This Year It Will Be Different: And Other Stories Short Guide

This Year It Will Be Different: And Other Stories by Maeve Binchy

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

The brevity of short stories leaves Binchy little room for character development in this collection. Themes drive these stories. Many of Binchy's characters may seem typecast, but that is because typecasting is a useful shorthand for conveying the kinds of difficult and irritating people who do make Christmas a chore. Binchy's lack of fine detail, however, is compensated by swift, deft brush strokes that create memorable (if uncomplicated) characters.

The two grannies in "The Best Inn in Town" appear on the scene rather abruptly and do not really do much. But readers come to know their characters when Binchy writes that one has "a lip that curled all of its own," and the other possesses "a tinkling laugh that would freeze the blood." The grandmother in "The Ten Snaps of Christmas" has a very minor role. Yet this woman reveals her character when, after unwrapping a gift of hair rollers, she takes "a plug off one of the lamps immediately in order to try them out."

Much of Binchy's appeal to American readers comes from her characters' use of indirect, ironic speech. Characters often use the form of one kind of message to convey the content of a message that says the reverse. Mrs. Dunne in "The Best Inn in Town" uses the form of a compliment to convey a message of criticism when she maintains that she admires young women like her daughter-in-law who never bother with makeup or dressing up in smart clothes just to please their husbands.

Physical details also become windows to a character's soul, as they do in "Pulling Together." Lassie Clark replies to inquiries "[w]ithout bothering to move the curtain of hair that hid her eyes and mouth." And "She had a way of shrugging her disapproval and boredom without even seeming to move her shoulders."

Although Binchy's stories do not allow for the same detailed character development as her novels, she does employ the humanizing and often comic touches that have become her hallmarks. Because this collection contains a cross-section of humanity who represent a broad array of social concerns, Binchy often depends on characters who are instantly recognizable rather than ones who grow and develop in complex ways.

Social Concerns

This collection of fifteen short stories centers on the stresses and strains of contemporary personal and family relationships for characters living in England, Ireland, Australia, the United States.

While Maeve Binchy touches on the cultural differences among the countries, her central concern is the lacerating effect Christmas season can have on people everywhere.

Binchy examines the effect of holiday stress in a variety of contemporary social arrangements. Four of the stories deal with traditional family structures and depict familiar holiday situations. In "A Hundred Milligrams," a couple spends Christmas with a mother who is critical of their lifestyle and the lack of a traditional code in their relationship. Beneath the lens of her microscope, they develop their own code. In "The Best Inn in Town," two grandmothers who despise each other make a ritual holiday visit to their progeny. While the son and daughter squirm, the grandchildren adapt disequilibrium into their notion of what constitutes a Christmas tradition. Ethel, the main character in "This Year It Will Be Different," rebels against all the years she has prepared for Christmas without any family help. The difference this year, she decides, is that she will do nothing to make Christmas happen and instead spend her time watching television. Her decision does light a fire under her family, but Binchy's ironic plot twist leaves Ethel with a different sort of assistance than she had hoped for. "The Ten Snaps of Christmas" deals with the anxiety surrounding choosing the right gift for a sulking teenager who is never content with any parental decision. Ironically, the teenager turns the unwanted gift into a lever for increasing her political power within the family structure.

"What Is Happiness?" puts a more contemporary spin on the holiday problems faced by families. An American couple and their young son escape from New York to spend Christmas in Ireland.

The choice is based less on their Irish heritage than on the desire to flee a woman whose fatal attraction for the head of the household seems to peak during high holidays. The young but precocious Parnell (who is reminiscent of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of The Catcher in the Rye, 1951; see separate entry), learns to be wary of the traps inherent in male/female relationships and comes to appreciate instead "the company of birds and men."

Two of Binchy's stories deal with the special Christmas problems faced by blended families. Stepmothers exhaust themselves trying to create a holiday that will cancel the ghosts of Christmases past.

Jenny, the focal character in "The First Step of Christmas" must learn to deal with a sulky, fourteen-year-old stepdaughter home on school holiday. Jen in "The Civilized Christmas" has an eight-year-old stepson. Both women overwork and exhaust

themselves trying to create Christmas traditions where there have been none before. While their efforts to manufacture the perfect external trappings fail, both do succeed in creating improved understanding and more open communication.

Three stories concern single women in love triangles. In "Christmas Timing," a young woman with a married lover fills her empty Christmas day by taking a pop psychology quiz in a newspaper. She hopes the quiz will convince her that the relationship is right, but the pop psychology turns out to be a substitute for common sense. In "The Christmas Baramundi," a single woman begins a promising relationship with a man in a fish market on Christmas Eve. When they meet for lunch three days later, she discovers that he is direct and sexual. She had hoped for indirectness and a slowly-evolving romance. His crass Christmas gift becomes a symbol of the differing styles and romantic expectations that create communication barriers between the sexes. In "Pulling Together," Penny exorcises a married lover from her life by opening her heart and her home to people who truly need her.

Those who live outside a family structure are the focus of five stories that are bound together by the motifs of abandonment and holiday loneliness. Five years after being jilted, the title character of "Miss Martin's Wish" decides to take her canceled honeymoon trip to New York. There she meets a man disappointed by a homosexual love affair who has a wish that she can help fulfill. The children of the focal character in "Season of Fuss" realize that simplifying the buzz and bustle of their mother's holiday season leaves her too much time to ponder the loneliness of widowhood. The passively critical residents of a nursing home band together and take charge of lives they believed they had lost long ago in "The Hard Core." Meg, the widowed protagonist of "Traveling Hopefully" prepares to bless a son whose Australian lifestyle and values differ radically from her own. And the American widower in "'A Typical Irish Christmas . . .'" reconciles an Irish father with his daughter's new lifestyle in the United States. In each of these five stories, characters who feel bypassed or excluded by the Christmas season are at least tempted to rejoin the human family. In all the stories, the present Christmas serves as either an end or a beginning or both, thus making it distinctive and "different."

Techniques

A reviewer for Publisher's Weekly lamented that in This Year It Will Be Different the "tales are formulaic and superficial." Binchy's techniques were cited as the major reason for the weakness of this collection: "While the characters and their predicaments are potentially interesting, as soon as her narratives begin to develop, Binchy catapults forward to disappointingly simplistic endings. Readers will yearn for more: more character development, more detail, less fast-forwarding, fewer perky or maudlin conclusions. These tales are fine for a fast read during a busy season, but many will wish that Binchy had instead developed one of them into a novel that would do justice to her characters and themes."

Readers accustomed to Binchy's novels will be disappointed that in these stories, she lets the third-person omniscient narrator carry most of the storytelling load and compress the time-frames of the narratives. This technique creates stories that are fast-paced and a collection that can be put down and picked up again with ease. But the epic style plots, the complicated character interrelationships, and the paralleling of characters and themes that she so deftly uses in her novels are absent here. This Year It Will Be Different is like an album of black and white snapshots valued for the two-dimensional images they capture. Binchy's novels are more like technicolor Cinemax, pulling the audience viscerally into the vivid action.

Themes

A theme that runs through all the stories in this collection is expressed most succinctly by Miss Hall in "Pulling Together": "I think Christmas is particularly hard, we have such high expectations, and it never lives up to them." The theme is most graphically demonstrated by Orla in "The Ten Snaps of Christmas" as she ruthlessly decides "to get a picture of Christmas the way it really is, not all people just posing and smiling."

In the world of Binchy's stories, the holiday season often becomes a time to plan and calculate, instead of letting events take care of themselves, as they do in ordinary time. Christmas becomes a high drama, and Binchy's characters vividly prove that they are inferior as actors, producers, and directors. Their flawed humanity prevents them from putting on the perfect Christmas show.

The exploration of Christmas as a material myth is complemented by the theme of Christmas as spiritual epiphany.

The focal characters in this collection work their way out of a period of darkness and into a season of lengthening light. Like the Magi in the original Christmas story, Binchy's characters experience revelations that offer them a new outlook on life, and frequently, new hope.

Because Binchy enjoys twists and turns in her plots, not all of the endings are entirely happy. Orla's family in "The Ten Snaps of Christmas" is to be pitied until the young woman runs out of either enthusiasm or Polaroid film. Miss Martin of "Wish" and Janet of "The Christmas Baramundi" face the prospect of spending at least one more Christmas alone.

The ironic tragicomedy of the Dunne family in "The Best Inn in Town" is that they probably will not be alone for several more Christmases to come.

The power love has to transform ordinary lives is what provides hope in Binchy's fiction. That for some characters love is elusive or a prelude to heartbreak and frustration is what draws readers and critics alike to conclude that her fiction has the aura of reality.

Adaptations

Irish actress Fionnula Flanagan narrates the stories on the Bantam audio cassette version (1996).

Key Questions

Holidays are times when people whose beliefs differ are bound together by some single tradition they share. Holiday stories tend to be populated by people separated by social, economic, or religious differences and serve to make some humanizing commentary on those differences.

The resolution of the story is a revelation of a human or spiritual element that the characters share. On the one hand, such stories are formulaic. Their major purpose is to teach the audience a moral lesson. On the other hand, the formula allows for a variety of storytelling methods and styles. The flexibility in the Christmas story, for example, has made it popular in varied media. Many secular and religious school plays, films, television specials, and seasonal cartoon programming tell and retell variations on the formula each year. Consider the framework of other familiar Christmas stories as you discuss the following: 1. Based upon your own experiences, would you agree with Binchy that most families contain "a time bomb" waiting to explode during the holiday season?

2. Consider the portraits Binchy creates of certain classes of female characters: teenagers, grandmothers, stepmothers, and housewives. Does she create women who are recognizable and lifelike? Or does she create types? How does your opinion influence your enjoyment of and identification with the stories?

3.In several stories, memories serve to trigger holiday stress. Examine the characters who experience this. Why are they haunted by the ghosts of Christmases past? How do they learn to deal with them?

4. How does the broken plate in "A Hundred Milligrams" serve as a metaphor for Nick and Helen's marital relationship?

How does it serve as an epiphany?

5. In "The Christmas Baramundi," what does Liam's gift of a tin fish symbolize to Janet? What do you think Janet means when she repeats her mother's words at the story's end?

6. Considering the collection as a whole, what social purposes does Binchy seem to feel the Christmas season serves?

What social purposes does the season defeat?

7. What shared societal values do the stories highlight? How do the major characters become humanized while resolving the differences that provide the conflict of the story?

8. Physicist Albert Einstein claimed that no form of energy is ever really lost.

Energy simply changes its form. How does Einstein's theory manifest itself in this collection of Binchy stories? How do both Einstein's scientific theory and Binchy's art form help to create a sense of hope in society?

9. Readers searching for authors whose subject matter and style are similar to Binchy's might enjoy Moses Supposes (1994), a collection of short stories by Irish-American writer Ellen Currie. Currie's dialogue is often peppered with colorful Irish expressions. In what other ways are her characters similar to Binchy's?

10. Ambitious readers may wish to sample one or more stories in James Joyce's Dubliners (1914). How does the Christmas epiphany experienced by the protagonist in Joyce's "The Dead" compare to the insights gained by Binchy's characters?

Literary Precedents

Binchy's fiction is comic in the most classic sense of the word. Her flawed characters persist in spite of their blunders, foibles, and faults. Mixups and misunderstandings abound, yet even when her stories do not end entirely happily, the characters generally experi ence something that gives them hope.

They find that at the very least, they can endure. Some find that they can prevail.

In The Irish Comic Tradition (1962), literary scholar Vivian Mercier traces what he calls "the prevalence of the comic spirit in Anglo-Irish literature of the twentieth century." Mercier begins with Irish Gaelic mythology and proceeds to trace the varieties of the comic spirit through many mainstream Irish writers, including James Joyce (1882-1941). It seems unfair to compare the best-selling Binchy to a male writer who has more devotees committed to unraveling the complex style in which he wrote than he ever had readers in his lifetime. Yet although their artistic boundaries differ, the geographic and thematic boundaries of both This Year It Will Be Different and Joyce's Dubliners (1916) are nearly identical. Both authors look critically at their societies, and both let their characters experience epiphanies that lead to maturation and sometimes evolution.

Perhaps the most appropriate branch of the Irish comic tradition on which to perch Binchy is the one that stems from the seanachai (SHAN-a-key), the ancient storytellers renowned for their capacity to tell tall tales, spin yarns, and keep an audience entertained in mesmerizing style. Binchy effectively translates this Irish tradition of oral storytelling into the written word.

Related Titles

Other collections of Binchy's short stories include The Lilac Bus (1994), a collection of twelve short stories. Eight are interconnected and focus on Dubliners who weekly board Tom Fitzgerald's pastel-colored bus for the four-hour trip to and from the village of Rathdoon. The remaining four are a reprint of Dub/in Four (1981), an out-of-print collection of stories connected by their setting in the heart of Dublin's fashionable southside.

The twenty-two stories in London Transports (1995; published in 1980 by the Irish Book Center under the tide Victoria Line), depict the life dramas of contemporary women who share a London commute.

The Copper Beech (1993; see separate entry) is a collection of interrelated short stories that actually form a novel.

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