

Sample Critique by Annie Mydla

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Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman

New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

This memoir was written in 1996 by the prominent Irish newspaper columnist, Nuala O'Faolain, and is a traditionally-published and well-regarded book. It will never be revised or revisited by its author, who passed away in 2008. To provide a demonstration, I have written this critique as though the book were a manuscript or self-published book passing through our hands at Winning Writers, with the potential for future drafts.

Trigger warning: Miscarriage, sexual abuse of a child, rape

Thank you for submitting your book, *Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman*, for critique. First, I'll summarize my findings. Then I'll move on to a more in-depth discussion of the technical execution of the book, its structure and contents, and its language. Finally, I'll give some concrete recommendations for how to move forward to a potential future draft. I was deeply impressed by *Are You Somebody?* and hope that my comments will be of some use to you as the book develops.

1. Critique summary

Are You Somebody? is a memoir with the soul of a documentary, representing with great power the brutal conditions and social changes in mid-to-late 1900s Ireland as experienced by the author, Nuala O'Faolain.

The strongest points of the book include the author's portraits of her parents and their marriage; the concrete details about the author's own experiences, her external environment, and the interesting and often well-known people of her acquaintance; and the many incisive and convincing insights on Ireland's changing social landscape.

Additionally, the author's representations of herself as a survivor of childhood neglect and abuse, molestation as a young teen, rape, and miscarriage serve the valuable role of destigmatizing these topics and empowering readers who have had similar experiences. For this reason, the book serves not just a literary, but a social, purpose. Missing from the memoir too often, however, are the author's own emotional reactions to these events.

The technical execution of the book, as well as its use of language, are ideal for the subject matter. Overall, though many readers may feel that the story is too lacking in details about the author's emotional life, this is an absorbing and masterfully executed work with an important social function.

2. Technical execution

May include layout, spelling and grammar, technical consistency, technical quality of illustrations, font, accessibility

I read the book as a Kindle Edition eBook, and found that the technical execution was impeccable. The layout is consistent throughout. Chapters are long enough to be substantial, but never lag. The spelling and grammar are flawless, and the font is perfectly accessible. Links are provided in the front of the book to the first page of each chapter. The only objection I have is the same I have with eBooks generally—that progress through the book is given in terms of percentage read, rather than with page numbers. Though this is doubtless practical from the eBook maker's point of view, it makes it harder to cite passages in a review or critique.

Besides the memoir itself, the book includes supplementary materials of great interest: A foreword by Frank McCourt, an afterword reprinting readers' appreciative reactions to the original edition, and a transcript of a radio interview with the author from 2008. The formatting in these additional materials matches the main body of the book, and allows a sense of seamlessness that enhances the experience of the whole.

3. Content and structure

Character, plot, theme, setting, internal consistency, structure, pacing

Are You Somebody? follows the author's life story in a consistently linear way, from childhood to middle age. Often, a strictly linear plot has the potential to lose readers' attention, but that's not an issue in this case. Interest is maintained throughout by the swift pacing and through the inclusion of highly pertinent and specific details about events and surroundings, in particular about the author's acquaintanceships, friendships, and intimate relationships. Some of the people involved are well-known: Philip Larkin, Mary Levin, and Norman Mailer, to name a few. The book is very good at providing one of the main delights of memoirs by public figures, which is to make famous people seem familiar and within our reach.

Even more interesting are the lives of the normal people in the book, especially those close to the author, such as her parents. The arc of their personal lives and marriage is one of the central elements of the book, with many resonant details. Readers with a similar background will see their own parents in this portrait, a potentially cathartic experience.

Generally speaking, the author is a master of the portrait, able to bring life, value, and a sense of detail within a few short sentences to every character in the book. This is especially useful given that one of the primary points of interest over the course of the book is the consistent focus on material and social challenges in Ireland from the 1950s to the 1990s. The author's mastery of portraiture allows her to put a human face on each of these complex issues, augmenting the book's underlying documentary impulse with a dynamic intimacy.

Importantly, the author also uses herself as a model for many of these social challenges and changes. The memoir is not only a documentary, but a personal testimony. By holding herself up as a woman who has undergone, and done, traditionally stigmatized and taboo things, the author helps to break the taboo and stigma, to relieve readers' shame, and to contribute to the incremental progress of a society healing from the brutality and repression of an earlier age.

The representation of the self is often, paradoxically, the greatest challenge for a memoirist, and the book is not immune to this difficulty. I found that throughout the

book, the author is noticeably reticent when it comes to sharing her emotional states and reactions. Although we learn many concrete details about her experiences, we are excluded from the emotional side of her life as she focuses, again and again, on the experiences of other people.

For example, at 25% of the way through the book, the author speaks of how she was raped, "a few awful minutes of red-hot pain", by a man who has just learned that his mother has died. We are very much made to feel sympathy for the man, but we learn barely anything of the author's own response to the incident—only that this was the only time that "sex made sense" to her during her life. This is a statement that is hard to understand without further elaboration. I came out of that episode feeling like I knew more about the man's emotional state than I knew about the author's.

At 38%, the author says that she has "very deep feelings about being childless," but does not illustrate or explain them.

At 68%, the author states that her "feelings about [her] father were (and still are) contradictory", but immediately proceeds to talk about her father's possible feelings about her, rather than her feelings about him.

At 72%, the author writes about how, after the death of her mother, who suffered from severe alcoholism, she attends an Adult Children of Alcoholics meeting with her sister. When the facilitator of the meeting asks the group members to each draw a floor plan of the house they grew up in, the author "drew the flat instead, that [her] mother had died in," and where the author herself had never lived. Even in ACA, where the focus is explicitly on the individual themselves, rather than the alcoholic, the author focuses on details of the other person's life instead of her own.

Perhaps the author is purposefully keeping herself out of the narrative in order to allow her readers to project their own psychology, feelings, and reactions into the framework of relatable experiences she provides. However, though some readers will appreciate this documentary approach, it must be remembered that the book is being marketed as a memoir, and not a documentary or hard-nonfiction book. Many readers who know Nuala O'Faolain as a public figure will come to the book expecting, and hoping, for much more insight into the author's personal life than is represented here.

They may feel alienated by the avoidance of the consideration of the author's own psychological and emotional states. To me, this represents the greatest liability within the book in its current form.

4. Use of Language

Register, tone, tonal consistency, literary devices, artistic style, imagery, sense of mastery, relation to themes

I found the use of language in this book to be highly superior, and suited to the content in every way. The memoir generally is geared to make many details and complex ideas maximally accessible to readers, including those underprivileged in material status education, and the language used is appropriately straightforward.

A medium register is used, remaining conversational without becoming either academic or slangy. The language is concrete rather than poetic, with few metaphors or similes. Hyperbole is avoided, although understatement is practiced throughout. All allusions to people, events, and works of literature are given context in a concrete and succinct way.

Sentences are short or medium-length, and rarely contain more than two clauses. Occasionally, direct quotes from interactions are included, but rarely last more than one sentence. Block quotes are also used for pieces of writing, for example with letters, most often as a single short paragraph (3-7 sentences).

These linguistic choices are ideally suited to the book's documentary and testimonial functions, making complex experiences, times and events accessible and identifiable to English-language readers from most walks of life.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

Are You Somebody? is already excellent in terms of its technical execution, linguistic accomplishment, social messages, and its wealth of concrete details regarding people, places and events. Because of this, the author has the opportunity to push even

farther, and tackle what is undoubtedly one of the most difficult elements for many memoirists: the personal dimension.

Memoir readers come to a book not only to learn facts, but to get an inside sense of who the author is: how the events of the author's life affected them personally, and how, despite their challenges, they managed to achieve the accomplishments that have made their lives notable.

This may sound obvious. And yet, many memoirists have trouble believing that readers will want to know these things about *them*. As a result, their books focus very much on other people, and on external events, places, and things, avoiding discussion of the author's internal life.

Certain passages in the book ("Biographers of Irish writers will be scraping the barrel very deep if they ever come to me...", 35%), as well as the author's training as a documentarian, lead me to believe that she, too, may be under impression that the personal side of her life—her emotions, psychology, strategies, and struggles—will seem superficial, uninteresting, or simply not valuable to readers. However, I believe that readers will be deeply interested in the contents of the author's mind and heart, and will notice their absence from the memoir.

I would like to share some of the questions I was left with after reading. Perhaps if the author decided to pursue another draft, more information could be included on any of the following:

In the book, we learn many of the outward details of the author's work life, but are given almost no emotional context. How did she feel while at work? What did her jobs mean to her, personally? How did setbacks and successes impact her emotionally? What were her emotions in regards to the people she met throughout her work? What attracted her emotionally to the work in the first place, and how did these emotions develop? What were the emotional tensions in her work life—with colleagues, with the material, as a woman in a male-dominated environment? What allowed her to succeed in her field compared to others who might have had similar career goals?

Some episodes in the book, such as undergoing a molestation in a public theater as a child, miscarriage, rape, and domestic abuse, are passed over with barely any discussion. Could time be spent talking about the emotional impact of these events, both at the time and later? What was the author's emotional journey? How did she cope?

As a young girl and the child of an alcoholic parent, the author endured neglect and domestic abuse, was laden with adult responsibilities, and was exposed to much suffering in the lives of others around her. In the book, we receive some of the author's considered opinions on this time in her life—but I was left wondering about her feelings. How did these times affect the author emotionally, both as a girl and today? How did they inform her life path? Her relationships? Her sense of self?

The author's fifteen-year relationship with the author and activist Nell McCafferty is of intense interest, and without doubt a top reason that many readers will seek out the book. And yet, though we learn some of the practical details of the author's life with McCafferty, personal feelings about the relationship are passed over almost completely. What was the emotional arc of the relationship? How did the women first become attracted to each other, why did they stay together, and what led to their eventual separation? How was this relationship different from or similar to others in the author's life, emotionally speaking?

Are You Somebody? is a wonderful achievement as a documentary, opening readers' eyes to the struggles of Irish society of the second half of the 1900s. By holding up, modeling, contextualizing, and working to destigmatize a wide range of complex behaviors and social issues, the book is a selfless act of public service. And yet, if we are to read the work as a memoir, it feels like only half the story, covering the facts of the author's life but not its inward truths. The value of the book as a documentary—as a testimony in which readers can see their own lives—would not be harmed, but greatly enhanced, by extending the scope from the external to the internal.

To the author: Thank you so much for submitting your book for critique. I am extremely glad to have had the opportunity to read about your life, and am grateful

for the expansion of my knowledge about the Ireland of that time and its struggles. I hope that my comments may have some value, and wish you all the best in your writing.