

**BOOK GROUP 2  
JANUARY 2023**

**NORA WEBSTER BY COLM TOIBIN**

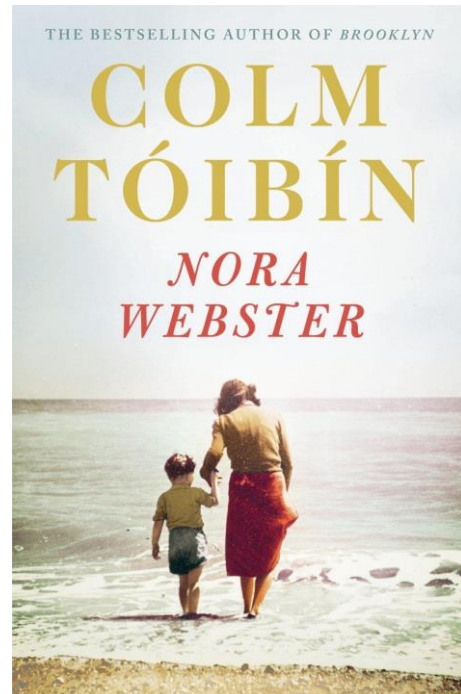
This book is set in Ireland, near Wexford, against the backdrop of “The Troubles” and portrays almost 3 years of the life of Nora Webster. It opens after she has been widowed for 6 months having lost the love of her life, Maurice, and it chronicles her struggle to cope with widowhood alongside caring for her 4 children and making a living to support them. Although she held down a responsible office job when she was single, she was then “cocooned” in her marriage and took on the role of wife and mother and is now expected to take on the traditional Irish role of widowhood.

The first weeks reveal a numbness of her feelings and a worried but detached anxiety for how her two sons were feeling. She faces up to the selling of their beloved summer holiday cottage to generate money. Many, too many, friends and family offer advice and support. This angers Nora and she rejects their offers. This sometimes shows her as harsh, cold and selfish – not entirely likeable! She wants to go her own way in her own time and this creates conflict. One of the turning points for the returning of Nora’s natural independence and rebellious streak is when she decides to get her hair dyed much to the delight of the village gossips. When she returns to work in the Gibneys office we see how she is an efficient office worker and copes easily with the job. This gives her confidence which continues to grow.

Nora accepts that “ life must go on “ now learning to make decisions on her own , watching her sons develop , and giving herself permission to feel passionate again about the sea, nature, music, her own accomplished singing talents, and hopefully much more. The delight the author takes in describing both the main character and many other busybodies in a very traditional slow to change Irish village, reminded one member of Dylan Thomas’ “Under Milkwood”, a marvellous Welsh portrait of village life .

The story ends when she has been without him for 3 years and has finally accepted his loss and has to accept also that she has a new, unwanted future which she must shape for herself. The story is a chronicle of the many ups and downs, new challenges and experiences she must go through to find herself again. She has support from family and friends but shows a stoic, independent desire to escape from the “grieving widow” persona others want her to adopt.

Some additional comments from members:



"I thought I already had a good handle on all things Irish, brought up and educated as a Catholic with nuns, monks and neighbours but this book was a very different experience and a very rewarding read. Direct honest prose I was able to read fast and grasp an extraordinary sense of a person's ability to deal with grief and be uncompromising with the overbearing, intrusive people around her who felt they should offer advice. I felt our writer was able to describe a human need for space and how to break the pattern of following rituals performing to other folk's expectations."

"I wondered if the author Colm Toibin had based his main character Nora on someone he'd known well who had recently become widowed , as the description of her controlled grief at losing such a loved husband ( and who the local community also loved ) was such a dense analysis of confused feelings and thoughts , in almost a masculine way".

"I don't think we have a description of what Nora looks like all through the book, but we do know her innermost feelings and reactions to others. She is feisty and determined to be practical in the decisions she makes. Restricted by life in a small Irish town in the 60s, having to support her family the best way she knows, she looks for something to give her life more meaning. In the end she finds singing as her "saviour from the drudgery of life".

"I enjoyed this book from the beginning and was amazed how the author identified with a woman's feeling and wrote so clearly about them. I didn't relate to her connection with the type of music she enjoyed so much, however it filled a hole in her life. I liked Donal's interest in photography and my favourite bit was when she started to rebel and become stronger in order to get Conor re-instated in the A class. The author has a knack of making you feel very involved especially with Donal and his struggles with boarding school. I loved the way Nora solved the problems she was having."

"I found the section about her mother dying particularly moving and well written and the ghost of Maurice talking to her. I will be reading more of Toibin's work."

"This story shows the importance of family and religion to the Irish."

"I did not enjoy this book. And I am baffled by the remarks made by the reviewers. The different strands of the story seemed very contrived to me. I felt as though the story was being written by a teenager. Hopefully someone can put me right as I feel I must have missed the point somewhere. Much of the vocabulary irritated me - It felt at times that it was a translation from a foreign language. Perhaps I am not used to reading Irish authors!"

And finally..... some members of the group who had been widowed spoke eloquently and openly about how they could relate to Nora's experience and attitude and the difficulty of coping with the many strands of the impact of the aftermath. This brought home the reality of widowhood and enabled all of us to get even more out of the book for which I thank them.

Christine Wright