



Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman

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Nuala O'Faolain attracted a huge amount of critical praise and a wide audience with the literary debut of *Are You Somebody?* Her midlife exploration of life's love, pain, loneliness, and self-discovery won her fans worldwide who write and tell her how her story has changed their lives. There are thousands who have yet to discover this extraordinary memoir of an Irish woman who has stepped away from the traditional roles to define herself and find contentment. They will make this paperback a long-selling classic.

Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman Details

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From Reader Review Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman for online ebook

Brenna says

I picked this up through paperbackswap.com because it looked interesting, and it delivered – though not in the way I expected. I think I was expecting a female Frank McCourt (author of “Angela’s Ashes”) but Nuala O’Faolain is something completely different. She is a very literary, intellectual woman, who always had a sense of being an outsider in a society that did not want to accept female intellectuals. Growing up with a philandering father and alcoholic mother naturally did not help her self-esteem at all. Nuala finds refuge from her difficult homelife in books, and her love of reading, and particularly of great literature, is both her saving grace and paradoxically her source of isolation.

While in a sense, this memoir could be seen as a self-pitying cry for attention, Nuala writes with such a sense of self-deprecation and so much honesty you can’t help but like her and wish the best for her. She writes of all of her mistaken attempts at love, failed relationships – mostly with married men – and her difficulty breaking into the world of public radio and television, though at the point in her life at which she writes the memoir, she is obviously seen as a great success. Being a successful woman of her age in educational programming, however, does not attract fame and fortune; the title of her memoir, she explains, comes from the frequent occasions on which someone will see her and have a vague sense that she must be an important personality, and query, “Are you...somebody?”

The memoir is Nuala’s examination of her life from a standpoint of a search for fulfillment – as an older woman with no partner and no children, she feels a sense of loneliness and lack. Through this examination, however, she comes to a new sense of self, a sense of interconnectedness with people with similar experiences and a similar love for literature. I wouldn’t personally go so far as to say I found her memoir “empowering” or “enlightening,” but it was still an interesting read. I found it engrossing primarily because I very quickly grew to like and admire Nuala, and wanted to know, if at the end of her journey into introspection, she found happiness.

Diane says

I read this memoir because I loved O’Faolain’s book, “My Dream of You”. The memoir was difficult for me to read and I didn’t like it very much. O’Faolain is only a few years older than I, but grew up in Catholic Ireland in a family of nine children with a severely alcoholic mother and a distant father who lived as often with his mistress as with his family. The children were pretty much left to raise themselves. What struck me most was O’Faolain’s dependence on having a man in her life. She was influenced by the women’s movement and recognized her need, but was never freed. Her happiest years seem to have been with a woman, but that also ended. I had a sense that she could not accept the need to work at a relationship, but that happiness for her was a type of suspended dream world that is unsustainable.

Late in the book, she begins to address her issues with her father and this is the best part of the book for me. I read a later edition that includes “Afterwords,” and that section spoke to me more than the rest of the book. Having published the memoir and received accolades from many people, she seems finally able to accept her life.

O'Faolain worked in journalism, radio and television and knew many writer, artists, and media celebrities. I found her constant reference to them uncomfortable, although I suppose these were the people in her life. I loved the title. It refers to an incident she describes briefly. She says that as a media producer/director her picture appeared in the paper and on TV. One day a woman passed her on the street and stopped and asked, "Are you Somebody?" It really is a good description of her life – wanting/waiting to be somebody.

In spite of my trouble with this book, O'Faolain is a good writer. The entire book was worth reading just for these two short lines written about her brother's funeral: "A bugler sounded the Last Post. Heartbreak made audible." (p 210)

David says

In the three years or so since I joined Goodreads, there have been a few surprises. The unexpected popularity of vampires. The hilarious brilliance of my shape-shifting namesake in Indiana (aka David Kowalski). The astonishing popularity of "Angela's Ashes", whose fans appear to be legion. Said fans are also extremely vocal in their defence of Frank McCourt - of all the reviews I've posted here, my (negative) comments about "A's As" have generated the strongest reaction by far - I still get roughly two messages a month that try to persuade me of the error of my ways. Their tone is generally civil - most seem to be written more in sorrow than in anger and express genuine puzzlement at my failure to appreciate what the writers perceive as true brilliance on McCourt's part. The overwhelming majority of these messages come from women. I'm ashamed to say that I haven't always managed to respond individually; nor do I have any particular desire to extend the discussion thread following my review. At some point one's interest in justifying dislike of any specific book starts to run out - the same opinions tend to be recycled. But I thought it might help illuminate matters if I identified an Irish memoir that I really, really liked.

All of which is just a long-winded introduction to my review of Nuala O'Faolain's "Are You Somebody"? There are many reasons not to like O'Faolain's memoir. Structurally, it's a mess. Apparently it was concocted after the fact from a bunch of previously published newspaper columns, with an introduction tacked on, and the lack of planning shows. Though there is some effort to arrange things in chronological order, this is perfunctory at best, so that the narrative shifts back and forth along the timeline, which may exasperate some readers. Another potentially exasperating feature is that Nuala O'Faolain was someone whose life could be considered a series of poor choices, certainly where men were concerned. There is a neediness that permeates this entire story that is almost frightening in its honesty. It's rare to come across a memoirist who seems less concerned with the kind of impression she is making.

Despite its numerous flaws, I found "Are You Somebody?" completely engaging. It's precisely O'Faolain's lack of concern for how she might be coming across that makes this memoir totally riveting. It's an unforgettable record of how it was for one particular very smart woman to grow up in a society that had not yet evolved to treat smart women as something other than second class citizens. Some of O'Faolain's choices and compromises may make the reader flinch, but her story is never less than fascinating. She writes eloquently, never veering into sentimentality - there is a toughness about O'Faolain that offsets her emotional neediness and commands the reader's respect.

It's gratifying to know that "Are You Somebody?" exceeded all pre-publication expectations, spending several weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, achieving a level of fame for its author that had previously eluded her. Nuala O' Faolain's story of a woman's struggle for recognition in a male-dominated society obviously struck a chord with readers. She followed this memoir with a second volume, "Almost There", and a novel "My Dream of You", published in 2001, both of which were bestsellers.

Nuala O' Faolain died in May, 2008, of metastatic cancer. Her story, as told in this book, is well worth your attention.

Marty says

I struggled with this book and halfway through was sure I really disliked it - and then around page (115)? it all changed and I began to see why the book was so popular. My first impressions were that it was poorly done stream of consciousness - she seemed to skip from topic to topic, time to time and I (at least) had trouble following her. However, at that midpoint it began to come together and "make sense" and I was able to get into the story and follow it more easily. By the end of the story, I had greatly increased my "rating" of this book. I would like to re-read the first part to see if I might make better sense of it - but I have quite a stack of books on my "to read" shelf, so not sure I will get to it immediately!

Jennifer Margulis says

This beautiful, poignant, important memoir is as painful to read as it is interesting. I loved it. I cringed. I cried. I laughed. I felt angry at Nuala for sleeping with other men's wives, having inappropriate relationships, and disliking Dickens. I also felt deeply sympathetic to her, hoping she could crawl out of the difficulties of her childhood, appreciating her honesty (she writes that when she had a miscarriage she did not know how she felt about it. And she still doesn't know how she feels), and wanting good things to happen in her life. I wish there had been a little less name dropping in the book (as a BBC reporter she seems to have had drinks with every poet and writer in Ireland and beyond) and a little more honesty (the book is full of sex and she has a 15-year relationship with a woman but she manages, still, to skirt around both sexual desire and bisexuality). If you like memoirs, add this one, as well as The Glass Castle, Daughter of the Drunk at the Bar, and Angela's Ashes to your list of must reads.

Lori says

Nuala O'Faolain's memoir is not particularly easy to read. It starts slowly with the history of her young years and family. It's difficult to read about her parent's relationship and the neglect and desperation felt by the family, especially the nine children. O'Faolain is so honest about her own shortcomings and dysfunctions at first it's hard to like her but how we admire her. She chronicles the historical context of Ireland from the 1950's through the 1990's with special emphasis on the role of women and the enormous societal changes in just the few short years between those decades. It is interesting to read her commentary on the social structure and roles of men and women as it emerged through this time period. The book's strength though is not in O'Faolain's ability to chronicle history, that at times is vague with a lot of names and places that may not be familiar to those outside of Europe. It is within this historical context that she continually points out

her lack of grounding or purpose as a young adult. She floats from job to job--relationship to relationship without much thought to the consequences of her actions. It is not until she reaches a personal crisis at her parents death that she acknowledges the destructive role alcohol plays in her life, the repeating of familial patterns and the aimless way she has existed. It is then that she begins to emerge as a different and more introspective person. The book begins to take on a different tone and we come to love the person that is Nuala O'Faolain. We have read about her struggles and see her becoming more than the wounds she has suffered in life. It is beautiful. At the end of the story she shares the letters from so many people who were moved and related to her life story. She continues to assert that she did nothing remarkable in writing what for her simply had to come out. But we the reader know that something special has passed here and can only stand back and admire a woman as brave as Nuala O'Faolain who has put down on paper the whole truth that is her life

Angela says

I read this book after I read "My Dream of You"

because I wanted to know more about the author.

Herein she describes her upbringing, education, and career as a writer for the Irish Times.

She is an extraordinary person with amazing powers of resilience,

despite her hard-scrabble, rural, Irish-Catholic upbringing, with an absentee father, and an alcoholic mother.

The crushing oppression of women, in Church dominated Post-revolutionary Ireland of the 1950's and 60's, under which she came of age, went to college on scholarship, and began her writing career, is the dreary, and sometimes chaotic, but uniquely fascinating, setting for her personal journey of self-discovery, and self-actualization.

Excruciating in its details, this is also an exposé of the experience of that generation of women in micro-cosm.

Many similar experiences had by American women of that era are writ large in the Irish experience, and it serves to illuminate the nature of that oppression.

The fact that she survived it at all shows that she is truly somebody, and somebody quite extraordinary at that.

Elizabeth says

I would actually give this book a 3.75.

Some of the cultural, historical and location references were over my head, but I perfectly understood the love and loss, the desire, the frustration with not being the person you think you should be, the mystery of reconciling your past self and your current self, and the struggle of learning to love yourself and to know yourself in different ways as you get older.

I'm glad I happened to pick up the version with the "Afterwords" section in it, in which Nuala O'Faolain shares what happened and what changed after this book was published. The story would have felt unfinished without it.

This book is sad. But it is good and is deserving of its sadness. I raced through the end to be done with it, but when I finish writing this review I'm going to add her three other books to my amazon wishlist.

Magdelanye says

It's so great to follow an obscure impulse to pick a book of which you know absolutely nothing, and have it surprise you with numerous insights pertinent to your situation. I had never heard of Nuala O'Faolain until I encountered her in the course of a browse in the library. I liked the title and I liked her face, reproduced in a photo strip along the side of the book, the same photo, in vivid colour at the top, fading to green; a face that looked straight out at the viewer, both tough and vulnerable.

And so she revealed herself to be, endearing herself to me not only for her honesty and her unflinching eye but her unostentatiously clever turn of a phrase. Second in a family of nine, she shatters the assumption of any cosy situation, for there were dramatic problems that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

But she did have the gift of reading, and a liberal selection.

"That was where I came from" she writes, "from inside the books I'd read."

Not a typical bookworm though. She had a zest for life and the fun of it. Her determination took her from poverty and the certain future of wife with children, to a life of travel and adventure and a modest success, sabotaged undoubtedly by her drinking and her unhappy love affairs. A genuine Bohemian and an inquisitive, restless soul, her empathy and gentleness develop over the course of the writing to fuse in a serenity that seems to suit her; a gracious acceptance of what life has handed her and a rich appreciation of what she has made of it.

Lauren says

This book gets five stars, which in this case means: brilliant; read it if you have any interest in women's experiences, writing, voice, the Irish in England.

If you love books with a rich, honest, courageous, particularized voice, I recommend this one. I came to love and admire Nuala O'Faolain through reading this memoir. In it, she is stunningly honest about growing up in poverty, in mid-century Ireland, about succumbing to drink and turning away from it, about not wanting to end up like her mother, and realizing that's exactly where she was headed. I learned so much, too, about the history of England in Ireland, and the experience of being Irish in England. I was inspired by her personal struggle to find her own voice and identity as a daughter, a woman, a writer, and a freestanding adult.

She went on to write another memoir, two novels, and a "history with commentary." She died in May 2008 of a fast-moving, incurable cancer.

Debra says

I was captured the minute I started reading. I did not know the writer or many of the people she discussed but I did know that she fascinated me and seemed to know many Irish and beyond literary figures. Her writing is sublime. After a winter of reading interesting books but none with the beauty hers wrought, I was enchanted. This is a memoir, so Nuala remembers her unconventional life (is there any other kind worth writing about) that during the mid 20th century seems impossible one could live. After she filters through her love affairs, professional breakthroughs, family and friend relationships, she like so many is grappling with her aloneness.

She winds up the way she wishes but still wonders how to navigate the aloneness at the end of her life.

She writes, "What happened , to make contentment so precarious? I've been trying here to understand the way things worked out in my life. And though what I have written is personal, part of my predicament is general. The challenges of middle age and the challenges of loneliness--which I know exist even within relationships--confront many more people than me, just as the same place I grew up in and the same influences I came under affected more people than me. Teachers used to say, ' Miss Noticebox! You're nothing but a noticebox!' But when adults slap children down and tell them not to be drawing attention to themselves, what are the adults doing? Why do they want the child to stay quiet and go away? Single middle-aged women aren't supposed to kick up, either. Who wants to know about them? If no companion depends on them? If they're nobody's mother? Nobody's wife? Nobody's lover? If they're not famous or powerful? My problems are banal only because so many people share them."

When I finished the book, I felt as if I had read about someone's inner life that understood me--someone who feels totally misunderstood and doesn't have the skill and beauty of language to express herself successfully--and immediately started researching her. I was disappointed to discover she died at 68, I believe, and was in a long-term though at many times long distance relationship at the end of her life. There is a sequel that I hope to read as I hope it deals more with her later life.

She wrote to one of her fans who told her that she helped so much with coping with aloneness, "Maybe something marvelous will happen." That's what we all are hoping for, what I am hoping for though life is generally good and most are generally happy and contented. After she wrote the book and it became a sensation, she wrote in the afterword that she hoped, almost yearned, for someone to come along and change everything. Someone did and brought intense pleasure but on the same day came intense pain and regret as her brother died, one with whom she had many regrets.

I wish I could express the beauty and haunting nature of her book on and to me. She penetrated the jaunty, cheery shell that one puts forth to face each day in order to continue.

Marguerite says

There are really keen insights here, and a wrenching story, but a lack of structure means the reader has to work harder to extract information. Women, journalists and those of Irish descent will find the effort worthwhile. This made me laugh, cry and think. I will revisit it.

Zoom says

I find it hard to rate this memoir, because there are parts that are 5 and other parts that are 1. The average of 3 obscures those highlights and lowlights.

It's a memoir written by a middle-aged Irish woman in the 90s, mostly about her youth. She grew up with an alcoholic mother, a philandering and traveling father, and a whole bunch of younger siblings. But it's mostly about her quest for sex and love as a woman, and the literary circles in which she traveled. As a woman in those times, those literary circles didn't have women at their centers, but in a more peripheral role. She was a reader, not a writer.

She's a woman of many regrets. A woman who lived a full life, but who never found the lifelong companion that she always felt was missing. A woman who drank, who slept with married men, who learned primarily from making mistakes.

The book was terrific when she focused on the personal, on the stories that made up her own life. It dragged when for long stretches she talked about literature. It just felt like so much name dropping. If you're going to tell me who was at a party, do so with interesting stories, not just by listing them. Most of them I didn't know anyway, and I found these sections tedious. Even if I had known them, they were not interesting stories.

One of my favourite parts was the afterwords, which she wrote for later editions. The book was a best seller, and it plucked her from obscurity and made her a celebrity for a time. She wrote about this in the afterwords, and it was a lovely and insightful piece. There was also an interview included at the end, conducted several weeks before she died of cancer. This too was interesting.

One thing I will say about this memoir was that O'Faolin was unstintingly honest, which is an essential ingredient of good memoirs.

courtney says

this felt like sitting down to coffee with someone you just met, but someone you need to get to know. o'faolin communicates the grief, frustration, and joy of a very specific generation of women. her perspective is powerful -- the distance she maintains between what she writes about, say the pain of her upbringing, and who and where she is when she writes about it allows the reader to undertake this journey without signing onto the wholesale melancholia that she might have offered. the way she characterizes her younger self, thinking she was free and progressive, but convinced that pregnancy/marriage was the only achievement worth hoping for, is sadly too familiar even in my generation. her treatment of sexual politics is sometimes difficult to accept and sometimes she offers a kind of generational apology: younger women might have defended themselves differently, but this is what i was taught to expect.

i thought she handled national politics a little gingerly, referring to her own (embarrassing) ignorance of the north in the 70s at one point and a few relationships that were somewhat contentious because of the individuals' positions regarding the troubles. after her clear and direct discussions of sex and the impossibly isolated position of irish women, i was surprised that she wasn't more direct or powerful in these aspects of the book.

my version of Are You Somebody? included an afterward that solidified the preceding anecdotes into a fuller and more compelling idea of who nuala is. in it, she comments on the reaction that the book received and that reaction indicates the breadth of the problems that she presents in her own story. the afterward was necessary to my loving this book to the degree i did. and i am not certain that the version listed here is the same one. i couldn't find the image of the one i was reading (which i bought at shannon before a flight) so i don't know if goodreads has the link to this more recent version. but the emotional punch of the final chapter really surprises and, somehow, comforts the reader.

Diane says

My reaction to this memoir was mixed. I kept asking myself if O'Faolain was a feminist. In therapy when she was in her 30s, she discovered that to survive she must not replicate her mother's life--alcoholism relieved only by reading. But it seemed to me that she wanted her father's life: a journalist who could escape from home, have affairs, and hang out with intellectuals and the rice and famous. O'Faolain's identification with English, male intellectuals--and the "great books" mentality--was annoying. She detailed her friendships with famous writers, and she bolstered her self-esteem through affairs with powerful men, even those whom she found unattractive(Clement Greenberg)or those whose wives were supposedly her friends. Yet it was often women not men who helped her get a foothold as a writer (Mary Lavin). By the time she wrote this memoir, in her mid-50s, and after a 15-year life-affirming relationship with a woman, O'Faolain considers herself a feminist and the poem that means most to her is Adrienne Rich. Yet O'Faolain doesn't seem to have fully applied this new consciousness to her understanding of her parents' lives or her own early years.
