



The Temporary Gentleman

Sebastian Barry

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A stunning return from the prize-winning and best-selling author of *The Secret Scripture*

Jack McNulty is a 'temporary gentleman', an Irishman whose commission in the British army in the Second World War was never permanent. In 1957, sitting in his lodgings in Accra, he urgently sets out to write his story. He feels he cannot take one step further, or even hardly a breath, without looking back at all that has befallen him.

He is an ordinary man, both petty and heroic, but he has seen extraordinary things. He has worked and wandered around the world - as a soldier, an engineer, a UN observer - trying to follow his childhood ambition to better himself. And he has had a strange and tumultuous marriage. Mai Kirwan was a great beauty of Sligo in the 1920s, a vivid mind, but an elusive and mysterious figure too. Jack married her, and shared his life with her, but in time she slipped from his grasp.

A heart-breaking portrait of one man's life - of his demons and his lost love - *The Temporary Gentleman* is, ultimately, a novel about Jack's last bid for freedom, from the savage realities of the past and from himself.

The Temporary Gentleman Details

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From Reader Review The Temporary Gentleman for online ebook

Michael says

Sebastian Barry is often credited for the way he captures the quintessential Irish life, especially with the McNulty family. The Temporary Gentleman tells the story of Jack McNulty, an Irish engineer that gets commissioned into the British Army in the Second World War. I will admit that this is my first Sebastian Barry novel but I had a fair idea on what I was getting myself into. The title alone gave me an idea of the type of man this is following, only temporarily a refined gentleman. It was also the idea that Jack wanted to be a gentleman but thought his social-economical background prohibited that.

The Temporary Gentleman serves as a retrospective of Jack's life as he reflects on the choices he made along the way. But unlike similar stories like this, Jack wasn't a nice person; in fact he was a real bastard. A drunk and a degenerate gambler, he not only ruined his own life but that of his wife, Mai. He joined the army to escape, not a honourable thing to do but I get a sense that Jack may have felt like this was the only time he was a gentleman. Leaving Africa would mean he would have to return to his past, but is this what makes him such a bastard?

I will admit that I went into The Temporary Gentleman with the idea that this was a post-colonial novel; I expected it to explore the effects of imperialism on Kenya as they were working toward their independence. I only guess that from the synopsis and I guess you can say there were some glimpses of this, the way the Kenyans treated Jack as an ex Major. In hindsight, if I was to look at this novel as post-colonial, I should have been focusing on the Imperial effects England had over Ireland. Considering this took place after the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and the Irish Civil War (1922-1923).

However I decided to look at this novel through the lens of psychoanalytical theory. I'm no expert at literary theories but I do try and this was a very in-depth and psychological look at Jack McNulty and the way he sees himself. A look at his mistakes and narcissism and how damaging his choices are for him and the people close to him. The Temporary Gentleman almost serves as a psychological profile and if I knew more about psychology I would try to analyse it.

I have to except that my literary criticism skills are still very lacking, I might have been able to handle this novel through the lens of post-colonialism but it was too focused on Jack McNulty to get much out of it. Psychoanalytical theory is something I'm very interested in and possibly my next focus in the world of literary criticism. All I can really say is that Barry makes it impossible to sympathise with Jack at all.

Sebastian Barry appears to know his craft; his approach to the novel was expertly executed. The prose in The Temporary Gentleman makes the whole experience bearable; you can help but enjoy the writing while grinding your teeth at Jack McNulty. I don't feel like I can truly recommend this novel, there are plenty of unlikeable characters that are more thrilling to read about but I will be returning Sebastian Barry in the future.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2014/...>

Chrissie says

If you haven't read Sebastian Barry you should at least try one. You should read him to experience his prose. You should read him because he captures Ireland and what it is to be Irish.

This is my second novel by the author, having given *A Long Long Way* five stars. *A Long Long Way* focuses on WW1 and the failed Easter Uprising of 1916, set before the Republic of Ireland came into being. Much was promised to the Irish soldiers and so little delivered. Independence came not until 1922.

The Temporary Gentleman is set in 1957, after both world wars and after Irish independence. The central character, Jack McNulty, is in Accra, Ghana, a former British colony, and it was in this year the Gold Coast gained independence and became Ghana. In his mid-fifties, he is looking back on his life. This is his story. He's an engineer, an expert on bridge construction, explosives and defusing bombs then later a UN observer. A husband and a father. Some of his dealings are shady. Was he involved in gun-running when stationed in Togo? His travels and his jobs and drink, they are for him escape. Escape from what? He is writing a memoir. Maybe by writing he will come to understand who he is and why and what he would like to change. How do we change in our own eyes and in others? He writes of his past, of his wife and of his children. How is it that we hurt those we love most? The book is both a personal story of one individual's struggle with life and marriage as well as an observation of how we are a product of our culture. Who is Jack foremost? Gentleman or bastard? British or Irish? Or a bit of each. Land, culture, language, religion and history separate and bind the English and the Irish. What has this done to the Irish people?

The prose is stellar. Simply beautiful lines, often melancholic in tone. Lines of subtle meaning that make you think. Lines for contemplation rather than definitive answers.

The telling switches between the past and the present, but one is never confused. The past and the present are intertwined; the past has shaped who Jack is now. What will the future hold? We are abruptly told at the very end. I like the ending.

I listened to the audiobook narrated by Frank Grimes. Easy to follow and told in an Irish dialect. It is very well read.

Diane Barnes says

"Our greatest trouble and our saving grace is that we have a soul. Time may seem like a great flood dragging with it all the debris of the past and catching you at last running through your own fields. Where there was once a great fire may seem only an ember now in the palm of your hand. But that ember is the soul and nothing on earth can rescind it."

The paragraph quoted above is the reason I read Sebastian Barry.

This is the story of a man who was a failed husband and father, a hard drinker who could not understand his wife's alcoholism and depression, who lost his home because of gambling debts, an Irishman who never chose sides because he didn't care enough. When he has lost everything, he starts a diary to try to understand his life and where he went wrong.

This is my third book by this author, and least favorite of the three. But the language, the singing words and phrases, the passion of his characters, it's all here in this book as well. Worth every minute spent reading.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Barbara says

Gorgeous prose, and a sad, sad story. This is a book that you could open to any page and find stunning language. Jack McNulty and his wife Mai, both lead lives, that at the end of the book, Jack, and indeed the reader, are not sure were worthy. Jack, like a cat with nine lives, escapes death several times. It seems to be pure dumb luck and not the case that he has to survive in order to accomplish great things. Barry's novels are all based on stories of his own family, and he plumbs the depths of that history.

Gail Ofterdinger-Ledgister says

I rarely have difficulty writing a review of a book that i have enjoyed reading, until now. This book is dark and disturbing. The love bond between Jack McNulty and his wife Mai is twisted and revolting. The term "temporary gentleman" refers to more than Jack's military years and applies to most aspects of his life. What kind of family man becomes a bomb de-fuser? What kind of man sneaks money from his wife's secret stash of cash to pay his gambling debts and bar bills until there is none left? What kind of man allows the lien holder to take the house because he cannot say no to his wife's extravagances and their shared alcohol addiction? What kind of man observes his wife's abuse of their children and takes off the next day? What kind of man deliberately finds ways to avoid living with his family? Both husband and wife are lonely and madly in love with each other. Reading this book filled my evening with sadness. But the language used and the writing style are beautiful and elegant. I was transported back to an earlier century. I loved learning of the tales of emerging African states. I loved hearing the tales about life in the Ireland that was and to be. But I am still left with sadness. Lost years and misunderstood signals. Selfishness and tragedy. My emotions remain torn open. Kudos Mr. Barry, a job well done. My thanks to the Penguin First to Read program for a complimentary copy.

Diane S ? says

Barry continues his novels about the McNulty family, this time Jack, who in 1957 sits in Accra trying to make sense of his life. His only companion, a man hired to take care of him. His life which at times had seem to promising, has led to many failures and dissolution. His marriage gone, his wife gone and all due to his failings.

While I would like to say I enjoyed this novel, I really didn't. The sentences are beautiful, his writing as always wonderful, Jack had seen so much in his life and some of that proved very interesting. The novel shifts, back and forth, from Sligo to Accra and other places. The tone of the novel though is what really effected me, it was so melancholic, Jack's life so full of failure. There really was little in the way of a saving grace.

Andrew says

'It's so strange to be sober day in, day out. I have too much bloody time to think,' says Mai, the wife of protagonist Jack McNulty towards the end of this haunting book.

Escapism is a running theme in this novel - Jack is, after all, only The Temporary Gentleman, born into an Ireland constrained by the Acts of Union, brought up an Irishman in the early days of the new nation, but unable to resist the opportunities for work within the British system. At times, escaping from the tracks of his life seems all but impossible.

The book opens with an extraordinary scene from which we are not sure how Jack emerges alive. He is, it's clear, a survivor. Soon, the form of the narrative is established: one long reflection on what has determined how Jack's fifty-odd years have unfolded, and on the nature of his marriage.

Set in 1957 between Ghana (where Jack has stayed on after independence) and the Ireland of the first half of the twentieth century, the book's milieu is constantly shifting. The constant is the narrative voice of McNulty, a literary protagonist with a compelling ability to delve into the depths of his own past. He is a brilliant creation - it is almost as if Sebastian Barry is forcing McNulty to wrestle with the big issues. How much influence has Jack's own troubled relationship with alcohol had on his wife Mai's descent into a haze of drink? Would different decisions have brought different outcomes, or was his life pre-determined? And, on a deeper level, what of the Irish tendency to cast blame on their past for their present-day troubles? Some of the descriptions of what alcohol does to the human mind are unforgettable - and have certainly left images imprinted on my memory.

The Temporary Gentleman is a strangely elegiac - even tragic - love story of the highest quality, which will stay with you after the last page is turned.

Dem says

The Temporary Gentleman by Sebastian Barry is a beautifully written and yet haunting novel and a portrait of one man's struggles with life and marriage.

Jack McNulty is a "temporary gentleman, an Irishman whose commission in the British Army in the Second World War was never made permanent. Jack is haunted by regrets and while in Ghana writes his memoirs of his work and life at home in Ireland with his beautiful wife Mai and how he tries to come to terms with the savage realities of the past, his demons and his lost love.

I really enjoyed this book very much and loved Barry's beautiful and elegant prose and while the novel may be sad and haunting in places it is the superb writing by Barry that keeps the reader engrossed in the story.

I loved the Irishness of this book, the reflections on Irish history of Collins and Kitty Kiernan and the names of towns and villages throughout Sligo, Longford and Cavan. Living in the midlands these areas are very familiar to me and enhanced my enjoyment of the story. I also love the way Barry writes about the War of

Independence in Ireland and the struggle of the Irish people in *The Temporary Gentleman* as he seems to capture the mood of the people of the time.

The characters were realistic and very well drawn but I disliked the character of Jack and while I was intrigued by the character of Mai and wanted to hear her voice in the story this sadly was not to be and yet something makes me think Mai's story will crop up again in another book from Barry. The "dreaded drink" plays a huge part in this novel and we learn how Jack and Mai deal with this demon in their lives and while this may seem disturbing to read, it was such a sad reality for many families in Irish life.

There was little if no humor in the book but yet I never found the story depressing. I loved some of the passages from the story and this one made me smile as it was so true in Irish families and seemed to have been..... " *The Irish Divorce of the time*'

Because, as if it there were a sort of hidden illness in the McNulty marriages, she (Mai) had stopped talking to me (Jack) directly as Mam had done with Pappy. Maggie was in low babies at school now and full of talk and her first job as a talker was official intermediary between her mother and father"

I really enjoyed this novel and loved to read all the connections with the other books by Barry like *The Secret Scripture* On Canaan's Side and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and while this is a stand alone novel I do feel you would need to have some insight into the McNulty family from the other novels in order to understand the story better.

A great book and one that I really enjoyed, but not a book that would suit everyone and therefore I would recommend it to some of my friends but not all.

Jeanette says

Depth of flowery and lyrical language coupled with a considerable profile/ psychological insight into a Personality Disordered man. He is looking in retrospect to his war and the years before and beyond. Not my style of preferred writing at all. And Narcissism makes it a harder go for me, as well. But I can see why the higher ratings of other readers, especially if you like Joyce or Faulkner paragraph length sentences.

Lidia says

Serían 3,5, pero le mantengo 3 estrellas aunque he acabado subrayando un montón de párrafos (pero sé que en el futuro pensaré en ella como una historia de 3 estrellas). Sin embargo, no ha sido la historia que esperaba. Me habría gustado que hubiera profundizado más en la relación (al tener solo la versión de Jack, perdemos toda la perspectiva de Mai) e incluso en la parte de los conflictos bélicos (me interesa el conflicto irlandés). Eso ha hecho que me faltara "sentir" más la relación.

El planteamiento del matrimonio o de la adicción al alcohol me han parecido bastante interesantes. Quizá es solo que no ha sido buen momento, no lo sé. Uno de esos ejemplos de "no eres tú, soy yo".

Christine Bonheure says

Relaas van een ongelukkig huwelijk. Als Mai's vader haar vriend Jack ontmoet, geeft hij haar de raad hem meteen te laten vallen, want "die brengt alleen maar ongeluk". Diepverliefde Mai legt die raad naast zich neer en trouwt met haar Jack: lieve man, daar niet van, maar ook een gokker en drinker. Door het gokken verliezen ze hun prachtige huis, door het drinken verliezen ze elkaar en hun kinderen. Mai evolueert van uiterst getalenteerde vrouw naar een dronken en angstig wrak. Jack schrijft zijn levensverhaal terwijl hij na de dood van Mai in Afrika werkt voor de VN. Zijn Afrikaanse en Ierse verhaal wisselen elkaar af. Het verhaal is in het begin moeilijk te volgen, maar eens die Ierse historie op dreef komt, ben je verkocht. Barry kan prachtig poëtisch schrijven, door zijn empathisch vermogen is het een plezier over de beschreven relaties en gevoelens te lezen. Ook de oorlogstaferelen zijn subliem.

Maria Clara says

Hacía meses que tenía el ojo puesto en este libro y, aunque no recuerdo cómo fue que me enteré de su existencia, me alegro de haberlo leído. Y llorado. Porque es una historia dura, quizá en algunas partes muy dura, sobre el alcohol, pero sobre todo es una historia de amor.

Marianne says

“For myself, I could only wonder at her - was this a sort of evil borrowed from alcohol? I didn't believe that in herself, in her heart and soul, she was a vicious woman. How is it that for some people drinking is a short-term loan on the spirit, but for others a heavy mortgage on the soul? How is it many a drinker becomes gay and light-hearted, but some so darkly morose and rescinded, filleted of every scrap of happiness, that they might beat their child in the snow?”

The Temporary Gentleman is the thirteenth novel by award-winning Irish author, Sebastian Barry, and his fifth work about the McNulty Family. Now in his mid-fifties, civil engineer and former UN observer, Jack McNulty sits in his rented house in Accra, Ghana, writing about his life in an old minute-book of the now-defunct Gold Coast Engineering and Bridge-Building Company, because “there is a lot to be said for writing things down. The fog gets pushed away, and the truth or some semblance of it stands stark and naked, not always a comfortable matter, no”

Now redundant in Ghana, Jack feels he should go back to Sligo, to what remains of his family, whose story he tells, interspersed with snippets of his life in Accra. While he includes his work in bomb disposal, engineering and as a diplomat, and his extended family, the overwhelming bulk of his account concerns the love of his life, the beautiful and popular Mai Kirwan, whom he met when studying engineering at college: “The waterfall of her black hair, the hat like a boat trying to weather it, her eyes dark in the dark carriage, not so much absent as deep, deep as a well, with the water a far coin below of brightness and blackness”

Readers familiar with Barry's work will appreciate the mention of many characters recognisable from his other works about this family, although some have different names. A bit of background knowledge of the Troubles in Ireland is also helpful, as much of the novel is set against this background. As Jack finally admits

his responsibility for certain heart-breaking events of his past, Barry adds another layer to the engrossing McNulty history.

Barry again succinctly comments about the devastating effect that the change of ruling party can have on those whose loyalties were seen to be with the “other” side: “What strange men were about the earth, after this half century of wars. Men who once were true, and their very trueness turned into betrayal, as the pages of history turn in the wind. Men who were vicious and oftentimes ruthless, turned into heroes and patriots. And a hundred shades and mixtures of both”

Readers are once again treated to the wonderful descriptive prose of which Barry is a master: “We could see the coast of Africa lying out along a minutely fidgeting shoreline. The only illuminations were the merry lights of the ship, and the sombre philosophical lights of God above. Otherwise the land ahead was favoured only by darkness, a confident brushstroke of rich, black ink” and “A lark, a single bird with her dowdy plumage, burst up from her cup of sand just in front of me and like a needle flashing in my mother’s hand of old made a long stitch between earth and heaven, with a joyousness that rent my heart” are just two examples. Both beautiful and sad, this is another brilliant read from Sebastian Barry.

More examples of Barry’s gorgeous prose:

“The bay there, so primitive and wide, as if desolate and unknown to mankind, with not a house in view, showed us its army upon army of white horses, their white-plumed heads rearing and tumbling on the fierce beaten colours of the water, strange blues and blacks, as if blue and black could be fire, and thrown from these wild acres, the heaven-ascending spray”

“The desert was as big as Europe. Humanity, local and imperial, milled about the oases, scorning the heat in mysterious displays of intent. Then these would drop away, and the wide, soul-emptying desert begin again, in which the bus was only a loudmouthed intruder”

“The rains, finally. All day there had been a metallic greyness at the edges of the usual egg-blue sky. A few minutes ago the universe gave a shrug, time seemed to step back, then surged forward to catch up, and then the heavens were ripped in a thousand places like a rotten topsail. And a solid water poured down, you might think no creature could breathe in it. It rubbed out every other sound, of insect, bird and animal. The palm trees dipped under it like dancers, their lovely costumes dragged and battered”

“It was a place where she had been happy so many times, as a girl and a young woman, and it seemed she needed a few minutes to allow an echo of that happiness to touch her”

Daniel says

Initially, I was impatient for it to get to the point. The narrative kept flitting around it, but just wasn't getting there. And, I have to admit, I took a break and read a couple of other books before returning to this.

However, as I got further in, I started to get a sense of what was happening. I felt like Barry was approaching it as a sculptor. There's a mass of grief and shame, but no definition and no context. Shaving off a layer here and a chunk there, you start to get a sense of shape. Layer after layer and you get to the details of Jack's pain.

You never get a sense from Jack that he's been a ne'er-do-well, but, through his descriptions of others' reactions to him, you find out. I think there's probably a lot of truth in that. The bad seeds probably don't sit and ruminate about how bad they are.

(view spoiler)
