

CONVERSATIONS WITH

Edna O'Brien

EDITED BY ALICE HUGHES KERNSOWSKI



Conversations with Edna O'Brien

Literary Conversations Series

Peggy Whitman Prenshaw

General Editor

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Edited by Alice Hughes Kersnowski

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August Is a Wicked Month. London: Cape, 1965.
Casualties of Peace. London: Cape, 1966.
A Pagan Place. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970.
Night. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.
Johnny, I Hardly Knew You. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977.
The Country Girls Trilogy, Omnibus Edition. London: Cape, 1987.
The High Road. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988.
Time and Tide. New York: Viking, 1992.
House of Splendid Isolation. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994.
Down by the River. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996.
Wild Decembers. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999.
In the Forest. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002.
The Light of Evening. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006.

Collections of Short Stories:

- The Love Object*. London: Cape, 1968.
A Scandalous Woman: Stories. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974.
Mrs Reinhardt and Other Stories. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978.
The Collected Edna O'Brien. London: Collins, 1978.
Returning: Tales. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982.
A Fanatic Heart: Selected Stories. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985.
Lantern Slides: Short Stories. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990.
Love's Lesson. London: Cuckoo Press, 2000.
Saints and Sinners. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

Stage Plays:

A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers. Plays of the Year Vol. 26. London: Elek, 1963.

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Poetry:

On the Bone. London: Greville Press, 1989.

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Introduction

Language is my tool, I want words to breathe on the page, but feeling is my agenda.

—Edna O’Brien, 1992

“Who’s Afraid of Edna O’Brien?” asks an early interviewer in *Conversations with Edna O’Brien*. When the question was posed in 1967, O’Brien had written six novels. With over fifty years of published novels, biographies, plays, telecasts, short stories, and more, it is hard not to be awed by her accomplishments. An acclaimed and controversial Irish writer, O’Brien saw her early works, beginning with *The Country Girls* in 1960, banned and burned in Ireland, but often read in secret. Before she was famous, she was infamous. Her contemporary work continues to spark debates on the rigors and challenges of Catholic conservatism and the struggle for women to make a place for themselves in the world without anxiety and guilt. The raw nerve of emotion at the heart of her lyrical prose provokes readers, challenges politicians, and proves difficult for critics to place her.¹

In these interviews, O’Brien finds her own critical voice and moves interviewers away from a focus on her life as the once infamous Edna toward a focus on her works. Parallels between Edna O’Brien and her literary muse and mentor, James Joyce, are often cited in interviews such as Philip Roth’s description of *The Country Girls* as “rural ‘Dubliners’” (1984). While Joyce is the centerpiece of O’Brien’s literary pantheon, allusions to writers such as Shakespeare, Chekhov, Beckett, and Woolf become a medium for her critical voice. In conversations with contemporary writers Philip Roth and Glenn Patterson, O’Brien reveals a sense of herself as a contemporary writer. The final interview included here, with BBC personality William Crawley at Queen’s University Belfast, is a synthesis of her acceptance and fame as an Irish writer and an Irish woman, and an affirmation of her literary authority.

December 14, 1967, the date of the first interview in this collection, just one day shy of O’Brien’s thirty-seventh birthday, she is being interviewed at University College Cork—at a teach-in, a sign of the modest social rebellions beginning in an otherwise very conservative Catholic Ireland. She is

there because she is emblematic of that nascent rebellion. O'Brien has, by 1967, published five novels, all banned in Ireland. Her message to the students at the teach-in is that "she wishes them, especially the young people of Ireland, to be free from guilt." Like the students at the teach-in, O'Brien's writing challenged and discomfited the Irish establishment by giving voice to women in a society where women were still disempowered. Relatively young as an independent country and having felt less of the direct social impacts of World War I and World War II, Ireland is just beginning to find its way as a modern society. Mother Ireland and Mother Church spoke, for the most part, with the same voice until the 1970s. The special position of the Catholic Church in the Irish Constitution was removed by referendum in 1973 leading to more open debates of women's rights and issues. Some of the social issues that would have concerned the University College Cork students in 1967 had only just found their way to a small segment of Irish society through the advent of the Irish National Television Service in 1962. This then is the milieu for the reception of Edna O'Brien's writing in 1960s Ireland.

Mary Maher's 1967 *Irish Times* interview, "Who's Afraid of Edna O'Brien," suggests something of the attitude toward O'Brien and her writing and is representative even in its title of the tone of many of the early interviews. The title is an allusion to the 1966 film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* based on Edward Albee's play. The comparison is apt. The film, starring Elizabeth Taylor,² provoked some of the same reactions for its "scandalous language" spoken by a woman as did Edna O'Brien's early novels. Maher's interview reflects the "what she looks like, what she writes about" paradox, a recurrent theme throughout O'Brien's early interviews: "and she looked perfectly lovely . . . the girl who writes about guilt, sex, scandal, and disheveled lives." In a 2010 interview with William Crawley, O'Brien comments on her irritation with people who have interviewed her hair and her house as emblems of her and thus tagged *her* as superficial: "Sometimes journalists have come to the house, and often women journalists as well, and have, if you like, interviewed one's hair. And one's fireplace. And they have given, if you like, the caption or emblem of superficiality just because one manages to look half okay." This ironic disconnect is present in many of the interviews, the exceptions being interviewers who know her well. Some interviewers are clearly impressed by her appearance and somewhat intimidated by her work. Such interviews are as much about the lovely, scandalous Edna as they are about her formidable literary accomplishments. She is correct in implying that such interviews have had an impact on the critical assessment of her work.

Although her literary reputation is now largely secure, being an attractive woman, particularly in the setting of an interview, was not, for O'Brien, in the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, a literary asset.

Though the 1970s begins with the publication of *A Pagan Place*, an experimental narrative written in the second person, there is little discussion about O'Brien's stylistic innovations in the interviews of the 1970s. *A Pagan Place* is the sixth, and last, of O'Brien's novels to be banned in Ireland though its setting and characters remain in the west of Ireland. Similarly, *Night*, a dream soliloquy, another of O'Brien's experiments in narrative style, published in 1972, is not the focus of serious critical discussion until much later. It is Philip Roth who takes the novel into serious critical consideration in the 1980s. Interviews generally follow the arc of O'Brien's critical reception, with fewer of them in the 1970s.

By the 1980s, O'Brien has established a literary reputation apart from her *Country Girls*. She is interviewed as a writer and her work receives serious critical attention by such interviewers as writers Philip Roth and Shusha Guppy (*Paris Review*). In these interviews, O'Brien creates a parallel narrative of herself and her work. Read through the nearly fifty years covered by the interviews included in this collection, Edna O'Brien is initially identified with her rebellious *Country Girls* in her early works, and she does not discourage this identification.

In 1986, her *Country Girls* undergo a transformation from the initial publication in three separate novels (*The Country Girls* [1960], *The Lonely Girl* [1962; republished as *The Girl with Green Eyes*, 1964], and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* [1964]) into a literary incarnation as *The Country Girls Trilogy*. The subjective *Country Girls* are now a literary object. O'Brien adds an epilogue to the trilogy, though she maintains that she has never been satisfied with it. This publication of *The Country Girls Trilogy* marks a turning point toward a more rigorous critical reception of O'Brien's work. Interviewers and reviewers now engage with her work as literature and with O'Brien as a literary figure. In 1987, she publishes a collection of short stories, *A Fanatic Heart*, with an introduction by Philip Roth. She has, by now, an established international critical reputation, one quite apart from her persona as the infamous *Irish country girl*.

Through the 1980s, some of her literary pantheon, including Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, become subjects of plays and nonfiction works. This pantheon also crowds her interviews, sometimes set up like icons on an altar, both literally and figuratively. Many interviewers discuss books by these writers

open on O'Brien's desk to specific pages and pictures of idolized writers displayed in her study. O'Brien's allusions to other writers effectively create a narrative of herself as writer. In addition to Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, a small sample of others that recur most frequently in the interviews include Chekhov, Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters, Flaubert, Proust, and Tolstoy. Names of writers are a kind of *leitmotif* in the interviews, just as they, and their characters, become subjects in her work such as Virginia Woolf in her play *Virginia* and her biography of James Joyce. The sheer numbers, in some cases topping over thirty in a single interview, function at times like a Greek chorus, commenting on O'Brien's sense of herself as writer. The writer's pantheon is one of the most consistent features of the interviews since, as O'Brien repeatedly asserts, her literary education is not formal, but rather a consequence of her unmediated and capacious reading. Her references to writers are also a mode of critical discourse functioning as a code, a way not only for her to interpret the interviewer, but for the audience to understand her.

By the 1990s and into the early 2000s, O'Brien's work returns to contemporary Ireland. Her eye for the underlying emotional current of events is as sharp as ever, but the sense of personal identification evident in earlier interviews is gone. In her 1992 interview with *Irish Times* writer Eileen Battersby, O'Brien is neither subject nor object; she speaks directly, for herself, and about her writing process. Battersby notes a "rawness of feeling" in O'Brien's fiction that may make her work more appealing in the U.S. and Britain than Ireland. O'Brien responds that now her writing "is more savage" and that *she* "is more savage." The Battersby interview spends only a brief moment on *The Country Girls*, to discuss O'Brien's representation of female experience. O'Brien suggests that her concerns are different from what they were thirty years ago, that now she focuses on "the universality of the female experience," a clear shift away from *The Country Girls*.

Beginning in the mid 1990s, O'Brien publishes a trilogy of novels about modern Ireland (*House of Splendid Isolation* [1994], *Down by the River* [1996], and *In the Forest* [2002]), writing about individuals tangled in contemporary conflicts. These conflicts are rooted in some of the same fears and repression that forced her *Country Girls* to flee from Ireland in her earliest works. In each of these novels, O'Brien presents characters whose emotional complexities are so finely rendered that the characters force the reader to sympathize with them even as we may violently disagree with, and ultimately condemn, their actions. In 1990, Edna O'Brien also begins a series of interviews at Long Kesh prison³ in Northern Ireland to create the

character at the center of her 1994 novel, *House of Splendid Isolation*. The protagonists, a “guerilla fighter” from Northern Ireland on the run to the Republic of Ireland and an elderly woman who is taken hostage in her own house, discover that they are both hostages to their own warped history. In the interview with William Crawley at Queen’s University Belfast, O’Brien relates some of her experiences during her research for *House of Splendid Isolation*. As she reflects on the Troubles, a period of political unrest and violence in Northern Ireland from the 1970s to the late 1990s, she remembers a story told to her by a Protestant boy meeting a Catholic boy on Christmas Day in the Long Kesh prison infirmary, the first Catholic he had ever met: “I couldn’t believe that,’ he said, ‘that the guy didn’t have two horns.’ And he meant that,” O’Brien says. “It’s these innate beliefs people have.” This kind of epiphany informs the conversations between the protagonists in *House of Splendid Isolation*. The venue and the tone of this interview at Queen’s University Belfast, a prestigious university in Northern Ireland, with Ireland’s most famous woman writer—a woman, a Catholic from the west of Ireland living in London—is a marker of the ways in which Edna O’Brien’s writing career so often delineates the social history of Ireland during the last five decades.

Published in 1996, *Down by the River* is based on the historic 1992 “Miss X” case. O’Brien clearly intends to relate the experiences of a child victim of incest, and the intense and often violent reactions to the victim by those opposed to her seeking an abortion. *Down by the River* is marked by its relative absence from conversations with interviewers, often being overshadowed by *House of Splendid Isolation*. The Belfast Agreement in 1998 marking the official end to the Troubles—and that *House of Splendid Isolation* is so close to the emotional core of the Troubles—likely explains the novel’s prominence in the interviews.

The 2002 interview “Deep Down in the Woods” with the *Observer* writer Robert McCrum discusses the third novel in the series, *In the Forest*. The novel is a psychological investigation of the person who murders a woman, her child, and a priest in the west of Ireland. Edna O’Brien’s fictional treatment of the triple murder, which occurred less than a decade before the publication of the book, stirs considerable controversy. Her response to the question, “What is *In the Forest* about?” suggests that O’Brien is not following a new sensationalist theme, but yet again examining one familiar in her works—the darker recesses of Irish history: “Ostensibly it’s about a triple murder in a forest, but I believe that the novelist is the psychic and moral historian of his or her society. So it’s about that part of Ireland I happen to

know very well. It's about that part of Ireland, and the darkness that still prevails." O'Brien's statement parallels one she made in 1992 when talking to Eileen Battersby, thematically tying the three works together: "I love Ireland and I hate Ireland. It has given me psychic soil, spiritual soil, and physical soil." This period of O'Brien's writing is marked by her absent presence; she is always in the background, but her works now outweigh her infamy.

In these interviews, James Joyce, O'Brien's mentor and muse, is a central figure. Joyce becomes the subject of a biography by O'Brien in 1999. For O'Brien, writing a biography of Joyce is something of a spiritual incarnation. She has been immersed in the life and works of Joyce since she purchased a copy of T. S. Eliot's *Introducing James Joyce* at the age of nineteen. A copy of Joyce lying open on O'Brien's desk is noted by almost every interviewer who interviews O'Brien in her home. And it is a rare interview in which Joyce is not referenced by O'Brien. She not only speaks about Joyce and his work, she often speaks *through* him when she makes a point about her writing, about Ireland, or the role of the writer. In a 1999 interview with Peter Guttridge, "Schooling for Scandal," O'Brien relates the experience of finding in her initial reading of Joyce, "some similarities . . . and that the key for me to write would be to go into my own life and to dig there." It seems something of an understatement for O'Brien who is sometimes seen as Joyce's female literary successor. Philip Roth's interview with O'Brien quotes Frank Tuohy's essay: "[W]hile Joyce, in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, was the first Irish Catholic to make his experience and surroundings recognizable, 'the world of Nora Barnacle (the former chambermaid who became Joyce's wife) had to wait for the fiction of Edna O'Brien.'"

Writer Glenn Patterson looks back on O'Brien's long writing career, and sees at the core of O'Brien's relationship with Joyce a shared understanding of language as "a moral endeavor in the rightness of language . . . that language is too incendiary to get it wrong." O'Brien responds, "I wonder if it's moral or if it's obsessive. Anything that's creative . . . requires such a truth, such an intent on the part of the doer." Such truth and honesty, for O'Brien, as a woman writer whose work now bridges two centuries, has come at a cost. Gender was for her, "the fourth net."⁴ Patterson, commenting on the totality of her work as a writer suggests that "as the writer in all of your works you have gone where the writing has taken you at whatever cost" (2007). Perhaps this is the resolution of her fame and infamy.

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St. Mary's University, Department of English & Communication Studies.
Research Associate, Patricia Amalia Sipes.

This book is dedicated to my American, Irish and Academic families.

AHK

Notes

1. This subject is further approached in *Edna O'Brien: The Fourth Net* by Alice Kersnowski (forthcoming).

2. Elizabeth Taylor also starred in *X, Y, and Zee*, the film adaptation of Edna O'Brien's *Zee and Co.*

3. Also known as the Maze prison, this detention center housed both Loyalist and Republican prisoners between 1971 and 2000. Edna O'Brien's interviews with prisoners at Long Kesh prison were highly controversial.

4. *Fourth Net: Edna O'Brien, an Irish Modernist*. The "fourth net" implied here is gender; the nets are a reference to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets."

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Chronology

- 1930 Edna O'Brien born 15 December in Tuamgraney, County Clare, Ireland, to Michael O'Brien and Lena, née Cleary. She is the youngest of four; sisters Patsy and Eileen, and brother John.
- 1936 O'Brien attends the National School in Scariff.
- 1938 Daphne du Maurier's popular novel *Rebecca* published. O'Brien recalls her impressions of the novel as pages were secretly circulated among the women in her village.
- 1941–1946 Edna O'Brien attends boarding school at the Convent of Mercy in Lough Rea, Galway.
- 1945 End of World War II.
- 1946–1950 O'Brien moves to Dublin where she works in a pharmacy and studies at a pharmaceutical college. James Joyce becomes her lifelong muse and mentor following her purchase of T. S. Eliot's, *Introducing James Joyce*, a small book containing excerpts of Joyce's major works.
- 1948 O'Brien begins writing small pieces for the *Irish Press*.
- 1950 Edna O'Brien is granted her license to practice as a pharmacist. Ernest Gébler, O'Brien's future husband, publishes his most famous novel, *The Voyage of the "Mayflower."*
- 1952 Edna O'Brien elopes with Czech/Irish writer Ernest Gébler. The marriage will be dissolved in 1964, but during the marriage, O'Brien's literary success is often attributed to her husband, some going so far as to say that he wrote the majority of the works for her. Sasha Gébler, son of Edna O'Brien and Ernest Gébler, born. Sasha Gébler will become an architect.
- 1954 Carlo Gébler, son of Edna O'Brien and Ernest Gébler, born. Carlo Gébler will become a writer, producer, and director.
- 1958 O'Brien moves to London where she continues to live.
- 1958–1959 In the fervor of three weeks around Christmas and the New Year, Edna O'Brien writes *The Country Girls*, for which she is given a £50 advance.
- 1960 *The Country Girls* published. It is the first of six novels by

- O'Brien to be banned in Ireland. Copies of the book are burned by a curate on the grounds of the local church in her home parish. Edna O'Brien's mother relates to her that women even fainted over what she had written. O'Brien is declared by the Minister for Culture and the Archbishop of Dublin as a "smear on Irish womanhood."
- 1961 31 December, initiation of the Irish National Television Service (Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) opens Ireland to the outside world and marks the beginning of a gradual liberalizing process in Irish society.
- 1962 *The Lonely Girl* (novel), published and subsequently banned in Ireland; reprinted in 1964 as *Girl with Green Eyes*. Edna O'Brien's short story "Come into the Drawing Room, Doris" printed in the *New Yorker*. She will continue to publish in the *New Yorker*, her contributions eventually numbering over forty. In addition to the *New Yorker*, through her career she will also write for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Redbook*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times*, the *Irish Times*, and other periodicals. *The Country Girls* wins the Kingsley Amis Award for Fiction. *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers*, O'Brien's first play, staged in London in 1962. Published in *Plays of the Year*.
- 1963 *The Wedding Dress* (television play for *ITV Television Playhouse*) airs and is published in *Mademoiselle* (November). United States President John F. Kennedy pays a formal state visit to Ireland and his ancestral home in June. JFK assassinated 22 November in Dallas, Texas.
- 1964 *Girl with Green Eyes* (screenplay) adapted by O'Brien from the novel *The Lonely Girl*. *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (novel) published and subsequently banned in Ireland. Edna O'Brien and Ernest Gebler divorce.
- 1965 *August Is a Wicked Month* (novel) published and subsequently banned in Ireland. Three O'Brien television plays produced: *The Keys of the Café* for *Armchair Theatre*, *Give My Love to the Pilchards* for *Love Story*, and *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers* for *Festival*.
- 1966 *Casualties of Peace* (novel) published and subsequently banned in Ireland. *Time Lost and Time Remembered* (screenplay) adapted from short story *I Was Happy Here* (1965).
- 1967 *Which of These Two Ladies Is He Married To?* (television

- play) airs. Edna O'Brien attends a teach-in at University College Cork. Her reputation as a rebel and a voice for women's sexuality makes her attractive to oppositional student movements. Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association founded and modeled on the civil rights movement in the U.S. Attacks on NICRA demonstrations become an important marker in thirty years of violence and unrest in Northern Ireland known as "The Troubles."
- 1968 *I Was Happy Here* (screenplay) produced. *Nothing's Ever Over* (television play for *Half Hour Story*) airs. *The Love Object* (short stories) published.
- 1969 *Three into Two Won't Go* (screenplay adapted by O'Brien from the novel by Andrea Newmann) produced; produced as a play in London in 1984. "The Troubles" take hold of Northern Ireland, spreading to the Republic of Ireland and parts of England with deployment of British Troops to Northern Ireland 14 August.
- 1970 *A Pagan Place*, Edna O'Brien's sixth novel, published and subsequently banned in Ireland. It is the last of her novels to be banned in Ireland, but not the last to cause controversy there.
- 1971 *A Pagan Place* wins the *Yorkshire Post* Novel Award. *Zee & Co.* (play) published.
- 1972 *X, Y, and Zee* (screenplay) adapted from *Zee & Co.* [filmed with Elizabeth Taylor]. *Night* (novel) published. Echoing Joyce's "Penelope," the novel is a dream soliloquy. Bloody Sunday (30 January). Thirteen civil rights marchers are shot in Derry, Northern Ireland.
- 1973 *A Pagan Place* (play) published. Produced in London in 1972, New Haven Connecticut in 1974. The Fifth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1972, is signed into law in Ireland (5 January), removing the special position of the Catholic Church.
- 1974 *A Scandalous Woman* (short stories) published. *The Gathering* (play) produced in Dublin, Ireland.
- 1975 End of Vietnam War.
- 1976 *Mother Ireland* (a travelogue with photography by Fergus Bourke) published.
- 1977 *Johnny, I Hardly Knew You* (novel); published (American ed. published as *I Hardly Knew You* in 1978). *The Gathering* produced at the Manhattan Theatre Club, New York. *Arabian*

- Days* (nonfiction) published. Edna O'Brien's mother, Lena, dies. O'Brien discovers a copy of one of her books in which her mother had "blacked out all the offending words."
- 1978 *Mrs. Reinhardt and Other Stories* (republished in 1979 as *A Rose in the Heart: Love Stories*) and *The Collected Edna O'Brien* (both short stories) published.
- 1980 *Virginia* (play) based on the life and works of Virginia Woolf. First performed at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada, later performed in England in 1981 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, and first performed in New York in 1985. *The Dazzle* (children's story) published. Edna O'Brien turns fifty and celebrates twenty years of writing. By this point, she has written eight novels, two nonfiction books, three collections of short stories, a children's story, five theatrical plays, numerous television and screenplays, and multiple pieces for news and leisure periodicals.
- 1981 *James and Nora: A Portrait of a Marriage*, (nonfiction) the first of several explorations of Joyce's life and work.
- 1984 *A Fanatic Heart* (short stories with a foreword by Philip Roth) published in the U.S. by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, a benchmark recognition of Edna O'Brien as a major literary figure. *Three into Two Won't Go* produced as a play in London.
- 1985 *The Country Girls* (screenplay) produced. *Flesh and Blood* (play) produced.
- 1986 "Samuel Beckett at Eighty" (essay). *Tales for Telling* (folktales retold in dialect by O'Brien) published.
- 1987 *The Country Girls Trilogy*, new edition of *The Country Girls*, *The Lonely Girl*, and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, published with the addition of an epilogue. The epilogue is controversial; O'Brien later states in an interview that she "was never quite satisfied with it." *Madam Bovary* (play adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's novel) produced at the Palace at Watford.
- 1988 *The High Road* (novel) published with dedication "To my grandson Jack Raymond Gebler."
- 1989 *Blood Memory* (play) produced. *On the Bone* (poems) published. Samuel Beckett, whom Edna O'Brien knew personally and cites frequently as a great inspiration for her, dies at eighty-three in Paris.
- 1990 *Lantern Slides* (short stories) published. *Lantern Slides* wins the

- Los Angeles Times* Book Award. Mary Robinson becomes the first female president of Ireland. Early 1990s: Edna O'Brien interviews Dominic McGlinchey and others at Long Kesh prison.
- 1991 *Girl with Green Eyes* wins the *Premio Grinzane Cavour* (Italy).
- 1992 *Time and Tide* (novel) published.
- 1993 *Time and Tide* wins the Writer's Guild Award for Best Fiction.
- 1994 *House of Splendid Isolation* (novel) published. Edna O'Brien interviews Gerry Adams for the *New York Times* (published 1 February).
- 1995 *House of Splendid Isolation* wins the European Prize for Literature from the European Association for the Arts.
- 1995–2007 Ireland sees a boom in the economy known as the Celtic Tiger.
- 1996 Publication of *Down by the River* (novel), based on the Miss X case, becomes the center of public controversy. Edna O'Brien becomes a member of Aosdána, an organization honoring artists who have made extraordinary contributions to Irish culture. O'Brien is a guest writer at the Kerry International Summer School. O'Brien, along with poet Brendan Kennelly, creates a theatrical piece for a Memorial Day honoring Gus Martin (Augustine Martin), supporter and friend of O'Brien and longtime Professor of Irish Studies at University College Dublin.
- 1997–1998 Edna O'Brien is a writer in residence teaching at New York University.
- 1998 The Belfast "Good Friday" Agreement is signed, signaling "the end" of The Troubles. O'Brien and poet Seamus Heaney do public readings in support of the public referendum for the Agreement. Ernest Gebler, Edna O'Brien's ex-husband, dies.
- 1999 *James Joyce* published. A biography in the *Writer's Lives Series*, it is a project of great importance to O'Brien and the culmination of her continual reading and study of Joyce, her muse and mentor. *Wild Decembers* (novel) published; movie version filmed in County Wicklow 2009. *Our Father* (play) produced at the Almeida Theatre. Edna O'Brien is awarded an honorary doctorate by Queen's University Belfast.
- 2000 *Love's Lesson* (short stories) published. O'Brien receives the Literary Award of the American Ireland Fund.
- 2001 O'Brien receives the Irish PEN Lifetime Achievement Award with encomium by poet, Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney.

- 2002 *In the Forest* (novel), published. Based on a triple murder, it creates controversy, in part because of the perspective. *Iphigenia*, a re-envisioning of the classic play by Euripides, is staged in Sheffield, England.
- 2003 *Iphigenia [of] Euripides* (play) published. *Triptych* (play) premieres at San Francisco Magic Theatre. Edna O'Brien is playwright in residence at San Francisco Magic Theatre.
- 2004 O'Brien receives an honorary doctorate from the University of Limerick.
- 2006 *The Light of Evening* (novel) published. University College Dublin awards Edna O'Brien the *Ulysses* Medal, announces the Edna O'Brien Prize, and appoints O'Brien adjunct professor.
- 2009 *Byron in Love* (nonfiction) published. O'Brien receives the Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award in Irish Literature.
- 2010 *Haunted* (play) published. *In the Forest* is shortlisted for the Irish Book of the Decade (Bord Gáis Energy Book Awards). Celebrations mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Country Girls* and Edna O'Brien's eightieth birthday.
- 2011 *Saints and Sinners* (short stories) published. *Saints and Sinners* wins the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. *Haunted* is produced in New York. Dermot Bolger launches the Edna O'Brien Lecture Series at the Scariff Public Library, County Clare.
- 2012 *Country Girl: A Memoir* published 24 September in the U.K., 30 April 2013 in the U.S.A.

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