Colm Toibin

Contemporary Authors Online

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 30, 1955, in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland. **Education:** University College Dublin, B.A., 1975; also attended graduate classes. **Memberships:** Aosdana.


CAREER:

Writer, journalist, editor, and educator. Worked as a writer for *In Dublin, Hibernia,* and *Sunday Tribune,* late 1970s; *In Dublin,* features editor, 1981; *Magill,* editor, 1982-85; *Dublin Sunday Independent,* journalist and columnist, beginning 1985; Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, Leonard Milberg Lecturer in Irish Letters, 2009-11; Columbia University, New York, NY, Mellon Professor of English and comparative literature. Visiting professor at Stanford University, University of Texas, Austin, Princeton University, and University of Manchester. Lecturer at universities, including Boston College, New York University, Loyola University Maryland, and the College of the Holy Cross. Has taught at the Dublin School of English, Barcelona, Spain, and New School, New York, NY; has given workshops and master classes at Listowel Writers Week, the Arvon Foundation, and the American University in Washington, DC; named a fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at New York Public Library, 2002.

AWARDS:


WORKS:

**WRITINGS:**

**NOVELS**

- *The Testament of Mary* (novella; adapted from his play *Testament*), Scribner (New York, NY), 2012.
TRAVELOGUES


EDITOR

- **The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan** (nonfiction), New Island Books (Dublin, Ireland), 1996.
- **Enniscorthy: History and Heritage** (nonfiction), New Island Books (Dublin, Ireland), 1998.

NONFICTION

- **Lady Gregory's Toothbrush**, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison, WI), 2002.

OTHER

- **Beauty in a Broken Place** (play), Lilliput Press (Dublin, Ireland), 2004.
- **Testament** (play), produced in Dublin, Ireland, 2011.
- **New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families**, Scribner (New York, NY), 2012.
Contributor to periodicals, including *New Statesman, Times Literary Supplement, Esquire, London Review of Books,* and *Irish Review.* Author's books have been translated into eighteen languages.

**MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:**

*The Blackwater Lightship* was filmed by John Erman, Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. (CBS), 2004.

**Sidelights**

Colm Tóibín is an Irish journalist who has gained an audience through his regular columns for the *Dublin Sunday Independent* and other publications, as well as through his travelogues. He was praised as "young, brave and, more unusual, never self-indulgent" by Ann Cornelissen in the *New York Times Book Review.* Also a novelist, Tóibín won the *Irish Times--Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize* for his debut work of fiction, *The South,* which was also nominated for the prestigious Whitbread Prize.

Katherine Proctor, the protagonist of *The South,* is an upper-class Protestant woman married to Tom, a landed farmer who is suing his poor Catholic neighbors for trespassing. Katherine, moved by the pleas of her neighbor's wife, asks her husband to give up his lawsuit. When he refuses, Katherine leaves him and their son for Spain. She is encouraged in her venture by her own mother, who herself fled from her family and came to England years before.

Katherine arrives in Spain in the aftermath of the civil war that ended in 1939. She drifts until she meets Miguel, who had been a political activist in the war. She is attracted to Miguel and his friends partly because of her belief that he is on the "correct" political side of things, whereas her family in Ireland was not. Katherine is also friends with Michael Graves, an expatriate Irishman who is Catholic and belonged to an Ireland Katherine never really knew. After years of living in Spain, Katherine returns to Ireland when Miguel dies in an accident. Back in Dublin, Katherine meets her grown son, who, ironically, is married to a Catholic woman and has himself converted to Catholicism.

Judith Dunford, writing in *Chicago Tribune Books,* commented that *The South* "aches with contrasts and parallels between Spain and Ireland." Dunford added: "Where Tóibín might have written a didactic, ideological tract, he has instead produced a book of sustained lyrical beauty and power."

The Irish characters in *The South* come from the small Irish town of Enniscorthy, as does the author. In Tóibín's second novel, *The Heather Blazing,* which captured the Encore Prize, the main characters--a judge and his wife--plan on retiring near Enniscorthy. Various events conspire to strain their plans and their marriage. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called Tóibín's writing style "measured and restrained as a Victorian memoir yet poetic in precision."

The narrator, Richard Garay, is the child of an Argentinean mother and an English father. His father dies when Richard is still young, and soon afterward, the narrator begins to realize his homosexual tendencies. Much of the book is given to descriptions of his search for lovers and his encounters with them. Yet he remains outwardly in denial about his sexual orientation, just as he denies the horrible truth of the political torture that is regularly carried on in his homeland. In one scene, Richard is enjoying a tryst with a lover but becomes puzzled by the sound of car engines repeatedly revving outside his building. Looking out the window, he sees the police station opposite, with several cars in front--driverless, but with engines running. His companion informs him that they are there to provide power for the cattle prods the police use on political prisoners. "As disturbing as the fact itself is Garay's failure to respond," noted Michael Kerrigan in the *Times Literary Supplement.* Kerrigan continued: "The anecdote embodies what is most memorable in Tóibín's tale of two cities: the sense of the 'ghost city, a shadowy version of our own,' which emerges at night, when the prosperous daytime streets of a modern, aspirational capital have emptied to become a playground for society's most deniable elements. Secrecy--and the shame of secret complicity--bring about this alliance of the torturer and the lover."

Tóibín's next novel, *The Blackwater Lightship,* gives readers a portrait of an Irish family that, after years of strife and division, is forced to come together when one of its
members comes home to die of AIDS. The taboos against homosexuality are strong in Ireland, more so in rural communities than in urban centers. Yet Declan, the main character in the book, asks to leave Dublin and spend his final days at his grandmother's cottage in a small seaside village. Declan further insists that his mother, his sister, and two of his gay friends stay with him there. "Tóibín understands this human tension between selfishness and altruism when a loved one is dying," commented Martyn Bedford in a New Statesman review. Bedford recommended The Blackwater Lightship as "a fine, thoughtful and compassionate novel," noting that the passages describing Declan's decline in his final weeks are particularly moving. John Boland, reviewing the book for World of Hibernia, observed that while homosexuality itself is the main theme of The Story of the Night, in The Blackwater Lightship Declan's sexual orientation is more of a catalyst to set events in motion rather than the main theme. The crux of the novel, according to Boland, is really the realignment of the relationships between Declan's sister, his mother, and his grandmother, brought about by his illness. "The book is stronger on atmosphere than on plot or motivation," stated Boland.

Tóibín used the letters, notebooks, and the novels of Henry James to write The Master, a novel that conjures an imaginative look at four years in the life of novelist Henry James. Readers do not need to be familiar with James or his works to enjoy Tóibín's book, according to Ann Skea in Reviewer's Bookwatch. "Tóibín's Henry is a fully realized, sympathetic character. He is educated, sophisticated, well-travelled, but a bit of an enigma. ... Through his own thoughts and actions, we come to see him as a person whose emotions are complex, as one who enjoys the privileges of his status as a well-known writer." Skea also credited Tóibín with recreating "the atmosphere, social mores, gossip and the style of the Victorian society within which Henry lives and thrives." The novel, furthermore, captures James's repressed homosexuality, which was apparent to almost everyone but himself. New Republic reviewer Deborah Friedell concluded that Tóibín's fictionalized James was more vibrant than the figure summoned up in the many nonfiction volumes about the author. "Tóibín is a wise and rapacious citizen of the Jamesian universe," Friedell stated, "an excellent reader of the biographies and of the literary criticism. In the end, though, he does all those works a disservice. For the James whom he creates on the page is a man who seems so utterly real, a creature of such vitality and pain, that he threatens to obscure or to overwhelm the actual man. I imagine that James would have been horrified by such a quantity of vitality; but when in the future I think of James, it will be Colm Tóibín's."

Brooklyn, published in 2009, won the Costa Novel of the Year Award, the first prestigious literary award that Tóibín received after being shortlisted for numerous others. The story is centered on Eilis Lacey, a native of Enniscorthy who travels to America. Although Eilis is reluctant to go, her priest and her sister, Rose, encourage her to do so, and she feels especially obligated because Rose has given up her own chance to travel there. When Eilis arrives in New York City, she rents a room in a Brooklyn boardinghouse, and she writes letters to her family in Ireland describing her new home. She takes a job at a department store and falls in love with an Italian plumber named Tony. Slowly, Enniscorthy begins to fade in Eilis's mind, but when she is called home in the wake of a family crisis, it is Brooklyn that begins to seem unreal.

"Tóibín's new novel stands apart because its protagonist has such an uncritical nature that she doesn't see she has grounds for complaint, much less possess any impulse to initiate confrontation. But slowly, equably, and without malice, Eilis exacts a bittersweet revenge for the expatriation she never intended--or, rather, one unfolds for her subtext and touching respect. He shows no condescension for Eilis's passivity but records her cautious adventures matter-of-factly, as if she were writing them herself in her journal." Liesl Schiller commented in the New York Times Book Review. She added: "In tracking the experience, at the remove of half a century, of a girl as unsophisticated and simple as Eilis--a girl who permits herself no extremes of temperament, who accords herself no right to self-assertion--Tóibín exercises sustained subtlety and touching respect. He shows no condescension for Eilis's passivity but records her cautious adventures matter-of-factly, as if she were writing them herself in her journal." James Walton, writing in the London Independent, made similar observations in his review, and he noted that "Brooklyn goes about its business with such quiet readability that it takes a while to realise how powerfully subversive all of this is. The current preferred myth is that we are, or at least should be, or should want to be, in control of our own lives. By capturing the unspectacular arbitrariness of Eilis's experiences so convincingly, Tóibín subjects this myth to a thorough and calmly intelligent kicking." Applauding the novel in Washington Post Book World, Jonathan Yardley asserted: "Tóibín's prose is graceful but never showy, and his characters are uniformly interesting and believable. As a study of the quest for home and the difficulty of figuring out where it really is, Brooklyn has a universality that goes far beyond the specific details of Eilis's struggle."

In 2012, Tóibín produced a bold novella titled The Testament of Mary, adapted from Tóibín's one-woman play that was staged in Dublin. The novella is told from the perspective of Mary, mother of Jesus of Nazareth, years after the crucifixion. Two men looking to write their own version of events--possibly the apostles John and Paul--demand that she tell them her story. Mary is still tortured by the events, which she relates with bitterness and despair. As he gained a following as a teacher, she found Jesus to be altered and false, his miracles weird spectacles. She blames the company he kept for putting him on the path toward his brutal and unjust death. She shares her account, and her anguish, reluctantly, knowing that her version of the story will not survive.
"The book’s premise is striking, and Tóibín’s handling is subtle," wrote Charlotte Moore in the *Spectator*. "Mary’s ambivalence towards the raising of Lazarus is particularly well done. The examination of the way history is fused from fact and fiction is interesting. But there is something lacking," Moore added. "Tóibín pares his prose down to the point where it seems drained of colour."

"*The Testament of Mary* is a beautiful and daring work," declared *New York Times Book Review* critic Mary Gordon in a more laudatory review. "It takes its power from the surprises of its language, its almost shocking characterization, its austere refusal of consolation. The source of this mother’s grief is as much the nature of humankind as the cruel fate of her own son. Her prayers are directed not to Yahweh but to Artemis, Greek not Jewish, chaste goddess of the hunt and of fertility, but no one’s mother. Mary’s final word on her son’s life and death is the bleak declaration: ‘It was not worth it.’"

In addition to fiction, Tóibín has written travelogues, including 1990’s *Homage to Barcelona*, in which he details the cultural history of the Catalan capital. Tóibín spent two separate periods living abroad in Barcelona, Spain, and he published *Homage to Barcelona* after his second stay there. In *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, Tóibín produced a work that transcended boundaries: It is part travelogue, part "memoir about his own relation to faith in the Irish context," according to *New York Times Book Review* contributor Patricia Hampl. The basis of the book is Tóibín’s Holy Week visits, over a number of years, to such Catholic strongholds as Spain, Rome, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. The book begins with the author’s memory of his mother and aunt returning to their home in Ireland after a group trip to the famous Catholic shrine in Lourdes, France. "Here and often throughout the book, Mr. Tóibín is an exemplary memoirist," affirmed *New York Times Book Review* contributor Hampl. "Spare and exact in his use of detail, his prose filled with wonder (or repulsion) rather than sentiment, with the past presenting itself not simply as a remembered story but as a vexing question never adequately answered."

In ensuing chapters, Tóibín examines the Catholic faith and his own relationship to it against the backdrop of Lourdes and other shrines. What emerges is "an unashamedly personal view of the Catholic Church ... [that] cannot be bettered," according to Peter Stanford in the *New Statesman & Society*. "Many authors have recorded a pilgrimage across Catholic Europe in search of the soul of the church, that elusive something behind papal pomp and dwindling mass-going statistics. But Colm Tóibín is in another class altogether. His prose is never anything less than a joy: informal, relaxed, uncluttered by detail but redolent with meaning."

*Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar* is Tóibín’s collection of essays devoted to gay writers, ranging from Oscar Wilde to James Baldwin and Pedro Almodovar. Many of the authors represented never came out as openly gay, or even acknowledged their sexual orientation to themselves; however, in Tóibín’s opinion, their writings nevertheless contain subtexts concerned with homosexuality. Tóibín feels that gay history is a critical component of gay identity, and his exploration of the themes of gay writers is "a way for him to reflect on his own preoccupations with secret erotic energy, sadness, tragedy, and with living fearlessly in a dark time," reflected a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor.

*Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* contributor Felice Picano found some flaws in Tóibín’s collection, including his tendency to paint gay lives as tragic. Yet despite its imperfections, Picano wrote that *Love in a Dark Time* is "bright, informative, opinionated and searching ... essential reading for anyone interested in gay literature."

In his short-story collection *Mothers and Sons*, Tóibín writes about family trials and tribulations that focus primarily on mothers and sons and issues such as betrayal and separation. Noting the Irish tradition of family secrets kept through silence, Brian Dillon wrote in *New Statesman* that the author’s "measured and humane short stories are concerned not only with what familial Irish silence might hide--a well-rehearsed litany of abuse, corruption, misogyny, covert sex and the corrosive tedium of loveless duty--but with the uses, too, of saying nothing at all." Dillon added: "Silence, Tóibín suggests, might also be a mother’s secret weapon." For example, the nine stories include "A Long Winter," a tale about a son who discovers that his mother is a secret alcoholic. In "The Name of the Game," a widow finds herself with three children as she takes over a failing supermarket. Another tale, "The Use of Reason," features a story about a psychopathic Dublin gangster whose drunken mother may have let slip to a cop her son’s involvement in a recent art heist. "Wistful, touching and complex, these stories form a panoramic portrait of loss," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor of the short-story collection. Joseph J. Feeney commented in *America*: "As an artist, Tóibín is a traditional storyteller, so sure a stylist that he pares his words to the minimum, so confident a plot-master that he can end a story without resolving the plot yet leave a reader fully satisfied."
Tóibín published *The Empty Family: Stories* in 2010. The collection of nine stories deals with the destruction of personal relationships and avoidance from the world at large. Each of the characters come to the point where they must face their pasts and their current situations in settings scattered around Europe.

*Los Angeles Times* contributor George Ducker observed that "with a spare, eloquent style, he guides us through hotel lobbies and pensiónes from Dublin to Barcelona. He directs our attention to estranged family members, divorcées and Muslim immigrants, catching each of them at the moment in which they are forced to reckon with their pasts." Portland *Oregonian* contributor John Strawn noticed that "there is nothing blatantly 'Irish' in Tóibín's prose, even when the stories are set in Ireland," but found that his "prose acquires its authority by renouncing flourishes or extravagance, proceeding along a carefully traced narrative path that generates trust in his readers, who will cling to his guidance like tenderfeet following a grizzled guide into the wilderness." In a review in Canada's *National Post*, Randy Boyagoda remarked that the author "is equally a master of the tense moments that pass between old friends meeting again after many years." Boyagoda also summarized that "only the very finest writers can explore the same themes, settings and characters, book after book, and manage to make these explorations, however familiar, still compelling. Among contemporary writers, the Irish author Colm Tóibín is certainly one of these, as most of his new short story collection, *The Empty Family*, attests."

In *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families*, published in 2012, Tóibín presents a collection of essays, lectures, and reviews which examine how writers' families influenced classic works of literature. His subjects include W.B. Yeats, Thomas Mann, John Cheever, Jane Austen, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Hart Crane, and Tennessee Williams. The treacherous relational terrain these writers tread ranges from alcoholism and narcissism to incest, Tóibín reveals.

"*New Ways to Kill Your Mother* is full of lurid, violent feeling; but the overall tone of the book is one of wisdom and calm," remarked Robert Hanks in the *New Statesman*. "[Tóibín] is a supple, subtle thinker, alive to hints and undertones, wary of absolute truths. Only now and then does he drift into schemes and certainties." "Though there's no truly coherent thesis here, it's a pleasure to watch Tóibín rove through 19th-and 20th-century literary history," asserted a *Kirkus Reviews* critic.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


PERIODICALS

Chicago Tribune Books, October 20, 1991, Judith Dunford, review of The South, p. 3.
Culture Vulture, August 18, 2004, Harvey O'Brien, review of Beauty in a Broken Place.
Financial Times, May 26, 2007, Mary Cregan, review of Mothers and Sons, p. 45.
First Things, March 8, 2013, Randy Boyagoda, review of The Testament of Mary.
Lambda Book Report, October 1, 2000, Elisabeth Flynn, review of The Blackwater Lightship, p. 17.
Maclean's, November 26, 2012, Brian Bethune, review of The Testament of Mary, p. 69.
Nation, November 1, 2004, Brenda Wineapple, review of The Master, p. 34.
National Post (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada), January 14, 2011, Randy Boyagoda, review of The Empty Family.
Oregonian (Portland, OR), February 5, 2011, John Strown, review of The Empty Family.
Spectator, September 21, 1996, James Simmons, review of The Story of the Night, p. 52; November 23, 1996, review of The Story of the Night, pp. 43, 46; November


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