

Author Spotlight

EDNA O'BRIEN



Edna O'Brien is a multiple award-winning Irish novelist, poet, short story writer and playwright. She was born on December 15, 1930 in Tuamgraney, County Clare, Ireland into a strict religious family. She received an Irish Catholic convent education and went on to study pharmacy in Dublin, where she received a license in 1950. In 1954, against her parents' wishes, she married the novelist Ernest Gebler, with whom she had two sons—Carlo and Sasha. The couple moved to London, where she started work as a reader for Hutchinson—the English publishing house. She was eventually advanced £50 to write her own novel—the first of a trilogy—*The Country Girls*. O'Brien turned to writing as a full-time occupation. Her parents were vehemently against all things related to literature. Her mother strongly disapproved of her daughter's career as a writer. She lives in London.

O'Brien's works often revolve around the inner feelings of women, and their problems in relating to men, and to society as a whole. *The Country Girls* is often credited with breaking the silence on sexual matters and social issues during a repressive period in Ireland following World War II. The book was banned, burned and denounced from the pulpit.

In *The Little Red Chairs*, a woman discovers that the foreigner she thinks will redeem her life is a notorious war criminal. Vlad, a stranger from Eastern Europe masquerading as a healer, settles in a small Irish village where the locals fall under his spell. One woman, Fidelma McBride, becomes so enamored that she begs him for a child. All that world is shattered when Vlad is arrested, and his identity as a war criminal is revealed. Fidelma, disgraced, flees to England and seeks work among the other migrants displaced by wars and persecution. But it is not until she confronts him—her nemesis—at the tribunal in The Hague, that her physical and emotional journey reaches its breathtaking climax.

The Little Red Chairs is a book about love and the endless search for it. It is also a book about mankind's fascination with evil, and how long, how crooked, is the road towards home.

Prepared by Maureen Socha
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Discussion Questions for *The Little Red Chairs*

1. How would you describe Dr. Vlad when we first meet him? To one person, he seems to resemble a "holy man," to another a figure of hope, to children he simply looks "a bit funny." The schoolteacher alone is suspicious...why?
2. What do you make of Father Damien, who at first is wary of Dr. Vlad, especially on learning that he's a sex therapist: "Chastity," he says, "is our No. 1 commandment." He later tells Dr. Vlad that many of the local residents "feel a vacuum in their lives." How so? Is he being insightful or full of clichés? The priest goes on to say that "repentance and sorrow for sin is woven into our DNA." What do you think?
3. How would you describe the lives of the women of Cloonoila? Why are they so susceptible to Dr. Vlad's charms—why do they fall under his spell? Does he, in fact, fill that "vacuum" that Father Damien referred to (see Question 2)?
4. Talk about Fidelma, both her marriage and her affair with Dr. Vlad. Is her attraction to Dr. Vlad a consequence of naïveté or lust? In what way is her story treated in the manner of a fairy tale, written with a near mythical quality?
5. Talk about Dr. Vlad's dream. It is written in a narrative style very different from the rest of the book, as if it were inserted as a separate piece of text. What was your experience reading it?
6. Talk about the punishment Fidelma later receives, a punishment way out of proportion to the offense. It is painful, almost impossible, to read...did you? Explore a thematic connection between Fidelma's brutal treatment at the hands of her townspeople and the brutality of the Bosnian war?
7. Can Fidelma atone for her interaction with evil? Trace her spiritual development: how does she work her way toward redemption? Why for instance, does she choose to live among the homeless—"the hunted, the haunted, the raped, the defeated, the mutilated, the banished, the flotsam of the world, unable to go home"? What do they represent to her?
8. Fidelma chooses "not to look at the prison wall of life, but to look up at the sky." Will this be enough for her? Is it enough for any of us?

(Continued on reverse side)



Discussion Questions for *The Little Red Chairs* continued

9. Given the nature of the world and its capacity for evil, Edna O'Brien seems to be asking whether innocence and naïveté are self-destructive—and whether skepticism, distrust or cynicism are justified. What do you think? What should our response be to the world?

10. O'Brien has said about her book, "I wanted to take a dreadful situation and the havoc and harm that it yields, and show how it spirals out into the world at large." How does she go about accomplishing that in *The Little Red Chairs*?

11. Why is memory so important in this story? During one of their last encounters, Dr. Vlad tells Fidelma, "Start forgetting...everything." Yet one of the displaced persons insists, "It is essential to remember, nothing must be forgotten." What is our responsibility as human beings: should we try to forget and forge ahead with life...or to remember and bear witness?

12. How much did you know about the Bosnian war before reading *The Little Red Chairs*? For instance, the character of Vladimir Dragan is based on "the Butcher of Bosnia" Radovan Karadzic—whose 2016 conviction of war crimes at the Hague coincided with the U.S. publication of the book. Consider doing some research on the conflict to enrich your book discussion.

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