



Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce

Colm Tóibín

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From Colm Tóibín, the formidable award-winning author of *The Master* and *Brooklyn*, an illuminating, intimate study of Irish culture, history, and literature told through the lives and work of three men—William Wilde, John Butler Yeats, and John Stanislaus Joyce—and the complicated, influential relationships they had with their complicated sons.

Colm Tóibín begins his incisive, revelatory *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know* with a walk through the Dublin streets where he went to university—a wide-eyed boy from the country—and where three Irish literary giants also came of age. Oscar Wilde, writing about his relationship with his father, William Wilde, stated: “Whenever there is hatred between two people there is bond or brotherhood of some kind...you loathed each other not because you were so different but because you were so alike.” W.B. Yeats wrote of his father, John Butler Yeats, a painter: “It is this infirmity of will which has prevented him from finishing his pictures. The qualities I think necessary to success in art or life seemed to him egotism.” John Stanislaus Joyce, James’s father, was perhaps the most quintessentially Irish, widely loved, garrulous, a singer, and drinker with a volatile temper, who drove his son from Ireland.

Elegant, profound, and riveting, *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know* illuminates not only the complex relationships between three of the greatest writers in the English language and their fathers, but also illustrates the surprising ways these men surface in their work. Through these stories of fathers and sons, Tóibín recounts the resistance to English cultural domination, the birth of modern Irish cultural identity, and the extraordinary contributions of these complex and masterful authors.

Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce Details

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From Reader Review Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce for online ebook

Rae says

If you love Irish literature and history, you are sure to love this book. Colm Tóibín's newest book is a compilation based on lectures he gave on the topic of three literary giants' fathers and families. Tóibín delves into the lineage of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and W. B. Yeats and paints a picture of 19th century Dublin through their fathers.

Tóibín's analyses are engagingly written and researched to give an enigmatic, full portrayal of artistic life in Dublin. William Wilde, John Stanislaus Joyce, and John Butler Yeats come alive in this book as Tóibín delves into their triumphs and failings. These men have their own professional and artistic wonders, which are allowed to shine. Further, the author shows the interaction between father and son, and how the son's work was shaped by their particular upbringing.

A truly fascinating read, and highly recommended to fans of Wilde, Joyce, and Yeats, and fans of engaging history.

Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for providing an e-copy of this book for review. All opinions are my own.

Lisa says

Mad Bad and Dangerous to Know, the fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce is, as you would expect from Colm Tóibín, beautifully written—but whether it's a book for you might depend on how interested you are in Wilde, Yeats and Joyce.

Now I am an unabashed enthusiast for everything Joyce has written and you can find plenty of evidence for that in the hours of my life that I have spent not only reading his books as a student, but also blogging my adventures with Ulysses, with Finnegans Wake, and a reprise of my love of Dubliners. So I loved reading about the father of James Joyce, and his various manifestations in Ulysses, especially since Joyce had a generous view of his father's undoubtedly failings.

By contrast, Stanislaus Joyce, James' brother, has nothing good to say of his father's fecklessness and abusive behaviour in his books *My Brother's Keeper* (1958) and *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce* (1971).

My father was still in his early forties, a man who had received a university education and had never known a day's illness. But though he had a large family of young children, he was quite unburdened by any sense of responsibility towards them. His pension, which could have taken in part the place of the property he had lost and been a substantial addition to an earned income, became his and our only means of subsistence. (p.166)

He is domineering and quarrelsome and has in an unusual degree that low, volatile abusiveness characteristic of Cork people when drunk... He is lying and hypocritical. He regards himself as the victim of circumstances and pays himself with words. His will is dissipated and his intellect besotted, and he has become a crazy drunkard. He is spiteful like all drunkards who are thwarted, and invents the most cowardly insults that a scandalous mind and a naturally derisive

tongue can suggest. (p. 167)

But James Joyce was magnanimous, partly but not entirely because he was at a distance in Trieste. He wrote to his benefactor Harriet Weaver:

I was very fond of him always, being a sinner myself, and even liked his faults. Hundreds of pages and scores of characters in my books came from him... I got from him his portraits, a waistcoat, a good tenor voice, and an extravagant licentious disposition (out of which, however, the greater part of any talent I may have springs) but, apart from these, something else I cannot define. (p.173.)

The chapter about Joyce's father, despite his manifest faults, is a pleasure to read because Tóibín considers at some length the ways in which Joyce pays homage in his fiction to this flawed father.

To read the rest of my review please visit <https://anzlitlovers.com/2018/11/20/m...>

Kathy says

This book was conceived by Toibin after giving a series of well-received lectures on the topic of the father and son relationships of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce. I have to admit, it was the title that drew me in to reading it. This book is extremely well researched with quotes and letters annotated on just about every page. That detail made the book seem to be more of a college thesis paper rather than a typical book of non-fiction. That being said, these fathers were an odd bunch and their stories would typify a Lifetime Channel movie. This book has it all..it is the story of stalkers, of libel court cases, of drunken cruelty, of moochers, of delusions of grandeur, of strange infatuations and of infidelity but it is NOT the story of pride in the accomplishments of their own children (although the "children" had their own issues!).

Margaret Sankey says

Originally given as lectures, these are vivid essays not just on the father-son relationships that formed the work of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce, but also about the precariously positioned knowledge middle class of 19th and early 20th century Ireland and the closely knit families who tried to parlay wealth or professional status into political leverage and recognition from the larger Anglosphere while remaining Irish.

Gustavo Offely says

A relação entre pais e filhos sempre me interessou em literatura (suponho que também seja interessante na realidade, mas nunca testei essa hipótese). Tóibín consegue, com excelente literatura, criar interesse na vida privada de três figuras paternas.

Achei John B. Yeats a figura paterna mais interessante. Ele foi um pintor não falhado, mas cujo sucesso foi adiado *ad vitam*. Fez do charme a sua primeira arte. Passou os seus últimos anos a pintar o seu auto-retrato e a escrever belíssimas cartas. O auto-retrato ficou feito nas cartas; a pintura ficou por acabar.

Stephanie says

I found this book utterly fascinating. It made me want to visit Dublin again. I understand so much more about the writers by getting to know their fathers. I understand why Oscar Wilde acted the way he did in his trial (that his arrogant brilliance left him above the law) and that trial of course led to his imprisonment and early death. So much of the way we are in life depends on how we are shown to be or taught to be in our families. Dublin is a major character in this book, seething with brilliance in its small streets.

Peggy says

I would probably have enjoyed this a lot more about 20 years ago when my readings of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce were much fresher in my mind. I still discovered some information I didn't know, but the writing is very impressionistic in style rather than straightforward biography. It's quite readable, but at the same time confusing because Toibin seems to be writing under the assumption that everyone is as familiar as he is with the people, events and texts he refers to. So, it's a good read for someone up to date on late 19th century-early 20th century Irish studies and authors. That's not me, so I found the most compelling bit to be when Toibin quoted Stephen's mother in *_A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man_*: "Stephen read out the essay to her slowly and emphatically and when he had finished reading she said it was very beautifully written but that as there were some things in it which she couldn't follow would he mind reading it to her again and explaining some of it." Yes! That's exactly what reading this book was like.

Bettie? says

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000...>

Description: *The award winning writer Colm Tóibín explores the complex relationships between three of Ireland's literary giants and their fathers. From Oscar Wilde's polymath father who was a doctor specialising in diseases of the eye and ear; an amateur architect, as well as a statistician who was knighted for his work; to W.B. Yeats' father a brilliant correspondent and impoverished artist who struggled to complete a painting; to John Stanislaus Joyce, a drinker and story-teller who was unwilling to provide for his family.*

1/5: In today's episode Tóibín takes a literary walk around Dublin, stopping off at a variety of landmarks immortalised in the works of some of Ireland's most famous writers. At the same time he reflects on his own writing life.

2/5: Tóibín is in Oscar Wilde's cell at Reading gaol where he is reflecting on the life and influence of William Wilde, the great writer's father.

3/5: William Wilde is engulfed in a court case which, strangely, foreshadows the famous trial which had

such devastating consequences for his son, Oscar, some thirty years later.

4/5: Tóibín's gaze turns to John B. Yeats, father of the literary giant, W.B. Yeats. It turns out that the brilliant conversationalist and impoverished artist was a source of exasperation, but also of inspiration to his son, and here Tóibín tells us why.

5/5: Tóibín turns to the romantic and occasionally erotic correspondence between John B. Yeats and Rosa Butt, when the pair were in their sixties. He then reflects on the influence that the father's boyish romance had on the writings of his son, the literary giant W. B. Yeats.

1877 caricature of Queensberry in *Vanity Fair*.

Rosa Butt | John Butler Yeats | oil painting

The Bookish Hooker says

Mad, Bad, Dangerous To Know is a collection of lectures given by Colm Toibin on three famous Irish writers, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Oscar Wilde. and the roles their fathers played in shaping their lives and careers. I chose to read this book because I have always loved Oscar Wilde and was interested in finding out more about him and his family life. The book is actually so much more than just a historical essay on the authors, though. It really encompasses Irish culture, their relationship with England, and the history of art and writing in that environment.

The introduction was extremely well written and featured an account of the wanderings of the author through the historically rich streets of Dublin. I found this section fascinating as it really set the stage for what was to come. Personal letters, both to and from the three writers and their fathers, and accounts left behind by contemporaries gave the sections dedicated to the individual writers an unexpected depth. Talking about a subject is one thing, but seeing their experiences through their own words was an added bonus. I really was able to feel Colm Toibin's love for the Irish country, people, and art through this book. In a few instances, the author made mention of a historical event or person, perhaps under the assumption that these would be well known outside of Ireland or literary circles, with little or no explanation of what they were. It left me to Google these points, which interrupted the flow of the book. These were easy to overlook, though, as the overall book was great.

Thank you to the publisher, Scribner, and NetGalley for the advanced copy of the book. It was provided in exchange for an honest review.

Elaine says

Beautiful, compelling, and glowing throughout with the brilliance and humanity of the author and his subjects. I will reread this book and also return to the works of Wilde, Yeats, and, particularly, Joyce, whose father—I now know—lives and breathes in the pages of his novels.

Kathy says

This book had its origins in lectures given by the author at Emory University a little over one year ago, or November 2017. I was drawn to reading this book after reading review by author Adrian McKinty. I was richly rewarded by following this lead and highly recommend this book to all interested in Irish literature. I could write a book enumerating all the nuggets of information and insights included in this scholarly effort, so I will not try.

Christopher Jones says

Loved this hugely ❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?❤️?

Kristine says

Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know by Colm Toibin is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in early October.

Yay, my first Colm Toibin non-fiction and about the fathers of Wilde (William), Yeats (John Butler) and Joyce (John Stanislaus), no less. Toibin does research while walking through areas in Dublin that still speak volumes about the personal lives of these authors and their fathers, even reading *De Profundis* in Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol. He describes William Wilde as a great, musing traveler after years as an ear & eye doctor and knighted for contributing to the Irish census, yet plagued by slanderous pamphlets for his former ward, Mary Travers; John Butler Yeats as a storyteller or 'talker' and "the painter who scrapes out every day what he painted the day before" before moving to New York in 1907, still relying on his son's dime to keep himself afloat; James Joyce and Stanislaus admiring their father, John, yet staying away from him and writing about their lives in their father's household, while he was sometimes steady, other times drunk and prone to violence.

Laura says

From BBC radio 4 - Book of the week:

The award winning writer Colm Tóibín reads from his new book about the fathers of Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. In today's episode Tóibín takes a literary walk around Dublin, stopping off at a variety of landmarks immortalised in the works of some of Ireland's most famous writers. At the same time he reflects on his own writing life.

The award winning writer Colm Tóibín explores the complex relationships between three of Ireland's literary giants and their fathers. From Oscar Wilde's polymath father who was a doctor specialising in diseases of the eye and ear; an amateur architect, as well as a statistician who was knighted for his work; to W.B. Yeats' father a brilliant correspondent and impoverish artist who struggled to complete a painting; to John Stanislaus Joyce, a drinker and story-teller who was unwilling to provide for his family.

Book of the Week looks at the lives of William Wilde and John B. Yeats and uncovers the ways in which their influence emerges in the works of their famous sons.

Episode 1 of 5

Colm Tóibín takes a literary walk around Dublin.

Episode 2 of 5

Colm Tóibín is in Oscar Wilde's cell at Reading gaol reflecting on the writer's father.

Episode 3 of 5

Colm Tóibín on two court cases, one involving William Wilde, the second his son, Oscar

Episode 4 of 5

Colm Tóibín turns his gaze to the life of John B Yeats, father of poet WB Yeats.

Episode 5 of 5

Colm Tóibín on the eternal youth of John B Yeats, father of literary giant WB Yeats.

Abridged by Richard Hamilton

Produced by Elizabeth Allard

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000...>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/bo...>

David Wineberg says

You might expect that three great Irish writers, growing up in Dublin in the same era, might have some commonalities, some insight into genius or at least talent. Colm Toibin looks at their fathers in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* to find that is as far from the truth as can be.

The writers are Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats and James Joyce. Their fathers were a knighted workaholic, an irresponsible, romantic dreamer and a horrific, spendthrift drunk, respectively.

Wilde's father Will was precocious. By his mid-twenties he was not only a medical doctor, but an archaeologist, and a recognized statistician. His knighthood came from his reorganizing and managing the Irish census, way beyond requirements or expectations. He was always doing numerous things at once, and evenings were spent hosting the political, scientific and artistic glitterati of Europe at their home facing Merrion Park in Dublin.

Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, was better known as a clever guest at those kinds of soirées. His writing reflected none of the deep analysis and discipline his father routinely demonstrated. There appears to be little connection between them or their lives.

John Yeats was a lost soul. He wrote exceptionally good letters, but never published a shelf of books. He wanted to paint, and was so meticulous and demanding of himself that he never seemed to finish a canvas. He would scrape and repaint a landscape as the seasons changed. His self-portrait, his masterwork, took him seven years not to finish. An uninspired if not damaging father of four, he didn't realize how blocked he was

until he left Dublin for New York, late in life. He thought that the (horse) streetcars of New York were “the nearest thing to heaven on Earth he had ever known.” He believed himself “a formidable institution of higher learning in his own right”, and had little desire to expose his sons to competition. It was all about him.

William Butler Yeats was a much deeper thinker, and obviously, far more successful. Of his father he said: “Far more than any man I ever known he could live in the happiness of the passing moment. “

James Joyce’s father was such a negative inspiration, Toibin says, that Joyce would not have been blamed had he used the character of the abusive drunk in everything he ever wrote. But he didn’t. Instead, he says, Joyce inhabited the character and let him explore his life and universe, allowing him a much richer vibrant experience than the one he actually lived. James Joyce left quickly and managed to avoid returning to Dublin ever again, and never saw his father again. John Stanislaus Joyce inspired a lot of Ulysses in the character of Simon Dedalus (“The spittin’ image” of his father, Joyce declared).

Only Joyce employed his father in any involved sense. They all could be said to be relieved when their fathers were gone. Joyce, who had the hardest time with his father, wrote that he regretted their relationship after his son was born and his father had died. But his father provided a springboard to literary fame, along with that other wellspring of character, Dublin itself.

Toibin, no slouch in the interpretation of all things Irish himself, draws no hard conclusions. He did the research in original letters, leaving the reader to decide how the fathers affected the development of the sons. It’s a short book, but a neat and neatly executed concept.

David Wineberg
