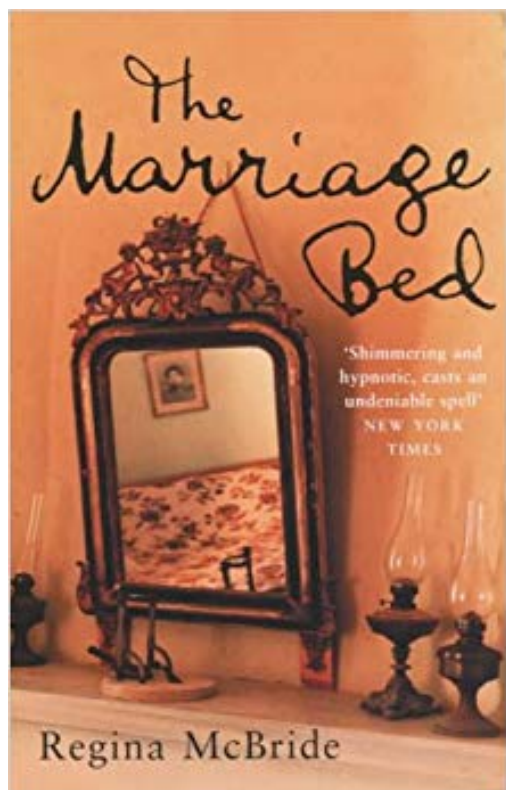


The Marriage Bed *by* Regina McBride



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Reviews of the *The Marriage Bed* *by* Regina McBride

Hamrl

Imaginative and well told story of Ireland, family, and finding oneself. Sets me dreaming of the shades of green, the damp, and the sea.

Zahisan

I love the way Regina McBride writes. She makes you feel like you are experiencing the story firsthand. This is not fast-paced or romantic or necessarily sad, yet it drew me in like all her stories.

Jieylau

Regina McBride, *The Marriage Bed* (Simon and Schuster, 2004)

Regina McBride's first novel, *The Nature of Water and Air*, which I read seven or eight years ago, was an immensely satisfying book. *The Marriage Bed* is her third, and while I didn't get the same thrill from it that I got from *Water and Air*, it certainly worked for me on a number of levels.

The story concerns Deirdre O'Brien, wife of Manus O'Brien, a Dublin architect. As we open, the two have been married for roughly fifteen years, and Deirdre is lamenting that her marriage has faded at the same time she's sending their two daughters to the same boarding school to which she was sent after a family tragedy long before (the nature of this family tragedy is the central mystery of the novel). We then get an extended flashback from Deirdre's time at the school to her marrying Manus before returning to the present day, where Deirdre must face her various problems, including coming to terms with the mysterious (to us, anyway) deaths of her parents.

The big thing about this novel, even more so than with *Water and Air*, is McBride's writing. It's big, bold, almost palpably sensual, as much in a description of a flower as it is in a sex scene. This is a gorgeously-written book, and losing oneself in its pages is a pleasure. Gorgeous writing, however, can only take a book so far, and almost by definition any book so written is going to be slow going; there is a plot to it, to be sure, but it's quite leisurely at spinning itself out. There's not as much substance under the style as one might hope. It's a book that seems to invite browsing over a period of months rather than reading through. I find this sort of thing enchanting; others might not. There's no denying McBride is a powerful, seductive writer, however, and if you haven't yet encountered her, you should. I'd suggest, however, starting with *The Nature of Water and Air* and coming to this one after. ***

ndup

McBride's female protagonists are exquisitely nuanced, their deepest longings and secret fears. They exist wholly-fleshed, surrounded by the turbulent beauty of the Irish coast.

When orphaned Deirdre is delivered to the convent of *Enfant de Marie* by her grandmother, she is admonished to keep secret the true story of her parent's deaths, an incident Deirdre has pushed into her subconscious, burying emotions with memory. In that dank environment, with its shadowy candlelit corridors and prayerful murmurings, Deirdre is desperately unhappy, fourteen years old and far from anything familiar.

Deirdre is fascinated by one of the other postulants, Bairbre McBreen, at *Enfant de Marie* to fulfill her family's obligations, an effort to appease a wrathful God after her mother leaves the convent to marry. In a blend of religious fervor and alchemic fate, the O'Brien's welcome their obligation to provide a son to the Church, an effort to repair past transgressions. Bairbre has come in lieu of her brother, Manus that he may marry and carry on the family line with sons of his own.

This family forms their own Trinity, mother at the apex, as a lonely Deirdre imbues them with powers beyond their capacity. Hopelessly lost in her own imaginings of domestic harmony, Deirdre gravitates first to the ethereal Bairbre, another postulant, sensitive to each despairing sigh, "the sound of it cast a shadow like a bird that followed me along the corridor, then flew suddenly past". By marrying Manus, Deirdre enters into an unholy alliance, underestimating its power until her entire life is usurped by her mother-in-law's will, the marriage purged of its promising intimacy. Even the granddaughters are caught in the web, plucked from their mother's over-protective grasp.

Only then does Deirdre accept her own complicity, hollow-eyed with grief at the loss of her daughters. In elegant, sweeping prose, Deirdre revisits the first days of her attraction to Manus, away from the penetrating gaze of Mrs. McBreen: "There was a dungeon in Manus's heart." Everything leads her back to the source of her fears, the tragedy she cannot speak of, her desperate flight from reality into the waiting arms of a woman who uses her as a pawn, as Great Blasket Island calls Deirdre home to reclaim the self she abandoned. After years of bending to the wishes of others, Deirdre embraces her own past and with it the chance to reclaim her children, her life and the love of her husband.

This elegiac novel touches a woman's interior, plumbing her secrets, the mysteries of religious devotion shrouded in piety and the softly murmured prayers of supplicants who harbor selfish intentions. The phrases spill like pearls: "I felt as if my body were comprised of hundred of subtler bodies thin as veils, but concentrated, all ignited and brushing at each other." The McBreen mansion is of gothic proportions, lushly appointed rooms contrasting with dim, stone-walled corridors leading to an alchemist's retreat. And everywhere the sound of the sea, hurling itself against the land. Luan Gaines/2005.

Moogugore

Up until 1907, Dierdre O'Coighligh lived on the impoverish Great Blasket Island off the Irish Coast until she was fourteen when her parents died. She feared the sea and never crossed it until her grandmother left her with no choice. The teen orphan was dumped at the Infant de Marie Convent on the mainland because her grandmother insisted that she was too old to raise a young lass. At the Convent, Dierdre meets wealthy novice Bairbre O'Breen, a widowed mother who is a key benefactor. Through Mrs. O'Breen, Deirdre meets Bairbre's brother Manus, an architecture student. He falls in love with Dierdre-and his mother feels she is acceptable as a daughter-in-law. Instead of becoming a nun, seventeen years old Deirdre agrees to marry Manus. After the ceremony, they move to a house in Dublin that his mother furnished. They have two delightful daughters, but Mrs. O'Breen demands a grandson who will be a priest regardless of how the lad or his parents feel because the matriarch has secret scandals that need heavenly intervention to remedy.

THE MARRIAGE BED is a very lucid look at Ireland in the years just prior to World War One. The story line provides the reader with a picturesque glimpse at middle class life and the influence of family on members. Though the secrets seem minor and Mrs. O'Breen's demands seem easily shrugged off and ignored (maybe this reviewer is the anachronism as perhaps I am using a liberated twenty-first century lens), Regina McBride provides a colorful character study that makes 1910-1914 thriving as if the reader is in Dublin right before the Great War.

Harriet Klausner

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