



Time Present and Time Past

Deirdre Madden

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Fintan Buckley is a pleasant, rather conventional and unimaginative man, who works as a legal adviser in an import/export firm in Dublin. He lives in Howth and is married to Colette. They have two sons who are at university, and a small daughter.

As he goes about his life, working and spending time with his family, Fintan begins to experience states of altered consciousness and auditory hallucinations, which seem to take him out of a linear experience of time. He becomes interested in how we remember or imagine the past, an interest triggered by becoming aware of early photography, particularly early colour photography. He also finds himself thinking more about his own past, including time spent holidaying in the north of Ireland as a child with his father's family. Over the years he has become distanced from them, and in the course of the novel this link is re-established and helps to bring him understanding and peace, although in a most unexpected way.

Time Present and Time Past, Deirdre Madden's eighth novel for adults, is about time: about how not just daily life and one's own, or one's family's past, intersect with each other.

Time Present and Time Past Details

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From Reader Review Time Present and Time Past for online ebook

Lisa Beaulieu says

Absolutely lovely. It's like the last episode of Six Feet Under, made into a novella. It's all going to go away, and it's all ok, and live it while you can, and every now and then, you get a glimpse from the other side of the mystery. Simple and spare and profound. Gives me the shivers in a good way.

Allan says

I'm not sure why I didn't connect with this book-perhaps I'm not the target audience? :-/

Gary says

Irish novelist Deirdre Madden's ninth novel, Time Present, and Time Past, takes its title from the "Burnt Norton" section of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past." It tells the story of Fintan Buckley, a Dublin legal adviser (described as "a strong contender for the title of Most Unimaginative Man in Ireland"), who at age 47 is facing an existential crisis in his domestic and family life. On the surface, Fintan appears to have very happy life, that is until he begins experiencing "strange shifts of perception" affecting time and memory, which ultimately lead to some rather dark revelations involving Fintan, his sister (Martina), and their emotionally distant mother (Joan). Along the way, one is reminded of Faulkner's observation in Requiem for a Nun: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Madden's luminous novel is many things: subtle, intriguing, somewhat melancholy, and thoughtful. After all, what more could one hope for in a novel?

Barbara says

This was a beautifully written book about contemporary Ireland on the verge of the economic collapse. It is about our present and our pasts, and the memories, the people who are important to us, and those that slip away. Some who slipped away in this story are the family in Northern Ireland. At some point during The Troubles, the children stopped visiting their grandmother and grew up with no further contact. Madden grew up in Northern Ireland, in Toomebridge, next to Lough Neagh. In a recent interview, she said that The Troubles are always in her book at some level [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013...>]. This melancholy is not heavy, but it lingers. Even though she is writing about Dublin, and people who are well off, there is a sadness in the book. I just discovered that Madden is married to the poet Harry Clifden.

Kellyk says

I don't think I've digested this book long enough to truly know why I loved it so much, but this easily soared to the top of my "favorites" list. Madden is an exceptional writer - before I'd even realize it, I'd have read 20

pages at a time, totally engulfed in the story and the characters. This novel follows the complexities within a domestic family in Dublin, Ireland - the father, Fintan Buckley, is a businessman who, with the help of his son Niall, contemplates the past and its influences on the present. This way, readers get the full history of the Buckley family as Fintan explores the meaning of every day life that often gets lost in routine. Each character was equally charming - one of my favorite scenes was where Fintan decides to take his daughter, Lucy, and her friend, Emma, to the Dublin zoo, and while picking up Emma at her father's apartment, Fintan muses on the depressing life he assumes Emma's father leads, compared to his own. Fintan's adoration and admiration of his children is especially endearing - though his life is rather monotonous and his mother is overbearing, it is ultimately his relationships that inspire him and keep him going, and I think that is a universal truth about humanity that is sometimes overlooked. I would recommend this book in an instant.

Roger Brunyate says

The Beauty of the Ordinary

We have become so used to reading about dysfunctional families in fiction that it is a rare delight to meet a happy one. Fintan Buckley is a fiftyish Dublin lawyer, married to a warm and unpretentious woman named Colette, and father of two college-age sons, Rob and Niall, and a seven-year-old daughter, Lucy, the love of his life. Although disillusioned with his work, he looks forward to coming home at night to their home by the sea on the rocky promontory of Howth, where the family evening meal is the happiest hour of his day. It is a daring novelist who can embrace such simplicity as her subject. This is a miracle of a book.

At the end of one of these meals, Fintan asks the family to sit still for a moment, without moving.

Bemused, they look at each other, but do as requested. For a short time they sit in silence, like worshipping Quakers waiting for the Spirit to move through the room.

A few chapters later, he recalls that moment:

Now he thinks that maybe it had had something to do with the idea of stopping time, of working against just this rush of life that he finds so disturbing. He had wanted to keep the moment, to preserve it, and even by the strangeness of his request to make of it something that they might all remember.

Stopping time. For Fintan appears to be suffering from some kind of sporadic hallucination, when he feels himself to be in the present and the past simultaneously. He becomes interested in old photographs and the other lives they reveal, both of his own family and the world in general. Very gently, Madden begins to unfurl their various back-stories: the courtship of Fintan and Colette; his affection for his sister Martina, and the secret that made her return to Ireland after many years in London; the difficult relationship of both siblings with their mother, but their love for their Aunt Beth; and the trips they used to make to relatives on a farm across the Ulster border, until these were abruptly stopped without reason. Deirdre Madden is not so sappy as to write a book lacking grit and a bit of mystery, but all the revelations have the effect of deepening one's understanding and feeling for the beauty of ordinary life.

I have recently reviewed *The Years* by Virginia Woolf, another family novel that celebrates the ordinary details of life rather than its extraordinary upheavals. I would wager that Madden is also an admirer of Woolf. There is a remarkable passage towards the end of this short book (a novella really) where she suddenly skips ahead by several decades, answering T. S. Elliot's time present and time past with time

future—a passage that reminds me of the extraordinary time-telescoping interlude in *To the Lighthouse*. But this novella differs from *The Years* in one significant respect: whereas Woolf's family, the Pargiters, move outwards from their center like ripples in time, Madden's Buckleys remain together as a family in every important respect, living in the present, accepting the future, and looking back with something like contentment:

All of that was more than ten years ago, and this is the reality of her life now: old age, Martina, and this house, where the morning sun warms the fur of the sleeping cat, and touches everything it falls upon with eternity.

Cathleen says

In Time Present, and Time Past, Deirdre Madden zooms in on several members of one extended Dublin family, in alternating chapters, so the reader sees them as they are, as they were, and in certain instances, as they will become. Standard demarcations of time are mere accounting conveniences. The past is all around us, as is the future.

The novel is a meditation on time--shown especially through Fintan Buckley. He is an ordinary man, but there's always more to the ordinary person than anyone sees at first glance. A man in his middle years, he experiences "auditory hallucinations." In any other language, they'd be called daydreams, elastic moments when he temporarily drifts away and either re-visualizes or remembers events in the past--or the future. He's a man of deep emotion that he usually keeps confined and tidy in his role as father, husband, and legal advisor. Life surprises--like his wife's unexpected pregnancy in middle age--have given them Lucy, a shot of joy, a child who Fintan feels he's been the best father for and he can most unselfconsciously love.

The "big" things in Fintan's life--marriage, family, career, home--are steady, always evolving but stable and smooth like the barely perceptible movement of a fine and finely tuned engine. Maybe that's why he has more head space to lapse into imagining the spaces surrounding old photographs, first of Dublin in the early 20th century, then into more extensive territory: photos of people, photos of his family. So strong are his sensory experiences that Fintan thinks that he, "Fintan Buckley, hitherto a strong contender for the title of most unimaginative man in Ireland...might look up from his book and find himself back in the distant past."

The past may be all around, but it is neither more exotic nor more gilded than Fintan might think. Or so says Niall, Fintan's son. He's the voice of empiricism, the counterweight to Fintan's subjectivities and intuitions. Imagining that the past has a different texture is misguided and just plain inaccurate, he tells Fintan while they share a pot of tea. The past would not be Masterpiece Theater; it "would smell of horse piss and horse shit" and of "nursing someone with diarrhea in a home with no bathroom." It's a fabrication, devised by people promoting a heritage view of the past, a time "more banal than we give it credit for, but also more complicated." Fintan listens and considers his son's position, but follows his photographs further and further into the past, and finding one, a photograph of his sister, himself and a long-lost cousin from when they were summer playmates during family visits to Northern Ireland. It's his fascination with that photo that drives the rest of his plot line.

Other family members, too, have their own stories and memories, interconnecting with and around each other. None is at all like the other, but all are dependent upon each other. Ultimately, the novel is both melancholic and hopeful--registering the power and illusions of time.

Bonnie Brody says

Fintan Buckley is an attorney, married to Colette, with three children. His sons Rob and Niall are in college and his daughter Lucy is seven years old. Fintan, "hitherto a strong contender for the title of Most Unimaginative Man in Ireland" is facing an existential crisis in his life. He is experiencing hallucinations and "strange shifts of perception" that are worrisome. However, he is also "sensible these days to an immense pathos in life, and finds himself fervently hoping this awareness will never leave him".

This is primarily a book about Fintan and his family. Fintan, though he loves his sons, has always had difficulty connecting with them. His daughter Lucy is the love of his heart and he believes that he loves her more than anyone on earth. His wife Colette is a loving and kind woman and she and Fintan have a good, solid marriage. Fintan's mother, Joan, is a passive aggressive woman who is usually quite unpleasant and critical. She is very hard on Fintan and bullies others with her opinions. Fintan's sister Martina is a beauty who has some dark secrets that keep her emotionally distant from others at time. Martina lives with her aunt Beth, Joan's sister, and their living arrangement works wonderfully. Joan never acted lovingly towards her daughter and Martina, though not estranged from Joan, keeps her distance.

This is a gentle book. It is about Fintan's inner life and the lives of his family members. We watch as Fintan tries to get closer to his son Niall by sharing a love of photography. We are allowed into the hearts of the Buckleys as each chapter focuses on another aspect of the family dynamic.

The novel takes place in Ireland during the economic boom but alludes to The Troubles in the past and fears of economic hardship to come. Fintan and Martina remember The Troubles as children, especially when they visited their grandmother's farm. The main part of the novel takes place during a three month period but the author provides a further landscape that gives the reader a wider view of what happens in the future.

I really loved the experience of reading this novel. It is resting inside me like a soft and gentle memory. I wish I knew the Buckleys. I'd want to sit down and have tea with them and have a good laugh and cry.

JodiP says

This is a quiet book, one that you must think about to really gain from. Not much happens, really, but so much is said--about the past, of course, but also how we relate to our families of origin, how becoming parents changes people, and how divorce can impact the parent with less custody. I also really liked, near the end, how she tells what happens over the next ten years to the family. This reminded me of a good Barbara Pym; it's all about the deftly drawn characters and their interior lives. Another reviewer said there should be a slow book movement, and that Madden would be a great example of it. That is also a very apt description. It was just what I was looking for at the time, too.

Ann says

A brilliant little book about nothing and everything; a reflection of time - past, present, and future - as exemplified by the lives of an Irish family.

Canadian Reader says

The focal point of Madden's lyrical reflection on time, memory, and nostalgia is Fintan Buckley--a middle-aged, moderately successful, and happily married lawyer--who is surprised to find himself lapsing into a sort of mystical reflectiveness. Fintan's problem all along, according to his prickly, imposing and stylish elderly mother is that he is possessed of too much heart--"functionally intelligent" but deficient in the ambition that she herself possessed as a young woman--ambition that was thwarted by her overbearing father who did not believe in education for girls. In the Buckley family, one is either a hawk or a dove. Fintan is the latter.

Fintan is experiencing a mid-life re-evaluation of sorts, one that finds him revisiting the past. His university-aged son points out that the past Fintan sees is viewed through rose-coloured glasses--devoid of the unpleasant smells and hardness of real life. Fintan is mistaking the medium for the reality, says Niall. Fintan's sister, the strikingly beautiful Marita, previously a high-end fashion buyer in London, has within the last couple of years returned abruptly to Dublin after a trauma which is eventually revealed. More estranged from their mother than Fintan, she initially sought refuge in the Dublin home of her aunt and uncle, a house little changed from the days of Uncle Christy's deceased parents. When Christy suddenly dies, Marita stays on with her beloved aunt in the house of old things.

Marita's relationship with the past stands in contrast to Fintan's. So painful is the experience that landed her back in Ireland that she has walled off part of her memory. The siblings make a sort of peace with the past by reconnecting with a cousin whom they haven't seen since late childhood. During that long-ago time, so the story goes, their mother stopped their trips to the north because of The Troubles. However, it was more than that: Fintan and Marita's mother seems to have been repelled by the dirtiness of the rural farming life of her husband's family, underscoring her sense that she has married below herself. The visit Fintan and Marita end up making to cousin Edward and the farm in the north allows a reconciliation of past and present for both siblings.

Madden's book is generally beautifully rendered. I say "generally" because about four-fifths of the way through, a sudden jarring turn in narration and a clanging shift in authorial voice occurs. The reader is propelled into a disquisition of sorts on the fate of the Buckley family two years into the future, when Ireland is reeling under the economic downturn. The abruptness of this break in the narrative destroys the dreamlike quality of the story, and it never quite gets back on track after this. It makes sense that an examination of nostalgia should be counterbalanced with a consideration of the future, but the gracelessness of this section mars what is otherwise a very lovely piece of work.

This is the first book of Deirdre Madden's I've read and I look forward to reading more of her work. Many thanks to Net Galley for granting me permission to read and comment on a digital ARC. (Three and a half stars)

Michele says

I loved this book. It is the first Deirdre Madden I have read. I am hooked. Some reviewers have set out what the book is about, so I won't repeat that here, other than to say the book insightfully portrays the finer points

about family relationships in a middle class contemporary family. It is set in the Dublin Bay town of Howth. The book beautifully captures the reflective and thoughtful side of life. The reader quickly gets to know the people in the book intimately and in a way that matters. The book is slow paced and domestic in its scope. I found that a strength. It speaks of the extraordinary thoughts of everyday people in everyday lives. This book may not change your life but it will touch it.

Catherine Woodman says

Dierdre Madden is an Irish author whose latest book was once again long listed for the Orange Prize. It is more of a novella in length, but it is so densely and beautifully written that you forget just how short it is. The book follows a family over time, headed by the father, Finlan. He is a guy who has what I would call permeable ego boundaries and what is perhaps a below average ability to tell one person from another. He sees connections everywhere he looks, and through his eyes, we see lots of them as well. The central issues are the ties that family hold now and for all time. Jane is Finlan's mother and for the most part, her family should either have avoided her like the plague or demanded she change for their own mental health, but her influence on her grandchildren is more positive, so there are pluses and minuses to maintaining connections with very negative family members. He sees his twin in a divorced father who is painfully separated from his child after a divorce that was clearly in everyone's best interest but the wife is still quite bitter. The desperate love that one can feel for their child can have the effect of making that child feel safe, but it has negative consequences for Finlan's own daughter--he loved her more than anyone else could and it left her unhappy. So it is not what you would call an inherently uplifting book, but it does show the light and the dark side of human relationships. Loved it.

Karyn Wolstenholme says

I was looking forward to tucking into this thin proof copy which isn't being published for another 2 months. I thought maybe I'd be among the first to soak up the wisdom of a fairly critically acclaimed contemporary author. I was excited that that book was Irish, about photography and memories, was set in a modern and domestic space...it turns out it was pretty mundane. No wisdom to soak up.

Firstly, this book is written in a very distant 3rd person which I couldn't help hearing as a dull narrator droning along in my head. The characters are really plain and ordinary but not studied or focused in on for long enough to find them more than flat or just hurried. I felt that we were given the quick draft rather than the full story. I wanted more insight more detail (which brings me to number 2).....

Secondly, it lacks detail. There are a few things or objects, an old house, a photograph, a child's room which are described so quickly in the first instance that they are entirely forgettable but then referred to with such nostalgic remembrance and over emphasis later that you feel you must have missed the first description (there is a quaint old house which is never described except by repeatedly saying how quaint and old it is, seriously frustrating as a reader.). If you're going to take of the topic of memories and photography you gotta invest in a little description and enlist in the help of all 5 senses.

Lastly, there is a weird chapter around page 200 when the author switches from this detached domestic narration to a weird monologue of "we must" sort of statements about society in by general terms. It goes randomly on about the economic crash in Ireland (2008ish) and how the book's characters' lives would be changed...again hurrying us through the only bits with any potential to be interesting.

I felt like this book had lots of promising ideas but was so poorly executed. Perhaps I'm not familiar enough with the writer to get it or understand why it should be considered good but as a neutral outsider and lover of all the promised elements to this story, I felt let down. Might try reading the author's previous works in case this one is just an outlier.

michelle says

One of my favorite passages from this beautifully written work.

"Tonight, as so often, all of Ireland lies under a soft thick blanket of cloud. The wind rises, and soon it begins to rain.

But none of them hears it: only the cat, awake and alert, sitting in total darkness at the top of the stairs in Beth and Martina's house; only the cat lifts its head and listens to the sound of the raindrops. And if either woman, in the drowsiness of sleep, were to suddenly switch on the light and come upon it there on the landing, the cat, with its folded paws and perfect markings, might well appear to them fabulous as a unicorn."
