

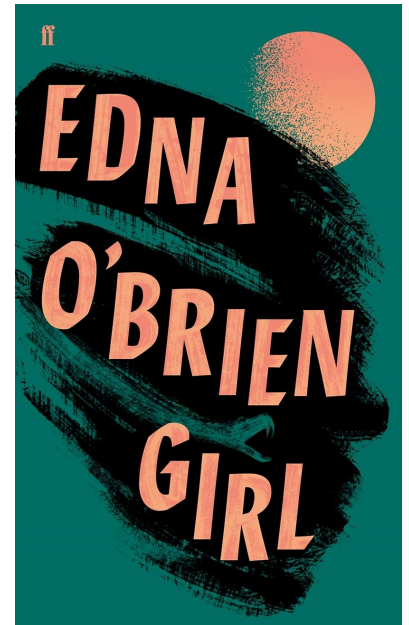
# Girl

Edna O'Brien

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By the end of *Girl*, the reader feels assaulted by the horrors contained within it, but that, in a sense, is easy; the more important question is whether one can feel one's empathy and understanding to have been enlarged. Here, once again, O'Brien pulls off that enormously difficult conjuring trick.

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## Edna O'Brien: brief author biography



Edna O'Brien, (born December 15, 1930, Twamgraney, County Clare, Ireland), Irish novelist, short-story writer, and screenwriter whose work has been noted for its portrayal of women, evocative description, and sexual candour. Like the works of her predecessors James Joyce and Frank O'Connor, some of her books were banned in Ireland.

O'Brien began to produce sketches and tales during childhood. She received a strict Irish Catholic convent education and went on to study pharmacy in Dublin, where she received a license in 1950. In 1952 she married the novelist Ernest Gebler, with whom she had two sons. In 1959 the couple moved to London, where O'Brien turned to writing as a full-time occupation. She was divorced from Gebler in the mid-1960s.

O'Brien's popular first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), was the first volume of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. It had as its main characters two Irish girls who

leave their strict homes and convent school for the excitement and romantic opportunities of Dublin. The girls' subsequent lives are traced in *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), by which time both have settled in London and have become disillusioned with marriage and men in general. Among O'Brien's many subsequent novels are *August Is a Wicked Month* (1965), *Casualties of Peace* (1966), *Night* (1972), *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* (1977), *The High Road* (1988), *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1996), *In the Forest* (2002), and *The Light of Evening* (2006). *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) was widely praised for its acutely observed characterization of an Irish villager who has an ill-fated affair with a war criminal in hiding. In 2019 O'Brien published *Girl*, which was inspired by the Nigerian schoolgirls who were kidnapped by members of Boko Haram.

O'Brien's novels express her despair over the condition of women in contemporary society and, in particular, attack women's repressive upbringing. Her heroines search unsuccessfully for fulfillment in relationships with men, typically engaging in doomed love trysts as a remedy for their loneliness and emotional isolation. The bleak tone of O'Brien's novels is, however, broken by flights of lyrical description and by the heroines' attainment of brief periods of happiness.

Collections of O'Brien's short stories appeared as *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories* (1974), *A Fanatic Heart* (1984), *Lantern Slides* (1990), and *Saints and Sinners* (2011). She also wrote plays, screenplays for film and television, and nonfiction about Ireland. In 1999 her short study *James Joyce* was published to critical acclaim. She chronicled the frenetic passions of Lord Byron in *Byron in Love* (2009). *Country Girl*, O'Brien's 2012 memoir, traced her passage from the repressive confinement of the rural Irish town where she was raised to the rarefied existence afforded by her success as a novelist.

[<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edna-OBrien>]

## Edna O'Brien: interview

### “I want to go out as someone who spoke the truth”

In May 2017, I watched Edna O'Brien read from a work-in-progress before a predominantly young audience at a publishing event in London. As the veteran Irish novelist arranged herself at a small table lit by a single lamp, I wondered how many of those present were aware of her literary lineage or even knew who she was. She waited for silence to settle before speaking – quietly at first, but with an intensity of purpose that belied her advancing years. “I was a girl once,” she began, “but not any more.”

I can still recall the rapt silence that attended her every word and hung in the air for a long moment after her reading ended. Then came the applause, heartfelt and sustained. It was an exercise in almost primal storytelling: stark, dramatic and pitch-perfect in its execution. A lesson from a master.

O'Brien's new novel, *Girl*, opens with that same haunting sentence, matter of fact and regretful. What follows is a contemporary story as raw and transfixing as the most visceral Greek tragedy, a story of abduction, rape and imprisonment recounted in often unflinching detail by Maryam, the young Nigerian girl of the title. It is, as the American novelist Richard Ford attests, a work “of profound empathy and grace”, its narrative leavened by deftly wrought moments of maternal intimacy that possess a

quiet but almost luminous intensity.

O'Brien is 88. *Girl* is her 19th novel and she has intimated that it may be her last. It may yet prove to be her most powerful.

The idea for the novel came from a newspaper report about a girl who was found wandering in Sambisa Forest in Nigeria.

“Every day the newspapers are full of novels waiting to be written, but this small item resonated in my inner mind,” she recalls. “The girl had escaped her captors, but she had lost her mind and she was carrying a baby. I could not have written this novel if the violence and injustice done to this young woman and many others hadn't been moulded on to my self and my soul.”

In 2016 and 2017, O'Brien made two trips to Nigeria, where she met several young women who had escaped captivity, having been among the 276 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram jihadists in the Nigerian town of Chibok in April 2014. “You hear these terrible stories and you absorb them,” she says. “They haunt me still. I wake sometimes thinking of the girls and the horrors they experienced.”

*Girl* is unlike any of the novels that preceded it in O'Brien's 60-year career, the style spare and restrained, the terrain

unfamiliar, a world away from the landscape and discontents of her native Ireland. “It was new territory for me, emotionally, geographically, culturally,” she says. “I had to discard the things that have fortified my writing for 60 years – landscape, lyricism, love. I had to put all those things aside and just dive in as if this was the first book I had ever written.”

I meet O'Brien at her modest terraced house on a quiet, well-to-do street in Chelsea. In older age, she remains glamorous, dressed today in a pleated top and three-quarter length skirt. Her eyes are alert and alive, especially when she laughs, but she is very pale and very thin.

“I have not been in great health this past year,” she says, when I ask her how she is doing. “I want and hope to get better. Right now, I am conserving my energy for the things that are most important to me, and writing is very high on that list.”

She makes tea in her homely ground-floor kitchen, handing me the cups and ushering me up the stairs ahead of her while she follows slowly and tentatively, pausing for breath at the turn of the stairs. We settle in the first-floor living room, which is also a work space. The wall behind her is lined floor to ceiling with books, including several novels by the mostly male big-hitters she admires: Roth, Pinter, Beckett, Joyce – the first three of

whom she befriended, the fourth whom she admires more than any other writer.

It is unmistakably a writer's room, a retreat of sorts, but also a place of hard graft. A desk in the corner by the fireplace is cluttered with manuscripts and writing pads. While researching *Girl*, she tells me, she amassed four boxes of notebooks and 16 boxes of research material. She picks up an early draft of the novel from the low table between us. "I'm a perfectionist," she says, opening it at a page decorated with handwritten notes and corrections. "I work so hard to get things right, changing lines and words right up to the end. It's exhausting, but absolutely necessary."

Her editor, Lee Brackstone, who has recently departed Faber, describes her as "an artist who adheres to the now old-fashioned belief that it should be difficult by necessity to make great work". It is, he adds, "almost masochistic with Edna: if she's feeling the pain, she's making the art. That inevitably takes its toll."

I ask her if this novel was more exhausting than the others. She nods. "I don't want to sound self-pitying about it, but it was the hardest and the most painful. I'm not exactly in the prime of youth. There was a point where I was faced with a long table filled with pages and pages of writing, hundreds of pages. You ask yourself, 'What am I doing? Why am I doing this?'" Has she found

a satisfactory answer? "It's what I chose to do," she replies without hesitation, "but, more than that, it's my life. Writing is my breathing."

In a recent BBC documentary, she described her state of mind on departing for Nigeria as "fearful and fearless". She also confessed to having smuggled £15,000 into the country, wads of cash concealed in her sleeves and her underwear. "I worked out that I would need roughly that much to give to people who could help me to arrange things. And, sure enough, it all got spent."

There, she met and interviewed doctors, aid workers, a trauma specialist and local journalists. She undertook often arduous journeys overland to visit camps for displaced persons, some of whom followed her around, pleading to be rescued. At one point, she stayed in a convent, which, she says laughing, "is one place I never expected to be". And, through her contacts, she met the girls – Rebecca, Abigail, Hope, Patience, Fatime, Amina and Hadya – whose survivor's stories she absorbed and then transformed into the novel's single, soul-searing narrative.

"They each spoke to me in a similar way," she tells me, "which was understated, reserved, guarded. They are so young and shy and protective of their modesty, even after all that has happened to them, the brutal horror of what they went through. There is shame, too, alas. It was heartbreaking and I

found myself crying a lot."

All of this, I venture, would have been physically and emotionally demanding for a much younger writer, never mind one in her late 80s. She nods and falls silent for a time. "It still is emotionally demanding, even to think about it. It was not just a new country for me, but a new everything. I thought I was in the Tower of Babel when I arrived in Abuja airport... the noise, the chaos. There were times when it felt like I was on a constant knife edge. And, as I say this, I feel almost mortified, because the girls I have written about are not on a knife edge, they are in hell. Their trauma continues and will stay with them for ever. At least I was able to come home."

If *Girl* was written out of a mixture of fierce anger and deep empathy, it was also, one suspects, driven by a keen awareness of O'Brien's own encroaching mortality. Is it something she finds herself dwelling on? "Well, I'm aware of it... I'd have to be, wouldn't I? I'd be Pollyanna if I weren't," she shoots back, laughing. "But it's not that I think of it every day; it's more that I want to do the things that I must do. And I want to go out as someone who kept to the truth. I can't bear phoneys. I want integrity."

Truth-telling of a kind was what fired her early books – *The Country Girls* (1960), *Girl With Green Eyes* (1962), *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) – and fuelled her reputation for scandal in her homeland. The

novels articulated what, until then, had remained relatively unspoken in staunchly Catholic Ireland: female sexual desire, active and acted upon. It was expressed gleefully by her young female protagonists, whose determination to enjoy themselves was, in itself, an instinctive act of rebellion against parochialism and patriarchy. The authorities responded by banning her books, the clergy by denouncing her from the pulpit. In her home town of Tuamgraney, County Clare, which she recently described as “not a town at all, but a hill with some pubs”, the local postmistress told her mother that, should her daughter dare to return, she “should be kicked naked through the streets”.

Those early novels had other less seismic, but more abiding, reverberations. “Looking at *The Country Girls* now, it is not so shocking,” says Irish novelist Anne Enright, “but what endures is the way she portrays the friendship between the two girls. When I first read it at 16, what really chimed with me was their adventurousness, their defiant spirit. Female friendship had not been written about in that way in an Irish context until she came along.”

The raw material for her early books was her own young life, which, as described in her wonderfully evocative 2012 memoir, *Country Girl*, was both fearful and transportive. She was raised in a once-grand house, the youngest child of a

beleaguered mother and a sometimes tyrannical father. “He was too fond of the drink,” she tells me, “but sadly for us, he was one of those unfortunate men who the drink did not agree with.” She grew up in fear of his rages, often retreating as a child to the surrounding fields to daydream and to write imaginary stories in which, she recalled later, “the words ran away with me”.

As she got older, she became her mother’s protector, her loyalty repaid by a fierce maternal love that turned to a suffocating possessiveness. When she rebelled, it was with a defiance that shocked the family and made her the talk of the parish. Having been sent to Dublin to train as a pharmacist, she met and fell for an older man, Ernest Gébler, an Irish writer of Czech-Jewish origin. She was 22 and he was 38, darkly handsome, divorced and the father of a young son. He was also an aspiring author, with a house in the country, a library and a classical music collection. “This was culture!” she told Alan Yentob recently. “This was real culture!”

In 1958, in the hope of furthering his writing career, Gébler relocated the family to London, where O’Brien found herself marooned in the drab outer suburbs of London with their two young children. It was there, in the hours between dropping off Carlo and Sasha at school and picking them up again, that she began writing, in a burst of feverish creativity.

“The words poured out on to the page,” she says. “It was the first and only time that happened.” In *Country Girl*, she remembers writing in floods of tears, but “they were good tears. They touched on feelings I did not know I had.” They were feelings that at least one generation of young Irish women connected with deeply. As novelist Eimear McBride later put it: “*The Country Girls* is not the novel that broke the mould, it is the one that made it... O’Brien gave voice to a previously muzzled generation of Irish women.”

Her suddenly unleashed creativity unwittingly incensed Gébler, who appeared at breakfast one morning with a manuscript copy of the novel in his hand. He told her: “You can write and I will never forgive you.” Their marriage was dissolved in 1964 and, against the odds, O’Brien was granted custody of the children after a three-year legal battle in which supposedly scandalous passages from her fourth novel, *August Is a Wicked Month*, were used as evidence of her wayward character.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when she was famous and fashionably scandalous, her regular house parties in Chelsea drew the likes of Marlon Brando, Richard Burton and Robert Mitchum to her door. (According to her memoir, she succumbed only to the latter’s advances: “We danced all the way up to the bedroom... with all the shyness of besotted strangers in syrupy

songs.”) For all that, though, she never remarried. I ask her if the trauma of that first, ill-fated union had hardened her against tying the knot again. She nods. “I suppose I was always hooked on this idea of love, by which I mean deep love. I didn’t have one-night flings, I just didn’t. Not out of morality, but more my own conviction that love is so serious. Of course, it’s carnal and it’s many other things, but it’s such a unity. I suppose I got that from my religion very early on.”

So, for her, love is an almost sacred ideal?

“Sacred – with profanity,” she replies, laughing.

It was that other great Irish romantic, WB Yeats, who described the creative life as a process of continuous self-reinvention – “Myself must I remake.” As her run of late novels attests, O’Brien seems to be living by that dictum. Where once she wrote about the interior lives of her female protagonists, since the mid-1990s she has looked outwards for her subject matter, at the state of things, politically and culturally. It was a typically bold move that followed a fallow period when her high lyrical style felt out of fashion with reviewers and audiences alike.

“Literature is a volatile business,” says her son, Carlo. “You are dependent on your latest success. When the critical tide turned against her, she shifted her voice. It became less lyrical, but there was absolute

fidelity to clarity, lucidity and directness. It is those virtues that are at the centre of her literary practice.”

The shift occurred, O’Brien tells me, “as my conscience and my consciousness opened out a bit to what was happening around me.” The first evidence of this change in style and subject matter came with 1994’s *The House of Splendid Isolation*, the first of what might be called her state-of-the-nation novels. It remains an interestingly flawed book, almost postmodern in its fragmented narrative style, but the stylistic experimentation was all but overlooked in scathing reviews that took issue with her too-sympathetic portrayal of an Irish Republican gunman.

“Someone in the *Spectator* said I did not deserve the gifts I had been given,” she says, still sounding mortally offended. Though her writing had, as she puts it, “deepened and darkened”, she was doing what she had always done: writing against the received wisdoms that prevailed in her homeland.

“In the south of Ireland, what you heard most often was that there was a war going on up there in the north and that they were all as bad as each other. I felt that was both untrue on the ground and untrue to history, to what will be written and said 50 years from now.”

Controversy also stalked her 2002 novel, *In the Forest*, which drew on a real tragedy that had

transfixed Ireland eight years before: the triple murder of a mother, child and priest by a mentally disturbed man. The pre-eminent Irish critic, Fintan O’Toole, described it as “a novel too far”, later writing that “there is simply no artistic need for so close an intrusion into other people’s grief”. When I broach that criticism now, she takes a deep breath and says: “If García Márquez or other writers write those sort of stories, they are not attacked in their own country for it; but I am and I always have been attacked. I partly think it’s to do with being a woman... and with the assumption that I approach themes that I shouldn’t.”

O’Brien remains an indomitable presence, the defiance and determination that drove her younger self still apparent despite her physical fragility. A few weeks after we speak, she sends me an email suggesting she is aware that, at 88, she may still provoke controversy with the publication of *Girl*.

The email reads: “It has been suggested to me that as an outsider I am not eligible to write this story. I do not subscribe to that devious form of censorship. Theme and territory belong to all who aspire to tell it and the only criteria [sic] is the gravity in the telling. I was haunted by the plight of girls in north-east Nigeria, Chibok and others, thrust into servitude, their childhoods stolen, the leeching of hope day by day. I marvel at their magnificent fortitude. The world is crying out for such

stories to be told and I intend to explore them while there is a writing bone left in my body.”

Her life, though, like her work, has become pared down. “I’m no longer a habitue of the social whirl,” she says, smiling. “But I love real conversations, whether with a shepherd or Schopenhauer, I don’t care. So long as one is lifted from one’s own stew to other things – and learning, always learning.”

When she’s not writing, she says to my surprise, she watches football: “I love football, all football.” Of late, too, she has been transfixed by the HBO series *Chernobyl*: “It was so meticulously plotted I kept thinking of the opening chapters of *War and Peace*.”

I ask her if, despite her run-ins with the Irish clergy, she is spiritually inclined. “I think so, yes. I have the necessity to think there is a God, but not the God I was breastfed on... a more compassionate one. But, when faced with the horror we see on the nightly news, any sane person would wonder, where is God in this scenario? So I am very puzzled and divided by God. That’s honestly how I feel.”

Though she has no plans to return to Ireland, she has “a very lovely grave” there. It is situated on a holy island on the River Shannon.

“It’s my mother’s family grave, but, ironically, she herself is not buried there, because she wanted her grave to be in a

village where people passing by would say a prayer for her. Whereas I want the birds, and the old monasteries that are ruined, and the lake and just the song of nature.”

I ask her if she has any regrets. “No, not really. I have been a bit foolish in my life,” she says, chuckling, “I’m a bit of a deep thinker, but I’ve been foolish with money, foolish in love. But, regrets are a waste of time. One moves on. One has to. In the moment, I am capable of real anger, because I am a passionate and furious creature as well as being a rather tender one. I am capable of Medea murder,” she says, laughing, “but I am not old and bitter.”

The following day, the Man Booker prize longlist is announced. Mystifyingly, *Girl* is not on it. When we speak again, she is disappointed, but philosophical. “All I will say is, I’m not throwing in the towel

yet. There will be other prizes.”

There may also be other books. Though she suggested recently that *Girl* would be her final novel, she tells me there may be another, but that it exists at present “only on the nascent horizon”. Still engaged, still curious, still defiant, Edna O’Brien may yet surprise us once again.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/25/edna-obrien-interview-new-novel-girl-sean-ohagan> ]



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## Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.