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Emily Dickinson's life is reimagined in her own voice and through eyes of a young Irish maid—an enchanting novel in the spirit of *Longbourn* and *Mrs. Poe*

Ada Concannon's first day in America is a success. She's the new maid for the respected but eccentric Dickinson family of Amherst, Massachusetts. Despite the differences in age and class, eighteen-year-old Ada, "a neat little Irish person, fresh off the boat," strikes up a deep freindship with Miss Emily, the gifted elder daughter living a spinster's life at home. Emily is a bastion of support as Ada struggles to find her place in this new world, while Ada's toil gives Emily the freedom she needs to write.

But Emily's passion for words begins to dominate her life. She decides to wear nothing but white and increasingly avoids the outside world. When Ada's safety and reputation are threatened, however, Emily faces down her own demons in order to help her friend, with shocking consequences.

Miss Emily Details

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From Reader Review Miss Emily for online ebook

Claire McAlpine says

Ada Concannon, the eldest of 7 children, possesses an energetic zest for life that was unappreciated by her previous employer; upon being demoted to scullery maid she decides to seek her fortune elsewhere, taking a passage on the boat to New England where her Aunt Mary, Uncle Michael and a couple of not too friendly cousins reside.

She lands on her feet with a job at the Dickinson household, a family of four, with the spinster sisters Vinnie and Emily, neigbout to their somewhat gruff (he was a treasure when he was younger recalls Emily) brother Austin, who is married to Sue, one Emily appears to (not very convincingly) pine for.

Emily is reluctant to leave the house, preferring words to company and attaches herself to Ada, the kitchen being one of her preferred refuges, thus friendship with the housemaid most important.

Her friendship with the maid flouts convention and is a kind of quiet rebellion within the home that the poet rarely steps out of.

Chapters alternate between Miss Emily's and Ada's perspective to reveal brief but eventful encounters in the kitchen and rooms of the Dickinson home, between the young Irish woman Ada, the poet Emily Dickinson and those around them.

Although Ada is outgoing and attractive, she still has something of the Irish reserve and tendency to silence when there is trouble. And trouble there will be. Ada and Emily must attempt to navigate the narrow space between their classes to deal with the trouble, without compromising their reputations.

Miss Emily is a lively, charming read, she brings her characters to life, especially the Irish and creates a world we can quickly imagine and inhabit. There is something comfortable and reassuring in her prose and novels that makes you want to abandon all else until the last page is turned. Just as she did with *Savage Mementos*, so too she achieves with *Miss Emily*. My only regret is that it all ends too soon, I'm still wondering about Ada and could easily follow after her into a sequel.

Rebecca says

I'm a sucker for novels based on the lives of historical writers. Emily Dickinson's Amherst is an inviting setting, and the alternating first-person voices of Emily and the family's Irish maid, Ada Concannon, are both well realized. However, the plot soon gets mired in the melodrama of a wrong done to Ada in the Dickinson household, which results in a crisis that – you guessed it – requires the reclusive Emily to leave the house. After reading, I remained greedy for more of Emily's inner life and poetry. There are a few glimpses here: for instance, her love of baking, and the hint that she had romantic feelings for her sister-in-law. But I suspect I'll have to pick up a full-length biography to satisfy my interest in Emily Dickinson.

Mary Lou says

This novel tells the story of a friendship which develops between the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson and the new Irish maid in her household, recently immigrated to America.

In all aspects it is pure delight.

Nuala Ni Chonchuir's prose is simple and effortless. Her expertise extends across her writing on the relationship between Emily and Ada, to her descriptions of nature, the basis of Emily Dickinson's inspiration. Even though the shocking event which befalls Ada does take over the mid section, Emily's actions and reactions to it (brave and unusual for that era) still play a vital role.

Care is taken to develop the characters of Emily's parents, her sister and brother and the complicated relationship with her beloved sister in law Susan. We are also given a feel for the debilitating episodes suffered by Emily and her reluctance to go outdoors.

This is a lovely read, worth a long wait

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

This lovely, slender novel imagines a friendship between poet Emily Dickinson and their Irish maid Ada Concanon.

I was immediately taken with this book, as both Ada and Emily are charming and captivating. The chapters alternate between their viewpoints, as the story of their friendship and the dramas around them unfold.

O'Connor's Emily grabbed me immediately, an intellectually curious woman happy to be in her home, moved by the wilds of nature and the passions of the heart. She hovers in the kitchen for sweets and bakes as a way to shower love on those around her; she composes in secret and doles out her poems carefully.

Ada is a willing audience, a teenager fresh from Ireland, bemused by Emily. The Dickinsons are a kind family to work for, and she thrives in their home, yet heartache still hits her. It is Emily who rallies to defend her and who helps her gain some measure of happiness despite tragedy. O'Connor puts away any imaginary idea of Emily Dickinson as a pallid, passive ghost hiding in the rafters; the complicated and curious woman emerges from her pages, immediate and intriguing.

It goes without saying that a novel featuring Emily Dickinson should read poetically; in this case, O'Connor manages lyrical prose that doesn't emulate Dickinson's yet still offers the passion and boldness the poet captured in her spare lines. My copy is heavily dog-eared from the various quotes that caught me up and gave me pause, like

I look at her words, one by one. Love. Thee. Breath. Smiles. Tears. It pleases me that each word is solitary, a

loner. Side by side, their staccato nature blends with others, but in the end they stand alone. Each word is a fence post -- upright, demanding, shrill -- but each one holds the fence erect, and as such, is indispensable. (p119)

or

From now on I shall be candle-white. Dove-, bread-, swan-, shroud-, ice-, extraordinary-white. I shall be blanched, bleached and bloodless to look at; my very whiteness will be my mark. But inside, of course, I will roar and soar and flash with color. (p121)

The more I write or talk about this book, the greater my affection for it grows, and it is one of my top ten reads for 2015.

I think this would make a fabulous book club read -- zippy yet bursting with wonderful discussion topics -- as well as those who love historical fiction featuring well-known historical figures. And of course, fans of Irish fiction and Irish authors must get this one!

Olga Miret says

A book to be enjoyed slowly and savored like the sweets the poet liked so much Thanks to Net Galley for providing me a complimentary copy of this novel in exchange for a review.

I spent a year at Mount Holyoke College and visited Amherst often. And one of the first places I went to was for a visit to the house and museum of Emily Dickinson (and I was living at Dickinson House at Mount Holyoke, where the Centre for Women's Studies resides).

I've always been intrigued by Emily Dickinson and this novel did not disappoint me. It achieves what for me is the trademark of great historical fiction, it makes historical characters and a time and place come to life, without becoming a textbook. It creates a sense of place and it submerges the readers in an era distant from their own.

The author provides enough detail of the period and places to transport us there, and in this case I felt the major strength of the novel was its psychological insights into the minds of the characters, Emily Dickinson and the fictional character of Ada Concannon. Each one of them take turns to tell the story from their point of view, in first person, present tense, and although the differences in language and education couldn't be wider, the two women bond over a common interest in baking and a kindness of spirit and curiosity for the other's world and life. Emily accepts and does not question Ada's religious beliefs and what she sees as her superstitions, and Ada is non-judgemental about Emily's rituals, reclusiveness and life-style.

The language captures beautifully Emily's poetry and her creative process, and it reflects the differences between the two women and the other characters around them. The relationships between Emily and members of her family and friends are understated as it would correspond to the period and there are feelings and interests hinted at but never fully developed, in keeping with the sense of propriety of the era.

If Ada's character is partly a way of providing an outsider's perspective into Emily's life, it also tells the story of Irish emigration to the US by sharing different experiences and very personal ones. Ada's troubles also help highlight some of the difficulties women would have confronted at the time, and what the general attitude towards them might have been. Although these elements might be seen as detracting from the focus of the story I felt they created a more rounded reading experience.

I particularly enjoyed the amount of domestic detail, the cooking, the descriptions of smells, tastes, textures, colours that complement Emily Dickinson's poetry. A book to be enjoyed slowly and savoured like the sweets the poet was so fond of.

Elinor says

Written by Irish author Nuala O'Connor, Miss Emily introduces an Irish character. Spunky and rebellious, Ada leaves her home in Ireland for the distant shores of Massachusetts and lands a job in the Dickinson household, where she and the reclusive daughter of the family bond over baking and become unlikely friends. Alternating chapters tell the story from each woman's viewpoint, which heightens the contrast between the two characters.

Emily Dickinson provides rich material for any author – a fey creature who wears nothing but white, is increasingly reluctant to leave the house, and is secretly in love with her sister-in-law Susan. In reality we know little about this ghostly, mysterious figure, but here she comes to life.

Her fictional voice is suitably poetic. "From now on I shall be candle-white. Dove--, bread--, swan--, shroud--, ice--, extraordinary-white. I shall be blanched, bleached and bloodless to look at; my very whiteness will be my mark. But inside, of course, I will roar and soar and flash with color." From that passage you can see that the author herself has a wonderful gift for words.

The plot suddenly turns dark when Ada experiences a horrifying assault. It is Emily -- by now more loyal friend than employer -- who forces herself to leave the sanctity of her chamber and come to the rescue.

Debumere says

Despite my misgivings I quite enjoyed this book.

A young girl from Ireland goes to America to be a housekeeper for an eccentric family, the daughter at least.

Trouble ensues for Irish girl, Ada, and Emily, the daughter, who'd found a friend in her, fights her family to save her.

Worth a read, quite surprised I enjoyed it.

ERIN SCHMIDT says

First, a caveat: this will be a very difficult book to read for anyone who is sensitive to depictions of sexual assault. An incident of sexual violence is described in detail and becomes a key plot point for the second half of the novel.

That said, this novel is a winning depiction of a fictionalized Emily Dickinson, told in part in Dickinson's own voice and in part through the voice of her Irish-born housemaid, Ada Concannon. Emily sees Ada as a friend and an equal. Over the course of the novel, Emily will confront her own agoraphobia (if we may apply

that late 19th-century word to a mid-19th-century woman) and put herself in danger for her new friend. My favorite thing about this novel is its beautiful depiction of female friendship.

My second-favorite thing about this novel is the fictional Dickinson's characterization. Personally, I believe Emily Dickinson is the English language's second-greatest genius after Mr. William Shakespeare. It's wonderful to spend time with the poet in her home environment, getting peeks into the origins of some of her best-known verse. If you read Seth Grahame-Smith's 'The Last American Vampire' (and I don't necessarily recommend that you do), you may remember a footnote that suggests Emily Dickinson's famous reclusiveness was a result of her being a vampire, and a not-heterosexual one at that. I liked that image, and although this novel has nothing to do with vampirism, it does make it clear that Emily's feelings toward her sister-in-law are of a romantic nature. This Emily may be married to words and to her homestead, but she's clearly neither asexual nor heterosexual. And it works as characterization in this context, whatever one may believe about the historical Emily Dickinson.

Nuala O'Connor is the Anglicized name of Irish author Nuala Ní Chonchúir (not to be confused with Northern Irish technology expert Nuala O'Connor). I'm not sure why, in the 21st century, an Irish name would need to be Anglicized, even for the American market. That the English tried to ban the speaking of the Irish language and cut my European cousins off from our ancestral tongue is a sad historical fact. Our indigenous language might well have died out if not for the systematic attempt in Irish public schools to reconnect the current generation with the mother tongue. So I say, at the risk of sounding like a Hyperbole and a Half comic: Irish language all the things!

But that's a bit beside the point unless you're a passionate Irish-American word nerd like me. Bottom line: this is a beautifully written novel about two amazing women and the people and things they care about. Whether you're a devoted American literature fan or simply a lover of authentically-told historical fiction, you will find much to appreciate here.

I received this book through the Amazon Vine program in exchange for this review.

Margaret Madden says

Emily Dickinson loves words more than people. She notices the beauty in the minutia of nature and sees random darkness of the world around her. Quite content to remain within the confines of her house and gardens in Amhurst, she adores her friend Susan, is indifferent to her family and whiles away her hours writing verse, in her bedroom. However, when a new maid arrives from Ireland she is strangely drawn to her chatty and inquisitive nature. Ada is not backward in coming forward and balances out the stuffiness of Amhurst, delightfully. There is life injected into the house and Emily and Ada become unlikely friends. The smell of baking lingers in the downstairs kitchen and pantry, the sound of chat is heard where there was formerly silence and Ada's beau is a frequent visitor to the Dickinson kitchen. Ada's life is altered one fateful evening and things slowly begin to unravel. A fear of the unknown, a lack of family and a dreadful illness cause Ada to become a problem for the Dickinson family. Emily is determined to help, in whatever way she can, but can she save Ada? Is their friendship strong enough to go beyond the barrier of the staff/employer divide?

To say I was chomping at the bit to read this novel is a bit of an understatement. I have been a fan of Emily Dickinson's work since studying her for my school exams. Not only are her words profound, intense and memorable, but researching her life was an unexpected pleasure. The 'crazy' lady, locked in her bedroom

with no company but for her poems. Dark, depressed and dreary. This is what many have come to believe about Emily's life and words. But this is an incomplete, and perhaps debatable or inaccurate, picture. Nuala O'Connor has identified with the woman behind the poetry. The human being who devoured literature, loved her friend and sister-in-law dearly, appreciated nature for its simple existence and who said :

"Hope is a thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all - "

Each chapter is given a unique title, which lends a feeling of a more intimate read. It also means the reader can return to favourite passages quite easily. The chapter lengths are short, yet each contains an equal measure of literary delight. There are no fillers here. For the first time, I am considering buying the audio book, to soak up the eloquent words from another perspective.

The author has taken a legendary poet and given her a voice through fiction. Using wonderful prose, elegant style and respectful narrative, she has brought Emily to life. Her famed 'darkness' is not relevant to this story, her love of flora and fauna, her trusting nature and her adoration of the written word are the important factors. Her unexpected closeness to the family maid is the core of this tale. Ada is what Emily needs, and Emily is what Ada needs. Two very different women, two vastly different walks of life, yet two characters who understand each other more than anyone.

Meticulous research has led to a novel full of detail, warmth, depth and beauty. It is historical fiction with elegance and integrity. Just as Miss Emily Dickinson deserves...

Amy Coles says

***3.5/5 stars

Miss Emily is a story both beautifully simplistic and plainly genuine.

For a book that lacks in the epic action department, I found myself quite invested from the first page. The simple language in which it is written makes Miss Emily an easy read (for a story taking place in the 1800's), and the shortness of it being 239 pages helps encourage binge reading. The alternating chapters written from Emily Dickenson's point of view intrigued me the most. O'Connor did a beautiful job of recreating Emily Dickenson's mind and bringing its innocence and marvel to life. Emily's chapters look at the world in a very poetic way that I found fascinating to read about. Keeping in mind the fact that despite the many non-fictional characters, this is a fictional story, I loved how O'Connor was able to subtly display the inspirations for Emily's poetry, and the mindset behind Emily's choice to live secluded - among other seemingly queer decisions. I even found Emily to be very relatable to the point where I would pick up this book for consolation.

On the other hand, we have alternating chapters written from the Irish maid, Ada's perspective. Ada's story of travelling to a new country and facing the hardships of starting a new foreign life decently balanced out Emily's chapters of living in her own head. Now, I didn't find Ada nearly as poetic to read about, but the slowly developing, mild action of her story kept me just interested enough to want to know where her story was headed. I only wish that the friendship connecting Emily and Ada was emphasized more, because I found that for a decent portion of the book, I was reading two completely different stories.

The ending of Miss Emily was both satisfying and charming, but nothing extraordinary. This is the type of book where the journey is more important than the destination, and I was glad to have taken that journey. When reading this, don't expect a lot of action (though there are a couple big events), but rather expect intriguing insight to the possible mindset of Emily Dickenson, friendship, romance, abuse, and even some poetry.

Kiki says

This is a fictional story about the poet, Emily Dickinson, her family, and an Irish immigrant and servant in their home, Ada. Ada is a brave teenager, who travels to Amherst from her native home in Ireland. She does have family, a dear aunt and uncle there in Amherst, though. Ada is sharp, fast thinking, and a hard working young woman. Emily adores her, and despite their differences in societal standing, they become good friends. There is plenty of imagined conversation here between Ada and Emily and we get to hear Emily's thoughts as well. She is a strange and lovely character.

I'm not going to rehash this novel, since it was short and sweet, and in my opinion, TOO short! That would be my main complaint. I wish this novel had another 100 pages. This is a wonderful little book.

Paula Dennen says

I have a soft spot for fiction based on the lives, real or imagined, of historical people. With Miss Emily, we experience the close friendship between Emily Dickinson and her entirely fictional maid Ada Conannon.

I wanted to love this more than I did. Don't get me wrong, it's beautifully written but the direction the story took left me feeling underwhelmed.

Wisewebwoman says

Nuala brilliantly captures the 19th century atmosphere in the home of Emily Dickenson, the poet, and her relationships with her sister in law and her new Irish maid.

Her writing is particularly tender in the observation of the small details.

The rape scene is horrific but is signalled well ahead of the incident.

5/5

Melissa says

This book made me so angry I almost threw it across the room. I am sick to death of stories where one character's rape serves as impetus for someone else's character development. Fuck Emily Dickinson and her

gingerbread and caramels.

Aisling says

Nuala O'Connor (Nuala Ni Chonchuir) writes, much as Emily Dickinson did, with an economy of words that paint a vivid and lasting picture. This book is a fictional (but clearly well researched) glimpse into one year of Emily Dickinson's life. The novel alternates between Emily's voice including her poetry and thoughts on writing, Amherst and being a recluse, and the experiences of a new Irish immigrant who works as a maid in the Dickinson house.

Even if the reader knows nothing of Emily Dickinson they will find it hard to put down. The story moves at a great clip, seethes with secrets and heart. It is charming and entertaining. If the reader has an interest in the Poet then they will be charmed by the portrayal of Emily and her thoughts, family and life.

This was a great read and I will be looking for more of the author's work immediately!
