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REFERENCE DEPT.

**O'Brien, Kate**

Born: Ireland, 1897; Died: 1974

Educated: Ireland.

Kate O'Brien was born in Limerick in 1897. Her mother died when she was five years old, and she was sent to join her older sisters at the French convent of Laurel Hill in Limerick. Later she received a scholarship to University College, Dublin, where she took her BA degree. After college she tried her hand briefly at several things: the foreign page of the *Manchester Guardian*, teaching, and governessing in Spain. Although she fell in love with Spain, she returned to London and was married for a short time before finally finding herself as writer, dramatist initially, then novelist. She lived most of her life in either Ireland or England – with lengthy trips to the USA – and was denied entry to her beloved Spain after the publication of her travel book, *Farewell, Spain*, in 1937. Not until 1957

was she allowed to return. She died in Kent in 1974. *Presentation Parlour* (1963) gives a whimsical account of the O'Brien origins, the sheltering and sheltered aunts, and the Presentation nuns who watched over the young family.<sup>1</sup>

O'Brien's first successes were in drama, but she soon moved to novels, and would also turn to journalism, criticism, travel books, and a life of Teresa of Avila. Her first novel, *Without My Cloak* (1931), in which gay relationships between men feature, won the Hawthornden Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Later novels also won critical acclaim and popular audiences, despite the banning of *The Land of Spices* (1941) by the Censorship of Publications Board; the acclaim was the reward of the well-crafted work, and the popularity may have been a response in part to the new content, the realistic focus on the woman's situation in the Irish Catholic middle-class. O'Brien's protagonists are torn between familial and religious duty and individual desire, and while the conflict is usually resolved in favour of duty, O'Brien makes no bones about the price this duty extorts from women. *The Flower of May* (1953), *Mary Lavelle* (1936), and *As Music and Splendour* (1958) all feature romantic female friendship and the latter two have lesbian heroines.

*The Land of Spices* (1941), presents the development of a young woman from child to adult, and seems to invite comparisons with Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as O'Brien's heroine, Anna Murphy, undergoes trials similar to those of Stephen Dedalus. O'Brien suggests, however, that women are faced with more obstacles in their quest for intellectual freedom than are men. Indeed, the battle against family and tradition is so tough that in order to succeed, Anna needs all the courage and discipline she can muster, as well as a powerful friend. The Mother Superior of the French convent of Sainte Famille becomes Anna's ally, a nurturing replacement of the negligent and incompetent biological mother. Anna's story intertwines with Mother Superior's, and we see the nun finally forgive herself her own youthful intolerance as she

encourages, advises, and fights for Anna. While Stephen in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* moves toward isolation and exile, Anna comes to an intuitive understanding and appreciation of the wisdom and detached maternal guidance of her unsentimental mentor.

O'Brien also analyses the parochialism of Irish nationalism in *The Land of Spices*. The English suffragette whom Anna befriends is suspect in the nationalist and religious climate of early twentieth-century Ireland. The young priests are very narrow-minded, and even the more enlightened bishop finds the French Catholic convent 'too European for present-day Irish requirements. Its detachment of spirit seems to me to stand in the way of nationalism.'<sup>2</sup> But Mother Superior resists attempts to distort education into nationalist service. 'Indifferent alike,' the narrator notes, 'to the needs of Gaelic Leaguer or British officer, she still thought it necessary to train girls, for their own sakes and for the glory of God, to be Christians and to be civilised.'(187)

*That Lady* (1946), perhaps her most popular work, presents the romance of Ana de Mendoza and Antonio Perez, and the place in their lives of Philip II of Spain. As so often in O'Brien novels, Ana is a Catholic of conscience, in love with a man forbidden by her religion. Again as so often, O'Brien probes the deep psychological recesses of Ana and of Philip, as well as the excruciating conflict between desire and constraints imposed by religion.

Kate O'Brien had a distinguished career as novelist, dramatist, scholar, and travel writer. She was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a member of the Irish Academy of Letters.

#### Works:

*Distinguished Villa: A Play in Three Acts*. London: Benn, 1926. Play.

*Without My Cloak*. 1931; rpt. London: Virago, 1986. Novel.

*The Anteroom*. 1934; rpt. London: Virago, 1989. Novel.

*Mary Lavelle*. 1936; rpt. London: Virago, 1991. Novel.

*Farewell, Spain*. 1937; rpt. London: Virago, 1985. Travel Book.

## Unveiling Treasures

*Pray for the Wanderer*. London: Heinemann, 1938; Garden City:

Doubleday, Doran, 1938. Novel.

*The Land of Spices*. 1941; rpt. London: Virago, 1988. Novel.

*English Diaries and Journals*. London: Collins, 1934. Memoir.

*The Last of Summer*. 1943; rpt. London: Virago, 1990. Novel.

*That Lady*. 1946; rpt. London: Virago, 1985; In USA, *For One Sweet Grape*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1946. Novel.

*That Lady: a Romantic Drama*. New York: Harper, 1949. Play.

*Teresa of Avila*. London: Parrish, 1951; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951. Religious Life.

*The Flower of May*. London: Heinemann, 1953; New York: Harper, 1953. Novel.

*As Music and Splendour*. London: Heinemann, 1958; New York: Harper, 1958. Novel.

*My Ireland*. London: Batsford, 1962; New York: Hastings House, 1962. Travel Book.

*Presentation Parlour*. London: Heinemann, 1963. Memoir.

## Notes

1. *Presentation Parlour*.

2. *The Land of Spices*, 233, Doubleday Edition.