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Reading Group Guide

Saints and  
Sinners

*Stories*

by

Edna O'Brien



A conversation with the author of  
*Saints and Sinners*

Edna O'Brien talks with Patricia Harty of  
*Irish America*

Edna O'Brien, born in Tuamgraney, County Clare, moved to London in 1954 with her husband, the Czech-Irish writer Ernest Gebler, and two sons. Divorced in 1964, she stayed in London, where she lives to this day. Her "voluntary exile" was due in part to the furor over her first book, *The Country Girls*, published in 1960, which became part of a trilogy that also includes *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). The books trace the lives of two Irish women, Kate and Baba, whose Catholic upbringing comes into conflict with their sexual awakening.

*Has your relationship with Ireland changed, now that the country itself has changed?*

I feel more welcomed as a writer in America than I do in England and, to a greater extent, than I do in Ireland, although Ireland has softened towards me at last [laughs]. I think that it's inevitable. First of all, we ourselves change and our relationships, whether with a

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country or a person, change. I think we become more, forgive the word, philosophical about our own plight contrasted with the carnage, upheavals, and barbarity of the big wide world.

*When you were writing The Country Girls did you think it was going to cause the furor it did?*

No. I would never have finished it if I thought that. In fact, I thought nothing. I used to read manuscripts for publishers and I was a little overambitious in my evaluations and so was given a commission of fifty pounds to write *The Country Girls*, half from the publisher in England, Hutchinson, and half from Knopf in the United States.

I was young, married with two children, and I spent the money on practical things. I bought a sewing machine, which I thought would please the person I was married to. We had come to live in London—way, way out in the suburbs. I didn't know anyone. It was so alien. I wrote *The Country Girls* in less than three weeks.

*It sounds as if you approach each new work with trepidation.*

I do. Great fear. The fear of doing it. The fear that even if one does it, it won't realize itself as perfectly as it must. The fear of what people will say, and inevitably critics get out their knives and other implements of torture.

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*The Light of Evening is as close to a memoir as you have written.*

Memory plays its own tricks. My mother was very, very attached to me. I was the last child, as the others had gone away to school, and I identified with her totally. For example, these few lines from the book—  
“When she coughed blood we stared down at it together, down into the well of the kitchen sink... Death for her meant death for us both... Thinking that if I picked primroses and put them in a jam jar to cheer her up that she would not die.”

It seems childish, but I always wanted to save her, to make her happier. When the time came to break away I could not do it completely. I both did and didn't.

*She was not happy that you were a writer.*

She disapproved of writing and feared the written word, feared that its essence was sinful—she might have had a point! She would have liked me to have been a receptionist in a hotel, something more genteel and wholesome. And yet as you can see from her letters, she was a born writer herself, she had an enormous gift and power. She was powerful as a person but she was also powerful as a writer. So the irony is that friends say my mother made me a writer, and I don't dispute it. Yet it was something that caused

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her a lot of suffering and shame, because with the first book, *The Country Girls*, everybody was in an uproar in County Clare, and indeed in the country at large.

There was the banning and the scolding exchange of letters between Archbishop McQuaid and Charlie Haughey, who was minister of culture at that time, saying the book shouldn't be let in the hands of any decent family. It was daft, daft [laughs].

*Do you feel as if you got to know your mother as a young woman in Brooklyn through writing *The Light of Evening*?*

What we forget is that our mothers are also daughters. My mother had her own disappointments, her own thwarted aspirations and possibly her own bruised heart. What I wanted in the novel was to try and imagine her as her herself, the young Lena in all the vertigo of youth, setting out for America and envisaging big things.

Emily Dickinson writes about the mind having many chambers, and in one of the chambers of my mind, my mother Lena is permanently there.

*You write all your books in longhand.*

I write and rewrite and then I dictate. It's all quite unnerving. What I feel about writing by hand—I may have a few soul mates in this—is that there is a con-

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nection between mind and heart and hand and the sequence of the words themselves. I feel that a typewriter or a word processor would be an artificial barrier, would stymie the flow between conscious and unconscious. It is not a fashionable or a practical view, but then, I have never prided myself on being practical.

*You talk of your mother not wanting you to have a successful romantic life. Do you think there was an element of the disappointed romantic about her?*

I'm not sure my mother was an utter romantic. That's where she and I probably differed. I am an incurable romantic. I can say that my mother's life was not so rosy. She married my father, who was very well off, only to find that the money got frittered away. My father's family—him, his three brothers, and a sister who lived in Boston and apparently was the first woman to drive a car in Boston—had inherited legacies. Their uncles were priests in Lowell, Massachusetts, who had patented a famous medicine called Father John's Medicine, which was a roaring success with the laity. It was probably cod liver oil with a few added ingredients, but it sold like a bomb.

By the time I was three or four, living on a farm in rural Ireland, I was very aware of rows over money, anxiety over money and the abiding fear of losing the place.

In the thirties there was the economic war, animals

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sold for next to nothing, there was no money to fertilize the fields, no machinery to work with and a sense of financial despair. Nowadays a little plot for a bungalow in County Clare is \$100,000 and that's not even with a glimpse of the Shannon.

My mother must have been disappointed at life taking a downward swoop. She had been born in the mountains, went to America, made a little bit of money, had nice clothes and trinkets and so on, and married, as she thought, into endless security. But it did not turn out like that. She was a stalwart worker. She fed calves, she fed hens, she boiled big pots of meal in the boil house and was kept going from dawn till dark. She held everything together, but I think she must have been truly exhausted, and to some extent broken. But though raised in the country, she was not a typical country woman, there was something other about her, as if perhaps she had wished for another fate, though I never asked her what that might be.

*Do you think that on some level your mother was jealous of your success?*

I think probably that was there. She feared that I was on the road to perdition. But she also perhaps resented my apparent success, because she would make little caustic comments such as "There was a photograph of you in the paper and people said you had drink taken." Yes,



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there would have been some element of jealousy because I seemed independent insofar as I was the breadwinner for myself and my children. To be frank, I would say she did not know me, she did not understand the compulsion, the necessity to write, and did not want to know that writing took one to another sphere. Beckett said in an essay on Jack Yeats that the artist who stakes his life has no country and no brother.

I think mothers identify very much with their daughters and therefore criticize their daughters more than their sons. I don't have a daughter but I have sons. [My mother] would come to London, and in those days I gave rather lavish parties. I was head bottle washer; cooked, opened the bottles, lit the fires, answered the door, opened the champagne and the oysters, and my mother, witnessing this largesse, probably feared that I was heading downhill.

The one thing in this world that I cannot bear, because I've had so much of it, is being controlled. People love controlling other people. I don't even control my children. I sometimes think they control me, my follies.

*Including men in relationships?*

Men certainly want control and get it. But let me say, women want control also, in a more insidious way. My mother was a controller.

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*You are not bitter towards men.*

Not at all, I love men. My experience hasn't been all that blessed. I haven't been in love often but when I have been, I have. I regard it as very profound and stirring and of course sometimes unrequited. Bitterness for a writer, or for anyone, is a dead end. To keep writing, one has to retain, against all the odds, some of the fervor and the innocence of childhood. Think of James Joyce, with his searing intellect, being able to write about Gerty MacDowell in the "Sirens" section of *Ulysses* and understanding her gushings, her longings and troubling himself to find out which exact dinky dye she used for her underwear.

*I read somewhere that the first book you bought was about James Joyce.*

Yes, it was a little book called *Introducing James Joyce* by T. S. Eliot, which included the Christmas dinner from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and one of the short stories, I think it was "Araby," and an extract from *Ulysses* and an extract from "Anna Livia." I love the "Anna Livia" section of *Finnegans Wake*. Anna, in all her personifications, going back to the sea, to her "cold mad feary father," knowing that for all her gifts and guile as a young woman, she will be quite forgotten. It's ineffably beautiful.

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*Do you think you would have liked Joyce as a man?*

I would love to have met Joyce, preferably in the evening hours when bottles were opened. He was a very cerebral man, but he was also a very witty man and undoubtedly a man of feeling. Someone once said to him, I think it was Arthur Power, that he had no feelings and Joyce smarted, his eyes filling with tears, and said, "God, I, a man without feelings?"

*You did meet Samuel Beckett. What was he like?*

He was one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. His intellect was formidable but his manner was genial and friendly. He was in no way boastful. I asked him on one occasion what he was writing and his reply with a shrug was, "Not much and anyhow what difference would it make?" For many years it seems he felt as a writer the shadow of Joyce the master, saying in an interview that he worked from near nothing, whereas Joyce had the gift of omniscience and omnipotence. He needn't have worried, he too is monumental.

*Did you always have this love of writing?*

Yes. I was childishly ambitious in national school and I would write little bits of their compositions for the

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other girls, often rewarded with a biscuit. I always thought of writing not as an escape but as a path into another kind of universe, another mode of thought and feeling. I believed that words were of themselves animate and, when grouped together, had an alchemy to them.

*But there were no books in your house.*

No books, just bloodstock manuals and Mrs. Beeton's cookery book, with its sundry stains of ink and egg yolk and tea and its marvelous recipes in which abundance was all. Then there were the prayer books and the missals, in which the devotional and the erotica went hand in hand and the paeans to Christ and the martyrs were like love letters to someone known. In fact, my earliest understanding of earthly love was implicit in these soarings. Then of course there were poems that one learnt by heart and in the one school-book, extracts, mostly by English authors, Charles Dickens, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Thackeray, all for our edification. I did as well learn and imbibe the great and fabulous myths. I might add that I learnt everything through Irish, except of course English, which maybe accounts for my style. One of the first books I read from start to finish was the short stories of Joyce.

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*Obviously Joyce had a very big effect on you.*

Yes, Joyce is prodigious. He wrote with the genius of man and woman, his words are blazing, his fracturing and reassembling of the English language as radical in literature as the splitting of the atom was in science. But I would be unfaithful if I did not mention that Joyce has a rival in my affections. It is Chekhov. He is the exact opposite to Joyce—his stories seem not so much to be written as to be breathed onto the page. Like Shakespeare, Chekhov knew everything there is to know about the heart's vagaries and he rendered the passion and conflict of men and women flawlessly.

Yes, I would be much lonelier on this earth without literature, and I might even have gone mad. As a last word, let me say this: Literature is the big bonanza, and writing is getting down on one's knees each day and searching for the exact words.

Originally printed in *Irish America* on December 22, 2006. Reprinted with permission.

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. In the story “Shovel Kings,” Billy’s widow says to Rafferty, “No one is given a life just to throw it away,” spurring Rafferty toward sobriety. What do you think is the main cause of this group of exiles’ heavy drinking—homesickness, personal trauma, heredity, or something else?
2. Unrequited love drives the narrators of “Madame Cassandra” and “Manhattan Medley” and the events of “Send My Roots Rain.” Emotions range from extreme agitation to quiet disappointment. Which responses are most relatable to your own romantic experiences?
3. Politics rarely figure into Edna O’Brien’s fiction, but the Troubles in Ireland are indirectly addressed in “Black Flower.” Do you think some readers would object to the sympathy Mona has for Shane? Do you share her sympathy? Why or why not?
4. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Edna O’Brien said, “Ireland has given me a good crop of stories. In the big world you don’t get stories.”

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Many of the stories in *Saints and Sinners* are set in small communities, whether urban or rural. How, to you, does this contribute to their depth and impact, if at all? How does place influence the behavior of the characters in, for one example, “Inner Cowboy”?

5. Social class plays a key role in some of the stories in *Saints and Sinners*, especially “Green Georgette.” What signs does the child narrator, who says Drew “is like a queen,” pick up on to set the Coughlans apart from her own family? How does her anger in the end differ from her more mature mother’s reaction to the evening?
6. How does this collection’s title, *Saints and Sinners*, reflect the thematic links among the stories?
7. The bond between mothers and daughters has often been explored in this writer’s fiction. Why is the penultimate story in *Saints and Sinners* called “My Two Mothers”? Are the extremes of the narrator’s feelings for her mother credible to you?
8. Edna O’Brien has written books about James Joyce and Lord Byron. Do you see the influences of these writers in the style and content of her work?

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9. In an interview with Philip Roth, O'Brien said that "doctors, lawyers, and other stable citizens" differ from writers in that "they are not dogged by the past." The story "Old Wounds" is dominated by the memory of a long-ago family feud. Are there such persistent memories in your own past?