



The Nature of Water and Air

Regina McBride

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"My mother was never easy in the world of houses. She was a tinker, a traveler girl who had married a wealthy man. Her name was Agatha Sheehy....There are silences all around my mother's story."

So begins *The Nature of Water and Air*, set on a patch of Irish coast where, amid a flurry of whispers, we meet Agatha's only surviving daughter, Clodagh. Determined to secure her mother's elusive love and the truth about her, Clodagh is swept into a relationship with a handsome, isolated man. He brings her to the heart of her mother's story, where she must confront the questions "Does a truth change love?" and "What madness will come from chasing a secret?"

Powerfully sensitive, this startling debut novel about forbidden love will place Regina McBride among our most celebrated novelists.

The Nature of Water and Air Details

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Author : Regina McBride

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From Reader Review *The Nature of Water and Air* for online ebook

Diane says

This book is beautifully written, almost poetic. Regina McBride tells a gripping story that revolves around love, folklore, and the ability to find yourself.

Clodagh is on a journey to discover herself and the secrets of her family. She wants only to find some acceptance and love. She does find it but only to realize that other darker things are at work here.

The atmosphere in this story is what helps to make it so compelling. We can almost see the buildings, the water and the fires that burn. We can most definitely feel Clodagh's pain and anguish.

While this is a dark story, it is worth the read. I hated to see it end.

Jessica says

I did not actually read this book, I listened to it on audio. The atmosphere of this book comes through with every word. The narrator spoke in the lilting Irish accent that only added depth to the story that I am sure I would have missed had I read this. Some books are meant to be heard, rather than read. If you have a choice, listen to this one.

The sentence structure of this book is far from plain, but at the same time, is not too flowery. Sometimes a word was simply exchanged for a more perfect word that made this such a joy to listen to.

I was pulled in to this book from the very first paragraphs. Clodagh (pronounced Clo - long o - duh) has a very mysterious mother who was a tinker (also known as a traveler) in her younger years when she catches the eye of Clodagh's father Frank Sheehy. He is of genteel Irish upbringing with two sisters and himself living on the family estate. Frank is taken by her untamed, wild beauty.

Sadly Frank passes away early in the story and the rest of the book is more about Clodagh, her twin sister Mary, and her mother Agatha. Along with the housekeeper Mrs. O'Dare, Agatha struggles with being drawn to her tinker roots while raising her two small daughters while banished to a distant house belonging to the Sheehy family.

Tangled amongst this story is the legend of the Selkie, a mythical sea animal that becomes human through her relationship with a man. Add Clodagh's longing for a father figure and later as she matures, for someone to love, and you've a cast of characters poised for joy and heartbreak.

At times I felt I could feel the meadow grass, hear the birds, feel the howling sea wind of the Irish coast. Slow in its telling this haunting novel, in the tradition of the oral Irish storyteller, is not a book you read with speed in mind.

Sadly, this book also has some very disturbing twists that were not my favorite. (No spoilers from me on exactly what.) This book, with the talents of this master weaver of words, could be amazing no matter which

way she'd decided to turn the plot. Even with the twists I didn't like, all is forgiven at the end of this beautifully written story. Sometimes I love a book not for the story as a whole, but the sum of its parts. This is one of those books.

Recommended for fans of Angela's Ashes, Ireland, and on a totally unrelated subject matter but a book that must be listened to rather than read - Ava's Man.

Diana says

I thought this book was beautifully written. I think that people are getting too distracted with what was admittedly a very disturbing and taboo twist. I did not love the twist, but I do not think the author's intent was to disgust the reader, but more to fully relay to you the core of the story. This is about Clodagh trying to figure out herself and even more than that, her mother. She is essentially so fascinated by her mother and the story that she does not know, that she is brought to a dark place. I really believe that Clodagh wanted to be her mother, and to really embody what she thought her mother was. I also think she knew even as she did this that her decisions and her mother's were so wrong. I loved the whole Selkie myth and the way it was woven through. I had this feeling while reading this that the time period it was supposed to be taking place in felt false. I was reading this like it was taking place in the 1800's for some reason.

Victoria says

Wow. I did enjoy this book, but it was QUITE unsettling... truly crossing the line into disturbing territory, even. The plot really took me by surprise. It was hard to see what was coming, and even in the moments that took more predictable turns, it wasn't something that a reader wanted to correctly guess. While not an uplifting book (at all), its harshness was really balanced about by the moments of beauty and the strength of the writing itself. The shock of the end really overshadowed the majority of the book. The haunting quality of it is really lingering... and I have no idea of what I will read next! I did really like it, even if it was so shockingly upsetting.

Keri says

The sea that surrounds the Irish lands is a place rich with mystery and mythology. Regina McBride interweaves the celtic culture with the hopelessly beautiful myth of the selkie in her book *The Nature of Water and Air*. According to Irish lore, Selkies are magical seals who, when on land, shed their skins and become human. A person that captures the shed skin can force the transformed seal to stay with him. However, on land, the seal becomes restless, and if her seal skin is found, will descend once again into the depths of the sea.

In this emotionally hypnotic book the worlds of reality and mythology converge as one. Although the story is born of the Irish lore of the selkie, it evolves into a story of loss for the young narrator, Clodagh. For Clodagh it is the loss of a mother and father, and the loss of a twin sister who had completed her, that left her searching ultimately for herself. "The whole right side of me, the side of me that was partly her, felt bereft" (McBride 47). The losses that pronounced Clodagh's childhood left her as emotionally unstable as the sea that commands the selkie. As Clodagh tries desperately to find the intimacy that has eluded her, and to make sense of the inconsistencies and silences that shrouds her family history, her life begins to mirror that of her

aloof mother's, Agatha; walking between the worlds of reality and mythology--of the living and the dead. "But my mother seemed to have come from nowhere" (14), so begins the half-truths and deception that seeps Clodagh's family roots deep in tragedy. A tragedy of the loss of a father and twin sister leaving Clodagh, the only surviving daughter, struggling to attain affection from Agatha, whose love is as transient as the tinkers whose campfires dot the Ireland shores. A former tinker, or traveler, before her marriage to Clodagh's father, it is in Agatha's nature to be drawn to the restless lifestyle. And it is with a tinker man, as Clodagh watches, that Agatha gives her love. The trysts, cloaked in misery, causes a greater divide in the unresolved relationship between mother and daughter leaving Clodagh with more questions regarding her identity. It is this malignant secrecy that fosters Clodagh's unfettering anguish and contempt toward her mother as Agatha falls deeper into sorrow's depression. It is this tidal wave of emotion that encourages Clodagh to chant "go, go" as she watches the sea call her mother home, like that of a selkie. It is in this moment that Clodagh fully realizes the nature of water and air. "I felt afraid that the curtain between worlds was not sufficient. Air blew things in and away and water exiled its creatures onto dry land and rushed away from them. It seemed to be the nature of water and air, to be random, heartless" (113).

The reader follows Clodagh as she grows into a young woman refuting the rumors linking her mother with the myth of the selkie. In Clodagh's quest to uncover the secrets within her family and discover her identity, she follows in her mother's footsteps and is lured into the tinker lifestyle. Living as a tinker offered Clodagh not only a sense of freedom that she had never felt before, but it also opened doors to her past. It is in Clodagh's search for answers where she first finds a sense of belonging, a release from the abandonment that had plagued her childhood. On her exploration of self-identity Clodagh becomes enamored with a copper-haired man, Angus. Angus provides Clodagh with the love that she had been deprived of her entire life. However, in chasing down her mother's secrets Clodagh gets more than she bargains for. Angus not only provides Clodagh with her ideal love, but also offers the missing link in her family tree. After all the secrets are out, Clodagh learns that this copper-haired man is not only the man that she had watched as a child who was with her mother, but he is also her biological father. In the end, Clodagh returns to the home of her distant aunts and delivered a son, Finvarra, otherwise known in celtic legends as the king of the dead. The Nature of Water and Air is wrote with such lyrical prose it is hard not to become enchanted by their mysticism. McBride's ethereal language brandishes a melancholic pain that resonates the length of the book. The Nature of Water and Air is very dramatic and incredibly unpredictable. Although it is a lovely read, I actually had to read this book a second time through to understand the reasoning as to why McBride could not have ended the story with a more fulfilling end. However, after rereading it, I am not sure if she could have ended it any differently. For it is in the end, that the book comes full circle to where water and air eventually converge.

Robert Beveridge says

Regina McBride, *The Nature of Water and Air* (Simon and Schuster, 2001)

Wow.

Okay, now that my first impressions are out of the way, this is one hell of a ride. All the more so because most books that have that effect on me are your typical big budget thrillers that, were they to go to the big screen, would be directed by John McTiernan or someone along those lines who uses a lot of pyrotechnics. *The Nature of Water and Air* is anything but; stuff doesn't blow up here at all. In fact, it tends to do quite the opposite; characters implode on a fairly regular basis, but they do so within the context of a pervasive atmosphere that this is the way things are supposed to be. It's hard to explain why something that's so low-

key can have such an effect, but I'll give it a go.

Everything that makes this book work is atmosphere-- big old houses that are falling apart, characters for whom clinical depression means things are looking up, Catholic schools harboring reclusive nuns, it all adds up to an unshakable feeling that not only is something bad bound to happen, but that everything that's bound to happen is bad. It's the revival of classic tragedy--bad things happen not because of the flaws in the characters (and there are certainly character flaws aplenty), but because the gods have deemed that, for these folks, the dice came up snake eyes again and again, no matter how many chances they got. And yet still, when bad things happen to these people (be they good or not so good), every once in a while the way in which the bad things happen, or the scope of the bad things that do happen, is carried off so brilliantly that it might as well be the roof of the Nakatomi Plaza being blown to bits in Die Hard. Enchanting.

The story centers around Clodagh Sheehy and her mother, Agatha. Clodagh's father has been dead for most of her life, and she has no memory of him. She has a twin sister, Margaret Mary, who's too frail to do much other than play the piano once in a while. To top it all off, she's convinced that her mother is a selkie, a seal taken human form who is destined to return to the sea at some point. Agatha married into the Sheehy family, and is not beloved of the rest of her husband's family, so they send her to the other side of Ireland to live in a decrepit mansion the family still owns over there. Mrs. O'Dare, one of the housekeepers, comes along for the ride, and it is there our story opens. Most of the action goes forward through the reader finding out more and more about Clodagh's family (the unraveling of her mother's mysterious origins, the relationships between Agatha's husband and his sisters, etc.), but there is also Clodagh's growing up; the book takes place over the span of twenty years. from Clodagh's girlhood until just after her twenty-first birthday.

It is an uncompromisingly dark novel, one for which the word "bleak" is too light and airy. And yet it never fails to be beautiful. ****

Grace says

This book is an example of how a well-written book can go awry. From the first page, I was hooked on the writing style. The author seemed to be a pro at beautiful prose poetry style writing. And although the first segment of the plot, with the protagonist, her sister, their mother, and a housekeeper all living in a house by the sea, seemed to go on far too long, the book later picked up pace and began being quite good.

But then came the ending.

I had heard that this book had a strange ending, and I thought "well I don't mind that." If by "strange" people mean "gross, disturbing, and a complete let-down" then I wholeheartedly agree.

And another thing...I've read books that use mythic subjects as a metaphor, and I've read mythic fiction books in which magic becomes real, but I've never before read a book that **reads** like the latter, so that you read and read, expecting a wonderful magic twist at the end, and then it ends up being the former, with the "twist" ending being just plain disturbing.

If it weren't for the amazingly eloquent writing, I'd give this 1 star.

Mary-Beth says

The characters in this book infuriated me constantly. I think that's a biased and fairly unhelpful opinion, but there it is. The characters lie to one another constantly and as a result end up in a morally questionable situation. I'm not going to explain any further than that because it would ruin the story, such as it is, but this tale isn't for the squeamish. As a result of these constant lies the worst always happens to the characters, to the extent that I basically said, "oh come on," and got very angry. I don't like collapsing dominoes plots of this type.

Anyway, this book was advertised as having a lot of selkie mythology intertwined with it, but what did exist was definitely tangential and merely part of the novel's imagery.

Sarah says

Regina McBride is a poet and this, her first novel, feels very much like poetry. The prose has a sweet, lilting quality. It's steeped in sensation and emotional resonance. It's lovely. But, for me, it was a little *too* immediate. Too much water and air. Not enough thoughtful analysis. WAY too much horrifying sex. --I don't mean "graphic." I definitely mean "horrifying."

McBride achieved what she set out to do. (Or I'll assume she did.) It just isn't for me.

Carrie Thomas says

Set on the Irish coastline, this book is hauntingly beautiful, sad, sensitive, and thought-provoking. I love books with an ironic (even if it's heart-breaking) twist and surprise. She is a beautiful storyteller.

Angela says

This is a sordid tale of love, passion and destiny. I am not one for sordid twisted plots, but her style of writing is remarkable. It was a riveting read. If not for the twisted end I would have rated the book a five star.

Noelle says

This is not my review. It is a review from Luan Gaines but much better than I could write:

Indeed, the young Clodagh lives in thrall of her beautiful if distant mother, Agatha Sheehy, one come from the world of itinerant tinkers, who listens carefully to the call of the wild land where they live, at the edge of the sea. Agatha's actions are shrouded with secrecy and sexual intimation, and she drifts just beyond her daughter's knowing, unwilling to be caught by time or place.

Clodagh's fragile twin sister, Mare, has died, and the girl wills Mare to remain, if only as her other half, the opposite coin of her identity. She plays the piano one-handed, leaving the other part, the other hand, for

Mare, and shares her innermost fears, sometimes staring into the cloudy mirror, hoping for a glimpse of her "other" self. Their father, Frank Sheehy, dies before the twin's birth, and Clodagh desperately clings to the only person left alive: her mother. But, like the mythological selkie, half-seal, half-woman, Agatha returns to the depths of the sea, unwilling to remain in this world, unable to meet the needs of her surviving daughter. Cut adrift and friendless but for a loving housekeeper, Clodagh begins a journey toward self-discovery, often tangled between the worlds of reality and superstition. In reaching out to identify the face of her mother, Clodagh discovers the truth of herself. Her adolescence is often painful and life changing, her passion for music frequently the only solace. Away at convent school or living with her paternal aunts, this is a world where Clodagh cannot find a place. Clodagh's dead father Frank, her possibly real father, a tinker, and her own early foray into sexuality are without meaning until she allows the woman inside to break free and claim own identity.

McBride's novel is flooded with images, page after page, opening windows that may only exist in this magic land, Ireland. The vast canvas of such rugged, gorgeous geography serves as the background for dreams and emotions as tumultuous and changeable as the storm-tossed waves that beat along the coast. This author has accomplished more than storytelling; she has opened my imagination to the true nature of Ireland, the very nature of water and air.

Christie says

Emily White of the New York Times Book Review says "Regina McBride writes in a shimmering and often hypnotic prose style, one that's full of incantatory repetition...*The Nature of Water and Air* has an urgent melancholy about it — it casts an undeniable spell."

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, I thought McBride managed to capture a particular time and place (1970s Ireland) extremely well. I was intrigued by the book's opening lines: "There are silences all around my mother's story." But in some intangible way, I felt that the novel failed me.

The narrator of *The Nature of Water and Air* is Clodagh, a sensitive, intelligent girl whose life is touched by tragedy. Clodagh and her twin sister, Mare, live with Agatha, their emotionally distant mother, and Mrs. O'Dare, their housekeeper, in a crumbling manor house. Agatha is not a traditional mother - before she "settled" she was a tinker- part of a sub-culture of people who traveled in caravans, selling bits and pieces and camping in fields. What little affection Agatha does manage to share goes to Mare, who is very ill and subsequently dies. Clodagh spends the rest of her young childhood watching her mother from behind corners and through windows.

It is difficult to say much more about this book without spoiling some of its revelations.

McBride is a poet and it's apparent in her prose. Her writing is lyrical and often quite lovely, but it also occasionally stands in the way of the narrative. While I can't say that I loved this book, I certainly appreciated McBride's talent. And in the end, despite some of the questions I had, I felt satisfied by the time I had spent with Clodagh.

Emilia Kandl says

Very disturbing but I loved it. Readers might feel that it moves slowly, since the author spends a lot of time establishing the setting and characters who exit the story less than halfway through. Personally, I was mesmerized enough by the gorgeous language and descriptions (and overall strangeness) to never be bored. I also felt the different phases of the story were meant to blur together, with dead characters playing as solid (or more solid) a role as living ones. Setting is an especially big deal here -- much of literally every page is devoted to making sure we remember to visualize the West of Ireland, a "meeting place between worlds" removed in some ways from the norms that would shape our responses to the story's events. Even though I found the ending in particular very unsettling, I could suspend/reconsider some of the feelings I'd normally have about it because of the unusual context. I thought the balance of reality with the magical aspect of this setting, and all the characters' different views of it, was handled especially well. I'd like to read more by this author.

Lin says

This is the only novel i ever chose to read twice. It remains my favorite ever.
