Nora, the Invisible Woman, Mother, and Wife: A Book Review of Nora by Nuala O’Connor (2021)

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Abstract. The present review introduces Nuala O’Connor’s fictional biography titled Nora, published in 2021. The work focuses on Nora Barnacle’s relationship and marriage with James Joyce, the famous Irish author of Ulysses. Nora was the invisible woman, mother and wife who loved and supported Joyce, the great genius. The novel illustrates how much Nora was an essential part of his life and existence. Nuala O’Connor in her work brings Nora into the limelight and presents a courageous woman with a distinctive and convincing voice. The book is not a biography but a fictional biography that offers the reader a greater in-depth view of Nora’s and Jim’s extraordinary relationship and journey together throughout their self-chosen exile beyond Ireland.

Key Words. Nuala O’Connor, James Joyce, Nora Barnacle, fictional biography

Nuala O’Connor’s fifth novel, Nora, published in 2021 is the fictional biography of Nora Barnacle, the lover and wife of James Joyce, Irish novelist. The novel begins in 1904 in Dublin with their first date and ends in 1951 in Zurich with Nora’s death. Nora and Jim spend thirty-seven years together moving from one European city to another, with Paris, Trieste and Zurich as their main strongholds. Their exile is the result of Joyce’s most famous works, Ulysses (1922) and Finnegans Wake (1939).

Nora’s figure has intrigued writers prior to O’Connor’s work. In 1980 Maureen Charlton wrote a musical titled Nora Barnacle which debuted at the Dublin Theatre Festival. “The highly
controversial play was described by the *Washington Post* as ‘the finest piece of theatre at this or at [any] other theatre festival since *The Cherry Orchard* with Siobhan McKenna in 1968’” (qtd. in *Irish Independent* 2007). Brenda Maddox wrote the first full-length biography of Nora Barnacle in 1988 titled *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce*. The work is important for any research on the theme as it provides information on Nora Barnacle’s early life, her loves, marriage, children, and her years spent alone in Zurich after Joyce’s death from 1941 to 1951. The work was translated into eight languages and made into a film in 2000 directed by Pat Murphy, Irish feminist filmmaker and lecturer, starring Susan Lynch and Ewan McGregor. Irish author Edna O’Brien also wrote a short book of merely thirty pages on the Joyces titled *Nora and James, A Portrait of a Marriage* in 1981. This little novella offers the reader a glimpse of Nora’s and James’ relationship as O’Brien wrote, “I feel that Joyce, with his ‘lightning-lit reveries’ is speaking to us from beyond the grave” (O’Brien 1981). O’Brien has continued to read and delve into Joyce’s works for the past six decades and has now written a play for Abbey Theatre titled *Joyce’s Women*. This is a portrait of James Joyce as seen through the eyes of six women who defined his life and career, including his wife Nora, daughter Lucia and patron Harriet Shaw Weaver.

Nora Barnacle was a simple, uneducated young woman from Galway. She acquired education only until the age of twelve, then she began working. She was the invisible woman, mother and wife who loved and supported a great genius; she was an essential part of his life and existence, thus “she was his rock” (Embassy of Ireland 2021). Based on substantial research Nora was born on 21 March 1884 in the “Union Workhouse in Galway. Nora Joseph Barnacle they called me” (O’Connor 2021: 12). The name Barnacle comes from the Irish “Ó Cadhain, usually anglicised as Coyne, Kyne, or sometimes as the Jewish-looking Cohen or Coen. But in Irish, cadhan meant ‘wild goose’” (McNally 2022). Accordingly, the barnacle goose has acquired a story of its own in Irish culture because it has both “religious and dietary significance. For many centuries, it was a bird even devout Catholics could eat on Friday, or during Lent. This was because of a belief that it was not a bird at all, more of a fish” (McNally 2022). The Barnacles like the Brent geese spent their winters in Ireland, but the breeding and the hatching of the young occurred elsewhere and the apparent “similarity of their plumage to a certain shellfish that grows on ocean flotsam, gave rise to the idea that the two were intrinsically linked. Hence the Goose barnacle and the Barnacle goose” (McNally 2022). Nuala O’Connor has included a chapter titled “Goose” in her book with a reference to this Irish cultural link and word play. When Nora was three years old, she was sent to live with her Granny Healy in “her quiet houseen in Whitehall” (O’Connor 2021: 12). Like the later grownup
Nora, her grandmother liked to tell stories and this story relates to the interrelatedness of the shellfish and goose as previously mentioned: “You’re a seabird, Nora Barnacle. Born from a shell” (12). For she was told that she was not just an ordinary one “born from an egg”, but “a shell. For the barnacle is a rare and magical goose” (12). Why Nora’s mother gave her child away instead of allowing her to grow up with her sisters and brother is not clarified in O’Connor’s work, though there is a wry comment by Nora: “Maybe, if I’d come into life more naturally, Mammy would love her Gooseen well” (O’Connor 2021: 13). The reference to Nora as “Gooseen” appears several times in the work and Joyce’s supposedly last word before his death to Nora was “Gooseen” (386).

Nuala O’Connor in her work brings Nora into the limelight and presents a courageous woman with a distinctive and convincing voice. The book is not a biography but a fictional biography that offers the reader a greater in-depth view of Nora’s and Jim’s extraordinary relationship and journey together throughout their self-chosen exile beyond Ireland. Research available on Nora shows that she was a remarkably brave, but chatty Irish woman, who loved to tell stories. And these stories find their way into Joyce’s writings which is why she is held to be Joyce’s muse.

Nuala O’Connor grew up in west Dublin but moved to Galway city twenty-five years ago. As a teenager she read Brenda Maddox’s biography of Nora, whose character she found intriguing. In Galway, O’Connor regularly attended the Bloomsday celebrations held at Nora’s mother’s house in Bowling Green which was made into a small museum dedicated to Nora Barnacle’s life. She wrote a short story titled “Gooseen” published by Granta in 2018 which she considers the foundation for the present work. According to the author she did not feel that she had completed her task, so she continued her work on Nora until it was made into a novel-length work. She considers this a “joyful journey” and “rewarding” (Embassy of Ireland 2021).

How authentic is Nora’s character? O’Connor mentions in several interviews that her main task was to find Nora’s voice, which she did by reading the letters available for research between Joyce and Nora, the biographies written on her, and looking at portraits of her. Since the work is a fictional biography, the author is allowed to take a stance because people remember different things. Hence, certain views and opinions may present contradictory ideas of Nora and Joyce and their relationship. Apparently, many nasty things were said about Nora after Joyce’s death, but according to O’Connor “Nora was just herself” (Embassy of Ireland 2021).

O’Connor’s book contains short chapters, which are like individual short stories. This specific structural format is a trademark of O’Connor since she is also termed a “flash fiction
writer” (Embassy of Ireland 2021). These short chapters, seventy-eight altogether, are basically sketches or flash glances of Nora’s life, and her family. For O’Connor the creation of the work was like a “jigsaw puzzle with blank pieces; you have to paint the pieces yourself” (Embassy of Ireland 2021), which the writer enjoyed doing and presents an emphatic and humorous image of Nora, the woman, wife, and mother.

The book highlights the first four decades of 20th century Europe with the emergence of the first and then the second world wars through Nora’s eyes and perceptions, while Joyce remains a relatively silent figure in the background. Joyce is presented as a rather chaotic genius always looking towards the future and quite irresponsible toward his family. Altogether the book does not portray Joyce in a favourable light, and his inability to handle money and excessive drinking bouts are also emphasized. Due to this, Nora often finds herself and the children in financial difficulties from which friends help to support them.

Is Nora a typical Irish woman of her time? When Nora and Joyce met, he was grieving his mother’s death. They were both urban Catholics, confident young people who love music. Nora, according to O’Connor, was “dynamic” and “earthy” with a “natural charisma” (Embassy of Ireland 2021). She was a strong woman, but certainly neither a saint nor a woman outright seeking marriage in the traditional sense, thus Nora does not fit the average Irish stereotype. Irish men at the time did not value women as they do today. And the average Irish woman was generally seen as a sexless matriarch, whose focus was marriage, the upbringing of children and the household. Nora has been considered a silent inconspicuous figure and a mystery, which is why she has received greater attention in the past thirty years. When Nora fell in love with James Joyce it was the man, not the writer, she revered. And she was ready to follow Joyce and leave Ireland without getting married. Their exile from Ireland offered a new beginning in a hitherto unknown cultural milieu where they could reinvent themselves. Nora thus experienced a wholly different life with Joyce, than otherwise, if she had stayed in Ireland. All stereotypical expectations are dissolved, and Nora is her own person, who is allowed to emerge from her invisible bubble within O’Connor’s work.

Sexuality is another feature that is exploited within the novel. Whether this is deliberate on the part of the author is uncertain. However, when reading up on Joyce we come across the so called “dirty letters” (Maddox 2004) that the couple shared. According to Maddox’s article in The Guardian, Nora was the instigator of the obscene letters they exchanged when they separated in 1909. “After five years, when he left her in Trieste while he returned to Dublin, she began the determinedly pornographic letters intended to keep him away from prostitutes when ‘the old fever of love’ struck” (Maddox 2004). These letters were meant for Joyce only,
containing obscenity that was “Brief, brutal, irresistible and devilish — like the act itself” (Maddox 2004). Obviously, Nora would have preferred to have these letters destroyed, but Joyce apparently kept everything, even the erotic letters. The correspondence implies a strong emotional bond between Nora and Joyce with a suggestion that Nora seems to have had the upper hand in their sexual relationship.

Nora’s influence on Joyce is indisputable because it was “her common sense and loyalty that gave him the security his art could not, at least for decades, as he struggled to find a publisher” (Independent 2022). Joyce loved Nora’s stories of Galway, and her very Irish humour. And Nora is described by Joyce in O’Connor’s work as: “Nora, you are syllable, word, sentence, phrase, paragraph, and page. You’re fat vowels and shushing sibilants.” “Nora,” Jim says, “you are story” (O’Connor 2021: 11). Many critics and biographers define Nora as “Joyce’s muse” and the “template for Molly Bloom in Ulysses” (Independent 2021). To Joyce she represents the Ireland they had voluntarily left behind:

To Jim I am Ireland, yes, still I am. I’m island shaped, he says, large as the land itself, small as the Muglins, a woman on her back, splayed and hungry, waiting for her lover. I’m limestone and grass, heather and granite. I am rising paps and cleft of valley. I’m the raindrops that soak and the sea that rims the coast. Jim says I am harp and shamrock, tribe and queen. I am high cross and crowned heart, held between two hands. I’m turf, he says, and bog cotton. (O’Connor 2021: 396)

Nora and Joyce remain in Europe rather than return to their homeland, when the two World Wars force them to move from Trieste, then later from Paris to their final destination, Zurich in Switzerland.

James Joyce was not under any obligation to leave his country; it was his decision to leave Ireland, thus this was a self-inflicted exile. And Nora could have said no because they were not married at all. And when they did get married in 1935 it was merely, according to O’Connor’s book, to ensure the inheritance of the Joyce estate. To the outside world they were a married couple; they quickly had their first child, and it was Nora, who kept house and minded Joyce. Nora also learnt Italian then somewhat later French, though she was never as fluent as Joyce, but good enough to do her shopping and chat with friends. They were a close-knit family, though Joyce had a habit of falling out with people, which Nora tried to remedy.

Nora the invisible woman becomes a visible, flesh and blood human being through Nuala O’Connor’s work. As she said in an interview: “By being Nora on the page, and feeling how she may have felt, I try to bring her alive for the reader, make her a vivid, breathing woman with a real woman’s joys and concerns” (O’Connor 2021: “Backstory” 403). O’Connor’s skilful
handling of the theme brings Nora closer to the reader; she becomes a very authentic feminine character, who remains Joyce’s “honourable barnacle goose. His Gooseen” (O’Connor 2021: 396). And ours as well.

Works Cited

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