

THE IRISH DRESSER SERIES by Cynthia Neale-PITCH **A Mini-Series for Television**

An image on a poster inspired this mini-series adapted from my published novels: *The Irish Dresser: A Story of Hope during The Great Hunger*; *Hope in New York City: The Continuing Story of The Irish Dresser*; *Norah: The Making of an Irish-American Woman in 19th-Century New York*; and *The Irish Milliner*. As a writer and an Irish-American, I was intrigued about the Famine and shocked over the ignorance of most Americans of its causes and effects, including the 5,000 ships filled with starving Irish immigrants arriving into New York harbor in a six-year period.

GENRE/SUBGENRE: Period drama/romance

NUTSHELL: It is Norah McCabe reincarnated into the character Eilis Lace (Saoirse Ronan) in *Brooklyn* 100 years later. And the Irish Norah McCabe meets Ewa (Marion Cotillard) on the mean streets of New York in *The Immigrant*.

LOGLINE: In turbulent, dung and gang-mired New York City, a young, plucky, visionary Irish woman who survived the Famine, achieves a hard-won identity as an Irish-American.

SETTINGS: 1847 Modest home in County Cork, Ireland; 1859 Five Points, New York tenement; Norah's used clothing store, 'A Bee in Your Bonnet'; businesses and streets in New York; a ship.

SERIES ARC: When Norah McCabe strives to strip herself of her impoverished past through such manifold schemes as buying her own used clothing store, she experiences corruption, exploitation as well as enchantment. She joins a rebel Irish organization to free Ireland from British rule, writes for an Irish newspaper, undergoes love's transformation, and suffers a shipwreck. She seeks to understand the feminist movement, but ultimately is unable to cross the chasm between herself as an Irish immigrant woman and Protestant feminist ideology. The terrors and questions of life strike her down when she becomes a widowed mother, but Norah forges on. Her solitary freedom is the colorful warp and weft in the fabric of who she has become -- an Irish-American woman.

THE IRISH DRESSER EPISODES

FLEEING FAMINE: 1859. We meet the vibrant and determined **NORAH McCABE, 25**, living in a cramped tenement in Five Points, Manhattan. Norah owns a second-hand clothing store and buys used gowns off prostitutes. She struggles to maneuver the dangerous, gang-filled streets and overcome poverty, while homesick for Ireland. **We jump back to 1847 County Cork, Ireland** to find Norah, 13, and her close-knit family attempting to survive the massive potato crop failure, which has thrust their country into starvation and chaos. Seeking solace, Norah hides in her dresser, dreaming of a new life. This dresser becomes her salvation, as she is later forced to hide in it as a stowaway when her family flees Ireland for a better life in America. On board the ship, she discovers that her family has been placed on another ship and she must survive the treacherous weeks traveling alone. Fever, death, and scarcity of food and water on the ship propel Norah into an act of defying authority and risking her life to steal what little food there is to feed others. When the ship docks in New York, she emerges from her dresser frail and bewildered, but triumphant in spirit.

EPISODE 2. STAYING ALIVE IN AMERICA – 1847

Norah is thrust into the pandemonium of New York harbor along with thousands of other immigrants. She reunites with her family who convey the heartbreaking news that her favorite sister

died at sea. The McCabes settle into a cramped tenement in Five Points, as the grief-stricken, yet resolute, Norah forges ahead. Sparks of young love flourish when she befriends the teenage **SEAN**, who teaches her to navigate the uncompromising streets and helps her find jobs, including becoming a newsboy. Encountering racial and gender discrimination, Norah hawks flowers and does domestic work, and even engages in a bold discourse with the poet Walt Whitman. Norah's teen life is filled with adventure, young love, and challenges; the latter most palpable when she is swept up in a theater riot and survives shaken but unscathed. However, Norah's Da is presumed dead. Heartbroken, Norah prepares to leave for Ireland, but unexpected news halts her plans as she realizes home is now in America.

EPISODE 3. VIOLENCE, AN IRISH REBEL, AND ROMANCE - 1859

We jump ahead 12 years to find the unwavering Norah, now 25, falsely accused of murdering a prostitute. She rebuffs the police commissioner's sexual advances and later is cleared of murder charges. Norah meets the Irish dandy, **JAMES HARRIGAN**, who hires her to work for his newspaper. Norah harbors unresolved feelings for Sean who left New York City years ago. Her relationship with James Harrigan is complicated, as seen when an over-confident Norah writes an article not to his liking and storms out of his office and into the arms of the educated Irish rebel, **THOMAS MURRAY**. They are smitten, but Murray is also passionate about fighting for Irish freedom. He grooms Norah for the movement that has raised \$30,000 to travel to England to buy arms. But not all goes as planned; Norah is abducted by the lecherous police commissioner who sells her to a brothel, which she cleverly escapes. Boarding the England-bound ship with the Irish rebels, Norah is ready to fight alongside her beloved Thomas Murray, but their intended battle for Irish freedom will soon become an expected fight for survival.

EPISODE 4. SHIPWRECK, LOSS, AND LOVE

Sailing to England, Norah and Thomas Murray, with passion for one another and Ireland, marry under a star studded sky. Their wedded union is cut short when the ship crashes and Murray perishes. After a harrowing survival, a grieving Norah returns to New York and discovers she is pregnant. Determined to move forward, Norah meets **NELLIE**, a Protestant feminist, with whom she attends the Seventh Annual Women's Rights Convention. Uneasy, she leaves and faints. Later, Norah is driven to provide for her baby and not return to a life of poverty. Norah agrees to marry Harrigan, but then rescinds; she cannot live an untruth. He's a closet homosexual and their relationship is merely a deep friendship. Desperate after a bank crash and unable to obtain Murray's money, Norah runs into Nellie. They go into an eatery and Norah encounters Sean who has returned from working as a reluctant ship's mate on slave ships. He's contrite and still madly in love with Norah, but she is pregnant and he assumes she's married. He boldly declares his love for her and Norah explains she is a widow. Sean promises never to leave her side.

EPISODE 5. LOVE ENDURES DURING WAR

Time passes; Norah becomes a milliner and Sean is present in Norah's life, but they don't marry. Norah McCabe gradually feels at home, that is, until the Civil War strikes poison in America and Norah's new life. Sean disappears to avoid the Draft and Norah falls headlong in love with **EDWARD M. KNOX**, son of the well-known hat maker, Charles Knox. Norah befriends the civil rights activist African-American, **ELIZABETH JENNINGS**, and involves herself in the Underground Railroad. But love is as heartbreaking as the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg that Norah visits. Edward M. Knox and Sean are both missing. And then it is on the fields of Gettysburg that Norah fully remembers Ireland strewn with the Famine dead, wearing grass-stained mouths. Will Norah McCabe survive this time? And will she ever see Sean and Edward again?