

The Irish Goodbye

HEATHER AIMEE O'NEILL

Attending parochial school in the eighties with undiagnosed dyslexia left me with plenty of stories about teachers frustrated by my inability to learn how to read. I was young for my grade, so my struggle was sometimes dismissed as immaturity. When I couldn't keep up with schoolwork, I became insecure—who wouldn't?—and that was blamed on anxiety. Unexpectedly, the place where I felt safest was the library.

The reason for this was a young librarian who chose books for me that she knew I could handle—stories that would help build my confidence. And it worked. I was proud of myself for being able to read what she recommended. She never said anything about her strategy, but I caught on when my second-grade teacher told me I was checking out books that were “too easy.” I was crushed. But when I told the librarian, she just shrugged and handed me another book—probably at the same level—and I went on feeling proud of myself.

I left parochial school in fourth grade and finally got the help I needed in the public school system. My experience with that young librarian remains one of the few happy memories from that time—something I still feel tremendous gratitude for. By sixth grade, I had won a contest at the library to write a book that would be included on their shelves. It was a collection of poems, one of which also won the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association's Student Poetry Contest. I was hooked. There was no question that this was what I wanted to do with my life, and I've been writing ever since.

After publishing two collections of poetry (three, if you count the one from elementary school!), *The Irish Goodbye* is my first novel. It follows three sisters reconnecting over a Thanksgiving weekend, years after tragedy fractured their family. I was inspired to write it after two decades of working as an editor, helping other writers share their stories. I originally intended it to be an exploration of what happens when a family fails to process their grief. It was only later that I realized it was also a book about shame, something I'd known intimately as a child learning how to read.

The Ryans are an Irish Catholic family grappling with a traumatic past, but *The Irish Goodbye* is ultimately a story about redemption, forgiveness, and healing. While the book takes on difficult topics—suicide, abortion, and the LGBTQ experience within Catholicism—part of my aim was to challenge the political absolutism that's taken hold across our culture.

I think the novel will resonate with readers who appreciate writers like J. Courtney Sullivan, Alice McDermott, and Mary Beth Keane. In these divisive times, I'm especially grateful for those—like you—who remain on the frontlines advocating for stories that allow for more complexity, conversation, and, I hope, empathy.

Thank you,

HEATHER AIMEE O'NEILL

Author of *The Irish Goodbye*