled McDermott to range widely through time, and in and out of the various characters as well, creating the novel's blend of tight control with lyrical expansiveness, and giving vent to a sensibility at once rapturous and haunted.

If *That Night* discovered its author's preoccupations - memory and the world of the child, the character of community, the power of desire, the evanescence and permanence of time, the ironies of fate - *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992) pushed them further. The novel studies an Irish-Catholic family in New York, circa 1960, through the eyes of two girls and a boy brought on weekly visits from their home on Long Island to their grandmother's apartment in Brooklyn, where through endless afternoons the children's mother and three aunts pour out decades of pent-up disappointments, hopes, and recriminations. Though the fate of one of the aunts figures as a recurring fugue theme, the novel is less plotted than painted. The coffee table with its doily, plastic flowers, and dish of sugared almonds; the family photographs; everything draped and dim and airless, and from the next room the muffled sound of someone sobbing: it is an achingly detailed tableau of lace-curtain Irish despair.

At Weddings and Wakes is the only novel I can think of told from a third-person-plural point of view, a narrative built on "The children saw..." and "To the younger girl it seemed that..." Yet the children's individual identities are strangely blurred; we barely learn their names, and other than a few parenthetical asides which sweep us decades ahead, we get no glimpse of their subsequent, adult lives and selves. This too is an extension of an impulse already evident in *That Night*. Indeed, an odd disjunction between the extravagant detail of her descriptive writing and an unwillingness to individuate the point-of-view character has figured increasingly as a hallmark of McDermott's style. Reading *At Weddings and Wakes* is a bit like being carried to a window on the shoulders of anonymous porters. Inside is a world where wedding-party bands play "Galway Bay" as men tell stories of Gentleman Jimmy Walker or a voice calls out "Sweet Jesus, don't mention Parnell!"; where children are taught the lives

of the saints by nuns with names like Sister Illuminata. At Weddings and Wakes took the lyrical sadness of *That Night* and joined it to something like ethnography. Written in a lovely prose that quivers at the brink of sentimentality - this is a writer who can make even a door, "easing itself closed with what sounded like three short sorrowful expirations of breath," seem wistful-it is a nostalgic and immaculately detailed valedictory to a vanishing corner of Irish Catholicism.

McDermott's new novel, *Charming Billy*, is her most challenging to date - incorrigibly digressive, brash with time, intricately layered and crammed full of life. Set in 1983, *Charming Billy* focuses on three days following the funeral of Billy Lynch, WWII veteran, longtime employee of Con Edison, and lifelong resident of Irish-Catholic New York (Queens, to be exact). Through the reminiscences of family and friends we meet an incurable romantic who drank himself to death at sixty: a Billy who charms older ladies in restaurants; calms a woman's baby by murmuring Yeats's "Down by the Salley Gardens"; writes notes on napkins to send to the priest; calls his cousin and best friend, Dennis, in the middle of the night to rail drunkenly against death and the passing of all things. It is a rousing, tender rendition of that stock Irish figure, the poetic rogue in love with his sorrows. Is that a breviary in Billy's jacket pocket, or a flask?

Behind his sorrow lies a tale of deception and lost love. McDermott takes us to Long Island in the summer of 1945, where Billy meets and courts a young Irish nanny named Eva. Back in Ireland, she agrees to marry him, accepts the money he saves to send for her passage - and then is heard from no more. Through a go-between Dennis uncovers the banal truth (Eva has married another man and used the \$500 to open a gas station), but tells Billy instead she died of pneumonia. The impulsive lie inaugurates Billy's decades of grieving devotion to her memory - he eventually marries, but stays true in his heart to Eva - and places in the novel's foreground the proposition that a life of deluded passion is better than one of clear-eyed disillusion.

Critics have likened McDermott to Joyce; but there's also a lot of F. Scott Fitzgerald in this novel - Billy an Irish workingman's *Gatsby*, Eva his Daisy, and Ireland itself, perhaps, the green light over the water. Like *Gatsby*, Billy conflates romance with poetry; kissing Eva on the beach in 1945 he feels, McDermott writes, "a desire for life itself to be as sweet as certain words could make it seem...." But McDermott frames Billy's life story in ironies, stinting neither the cost nor the complexity of his romanticism. First there are the ravages of alcohol and its punishing toll on the body: the downside of poetry is, literally, morbidity. Then there's the fact that Billy's tragedy is founded on a lie. And for whose benefit? His goodness of heart gets soaked up by friends and relatives whose hurting he does for them: he loves and loses; he keeps the faith.

The Christian echo of a redemptive, sacrificial quality to Billy's passion could be heavy-handed. But McDermott guards against bathos by making those mourners who explicitly construe Billy as a Christ figure themselves seem heavy-handed. Still, those who dismiss Billy's suffering as the "genetic disease" of alcoholism - there's an Uncle Ted, an evangelical AA member - come off as pinched and zealous proponents of our era's mistaken urge to collapse tragedy into (mere) pathology: a reductively pragmatic approach, McDermott clearly believes, to the mysteries of human existence.

Charming Billy is a stealthily ambitious work of fiction. Under the cover of a realist's reverence for descriptive detail and a romance writer's duty to affairs of the heart, McDermott conducts surprising experiments in form and voice. At times she's content simply to sit her characters around a table and quote speaker after speaker, or to compress their talk into a group monologue of page-spanning paragraphs that reads like an unedited transcript. Elsewhere, her narrator steps forward with pronouncements that have a Jane Austen-like ring: "In the arc of an unremarkable life, a life whose triumphs are small and personal, whose trials are ordinary enough, as tempered in their pain as in their resolution of pain, the claim of exclusivity in love requires both a certain kind of courage and a good dose of delusion." An elegiac impulse plays freely with her sentences, lending a curious, huffing quality:

He had, at some point, ripped apart, plowed through, as alcoholics tend to do, the great deep, tightly woven fabric of affection that was some part of the emotional life, the life of love, of everyone in the room.

How lonely they all seemed to me that night, my father's family and friends, lonely souls every one of them, despite husbands and children and cousins and friends, all their hopes, in the end, their pairings and procreation and their keeping in touch, keeping track, futile in the end, failing in the end to keep them from seeing that nothing they felt, in the end, has made any difference.

There's a fine line between the exquisite and the laborious, and such writing risks becoming a parody of lyricism. There's something almost willful in the baroque extravagance of McDermott's style. It's as if she feels her previous books haven't gone far enough, that this time she's determined not merely to write about loss, but to take it down into the basic structures of the novel

itself, fashioning a syntax of melancholy, a prose that gasps with sadness and doubles back on itself like the tangled contingencies of fate.

So too with the profusion of characters and their stories. Charming Billy seems wildly discursive, chronicling not merely the principal players in Billy's life, but much of the large supporting cast as well. You may find yourself flipping back to check which Daniel Lynch this is (there are two) or whose Uncle Jim worked at Edison back in '37; or wondering how you got onto the story of Billy's cousin's mother's Great-Aunty Eileen. Who are all these people? Again, McDermott isn't content merely to describe a texture of consciousness; she wants to create it, taking the density of Irish Catholic working-class family life and pressing it into the very molecules of the novel. It's as if the welter of names and stories - or rather our resistance to it - reveals our own attenuated capacity for family life. Reading Charming Billy one feels at times something like the strangeness, the scratchy bewilderment, of things perceived across a cultural divide.

Which brings us, finally, to the narrator. Charming Billy is told by the daughter of Billy's cousin Dennis, but through much of the novel you'd hardly notice it. She's a rather ghostly presence, never named, often present in the room but listening far more than talking. Only in the margins of the story do we get the skimpiest hints at her own life: a college graduate, married, living in Seattle with her children and husband. Readers of McDermott's last two books, recognizing yet another version of the trademark stealth narrator, may wonder, why not simply dispense with her altogether? Why bother to bring the narrator in as an actual character if you're not going to fill her out? It would be easy enough to toss the crutch aside and let an omniscient narrator take the slow drift back through the decades of Billy's life.

But there's a reason for the elusive, anonymous quality of McDermott's narrators. Third-generation Irish-Americans situated at the end of a progression that goes urban New York, suburban Long Island, Somewhere Else, they stand looking back through the one-way window of assimilation at the lives their parents and grandparents lived. It is a crowded picture, replete with emblems of a no-frills urban Irish Catholicism: a funeral party over roast beef and boiled potatoes; characters with names like Mickey Quinn or Bridie "from the old neighborhood" (famous for her pound cake, made with a full pound of butter); men who stop after work at Quinlan's for a quick drink before Friday Mass and who call their wives "Mama"; apartment living rooms where the brocade sofa with its plastic slipcovers stands beneath a framed copy of the Irish Blessing as a new widow sobs in grief, and the Monsignor, stopping to offer solace, is welcomed with awe and deference, like a movie star.

For better and for worse, this is the life of ethnic and religious community - loud, close-knit, restrictive. And it is a life McDermott's point-of-view characters have left behind. In Charming Billy the narrator's few comments about herself make clear who she is: "I married Matt and we headed off to Seattle. Lives of our own, we said. Self-sacrifice having been recognized as a delusion by then, not a virtue. Self-consciousness more the vogue."

Lives of our own, we said. The mildly deprecating irony McDermott reserves for what might be called post-Irish life suggests ambivalence about the trade-offs that come with breaking free of one's roots. Yes, things are gained: mobility, a change of scenery, freedom - including sexual freedom - education and professional status, and so on. But much gets lost. To shrug off the burdens of group identity is also to shrug off ferocious attachments; and McDermott's novels express doubt about whether, as ties attenuate and the old neighborhood sinks further into the past, anything as vivid and nourishing will take their place. The grand struggle to wrest one's self from the group delivers her protagonists to this deeply American paradox: that getting a life of your own brings a diminished sense of who you are. Hence the ghostly narrators. Charming Billy bids farewell both to Billy and to his entire way of life, its nameless narrator sent back to inspect a world where everyone owned a piece of you from one where identity rests on the still more perilous ground of self-discovery. Who is this person looking back with such regret and longing?

Rand Richards Cooper is a frequent Commonweal contributor. His most recent book, a collection of short stories, is *Big as Life* (Dial).

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