



A TRIBUTE TO NUALA O'FAOLAIN

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Celeste Bartos Forum

**The New York Public Library**

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**(music not transcribed)**

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Cillian Vallely. **(applause)** My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the director of public programs here at the New York Public Library, and it is an honor, a deep honor, to pay tribute to Nuala O'Faolain. This is not a memorial; this is a tribute. Thank you so much, all, for coming. Nothing, or nobody at all, could have held me back when Sheridan Hay and John Low-Beer approached me with the idea of paying tribute to Nuala O'Faolain at the New York Public Library. She loved this library and I loved her. On the Ides of March 2005, to celebrate St. Patrick's Day two days in advance, one of the first programs I did here was with Nuala. It was called "Silence, Exile, and Cunning: What's So Irish About That?" She was joined by Frank McCourt and Susan McKeown, who are joining us tonight. Thank you, Susan, and

thank you, Frank. And thanks to all of you who have come tonight, many of you all the way from Ireland: her family members and friends, all here for Nuala. Thank you, thank you so much.

I only had one other occasion of meeting Nuala O’Faolain and this was when I did a radio program with her, a new radio program I’m hosting. And what struck me so deeply about her—and I know a lot of people are maybe going to talk about her character, her cantankerous nature, at times. I was struck by her vibrancy, her sense of enthusiasm and joy. We actually laughed a lot, something irrepressible in her; I felt something so deeply amused, perhaps she was amused by the situation of being on that radio program with me, on the Queen Mary 2. I host a program that actually airs in part, or is actually recorded from the Queen Mary 2. And the program was going for quite some time, and she was getting nervous and the time was going by and it was too long, and she made it *known*, but even when she made it known, she still managed to say absolutely fantastic things on that program. And I’m delighted tonight to be able to play for you just two minutes that one of my producers, Marty Goldensohn, put together. The program is called “Liner Notes,” and as I said, it airs in part from the Queen Mary 2, is recorded on the cruise ocean liner. And we talked, among other things, about the Irish character, American tourists, and where you go when you visit Ireland. And as it so happens, she also spoke about *Angela’s Ashes*. Let’s take a listen to that.

**(begin radio clip)**

**NUALA O’FAOLAIN:** The Irish themselves—and I live in Ireland, I would never live anywhere else—are very, very watchful and suspicious of each other. They’ll put anyone down,

particularly if they can do it wittily. It's a way of life, and you can like, but when you're with Irish-Americans, or tourists of any kind, they're so starry-eyed and they're so open that you can say, "No, stay the night on my floor! No, allow me to give you a lift to Donegal! Oh, of course I read Beckett every day!" And you can be what you imagine is your best self, nobody's going to call you on it, they know nothing about you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Why do you think they wish to be kind to strangers and not amongst themselves?

**NUALA O'FAOLAIN:** It's easier—they want to be loved, but they haven't a chance of being loved by anyone who knows them. **(laughter)**

Official Ireland tried to look down on *Angela's Ashes* and to say it was kind of written for the Americans, and so on and so forth, and that it had not been like that in Ireland. But the book—quite apart from being a marvelous construct—told the truth by a person who magically escaped from the underworld that had no voice. But the way he forgives it and laughs now, that's America in him. You know, if he'd stayed in Ireland, he'd have been the bitterest of men.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I would like you to tell our listeners who are perhaps pondering a trip now to Ireland where they must go, or, differently stated, what can they absolutely not miss?

**NUALA O'FAOLAIN:** Well, I think everyone should go to pubs, even if they don't drink, even if there are people standing on their feet, even if they don't really see the point, they should go to

pubs every single day. **(laughter)** And secondly, I think people might go to Belfast and watch a city emerging from decades of malice into happiness.

**(end radio clip)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was wonderful to hear you all laughing. It's that characteristic of Nuala O'Faolain that I particularly relished, or at least that particular aspect of Nuala that I knew, that she made available to me. I'm sure during the evening we will discover a woman with many different facets, and to start us out on the evening, I'm going to invite Deirdre Brady, one of Nuala's sisters and the author of *Thank You For the Days*—she will read something, not from her memoir, which is quite contrasted with Nuala's *Are You Somebody*. She will read from *Are You Somebody?* to give us a sense of her sister. Thank you.

**(applause)**

**DEIRDRE BRADY:** Well, if Nuala saw me here now, she'd be amazed. My older sister, before I came—Grainne—said, “Deirdre, you've got lots of talents, but public speaking is not one of them.” **(laughter)** And I was on a local radio once and she said, “I couldn't hear a word you were saying, all you were saying...” So she said you've got to project, and she was giving me all these hints, but if Nuala was here, Nuala would say, “You've got to prepare, you've got to know what you're going to say,” and she would be really cross and really serious, and then she would say, “But be yourself.” **(laughter)** So, I'm afraid I shall be. Now the first thing I want to do is to thank Nuala's partner John and her good friend Sheridan, and Paul Holden—berger. **(laughter)**

Oh. Sorry. Gräber. For organizing this wonderful night for Nuala. And all of you for coming, because it would have been in vain if nobody came **(laughter)** and Nuala would be very, very—she probably would say, “I don’t know what to say.”

So, to start off, anyways, as children, Nuala was exactly the way she was when she was an adult in that she was terribly clever, bossy, born leader, impatient, and she instigated all our childhood adventures, of which we had many. And we always got into trouble and we’d blame Nuala.

**(laughter)** And I always got away from it because I was the good girl, and she was the brainy girl, as Mammy typed us. But she really, really was unusual, like right from the time I can remember. And you know, my other sister Grainne was very beautiful and Nuala was always reading, and she just seemed to have—I don’t know—a deeper empathy or understanding of other people. I think I just coasted along in a little dreamy world on my own, kind of on her coattails, but, I was saying to her there, she was very embarrassed about public affection, or if you gave her compliments, anything like that.

But shortly before she died, actually, the day before she died, the hospice gave us a hospital bed, you know, you press the buttons and everything. Because John had been lifting her and doing everything for her. And her two lovely friends, Brian and Ian, put all of the clean sheets on it, and Nuala was comfortably put back in and we showed her how it worked, and she said, “Oh, isn’t this wonderful, isn’t it lovely, John, and aren’t I so lucky to have so many people looking after me and everything?” And I said to her, “Well, you know, Nuala, an awful lot of people love you, and you know that they say God is love.” And she kind of smiled at me like, oh, here goes

Deirdre again, good little sister. And you know, if had been anybody else, she probably might have used stronger language, you know, but she kind of nodded her head anyways.

But, so then when we were teenagers, I only remember her being quite—not very nice to me.

**(laughter)** I remember the first time I wore my nylons with the line down the back and I was really self-conscious and I was going down the road, and she walked behind me and she said, “You look ridiculous in those.” **(laughter)** And then she went off to boarding school and I begged her, could I please go to boarding school because I thought it would be wonderful, with midnight feasts and tuck-boxes and all these sort of things I used to read about in comics. And of course it wasn’t that, and it was an old Irish school, and I might as well have been landed on the planet Mars. I arrived and everybody’s speaking Irish, and I couldn’t speak any Irish, and Nuala was supposed to look after me, and I don’t believe I saw her for the whole year. **(laughter)** Except she was in the school play, and I was in the school play, but anyway.

Anyway, then she went off to college, to Oxford, everywhere—oh, sorry—BBC, all these places, and I settled down on my own with my husband Eamon and led a very ordinary life and raised our seven wonderful children—I have three daughters here with me this evening. And she’d pop home occasionally, and I thought she was the most exotic thing. She had long curly hair, but she used to have it wrapped in London, that’s what you did, and she’d have the most beautiful clothes and lovely legs, and she smoked cigarettes and she talked about books and everything, and I just thought she was fabulous. But I didn’t know her at all. **(laughter)** But everything changed when she came back to Dublin and she wrote for the *Times* and she used to come to

dinner in our house on a Sunday. Eamon cooks the dinner and she loved that. And also, we got to know each other a little better because she would go and see Mam and everything.

And then, she wrote *Are You Somebody?* and really everything changed then. Her life changed. She had come to a standstill and America rescued her. And she found wonderful friends here and she had a new beginning. And she said, “It’s wonderful, Deirdre, in America they don’t care what age you are, so long as you can do everything. John’s mother’s 92”—well, she’s 93 now. And she said, “In Ireland you think you’re finished once you hit 60, you know.” **(laughter)** Anyway, she loved America, and she made money from her book. And we were at a wedding in Westport, all sitting around, all brother and sisters and she said, “[Seferinis]. That’s where I’d like to have my sixtieth birthday. So we all said, yeah. It’s in generous, she said, you know Frank **(inaudible)**.”

So lo and behold she organized that we would all go to [Seferinis], and we would go on our first Italian holiday together, but we had to **(inaudible)**, that was really important, because Nuala didn’t—package holidays were out with Nuala, Nuala had to find the most out of the way place in Italy that was the most difficult to get to. **(laughter)** But she loved the adventure of it, and so she brought myself and Norine and we went on this **(inaudible)**. So we had to find out what time the planes went, the trains, and we went down to Levanto, and she said to me, “Now, Deirdre, the Italians wear beautiful clothes. You’ve got to wear really good, smart clothes, none of your secondhand stuff.” **(laughter)**

So I got these lovely linen trousers and a jacket and everything—beautifully dressed, I thought—and we get the train down to Levanto and we get off the train and it's flashing out of the heavens. And Nuala said, "We've got to find a hotel, quick." So it's a very small, little place, and Nuala said the Hilton. So we get to the Hilton, small little crumbling building, with babies going up and down the stairs, cross people, passports please, upstairs we go, we've only got two rooms. They showed us a room with a double bed looking at a concrete wall. Nuala said, "You and Norine have to sleep in there." Another little single room. And I said, "Nuala, we're not staying here." "Well, you go and find a hotel." Because she was just brownd off by this date. So I said, "I will."

So she sat on the step, in the rain, with her bag, and I walked along and upstairs was this hotel with the most beautiful—like, you go up the stairs, the hotel was on the second floor—beautiful frescoes, and windows opening onto the garden and everything. And I came racing down the stairs and I said, "Nuala, I found a place, I found a place." And she said, "Oh, brilliant. Now we'll leave our bags and we'll go out"—because Nuala could never stay easy. "Well go out for a walk, over to the Cinque Terre." So off we traipsed, in the rain, through the forest, and the next thing Nuala goes flying down the hill, and Norine follows her, and I follow her, **(laughter)** all our lovely cream and our new shoes, covered with muck, sodden with rain, sat down, our bottoms were soaked, and back to this beautiful swanky hotel. **(laughter)** Oh my—of course, as it turned out, it was worthwhile because it was our first holiday and we all stayed in separate places, up the hill and down the hill and everything. But as the years went by, we'd go to different places in Italy, and it was wonderful when John joined us because we had somebody who spoke Italian and who could drive. **(laughter)**



And we grew closer together emotionally and we grew closer together in that eventually we'd stay in hotels, like beside each other in different rooms, you know. Still had our privacy. And we were more relaxed with each other and everything was going wonderful. And this year, we were to go to Trapani, that's where Nuala picked because Ryanair were doing flights there for the first time. And we were to go on a **(inaudible)**, herself and myself, but it wasn't to be, so she said, could we move it a bit earlier, and could all of us go on the **(inaudible)**? So we all said yes, and the hospice nurse said yes. The other nurse said, "Madness, you can't go." And Nuala said to the hospice nurse, "Could you bump up my steroids? Because they gave me energy." **(laughter)** And the hospice nurse said yes. And I said, "Nuala, if you're able to sit in the wheelchair, we'll go." So it came to the **(inaudible)**, and we were on tenterhooks, and John rang, "Where's Nuala?" "She's sitting in the wheelchair." "We're going."

So we went, and it was—it was sad, and it was wonderful. But that was Nuala, she didn't waste a minute, she didn't waste time. She was generous and kind and funny and we had lots of laughs, didn't we, John? And when she came home it was almost like, well, that's that. She said—the day before she died, she said, "Well, I've nothing left to do. I've no more work to do." And she kind of looked at the nurse, and the nurse said, "Nuala, you're not going to die today." And Nuala said, "Oh." Like, a bit disappointed, you know? **(laughter)** And the next morning she spoke to friends on the phone and she said goodbye to them. And then we all went to the hospice with her, and she didn't speak after that. And she was very—she had a very peaceful death. And as she took her last breath, her eyes opened slowly, and I like to think that she was looking at...what's next. So.

**(applause)**

And now, we were trying to pick two pieces from her wonderful book and my little book that might complement each other. And I was going to pick what she wrote about America when we were children, you know, how wonderful it seemed and how it turned out to be wonderful for her, and about my mad first-ever journey to America, where I discovered there were no sidewalks, and it was just so strange. But we decided that we would do a piece about Mammy, because Nuala really loved Mammy and she had a difficult relationship with Mammy, and I wrote about Mammy and so did Nuala. So my daughter Mairead is going to read a little piece from mine. Okay.

**MAIREAD BRADY:** Good evening. **(applause)** This is a little piece from my mother's book, *Thank You For the Days*:

“Mam was docile and subdued whenever she had to be institutionalized, accepting the routine, burying herself in her books. Yet as soon as she was back home, her sad, solitary life resumed. Bed for days on end, sustained by warm milk with pepper, gruel, biscuits, or a dinner left for her while she read and read. Or, brushed and lipsticked, her heavy square basket tucked in the crook of her arm, she'd walk the familiar route to her local. There she would ensconce herself in a corner, glasses halfway down her nose, to read her book and drink double gins until one of her kind friends would drive her home and link her into her flat.

This was Mam's life after Dad. She was lost without him. He had been her only love. She had got through his funeral and Christmas after he died in a haze of tablets and alcohol. Then it really hit her. He was gone. One Thursday evening in January, I called to find her sitting, quiet and still, hunched over in the armchair, fully dressed. She was sober. Bringing her soft hands painfully together, she lifted up her grief-ravaged face and looked up at me with tear-worn eyes. "Oh, Deirdre, I miss him so much. So much." I could only put my arms around her.

Grainne dropped in regularly, and Nuala, who now lived in Dublin, took Mam out in her car. Our gang visited every Sunday. **(inaudible)** put on Mam's favorite records, the little ones bopped around, and Mam danced with Eamon. "What wonderful rhythm you have!" she'd declare breathlessly, as she sank back into her armchair in front of the electric fireplace. Moderately inebriated, briefly happy, her gaze fixed wistfully on the past, she told us of wonderful times with "your father." She said that inside the soul body there's still an 18 year-old girl.

Back in the present she could be artfully tactless. When Colleen, our first daughter, was born, Mam's comment was, "Congratulations, Deirdre. Pity she's so plain." **(laughter)** And to 17 year-old Kieron, she said, "Why don't you shave off that dreadful mustache?" It was a waste of time phoning Mam, as she was apt to put the phone down abruptly. She expressed little interest in the lives of her scattered children. She was sweet and polite when they visited her, but didn't bother to hide the fact that she had certain favorites. She had scribbled a poem once on a page torn from a novel, which began, "I am a damaged woman."

It was a glorious September afternoon. Mairead and Claire played as we waited outside the door. I held a side plate of Eamon's home-cooked dinner in one hand, some roses from our garden in the other. No answer. "It's through the kitchen window again." I looked meaningfully at Eamon. So many times Mammy had been found in a heap on the floor of her bedroom—too many sleeping pills, or gin, or both. We—Nuala, Grainne and I, her eldest children—had tried to confront her about the damage to herself. We'd called one day, and it was decided that I should voice our worries. I knocked and went into her bedroom.

"What are you all doing here?" she demanded suspiciously. "Mam. We're all worried about you. You've got to start taking care. You can't go on like this. You'll be found dead someday if you keep this up. If you go on neglecting yourself we'll be forced to do something." I stood at the foot of her bed, hurting and helpless. I could feel her anger across the room. She raised herself up, leaned forward towards me, and hissed, "How dare you? How dare you? It's none of your business. Your father left me enough money to live the way I chose. You take care of your own family. You're not going to send me anywhere. I'll die in my own home. Now, get out."

Eamon lifted seven year-old Mairead up to the open window. I watched her soft, **(inaudible)** legs disappear in a flounce of tartan. And a minute later, she opened the front door wide for us, with an important grin on her heart-shaped face. The gloomy bedroom was empty. There was no note in the kitchen. Mam usually left a message if she'd gone down to the pub. She knew we always called. I was angry. "We'll just leave everything. I'm not waiting around."

Mairead took my hand. “I have to go to the toilet.” So we waited for her. “I can’t open the door, there’s something in the way,” I heard her call out. I stood where I was. Eamon ran to the bathroom. “Ring for an ambulance, quick!” he shouted. I cuddled my two small girls tightly as I watched them carry out my mother’s body on a stretcher. She looked really well, I thought, her hair newly dressed, face flushed a deep pink. Only her soft hands were a ghostly white color. Still wearing her wine velvet dressing gown, she had been preparing herself for our visit. An empty bottle of gin was found under her. Who would have thought she would die suddenly from a massive heart attack, in her own bathroom? She got her wish.”

**(applause)**

**DEIRDRE BRADY:** Sorry. Should have been ready. This is from Nuala’s *Are You Somebody?*

“After he died, she looked around absently for him, the way you might glance around a room if the light in it suddenly changed. Every so often my sisters would, with heroic effort, get her into a home to dry out for a while and get some treatment for her malnutrition. Mammy was like a child in there, afraid of the authorities, keeping clear of the other patients, hiding in her room, lonely as ever. She would ask me plaintively, “What’s wrong with your sisters? Why is everyone so cross with me?” She didn’t even remember the awful episodes my sisters were dealing with at the time. And she’d say with honest petulance, “Why did your father die and leave me here?”

I drove out to see her every week or so. I would ring beforehand, my stomach cramping. I often put the phone down halfway through dialing, but then I would work up my courage again,

knowing that if I was lucky I'd get her in the interval between her being too sick to talk and too drunk to talk. If she seemed lucid enough on the phone I would hurry out of the flat. Sometimes she was ready for me, sitting on her chair in her crumpled coat, her handbag close to her chest, with pallid, shaky fingers. In my relief, my heart would open to the pathos of her. The lipstick swiped on with unforgotten expertise, the blobs of mascara, the dabs of pink powder, when under the makeup her skin was gray and bristles were breaking through on her upper lip.

If you fed her the cues for one of her little reminiscences, going along in the car, and you linked her up the steps into the library, and if the librarian quickly got her four or five books that she would like, and you sat her there at the sunny window in some hotel lounge with a double gin, she would radiate happiness. She would take on the mannerisms of a pampered, pretty woman. She would beam in a blurred kind of way at any people around. The flowering might last a half an hour, an hour.

When they rang me a few weeks later and told me she was dead, that she had died in the bathroom and they had found her on the floor, I was almost prepared. I had seen her sprawled on the floor. Her dead body was only the same as the body that had shut me out the day I had shouted at her through the window. She left her clothes, a wedding ring, and an estate, which totaled one thousand pounds. She left the biscuit tin, with her scribbled book reviews in it, and the letter from my father from Donegal. And she left us nine people: her children. None of us had mattered very much to her. Once when we all happened to be in Dublin, six of us got together and took our courage in our hands to go and see her and to ask her to allow us to get help for her. She threw us out of the flat with a few venomous words. We were only the children.

I remember her through windows: standing at her bedroom window when she was young, a sheet wrapped hurriedly onto her ivory shoulders, in the bungalow we lived in then. She was shouting at us children to go and play, to stay out, not to come in till we were called. Then she turned back into the bedroom, where my father would have been waiting.”

**(applause)**

**SUSAN MCKEOWN:** When I was here three years ago, as Paul said, it was to perform at this series on an event entitled “Silence, Exile, and Cunning: What’s So Irish About That Anyway?” with Nuala and Frank and Colum McCann, and we discovered just how much there was to do with silence, exile and cunning, and being Irish. And I was asked to sing a couple of songs of immigration, and so I did so with Eamon and Dana. And when we finished one of the songs, Nuala got up to speak. She complimented the music and went on to say that while Ireland—she said, “They were lovely songs, and Ireland has so many lovely sad songs of immigration, but the truth was, for the women, they couldn’t wait to get away.”

And the statement set off a little spark in me, because I identified with her completely. And then she launched into this brilliant speech, most of it, or much of it, concerning the life of Chicago May, which she’d finished researching. And she laid out the hardness of the realities of life for women in Ireland, explaining how for those who immigrated to the United States and other places, they got away: it meant opportunities that would never have presented themselves at home.

In my experience of Irish song, my favorite kind is the one that I call the “sexually ambiguous folk song genre.” **(laughter)** And in its various versions, it tells the tale of an Irish woman who, much like Chicago May, wants something more for herself than the hard domestic lives of the women she sees around her in the kitchens and in the fields. So she decides to make her escape, usually by dressing up in a man’s clothing. And that invariably leads to her having the adventure of her life, discovering herself and finding true love in the process. This version was collected in County Clare, where Nuala’s beloved Merriman Summer School is held. It’s called “To Fair London Town,” and all of the lyrics are in your programs.

**(music not transcribed)**

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Could I hear a round of applause for Susan McKeown, Eamon O’Leary, Dana Lyn, Cillian Vallely, and Lindsey Horner?

**(applause)**

And now I have the pleasure of bringing to the stage Sheridan Hay, who is a novelist, editor, and teacher. She met Nuala O’Faolain in 1999 and remained a close friend until her death. Sheridan knows of Nuala’s love of poetry and its sustaining force throughout her life, and her love particularly of Rilke, a love that Sheridan and Nuala shared. After Sheridan, we will hear from



Paul Muldoon, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003, and in 2007, he became the editor of *The New Yorker*, the poetry editor. He will also discuss his connection to Nuala through poetry, perhaps with some mention of Rilke.

**SHERIDAN HAY:** “I hung back in the doorway, frightened, then the warm spring sun washed over me because the porch blocked off the wind. I turned my face up to the bright sun, the first one after a long winter. There was a single cloud, like a dab from a white paintbrush, at the highest point of the sky. In the instant I glanced at it, the cloud melted into nothing, and the wide arc became perfectly, intensely blue. Orpheus ascending, I said to myself. Here I go.”

It steadies me to read Nuala’s words, because I can’t trust my own voice, just yet, not to break in speaking of her. We met, actually, more than ten years ago, in Dublin at Colm Tóibín’s house. My husband Michael had fallen in love with *Are You Somebody?* and found it a home with an American publisher, and we fell in love with Nuala. We met her just at the moment when her life began to change, when she began to change. She described it this way, in *Almost There*: “Climbing on my own words and the words of other people, the journey has been upward all the way. Writing brought me up from the underground. I’ve been my own Orpheus.”

For years we’ve met for breakfast every Thursday at the counter at Eisenberg’s, sometimes reconvening for lunch. “Art helps you live just as directly as friendship does,” she wrote in *Almost There*, and after moving to New York, Nuala wanted and needed friendship just as I did when I met her. “Who’d have thought that America could give an Irish woman an Australian woman?” she used to say.

Nuala had a great gift for intimacy, which is not the same as saying intimacy was easy for her. She was a deeply private person, yet she could disregard with some alacrity the privacy of others. **(laughter)** Believe me. She was essentially solitary, yet she longed for companionship. Ambivalence ran through her like a charged wire. A deeply sophisticated thinker, she was often childlike, hilariously funny, and deeply serious. Brilliant, with a penetrating intellect and a mind full of arcane knowledge, she could be obtuse. She would not proffer her cheek for a kiss, but would hold my hand in the street. She was eccentric and contradictory, but there was not a moment I spent with her... **(pause)** Nuala would say, “You must not weep!” There was not a moment I spent with her that I wasn’t conscious of her value, of the great privilege of knowing her, the privilege of loving her. It was risky to love Nuala, it was never dull, and while it was sometimes difficult, it was also all too easy. One felt sworn to her in some way. She saw me as better than I am, but would tolerate no compliment in return.

I never met anyone so quick, and it often pulled me up short how extraordinary she was. I remember her protesting over some small thing I imagined she had invented. “I didn’t make it up!” she insisted. “I’m not that original.” In fact, she defined the word. I think Nuala’s gift for intimacy had something to do with her great love of poetry. Erudite and with a fine, sharp sensibility, she knew dozens of poems by heart and wore it all lightly and without pretense.

We both loved Rilke, and when I went to Clare in March to take care of her after radiation treatment, I found a book of Rilke’s poems on her shelf. I had the same collection at home. Radiation had left her ill and exhausted. It was her first experience of invalidism. She hated

every minute of my week with her. I did everything she could not, and it drove her mad. Trying to leave her alone, I reread Rilke in the next room and marked up passages with post-it notes.

One I remember calling out to her: “I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people, that each should stand guard of the solitude of the other.”

“Well,” she shot back, “then shut the fuck up.” **(laughter)**

In *My Dream of You*, Nuala has her character Kathleen riff on Rilke. “Oh, to have been a poet like him”—this is Nuala as Kathleen—“to have been grand, to think in sweeps, to see life and death and love in deep and beautiful forms. Not to be suburban, a nobody with a drab little imagination. I memorized a remark Rilke made in an article I read about him once: that he had a ‘bitter self-knowledge of the weaknesses from which his strength came.’ Well, why couldn’t I hope to be like that? Then I started to laugh, even though I was still crying. I’m used to your whining at the least opportunity, I said to myself. But to start crying because you aren’t a genius takes the goddamn biscuit. **(laughter)** I would read him again. Rilke would be a better resource for me when I was an old woman than any man.”

Rilke, it turns out, was a resource of her for the last weeks of her life, just as poetry, as music, as art, as friendship, had been throughout her life. A poem I’d marked was on her mind the week she died, a great and strange poem, “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” It is a disturbing poem, for Eurydice is far from unhappy in her state. One stanza runs, “Being dead filled her beyond fulfillment, like a fruit suffused with its own mystery and sweetness, she was filled with her vast

death, which was so new, she could not understand that it had happened.” Nuala sent me an email a couple of weeks before she died, which said in part, “This place has never been the same since you left. Mabel” (her dog) “hasn’t been the same, I haven’t been the same. But not worse. More somber, more solitary, even though there are far too many people around. I am moving, in other words, into the dark, but at the enemy’s pace.” None of us thought she had so little time, but I see now that Nuala sensed it. The poem continues: “She was already loosened, like long hair, poured out, like fallen rain, shared, like a limitless supply.”

Nuala decline chemotherapy, knowing, after that week in Clare, she could not tolerate hospitals and staying in bed. Instead, in a wheelchair, she went to Paris, Madrid for the Prado, to look at the Valesquez, back to New York to say goodbye to her friends, many of whom are here, Berlin for the opera, and Sicily with her sisters and brother, and her beloved John. She died in Dublin a few days after that last trip. It was almost three months to the day when John and I has sat with her in the emergency room at New York Hospital.

When I left Clare, I pinned a note on the marked-up book of Rilke poems. I thanked Nuala for letting me come to her and quoted another poem we both knew well. “Who knows, perhaps the same bird echoed through both of us yesterday, separate, in the evening.” I didn’t fully know what I meant when I left the note, except to say that we could experience the same thing, like Rilke’s bird, while apart, and that meant we were separate but not distant. That experiencing the same loved thing joins us each to the other. As it is, I think and think of her, and it occurs to me now that it is Nuala and the memory of her that echoes through us all here this evening like

birdsong. Her memory is here, separate, in each of us, even as she is tonight in the library, a shared love, our common thought. Thank you so much.

**(applause)**

**PAUL MULDOON:** Good evening. I'm going to read two poems by Rilke, which I've attempted to translate myself. They're both poems about perception, but perspective, and I suppose that one of the things that's happening this evening is that we're figuring out not only how we—partly how we viewed Nuala ourselves, but also, I think to a large extent how she viewed us.

I met her about thirty years ago in Belfast. We both worked for the BBC. We met in the Wellington Park Hotel, a hotel not to be confused with the Europa Hotel, which of course was the hotel most favored by journalists in that era, the most bombed building in Northern Ireland. It was the hotel in which a reporter was having dinner one evening and he was having a salad, the very notion of having a salad something of an adventure **(laughter)**, I think, in Belfast in that era. And adventure it turned out to be, because as he turned over on leaf, he came upon a slug sitting there on the plate. He called the waitress over. "Look at this," he said. "Look at this." And she looked at it, and she looked at him, and she looked at it, and she said, "You put that there."

**(laughter)**

That's the kind of—to make sense of that moment was something at which Nuala was astonishingly adept, as you might have imagined. I'm reminded to go from Belfast to New York,

by way of introduction to these two poems, reminded of that story of Mikhail Baryshnikov on the Upper West Side. He's out walking his dog, and alas, the dog must answer a call of nature. And the dog—Baryshnikov, of course, very sheepish, if that's the right term, about this, dragging the poor dog out into the street, and a New York woman is watching this performance, and she says, "Who do you think you are? Who do you think you are? I mean, I know who you are, but who do think you are?" (**laughter**) So by way of answer to those two questions, we'll read these two poems about animals. This is "Black Cat":

Despite its being invisible, a ghost has enough mass to take your glance and give it glancingly back

Here, though, your sternest look will pass not through but into her fur, fur as dense and black as the walls against which a madman pounds his fists, the padded cell against which all night long he expends himself until his fury has abated

For it seems that she has somehow been able to keep within herself every glance that's ever been cast at her, as bristling up for battle she gives them the once over before falling asleep

Then, as if starting from slumber, she turns her face directly toward your own, and you see yourself, held fast in the yellow stone of her eye, like a bug, like a long extinct beetle set in a lump of amber

And then, "The Unicorn":

This, then, is the beast that has never actually been

Not having seen one, they prized, in any case, its perfect poise, its throat, the straightforward gaze it gave them back, so straightforward, so serene

Since it had never been, it was all the more unsullied, and they allowed it such latitude that in a clearing in the wood, it raised its head as if its essence shrugged off mere existence

They brought it on not with oats or corn, but with the chance, however slight, that it might come into its own

This gave it such strength that from its brow there sprang a horn, a single horn

Only when it met a maiden's white with white would it be bodied out in her, in her mirror's full length

I want to take this occasion to remind myself that Nuala O'Faolain allowed us to be not only who we were, but who we thought we were.

**(applause)**

**SUSAN MCKEOWN:** This is a northern song by Seamus [O'Grainne], "Thois I Lar an Glanna" or as Nuala knew it, **(inaudible)**. It's a song she knew and it came into her mind when she was dying, and she referred to it in the interview, the last interview she did with her friend, the Irish radio journalist Marian Finucane, on her national radio show. And as Nuala put it, the last lines of the chorus go—well, in the last lines of the chorus, I think she put it as, "You call upon God even though you know he doesn't exist, to bring back last night even though you know he can't."

**(music not transcribed)**

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Thanks again to the wonderful, wonderful musicians. This is such moving music. And now it's my pleasure to bring up to the stage Julie Grau, who edited three books with Nuala, and she may tell us how easy or how difficult it sometimes was to edit Nuala. Fintan O'Toole will speak right after, and he wrote for the *Irish Times*, where Nuala also wrote, and he will choose a column that Nuala wrote for the *Irish Times* and comment on it, tell us perhaps how it was working with her, together, at that newspaper.

**JULIE GRAU:** Sometime in 1997, Michael Jacobs, who was then working as an agent for New Island Books in Dublin, handed me a big, fat volume that was the collected opinion columns of a woman who wrote for the *Irish Times*. Michael told me not to bother reading the columns, but to read the author's introduction to the work. In spite of myself, because of course we editors are trained to uncover the reasons not to publish a book as quickly as possible, I was reeled in by the crystalline, unapologetic voice of this accidental memoir. I soon found that I loved it, in fact, and I wanted to publish it, but was beaten back by certain executive opinions who didn't feel quite as bullish as I did about the book's prospects. That I ceded to those views and didn't put up a howling fight is a great regret of mine, but when *Are You Somebody?* went to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list, it also gave me the greatest "I told you so" of my career.

"Go get that writer!" I was told by the same folks who'd passed on the chance of publishing Nuala the first time around. But I wasn't one to stand on ceremony, so go after her I did, with the



full force of the house behind me. And after reading a hundred pages of her first attempt at fiction, and an intense, dazzling meeting in which it was never quite clear which one of us was doing the auditioning, I did, in fact, acquire Nuala O'Faolain's next book for our list. Shortly after, Nuala called me at my office. "Are you well, Julie?" she asked. "Yes, I'm fine, thanks," I said. "No, I mean, are you well? Are you a healthy person?" "Sure, yes, I'm fine, I'm healthy," I replied. "Well, good, because every day, I want you to come to your office and ask yourself, what can I do for Nuala today?" **(laughter)**

I might have thought that was a peculiar little joke for a while, but soon it became clear to me that that was no joke. Ours was not to be a typical editorial relationship. At first, Nuala tested me, tested my devotion to her, my loyalty, my ability to fight on her behalf in publishing meetings. She also tested my breaking point, when I'd push back and let her know she'd crossed a line. In the early days, I didn't have the temerity to go up against Nuala very often, and mostly, really, I wanted to prove myself worthy of her. I wanted to show her I could keep pace with her brilliance and stamina and fortitude. So I'd read the prodigious output that came out of her output, draft after draft after draft. She was tireless, and unself-conscious, and had the work ethic of a newspaper columnist who was used to generating several hundred words a day, except with Nuala it could be more like thousands of words each day.

She was a dogged, miraculous reviser, too. Often I'd see work that was very rough survive several drafts. And it would be maddening, because I thought she'd chosen to ignore my diligent comments, when suddenly, in its fifth or sixth incarnation, in due course, these same pages would be breathtakingly transformed into gold. So in those early years, she would test me and I

would strive to pass each test, because could there be a better feeling for a youngish editor, than the approbation of a writer you admired with your whole heart, a person who prevailed over a childhood of terrific adversity and deprivation, through sheer intellectual grit, to become an academic and a journalist, an opinion maker, a feminist, a memoirist, a novelist, a somebody, whose life and survival was a singular testament to the transformative power of literature?

She'd ask me to meet her for lunch, for dinner, to discuss her work. She'd never want to hear about other writers, other books. When I was with her, she was my one and only. She'd make somewhat nasty, casually mean comments—maybe I was dim, but I was never sure if it was her intention to be so cutting toward me, or if it was a vestige of her childhood. I only knew I didn't want to find myself in her crosshairs. In no time, the boundaries blurred. She'd ask me to come shopping with her to help her choose clothes for a book tour, and tell me to follow her into the dressing room so we could keep talking. I lost my discomfort at such moments surprisingly quickly, which is more about Nuala's famous candor and her ability to disarm those around her, than it is about my unflappability.

One Valentine's Day, before Nuala met John, she and I shared a candlelit dinner at an Italian restaurant full to capacity with lovers, where, in very close proximity, we watched Tatum O'Neal open a jewelry box from her hopeful suitor, and clocked her disappointment with its contents.

**(laughter)** Of course, Nuala's play by play made us both weep from stifled laughter.

She asked me to come to the west of Ireland to work with her on the final draft of *My Dream of You*. She didn't really need me there, we could have spoken on the phone or written each other

emails, but I recognized that she was throwing down a gauntlet. How far would I go for her? Would she make me fly across the Atlantic, leave friends and family behind, and devote five days to her exclusively? Of course she could. I got on a plane to Shannon, and entered Nuala's beloved Bartra. I understood that by making this trip I was meeting her particular needs, but I also realized that on some level I was being rewarded for all the tests I'd previously passed.

We walked the misty, lush country lanes down to the Atlantic with Molly and Roger, two wonderful dogs, beside us, and we'd talk about the novel. She pointed out the seals sleek heads bobbing in the waves, the lichen that was disappearing from the rocks. She educated me about traveler culture. She drove me to see the marvelous grottos and shrines tucked into the green hills of County Clare. We took steam baths in the spa at Lisdoonvarna. I read the pages as they came out of her printer, and we'd talk endlessly about the work. We took every meal together. She marveled aloud that I wasn't getting on her nerves. **(laughter)**

On our last day together, we went into a dress shop in Cork. Luckily, there was only space for one in the fitting room, **(laughter)** but the sales ladies recognized her instantly and swarmed around her, making a fuss, asking for an autograph. And I had a glimpse of the folk hero status she enjoyed at home. My memories of that trip, however it came about, are cherished ones, all the more now.

I went on to publish two more of Nuala's books: a second volume of her memoirs and an unconventional biography of a turn of the century Irish émigré who became a mythically glamorous international criminal. In between, I killed a novel she stubbornly tried to bring to life

more than once. Writing that letter, knowing how it would cut Nuala to the quick, was perhaps the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my professional life. It was also, though, a measure of how I'd grown under her inimitable tutelage. Years later, when she was very sick, she wrote to me in an email: "I've talked to you very often recently, especially at night, mostly laughing at this or that. Other people might not realize it, but I loved every minute of knowing you, including when I'd let you/me down."

I was sitting at my desk when I read those lines, and burst into tears. I was instantly choked with regret. How could I have failed to appreciate fully every moment with her? Why did I let time go by when we weren't closely in touch? Did I not understand that she was utterly, uniquely gifted as a human being? Difficult, oh, yes, she could be very difficult, and complicated, and demanding, but she was so worth knowing. What a privilege it was to be her editor and her publisher, to have passed the tests, to have been able to make her laugh, and to have held a place in her memories of happy times, and she has in mine.

**(applause)**

**FINATIN O'TOOLE:** Good evening. I can think of no more fitting place in the world to honor someone like Nuala, whose entire life was passionately devoted to the idea that stories, ideas, and words are the common heritage of all men and women. And I can also think of nobody more fitting to be honored in this great institution than Nuala. When Nuala published *Are You Somebody?* in Ireland first, she was overwhelmed by the astonishing reaction that she got from people, and she wrote at the time, "It was as if I were at my own funeral, and extravagant praise

had been licensed.” That phrase, I think, was in some ways typical of Nuala, and of her difficulty sometimes in accepting that she might be loved. I think, however, it also perhaps hinted at something which marked, to some degree, the fact that *Are You Somebody?* was a kind of funeral. In revealing herself, in revealing her private self, to some extent, she deconstructed and killed off an extraordinary public self which had preceded it, which I want to talk about for the next couple of minutes.

In the world of journalism, which I have the misfortune to inhabit, the most difficult word to use is “I.” It tends either to be monstrous egotism, self-absorbed solipsism, or at best, a comically hapless self-parody. Nuala, as a newspaper columnist, found an “I” that was none of these things. It wasn’t quite the pained, complex, hurt self that she revealed in her memoirs, but it was a public persona that was entirely true to that private self. And I think there are very few columnists in the history of journalism of whom that could be said with such absolute truth.

This self that Nuala constructed as a journalist was rooted in the great 1960s feminist slogan, “The personal is political.” But what made her so distinctive was that it was also rooted in the reverse of that slogan: that the political is personal. What Nuala was extraordinarily good at doing was making both sides of that equation work all the time. She had, I think, perfect pitch for a note that was precisely halfway between the intimacy of confession on the one side, and the objectivity of reportage on the other side. She personalized public issues without trivializing them, and she gave a public dimension to personal experience without falling into that dreaded solipsism. She managed, as I have said, few journalists have ever done, to use “I” with sincerity and integrity on the one hand, and with a cool objectivity on the other side.

In this regard, I think Nuala's devotion to Marcel Proust was not accidental. She learned from Proust how to construct a coherent sense of self in writing, one that could be intimate and immediate but also infinitely expansive. Often her newspaper columns started and remained with herself, but brought political and moral issues within the frame of her own vibrant emotion and luminous intelligence. They could begin like strange, strung-out short stories. A lot of her columns just began, as if they were first-person short stories: "For Christmas week, I was stuck in a small, litter-strewn Bulgarian sea resort, where there was no snow, and therefore no skiing, and therefore nothing much to do." How could you not read on after an opening to a column like that? Or, I just want to read a very short passage from a typical way in which she could use this "I" so brilliantly in journalism. This was a column about sexual harassment:

"I was waiting for someone at a pub the other day. It was just before the lunchtime rush, and the boss was having a cup of coffee. He had positioned himself on a low stool beside the entrance to the counter. The lunchtime waitress was hurrying in and out of there, and every time she passed, he grabbed at her legs and tripped her. He was laughing, but his were intent. He was absorbed in his little piece of sadism. She wasn't laughing. But she has to put up with it, hasn't she? He's the boss; he has power over her."

She used, in that perfect microcosm of a story, a personality, an observational ability, which immediately brings a hugely important political issue and moral issue down to the level of vivid immediacy. And I just want to read another passage from a different column, because I think it gives you a sense of the way her intelligence and her use of this kind of mixture of the immediate

and personal on the one side, and the large, political on the other side, could lead to a kind of unique insight. This is a brilliant column she wrote about one of the first revelations in Ireland of the scandals of the way children were treated in institutions run by the Catholic Church, the abuse of children in those institutions. And it's worth noting in this little passage the way she moves very quickly into an insight about the relationship between the intimate cruelty towards children in this society, which of course was very much rooted in her own anger. She moves from that to an extraordinarily brilliant point, I think, about the relationship between the treatment of children in Ireland and the process of migration. And so you move from something tiny to something very, very large, very quickly.

“People are reluctant to face the truth, but I believe the truth is what lay behind the cruelty perpetrated on children was Catholicism itself. It developed the concept of sexual wickedness and material sin, which were used to facilitate the expression of sadism.” That word again. “And the more general, ordinary abuse of children was in part the consequence of more Catholic teaching, this time on contraception. It was known that almost all the children of large families, almost all children, would never have a stake in Irish society, never have children here themselves, never count for anything. Their eventual unimportance in London or Springfield, Massachusetts, was visited upon them early. Why would their minders or teachers value them? Their country didn't value them.”

That extraordinary rhetorical power, which as I said was rooted in this absolute integrity of her use of the word “I,” reminded me, in conclusion, of something important about her, and perhaps something about the notion of the afterlife. Nuala was a very paradoxical person, and never more

Irish than in being paradoxical. My favorite Irish paradox was unearthed by her great namesake in Irish literature, Sean O’Faolain, who in the early 1930s, when he was writing a book about Ireland, asked an old woman in west Cork whether she believed in the little people. “I do not, sir, but they’re there.” **(laughter)**

And Nuala’s relationship with a notion of religion, and particularly a notion of the afterlife I think was very similar. She didn’t believe in the afterlife, but she knew it was there, somehow. And for a writer, of course, it is there. The words wonderfully remain. And it struck me in thinking about this event that there’s some sense in which in the persona she forged for her newspaper columns, Nuala created a kind of idealized self, which is like the idealized self that we all imagine for ourselves in the afterlife. It wasn’t the self that she would go on to expose with such extraordinary power and courage in her memoirs, it was that self which was perfectly poised between the public and the private.

In her columns—which I think that it’s a pity, maybe, that they were left out, although I perfectly understand why they would be, but they are wonderful works of literature in themselves—she achieved a kind of balance, which I think she only pursued in her private life. It was a balance between passion and poise, between anger and compassion, between an absolute love for Ireland and an absolute hatred for its cruelties, between a potent sense of communal belonging and individual truth, between the public self and the private self, between the knowledge that love doesn’t conquer all and that the search for it fused everything she did throughout both her personal and public lives. Thank you.



**(applause)**

**(start audio clip)**

**NUALA O’FAOLAIN:** Anyway, when I started *Are You Somebody?*—and I never really meant to, I need hardly tell you that nobody ever asked me to write a memoir, no more than people go round tapping middle-aged women on the shoulder and saying, “Excuse me, with your favor the world with your memoirs?” **(laughter)** What happened was that an American man working for a publisher in Ireland suggested my old columns from the *Irish Times* be collected. And the reason he did it was because his friend had no money and that way they’d have a book without having to, you know, even proofread it. **(laughter)** And it’s a shame, this piece of book-making, and I would have said no except that it was Christmas, **(laughter)** and I was going to spend Christmas with my cousin Doug, and mind you, there’s far worse company, **(laughter)** but there’s better company, too, you know, they don’t crack a joke or say, “Will I open another bottle of wine?” They just are, and I felt that I had lost out on life and so I said to him, “Yes, you may, even though everybody will sneer at me because nobody reads old opinion columns, but I’ll write an introduction. I’ll have it ready for you next May.”

Because this was December, May was infinitely far away, and of course I couldn’t get round to writing it and I had to stop answering the phone in case it was him asking where is it? **(laughter)** Because in principle, of course, I could write it, you know, it was just that in practice I couldn’t. And it was because I’d realized that the proper introduction to opinion columns is your life. They don’t come from what you learned in political science class. They come from your experience,

and that I'd have to write a personal introduction. Now, I often wrote my opinion columns in the first-person singular: "I feel about the European monition fund such and such, blah blah blah; other hand I feel such and such." But that "I" was of course a false "I." It was an opinion column "I." And actually I never got over writing an opinion column because nobody I personally knew took the slightest notion of my opinions. **(laughter)** Only when they were in print.

**(end audio clip)**

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A passage I particularly love from *Are You Somebody?* The second chapter begins this way:

"The most useful thing I brought out of my childhood was confidence in reading. Not long ago I went on a weekend self-explanatory workshop in the hope of getting a clue about how to live. One of the exercises we were given was to make a list of the ten most important events of our lives. The key moments that brought us from birth to wherever we are now. Number one was: I was born. And you could put whatever you liked after that. Without even thinking about it, my hand wrote as number two: I learned to read. I was born, and I learned to read. Wouldn't be a sequence that occurred to many people, I imagine, but I knew what I meant to say. Being born was something done to me, but my own life began, I began for myself, when I first made out the meaning of a sentence."

I should add, tonight, that *Are You Somebody?* and other books by Nuala O’Faolain are there available for you to purchase, so you can go home, if you don’t have books of Nuala O’Faolain, with a bit of her. I should also mention that after John Low-Beer comes up here, and Frank McCourt, to end our evening, followed by some music, we will offer you a glass of champagne to celebrate Nuala O’Faolain. John Low-Beer met Nuala in 2002, and they registered as domestic partners that year. John, it’s a pleasure to bring you up.

**(applause)**

**JOHN LOW-BEER:** I’d like to thank Paul, Kim Irwin, and Meg Stemmler for offering us this venue and for their work in producing this occasion, and Susan McKeown and the other musicians who have so generously given their very moving song and music to us, and all of you who’ve come to celebrate Nuala. A month before Nuala died, her old friend Marian Finucane interviewed her on the radio about her dying, and Marian asked her, “What about passion, which has been such an important part of your life?” And Nuala said, “Passion can go and take a running jump at itself.” But to love and be loved was very important to Nuala, she longed to be, as she put it, “Among those who were met at the airport or the train station, rather than among those who had to make their own way home.” Yet, she very much doubted, both publicly and privately, her ability to obtain that status and to be committed to another person.

After her death, the *Independent* newspaper wrote of her “life marked by a series of failed relationships,” the *Sun* called her “tragic,” the *Times* of London mentioned her “tormented love life,” and the *Boston Globe* her “heart-wrenching account of her search for love.” I understand

these characterizations, which she to some extent fostered, but I reject them and I know Nuala did love and was loved in return. She loved many people in different ways, and your presence here today shows how much she was loved in return. She loved me in the ordinary way that a woman loves a man. I've never really understood why Nuala loved me, and she too always said that our relationship was improbable. Nuala's longing for love—with which many people identified—was genuine, and she would never be fully satisfied, but she was wonderfully capable of love and closeness and intimacy and joy, and she was more constant than she knew and more and more so as time went on.

I met Nuala in New York on January 19, 2002, through an Internet dating service. Match.com. **(laughter)** From that time forward, we spoke on the phone at least twice a day every day. If she was in New York, I called her from the office once or twice, or she called me. And if she was in Ireland, around midnight I would email her, sometimes with my eyes swimming in head, so that she would have a morning bulletin. And if I didn't do it, I'd hear about it the next day. We exchanged commonplaces, mostly boring stuff, at least what I had to say was boring. The way couples do, we were close. She had her own apartment, but we spent almost every night together when she was in New York, which was most of the time.

But intimacy was harder for her than for most people. One of her themes was loneliness. Until about a year and a half ago, she would tell me about every six weeks that we should call it quits, that we had nothing in common, she had lost the connection. But I mostly knew that shortly she would regain it and come back to me. In the past year, after a particularly rough patch in the

spring of 2007 when we almost split up, she stopped doing this, and we had found a new peace and stability in our relationship, in the last year.

*Almost There* was a happier book than *Are You Somebody?* and therefore less successful. In *Almost There* she spoke frankly about another taboo subject, her jealousy of my daughter Anna, who's now 14. Despite her statements on step-motherhood, she loved Anna most of the time, and Anna loved her. She wrote in *Almost There*, if I could love more steadily than I ever thought I could, more than I ever saw done, I know I would be saved, and then I would have very much to give. I could make that child laugh." And by the way, she did make Anna laugh, very often. "I could be the other half of his love for her. As it is, sometimes when I catch sight of her I have to stop myself from moving towards her."

Martha Cooley, her friend, who's here today, told me how surprised she was after knowing Nuala some time, and having heard some of what Nuala said, to see how Anna and Nuala actually were together, their obvious enjoyment of one another, and the love between them. And Martha was not the only one to make this observation. My mother, who's an analyst, a psychoanalyst, who's also here today, made the same observation. Never would Nuala return from a trip without a present for Anna, and she dedicated *Chicago May* not only to me but in the acknowledgments to Anna as well.

Nearly everyone has remarked on Nuala's brutal honesty. It was easier for her to speak about her loneliness and her feelings that things were not going well, which were real, then about her connectedness, which was also real. In her last radio interview, the one with Marian in Galway,

she mentioned me only as the source of her health insurance. **(laughter)** I had driven her to the interview, but I didn't hear it until a few days later, on April 12, when it was broadcast. And when I heard it I was hurt and I told her so, and she said, "I'm only just learning how kind you are to me and that I love you." I was somewhat miffed about that "only just learning bit." I thought I'd been kinda nice to her all along **(laughter)** but I was mollified and touched by this expression of love and the newness of our relationship, even at the edge of death.

On April 17, she wrote to Sheridan, "John is coming back the weekend after next. Imagine if I learned the velvety peace of loving someone." Despite the conditional, she had already learned, and she knew how to love me. And I love her in return. I will miss her tremendously, as will we all. And I'd like to say one more thing. On April 18, in the midst of an email about her affairs, she wrote, written to me and—I was cc'd and it was to her sister Norine, she wrote, "And I'd like, if he didn't mind, to have written on the headstone: 'Here lies, or whatever, anno died, whatever date, etcetera, beloved of John Low-Ber of Brooklyn.'" I replied, "I don't feel worthy of this, I don't want you to write our love in stone just because you didn't say anything about us in that interview." **(laughter)** And Nuala replied, "I would love this for years and years, people would wonder about the story behind your unusual name and Brooklyn. It has been a kind of amazement that we were together, and though I won't know, the words on the stone will go on saying that. So let me celebrate that you are loving enough to be with me at the end."

So the stone was carved and Nuala was all too prescient, because the stone carver himself was obviously puzzled by my unusual name. He left a large space between the Low and the Beer, so Nuala's brother-in-law, Dary, stopped by the grave to find a man polishing the stone, who asked

him, “Why does it say, ‘Beloved of John Low, Beer of Brooklyn’?” **(laughter)** This wasn’t the wondering that Nuala had in mind, I don’t think. **(laughter)** But thanks to Nuala’s sister Deirdre, the stone will be re-polished and they’re going to do it over. Thank you.

**(applause)**

**FRANK MCCOURT:** Who was that woman, in that television makeup studio, that morning, that St. Patrick’s Day a few years ago, when I walked in to do the—was it—*Good Morning America*, with Charlie Gibson, the woman sitting already in the chair. “You’re Frank McCourt.” “Yeah.” “Well, I’m Nuala.”

What, Nuala? Well, there’s only one Nuala in the world. I knew who she was because I’d had some transatlantic connection with her before. Now, this is not about me, this is about Nuala, but when you talk about Nuala, you find yourself talking about yourself. So, that morning, we went to do the show with Mr. Gibson, and we were on a little couch, and it was St. Patrick’s Day, and everything was green in the studio **(laughter)** and Charlie Gibson said to me, “Well, what is all this fighting about in Ireland all the time?” And I said, “Well, ask her.” **(laughter)** “She lives in Belfast,” which she did at the time; she always had to go to the source of things, the center of things. I’m sure she has found it, by now, I hope.

That was our first face to face contact, and we had a few other occasions, a few readings and so on, and I became more and more interested in her, because I’m very interested in Irish female writers. And the two that come to my mind when I met Nuala, before her, who were what you

would call ambassadors, women, were Kate O'Brien, from Limerick, who was banned, some of her books were banned, and one of her books, there was a slight hint of lesbianism and at that time in Ireland there was no contact between males and females or even females and females or anything. **(laughter)** Only between men and sheep, I don't know, that was all right. But Kate O'Brien, Kate found Ireland unbearable and as a novelist, she had to leave and she went to Spain and she got married and so on. She was an excellent writer.

Then, there was Edna O'Brien, the second county of Nuala's. Edna, as you probably know, was a young star in the literary world, but again, controversial in the Ireland of the time. Especially in the area that we grew up, in Limerick and Clare, and of course she had to clear out to London, where again, she was very successful. But she didn't have an easy life. One night I was in the Algonquin Hotel with her and Colum McCann, and we were doing a kind of a discussion, and I leaned over to her during a break and I said, "Edna, all those years you were over in London and I was teaching in a vocational high school in New York, and I envied you transatlantic"— "Forget that," she said, "I was miserable as hell." And Edna had a very troubled marriage and she had children. But I suppose she used it just as the way Nuala used it.

Somebody said—some critic said about Nuala, about her, about her—entangled with her mother, her distress, and unhappiness over her mother—that she should get over it. Get over it. That's what a Supreme Court justice just recently said, Scalia, about the events in Florida a few years ago. Get over it. Well it wasn't Nuala's business to get over her mother or her family life, you don't get over it, you get into it. **(laughter)** You get under it, you get around it, you use it, that's



the business of the writer. I'm so happy myself that I had a miserable childhood, because I might have grown up suburban, then what the hell is there to write about? **(laughter)**

And Nuala, I suppose, grew up on the edges of suburbia, and for me, her life is miraculous. Because she emerged from this—and you all know her family situation now—she got an education, she went to university, of *course* she went to Oxford, she went back to UCD, she was an omnivorous and constant reader, she worked for BBC, she worked for the Irish television. She was constantly on the front lines, and yet all this time she would engage in these bouts of self-abnegation, insecurity about herself and say she didn't deserve anything. Well, if that's the way she felt, she didn't act like that. **(laughter)** She went forth to battle, but she never fell. So this was the Nuala you got to know, and when you were in her presence, you had to be honest, and that's all I can say about it. Not fearful, or not timid, but I think she did go through bouts of temerity, and doubted herself, but not enough to stop from writing.

When she was invited to—when she said she was going to write the introduction to that collection of columns, the amazing thing for me is she went and took a course in writing. **(laughter)** She writes about this in *Almost There*. She goes up to the Irish Writing Center in Dublin, in Parnell Square, and she said the other people there who knew who she was, and here's this distinguished, powerful journalist—and she admits that she was influential—here she is taking a course in writing. And then she talks about, in the book, about one of the assignments, because she said she spent so much time looking at the shoes of her instructor, and her fine, shapely legs—I don't know why that phrase stuck with me, but there you are, it's the shoes I think. So she said she was going home after receiving the assignment from this instructor that

said you are to write about a bathroom, something that happened in a bathroom. Not sex, but you have to write about something that happened in a bathroom. And on the way home she started thinking about bathrooms, what people do in there and how they get locked in, and you know the story of her mother.

But all of this is revelation. Everything about Nuala is revelation. You think you know her, but she comes up with something new all the time. The range of her interests is fantastic. She knew French; she studied medieval literature. The last job, I suppose, and John knows more about this than I do, her last job in America is she was reporting on the American political scene. I haven't read any of those reports. I must get them. They must have been tart. I'd like to see what she did with our politicians.

So I didn't have that much of a constant relationship with Nuala, but I knew you had to be honest. One time I was up here reading, she was in the audience, and I was reading a passage from my second book, *'Tis*, about a situation up in Washington Heights, where I had a landlady, an Irish landlady, whose husband was Jewish, and he had gone off to Germany, and he disappeared but the son returned. And the son was destroyed by his experiences in the camps, and she used to refer to him as "Michael, what's left of him," in the bed, and I'm afraid that I used her for comic effect. And I said, in the passage, I said, "Michael, what's left of him." And she reprimanded me later, she said, "That's not funny. This boy that comes back from the concentration camps, that's not funny, you shouldn't have done that." "All right, Nuala." She was right. But I was relishing the moment of laughter; we all do that.

So I look back at what I learned from meeting this remarkable woman and from reading her columns over the years in the *Irish Times*. And I'm glad I met her. This is the main thing, and I won't forget her, you won't forget her. You'll read her books, you'll read her columns over and over again, and you'll reflect on this remarkable life, this escape from this—what I suppose Nuala describes as a terribly family situation, that poor doomed mother and the feckless father—it's almost a stereotype of Irish life in that generation. So many of us are familiar with this. So I admire mostly the escape route that she found. That she was able to go off to England, our deadly enemy for eight hundred years, and then eventually write this book *Are You Somebody?* which could have been her road to Calvary, or liberation. Thank you.

**(applause)**

**(start audio clip)**

**NUALA O'FAOLAIN:** What can I do but take my chances? I was thinking incoherently, coming out of the chapel into the midday light. And what else can I do? Look after my teeth, listen to all the music I can, and keep going. Keep working on my escape tunnels out of the past, keep hoping to break through to the here and now, to be just myself, like the cat, which is so perfectly and un-self-consciously a cat, and doesn't know it will perish. What can I do, where everything is so various, and so beyond me, but cling on, and thank the God I don't believe in, for the miracles showered on me.

**(end audio clip)**

**SUSAN MCKEOWN:** This last song is one that is sung every year at the closing of the Merriman Summer School in County Clare, and as Paul said, you're welcome to stay for the champagne toast to Nuala after this. The lyrics are in your programs.

**(music not transcribed)**

**(applause)**