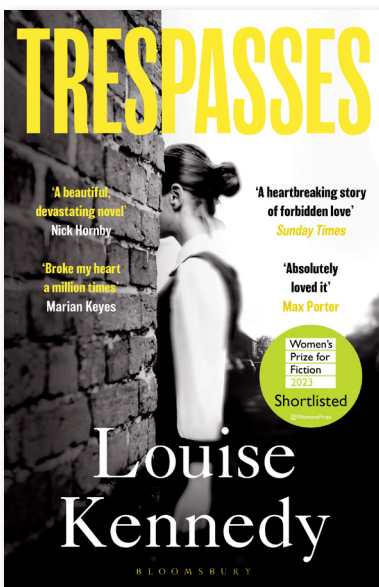


Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

TRESPASSES LOUISE KENNEDY



PLOT SUMMARY

Cushla Lavery lives with her mother in a small town near Belfast. At twenty-four, she splits her time between her day job as a teacher to a class of seven-year-olds, and regular bartending shifts in the pub owned by her family. It's here, on a day like any other – as the daily news rolls in of another car bomb exploding, another man shot, killed, beaten or left for dead – that she meets Michael Agnew, an older (and married) barrister who draws her into his sophisticated group of friends.

When the father of a young boy in her class becomes the victim of a savage attack, Cushla is compelled to help his family. But as her affair with Michael intensifies, political tensions in the town escalate, threatening to destroy all she is working to hold together.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Kennedy's description of setting in *Trespasses* is detailed, gritty and often grim, such as the warning signs about guns and bombers on roadside hoardings, the mould inside kitchens, the blocks of flats where children cannot sleep at night because of the lights from the police helicopters shining in through the windows. Kennedy renders Eamonn's pub full of sticky surfaces, stubbed-out cigarettes and aggressive men, and Cushla and Gina's home the place of shallow baths, indigestible food and family arguments.

Yet, despite its bleak setting, *Trespasses* is a love story, and Cushla and Michael's moments together transcend the mundanity of their surroundings. In Michael's flat, he and Cushla listen to music, talk and make love, and even the less romantic aspects of Michael – washing under his underarms with a flannel, his

ugly pyjamas hidden under the mattress – don't deter Cushla from falling for him.

In this way, Kennedy seems to be saying to the reader that love is a remarkable occurrence that can happen anywhere and at any time, regardless of whatever oppressive context might surround it. Cushla and Michael's love is far from ideal, but, perhaps because of the context of *The Troubles*, Cushla feels that she would rather have the limited version of a relationship Michael can offer, than nothing at all:

"She had been unable to say no to him. It wasn't because he had been kind to her. It was because each time she saw him she was afraid it would be the last time." (p141)

In this way, the grim setting of Northern Ireland in the early 1970s seems to in part provide the motivation for Cushla and Michael to pursue their affair: in such an environment, any love at all is worth pursuing.

DISCUSSION POINTS

We learn that Michael has a reputation for being a ladies' man, and Michael is married when he starts seeing Cushla. On p85 and p86 we see Cushla trying to come to terms with the fact that she's involved with a married man and imagining what Michael's wife could be like.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Louise Kennedy grew up in Hollywood, Co. Down. She is the author of the short story collection *The End of the World is a Cul de Sac*, and was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Audible Short Story Award in both 2019 and 2020. *Trespasses* is her debut novel. Before starting her writing career, Kennedy spent nearly thirty years working as a chef. She lives in Sligo with her husband and two children.

The pressure on Cushla and Michael to keep their affair a secret isn't just because he's married: Cushla is Catholic and Michael is Protestant, which means that the society of the time deems it wrong that they should be together. Eamonn, Cushla's brother, is also very protective of Cushla, seeing it as his responsibility to screen her boyfriends and tell her who and how she can date. Gina, too, is restrictive of Cushla's behaviour, saying she shouldn't be going out to see men, but later seems to understand that at 24 Cushla should be allowed a private life.

Can you imagine being Cushla and having your actions and relationships monitored so closely? Do you judge Cushla and Michael for their affair, or does Kennedy make us feel sympathetic towards them?

QUESTIONS

In the scene where Cushla is reading *Cosmopolitan* magazine just before she and Michael have sex in his car, what might Kennedy be showing us about differing attitudes to sex and women in the 1970s?

How do you feel about Gina as a character? How does her alcoholism affect her relationship with Cushla, and is Gina's drinking perhaps a response to the stressful environment?

What are Michael's friends' motivations towards Cushla during their Irish lessons?

How do those scenes highlight tensions between Catholics and Protestants at the time?

How are The Troubles represented through the voices and experiences of the children in the book, and Cushla's relationship with Davy in particular?

NEXT STEPS

Write a poem in which lovers are kept apart by politics or religion (or both). How will you create the tension of the situation? You might choose to depict two voices in the poem, or one narrative voice that knows each side of the relationship. How can you best capture the couple's yearning, despite the situation? Will it be a poignant poem, sad, tragic, optimistic for the future?

Alternatively, you might look back at British and Irish media coverage of The Troubles. What language is used in broadsheet and tabloid stories of the time? Kennedy details the daily occurrence of seeing headlines reporting people dead – how is it phrased when you look back at it? How does the language used attempt to form an opinion in the reader? Were there assumptions being made about either side? You could take a dramatic headline and use it as the title of a poem about conflict, or about love.



'Set during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, *Trespases* is ostensibly a love affair, but it also weaves in community and religion and politics. It is a deftly woven novel.'

Bella Mackie, 2023 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

In *The End of the World is a Cul de Sac*, Louise Kennedy's short stories delve into domestic violence, poverty, sex and Ireland's folklore and politics. In Louise O'Neill's *After the Silence*, police investigate the murder of a young girl in Ireland, uncovering a dark undercurrent of abuse.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES PRISCILLA MORRIS

BARBARA KINGSOLVER DEMON COPPERHEAD

JACQUELINE CROOKS FIRE RUSH

LOA LALINE PAULL

MAGGIE O'FARRELL THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?