


New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families

Colm Tóibín

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In this fascinating, informative, and entertaining collection, internationally acclaimed, award-winning author Colm Tóibín turns his attention to the intricacies of family relationships in literature and writing.

In pieces that range from the importance of aunts (and the death of parents) in the English nineteenth-century novel to the relationship between fathers and sons in the writing of James Baldwin and Barack Obama, Colm Tóibín illuminates not only the intimate connections between writers and their families but also, with wit and rare tenderness, articulates the great joy of reading their work. In the piece on the *Notebooks of Tennessee Williams*, Tóibín reveals an artist "alone and deeply fearful and unusually selfish" and one profoundly tormented by his sister's mental illness. Through the relationship between W.B. Yeats and his father, or Thomas Mann and his children, or J.M. Synge and his mother, Tóibín examines a world of family relations, richly comic or savage in its implications. In Roddy Doyle's writing on his parents we see an Ireland reinvented. From the dreams and nightmares of John Cheever's journals Tóibín makes flesh this darkly comic misanthrope and his relationship to his wife and his children. The majority of these pieces were previously published in the *Londron Review of Books*, the *New York Review Review of Books*, and the *Dublin Review*. Three of the thirteen pieces have never appeared before.

New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families Details

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From Reader Review *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families* for online ebook

Marleen says

In this fascinating book, Colm Tóibín sets out to show how their families influenced the work of various authors. Divided into two sections he first concentrates on Irish authors: W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Samuel Beckett, Brian Moore, Sebastian Barry, Roddy Doyle and Hugo Hamilton. The second part of the book, called 'Elsewhere' gives us glimpses of the lives and families of Thomas Mann, Jorge Luis Borges, Hart Crane, Tennessee Williams, John Cheever, James Baldwin and finally Barack Obama, a man we don't think of as an author first and foremost. And there is one other author who returns in chapter after chapter although he isn't given one of his own: Henry James.

Of course Henry James is a favourite subject for Tóibín. His book 'The Master' provides a wonderful description of James' life and work. And having recently had the opportunity to hear him talk about the James family and their connection to Bailieborough, a town close to where I live, I fully appreciate the depth of his knowledge and his affection for his subject.

With skill and clarity Tóibín shows us how authors made use of their relationships – or lack thereof – with their families. For example, in the preface he reflects on the absent mother who, in the novels of Jane Austen and Henry James, is a vehicle to allow the main character to develop on their own, without maternal influences.

But the observations in this book are not limited to how the family influenced the work of the authors mentioned, they also reflect on their actual relationships in real life:

“Thus the two successful authors, William (Butler Yeats) and Henry James, each in his prime, had managed to kill their father rather fatally, as it were, by letting his work be published in book form.”

But the reader is given much more than the title of this book seems to promise. While connections between authors, their relationships with their families and their work are frequent, those works are discussed in detail that goes above and beyond the family relationship. So, with regard to W.B. Yeats and his (much younger) wife George we are shown:

“...a symbol of the way writers use houses for their magic properties rather than their domestic space.”

And Sebastian Barry in his play *Hinterland* deals with the Father, as did a lot of plays in the early years of the twenty-first century. More specifically, he deals with the father and his short-comings, both as the head (and thus father-figure) of a nation and in his home life.

“If Ireland needed a public figure to become its disgraced father, then Charles Haughey auditioned perfectly for the role and played it with tragic dignity in a lonely exile in his Georgian mansion in North County Dublin.”

The chapter on Roddy Doyle and Hugo Hamilton provides the reader with a contrast in fathers. While father Doyle came from a republican family he had no real interest in the concept of Ireland and its language. Hamilton's father on the other hand took such pride in his Irishness that he refused to speak English and forbade the use of that language in his house and thus managed to cruelly curtail his children's' childhood in the process.

In part two of this book, 'Elsewhere' we start with a look at Thomas Mann and his family. To say that the relationships within this family were unconventional would be putting it mildly. Covering among other things homosexuality and incest this chapter is rather gossipy in appearance and rather fascinating as a result.

With Borges however we are back in line with the title, be it that the parent being 'killed' is the father rather than the mother:

"It is as though an artist such as Picasso, whose father was a failed painter, or William James, whose father was a failed essayist, or V.S. Naipaul, sought to compensate for his father's failure while at the same time using his talent as a way of killing the father off, showing his mother who was the real man in the household."

I could give more examples of how authors deal with their families in their published work, but this book covers so much more than what is implied in the title. This book also discusses the authors' work; sometimes staying on topic and discussing how their families and their relationship with them influenced it, but, at other times, giving a much more general description of their writings. In fact, there are some chapters in this book in which the author's family is barely mentioned at all. Brian Moore's story seems to be more about his absence from his native Belfast than about his relationship with his relatives for example. So I think it is fair to say that while for some of the authors mentioned their relationships with their families were hugely influential on their work, for others that was less or not at all the case. In fact, the first piece about James Baldwin doesn't appear to be about his family at all but about his 'relationship' with America and the changes it was going through. The chapter James Baldwin shares with Barack Obama on the other hand is very much about their families or, more specifically, their absent fathers.

Tóibín may be writing about other authors and quoting from their work, letters and diaries – giving the reader a taste of the magnificence of those authors – his own writing is equally impressive in its thoughtfulness and fluency. It is clear that he is an expert when it comes to authors, their work and the connections between the various authors. At times this book reads as if he personally knows all these people he is writing about and is generously sharing this personal knowledge with his readers.

This is neither a quick nor an easy read. It is a fascinating book though. Ideally, I feel, it should be read in bits and pieces, a chapter started and finished when you are reading a book by or about the author in question. Especially since I found that I was far more interested in the chapters on authors and books I am familiar with than in those whose subject I had barely heard of. I know I will be revisiting certain chapters when I'm preparing for book discussions with my reading group.

Colm Tóibín provides his readers with fascinating and knowledgeable insights into authors as well as their work and in doing so also gives his readers a better understanding of those works and of what motivated the authors to write them.

Magdelanye says

In this rather anarchic, rambling collection of literary commentary, CT proves himself once again a master of the gab. I amazed myself by finding interest in anecdotes concerning authors I quite dislike, and works I've previously considered boring. Adverse as I am to games such as trivial pursuit, I have to admit there lurks in me a love a certain kind of gossip, the kind about literary feuds and old muses. Its quite fascinating (although

sometimes appalling) to read about the families of great authors and their influence or lack of it.

It would have been nice if there was a bit more coherence to this book, but if you love to read, there is quite a feast here.

Lydia says

So this book is a collection of essays about writers, their own family relationships and the affect that this had on their writing.

It was a pretty solid collection and I think it's testament to Tóibín's writing that even the essays about writers whose works I had not read I found engaging. I only got the book out because I wanted to read the essays about Jane Austen and James Baldwin (I am ever predictable I know), but I ended up reading the whole book and I'm really glad I did.

(also it was v gay which i always appreciate)(although it could have done with discussing more female writers rather han being 90% men)

Ci says

Tentatively, I put this book on "read" shelf even though I promised myself to return to it in later time when I have read the other authors he analyzed. My range of literary reading is not broad enough to make use of several of his essays.

I am very impressed and instructed by his analysis of the role aunts played in Jane Austen and Henry James' novels. They were plot devices that I did not quite notice, except when they obviously facilitate or impede the heroines or heroes's actions. Mr. Toibin has educated me to look also for the absence (physical or emotional) of mothers, and the emotional core essence that a young woman would have to shape by her negotiation with benign or malicious aunts. Washington Square is an excellent example of a quiet and obstinate young woman who finally comes to her own by coming to terms to her reality.

The writing is crisp, witty and entirely enjoyable. I must re-read it when I get more family with the other authors he analyzed.

Jessica says

Seeing Colm Tóibín read was a bright spot in an otherwise underwhelming trip to Seattle. He's hilarious! And brilliant! I'm a sucker for that.

Never read anything by him, but remembered that my mom had given me this book and resolved to check it out once I got home.

I read about half of this, and enjoyed it so much that I forgot to notice that I'm not especially interested in its topic, which seemed to be the lives of various Irish writers. Then I remembered, set the book down on my nightstand, and didn't touch it for the next five months.

I'm doing a "currently-reading" purge today and so I'm moving it, both on the Bookface and literal physical shelves... Ciao, Colm! Maybe I'll read more of this at some point, but it doesn't seem to be happening now.

Kelly Furniss says

I chose this purely because I have read Colm Toibins work before and enjoyed it, although his other books I have read have been works of fiction.

This is more a collection of essays about the intricacies of the family relationships and how it has impacted the literature of different authors.

I enjoyed delving in to each authors life and learning a little more about them and how these relationships shaped them as a person and shaped there work.

Split in to parts the book allows you read it the whole way through or dip in and out of the segregated essays which I enjoyed whilst doing chores etc.

Anyone who wants to learn about some of our great authors should pick this up.

A very enjoyable read. :0)

John says

First things first: author Colm Tóibín's *New Ways to Kill Your Mother* is no lightweight, frothy summer beach read, so be prepared for that. He's an Irish novelist, essayist, journalist, critic, short story writer, playwright, and more recently, a poet. Described recently as an "old-fashioned literary man o' war," he is generally regarded by those familiar with his works as having outclassed many at the various literary forms in which he has delved.

Though the title might suggest a manual about matricide, Tóibín's new work is not about the act of murdering one's own mother. The author skillfully delves into the association between the portrayal of family relations in literature and the actual home lives of writers, and it can be as complex as it is absorbing. The title is metaphorical.

The relationship between writers, their chosen occupation and the part that it plays with their families is often like combat. It is to this absorbing topic that author Tóibín turns in his interesting collection of essays on writers and their mothers, fathers and other family members. Early into the book we see these words:

"The novel in English over the nineteenth century is filled with parents whose influence must be evaded or erased to be replaced by figures who operate either literally or figuratively as aunts, both kind and mean, both well-intentioned and duplicitous, both rescuing and destroying.

The novel is a form ripe for orphans, or for those whose orphanhood will be all the more powerful for being figurative, or open to the suggestion, both sweet and sour, of surrogate parents."

After an interesting opening section with a look at Jane Austen, Henry James and s bit more, we find Tóibín's work arranged in two parts. In "Ireland", he reflects on the work of W.B. Yeats, Synge, Beckett, Brian Moore, Sebastian Barry and others. He writes about Thomas Mann, Jorge Luis Borges, Hart Crane, Tennessee Williams, and John Cheever in "Elsewhere," ending that section with some insight into the writings of James Baldwin and Barack Obama:

"James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, begins: 'On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died.' Baldwin was almost nineteen at the time. Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, published in 1995, begins also with the death of his father: 'A few months after my twenty-first birthday, a stranger called to give me the news.'"

As seen in that passage, the title of this book can be misleading, as Tóibín's essays are quite often concerned with the role of the father as much as the mother.

A good number of the essays found here were originally published in periodicals, including the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *Dublin Review*, as is noted in the author's acknowledgements in the back of this book.

Colm Tóibín as the essayist reflects a certain asceticism, but he's as crafty a storyteller as Tóibín the novelist. For the reader, his most highly regarded fiction, *The Blackwater Lightship*, *The Master*, and *The Heather Blazing*, generally build up with a slow but sure gathering of events. There becomes a point with his novels that the reader becomes engaged, and it's this skilful cumulative result that makes his novels seem most believable. This reader had admittedly found Tóibín's highly acclaimed *Brooklyn* to be a "one-dimensional disappointment" when reviewed in 2009, but after reading his latest here, it's a very compelling thought to give that novel a second look.

Again, *New Ways to Kill Your Mother* is no simple summer beach read. But when you feel that your brain cells have been almost destroyed by the likes of the 'everyone-is-talking-about-it' *Fifty Shades of Drivel* series (and apologies if you're a die-hard fan), Colm Tóibín's 5-star book may go a long way to being cathartic, if only for the healing effect it will have on your thinking process.

Note: portions of this review appeared here earlier.

6/20/2012

Jenny Tipping says

I was drawn to this book by the write-up in the Guardian review a couple of weeks ago and by the title. Although it is a pleasant read, the mismatch between the title and the book and some confusion about what the book actually is, made the overall experience a bit disappointing.

Essentially it is a collection of essays of literary criticism, loosely linked by the subject of writers and their families. It particularly, but not exclusively, concentrates on family relationships that writers have sought to escape for various reasons. We meet WB Yeats' father, Samuel Beckett's mother and Thomas Mann's children.

There is some interesting discussion of post-independence Irish literature (Brian Moore, Sebastian Barry, Hugo Hamilton and Roddy Doyle), the quest for an identity, exile and the failure of the Irish father in literature. I found this particularly interesting and would happily have read a whole essay on this topic.

The problem is that if you were looking for such a discussion, you wouldn't know to look in this book. There is no introduction and the first chapter which one might think would serve as a prologue is a discussion of mothers in the work of Jane Austen and Henry James and sheds no light on what the rest of the book may contain.

If this were an academic essay collection, you would expect an introduction setting out the overall theme and discussing each essay and how it links to the theme. If this were a work of literary criticism for a lay audience, you might expect a prologue or shorter introduction which might introduce a narrative thread, which would then run through the rest of the chapters.

This book has neither and in my notes it is only on page 156 that I have worked out what the book actually is. It is a well-written collection of essays, which introduced me to some new writers and new ways of looking at old writers. It is a learned and gentle work, which bears no real relation to the sensationalism of the title.

Sivananthi T says

This is a provocatively titled book, and its actually more of an exploration of writers and the relationships with their families - some which include mothers, some wives, some fathers and some extended family members. Dysfunctional families often provide subject matter for a lifetime, best exemplified by Eugene O'Neill's plays. But I know of Colm Toibin, more as a writer of novels so it was utterly fascinating to read how he researches the lives of other writers and also has written as many works of non-fiction. Kind of a gossip-rag for the literati - so it was fun for me.

Moira Russell says

Realized too late that instead of an interconnected narrative, this is a book of essays - most published in the LRB, the NYRB, and the Dublin Review - loosely organized around a sort of guiding aesthetic about how artists use and are formed by their family dynamics. "Loosely" is the appropriate word. This is sort of like *The Anxiety of Influence* with the theory left out, which you would think might be a more pleasant experience

than reading this fix-up actually is; the pleasure in reading carefully crafted sentences or analytical insights fades as the reader, deceived by the illusion of structure, gets a kind of mental headache trying to fit all the various pieces into one overarching Magic Eye-like vision that never quite shifts into focus. This book works mainly by allusion and comparison: this is like that, that resembles this. Sometimes this works quite well, as when he compares the various parallels between the James and Yeats families. (James is referenced everywhere, and paired up with Jane Austen, James Baldwin, and other stunningly inappropriate figures.) This attempted thesis-antithesis-synthesis movement fails most disastrously when a terribly shallow analysis of Baldwin merges into a really dreadful comparison of Baldwin the writer to Obama the politician. Unfortunately, these failures are the last and the next-to-last essays in the book, so they nearly eclipse the earlier fine work on Yeats and his father, Yeats and his wife, Synge, Beckett, and so on -- in short, the first part of the book, "Ireland," works quite well, and the second half, "Elsewhere," is about as disastrous as you might suspect. The essays on Mann, Borges, and Crane are merely perfunctory and unnecessary, but the misunderstanding -- descending at times to sneering -- shown in the sections on Tennessee Williams, John Cheever, and especially Baldwin, is baffling. It is perhaps not a coincidence that those writers draw a great deal of their power from a regional register, and are based in particular American experience.

This man has apparently written a novel about Brooklyn. I cannot imagine what it might be like, given his apparent partial, extremely literary and incomplete understanding of American authors and history.

Silvio111 says

This is a scholarly, literary critique of a handful of authors who had issues with their mothers. However, the title (*New Ways to Kill Your Mother*) suggested (to me) that it would take the perspective of how the act of writing about one's mother alters or affects that relationship. (And perhaps this says more about me than the author...)

As it turns out, Toibin's focus has nothing to do with how the mother perceived or was affected by the works of their child. No, it has more to do with how the author created or subtracted mother figures throughout his or her works. I found the Jane Austen section the most interesting; Toibin suggests that Jane Austen subtracted mothers from her plots in order to give her female protagonists more freedom to be the women they needed to be. This is interesting (although not entirely convincing), but it is not the book the I wanted to read.

After reading Alison Bechdel's riviting graphic (as in "cartoon," not as in "lurid") memoir, *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, which does indeed deal with (among other things) the issue I wanted to read about (how a mother reacts to an author's portrayal of her, and how that affects the author herself), I wanted to see who else had written about this.

To digress somewhat, some years ago, the songwriter, Sheryl Crow put a song (I think it was called "The Book") on her *GLOBE SESSIONS* album. It was about how she spent a holiday in Europe with an author, and later was chagrined to recognize scenes from that holiday in the author's novel. It is an anguished statement about how unfair it was of him to steal her acts and use them, and it also called into question the sincerity of their interaction, since, she assumed, he was only doing research.

At the time I thought this quite hypocritical; here she was, a songwriter, encapsulating her experiences (presumably with real people) into songs, and yet when she became the subject, instead of the author, she

cried foul. I am still of two minds about this.

But when I saw Toibin's book, being such a fan of his fiction (and his honesty), I thought he would shed some light on this topic. But alas, he did not.

Am I the only one seeking thoughts on this topic?

Bonnie says

Maybe this is not the Toibin book I should've started with. I'm not even sure what the point of this book is. It's supposedly about "writers and their families" and I suppose that would mean how a writer's family shaped their work, especially parental influence. Yeah, that is not what this is about. It's basically a collection of mini-biographies concentrating on writer's adult lives. Some are interesting. Some are not.

How Toibin chose the authors to write about is entirely a mystery, since he refuses to indulge in anything like a prologue, epilogue, intro, anything. Half the profiled writers are Irish, the other half are not. Almost everyone cheats on their wife with multiple partners. Apparently all the wives are cool with that. They are also almost all unhappy and were terrible fathers.

The most interesting chapter by far was on Thomas Mann and there was some fucked up shit in that one. Apparently the Mann family was big on incest. Mann's wife was rumored to be in love with her brother. Mann had a sexual interest in his eldest son (who was fourteen, which makes Mann not only incestuous, but also a pedophile). Mann's eldest two children were also *uncomfortably* close. The focus on this chapter really is less on Mann than on his two eldest children, who turned out to be way more interesting. They are like something out of *Brideshead Revisited*. Erika is the eldest child, her father's favorite, who could be just as sensual and pleasure-loving as Klein, but with a fierceness and iron will that he lacked. And she eventually got strongly into anti-Facist politics. Klein is his mother's favorite and is indolent and forever in his father's shadow. There is a book in there somewhere.

The other super interesting chapter was on Cheever, who I have never read but was a closeted homosexual who, like most of the writers in this book, was an asshole. He explicitly told people that he expected sexual favors for helping advance their writing careers. So the themes that are emerging here are: writers/Irish/unpleasant human beings/screwed up families. Then there is a chapter on Barack Obama. Because, I guess, why not? Obama isn't even primarily a writer. Unlike all the other people in the book, he is certainly not a fiction writer. He's not Irish. He doesn't cheat on his wife. He seems like a good father. One of these things is not like the other one. As far as I can tell, Toibin added this on just because.

Okay, Toibin, whatever, but I'm not playing your game. I'm calling this the rambling and directionless book it is. Though I am a little happy I was introduced to the hot mess that was the Manns.

Susan says

This is a fascinating account of authors and the importance of the family in their life and literature. It is split into two parts - Ireland and Everywhere Else. It begins with an essay on the Death of the Mother in novels of the late eighteenth century and the aunt figure in novels by authors such as Jane Austen and Henry James.

The section on Ireland looks at the relationship between W.B. Yeats and the humiliating letters from his father trying to promote his own literary endeavours, John Synge and his relationship with his religious mother, Samuel Beckett, Brian Moore, Sebastian Barry and Roddy Doyle. This part of the book also considers Irish nationalism, politics and language on their writing.

Elsewhere, there are essays on the Mann family (with their problems with sexuality, incest and suicide), sons emerging from their fathers literary failures, such as Jorge Luis Borges and the relationship with siblings. Tennessee Williams, for example, adored his sister Rose, whose mental illness cast a shadow of madness over his life.

This is a fascinating book about the importance of family, how authors attempt to give their characters escape and individualism they may not succeed in during their own lives and the ability (or lack of it) to escape family ties. I recommend this highly for all of us that are obsessed with reading and who like to know what motivates the work of authors.

B. Morrison says

When I heard the title of this book mentioned during Tóibín's appearance at a local college last week, I knew I had to have it. I first encountered his work at a used tool and book sale in a small market town in the Midlands. Rows of long tables filled the town hall, stacked with old saber saws and wrenches, as well as piles of well-thumbed books. I picked up a copy of *The Heather Blazing*, intrigued by the title, and devoured it that night. I liked it so much that I made my book club read it, and they too thought it one of the best books we'd read. We're all Tóibín fans now and have gone on to read together *The Master* and *Brooklyn*.

When the title of this book was mentioned last week, the audience laughed uneasily, and Tóibín drily agreed that it was not the best marketing ploy. I, however, wanted to purchase it on the basis of the title alone. Luckily I enjoyed the entire book. For me, these essays accomplished the highest purposes of such writing: they made me want to reread authors whose work I know well; they pushed me to explore the work of authors new to me; and they gave me insights that I can use in my own work.

A longer review will be posted on 11/26/2012 at <http://www.bmorrison.com/blog>.

Elle says

You think with a name like that it would be damn hard to be so boring but he finds a way don't worry
