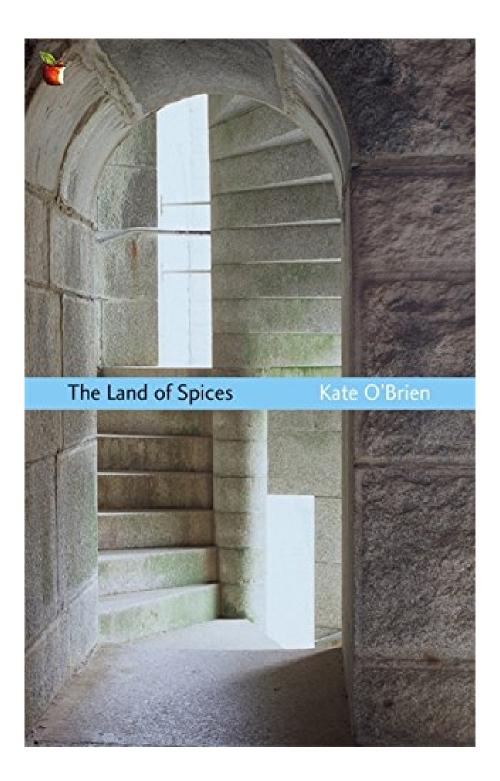


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O'Brien exquisitely evokes the harem atmosphere of convent life, the beauty and the silence, the bickering and the cruelties . . . If novels can be music, this is a novel with perfect pitch?Clare Boylan

About the Author

Kate O'Brien (1897-1974), one of Ireland's greatest and best-loved writers, was born in Limerick. As well as writing plays, travel, and biography, she published nine wonderful novels.

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Mere Marie-Helene once turned her back on life, sealing up her heart in order to devote herself to God. Now the formidable Mother Superior of an Irish convent, she has, for some time, been experiencing grave doubts about her vocation. But when she meets Anna Murphy, the youngest-ever boarder, the little girl's solemn, poetic nature captivates her and she feels 'a storm break in her hollow heart'. Between them an unspoken allegiance is formed that will sustain each through the years as the Reverend Mother seeks to combat her growing spiritual aridity and as Anna develops the strength to resist the conventional demands of her background.

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9 of 10 people found the following review helpful.First-rate novelBy Heather MillerKate O'Brien's The Land of Spices tells the story of a woman who betrayed herself as a young girl--

becoming a nun as a reaction to the shock of discovering her father's homosexuality. O'Brien brilliantly shows how Catholic doctrine made it impossible for the protagonist to interpret her father's homosexuality as anything other than a violent betrayal. In cutting off her father whom she loved more than anyone in the world, the protagonist cuts herself off from her own heart and proceeds to live an emotionally hollow existence as a nun. While rapidly rising through the ranks of the international order she belongs to, she is appointed to run a convent in Ireland. As an Englishwoman in Ireland, she feels more lost than ever and yearns to quit her post. Then she begins to have a relationship with a 5 year boarder, who is there because of her own family problems. The little girl reminds her of being a happy little girl with her father. As the nun grows to love the young girl, she gains the ability to understand that she still loves her father and that she has made a terrible mistake, both in judging him and in choosing life as a nun out of fear. This is a moving book well worth reading.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Coming of Age in an Irish Convent

By LH422

In a convent school in the Ireland of the 1930s, O'Brien weaves the parallel tales of a sensitive young pupil and the lonely mother superior who sees promise in her. Anna Murphey, daughter of an alcoholic father, weak mother, and dictatorial grandmother, finds solace only in the companionship of her younger brother, Charlie. Away at school from a young age, Anna's academic talents create a barrier between her and her classmates, and they run her afoul of certain of the most jealous nuns. Compounding Anna's problems is the fact that she is emotionally isolated from her mostly useless family. Her drunk father, her dominating grandmother, and her spineless mother all exist outside of Anna's emotional world.

O'Brien is clearly cognizant of the dangers of convent education for sensitive young women like Anna. The book suggests that loneliness and unhappiness is the lot of the thinking, feeling woman, as epitomized by Anna and the mother superior. Loneliness is endemic. The only happy women in the book are some of the simplering, unthinking elder students.

The book also provides a strong indictment against the provincialism of Irish nationalism. The Irish nationalists in O'Brien's work are univerally short-sighted and unsure of why they support their cause. In short, they are incapable of seeing the forest for the trees.

This is an interesting, thinking novel, which provides a fascinating look at life in a convent school.

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