

The Copper Beech Short Guide

The Copper Beech by Maeve Binchy

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Contents

The Copper Beech Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

The Copper Beech has seven main characters: Madeline Ross, Maura Brennan, Eddie Barton, Dr. Jims, Nora Kelly, Nessa Ryan, Richard Hayes, and Leonora Murphy.

Madeline Ross is one of the teachers at the Shancarrig school. She lives a lonely life with her mother, but she finds a friend in the new priest, Father Barry. The two become close friends, and then Maddy falls in love with Father Barry. When Father Gunn suspects that the two of them are having, or are about to have, an affair, Father Barry is sent to do missionary work in Peru. Maddy is faithful to Father Barry in his absence, but he falls in love with another woman.

Maura Brennan grows up in a poor family with an alcoholic father. Maura's dream is to stay in Shancarrig and have a home of her own. She thinks her dream is being fulfilled when she gets pregnant with Gerry O'Sullivan's child and he promises to marry her, but it is not. Gerry leaves her when he discovers their child has Down Syndrome.

Nevertheless, Maura loves her son Michael. In a surprise turnaround, she finds Mrs. Darcy's emerald necklace and receives a large amount of money to keep quiet about the necklace's whereabouts. With this money, Maura is able to buy a cottage for herself and Michael, and eventually start a home for children with Down Syndrome, ultimately discovering a very different happiness than she ever expected.

Eddie Barton is raised alone by his mother. Eddie loves collecting and pressing flowers. His mother and his friends do not understand his fascination, so when Eddie finds a pen pal named Chris Taylor who understands him, he is willing to pretend to be a girl to keep the correspondence. After four years of writing to each other, Chris admits she knew Eddie was a boy, and the two fall in love. After more letters, Chris visits Shancarrig, her visit quickly turning permanent.

When Dr. Jims, a young, ambitious doctor, arrives in Shancarrig, he is taken in by Dr. Nolan. Dr. Jims becomes the secondary doctor of Shancarrig. Dr. Jims falls in love with Frances Fitzgerald soon after arriving, and Dr.

Nolan encourages them to get married.

After Dr. Nolan's death, Dr. Jims becomes the only doctor in Shancarrig.

Dr. Jims and Frances have two daughters and try repetitively to have a son.

When a boy is finally born to them, Frances dies during childbirth. Dr. Jims is never able to forgive his son Declan for surviving birth when Frances does not. Dr. Jims distances himself from Declan. He tries to have as little to do with the child's upbringing as possible and does not miss him much when he leaves for college. Ironically, Dr. Jims and Declan have their first intimate moment when Dr. Jims arranges for the abortion of his son's baby.



Nora Kelly and her husband run the Shancarrig school. The two are not able to have children, so Nora's sister's child is a favorite of theirs. When her sister Helen and her daughter are visiting Nora, Helen is killed by a runaway horse cart. Nora and Jim are left to take care of Maria. Maria fulfills their desire for a child and fills their home with love. The Kellys raise Maria always fearing the child's father will ask for her return to America. Nora's prayers are finally answered when Maria's father visits Shancarrig to announce he is remarrying and wants the Kellys to raise Maria.

Nessa Ryan is the daughter of a domineering mother and a submissive father. Nessa's mother runs the Ryan Hotel. Nessa goes to the Shancarrig school with Leo Murphy, Maura Brennan and Eddie Barton. As a child, Nessa is embarrassed by her mother's assertiveness. She wonders if gypsies left her on the doorstep of the hotel.

Nessa spends much of her time wishing for friends. When she is eighteen, Nessa meets Richard Hayes. She develops an interest in him, and he in her.

The attention Nessa receives from Richard boosts her confidence and allows her to pursue the person she truly loves, Niall, Richard's cousin.

Richard Hayes and his parents visit his aunt and uncle in Shancarrig every year when he is a child. He resents the visits because he believes Shancarrig is a boring village; he would much rather be in Dublin. When he is older and working in a firm in Dublin, Richard is fired from his job because his girlfriend, a judge's daughter, is supposedly pregnant. One of Richard's girlfriends had become pregnant three years before. After this announcement, Richard is sent to Shancarrig to work in his uncle's solicitor office. During his years of exile, Richard pursues Nessa Ryan, then finds a married woman and falls in love. Richard's affair with Gloria Darcy begins as a sexual fling, but Richard becomes hooked by the fascinating woman.

Gloria never intends for the affair to be more than sex. She is content in her marriage. Through this relationship Richard learns what love is.

Leo Murphy, a curly-haired child, grows up in The Glen, the largest house in Shancarrig. Early in her life she knows her family is different. Her father does not have a job and her mother does not associate with the town. Her parents do not even share the same bedroom. When Leo is fourteen she unknowingly witnesses her mother's lover running from the house.

Three weeks later, Leo witnesses her mother killing the man. Immediately her family covers up the crime and pretends that nothing has happened.

Leo's life is changed. Her mother loses her sanity and spends time lying on the rock heap that covers her lover's body.

Leo turns to Foxy Dunne for comfort but cannot yet tell him her family's secret. Years later when the two decide to marry, she confides in him and he comforts her.



Social Concerns

The Copper Beech, Binchy develops in the lives of the people of Shancarrig through seven interacting characters.

The Copper Beech addresses the difficulty of celibacy, within the priesthood and before marriage among the Catholic Church's parishioners. The relationship between Madeline Ross and Father Barry never develops past friendship, even though Madeline wants a deeper, intimate relationship with the priest.

Maura Brennan gives in to a sexual relationship in hopes of finding love.

In a roundabout way, the relationship does bring her love through her son Michael, conceived out-of-wedlock but born in wedlock. Nessa Ryan debates having a sexual relationship with Richard Hayes, but decides the danger involved with such a relationship outweighs the possible pleasure. She decides love and marriage are more important to wait for. Richard Hayes has many sexual relationships, most without love. He finally finds love in his affair with Gloria Darcy, but it only causes him pain. Leonora Murphy's mother's sexual affair ruins her family, bringing about a murder that destroys the feelings of security the family once had. The copper beech, the tree in the Shancarrig Catholic School yard for which the novel is named, becomes a central metaphor for the intertwining lives of the people of Shancarrig. The students of the school develop a tradition of carving their names or initials into the gnarled bark on graduation day. This ritual gives the students permanence in their society and emphasizes Binchy's strong belief in the need for personal and community involvement.

Techniques

Each of the chapters in *The Copper Beech*, except for the first and last, have the title of a character's name. The first chapter is called, "Shancarrig School," which focuses on the school, and the last "A Stone House and a Big Tree" focuses on what is left of the school after the children leave. Each of the chapters in between tells the story of a character's life, the titles indicating the narrative view the chapter will take.

The third person view in the novel allows the characters' experiences to be seen intimately without having the novel voiced through first person point of view.

Themes

In *The Copper Beech*, Binchy uses Father Barry to stress the difficulty the Catholic Church has finding and keeping young priests who are willing to be celibate. Father Barry's strong belief in God and the need for good works make Barry a good candidate for the priesthood. Many Catholic men share Father Barry's enthusiasm for God and lack of enthusiasm for celibacy. Binchy is insinuating, quietly, that the Catholic Church should reconsider its stand on allowing priests to marry. In addition, Binchy's feminism surfaces in Nessa Ryan's and her mother's desire to run their own commercial establishment.



Key Questions

One of the novel's premises is the strength of the bond of a small town on its inhabitants, when they are placed under stress of the changing religious sexual and religious tensions in the 1950s. The series of interlocking stories about ordinary people is given dimension through Binchy's empathetic insights.

1. Is Maddy brainwashed by the Family of Hope or has she lost her sanity?
2. Should Leo's father have called the police when her mother shot Danny?
3. Why did Chris's parents not question their daughter's staying to live with Eddie and his mother?
4. Should Father Barry remain a priest? Was it for the best that Father Barry left the parish?
5. Did Maura believe Gerry would marry her and stand by her forever?
6. Does Dr. Kelly feel remorse for killing the child of the son he never loved?
7. Did Nessa love Niall when she turned her attention to him?
8. Why did Richard marry a woman like Vera after loving Gloria Darcy?
9. Will Danny's body ever be exhumed?
10. Why is the novel titled The Copper Beech?

Literary Precedents

While Irish male authors have a long line of literary precedents, Irish female authors have only flourished fairly recently. Virginia Woolf, a British author, often decried the paucity of women writers in general. Binchy and other contemporary Irish women authors such as Edna O'Brien, Julia O'Faolain, Jennifer Johnston, and Clare Boylan (to name a few) owe an allegiance to turn of the century novelist Maria Edgeworth and her domestic saga *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Other precedents include Edith Somerville and Violet Martin's (E.O.E. Somerville and Martin Ross) *The Real Charlotte* (1894), and the writings of the early 1900s of Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin, and Molly Keane.



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