Miss Emily

by Nuala O'Connor



About the Book

The American debut of an award-winning Irish writer that brings to life Emily Dickinson and will enthrall fans of LONGBOURN and MRS. POE

Nuala O?Connor?s enchanting American debut novel, MISS EMILY, reimagines the private life of Emily Dickinson, one of America?s most beloved poets, through her own voice and through the eyes of her family?s Irish maid.

Eighteen-year-old Ada Concannon has just been hired by the respected but eccentric Dickinson family of Amherst, Massachusetts. Despite their difference in age and the upstairs-downstairs divide, Ada strikes up a deep friendship with Miss Emily, the gifted elder daughter living a spinster?s life at home. But Emily?s passion for words begins to dominate her life. She will wear only white and avoids the world outside the Dickinson homestead. When Ada?s safety and reputation are threatened, however, Emily must face down her own demons in order to help her friend, with shocking consequences.

Discussion Guide

1. Were you familiar with Emily Dickinson?s work before beginning this novel? Do you read poetry frequently? What drew you to the book?

2. Nuala O?Connor incorporates some of Dickinson?s poems throughout MISS EMILY. Which did you enjoy the most?

3. In 19th-century Amherst, Emily and Ada are both limited by their gender, but Ada is also constrained by class. What examples can you find of each woman?s respective powerlessness?

4. Emily repeatedly describes Ada as her friend, much to the disgust of her brother and sister-in-law. Is it possible to be

close friends with an employer, or with someone outside your own class?

5. The novel alternates between Emily?s voice and Ada?s. How would a narrative told only from Ada?s or Emily?s perspective have changed your understanding of the characters and events in the story?

6. What is your family?s history? Did you or your relatives immigrate to the United States, like Ada did? What was your/their experience like?

7. If you were to describe this novel to a friend, what three words would you use?

8. No one knows what caused Emily Dickinson to lead such an intensely cloistered life --- some people have supposed that she suffered from an anxiety disorder or poor health. Based on Emily?s internal monologue in the book, what does O?Connor imply is the root of this behavior?

9. Is Emily happy with her life? Is Ada?

10. The closing lines of the book belong to Ada?s musing on hope, seeing it as ?small and bald at first, but then it gathers feathers to itself and flies on robust wings? (p. 239). This calls to mind Emily?s famous poem ?Hope is the thing with feathers,? which imagines hope as a bird ?that perches in the soul.? What is the significance of this image? If possible, find a copy of the poem and compare it to Ada?s description.

Author Bio

Nuala O?Connor is the author of MISS EMILY and a well-regarded short-story writer and novelist, writing in her native Ireland under the name Nuala Ní Chonchúir. She has won many fiction awards, including RTÉ radio?s Francis MacManus Award, the Cúirt New Writing Prize, the Jane Geske Award, the inaugural Jonathan Swift Award, the Cecil Day Lewis Award, and the Kerry Irish Novel of the Year Award, among others. Her short story ?Peach? was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and she was shortlisted for the European Prize for Literature for her short story collection NUDE. She has been published in *Granta*, *The Stinging Fly* and *Guernica*, among many others. She was born in Dublin in 1970 and lives in East Galway with her husband and three children.

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