



## **Dance Lessons**

*Aine Greaney*

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A year after her husband's death in a sailing accident off Martha's Vineyard, Ellen Boisvert bumps into an old friend. In this chance encounter, she discovers that her immigrant husband of almost fifteen years was not an orphan after all. Instead, his aged mother Jo is alive and residing on the family's isolated farm in the west of Ireland.

Faced with news of her mother-in-law incarnate, the thirty-nine-year-old American prep school teacher decides to travel to Ireland to investigate the truth about her husband Fintan and why he kept his family's existence a secret for so many years.

Between Jo's hilltop farm and the lakeside village of Gowna, Ellen begins to uncover the mysteries of her Irish husband's past and the cruelties and isolation of his rural childhood. Ellen also stumbles upon Fintan's long-ago romance with a local village woman, with whom he had a daughter, Cat. Cat is now fourteen and living with her mother in London. As Ellen reconciles her troubled relationship with Fintan, she discovers a way to heal the wounds of the past.

Deeply rooted in the Irish landscape and sensibility, *Dance Lessons* is a powerful story of loss, regret, and transformation.

## Dance Lessons Details

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Author : Áine Greaney

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# From Reader Review Dance Lessons for online ebook

## Tonya says

Ellen is a widow, hasn't even been a year ago since her husband Finlan drowned. She runs into Sheila who knew Finlan back in his home town. Finds out her husband wasn't an orphan, his mother is still alive. So after a few events leading up to Ellen arriving at her husband's hometown overseas, she ends up taking care of his mother that is dying of cancer.

Do they ever really to a point in this book or does it just drift? That was my feeling the whole entire book. It left me feeling as if I was looking through the scenes with a sheer curtain in between and I couldn't get the whole glimpse. Left me feeling not done, not done hearing the story.

However beautiful the writing was, I did enjoy this book. Not sure why it is called Dance Lessons...I get Finlan's daughter that Ellen never knew about dances, but I don't think that was the main part. At least I didn't get that.

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## Sarah says

After the death of her husband, Fintan, Ellen Boisvert sets about planning the rest of her life. She is a successful, 39-year-old teacher living in Boston, set free from a difficult marriage by fate. However, a year after Fintan's death, Ellen discovers that her immigrant husband was not an orphan as he had claimed, but that his mother is still living on the family farm on the west coast of Ireland.

Confronted with this sudden revelation, Ellen makes the decision to travel to Ireland in an attempt to find her mother-in-law, Jo, and to discover the truth behind her husband's decision to pretend both parents dead.

Ellen's trip to Ireland to meet Jo takes her on an unexpected journey of sacrifice, selflessness and truth. What Ellen learns about her husband, his mother and the little community in which they grew up would have been enough to scare most people away for good - but not Ellen! Ellen makes the difficult decision to stay with Jo through the final stages of her illness, and then after her death make the changes necessary to right the wrongs Jo made during her life.

Dance Lessons is a novel on the complexities of family; how the decisions made by parents may lead their children to wander through a life of misery and regret. It's not difficult to pity Jo for the life she was forced into taking, and it's even easier to feel sorry for Fintan for the childhood he had to endure as a result. As for Ellen, she is admirable for her determination to do the right thing.

Thanks to Aine Greaney for inviting me to read this novel: It was a great way for me to pass the slow days at work, and although quite different to what I would normally read, I really enjoyed the story.

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## Athira (Reading on a Rainy Day) says

Ellen's husband, Fintan, had just recently passed away, when she meets an old acquaintance from the past -

someone who knew both Ellen and Fintan. In that one meeting, Ellen learns some new facts about her husband - such as the news that his mother is actually alive and kicking, and that Fintan was not an orphan as he had let her to believe. This discovery bothers Ellen enough to make her visit Gowna in Ireland and find out what caused Fintan to lie about his mother.

I have to say - when I first came across *Dance Lessons* (through the many nominations it received for the Indie Lit Awards, I wasn't intrigued at all. The cover, the title and the synopsis all repelled me, but knowing that it came from an independent press, a part of me thought there must be something else to this book that wasn't standing out at first glance. Once I finished it, I could see the merit in this book - it surprised me a lot (and the panel members, I should add) - in fact, I kept going between this and *Silver Sparrow*, when trying to decide the book I would rate first.

Here's the story I made up before reading the book (we all do that, right? Pretend we know where a story is going?) Ellen would go to Ireland, meet Fintan's mother, find something shocking, resolve the issues, find a local man, fall in love, and voila! Happy Ending! That isn't what happened. Some of it did, but there were enough non-conventional stuff in the book to allow me to enjoy it.

Ellen and Jo, Fintan's mother, are the main characters of the book, and even Fintan, who is already dead from the beginning, is fleshed out well through flashbacks and back-stories. Initially, I saw Fintan as a controlling man, who didn't much value his wife's opinions. But by the end, I really wanted him to be alive, because by then, a whole new side of him had emerged, one which even Ellen didn't know, and one which puts his character in a different light. Jo was a totally different case. She was an mean, inconsiderate old woman, who did make life difficult for a lot of people. Her relationship with Fintan was interesting and domineering and that set the tone for many things that happen later between them. While it could have been a one-dimensional relationship, I loved how the author took care to introduce Jo's own childhood story into the mix. That certainly put a lot of things into perspective, and left me thinking for a while on Jo's character arc. I won't say I said "A-ha!" because some of the actions confused me, but I guess that's how life is - there is a lot of ambiguity when you start thinking cause-and-effect.

The other characters however didn't feel that vivid, and I guess for me, this is where the book didn't do that well. I wished the narration had moved between a few more characters, rather than just Ellen and Jo, for the most part, because there were some characters who could have brought more to the story (based on their recollections).

This was another fast-paced book. (If there's one thing that all the *Indie Lit Awards* nominees share, it is their pacing.) There's also a good sense of community in this book, and a very strong feel of Irishness. I love books that evoke the culture of the setting, and I felt that this book definitely succeeded on that point. I also liked that the small-town sentiment wasn't dangled in front of me but rather subtly woven into the plot, so that it was more felt than seen.

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## Mary says

Excellent book----you felt you really knew the characters. Love Ireland and you'll love this!

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## **Pam says**

Two and a half stars. This book was fair. I would like to have seen more development in the plot. The story was everywhere. In a nutshell, the main character, Ellen, marries an Irish immigrant who she does not love. He is rather cruel, which stems back to his childhood as his mother was cruel to him. Her meanness stems back to her parents feeling the need to give away the family farm in order to get her married to a man twice her age. This is a story of sadness and regrets and does not always make sense. It was a rather short book and too many stories were left undeveloped for me.

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## **Joanna says**

Better than I thought it would be. Some very memorable characters, although I felt the whole Cat story line was completely unnecessary to delve into. I also thought the end dragged a bit.

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## **Cassandra says**

I'm a sucker for novels set in Ireland. I always have been. All through high school, I read the Maeve Binchy books, even though they were nothing like anything else I read. It didn't matter. They were Irish. That is the reason that I decided to give this book a chance. I wanted to see how it fit in with the other works that I have read (see "A bit 'o Irish lit" post). *Dance Lessons* makes a worthy contribution to the tradition of telling stories of strong female characters who must discover and overcome long-hidden family secrets.

Ellen believed that her Irish husband was an orphan, so when he dies, she does not hurry to let anyone in Ireland know that he has died. She does not expect there to be anyone who cares. It is only after running into another Irish ex-pat in a cafe that she realizes that Fintan's mother is still alive and living in the same house that she has always called home. Ellen finds herself in Gowna, hoping to find the closure that has eluded her since Fintan's death. When Ellen meets her husband's mother Jo, she can tell right away Jo does not have long to live. While Ellen still does not know what it was that caused Fintan to sever all ties with his mother and his home country, she does feel compelled to do something that will bind them all back together. She will succeed, though not in the way that she anticipates.

Greaney navigates the complicated familial drama with the a slight detachment, much like that which is felt by Ellen as an American figuring out the social dynamics of a small Irish village. In fact, it is an interesting choice that she has made, focusing primarily on Ellen's narrative, when she would seem to identify more with any of the Irish characters (being from County Mayo herself). It was a gutsy decision, one that could have easily backfired, but she handles it well. Ellen is as real as any other American woman in her late 30s who suddenly finds herself a widow. She notices the differences between the way of life that she is accustomed to and easily able to adapt - a bit faster, perhaps, than some since she is the daughter of immigrants and is used to living in two worlds.

The inclusion of Cat's storyline was a masterful choice, though it should have been introduced a bit sooner. Returning to Cat in the epilogue was also a good choice, but I found myself wishing that it had been taken a bit further. I wanted to know more about her and the dance lessons.

The world that Greaney has created is familiar. Every family has their secrets, and they often come to light

following a tragedy. What is unique in this story is that the one who brings everyone together in the end is an outsider. Ellen never would have appeared on the scene had Fintan not been hurt so badly by his mother and his friends. Greaney's approach is a refreshing one, as is a happy ending that is not based on romance. It is about a woman learning to love herself and enabling others to do the same.

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### **Cynthia says**

One man caught between three women.

This book touched me deeply. The action pivots between Boston and Ireland. The pacing is exquisite. I literally couldn't stop turning the pages because I wanted so badly to understand how Finton and Ellen found their marriage disintegrating. The roots were in Ireland and that's where Ellen heads when her marriage ends. She goes to visit her dying mother-in-law outside Galway on an isolated dairy farm. Jo is a crusty, tough old woman on the exterior and perhaps that's why her son told his American wife his mother was dead. Jo is as solitary as her son is social though both share a strong will and intelligence.

In Ireland Ellen discovers a third woman is involved in the story of her husband's troubled past. As the old woman dies and Ellen cares for her she reminisces about her life and where things went so tragically wrong in her relationship with the son she loved so much yet pitted herself against so passionately. This a dark story with redemption veining through it. The writing is subtle so the emotion slowly builds. The emotions are heart tearing but clean. There is no manipulation. There was only one plot device that felt over the top.

This review was based on an ebook supplied by the publisher.

4.5/5

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### **Rubery Book Award says**

Shortlisted for the Rubery Book Award

This was beautifully and carefully crafted with a great sense of character and place. It painted a warm, evocative picture of rural Ireland, effectively contrasting it with the world of academic life in the US.. There were many short, vivid episodes, which skipped between viewpoint, place and time. This device was mostly effective, although the judges thought that it sometimes slowed down the story. Nevertheless, the writing is exceptionally good and the presentation contemporary and sharp.

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### **Bree T says**

Ellen is a French teacher at a relatively exclusive school in America's north east. Her husband Fintan, from whom she was mostly estranged, living during the week on her campus in free accommodation from staff, dies in a sailing accident. Ellen, who had been trying to muster up the courage to leave Fintan after a marriage that had disintegrated into mental beration and abuse, is feeling as though some effort should be made to inform Fintan's family. An Irish immigrant who was illegal for many years until his marriage to

Ellen, Fintan had never returned home and told Ellen that his immediate family was deceased.

A chance run-in with an Irish woman who Ellen met briefly many years ago when she first started going out with Fintan and who hailed from a part of Ireland very near to where Fintan did, leads Ellen to discover that Fintan's mother is, in fact, not dead like he told but still very much alive. After sending a letter and making a phone call to the woman and getting precious little in the way of response, Ellen decides to fly to Ireland in her summer break from teaching at the school. She wants to see where Fintan grew up, do the right thing about informing his family properly and lay the ghost of her husband and their unhappy relationship to rest.

Jo, her mother-in-law is a tough and forthright sort of woman. She immediately assumes that Ellen has come to see what she can get out of Jo when Jo dies as Jo is very ill with lung cancer. After seeing how badly Jo is, and how she is struggling to cope alone on her isolated farm but refusing to go to hospital, Ellen surprises herself and Jo by offering to stay and take care of her. By staying on in Galway, she will learn the deep, dark secret that made her husband flee his native country to America without ever once looking back. She will learn what sort of woman his mother was and the actions that she undertook that made her son tell everyone, even his wife, that she was dead when she was still very much alive.

Dance Lessons is a journey of self-discovery as well as the discovery of truth about the spouse that Ellen comes to feel she never knew after he died – not really. He never chose to confide much of his life in Ireland to her at all, especially the important pieces. The fact that his mother is alive really shakes Ellen and her determination to go out and see where her husband came from and see if she can get to know him a bit better in death than she feels she did in life. Her attitude towards her recalcitrant and often rude mother in law is very patient, and her desire to stay and nurse the woman on her deathbed is really quite surprising. It's no easy task to undertake, especially if you have no qualifications or training in that particular area and I would've liked to see the trials and emotional upheaval that comes with that explored a bit more in depth. It's very much glossed over, the fact that Ellen is tending to a virtual stranger in the final days of her life. She also does this with not a single complaint or breakdown which I find a fraction unrealistic. I know that the nursing part is not what the novel is about, but it's a rather large portion of the novel so I did expect to see a little more depth to it.

What I did like was Ellen, as a mostly-repressed American raised by strict parents who were determined for her not to get airs above her station, coming to grips with small town Ireland, especially small-town Ireland from 40 years ago. Although the narrative starts with Ellen, we switch to Jo after meeting her and she takes us back in time so that we can hear her story – how she came to marry a man old enough to be her father, forced into it by her parents and the envy she had for her sister Kitty, who had freedoms and choices that were never available to Jo. Her relationship with her son is explored for the reader to absorb – dysfunctional and often uncomfortable to read. Although fiercely proud of her extremely intelligent son, Jo was incapable of truly expressing it, although she was extremely quick to show anger. And she proves towards the end of the novel that she will go to any lengths to give her son opportunities (or take them away) and it costs her dearly in the end.

I would've also liked to see more from the third point of view we are treated to in this novel – it does feel a bit rushed, appearing when it does and I would've liked more of a background on that person's life and upbringing. I did like the actions Ellen took towards the end of the novel, they seemed very fitting with her generous nature, and because of that I'd have liked a longer epilogue with the third narrator to tie things up just a little more. You know the essentials but I'm always one for more detail! It could've done with more depth and character growth. I felt a bit flat, like I didn't really care that much about the end gift because I didn't know the recipient enough!

Dance Lessons certainly had some bright spots – I love the setting of rural Ireland and the depth of the description of local life. Even when describing current time, it was almost like taking a step back into another time and it was amazingly vivid. Especially the stories pertaining to Jo's youth, taking place during an era that felt like much longer than 40 or so years ago, with talks of dowries and arranged marriages! Where I did feel a bit let down was the lack of character development – it doesn't seem as though fundamentally, Ellen changes at all. Even Jo doesn't change, despite all she has done in her life and where it got her in the end. I think that this could've been explored beautifully but was a little underdone.

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### **Serena says**

*Dance Lessons* by Áine Greaney is about the dance we play with our husbands, wives, in-laws, and our own parents as we strive to keep things amicable and not reveal too many of our own secrets, especially secrets we're not comfortable with ourselves. Sometimes, it is about the dance the characters play with themselves, balancing the truth and the lies. Set in Boston, the North Shore, and mostly Gowna, Ireland, Greaney's prose sways like a graceful dancer telling Ellen Boisvert's (a young lecturer at Coventry Academy) story. She learns that her Irish husband, Fintan, was not an orphan as he had told her, but has a mother still in Ireland, and there are many other secrets he never revealed to her while alive.

*"Ellen has read this about nurses, psychotherapists, doctors. Even the largest or most life-saving job boils down to its component pats, a roster of daily tasks." (page 132)*

Despite Ellen's desire to leave her husband, she stayed with him for more than a decade and never left him before he died in a tragic sailing accident. Upon learning that she has a mother-in-law, she writes a letter to inform Jo Dowd of her son's death. After an eerie conversation with the woman and several ghostly dreams, Ellen decides to travel to Ireland. Each step and each movement is part of a larger story, a larger existence. Fintan's life and decisions had more of an impact on those around him than he realized, from his mother to his one-time girlfriend and his current wife, Ellen. Greaney's story is not one just of grief, but of moving on, stepping out into the light and claiming one's life back.

Read the full review: <http://savvyverseandwit.com/2011/09/d...>

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### **Peggy says**

The book held my interest because of the way it switched back and forth between the current period and the back stories of the characters, building up to explain the actions that they took in the beginning of the book.

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### **Victoria says**

I actually rated this book by how much this story haunted me after I had finished reading it. It just wouldn't leave me alone. And even now, sitting down to review it after having read it weeks ago, I'm still feeling the same weary and appalling way I did right after I had finished it.

I say that because, even though this came out to be a very horrifyingly sad and emotional read, I hated all of the characters in it. If they were real people, I would never want to know any of them. Not even before all of the bitterness and sadness had come about in their lives. I don't even really know where to begin breaking



down this read. The actions of some of the characters was truly vengeful, ugly, and devastating.

I guess first I will start with how this was written and formatted. I really liked how the three main women in this had their own sections and how when needed it seemed like it was easily sewn together when their stories joined. It was a pleasantness while reading it, knowing that an event that happened in the past was going to be explained soon made this book easier to take, not having to wait and wait for the story to unfold the way it did.

In the prologue, the reader is introduced to Ellen and Fintan, a happy young couple, before heading into the first chapter, where you find that their marriage is slowly falling apart, which leads up to a horrible tragedy and Ellen finds herself on her way Ireland to meet her mother-in-law, for the first time. What Ellen finds out while there is truly heart-breaking and she won't, or can't, move on until she pieces together Fintan's devastating past.

Even though this was so haunting, I found myself not being able to put it down, and spending those extra half hours a night in bed reading this book. I had to know what happened and what caused Fintan to be the way he was towards his mother. And what caused Fintan's mother, Jo, to become the sad woman that she was. The explanation, as I've already said, was haunting and the results of those actions truly sad.

The ending however, I found to be a little flat. Otherwise I might have given this five stars. But there was one thing that came about in the ending that I had been wondering about since I first read about that character. I wondered where she was after all of that happened, and I got my answer then at the end of the book, which was actually a little gratifying getting that one last extra piece of the puzzle.

This was such an engrossing read, I don't think I'll forget it for a long time.

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## **Lynne says**

This book wasn't what I expected at all. I thought it would be chicklit, which isn't a bad thing, but this wasn't that genre at all. It's the story of Ellen, who's Irish husband is killed in a sailing accident, and how discovers by accident that he wasn't totally truthful about himself and his family. Ellen heads off to Ireland to confront her husband's past. The story touches on terminal illness, family relationships and life in rural Ireland. The book tells the story of the main characters in the future and the past and there are little sub plots going on which all tie together nicely at the end. I really loved this book, it handles all the subjects very well and it's a great story too - totally would recommend this book. It's not chicklit but it is great women's fiction.

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## **Sarah (Workaday Reads) says**

Dance Lessons: A Novel by Aine Greaney will be published in March 2011. It follows Ellen as she travels to Ireland to find her deceased husband's mother. Ellen has only just discovered she exists when she bumps into a woman who knew her husband growing up. He's always told her he was an orphan.

This book was very sentimental, and had a misty quality to it. It's light and airy, yet still has a great deal of emotion. I found it delightful, sweet, and very sad.

There are a few spots where the story seems to switch narrators and time frames rather abruptly, but overall it flows quite well.

It ends a little abruptly, without any kind of closing. But the idea of the ending is there, I just wish there were a few sentences that tied it up and signalled the end. When I read the last page, I tried to flip to the next to

read the final paragraph.

Overall, this is a beautiful, poignant story.

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