



Charming Billy

By Alice McDermott

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Charming Billy By Alice McDermott Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Charming Billy is a devastating account of the power of longing and lies, love's tenacity, and resignation's hold. Even at his funeral party, Billy Lynch's life remains up for debate. This soft-spoken, poetry lover's drinking was as legendary among his Queens, New York, family and friends as was his disappointment in love. But the latter, as his cousin Dennis knows, "was, after all, yet another sweet romance to preserve." After World War II, both young men had spent one sun-swept week on Long Island, renovating a house and falling in with two Irish sisters--nannies to a wealthy family--"marveling, marveling still, that this Eden was here, at the other end of the same island on which they had spent their lives."

By the end of their idyll, Billy and Eva were engaged, though she was set to return to County Wicklow. Determined to earn enough money to bring her, her family, and if necessary her entire village back to the U.S., Billy took two jobs, one of which would indenture him for years. But despite the money he sent, Eva never returned, and then was suddenly dead of pneumonia. The true tragedy is that she had simply kept her fare and married someone else--a secret Dennis keeps for the next 30 years as he watches Billy fall into a loveless marriage and the self-administered anesthesia of alcohol.

Alice McDermott's quiet, striking novel is a study of the lies that bind and the weight of familial wishes. She seems far less interested in the shock of revelation than in her characters' power to live through personal disaster. As Dennis's daughter pieces together Billy's real history, she also learns of the accommodations her own family had long made--and discovers that good intentions can be as destructive as the truth they mean to hide.

From Library Journal

When Billy, the glue of a tight Irish community in New York, dies as a result of lifelong alcohol abuse, mourners gather around roast beef and green bean amandine to tell tales and ruminate on his struggle for happiness after he lost his first love, Eva. With carefully drawn character studies and gentle probing, McDermott, who won the National Book Award for this work, masterfully weaves a subtle but tenacious web of relationships to explore the devastation of alcoholism, the loss of innocence, the daily practice of love, and the redeeming unity of family and friendship.

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From Kirkus Reviews

McDermott (*At Weddings and Wakes*, 1992, etc.) extends her view of Irish-American life with this gentle portrait of an alcoholic freshly dead from drink, and of the family he leaves behind to reveal and remember. Everyone at the wake agreed that Billy Lynch was a fine man--when sober. But they also knew something of his pain, born from the long-ago death of his fianc, just before she was to come back to Brooklyn after a trip to Ireland. Only his cousin and best friend Dennis, though, knew the whole story: Eva didn't die, but she did marry her Irish love--a fact he concealed from Billy for 30 years, not knowing that Billy would mourn what might have been for the rest of his life, even after he met and married the gentle, love-struck Maeve. Then, in Ireland in 1975, to take The Pledge after years of hard drinking, Billy learned the truth by chancing to meet Eva as he was on his way to visit her grave--and promptly took back his Pledge. As he had in times previous, Dennis helped Maeve through the years that followed, answering Billy's wee-hours phone calls and bringing him to bed whenever he'd passed out, even as Dennis's own wife sickened of cancer and died. And now Dennis's daughter, grown with children of her own, has come home to support him after Billy was found dying in the street--just as Dennis supported Billy and Maeve, and as his father before him supported

countless penniless Irish relations as they made the leap across the Atlantic to a new life. It's this daughter who puts the pieces of Billy's sad but profoundly loyal existence together, mingling them with her father's and her own in a special way that leaves her well prepared for the turn of events to come. A softly resonant and nostalgic tale told so masterfully, so movingly, that it seems to distill a human essence on virtually every page. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bess Malloy:

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