

'Nora Webster,' by Colm Toibin By JENNIFER EGAN OCT. 2, 2014



5 Colm Toibin Credit David Walter Banks for The New York Times

The story of a middle-aged widow struggling to remake her life after the premature death of her husband, it is written without a single physical description of its characters or adverbial signpost to guide our interpretation of their speech. The emotional distance between protagonist and reader is so great that at times the title character seems almost spectral. Yet it is precisely Toibin's radical
10 restraint that elevates what might have been a familiar tale of grief and survival into a realm of heightened inquiry. The result is a luminous, elliptical novel in which everyday life manages, in moments, to approach the mystical.

... his uncanny ability to muster outsize storytelling force behind a deceptively simple narrative. ”

15 Each of these crises dissipates, as crises often do in real life (as opposed to the sort of fiction in which they serve as plot points). And each time, I found myself unnerved and then exhilarated by Toibin's resistance to an artificially dramatic arc.

The epiphanies in “Nora Webster” accrue slyly, in offhand moments....

20 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/05/nora-webster-review-colt-toibin-powerful-study-widowhood-love-letter-to-ireland>

Nora Webster review - Colm Tóibín's powerful study of widowhood

Personal grief plays out against a backdrop of political turmoil in Colm Tóibín's love letter to an Ireland in flux [Robert McCrum](#) 5 October 2014

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In Ireland, there is only one Nora – Nora Barnacle, James Joyce's wife and muse. ..(Nora Webster is) an important contemporary Irish writer's relationship with Joyce, whose work still throws such a long shadow across every angle of Irish literary life.

30 *Nora Webster*, .., is about a tough-minded Irish mother and a country morphing, so to speak, from Ulysses to Bloody Sunday. Explicitly, it is a powerful study of widowhood and grief,

..... and because no Irish writer returning to his or her homeland can (n?)ever quite step out of Joyce's shadow, *Nora Webster* carries a burden of detail missing from *Brooklyn*. Put simply, Tóibín's novel contains an awful lot of its author and his resonant sonority. This cuts both ways, good and bad.

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All this is so cleverly braided into the widowhood of Nora Webster and her two boys, Conor and the stuttering, damaged Donal, that Tóibín's considerable narrative gifts successfully navigate the bumpy intersection of the private and the public. Through the slow personal reawakening of Webster, he finds a subtle way to reflect on Ireland's need to put its own grief into a larger context.

40 *Nora Webster* is an Irish love story and a love letter to Irish readers from one of Ireland's contemporary masters. But it skilfully transcends its source material in a way that will probably recommend it to a much wider audience. When, in the closing pages, Webster burns her late husband's letters because "they belonged to a time that was over now", Tóibín's message is clear. The past is another country. Better to be an exile from regret. The only way for things to "work
45 out", a recurrent phrase, is to move forward, boats against the current.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/11/nora-webster-cormac-toibin-review-rare-achievement>

Nora Webster by Colm Tóibín review - 'a rare and tremendous achievement'

50 This personal portrait of grief and politics in 1960s County Wexford does everything a great novel should. [Tessa Hadley](#) 11 October 2014

.....The eyes – or the ears, if we're listening to something read aloud – seem crucially involved in conveying that inward clinch of critical conviction, just as in attending to paintings or music.

55 Reading down the first page of Tóibín's new novel, [Nora Webster](#), I know that this novel is the real thing, rare and tremendous. But how do I know?

Like *Nora*, we feel tone on the skin and in the body; it produces a visceral response. Tóibín's style is distinctive, though it's the opposite of what is usually called "style" – there is no exhibition of cleverness, or highly ornamented manner, or any figurative or strenuously descriptive language. ... Someone said to me once – not uncritically – that reading Tóibín was like drinking a glass of water.

60 (The plainness makes his attraction to Henry James's extravagance all the more interesting.)

The whole novel is done like this, step by chronological step, from inside Nora's consciousness,It's written in strict chronological sequence, as time carries her forwards ...

65 It is clear that Tóibín has drawn closely on his own mother's story for [Nora Webster](#): presumably he made his young self into Donal, Nora's third child, the moody incommunicative boy who stammers and sees the world through his camera. It is poignant that Donal and his mother can't easily talk and seem almost estranged – he confides in his aunt instead, who is simpler and gentler..... it does everything we ought to ask of a great novel: that it respond to the fullness of our lives, be as large as life itself.

70 4. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/colm-toibins-nora-webster-a-masterful-portrait-of-a-grieving-woman-finding-herself/2014/10/07/524108f6-4b0a-11e4-b72e-d60a9229cc10_story.html

Colm Tóibín's 'Nora Webster': A masterful portrait of a grieving woman finding herself By [Ron Charles](#) October 7, 2014

75 ...In this incorrigibly subtle novel, She measured her success with the boys by how much she could control her feelings.”

... “It will be all right,” an old nun tells Nora. “It is a small town, and it will guard you.” Nora doesn’t load up on advice books or whisk her sons to urologists and speech therapists. They rely, instead, upon their own kindness and determination. Given a little peace and space, Nora knows
80 “she would work out how she was going to live.”

..... Tóibín would probably cringe at the idea, but there’s something implicitly didactic about this novel: Its barely undulating plot and exactly modulated tone serve as a kind of guide to living without excess drama. Nora never breaks down; her children never lash out; none of them spray their grief on Twitter (they don’t even have a phone in the house). It’s a poignant reminder of a time
85 when people responded to hardship with dignity instead of indignation.

5. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/nora-webster-by-colt-t-ib-n-book-review-this-is-a-writer-of-integrity-9759605.html>

Nora Webster by Colm Tóibín - book review: This is a writer of integrity

90 • Saturday 27 September 2014 . Matt Cain

As you might expect from Colm Tóibín, an author not known for his focus on storytelling, this recovery doesn’t come through a series of big, dramatic events. In fact, it’s so gradual that at times it barely even registers. ...

95 Because there’s no question that the novel’s main theme is grief; Nora Webster is a beautiful and heartbreaking portrayal of one woman’s experience of depression and loneliness. But it also evokes the protagonist’s struggle to find – and express – her own voice and identity. Nora is an intelligent woman with strong opinions but because of social circumstances she hasn’t acted on this until now. Slowly, through the freedom she finds in her new status as a widow, she begins to do so.

100 Of course, themes like death, loss and the search for identity will be familiar to regular readers of Tóibín – as will the setting and some of the novel’s minor characters. Like *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, *Nora Webster* is set in the author’s hometown of Enniscorthy, County Wexford. In its opening scene Nora is visited by May Lacey, the mother of Eilis, the young girl who emigrated to the US in Brooklyn. As in previous novels, the world of small-town Ireland is evoked with exceptional skill; *Nora Webster* is a quietly perceptive and wonderfully modulated portrayal of
105 life here in the late Sixties and early Seventies. It’s so richly detailed and laced with such dialogue that you feel like you are living in Nora’s world.

Tóibín is rightly celebrated for his mastery of style and form. And if this is a book about grief then his prose is carefully crafted to mirror and complement his subject matter – just like the music Nora plays to shore up her sadness. But this, for me, is where the novel begins to falter. The slow-moving narrative plods through every sad step on Nora’s journey, the sentences settling us into the gentle
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rhythm of life for a middle-aged widow in late Sixties Ireland. And although this is effective and often very moving, it can get a little wearing.

..... For me, the novel would have benefitted from more flashbacks

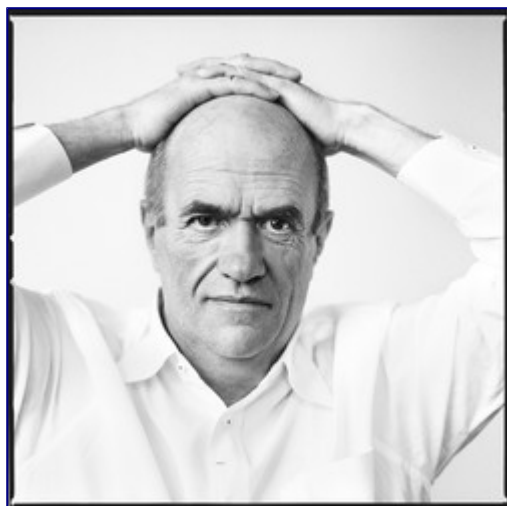
115 By the end of the book Nora's beginning to emerge from the grief that's engulfed her but there's no sense that her journey towards happiness should be remotely uplifting for us. I'm sure this won't worry Tóibín as, on its own terms, *Nora Webster* is a very successful novel. Perhaps, after the popular success of *Brooklyn*, this will only strengthen his reputation as a writer of integrity. I only hope his next novel has a little more to offer the reader.

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120 http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Nora-Webster/Colm-Toibin/9781439170939/reading_group_guide

This is a reading group guide - I am not giving you any of it, but would be interested if any of you think it could be useful to guide our discussion.

About the Author



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Colm Toibin

130 Colm Tóibín is the author of seven novels, including *The Master*, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *Brooklyn*, winner of the Costa Book Award; *The Testament of Mary*, and *Nora Webster*, as well as two story collections. Three times shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, Tóibín lives in Dublin and New York.

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135 <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/colm-t%C3%B3ib%C3%ADn-i-started-nora-webster-in-2000-and-finished-it-in-2013-i-thought-about-it-every-day-in-between-1.2293709>

This is an interview with Toibin and his editor. A bit chatty but also interesting.

140 **8. This is also an interview. Quite stimulating to read the whole.**

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/22/guardian-book-colum-toibin-how-i-wrote-nora-webster>

Colm Tóibín: how I wrote Nora Webster

145 The novelist on thinking about the book every day for a decade and how listening to Beethoven helped him capture a widow's loss

_'The book came as a battle between night and day' ... Colm Tóibín. 22 January 2016

I wrote the first chapter of my novel *Nora Webster* in the spring of 2000, in the same season as I
150 wrote the first chapter of *The Master*, my novel about Henry James. Both books dealt with a protagonist over four or five years. Alone in the world, both James and Nora Webster attempted to find a way out of failure or grief or loss. Although *The Master* required a great deal of research and *Nora Webster* almost none, I found *The Master* easier to work on, and easier to finish.

In *Nora Webster*, I was dealing with memory. ...

155 Memory, we are told, plays tricks, is filled with shadows and uncertainties. The problem for me, however, as I remembered those few years in that small house with my newly widowed mother and my younger brother, was that memory for me seemed exact, stable, sharp. That might be useful if I had to give evidence in a courtroom; it was pure hindrance, at least most of the time, when it came to writing a novel. I had to sift and distill what I remembered to find a shape for the novel.

160 The book came as the result of a battle between the night and the day. At night I would think of a scene that might work in the book. By the time I went to sleep I almost had it ready for the morning. In the morning, however, it did not pass the unforgiving test called the hard light of day.

For a decade I thought about the book at some point every day. I worked out a structure. Slowly, the character of Nora Webster herself began to emerge for me more clearly. I wanted her to be both
165 brave and difficult, to be someone fiercely loyal to her children when there was a crisis, but oddly nonchalant in the ordinary course of events. Her sisters were afraid of her. There is a sense of her as trapped by her circumstances, in a small town.

In 2006, as I read over the first chapter, I found the story that became the novel *Brooklyn* in a few sentences in the first few pages. I stopped writing *Nora Webster* and wrote *Brooklyn*. A few years
170 later, I wrote *The Testament of Mary*, both as novel and as play. I also wrote a short book and then a play about the Irish playwright *Lady Gregory*, also a widow in her 40s with an only son. I completed two collections of short stories – *Mothers and Sons* and *The Empty Family*. It seemed in all these books that I was circling the story that was Nora Webster's, working out ways of writing about family and loss and trauma.

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9. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2014/sep/25/colum-toibin-loss-father-nora-webster-video>

This is a video clip

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10. A wide-ranging interview.

<https://longreads.com/2015/02/24/novelist-colm-toibin-on-his-richly-textured-subtle-fiction/>

185 11.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/11139923/Colm-Toibin-austere-in-writing-wicked-in-person.html>

Colm Tóibín: austere in writing, wicked in person

190 **Colm Tóibín's new novel about a bereaved family in rural Ireland is his most personal yet. He tells Gaby Wood why it took him 14 years to write**

By [Gaby Wood](#) 04 Oct 2014

195 ...What's striking, though – and what gives the book its insistent power – is that all of this is seen through the eyes of the mother, Nora, not the boy. In fact, it's seen through the eyes of a mother more or less blinded by grief. So the idea that the book is autobiographical seems somehow misleading. It is, surely, a refraction of his own experience?

200 “You see, I couldn't do it from my own point of view because I didn't exist,” Tóibín replies. “I was almost reduced so much by what happened that nothing made any sense at all. But of course I was watching her. She was rebuilding her life – she wasn't rebuilding mine, anyway – and I became interested in the idea of this sort of anti-mother.”

Nora

205 Mothers are something of a specialist subject for Tóibín, whose last book, the Booker-shortlisted *The Testament of Mary*, took the ultimate mother and turned her into someone who had chosen to save her own skin rather than stand by her son. Yes, she sees him on the cross, but then she runs for her life, stealing clothes and shoes from strangers along the way. She dreams that she has held Jesus in her arms, but the pietà, in truth, never happened.

210 Tóibín is suspicious, he says, of “literature that depends on plot”. He doesn't think more should be required than “a portrait of a sensibility”. He suggests it's as if someone had told Vermeer, “If you could just stick a knife in the back of one of those girls, it would be so much more exciting. And he said, No, no, she's just going to read a letter. Or if she wept reading the letter, could you have tears? No, no tears.”

Still, he doesn't think of it as realism. ...

The truth is, what Tóibín really likes is silence. Or music, accompanied by silence.