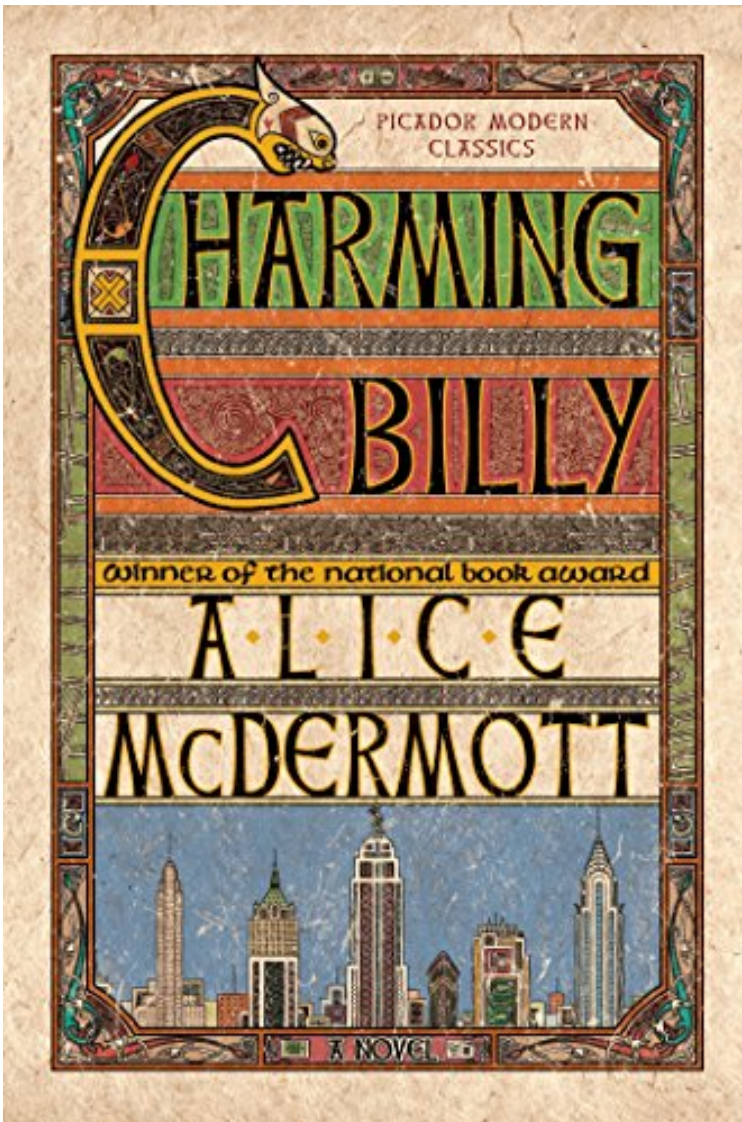


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Charming Billy: A Novel



Par Alice McDermott
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAlice McDermott tells the story of Billy Lynch within the complex matrix of a tightly knit Irish American community, in a voice that is resonant and full of deep feeling. Charming Billy is a masterpiece about the unbreakable bonds of memory and desire.Charming Billy is the winner of the 1998 National Book Award for Fiction.ExtraitChapter OneSOMEWHERE IN THE BRONX, only twenty minutes or so from the cemetery, Maeve found a small bar-and-grill in a wooded alcove set well off the street that was willing to serve the funeral party of forty-seven medium-rare roast beef and boiled potatoes and green beans amandine, with fruit salad to begin and vanilla ice cream to go with the coffee. Pitchers of beer and of iced tea would be placed along the table at intervals and the bar left open--it being a regular business day--for anyone who wanted a drink.The place was at the end of a sloping driveway that started out as macadam

but quickly diminished to dirt and gravel. There was an apron of dirt and gravel in front of the building, potholed, and on the day of the funeral filled with puddles, and the first ten cars parked here, including the black limousine Maeve had ridden in. The others parked up along the drive, first along one side, then the other the members of the funeral party walking in their fourth procession of the day (the first had been out of the church the second and third in and out of the graveyard), down the wet and rutted path to the little restaurant that, lacking only draught Guinness and a peat fire might have been a pub in rural Ireland. Or, lacking dialogue by John Millington Synge the set of a rural Irish play. How in the world she ever found this place was a mystery despite the question being asked again and again as Billy's friends and family filed in--the women in high heels walking on tiptoe down the sloping path the men holding their wives' arms and umbrellas that had already been well soaked at the side of the grave. All of them in their church clothes giving a formal air to the gray day and the ragged border of city trees and wet weeds. All of them speculating: perhaps the undertaker had suggested the place, or someone from the cemetery. Perhaps a friend friend or relative on her side (few as they were) who knew something about the Bronx, or maybe Mickey Quinn, who had his territory up here. But Mickey Quinn denied it, shaking his head, if you can believe there's a bar in any of the five boroughs that he hasn't been to. The place smelled slightly of mildew, understandable in this weather and with this thick (even in April) bower of trees but the red-and-green tile floor was immaculate and the wooden bar gleamed under the fluorescent light. One long table draped with white tablecloths and set for forty-nine cut diagonally across the entire length of the room. One large window showed the parking lot full of cars, the other a wood that no doubt ended at a narrow side street or a row of dumpsters behind a row of stores, but seemed from in here to be dark and endlessly deep. Maeve sat in front of this window, at the head of the table. She wore a navy-blue dress with long, slim sleeves and a round neckline, and anyone in the room who had not thought it earlier thought now--perhaps inspired by the perfect simplicity of what she wore--that there was a kind of beauty in her ordinary looks, in her plainness. Or, if they didn't think to call it beauty, they said courage--more appropriate to the occasion and the day--not meaning necessarily her new-widow's courage (with its attendant new-widow's cliches: bearing up, holding on, doing well), but the courage it took to look out onto life from a face as plain as butter: pale, downy skin and bland blue eyes, faded brown hair cut short as a nun's and dimmed with gray. Only a touch of powder and of lipstick, only a wedding band and a small pearl ring for adornment. Of course, they'd thought her courageous all along (most of them, anyway, or--most likely--all but my father), living with Billy as she did; but now, seeing her at the head of the table, Billy gone (there would be time enough throughout the afternoon to say it's unbelievable still), her courage, or her beauty, however they chose to refer to it, became something new--which made something new, in turn, of what they might say about Billy's life. Because if she was beautiful, then the story of his life, or the story they would begin to re-create for him this afternoon, would have to take another turn. My father sat to her right. Although Maeve had made all the arrangements herself--had found the place and chosen the menu and requested the fruit salad he served as soon as all the guests had arrived so there would be no long interval for speeches or toasts, only a quick blessing from one of the priests, he was the one the waitresses spoke to, and the owner of the place asked every now and then if anything was needed. He was the one who would settle the bill at the end of the afternoon and tip the waiters and the girl who took the coats and the umbrellas. He was the one who asked Maeve, after he'd already poured her a glass of iced tea, if she would like a drink, and then got up to fetch it for her, nodding to the undertaker and the driver, who were having their lunch at the bar. She said, "Thank you, Dennis," when he placed the martini in front of her and then waited just a moment, her pale hand just touching the stem of the glass before she lifted it. "Good luck," he said, raising his own glass of beer. She nodded. There's not much sense in pointing out the irony here--or even in trying to determine if everyone was either oblivious to it or so keenly aware that it no longer bore mentioning. Billy had died an alcoholic. Last night, in his casket, his face was bloated to twice its size and his skin was dark brown. (Dennis himself, my father, when he had identified the body two days ago at the VA, had said at first, momentarily relieved from the fact that Billy was dead, "But this is a colored man.") Billy had drunk himself to death. He had, at some point, ripped apart, plowed through as alcoholics tend to do, the great, deep, tightly woven fabric of affection that was some part of the emotional life, the life of love, of everyone in the room. Everyone loved him. It was Mickey Quinn saying this, down at my end of the table. Mickey Quinn, who also worked for Con Ed, his territory being here in the Bronx, although he'd never heard of this place before. Mickey with a beer in his hand, and the irony either lost on him or too obvious even to bear mentioning. "If you knew Billy at all," he said, "then you loved him. He was just that type of guy." And if you loved him, we all knew, you pleaded with him at some

point. Or you drove him to AA, waited outside the church till the meeting was over, and drove him home again. Or you advanced him whatever you could afford so he could travel to Ireland to take the pledge. If you loved him, you took his car keys away, took his incoherent phone calls after midnight. You banished him from your house until he could show up sober. You saw the bloodied scraps of flesh he coughed up into his drinks. If you loved him, then you told him at some point that he was killing himself and felt the way his indifference ripped through your affection. You left work early to identify his body at the VA, and instead of being grateful that the ordeal was at long last over, you felt a momentary surge of joy as you turned away:

This was not Billy, it was some colored man. "He had the sweetest nature," another cousin, yet another Rosemary, said at my end of the table. "He found a way like everyone, he really did. He always found something good to say, or something funny. I He could always get you laughing." "He was funny, though." It was agreed. "God, wasn't he funny?" "Everyone loved him." Not missing the irony of the drinks in their hands and the drink that had killed him, but redeeming, perhaps, the pleasure of a drink or two, on a sad, wet afternoon, in the company of old friends, from the miserable thing that a drink had become in his life.

Redeeming the affection they had felt for him, once torn apart by this willfulness, his indifference, making something worthwhile of it, something valuable that had been well spent, after all. The fruit salad was canned but served with a little scoop of lime sherbet, which was refreshing, everyone agreed. It cleared the palate.

"The rolls were nice. There was some soda bread in one of the bread baskets, someone must have brought it.

"Not as good as mine, but then I prefer it with caraway seeds, the way my mother used to make it..." You could not redeem Billy's life, redeem your own relentless affection for him, without saving at some point, "There was that girl." "The Irish girl." "Eva." Of course. Kate, his sister, would remember her name. "That was a sad thing, wasn't it? That was a blow to him." "A girl he met right after the war. Right after he came home.

Out on Long Island." "An Irish girl," Kate said, "visiting her sister, who was a nursemaid for some wealthy family from Park Avenue. He wanted to marry her, even gave her a ring. She had to go back home first, her parents were elderly, I think. But they wrote to each other. Billy was a great letter writer, wasn't he? He was always scribbling notes and mailing them off." "He'd write a note on anything, wouldn't he? A paper napkin, a train schedule, and mail it off to you." "I have one," Bridie from the old neighborhood said. She dug into her patent-leather purse and found a greeting-card-sized envelope with two stamps that showed a harp and a fiddle. She looked at the postmark--June 1975--and then extracted a limp paper square of a cocktail napkin that contained Billy's looping hand. "He sent it from Ireland," she said. "From Shannon Airport." And there was the Act Lingus logo in the corner. With a blue ballpoint Billy had written: "Birdie: Just saw your face pass by on a twelve-year-old girl in a navy-blue school uniform. Said her name was Fiona. She was meeting her father's plane from New York...Revue de presse"Eloquent ... heartbreaking ... McDermott is brilliant.

"New York Times Book "There's no one like Alice McDermott for catching the ebullient particulars of the Irish-American sensibility, and in this superbly drawn, bittersweet tale of a captivating alcoholic, Charming Billy, her touch is light as a feather, her perceptions purely accurate." Elle "An astoundingly beautiful novel about the persistence of love, the perseverance of grief, and all-but-unbearable loneliness, as well as faith, loyalty and redemption." Philadelphia Inquirer "Magical ... In Charming Billy, Ms. McDermott writes ... with wisdom and grace, refusing to sentimentalize her characters even as she forces us to recognize their decency and goodness. She has written a luminous and affecting novel." Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times