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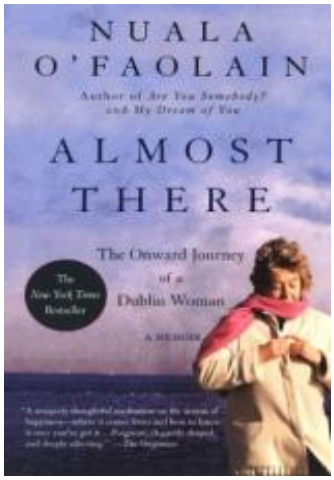
Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman

by Nuala O'Faolain



About the Book

Nuala O'Faolain burst upon the literary scene in 1998 with **Are You Somebody?**, a fiercely candid account of her youth and adulthood as an Irish woman that became a bestseller around the world and launched a new life for its author. **Almost There** begins at that moment when O'Faolain's life began to change and it both tells the story of a life in subtle, radical, and, above all, unforeseen renewal, and meditates on that story. It is on one level a tale of good fortune chasing out bad--of an accidental harvest of happiness. But it is also a provocative examination of one woman's experience of "the crucible of middle age"--a time of life that faces in two directions, forging the shape of the years to come, and clarifying and solidifying relationships with, friends and lovers (past and present), family and self. **Almost There** is a crystalline reflection of a singular character, utterly engaged in life.

Discussion Guide

1. In the first chapter of **Almost There**, O'Faolain relates, during her thoughts about the end of her relationship with her lover Nell, how she quit smoking. For O'Faolain, how is quitting smoking like quitting a lover? What other habits does she try to break? For O'Faolain, is love a habit she's trying to break? Is she ever successful?

2. On page 12, O'Faolain writes "?how close to crazy I really was, when thinking I'd lost the dog woke up too vividly everything I'd ever lost-my mother and father, all the other people, all the love affairs, all the places I'd lived, all the intimacy and warmth of my home, the investment of all the years of love that came to nothing. Everything." What do you make of this statement? What is she referring to when she writes "nothing" and "everything"? Why does the threat of losing her dog cause her to panic so dramatically?

3. How does letting Luke into her life change O'Faolain? What does he teach her about platonic friendship?

4. O'Faolain writes, "I was not, when I began writing my life story, and am not now, healed of my mother" (pg. 36). Given the way this memoir ends, do you believe it is possible for O'Faolain to ever be healed of the pain her mother caused her? Does she consider her relationship with her father differently? How do her mother and father haunt O'Faolain? What aspect of her own life is she constantly measuring against her mother's life? How do her feelings for her father creep into her relationships with men? What about her sisters and brothers? How does each of them struggle with the past? How do they fail or succeed to beat their own ghosts back?

5. Discuss O'Faolain's ever-shifting relationship with America. How does it evolve? How does she grow from living in New York and touring the country? How does spending time in America change her relationship with Ireland?

6. O'Faolain discusses her reaction to Nell's showing a draft of **Are You Somebody?** to a friend, and how upset it makes her, as if she's been violated. Why does she have such a strong reaction to sharing a manuscript she's planning to publish worldwide? Who really has the rights to the true stories we tell? Is Nell just as much entitled to stories of her as O'Faolain?

7. Once she finds out Joseph is married, O'Faolain claims to regret the affair, although she continues to see Joseph when she can. Do you think she truly regrets the affair, considering that it is the inspiration for her novel?

8. "It took decades to learn how to talk myself into believing, every time I went out to do a job, that I would not fail?.It was only after I wrote **Are Your Somebody?** and it was a success that the side of me that confidently leads me on became just a little stronger than the side that undermines the confidence and drags me back" (pg. 108). Given everything she tells us throughout this memoir, do you agree with O'Faolain's assessment of herself? Is she confident? How does her self-doubt leak into other aspects of her life beyond her writing?

9. O'Faolain reflects often on the differences between writing fiction and non-fiction. Do you have a sense of which genre is more fulfilling for her?

10. How does the tragedy of September 11th, 2001 change O'Faolain's feelings for America? How does it make her feel more a part of America? How more separate? How does she-and those she knows-resolve their fears and sadness?

11. As O'Faolain describes the letters she receives from readers, she comments on how some of them seem to have actually fallen in love with her, proposing trans-continental dates and even marriage. In general, why do we fall in love with writers? What do writers offer their reader that is so romantic?

12. How does O'Faolain try to conquer her overpowering feelings of loneliness? Does she ever succeed? She remarks that she can feel terribly lonely but very happy at the same time. How does she resolve the juxtaposition between these two contradicting emotions?

13. On page 161, O'Faolain writes, "The first thing is you must live. As long as you are alive, something might change." Where do you see O'Faolain applying this optimistic philosophy in her own life? At what times does the philosophy fail her?

14. Does O'Faolain's relationship with John fill the voids in her life? Is her reaction to his daughter justified? What is she reacting to when she acts out about the little girl?

15. How does O'Faolain succeed as a feminist? How does she fail? What about Irish culture squelches feminism? Considering she sees America as a place where feminism is embraced and women can overcome obstacles, does living in America do anything to make her stronger and more confident in being a woman?

16. "Climbing on my own words and the words of other people, the journey has been upward all the way. Writing has brought me up from the underground. I've been my own Orpheus" (pg. 168). How does this statement relate back to the title and subtitle of the book? Do you feel that these relate to writing, life, or both? As the title of the book is **Almost There**, what do you think O'Faolain is moving towards? Do you think she truly is almost there?

Author Bio

Born in Dublin, Ireland, the second eldest of nine children of a journalist who became Ireland's first 'social' columnist --- a gentler Walter Winchell or Nigel Dempster --- who for years wrote a newspaper *Dubliner's Diary* about the goings-on around town the night before.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, the second eldest of nine children of a journalist who became Ireland's first 'social' columnist --- a gentler Walter Winchell or Nigel Dempster --- who for years wrote a newspaper *Dubliner's Diary* about the goings-on around town the night before. This occupation meant he was rarely available to his wife and family, and over time --- as touched on in Nuala O'Faolain's autobiographical essay, "Are You Somebody?" --- his wife, Nuala's mother Catherine, became more and more lonely and sunk in alcoholism, and the home and the children became more neglected. The family lived in various cheap rented houses up and down the line of the railway out of Dublin and from time to time, like something out of a fairytale, the glamorous father would descend from a train.

Nuala, aged 14, was a gifted but almost out-of-control girl, sneaking out at night to go to dancehalls with men and women much older than herself. The nuns at her convent school asked her parents to remove her, and in an uncharacteristic burst of attentiveness they found the money and made the arrangements to send her away to boarding-school where she spent the rest of her school years. At this remote, Irish-speaking convent, she began to achieve academic success and to convert the turbulent impulses that had got her into so much trouble at puberty into an intellectual and an emotional life.

At 18 she went to university in Dublin on a coveted entrance scholarship. But the freedom of Dublin city and new interests --- love, left-wing politics, drinking --- unbalanced her again, and she dropped out of college and had to go to England, to work --- like many penniless Irish at the time --- at various unskilled jobs. She was saved from this being a permanent fate by the kindness of some older people in Dublin who watched over her and lent her money to pay her fees while trying to complete her degree.

She did this with distinction, and over the next few years also got a scholarship to the University of Hull in England where she read medieval literature; returned to Dublin and got a qualification in French, and an M.A; and finally won a travelling studentship, which she took up at the University of Oxford where, in the late sixties, she got a post-graduate degree --- a B.Phil. --- mainly in nineteenth-century literature.

Oxford University in the late sixties was still beautiful and unspoiled by tourists, and because of the Beatles and Lucky Jim and Carnaby Street, working-class students, and even plebeian outsiders like the Irish, were in fashion. After three marvellous years it was a difficult transition to return to Dublin to become a lecturer at U.C.D. --- not least because of an on-again off-again engagement to an English writer. The next 10 years were unsettled by this relationship, which in the end came to nothing.

To be near this man, Nuala O'Faolain moved to London to become a producer with the BBC, making television and radio programmes for the first years of the arts faculty of the Open University. Then she became one of the first team making 'access' programmes for BBC television and then made programmes from Northern Ireland for a BBC Further Education series. This decade was one of constant travel and learning, for a BBC still perfectly self-confident. Nuala O'Faolain also reviewed books for the *London Times* during this period; was a guest lecturer in Indiana and many other places, was seconded to Teheran for the planning of an Iranian 'open university' in the last year of the Shah's reign, taught occasional evening classes in Morley College, etc.

She began to visit the west of Ireland on holiday and to become, for the first time, interested in the Irish language and Irish traditional music and song and dance, and Irish social history. And the day she realized that the place she liked best in London was London Airport she gave up on England, and returned to Ireland, getting work as a television producer in the current affairs section of Radio Telefis Eireann, and also reviewing and lecturing extensively. When a new university was set up in Dublin she took a year's leave of absence and taught Media Studies. She became one of an all-woman team who made a weekly woman's programme --- a first on Irish television --- and also made a series with older women, called "Plain Tales," where "ordinary" women told the stories of their extraordinary lives. This won the award for television programme of the year. Soon afterwards, Nuala O'Faolain was invited to become an opinion columnist for *The Irish Times* --- Ireland?s leading newspaper. The next year she won the annual award for journalist of the year.

For the last twelve years, she has been with *The Irish Times*, primarily as a columnist but also writing features from Africa, the United States and all over Europe, and --- taking up residence in Belfast for almost a year --- from Northern Ireland. She also presented a television books programme, a series of radio interviews, reviewed for magazines and so on.

In 1996 a small Irish publisher brought out a selection of her opinion columns, and she offered to write an introduction to them. The introduction, unexpectedly, and uncalled-for, grew and grew as she wrote it. She wrote it for herself --- looking back over a life which had always been difficult and lonely on a personal level, in an attempt to accept that her promise had come to nothing, and that now, in her fifties, she had no accomplishments to show, no partner, no children --- no company of friends, even, at times like Christmas --- and that she must say goodbye to hope. The book of journalism with his introduction had a very small print run and came out quietly, with no launch, no review copies sent out, no advertising, etc. But when she talked about it on television it became an instant bestseller in Ireland --- selling, indeed, so fast that in many bookshops it was sold from boxes, because the staff hadn't time to put it on shelves.

It turned out that the introduction --- quickly reprinted as a book in its own right, called ARE YOU SOMEBODY? ---

sounded some tone which men and women everywhere could respond to. This note sounded even across barriers of age and culture and experience. The autobiographical essay of an obscure Irish journalist eventually spent many weeks on the bestseller list of the *New York Times*, reached number three in Australia, and did very well in the UK and Germany and Sweden. It didn't change Nuala's private life, but it brought her loving responses from all over the world.

Because of the autobiography's success approaches were made to her for her 'next book.' She protested that she was not a writer of books --- that she didn't look on ARE YOU SOMEBODY? as a book, and had no plans at all to write anything else. But gradually, the idea of trying to write a fiction became irresistible. To do this, she took leave of absence from the Irish newspaper, and moved to America where the culture is so much more hospitable than Ireland's to believing that dreams can come true and late attempts succeed. In the nurturing artists' colony of Yaddo she wrote the beginning of a novel about a middle-aged Irishwoman coming to terms with the role of passion in her own life, through a contemplation of a disastrous --- real-life --- passionate affair that took place 150 years ago in an Ireland devastated by the potato famine. Then she went to New York and showed what she'd written to an agent. The agent took her and the pages around a number of publishing houses. Various bids were made: within weeks a contract had been signed with Riverhead books for the completed novel, to be delivered a year later.

Then began what for Nuala was one of her life's happiest adventures. She had a one-room apartment in Manhattan, the company of a little cat rescued from a shelter, and a laptop, and over one fall and winter, and generously helped by her agent and her supportive editor at Riverhead, she wrote MY DREAM OF YOU.

Change has come about so quickly, since the day she sat at her kitchen table to begin telling herself the story of her life, that she can still hardly believe it. 'Isn't it extraordinary!' she said the other day, when she was having a coffee with some of her sisters and her brother. 'Me, at my age, writing a novel!' There's nothing extraordinary about it, they said. 'Do you not remember?' they said. 'When we were kids and we all slept in the same bed? You wouldn't let us go asleep. You made us stay awake every night to listen to your stories?.'

Critical Praise

"A uniquely thoughtful meditation on the notion of happiness--where it comes from and how to know it once you've got it?.Poignant, elegantly shaped, and deeply affecting."--- *The Oregonian*"O'Faolain is still that ferociously truth-telling woman?She has a tangy story-telling style, nurtured in a mordant Irish sense of irony and an Oxford-trained sleekness of thought. The most vivid of her recollections have the rush of elegant daydreaming?It is such unrepentant honesty--and her almost childlike determination to do better--that gives her book its strength."--- *The New York Times Book Review* "Disarmingly honest, painfully funny and sharply observant?**Almost There** is another letter from a wise friend."--- *USA Today*"Remarkable?O'Faolain has scarcely an equal today in probing the intricacies of relationships?A truly memorable work."--- *Rocky Mountain News*

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