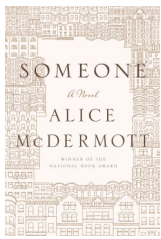


Someone



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No one else writes with the lyric flow of Alice McDermott. Or covers childhood and adolescence with so much immediacy as though it were happening right now. When I surfaced for breaths while reading this novel, I had to remind myself that I wasn't in a stuffy walk-up in Brooklyn listening to children play ball and jump rope in the street.

The novel tells the story of Marie Commeford as a child, teen, young woman and as an older woman with grown children of her own. Marie is the stubborn second child of Irish Catholics. Her brother Gabe is remarkably obedient and good, already in grade school, on a path for the priesthood, whereas Marie is rebellious, adventurous, and not one for rules.

Her dad takes her on walks to speakeasies and encourages her fiery temperament; her mother tries to discipline her and tamp down her rebellious spirit. Saturday mornings, she runs to her best friend Gerty's house and buries herself in her mother's lap, but Gerty's kind mother dies in childbirth. This tragedy convinces Marie to refuse to learn how to cook. Gerty had learned and look what happened to her.

The children on the street include one blind boy. The other children mostly mock him. They are mean and loud and will tease anyone about anything, often they are cruel. But Marie is tough and these kids grow up together. At 17, she falls in love with Will Hartnett, a man with a gimpy leg and a limp. He woos, asks her to marry him, but soon abandons her for a rich judge's daughter.

Marie is heartbroken. She had planned her escape from the family apartment, an entry into a comfortable adult life. Gabe, who by this time has been ordained but left the priesthood, comforts her and they walk for hours in the city.

After graduation, Marie refuses to take a job in Manhattan. Her neighbor Pegeen worked there and died suddenly from a fall after work, so Marie associates downtown with danger. Her mother and brother cut job ads out for her that she ignores. Before long, her mother makes an appointment with the undertaker for a position as his assistant. Marie plans on refusing the job until the funeral parlor owner, Mr. Fagin, offers her five expensive dresses so she can look presentable at wakes and funerals. She's never had five new dresses in her life! This nails the job for her. Soon she becomes the "angel of mercy" at end-of-life events for the neighborhood.

As you might guess from the description, not a lot happens in this novel. But McDermott so masterly captures the emotions of family life, the bonding of friends, the passing of time, the smells and sounds of city life that you feel as though you are living each moment. For another literary novel about a female assistant that guides you through an unfamiliar world, try Ann Patchett's *The Magician's Assistant*.

Posted by Dory L. on March 19, 2014

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