In The Forest
by Edna O'Brien

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A New York Times Notable Book and a Book Sense 76 selection

"This literary thriller reads like a dark enchantment, an unholy myth, a terrifyingly true fairy tale." — Elle

In the Forest returns to the countryside of western Ireland, the vivid backdrop of Edna O'Brien's best-selling Wild Decembers. Here O'Brien unravels a classic confrontation between evil and innocence centering on the young, troubled Michael O'Kane, christened by his neighbors "the Kindershrek," someone of whom small children are afraid. O'Kane loses his mother as a boy and by age ten is incarcerated in a juvenile detention center, an experience that leaves him scarred from abuse — and worse, with the killing instinct buried within. A story based on actual events, In the Forest proceeds in a rush of breathtaking, hair-raising episodes and asks what will become of O'Kane's unwitting victims — a radiant young woman, her little son, and a devout and trusting priest.

Riveting, frightening, and brilliantly told, this intimate portrayal of both perpetrator and victims reminds us that anything can happen "outside the boundary of mother and child."
"A chilling read that will settle forever into the marrow of your bones." — USA Today

"A tour de force of finely restrained fury." — Dan Cryer, Newsday

"It's pure Edna O'Brien, who can take the verdant promises of the west of Ireland and render them sensual, paralyzing, and dangerous, sometimes all at once." — Gail Caldwell, Boston Globe

"One of [Edna O'Brien's] most powerful and effective novels, a model of its kind." — Sunday Telegraph

Edna O'Brien on Writing, Writers, and Herself

On the rural Ireland of her childhood:

I happened to grow up in a country that was and is breathlessly beautiful, so the feeling for nature, for verdure, and for the soil was instilled in me. Secondly, there was no truck with culture or literature, so that my longing to write sprang up of its own accord, was spontaneous. The only books in our house were prayer books, cookery books, and blood-stock reports. I was privy to the world around me, was aware of everyone's little history, the stuff from which stories and novels are made. On the personal level, it was pretty drastic. So all these things combined to make me what I am.¹

On leaving Ireland:

To establish oneself in a particular place and to use it as the locale for fiction is both a strength to a writer and a signpost to the reader. But you have to go if you find your roots too threatening, too impinging. Joyce said that Ireland is the sow that eats its farrow. He was referring to its attitude to its writers — it savages them. It is no accident that our two greatest illustriissimi, himself and Mr. [Samuel] Beckett, left and stayed away, though they never lost their particular Irish consciousness. In my own case, I do not think that I would have written anything if I had stayed. I feel I would have been watched, would have been judged (even more!), and would have lost that priceless commodity called freedom. Writers are always on the run, and I was on the run from many things. Yes, I dispossessed myself and I am sure that I lost something, lost the continuity, lost the day-to-day contact with reality.
However, compared with Eastern European writers [as of 1984], I have the advantage that I can always go back.¹

**On the correct position regarding women in literature:**

The correct position is to write the truth, to write what one feels regardless of any public consideration or any clique. I think an artist never takes a position either through expedience or umbrage. Artists detest and suspect positions because you know that the minute you take a fixed position you are something else — you are a journalist or you are a politician. What I am after is a bit of magic, and I do not want to write tracts or to read them. I have depicted women in lonely, desperate, and often humiliated situations, very often the butt of men and almost always searching for an emotional catharsis that does not come. This is my territory and one that I know from hard-earned experience. If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud's exploration of it, the son's desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires her mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy, or in fact, that that desire can be consummated.¹

**On the function of fiction:**

Fiction should be in its way subversive. I don't think books should be neat or gentle or genteel or comforting. I think they should be raw. They should be written as perfectly as possible, but what they do is to stir up, to lance the reader . . .

I remember years ago Kenneth Tynan saying to me, "You love Chekhov so much because he writes thrillingly about desperation," and I want to write thrillingly about desperation. I don't want to write depressingly about desperation. To do what? To put it on its toes. To make it dance. And yet still make it desperation.²

**On her favorite writers:**

It has to be James Joyce. It is not out of national feelings that I say such a thing. It is simply that when I was working in Dublin in a chemist's shop, I one day bought a book for four pennies called *Introducing James Joyce*, by T. S. Eliot, and I opened it to a section from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the Christmas dinner scene . . . When I read that, I realized one thing: that I need go no further than my own interior, my own experience, for
whatever I wanted to write. It was truly . . . an utter revelation to me.

The other is William Faulkner. If there are two men in heaven, as I hope they are — though Joyce would not want me to mention such a place — if they are in the ether out there together, I hope they are drinking, and I drink to their greatness, to what they have given. It is massive what they have given to life. There are writers and writers. But there is Joyce and Faulkner, for me.

About the Author

Edna O'Brien, born in Taumgraney, County Clare, Ireland, is the author of numerous works of fiction, including *Down by the River*, *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Time and Tide*, and *Lantern Slides* (stories), which won the 1990 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. Her biography of James Joyce was published in 1999. The west of Ireland, where she spent her childhood, provides the setting for most of her novels and stories, and informs many of her plots. In 1951, O'Brien married the Czech-Irish writer Ernest Gebler and moved to London, where her two sons, Carlos and Sasha, were born. After her 1963 divorce from Gebler, she remained in London, raising her sons and establishing her reputation as a writer.

Her first novel, *The Country Girls*, appeared in 1960, to controversy, burning, and banning. Her next six novels, from *The Lonely Girl* (1962) through *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* (1977), were also banned in Ireland. *Mother Ireland*, a tribute to her homeland, appeared in 1976. In 1986, the single-volume reissue of her first three novels — as *The Country Girls* — brought her international recognition. In 1994, she incorporated political issues into her fiction with *House of Splendid Isolation*. She published *Wild Decembers*, her fourteenth novel, after receiving an honorary doctorate from Queens University, Belfast. In addition to the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, she is the recipient of the Kingsley Amis Award (1962) and the 1995 European Prize of Literature, in recognition of her life's work. O'Brien is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She continues to live in London, with frequent stays in the west of Ireland.

3 "LitChat," *Salon* (December 2, 1995)