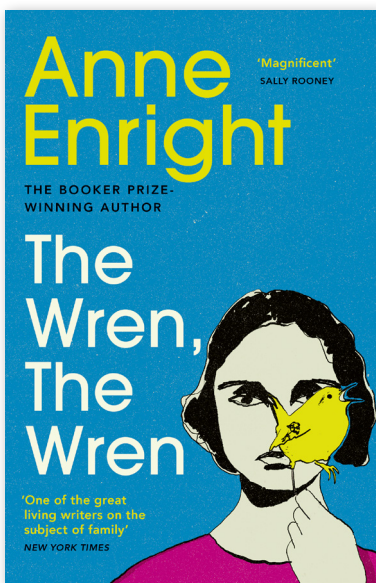


The Wren, The Wren

by Anne Enright



SHORT PLOT SUMMARY

Carmel had been alone all her life. The baby knew this. They looked at each other, and all of time was there. The baby knew how vast her mother’s loneliness had been.

Carmel’s daughter Nell – funny, brave, and so much loved – is a young woman with adventure on her mind. As she sets out into the world, she finds her family history hard to escape. For her mother, Carmel, Nell’s leaving home opens a space in her heart, where the turmoil of a life-time starts to churn. And across the generations falls the long shadow of Carmel’s famous father, an Irish poet of beautiful words and brutal actions.

The Wren, The Wren is a meditation on love: spiritual, romantic, darkly sexual or genetic. A generational saga that traces the inheritance not just of trauma but also of wonder, it is a testament to the glorious resilience of women in the face of promises false and true. Above all, it is an exploration of the love between mother and daughter – sometimes fierce, often painful, but always transcendent.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *The Wren, The Wren*, characters experience men in different ways, from controlling and problematic to dull and also loving.

Nell’s boyfriend Felim deliberately keeps her at arm’s length, only seeing her for sex when he wants to, and is controlling in the bedroom in a way that we are not sure is always consensual. At least, Nell and Felim never have a conversation about whether Felim can put his hand around her neck, or insult her as they are having sex, although for some of their relationship, Nell seems to seek out the annihilation she feels when she is with him. Nell processes her relationship with Felim with her writing:

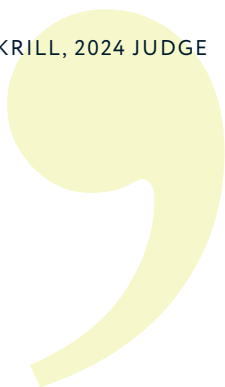
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Shortlist
2024

“A beautiful, powerful meditation on generational trauma and love. Anne Enright’s writing is utterly unparalleled, and I’m so jealous that I did not write this incredible book.”

LAURA DOCKRILL, 2024 JUDGE



Shortlist
2024

‘It is for me. Because my life fell apart and I called that Felim. Or I called it, Be mean to me. The name of the book is, *The Beautiful Father And All The Father’s Beautiful Things*. The name of the book is, *Do not be afraid*.’

Carmel, for her part, has to deal with her father Phil, the poet, who leaves her mother when she has breast cancer, and who is often angry, hitting his daughters:

‘This man was twice her size and he was her father, so the back of his hand was like the weather, you just kept out of the way. If you couldn’t do that much, you only had yourself to blame.’

Ironically, Phil is known in Ireland for his love poetry, although actions towards his family are far from loving. Yet, Phil himself grows up with a hard father, and the story about Brock the badger and his first love Hanorah shows us the savagery of the men he lives among, from men who would happily watch animals tear each other apart, betting on badger baiting, and who would also punish their own daughters to assert their authority over other men – or boys.

Nell’s friend Mal helps her to think about love, sex and her relationships with men in new ways. And Carmel’s relationship with Ronan is a different kind of relationship again: boring and predictable.

Yet, at the end of the book, when Nell brings David home, she notes that Carmel loves male company. And, as a child, Nell also adores Ronan, Carmel’s boyfriend, to the point where Carmel feels that Nell likes him more than her. By the end of the book, we feel that Nell and Carmel have to some degree healed some of the toxicity in their relationships with men, and found happiness as a family.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In *The Wren, The Wren*, Carmel’s father’s poetry punctuates the chapters, sometimes relating to narrated events and sometimes relating more generally to themes of nature, love and loss. We are reminded with his poetry of his presence through the book, even though he himself is mostly absent – reflecting the experience of his own family, for whom he is absent and a constant presence in traumatic memory – but also inescapable in the wider context of Ireland, where he is a literary hero.

This dichotomy of public hero/private monster is a common one in the lives of the family of famous men who may be loved for their work, but who have been problematic husbands, lovers and fathers.



Discuss the theme of art in the book. How accurately does Phil's poetry and the art in the Uffizi Gallery represent reality? What is the payoff or reward for the reader and the viewer of artistic work? What does it give us, and does our interpretation of the work change if we know more about the maker of the artwork or the cultural context in which it was made? Can we still love art and poetry even if we know that its creators hurt other people?

QUESTIONS

What is Enright saying about love in *The Wren, The Wren*? Is love important?

How do Imelda and Carmel deal with their father's absence in different ways? How are they alike as sisters, and how are they different?

What did you feel about Nell and Carmel's relationship? Could you relate to it? Why, or why not?

Mal says, 'The masochist is always in control'. Is Nell a masochist at that point in the book? Why, and is this a bad thing?

NEXT STEPS

Write a poem about a bird you see often, or a bird that you have always liked. Use the bird as a metaphor for something. Is it love, freedom, a journey, a particular person, loss, death...? See if you can extend the metaphor – is the colour of the bird meaningful in some way, or its habits, or its song? Researching the bird may reveal an interesting fact that could help shape the theme of your poem.

Alternatively, write a descriptive piece inspired by a piece of sculpture – it could be classical, modern, religious, female, male or a completely abstract piece. If the sculpture could speak, what would it say? Does it have a history, or an unspoken history you would like to tell? Does it remind you of something or spark a personal association in some way? ■

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Enright was born in Dublin, where she now lives and works. She has written two collections of stories, published together as *Yesterday's Weather*, one book of non-fiction, *Making Babies*, and seven novels, including *The Gathering*, which won the 2007 Man Booker Prize; *The Forgotten Waltz*, which was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction; and *The Green Road*, which was the Bord Gáis Energy Novel of the Year and won the Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award.

In 2015 she was appointed as the first Laureate for Irish Fiction, and in 2018 she received the Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Contribution to Irish Literature. Anne Enright was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2008 and 2020 for *The Gathering* and *Actress* respectively, and shortlisted in 2012 and 2016 for *The Forgotten Waltz* and *The Green Road*.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

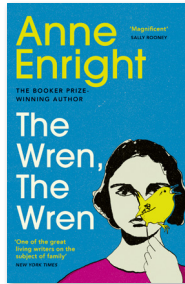
In *The Green Road*, Anne Enright explores the dynamics in an Irish family between four children and their mother. It was shortlisted for the 2016 Women's Prize for Fiction.

In *Tom Lake*, Ann Patchett depicts powerful mother-daughter relationships and reflects on marriage in an elegiac tale of past love.

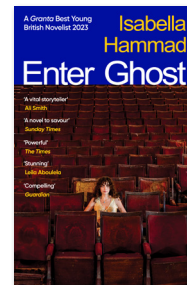
Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women's Prize Library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

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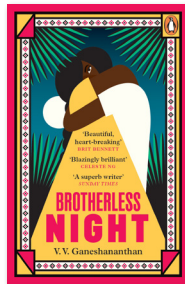
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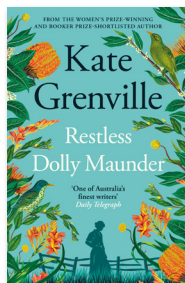
Enter Ghost
by Isabella Hammad



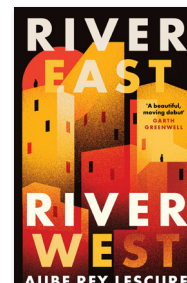
Brotherless Night
by V. V. Ganeshanathan



Soldier Sailor
by Claire Kilroy



Restless Dolly Maunder
by Kate Grenville



**River East,
River West**
by Aube Rey Lescure

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