



# Annie Dunne

*Sebastian Barry*

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## **Annie Dunne** Sebastian Barry

Annie Dunne and her cousin Sarah live and work on a small farm in a remote and beautiful part of Wicklow in late 1950s Ireland. All about them the old green roads are being tarred, cars are being purchased, a way of life is about to disappear. Like two old rooks, they hold to their hill in Kelsha, cherishing everything. When Annie's nephew and his wife are set to go to London to find work, their two small children, a little boy and his older sister, are brought down to spend the summer with their grand-aunt.

It is a strange chance of happiness for Annie. Against that happiness moves the figure of Billy Kerr, with his ambiguous attentions to Sarah, threatening to drive Annie from her last niche of safety in the world. The world of childish innocence also proves sometimes darkened and puzzling to her, and she struggles to find clear ground, clear light - to preserve her sense of love and place against these subtle forces of disquiet. A summer of adventure, pain, delight and ultimately epiphany unfolds for both the children and their elderly caretakers in this poignant and exquisitely told story of innocence, loss and reconciliation.

## **Annie Dunne Details**

Date : Published May 19th 2003 by Faber and Faber (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780571216444

Author : Sebastian Barry

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Ireland, Historical, Historical Fiction, European Literature, Irish Literature, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review Annie Dunne for online ebook

### Tony says

Has anyone else noticed? In movies, a character's name *alone* can define.

I submit to you: *Annie*.

In the movies, Annies are always: cute/pretty/beautiful; perky/down-to-earth; inquisitive to intelligent/well-read; loyal/wholesome; a perfect woman for a good man.

Think about it.

In *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner is devoted to 'Annie', in jeans and flannel shirts, a Berkeley degree, who believes in magic and the first amendment.

*Sleepless in Seattle*. Tom Hanks will never marry again. Except his son finds him 'Annie'. "You're 'Annie'?" And they hold hands forever after as Jimmy Durante sings 'Make Someone Happy'.

*Father of the Bride*. Of course his daughter's name is 'Annie'. And they play a one-on-one game of basketball.

*Bull Durham*. Susan Sarandon is 'Annie', who knows all about baseball and literature and gets weak at the greatest soliloquy since all that Hamlet stuff.

*Overboard*. Goldie Hawn is Joanna Stayton, filthy rich and insufferable, until she meets a carpenter (Kurt Russell) who rescues her, but she has amnesia. He renames her 'Annie' and she becomes lovable, funny and, well, all the things she could not be as a 'Joanna'.

*Bridesmaids*. (See, I'm current). The heroine (Annie) is down to earth and genuine, unlike that rich girl.

*Annie Hall*. Eponymous. Looks good in a tie and baggy slacks and a hat. (Annies always look good in hats).

*Annie*. 'I don't need sunshine now to turn my skies to blue. I Don't Need Anything But You.'

This is not a coincidence.

I have a mother and a daughter. Both Annie. If you made a movie about them, you would have to name them 'Annie'. I am that lucky.

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Annie Dunne is not Meg Ryan or Goldie Hawn or Amy Madigan. She is old, and hunch-backed (she prefers 'bowed') and bitter. Yet I loved her so.

There is something in the lilt of the best Irish writers that soothes me. Yes, even a hard case like me. There is no heart so black that it does not love a lullaby.

A bad man is made to swear as to the truth near the end of the book. There are only two books upon which to swear. One is the Bible, the other the collected works of Shakespeare. Which one would you push forward?

Annie Dunne will linger. I swear.

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### **Susan says**

You can tell Sebastian Barry is a poet. Every line in this book is beautiful. This is a quiet tale of an aging Irish woman who lives on her cousin's farm, and during one summer in the 1950's, she takes care of two young children, her great-niece and great-nephew. Though most people would hardly call the events of this summer world-shattering, for Annie Dunne it is a defining experience, and most of it takes place in her own mind. I truly love this author.

An example of Barry's prose: "Outside the heavy hot wind of the summer night stirs the fresh leaves of the sycamore. The moon no doubt will be riding to the south, where it sits above the sloping field. Suddenly, in the byre, Billy will fall asleep, just suddenly there where he stands, his guilt evaporating in slumber, like a human. The calves will curl up on the shitty hay and breathe heavily through their stupid noses like old men with colds. Even the hens will nervously sleep, the night fear o foxes infecting their henny dreams, whatever they might be, I could not say. And we will dry and settle the children in their beds, in their pyjamas aired by the sun on the fuchsia outside, with the good air of Kelsha in the crisp cotton, and they will sleep. And we will go to our bed, and we will sleep. Which seem like good matters."

And: "I can feel the heat getting into the very fibres of my blouse, a slight heat addressing a woman of slight heat. My bones are grateful where they lie in their wear slings. i life my face to the light and am amazed again at what great pleasures there are to be had on this earth."

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### **Elaine says**

I read and reviewed a Barnes & Noble Nook eBook edition.

Sebastian Barry makes us privy to that neverending internal dialogue we all engage in as we go about our daily doings. In superb prose, which brilliantly evokes Irish speech without the annoying misspellings characteristic of attempts to portray dialects, Barry allows us into Annie's rich internal meanderings: her resentments, her fears, her worries, memories, her delight in the yeasty smell of unbaked loaves of bread, and her genuine confusion when she finds her young charges lying naked in bed with the girl commanding her brother, "Lick it."

Barry brings to life the insecurity of a humpbacked woman who must depend on others for a home and who pays for the privilege of half a bed and daily food by backbreaking labor.

A great book. A good read. A must for lovers of prose. I savored every phrase by this uncommonly gifted artist

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## **John Needham says**

Simply superb. This is the third novel I've read by Sebastian Barry (the others were *The Secret Scripture* and *A Long Long Way*) and he's yet to disappoint. I doubt he ever will though. I hate to descend into stereotype (although I really don't do so disparagingly), but after reading just one sentence you know these are the words of an Irish writer, and a very fine one at that. If you want to experience something of what life was like living and eking out a tiny agricultural living in long-ago 1950s Ireland, read this evocative book.

As other reviewers have said, there's little plot in this comparatively slender novel, although a dramatic event near the end had me forgetting to breathe, so involved was I in the characters by then. Annie, her cousin Sarah and the children entrusted to their care for a few weeks are beautifully and so sympathetically drawn.

Mr Barry has the ability, as he also showed in *The Secret Scripture*, to completely inhabit the minds of women, particularly elderly ones, and invite you to join him, and he does so here with sharp insight and great humanity.

What this fine book lacks in page-turning plot it more than compensates for in wonderful, lyrical prose that's best savoured slowly, lingeringly rolling each evocative phrase around your brain – no, your soul – like luxuriating in a long warm comforting bath.

Just brilliant.

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## **Bruce says**

Told in the omniscient first-person voice by Annie Dunne, an elderly spinster living on a farm in County Wicklow, Ireland, with her equally old cousin, Sarah, this is the story of a summer in 1959 when she cares for her grand-niece and grand-nephew, age 6 and 4. The prose is typical Barry, lilting and lyrical, with all the delightful syntax of rural Ireland. I try to read it in my version of an Irish brogue and am captivated by Barry's gentleness and sensitivity, his ability to capture the ambiance of place and characters simply and succinctly. His use of the present tense in the narrative creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy. The life of the characters feels as if it is fifty years earlier than 1959, and it is hard to realize that this is rural Ireland in the mid-20th century.

"The years return us gradually to the afflictions and shames of childhood, it is a curiosity of existence."

This is a story of family, of joys and anguish, of misunderstandings and reconciliations, of loneliness and community, ultimately a story about love.

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## **Dem says**

**2.5 Stars**

Sebastian Barry is my favourite Irish author and this is my seventh novel by him. Annie Dunne is his second novel and for me his weakest link in the chain of novels. The prose which he is renowned for is not present in this book nor is his characters well developed compared to books like *The Secret Scripture* or *A Long Long Way* and this is just one of those reads where little happens and the plot is wanting in many ways.

*The book is a short read at under 230 pages and is set in a small farmhouse in Co Wicklow in the late 1950s. Annie Dunne an unmarried woman in her sixties who lives with her similarly solitary cousin Sarah on the farm. In the summer of 1959, they are asked to care for their grand-niece and grand-nephew whose parents are going to England to seek work.*

I normally love books set in this time frame in Ireland but this one just didn't work for me as I didn't get a sense of time and place or the characters just seemed flat and the prose not up to Barry's standard. Perhaps he has me spoilt with all his other great novels.

I still highly recommend *A Long Long Way* or *The Secret Scripture* *The Temporary Gentleman* or *On Canaan's Side*

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### **Lucinda says**

Another fantastic Sebastian Barry novel.

As part of a series that follows the fortunes of the Dunne family, this one catches up with Annie Dunne when she is entering her 'old age' and dealing with the insecurity of a woman who is dependent on others for a place to call home. There is a lot of tragedy in *Annie Dunne*, but they are tragedies of the smaller kind, ones that stem from the accumulation of years spent with lack of opportunity, lack of acknowledgement for one's contributions, with a growing awareness of all that one has missed out on in life because of circumstances beyond one's control.

But Annie Dunne, like most people, is not entirely self-aware. She does not see how her dwelling on all of this loss has made her bitter and appear as a hardened, sour woman to others. She does not hear her constant whingeing and how other people may find that unpleasant.

The events of the story bring Annie to a breaking point, but most of the turmoil occurs beneath the surface; she suffers - and creates for herself - a lot of inner torment that results in sudden bursts of anger that other people misinterpret or misunderstand. Still, Barry is such an empathetic writer that you really feel for Annie and what she is going through. This is what I enjoy so much about Sebastian Barry's writing: he takes us right into the murky depths of his characters' souls, and shows how even in the most mundane of lives there is so much complex thought and emotion. Beautiful writing.

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### **Stephen Kiernan says**

I expected this book, which was a gift from a friend, to tap the heart strings of my Irish heritage and make them sound lovely notes of appreciation and perhaps nostalgia.

For reasons I can't explain, and despite a character with an Irish anger I recognize from relatives (and admittedly sometimes myself), the story didn't grab me. Perhaps the existence of a new and more prosperous Ireland, or the fast evolution in the rural area where I live, made me feel less compelled by the change of dirt roads being paved.

Smart people have loved this book. I lasted till page 153.

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## **Eli says**

A simply wonderful read! Not plot-driven -- young brother and sister spend the summer with two spinster aunts on a small farm in Ireland -- but, oh, the writing is positively lyrical. No doubt this guy is Irish!

"At length against the long impulse of the night I go out into the starry yard to comfort the long ropes of my muscles and the field sticks of my bones. I carry the bed heat on the surface of my skin and the soft breeze of the night shows a great interest in me, raising the hairs on my arms."

"God is the architect, and I am content there, sleepless and growing old, to be friend to His fashioned things, and a shadow among shadows."

". . . for when the dark is broken by the fussy fingers of the dawn we must be up and about."

"Hopefully heaven itself will consist of this, the broadening cheer of light when I walk out into the morning yard. The stones already hot, softened by dawn. The rain deep in the earth seeps further down, and a lovely linen-like dryness afflicts the land. Grass becomes bright and separate, like a wild cloth. . . . You can almost hear the work of the sun on those long, patient things, the buds of the crab-apple tree, the little hinges of the sycamores. How fresh and alive the leaves even, shouting with green, delighting in life."

Res ispa loquitor.

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## **Fionnuala says**

There is nothing petty about Annie Dunne. She is, to the core of her being, an angry and bitter woman, but one possessed of a poet's sensibilities and a brave and loyal heart. Thank you, Sebastien Barry for creating this wonderful character and for preserving her, along with her rural Wicklow life, for future generations. I hope they will be able to appreciate her worth.

P. S. Sebastien Barry revisits Annie Dunne in his more recent novel "On Canaan's Side", which tells the story of Annie's youngest sister, Lily who emigrates to the US. In the novel, Lillie remembers Annie as being often cross, rarely smiling and having a very sharp tongue.

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## **Carla says**

At least one writer out there is willing to explore the heart and mind of someone who is not a contemporary, college-degreed, high-performing, successful but tormented over consumer who travels to Provence and dabbles in serial mating.

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## **Lorraine says**

For much of this book, I did not feel drawn to picking it up but when I did, I had a hard time putting it down.

I think the ambivalence is that the writing is so good but it brought me to a very uncomfortable place all the time. It was actually like a scary film, with danger lurking behind every shadow, like when you don't want to look but you can't turn it off either. I kept thinking, "oh no, don't go there, Annie!" My chest was tight with the suspense, the kind of suspense that I do not like, that makes me stay clear of scary movies. And yet it is a very ordinary story of a spinster in rural Ireland of the late fifties. Not at all like a scary film.

For me, this book rates 4 stars for its brilliant writing and its emotional impact. Even though I did not enjoy reading it, and did not like the emotions it drew out of me, I have to mark it as one of the most memorable.

For other readers, I think it would be hit and miss depending on what the reader is looking for and whether or not the author touches you with his writing. It is not the story but the telling of it that is so powerful. He brought me to this other world, so foreign, and made me care so much about Annie.

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### **Doriana Bisegna says**

Sebastian Barry does it again! I read *The Secret Scripture* and knew that I had come across a very talented writer. I have no idea why Irish fiction stirs my soul since I am as Irish as rigatoni with a bolognese sauce but alas it does just that! So does rigatoni with bolognese sauce but that would be for another time and maybe another story! Annie Dunne cracked me up as much as she angered me! The story is non eventful...no high drama, no plot twists nor turns...just a simple tale of two elderly spinsters trying to make do and following them along was like having the most wonderful dream! This little treasure took hold of my heart and it will be embedded there for awhile yet! I am ready for another Sebastian Barry! He just does it for me!

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### **Katherine says**

"And there is no thrashing about of branches to disturb the children, who, after all, are city children, and need time to adjust, and not just to the butter. Salted, unsalted, that is the difference, salted and unsalted life" (9).

"A day of hardship is a long day, good times shorten the day, and yet a life in itself is but the breadth of a farthing" (10).

"I am thinking about nothing, slipping from one idle thing to the next as one does beside a fire" (10).

"Billy Kerr...is a man with no qualities. There is probably a Billy Kerr, or someone like him, in all human affairs. Otherwise all would be well continually" (10-11).

"I gather her in my arms. She is only gentle bones. To think a person is a soul wrapped in this cage of bones. What an arrangement, how can we possibly be protected?" (12-13).

"Then he hovers there. There is no end to his ability to hover" (20).

"Neither is speaking. There is a sort of tea-drinking silence that country people have perfected over the centuries. A lot can get said in those silences, they are dangerous elements" (27).

"...well down from the sacred precinct of the hearth, where the human animals gathered and took their farthings of ease at nightfall" (46).

"There's more than Billy the pony in those tears, that silver deluge that marks her rough cheeks. There's other things, the tolling bells of other matters, the arrangement of little things that afflict us all, and give strength and engine to our tears, whenever they should fall. They are the tears of an ageing woman without a mate, I must surmise. But whether Billy Kerr could know this is another matter. Men know nothing but their own bellies, and if there is space for their feet they think all is well" (56).

"...the squeals out of them like the poor pig when I go to cut his throat, or feed him, one or the other" (57).

"The turf fire mutters in the murky hearth. The clock seems less anxious to seek the future, its tick more



content, slower. All is in the balance of a kind, the weight and the butter in the scales in sufficient harmony” (67).

“Her floury hands go to her thighs and she rest them there, imprinting the soft map of her palms” (67).

“Heavily the old clock tock-tocks in the dresser, it is a clock in fact without a tick to its name, only that old banging tock tock. Perhaps it was cheaper bought without the tick. Clocks for sale, clocks for sale, reduced price, owing to the lack of a tick” (69).

“...the silence not a real silence, but a roar of anticipation” (70).

“The murk of the darkened daylight hangs in the room. It is they who own the stormy sunlight outside” (71).

“Religion was a terrible burden to us as little girls, excepting the excitement after mass, when you could count your cousins alive on the church steps, and dead in the churchyard” (75).

“Sarah sleeps, the old embroidered blanket over her face, its hart and hounds forever caught hunting across the low, unstable hills of her breast” (82).

“‘My father will not even kill a bluebottle, though bluebottles eat poos,’ he says, gravely” (117).

“True, I never read those books, but lapped such knowledge from my father’s garrulous knees!” (136).

“It is like Eden, my own father used to say, in the bright dispensations of the summer months. These days that, even as you live through them, seem like memories, caught up as they are in the lost happinesses of other, similar days” (168).

“I would like to cleave his breastbone with a slash hook, now slash hooks are the topic...” (185).

“In the old days, a passing cart could not easily decline to give your bum a perch” (196).

“She pushes open her door and stands in the morsel of yard” (205).

“Even the halves of songs I know, our way of talking, our very work and ways of work, will be forgotten. Now I understand it has always been so, a fact which seemed to heal my father’s wound, and now my own. I think in the end he understood it too, and gained his salvation from that new courage he found, to go naked and unadorned in the next world. Even great kingdoms—Ireland, England herself—are subject to this law. How could this simple yard in Kelsha be exempt?” (227).

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## Teri says

I just finished reading this little gem of a book. Lovely and touching in many ways. Set in 1957 Ireland, the novel is told from the point of view of a 60-ish "spinster" who lives with a cousin on a farm in County Wicklow. Her nephew leaves his children with her, ages 4 and 6, for the summer. But this isn't a book about plot so much as a constant knowing of someone's very honest mind. Annie's descriptions are original and evocative, yet reflecting her personality and character.

I chose this book to read, bought it used at Amazon, because I have read 2 other novels by Sebastian Barry. I thought "A Long Long Way" should have won the BOoker Prize a few years ago -- it was shortlisted but I thought it was better than the novel that won. Today I read that his newest novel, "The Secret Scripture" (I've already ordered it) is in the 13-item Booker Prize Long list!

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## Jeff says

Annie Dunne is a hunchbacked spinster living with her cousin in rural Ireland in the 1950's. She is asked to

care for her young grand niece and nephew for a summer and as she tells of the mostly mundane events and hours of drudgery of that summer, the reader learns much of her life story, which turns out to be compelling. As much a character study as it is a novel, we learn of her fears and disappointments as well as her hopes and joys. The writing style is almost poetic and the Irish ways of speaking add authenticity. Annie shines through as a sympathetic and three dimensional character, at times petty and short-sighted, but also thoughtful and caring. Sebastian Barry is a gifted writer. It's not easy to make an interesting read out of such a basic story. I don't understand why he isn't more widely known and read. I can't wait to read more from him.

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### **Teresa says**

This starts off slowly -- which isn't a criticism -- spinning its tale and characterization and themes as a spider spins a graceful web. The beautiful, lyrical prose gets better and better as the story goes on.

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### **Sarah says**

The writing is beautiful. The story is of changing times; what once was is no more or quickly fading. Though I found the story slow I enjoyed seeing Annie Dunne's thoughts versus her words.

Annie struggles within herself to know her own self and place in the world. She is critical of others until she is shown otherwise, awkward in communicating with others. Though seemingly gruff I think she has a desire to love and be loved. It seems her own childhood hurts and self-loathing are large factors in how she has come to view the world.

She fiercely loves her great nephew and great niece and struggles with how to best care for them while they are in her charge. While being the caretaker of the children, she also struggles with her own future and worth.

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### **Colleen says**

You should not read Annie Dunne for action or a complicated plot. Sebastian Barry is a beautiful writer and tells this slice-of-life tale in the most lyrical way. Annie Dunne and her cousin, Sarah, live on a farm in 1950s Ireland. Day by day, they toil away, trying to understand and adjust to the progress sweeping across Ireland. This daily routine is upended by the arrival of a girl and her brother, the children of Annie's nephew, who will stay with the two older women for the summer while their parents look for work. The unsettling attentions to Sarah by a local man also threatens Annie's security. Sebastian Barry succeeds, when so many male writers don't, in creating the voice of an elderly woman. I'm always impressed when a writer chooses to write about someone completely outside his realm. Annie is feisty and curmudgeonly but her sense of vulnerability shows through that veneer. She is strong but constantly aware of the dangers in her life--from creepy gypsies trying to break into the house, to runaway horses, to a suitor to Sarah who could potentially kick Annie out, leaving her homeless and alone. That sense of foreboding permeates her daily thoughts. The arrival of the children break the two women out of their rut as they find ways to include them in farm life, as well as entertain them. But then Annie witnesses something disturbing and once more, the darkness descends

over her. Let's just say this incident goes above and beyond "playing doctor." I, too, felt equally alarmed by this. But the beauty of Barry's writing truly shines through in this novel. I just have to share a couple of passages: "But her face is smiling, beaming, she keeps turning her head like a lighthouse engine, and shines her yellow smile down on the children." And: "Heavily the old clock tock-tocks in the dresser, it is a clock in fact without a tick to its name, only that old banging tock, tock. Perhaps it was cheaper bought without the tick. Clocks for sale, clocks for sale, reduced price, owing to the lack of a tick." Life goes on for Annie and Sarah--the seasons change and the years pass but their work remains the same. They know they are swimming against the tide of progress, but they soldier on anyway. This passage, written about Annie's brother, Willie, who died in WWI, sums up their dilemma perfectly: "He died in the mud like a beast for us, our Willie, so that everything could continue as before, and despite that he did that, and gave his life, it never did."

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## **Stephanie says**

Two aging spinsters barely make a living on a small farm in Ireland in the 1950s. For a summer, Annie gets to care for her niece and nephew while their parents are getting settled in London. Parenting a four year old boy and a six year old girl are challenging, but when a man decides to try to marry her companion Sarah, she finds her world crashing down around her. Sebastian Berry understands the thoughts and feelings of an elderly woman and writes this story using Annie's voice. Reading it you can almost hear the Irish accent and see the countryside.

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