

SERIES BIBLE: THE IRISH DRESSER by Cynthia G. Neale

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. Owning a used clothing store, loving a rebel, becoming a milliner who makes hats for escaped slaves, and overcoming rape and loss, this gritty and imaginative character is no pig-headed Bridie, and could be any woman, any immigrant, at any time in history.

SERIES SYNOPSIS: In County Cork, Ireland, thirteen year old Norah McCabe crawls inside an old dresser and finds solace through her imagination as the ravaging effects of the Famine strike her family and country. It is in this dresser Norah is hidden when her father declares they must leave for America and there is no ticket for her passage. Separated from her family, Norah travels to America stowed inside the dresser and experiences adventure as she tries to survive. She steals food from the ship captain to save passengers and helps the sick and dying, avoiding getting caught and tossed overboard.

Arriving in Five Points, New York, Norah and her family encounter further poverty, violence, and injustice as Irish Catholic immigrants. Norah meets Sean, a street tough boy who teaches her how to survive the streets, but Norah vows to save money and return to Ireland. Dressed as a boy, she becomes a newsie, meets Walt Whitman and challenges his views about the Irish, and visits Pete Williams Dance Hall to find her dancing feet again. Norah is thrust into the first major theater riot when her beloved Da, a fiddler who is playing music for the Astor Theater when it is attacked during the riot, is missing and presumed dead. A wake is held and Norah buys a ticket for Ireland but days later, Da returns home. He had been unconscious in an infirmary through a strike to his head. After this near loss, Norah learns that true belonging is in the human spirit and in the love of family and friends. Norah remains in New York and in the ensuing years, becomes an even more spirited and determined young woman. She buys a used clothing store, *A Bee in Your Bonnet*, and promenades with her friend, Mary, an orphan from Famine Ireland, on the streets of New York. She meets the dandy, Harrigan, who owns an Irish-American newspaper and is hired to work for him. Her childhood friend, Sean, leaves New York to work as a ship's mate and she doesn't see him for years, but thereafter experiences passionate romance with Thomas Murray, an Irish rebel. Norah undergoes corruption and violence via a police commissioner who eventually abducts her and sells her to a brothel. After escaping the brothel,

Murray convinces Norah to join a rebel organization that raises \$30,000 to fight for Ireland's freedom. Norah leaves New York with Murray, John Mitchel, the leader of the Young Ireland movement, and other rebels on a ship bound for England to purchase arms. Norah marries Murray on the ship, but soon after, the ship wrecks and Murray perishes at sea. Norah survives and returns to New York grief-stricken and finds she is pregnant.

Thereafter, she perseveres in finding dignity and idealism in a city that is magical and mythical, but unforgiving and harsh. Harrigan once again hires Norah to work for the newspaper and she comes into her own as a writer. Norah meets a feminist, Nellie, who invites her to the Seventh National Women's Rights Convention. 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. Harrigan proposes marriage, but as a homosexual, only a deep Philia love exists between them. Norah eventually triumphs over loss, displacement, and poverty. These have not destroyed her, but have given her solitary freedom that becomes the colorful warp and weft in the fabric of her becoming an Irish-American. It is then that Norah, pregnant with Murray's child and at home within herself, meets Sean, who has returned to New York from working on slave ships. He is altered, humbled, and deeply in love with Norah McCabe. After her baby, Katie, is born, Norah and her friend, Nellie, share an apartment. Norah learns millinery and is in love with Katie and her new life. And embellishing this new life is the renewal of friendship with Sean O'Connelly, whom she steps out with on occasion to go dancing at Pete Williams Dance Hall. For now, it is enough, but will she marry Sean and continue to long for Ireland?

PILOT LOGLINE: Suffering near starvation during the Irish Famine, a close-knit family realizes the only way to survive is to leave their cherished country and flee to America. There is no choice but to stow away their feisty young daughter in the cupboard of a dresser with the hope she will unite with them in New York.

THEMES:

1. Survival. Norah is hungry as a caterpillar, devouring the leaves of a tree during the Famine and understands that for her to live, she must eat just about anything, including nettles and drinking the blood of a cow. Later, inside an Irish dresser on a ship separated from her parents en route to America, Norah must be wise as a serpent so as not to be thrown overboard. Survival

continues to dog the heels of Norah and her family as they seek work, shelter, and food once they are reunited in America. Many years later, as a grown woman, Norah is again faced with survival when she is viciously attacked and abducted by a police commissioner. She fights her way to escape and persists in finding dignity. Love then comes passionately to Norah through Murray, an Irish rebel, and she is soon on a ship bound to fight England for Ireland's freedom. Surrendering to romance and idealism ensures Norah in the persistence of surviving the past, but the ship wrecks, he perishes, and she is grief-stricken near unto death. Again, Norah endures loss and hopelessness and rises from the ashes.

2. Immigration. Five thousand ships full of impoverished, destitute, and hungry Irish immigrants arrive in New York within six years. Norah McCabe is one of them and she knows right well the plight of her people who went from rural poverty to urban poverty. Norah is told to walk on her own Irishman's sidewalk and that an Irishman is only a nigger turned inside out. Each day, Norah reads the newspapers that describe her people as dirty, insolent, ignorant, Popish freaks, but she fiercely possesses that sea soggy dream of all immigrants that America will become home.

3. Dignity. Eoin McCabe (Da) insists on paying for his family's tickets to America and when there is not enough money for Norah, he concocts a plan to hide her in her beloved dresser. Norah, her family, and neighbors are poor, but possess pride in culture, i.e. music, dancing, and community. In America, Da is proud to work as a street sweeper and play his fiddle in saloons, persisting in providing for his family. Mam scrubs floor with dignity. Norah flounders with feeling worthy at times, but seeks to rise above her poverty and the ridicule of her Irish ways. At first, it is the wearing of Paris finery and losing her brogue that Norah seeks to feel worthy, but later, she learns it to be a noble place within her, as well as in her African-American friends.

MAIN CHARACTERS

NORAH MCCABE: In Famine Ireland, Norah McCabe, spirited, brave, and hopeful, retreats to her dresser dreaming of a better life, searches the fields for berries and nettles, and passionately loves her family and country. When death is at their door, Norah and her family leave for America and Norah is hidden in her dresser on a cattle ship and experiences tragedy and

adventure. In America, Norah is all about making money and caring for her family, but longs to return to Ireland. She devises a way to go, saving money from hawking newspapers, berries, fish, and domestic work. There are sparks of romance with her friend, Sean, who takes her to the theater and out dancing. A theater riot causes twenty-five deaths and many injured, and her Da is thought to have died, but later, is found to have survived. Norah is so altered after these incidences, she stays in New York and throughout the years, seeks to overcome poverty and wear Paris finery. She opens a used clothing store, experiences a violent attack, but endures. Romantic, idealistic, and strong-willed, Norah McCabe stumbles into romance, loses her friendship with Sean when he leaves New York, and gets involved with an Irish rebel organization. Eventually, she travels with her Irish lover, Murray, to help fight for Ireland's freedom and loses him in a ship wreck. Surviving yet another loss, Norah seeks to find where she belongs when she learns she is pregnant with Murray's baby but finds much more within herself. She learns of the feminist movement, abolitionist movement, and how to write a good article. She also becomes a milliner and is able to provide for her herself and her baby, Katie. And then Sean, her childhood friend, re-appears in her life.

SEAN O'CONNOLLY. Originally from Dublin, Sean is a street-wise, sixteen-year old, Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick type. He's got stars in his eyes for climbing the ladder of success in America and stars in his heart for Norah McCabe when he meets her on the docks when she first arrives from Ireland. He is a newsboy who trains her to be one, too, and teaches her how to survive on the streets of New York. Norah McCabe adores her friendship with Sean, but she has other plans and soon quits the newsboy business and seeks other street vendor selling. Because Norah desires to return to Ireland, she belittles Sean for dreaming so big about becoming a bigwig in America when her people are treated as dogs. He loves her still, dresses better, takes her to Pete Williams Dance Hall, and listens to her talk about love for the ole country, trying to convince her that it's America where the digging of gold ought to be. Eventually, Sean, with hope that someday he and Norah will marry, leaves New York to become a ship's captain and Norah doesn't see him again for another seven years. By then, Norah has suffered violence, been married, survived a shipwreck, and is with child. And that man, Sean, seasoned, as well as contrite over seeing slaves sold on the ships he worked on, is madly in love with Norah McCabe.

EOIN MCCABE. Norah's Da is a gentle giant of a man with fierce pride and a sense of justice. He battles the Famine in Ireland and hardship in America with his love of family, playing fiddle, words, and idealism. He's no weakling and is not taken with the drink or too proud to work as a street sweeper, and he'll use his fists if it comes to that. He's preparing to work on the rails to make money for his family. He and Norah share deep affection and have late night talks that are philosophical in nature. When Norah disappears, he is ill with consumption, and nearly dies, but lives to see Norah return and triumph in her life.

MARY LEAVEY. Norah's slightly bombastic redhead friend, who, as a child survived the workhouse during the Famine in Ireland. Norah and Mary have been friends since children coming from Ireland, but Mary is still in the orphanage, as an employee with nowhere else to go. She helps Norah with her shop and is a bit more street-wise than Norah. She flirts unabashedly with gentlemen she meets when she and Norah dress in fineries and walk on Fifth Avenue. Her only hope is marriage to one of them. Eventually, she and Norah grow apart and Mary and the former policeman, who once helped Mary and Norah, have a love affair. Mary dies from an abortion on the street and Norah doesn't learn of this until after the shipwreck.

JAMES HARRIGAN. Harrigan is an Irish-American newspaperman who is a closet homosexual and dandy. He loves his togs, keeps peace with Tammany Hall, and likes writing feel good stories about Irishmen who are successful. He meets Norah and is taken with her spirit and drive, and they become friends. Norah eventually encourages Harrigan to write authentic articles about important issues of the day. When Norah asks Harrigan to let her write an article, he tells her she needs more experience and she walks out angry. After the shipwreck he offers her a job and she hones her skills at the newspaper and he learns a thing or two from Norah McCabe.

THOMAS MURRAY. A tall, dignified, dark, and bookish Irish-American whose father had fought for Irish freedom, Murray is driven to carry on his father's ideals. Although raised in Five Points, he became an educated man, an essayist in Georgia, and returned to the Sixth Ward as a councilman. When Murray meets Norah, sparks fly between them. Norah is intrigued with this educated Irish man whose roots were once as poor as her own, and who is passionate for Ireland's freedom.

But Murray is not only in love with Norah McCabe, he is headlong engaged in raising money through Irish benevolent organizations to fight for Irish freedom. He grooms Norah for the movement and agrees to take her with him to buy arms in England. But when Norah is abducted from a pub one night, he vows to find her and keep her safe. When he finds Norah and she escapes the brothel she'd been sold to, they leave for England and marry on board the ship. Murray acknowledges that the passion he had for the movement was more his father's passion and now he desires Norah McCabe and a life together more than being a rebel for Ireland. The ship crashes into a rock and most of the passengers are killed, including Murray.

SETTINGS: Five Points, New York tenement apartment; Norah's family home in County Cork, Ireland; Norah's used clothing store, 'A Bee in Your Bonnet,'; a few businesses and streets in New York; ship on the Atlantic Ocean.

THE IRISH DRESSER EPISODE SUMMARIES

PILOT EPISODE I. FLEEING FAMINE

Norah, 25, spirited and determined, lives in Five Points, New York. Tenaciously committed to rise above Irish poverty, she owns a second hand clothing store and buys used gowns off prostitutes, while struggling with memories of Ireland and the vicissitudes of living in America. She parades in fineries with her friend, Mary, seeks to overcome her brogue and Irish ways, and yet is fiercely proud to be of Ireland. She's an enigma to herself and others; she often questions life while kneeling before her dresser in a tenement apartment she shares with her family.

Flashback to 1847. Norah, 13, and her family, poor, are living with love and music in County Cork. Then the massive potato crop failure thrusts the country into hunger and chaos. Norah hides in the cupboard of her dresser and dreams of cakes and fairies, and is later forced to hide in the dresser as a stowaway when her family decides to leave for a better life in America and there is no ticket for passage. After a harrowing and adventurous journey across the sea separated from her family, Norah McCabe arrives on the shores of America.

EPISODE 2. STAYING ALIVE IN AMERICA - 1847

Arriving in New York, Norah anxiously waits for her family to arrive on another ship and when they do, she learns her sister, Kate, has died at sea. Norah befriends Sean, also come from Ireland, who helps her maneuver the streets of New York, including becoming a newsboy. Sean adores Norah and there are sparks of young love, but Norah, though dazzled by her new country, sees how despicable and impoverished her people are, and is determined to return to Ireland. She rebuffs Sean, who loves America and dreams big, and saves money through hawking flowers and doing domestic work. Norah meets Walt Whitman at Barnum's Circus and challenges him about his views of her people. The first major theater riot occurs and Norah's beloved Da, who was playing fiddle at the Astor Theater when it was attacked, is presumed dead. Norah, heartbroken, prepares to leave for Ireland, but Da returns home, after recovering from his injuries. Norah realizes home now is with her family and friends in America. Maybe America can become home after all.

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

Norah, 25, in her tenement apartment is sleeping before her dresser, dreaming of Sean, who left years before to work as a ship's mate. An Irish policeman comes to take her in for questioning about the murder of a prostitute and the theft of an expensive bracelet. Norah is attacked and nearly raped by the police commissioner, but escapes. She and her friend, Mary, had been set-up and both girls, having experienced this raunchy commissioner's ways, are now distrustful of men. Soon after, Norah meets the charming Irish dandy, James Harrigan, who asks her to work for his Irish-American newspaper, and Norah, over-confident, writes an article not to his liking. She storms out of his office late at night and into the arms of the educated Irish rebel, Thomas Murray, whom she had met previously. Norah and Murray are smitten with one another, but Murray is also passionate about freeing Ireland from British control. Murray grooms Norah for the movement that has raised \$30,000 to travel to England to buy arms. But Norah is abducted by the rejected and nasty commissioner who sells her to a brothel. Norah eventually escapes the brothel and she and Murray board the ship bound for England, while her beloved Da is near death with consumption and her family knows not where she is.

Episode 4. SHIPWRECK, LOSS, AND LOVE

On a luxury liner with a bunch of Irish rebels, Norah and Murray marry, but the celebration is short-lived; the ship crashes and sinks. Most of the passengers perish, including Murray, but

Norah survives and returns to New York, grief stricken and confused; she discovers she is pregnant. When Da, who survived consumption, tells Norah Mary died, Norah has a mental breakdown, but soon rises from the ashes to reclaim herself and her determined spirit to not just survive, but thrive. Harrigan asks her to work for the newspaper and she hones her writing skills and learns about the abolitionist and feminist movements. She meets Nellie, a Protestant feminist, and goes to the Seventh Annual Women's Rights Convention. She is intrigued by the movement, but feels like an outsider amongst Protestant do-gooders. She feels ill and when leaving, faints and thinks she hears Sean's voice, but believes it's her imagination.

Thereafter, Norah is driven to provide for her baby and not live in poverty. When Harrigan asks her to marry him, she says yes because she loves him, but mostly because her baby will be provided for. Later, in true Norah fashion in needing to be honest, she tells Harrigan they can't marry. He's a closet homosexual and their relationship is merely a deep friendship. Not knowing how she'll survive, but feeling the strength within to not lose who she is, she heads out to the bank Murray had an account at. However, there are mobs of people on the street declaring there's been a bank crash. Norah runs into Nellie and they go into an eatery where Norah meets Sean who has returned from working for years on slave ships. He's contrite, humbled, and madly in love with Norah. Norah moves into an apartment with her baby, Katie, and Nellie, and becomes a milliner who occasionally writes articles for Harrigan's paper. Sean becomes a constant companion who takes her out dancing at Pete Williams' Dance Hall. Norah McCabe is at peace with herself and her life.

THE IRISH MILLINER - A SECOND SERIES.

Adapted from my novel, *The Irish Milliner*, this series follows the life of Norah McCabe, a milliner who occasionally writes articles for the *Irish-American* and volunteers at the Five Points House of Industry, a Protestant mission housing orphans, a woman's working house, a free medicine dispensary, and a children's school. Beginning just prior to the Civil War, Norah meets Abraham Lincoln when he comes to visit the orphanage. Norah befriends the real life, Elizabeth Jennings, an African-American woman who was thrown off a trolley and took the company to court. Norah is still in a romance with Sean O'Connolly, but again desires to experience life beyond what Sean wants. Norah feels the pull to experience Republican ideals, which is counter to her Democratic Irish enclave.

Eventually, Norah creates hats for escaped slaves fleeing to freedom through the Underground Railroad. She also meets the real life Edward Knox, son of the well-known top hat maker, Charles Knox. Norah comes from rabble Irish and Edward Knox from lace curtain Irish, but the two fall in love. Sean is still hopeful for a life with Norah, but leaves before conscription. He wants nothing to do with the war, but before he leaves, the Draft Riots occur and he has to make sure Norah and her daughter, Katie, are safe. Edward Knox lies about his age and signs up.

Norah continues writing for the newspaper, becomes involved in support for the war, and after the Battle of Gettysburg when Edward is missing in action, she travels there. Harrigan wants her to write about Gettysburg, but she is really seeking to find Edward. When Norah eventually finds Edward, he has lost the use of his legs and tells Norah he cannot marry her. His father comes for him and he goes to Europe to convalesce. Norah stays on in Gettysburg and nurses the wounded, serving selflessly, no longer driven to find herself in romance or success. The war has changed her and she has come full circle in juxtaposing the Famine with the carnage of Gettysburg. She has seen Irish and American soil saturated with human blood and these places have become sacred ground for her. Norah returns to New York City, but eventually moves to Corning, New York with her family. She owns the first velocipede in Corning and becomes quite comfortable attending a women's rights convention. When she goes to Washington Hall in Corning to hear Susan B. Anthony speak is it Sean O'Connolly standing on the steps or is it just her imagination?

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