



History of the Rain

Niall Williams

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We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling. That's how it seems to me, being alive for a little while, the teller and the told.

So says Ruthie Swain. The bedridden daughter of a dead poet, home from college after a collapse (Something Amiss, the doctors say), she is trying to find her father through stories—and through generations of family history in County Clare (the Swains have the written stories, from salmon-fishing journals to poems, and the maternal MacCarrolls have the oral) and through her own writing (with its Superabundance of Style). Ruthie turns also to the books her father left behind, his library transposed to her bedroom and stacked on the floor, which she pledges to work her way through while she's still living.

In her attic room, with the rain rushing down the windows, Ruthie writes Ireland, with its weather, its rivers, its lilts, and its lows. The stories she uncovers and recounts bring back to life multiple generations buried in this soil—and they might just bring her back into the world again, too.

History of the Rain Details

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From Reader Review History of the Rain for online ebook

Dawn says

I received a copy of this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

Three quarters of the way through this book, I thought I knew what my review would say. I was going to tell you how "History of the Rain" by Niall Williams is one of the best books I've read; how I've never laughed so much during a book; how the characters pop up out of the page and add so much charm to the story; how reading just a few pages in the morning changed my day.

Having now finished, most of the above is still true. The only thing I want to change is to say: "History of the Rain" may just be THE best book I've ever read - despite reading the last chapter with tears rolling down my face.

It's about Ruth Swain. It's about people - with all their quirks and crazinesses. It's about being who we are, and how we get to being that person. It's about life.

Niall Williams' writing can be summed up in one word: REAL.

I am in awe. This book needs to be read.

Elyse says

"As It Is in Heaven", was so enjoyable, I wanted to return to another Niall Williams novel - sooner - rather than later.

"History of the Rain", is extraordinary-phenomenal-brilliant!!! WOW!! - just WOW!!!

A young girl name Ruth Swain, an Irish girl, lies in bed sick....(we never know what she has), but is surrounded by books - around 3,000 books - which she inherited by her father. Throughout the story, books are dropped like rain. I was marking books I haven't read and looking up books to familiarize myself with. At one point during a break from reading ---

I became curious.....Have MANY of my friends inherited books from their parents? I asked one friend on Goodreads - [an author and an artist today] - if his parents were 'book people'. They were: readers, not writers.

For 30 years, I saved boxes of children's books that I wanted ALMOST DESPERATELY to pass down to my grandchildren. (approx. 30 boxes worth).

Given how much fun reading was with my daughters growing up -- (writing little luv messages in the books that had special meaning: theater productions, etc.).... I had a vision of passing them down.

However after 30 years of 'waiting' and no grandkids - we felt it was time to donate them. I saved a few special favorites.

I'd really love to know - from my friends - what it feels like to be reading books that were once your parents. How do those books feel for YOU now? I never had that experience-- and it was so wonderful in 'this book'!!!

I COULD NEVER DO THIS BOOK JUSTICE with my measly review.

In my opinion -- it's as close to a masterpiece as any book is called one. We are pulled into this family... RUTH is struggling to find her way through distress and her illness.

ITS THE WRITING AND STORYTELLING....including learning about booksthat is soooo awesome-- so well done!

We learn about Ruth's father- and his father - seen through literature. We also get invited to feel - for a short time anyway to be part of this Irish community....in a small village in Ireland. I loved it!!

Visually-- I felt like I was was living in Ireland!!

"You head along and you know the river is somewhere down here. You'll feel your descending towards it, river in a green underworld. And the drizzle kind of sticks to the windows so the wipers don't really take it and the fields seem lumpish and bunched together the way you imagine green dancers might if they fell under the spell and lay down. That's how I think of it, the slopes and slants, the green dips and hills on either side of you.

Many characters to laugh at and laugh with --many to love!
There is history - tragedy - humanity -beauty - and BOOKS!!!

Niall Williams writing is wonderful!!!! HIGHLY RECOMMEND!!!!

Kelly says

Oh my god, this book makes me so angry because if you just cut out the repetitive, far too long, cloying middle 80 pages or so where he shows his hand over and over so insistently that I can't help but look at it, it's a gorgeous, gorgeous talented thing full of pain and life and love and erudition and things put just so. I'm really pissed off that this author over indulged and threw me out of the narrative by telling me how clever he was again and again and getting maudlin about how Irish people are. I liked Ruth, damnit. If I could give any advice, it would be to skip most of Part Two. You know what's going to happen anyway since the beginning, and Book Three will probably read all the more affectingly because your tolerance/cliche radar wasn't tested by Book Two. That would be a five star, always-remembered classic of a book right there- so read that book instead. I'm jealous of you.

(A slightly longer review included in my review of my fall/winter reading in 2016 here:
<https://shouldacouldawouldabooks.com/...>)

B the BookAddict says

I picked up History of the Rain after reading the review by my good GR friend Terri. I am indebted to her for bringing the novel to my attention.

Plain Ruth Swain is one of the most appealing characters I have met in a long time. There is nothing plain about Ruth, in my opinion, as she writes in her "*still, small, strong, hopeful voice.*" Confined to her bed and

with her golden twin already slipped away from her, she is a reader. Like many of the infirm, she views the world from a different viewpoint than the rest of us and her voice is unsubtle, insightful and delightfully extraordinary. From her bed, Ruth is searching for her father, Virgil Swain and, as she puts it, *“she’s writing a river”*. Her story simply flows.

Beginning with the incredibly obstinate Swains, her great grandfather the Reverend, grandfather Abraham, she also tells you snippets of her mother’s family history. There’s the Shannon River, rain, fishing, pole-vaulting, poetry, Ireland and there’s Ruth. Woven with her own tale and references to her 3958 books, she imparts her father’s story: *“This is my father’s story. I am writing it to find him. But to get where you’re going, you have to first go backwards. That’s directions in Ireland, it’s also T.S. Eliot.”*

“We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or to keep alive those who only live now in the telling”

“He had the kind of brain where strange is just normal in a bit of a storm.”

“All time was the same to Nan, she had that most remarkable of skills, the habit of living, and has it so perfected that death has given up and gone away.”

If you don’t fall for Plain Ruth Swain, there just may be something amiss with your humanity. The Times’ summation of *History of the Rain* is perfect: *“Williams’ prose is bathed in poetry and moonlight.”* Ruth Swain is a narrator who tells a story unlike any other storyteller. Her voice and her story are indelible and captivating. Mr Williams, I applaud you!

This is one of the best reads I have had this year. **The blurb says this novel is exquisite – believe me, it is.** Most Highly Recommended. 5★

Robert Blumenthal says

I sometimes go back and forth while reading a book, changing my star ratings as I proceed. This stellar novel was easy--it was a 5-star journey all the way. If I was forced to use only one word to describe this novel, it would definitely be "Irish." It is so Irish that I could hear fiddle music and Irish brogue, taste the whiskey, and feel the warmth and charm of the characters as I read. It is narrated by a wonderful narrator, a sickly Irish woman in her 20s. It is mostly about the life of her dad and her family, which included her twin brother. The father is a poet of sorts, and poetry and the father's large classic fiction collection play a big role in the telling. Along with her family and other townsfolk, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Butler Yeats, amongst others, are part of the major cast of characters. There are deaths and births, tragedy and joy, and, when all is said and done, Love with a capital L. It is a novel that made me laugh (a lot) and cry (a lot) and generally feel a great love for Ireland and its people. I cannot recommend it enough. It enchanted me.

Katherine says

"There's a book inside you. There's a library inside me."

I woke up thinking about this novel, and I almost regret dedicating my morning to finishing it. But sometimes a story begs to be devoured.

Sometimes, you can tell an author is a devout reader through their writing. Niall Williams clearly is one of these types, based on *History of the Rain*. So, of course, I love him the more for it. **This is a story of family, history, love, tragedy, Ireland, and books.** And it's probably my favorite Man Booker 2014 longlisted novel so far.

Ruth lives in her room due to a vague illness and a fear of the outdoors. She's inherited her father's extensive library, where she attempts to find him, one book at a time. Throughout the story, books are dropped like rain, and I was personally reminded of how many I need to experience. Though I'm very familiar with one of the most important writers frequently mentioned: Yeats. For how could you not include him in an Irish novel about writing and poetry? So, he's there. *History of the Rain* will surely strike a chord in people who **appreciate not just the story inside the books, but the history and physicality of them as well.** I'm firmly in the camp of books being a necessary part of my home's ecosystem. But as I've gotten older I've come to relish certain stories not just for the meaning of their content but for the fact that they were purchased and read by *my* father. A few he's given to me, and reading them is something personally spectacular. Though I'm not searching for my father in the way Ruth must, I find through his books how he came to be who he is now, before I ever existed. A moment like this I could particularly see in my own father (and perhaps a quality in myself):

"The library that grew in our house contained all my father's idiosyncrasies, contained the man he was at thirty-five, and at forty, at forty-five. He did not edit himself. He did not look back at the books of ten years ago and pluck out the ones whose taste was no longer his."

I can relate to this as my Father's only daughter (and child), and the importance it's had on my own life. Williams writes of a father/daughter relationship not often seen in literature, though these are generally portrayed much less than father/son relationships in the first place.

Niall Williams writes with beautiful clarity and apparent ease. Hardly a chapter or page went by without a pause to take note of something profound. The imagery evoked in this sleepy community celebrates the Irish qualities that only such an account as this can excite. I wanted to fly to Ireland immediately while reading, but perhaps I should explore my own history first.

If themes like this are of any interest, I encourage a thorough reading of this chronicle of one family. **Though you don't need to be a Swain, or Irish for that matter, you may find pieces of your own history in this account,** like I did. In fact, it kept popping up in my thoughts throughout the day when I wasn't reading, and made it's way into my work notes as a little doodle:

I was probably being a bit optimistic though. As I probably didn't accurately convey, you're going to want some tissues with this one.

Highly recommended.

Bonnie says

This is the most achingly beautiful book I have ever read. There is not one flaw and exceptional beauty. Niall Williams has created poetry out of words and created characters so real they will live on forever. The setting is Faha, Ireland where rain is the only constant. The main character is Ruth Swain, a girl who loves to read and vows to read her father's collection of 3,958 books in order to understand him. Ruth is sickly with a "blood disease" and spends her days in an attic room with skylights over which rain falls. She is as a unique character as someone from Faulkner and soon has you under her spell.

Her father back from sailing the seas marries a local girl and they, after years of trying, have twins, a boy and a girl. Aeney is vital and outgoing in contrast to his immobile sister. They live on the wild, rain-sodden history of fourteen acres of the worst farming land in Ireland, and her father battles the stone littered, brackish watered river to make a living for the family. He plants potatoes and watches as they flourish only to die from blight, he relentlessly shovels the soggy ground bordering the River Shannon from encroaching on his land and, finally, begins writing poetry.

This book is so unique dealing with the love of reading books that passes from father to daughter. The mood is quirky(Chapter Twelve is four words: Your blood is a river) and inundated with witty sayings. After every mention of a book, the author, publication date and city is given, "Read Middlemarch(Book 989, George Eliot, Penguin Classics, London).

The novel relates the first meeting of Virgil and Mary and their loving but meager existence where Virgil vows God is not going to beat him and took every setback as a trial, doubled the lies of wire, re-staked the fence, then made a double perimeter along the river when he came out one morning to see a whole portion of it, posts and wire both, had been pressed forward into the water. The river always wins so Virgil spends more time reading than working and Mary works twice as hard. Ruth writes about their cows that kept going toward the river where three drowned and she comments, "One drowned is bad luck, two is the devil himself, three is God". A neighbor has to point out that maybe they were thirsty.

At one point, Virgil gives up and starts writing poetry at a desk under the eaves. He is known as "the Poet" and turns his love of reading into action.

This is the best and most unusual book I have read and I cannot heap enough praise on Williams for this remarkable story of the Swain family. As Ruth says, "It is enough to keep hoping and to keep telling stories, for each other and about each other, collaborating in the elaborate history of ourselves so that in stories we exist".

Rosana says

Ruth is the most likeable narrator I have come across in years. It is impossible for anyone who loves books not to fall in love with her and her quest to understand her dead father through the books he read and collected. The story meanders a bit, but to my ears it added a conversational tone that drew me in. There is a saccharine quality to it, and the narrative is full of hyperboles, yet the voice remains fresh and not once I heard a cliché.

The end, maybe too optimistic, made me consider lowering my rating, but then I decided that it would just reveal how cynical I have become, that I find a hopeful ending reason to lower my rating of a book.

It did take me back to a place I have been finding harder to achieve with books, where a story carries me for hours on end, and that the simple act of hearing it makes me feel I understand humanity a little bit better.

I feel I was given a gift by the author.

I also should mention that I heard it in audio, which was perfect for the POV, and that the narration by Jennifer McGraff was impeccable. Her voice was perfect for Ruth's voice.

Deborah Meyler says

I've not finished this book yet, but I am tempted to a mid-read review, partly because I don't want it to end. It reminds me slightly of *Ulysses* except I am enjoying it; perhaps it reminds me of *Dubliners*. It also reminds me of John McGahern, but it might be that my sampling of Irish literature is too limited to come up with better comparisons. It's very funny, but the humour is soaked through and deepened with tragedy and lost opportunity and resignation, a mood here as perpetual as the rain that rains down all through the book (so far, that is). Here's a paragraph by way of example:

"I've had stupid teachers, lazy teachers, boring teachers, teachers who were teachers because their parents were and they hadn't the imagination to think of anything else, teachers who were teachers because of cowardice, because of fear, because of the holidays, because of the pensions, because they were never called to account, never had to be actually be any good, good ones who could not survive in any other profession, who were not aware they had trod on butterflies. But none of those compared to Mr Maurice Crossan. He was the one who first stamped on my brother's soul. He was dark, as they say here. For those who want more of him, visit the dark character of Orlick Dodge in *Great Expectations*, and cross that with a ginger-headed weasel."

It is often said that something is brilliantly written, but sometimes it's also true. *History of the Rain* is the kind of book one wants to annotate. You begin to wish you lived near Niall Williams so that he could tell you more stories, and yet the book engenders a sense of profound sorrow, even as you laugh. It is a large, generous book, a book with enormous breadth and scope, even as it is focused on one small book-filled rain-battered room. I doubt that people will be able to get through it without tears, and I'll eat my hat if they can get through it without laughing.

Elaine says

A very beautiful if imperfect book. Is it a cliché to call an Irish book lyrical? Well, this one is. It's a wistful, tender family saga rooted in a dreamily rain-soaked Irish riverside landscape. It's also sometimes quite funny, as Williams' linguistic creativity bounces off the walls and into various phenomena of contemporary culture (particularly those associated with the Great Recession - the Bust, as he calls it).

I found it quite absorbing and was prepared to be blown away at the beginning. Oddly, it was the narrator herself that held me back from complete enjoyment. I never quite believed her as female - hard to put my finger on why - and I wasn't quite sure why she had to be almost-terminally ill. Psychically ill made sense to me - but it's hinted she has leukemia - and that just seemed like piling on to a certain extent (and also - and I know this is petty - reminded me irksomely of the execrable *The Fault in Our Stars* with its preternaturally brilliant and witty dying teenagers).

Still a very impressive book and a delight to read.

Antonomasia says

Just as I was one of the 'right' readers for its fellow Booker longlister *The Wake*, I'm a wrong 'un for *The History of the Rain* - a book which is, so far, effusively well-loved on here.

It's very, very Oirish: whimsy and tragedy and tragical whimsy, eccentric villagers and stone-filled fields and potato blight and poets who won't publish. Ireland is pretty enough but these things - or in some cases the manner in which they're written - just don't do it for me. (As with not liking any sort of bestseller or hit, I don't feel too bad about not being fond of Oirishness: there are squillions of fans and it will be just fine without me.) Though what stock-Ireland does very well IMO is jokes about Catholicism: e.g. "a miniature Virgin Mary who, First Miracle of Faha, transformed herself into a plastic bottle with blue cap-crown". (It may be the absence of that sort of cynicism about anything else that explains the failure to connect.)

I'm not heartless and can see why one may be moved by this, young narrator Ruth's potentially terminal illness faced mostly off-screen as she devotes most of her attention to family history, or the magic surrounding her lost poet father and his family's "Impossible Standard". There are a couple of pages about grief and loss in Part 3, Chapter 1, which are absolutely perfect. Perhaps it implicitly indicates, especially near the end, that the romanticisation of failure - whilst an impediment to some - can be helpful when there's truly not much choice, it can be a comfort when you're long term sick and lend the possibility of being interesting rather than merely a degraded mess. (Though I may be reading in this idea which I consider important and too-little stated - merely because Ruth is still naively starry eyed about said romanticisation.) However, ultimately the book still adheres to the idea of publicity / publication as success. But aside from those few bits, my feeling is that it's all been said before and I wasn't keen enough to hear it again. The book seems *unnecessary*. Though to all those who adore it, it clearly is.

I've heard a similar story, from a similar narrator, very recently. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, also on the 2014 Booker longlist, has likewise a provincial nuclear-family setting with now-absent siblings and father, a chatty, meandering daughter-narrator who, although she's a student at least some of the time during the book pays practically no attention to her contemporary culture, making it claustrophobic - and yes, depressingly provincial, gotta get out of here - for those of us who thrive on references. The authors are

in both cases old enough to be the narrators' parents. (And this, like the three other Booker longlisters I've read so far, contains discussion of religious doubt; perhaps it is universal in litfic and I hadn't quite noticed, but it's easy to imagine panel chair and noted atheist A.C. Grayling nodding approvingly towards these paragraphs and books.)

Ruth sounds like she was "born middle-aged" to quote some other book I can't remember, with an air of gossipy, bustling capability although she spends most of the present-day parts of the book in bed or in hospital. She may sound mature and wise-beyond-her-years, but cynically I'd argue that it might just be easier for an author in his later fifties to create that, than to write a nineteen year old who sounds more like one. I am not entirely convinced by her. Although, yes, I have met women who seemed middle aged in their teens - straight into work after school or students living at home... It's odd, actually, that Ruth never mentions her experience of the university she's had to leave or take years out from. And I don't always find Ruth *that* wise - one hopes she will come to detach more from her family's unrelenting standards and history through having understood them so young, and you want to give her a copy of *Pink Brain*, *Blue Brain* to get her to her examine all her gender generalisations. Though countless novelists in their thirties and forties, whom you'd think both old and young enough to know better, still make similar ones.

As the genres list tells you, this is one of those Books About Books. Inevitably beloved on sites like this one, but I am almost always a refusenik. Twee, embarrassingly insular, I tend to think - but then, for all I've read, books aren't really my 'home' form. All the precious stuff that sounds like guff when I hear it said about novels or films makes utter perfect sense when it's said of music. (Which is more ancient, requires greater, more esoteric skill to produce yet demands nothing more than possession of a sense to absorb, and is physical as well as mental. And, for the last century or so, can even be appreciated whilst doing other things.) And I might just buy it re. poetry. Ruth is trying to get to know her lost father more deeply by reading his library. Goodness knows I understand the idea of using someone's favourite things to relate to them and absorb them when they're not there (and I wish I'd been more forgiving towards a couple of people who'd done the same to me when I was younger). But - perhaps because Ruth's young, or perhaps because it's too poetic a book to introduce such doubts - it never acknowledges that without the person there to talk to, you might be ascribing the wrong meanings or picking out the wrong bits, so you have to accept you're doing it as a comfort and daydream for yourself, and you're only going to get your own responses out of them. Nor would it be the sort of novel to say that 3000 mostly water-damaged old books, almost certainly mouldy, are not good companions for someone with what sounds like leukaemia. Many others say they've been inspired to read more via the references in *The History of the Rain*; like Ruth, I was a "reader of so many nineteenth-century novels before the age of fifteen that I became exactly too clever by half". I'm still pretty content with my intake of English classics, and the only book mentioned in here that I want to read and haven't is *Anna Karenina*.

Some generally favourable reviews find the references to modern life - the Boom, the Crash, Latvians and Lidl, the internet - jarring. True, a lot of the book does feel like it could have been an Irish village at almost any time in the twentieth century, but I think it blends things quite well. In smaller places, where you don't see adverts everywhere and streets full of people walking around with iPhones, a lot of life honestly doesn't look terribly different even if it is affected by wider economic change, and a lot of the work is of a type that means you couldn't be on the internet all day anyway. Their village doesn't have broadband, they still have a lot of VHS videos in the house, she's never become "an e-Person, an iPerson". The sense of continuity and change rings true even if the voice and cast are a tad clichéd.

Phrynnne says

I would give that six stars if I could. It was perfect. I loved the watery theme, the rain, the rivers, the salmon, even the mud and the floods. The descriptions of Ireland were spot on and some of the observations of the people were laugh aloud funny. I found Ruth to be an endearing heroine and loved all the other main characters as well. At times it was a sad book, at other times it was hopeful and uplifting. It was full to the brim with literary references as well as current day politics and events. And the history of the Irish people dating back to their beginnings as frozen sea weed was delightful. I have not read anything by Niall Williams before but his writing here was superb. I will certainly look out for more of his work.

Carolyn says

"This, Dear Reader, is a river narrative. My chosen style is The Meander."

Ruth Swain, 19 years old is lying ill in her attic bedroom in her big boat bed, hand built by her father, surrounded by the almost 4000 books belonging to her father, Virgil. She is watching the interminable Irish rain through her window and writing a history of her family.

This is a wonderful, lyrical history of a family and their relationship with the river Shannon and the land beside it, 'the worst fourteen acres in Ireland', that her impractical poet father tries to farm in the small community of Faha, County Clare. The river runs through the novel as a powerful metaphor, telling the past, the present and the future of Ireland itself and the Swains. In summer the river is benign and golden sunny days are spent swimming and fishing the leaping salmon and in winter the incessant rain can cause it to flood destroying the farm and threatening the people living nearby. It is the centre of their lives but is never to be taken for granted and can snatch a life in an instant.

"Here in Faha, of rain we have known All kinds, the rain that pretends it's not rain, the rain that crosses the Atlantic and comes for its holidays, rain that laughs at the word summer, sniggers at the dry day in Ennis twenty kilometres away, hoots at what pours, streams, teems, lashes, pelts, and buckets down. But this was different. It had intent. That's what Mam thought. And the intention was Flood."

As much as she is becoming a writer, Ruth is also a reader and her writing is coloured with what she has absorbed from her father's great collection of books. She recalls her grandfather, Abraham who wrote and published a book on Salmon fishing in Ireland, and writes of her twin, Aeney a blue eyed, blonde haired golden boy who was taken from them. From her sickbed she is able to view her family history from a distance and seek and find her father and his love for them.

"And my book will be a river and have the Salmon literal and metamorphic leaping inside it and be called History of the Rain, so that his book did not and does not perish, and you will know my books exists because of him and because of his books and his aspiration to leap up, to rise. You will know that I have found him in his books, in the covers his hands held, the pages they turned, in the paper and the print, but also in the worlds those books contained, where now I have been and you have been too. You will know the story goes from past to the present and into the future, and like a river flows."

Ravi Gangwani says

These words are from writer 'Niall Williams' of the book 'History of the Rain'. Almost two years ago.

Dear Ravi,

Greetings from a deep dark and starry night in County Clare. Thank you for your email about my novel 'History of the Rain.' It is a wonderful thing that a book written here in the wind and rain of the Atlantic coast of Ireland can reach a reader in India. I am greatly touched by your taking the time to let me know that you enjoyed the novel.

Best wishes from Ireland

Niall

Yes without a doubt it was from him. I know I am writing this very late. But I need to write this.

"I love the smell of the pages, sound of the pages", "Books are living things, they have smells and length of life," "Sheer pleasure of human condition is levitation". And "Poetry makes human lives more fine".

I read this book when it was nominated for Booker 2014. When I read it, I read it again then re-read, again read and re-read it many a times (I forgot the count of it)... What I will say I am touched by anything in this world by it. What books meant to me is same as What it meant to Ruth Swain "As they are life". It almost clutched to my heart and cried for the grief of Ruth Swain ... Not only that I couldn't resist at that time so somehow I clicked on the website of the Author and expressed my sentiments and luckily he replied. Today almost 2 years later when I was browsing my mail box I found these enchanting words again.

Yes this book is very close to me. In fact it will always be under best 5 books of my all time list. I still keep this one at my desk at my office and read some of the section almost million times.

Once my flatmate scolded me for purchasing so many books (I had around 300 plus something at that time not I lost the count but it must be over 1500 + books now).

And I said "I will read all of them Before Dying"... I was quite shocked when Ruth Swain in the book said same sentences in History of the Rain. More than anything it gaped mouth of my flatmate.

“We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling.”
? Niall Williams, History of the Rain.

Tom Lee says

It's a little depressing to see so many Goodreads reviews lauding the grace of this book's writing. It's kind of bad writing! In truth, it uses a pretty formulaic trick to evoke resonance and meaning: overwrought run-on sentences interspersed with smirking, percussive declarations. Pleading, plaintive, frankly embarrassing jumbles of words followed up with overconfident Joss Whedonisms. Read the damn thing again and you'll see. The offense is not absolved by our narrator repeatedly acknowledging her tendency toward purple prose early in the novel.

The book describes several generations of the Swain family, culminating in the narrator, who is chronicling her history while facing a long-brewing medical crisis. Poignant events occur during this history, but there is no particular plot or tension. Everyone is either a stalwart, a moony dreamer, or an impossibly quirky Irish small-town personality.

And the fucking Irish! So many words are spent noting the idiosyncrasies of the Irish character. I have begun to suspect that the Irish character is best characterized by its refusal to shut up about itself. Honestly, it felt a bit like a preview of one of those romantic comedies set in some small town hours from Dublin that I never care to watch.

So, look: the writing is less sophisticated than it pretends, but it's not graceless, per se. The plot is less interesting than it imagines, but it's not boring, per se. It's difficult to call this a bad book. It's just that there's so much artifice present, so many words designed to convince us it's a certain type of book, with a certain associated value. It's flatly not that book, and it doesn't deserve the associations that it helps itself to.

It also suffers considerably from its insistence on name-checking other books. This is both pretentious and self-indulgent. Please, no more literary books that bend over backward to pat their audiences on the back for the act of reading by elevating it to some quasi-mystical nonsense. (A partial pardon is extended to Carlos Ruiz Zafon because he usually manages to kill a bunch of characters gruesomely in between rhapsodizing about typefaces or whatever.)

Anyway! I expect this novel to be optioned into a mildly successful film starring whoever the contemporary equivalent of Andie MacDowell is. But I really wish the Booker judges would stop falling for this stuff.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I contemplated leaving this book unfinished, but decided to stick it out. I can't say I'm glad I did, as the whole experience left me feeling a bit ambivalent.

That surprises me because on paper I should like this book quite a bit - the story of a sick/dying girl reconnecting with her dead father through his library. But the story meanders quite a bit, and the author (or we can say narrator) Really Likes To Emphasize Ideas With Extra Capital Letters. This is something that is one of my top pet peeves of all time, right up there with people who try to take my rights away and people who can't follow through. I Really Hate It, and that made it Impossible To Connect with This Book.

(However I am writing down this quotation to use in my storytelling class):

"We tell stories. We tell stories to pass the time, to leave the world for a while, or go more deeply into it. We tell stories to heal the pain of living."

And this one's just for me:

"I didn't want to be a writer, I wanted to be a reader, which is more rare. But one thing led to another."

Julie Christine says

A novel of beauty and grace, showing again that Niall Williams is more than a writer, he is a composer who elicits music from the magical combination of letters we know as words.

Young Ruth Swain has returned home from university to convalesce in her attic bedroom, where the rain of Co. Clare pours ceaselessly on the two windows above her head, and three thousand, nine hundred and fifty eight volumes of classic prose and poetry surround her in teetering stacks. Her father is gone and Ruth seeks him, his history, and his truth, in the vast library he left behind. Her clear, funny, and poignant voice guides us through misty decades of Swain and MacCarroll family lore to illuminate how her father, Virgil, and her mother, Mary, came to farm the worst fourteen acres of land in Ireland.

The reminders of present-day Ireland—references to the Crash, the internet, Marty in the Morning on RTE's Lyric FM—jolted me out of the dreamlike meanderings in a timeless world, casting a surreal glow over this rain-sodden ode to Ireland, literature, and love. But the anachronisms make the story more bewitching; Williams shows us that even in this hyper-connected world, it is possible to escape. And the greatest escape is found in the pages of a book.

This is a book to savor, slowly and delicately. It pokes gentle, meta, self-mocking fun at the conventions of novel structure. If you are a reader who expects tidy packages of chronological storytelling, plot points, and story arcs, give this a try. You might be surprised what beauty can be woven outside the confines of the Fiction 101 blogosphere. And read with a notebook by your side, because you'll want to make note of each volume Ruth references in her vast library—it's a primer on Western literature's greatest works of poetry and prose. Tissues would be good, too. I reckon you won't make it through this with dry eyes.

Tied up in my delight with *History of the Rain* is my love for Ireland, particularly the west. Williams, as he always does, captures this incomparable spirit, the particular state of longing that I feel when I am in Ireland, or just thinking about being there:

We're a race of elsewhere people. That's what makes us the best saints and the best poets and the best musicians and the world's worst bankers. ...It's in the eyes. The idea of a better home. Some of us have it worse than others. My father had it running in the rivers of him.

Let this river of words take you away. But be forewarned: you won't want to return.

Jenny's says

Brilliant! Exquisite! Delightful! Pure Poetry! The best thing I've read so far this year!!!!

"He had no intention of writing. He loved reading, that was all. And he read books that he thought so far beyond anything he himself could dream of achieving that any thought of writing instantly evaporated into the certainty of failure. " -Niall Williams

I don't often covet the gift of writing either. Mostly I'm content just to be a reader of books as well, though reading this one made me wish I was a better writer just to sing it's praises!

Within these pages I found Ruth. Ruth's family name is Swain, and the Swain family is central to this story. A young woman of Ireland, slowly dying in her attic bedroom, in her big ruff handmade bed surrounded by three thousand nine hundred and fifty eight books that belonged to her father.

Above her is a skylight in this attic room. And above the skylight falls the rain. The rain, like a river flows across the skylight. The rain, the river, the salmon are metaphor. We travel the past, and present. The realities and the dreams. Family, friends, stories, laughter, heartbreak and love, carry us through the rain. We travel with Ruth as she makes sense of it all. As she sets out to discover and tell her father's story, and her own.

"I am plain Ruth Swain. See me, nineteen, narrow face, MacCarroll eyes, thin lips, dull hazelnut hair, gleamy Swain skin, pale untannable oddment, bony, book-lover, reader of so many nineteenth-century novels before the age of fifteen that I became exactly too clever by half, sufferer of Smart Girl Syndrome, possessor of opinions and good marks..... the poet's daughter."

"....Bedbound, here, attic room beneath the rain, in the margin, where the narrator should be, between this world and the next. This is my father's story. I am writing it to find him. But to get to where you're going you have to first go backwards. That's directions in Ireland, it's also T. S. Eliot."

Part of the magic in this story is the way Niall Williams weaves so many other books, and book knowledge through out. Read the following:

"We are Swains. I read an essay once where the critic complained there was a distance from reality in Dickens's characters' names. He didn't know Dickens couldn't sleep. That he walked the graveyards at night. He didn't know Moses Pickwick was a coach-owner in Bath, or the church register at Chatham lists the Sowerberry family, undertakers, or that one Oliver Twiste was born in Salford, and a Mr Dorrett was confined in the Marshalsea prison when Dickens senior was there. I know, weird that I know that. But if you lie in bed all day with nothing but books you won't be Class One Normal yourself, and anyway Swains don't do Normal...."

"My actual great-grandfather I never met..... Out of the mists of my night-time unsleeping I sometimes see him, the Reverend. He too cannot sleep and walks away from a shadow church at marching pace, striking out past a graveyard where the headstones tilt like giant teeth and the stars are bared. He cannot get where he is going. His burden is an intense restlessness that will not let him lie down, and so while his lamb-wife Agnes sleeps on the very edge of their bed the Reverend walks the night. He walks twenty miles without pause. From him escapes a low murmuring hum that may be prayers. Hands behind his back, he is like a man with Business Elsewhere, and none of those he passes, lost souls....dare delay him.....What his business is, where he goes to meet it and how exactly it is transacted are all enfolded in the mystery of ancestors. He can only be followed so far. Above the tree I sometimes throw a fistful of stars, hang a crescent moon, but for my moon and stars the Reverend does not pause; he paces on into the dark.... Just a brief shiver of great-

grandfather".

THE SENTENCES!!! Beautiful sentences! There are layers, metaphors as deep as the water, traveling through the book.

The Swain family philosophy is another center of the story.

"What the Reverend bequeaths to our story is the Swain Philosophy of impossible standard. In the year eighteen hundred and ninety-five he leaves it to his son at the christening, dipping the boy into the large cold name Abraham, and stepping back from the wailing, jutting the jaw. He wants his son to aspire. He wants him to outreach the ordinary and be a proof to God of the excellence of His Creation. That is how I think of it. The basis of the Philosophy of Impossible Standard is that no matter how hard you try you can't ever be good enough. The Standard raises as you do. You have to keep polishing your soul ahead of Entering the Presence. Something like that. And Grandfather Abraham began polishing straight away".

Ruth is not ready to die. She has something to learn first. Also she has things to share and leave behind. The longing to leave behind part of yourself or some precious truth learned through life is very powerful. This book is powerful. Niall captures something extraordinary and passes it to us!

Ancestor's, and genealogy are very powerful too. I have spent 30 years researching my family, my roots, their lives, photographs their stories. I'm sure this is another part of my connection and love for this book.

For readers, finding the right book at the right time, is also very powerful. It can alter the way we see our world, how we understand other's, how we give and receive comfort, forgiveness, knowledge, and love. For some of us it is so powerful we spend our lives reading and searching to better understand ourselves, our lives, our world And to find the Ultimate beauties and truths within it.

The search then, for me, is to find that glorious read when someone expresses what is inexpressible to me. It's a thing deep inside that vibrates and rings. It's joy, in my heart! I give over to the words, to the story. Now I'm connected. Now it's my story too. It's revelatory. To read it is to reveal a part of myself. What I could never put to words or share, a great writer surely has, and in a perfect way. The connection is exquisite! Other's express this phenomenon better than I.

It's these writer's gifts that keep me reading, and searching for more of these experiences.

Hopefully you will add this one to your list of reading. I've purposely been obtuse about much of the book. When you read it you'll appreciate the discovery yourself. I hope you'll find it as inspiring, funny, heartbreaking, breathtaking, and brilliantly rewarding to read as I did.

I will wonder if anyone else finds themselves disappearing into the pages. Will you find yourself sitting next to Ruth, reading with her out of the great books of her father? Did you lie down next to her with your arms behind your head and watch the rain fall, and the river run? Will the story envelop you the way it did me?

This book is as vibrant as the sun! It's rich and warm. I am keeping it close, the way I keep all good friends.

Cheri says

"We tell stories. We tell stories to pass the time, to leave the world for a while, or go more deeply into it. We tell stories to heal the pain of living."

In prose that sings the songs of falling rain, of ancestors, of family hovering in that place "in between" this life and the next, of the beauty of the land that is Ireland, of the salmon that swim the Shannon, and of poetry, surrounded by her father's thousands of books inside, the beauty of words on every page.

"We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling. That's how it seems to me, being alive for a little while, the teller and the told."

And so Ruth tells her story, the story of how she and her twin brother Ainey came to be blessed to live in this house filled with nearly 4,000 books, and the stories that follow their arrival, and the stories of those whose feet no longer trod this earthly soil.

"I am plain Ruth Swain, bedbound, here, attic room beneath the rain, in the margin, where the narrator should be, between this world and the next."

There is an other-worldliness to this story, to the rhythm of the language, you feel and hear it all as you are reading, the waves lapping, the birds, the rain... always the rain, as though tears from heaven falling all around Ruth and her family, feeling her pain.

"The library that grew in our house contained all my father's idiosyncrasies, contained the man he was at thirty-five, and at forty, at forty-five. He did not edit himself. He did not look back at the books of ten years ago and pluck out the ones whose taste was no longer his."

The relationship of this father and his only daughter is a primary focus, which felt so natural and true to me, a combination of a man who shares of himself not only through his library of books, his love for the written word, but also in bits and pieces of his time, as life and dreams occupy the remainder.

"There's a book inside you. There's a library inside me."

And now, there's a new book inside me, firmly planted in my heart by this enchanted story. One to cherish forever.

Recommended

Chrissie says

This book is d-e-p-r-e-s-s-i-n-g! Must it be SO depressing? It doesn't help that the end tries to close with a hopeful note.

The book is about death and illness and how some people demand so much of themselves that they are doomed to fail. It is also about the importance of stories, our stories. There lies the wisp of hope embedded in the book.

There are some beautiful lines, lines that perceptively reveal human relationships and some of descriptive beauty. I did feel the drumming of the rain on the skylight above Ruth's bed.

The book is written for bibliophiles....maybe. I love books, and I have read a large number of the many referred to, but still this book was not for me. The central character, Ruth, is a bedridden girl of 19. She has decided to read all her father's books, the point being to discover who her father really was. A person's books do say who you are, don't they? She refers to these books by their number in her father's library. Yep, they are all numbered, and they are in the thousands. Poetry and classics. Mythology and history. Dickens and Edith Wharton and Faulkner. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy too, of course. I objected to how she refers to characters/events in these famous books as quick explanations for events and characters in her story. (The book we are reading is Ruth's story.) But you can't do that. The situations are not the same; the details are not the same, and it is the details that make a story. It all becomes superficial and cursory. For me this was a disservice to the original literature. In addition, the numerous references to the books' titles, date and city of publication made the writing disjointed.

I didn't feel engaged in the lives of her father, her mother, her grandparents or great grandparents. All are quickly covered. There is too much in too few pages. Her relationship with her twin brother, yes, there the story came alive. Only here did I feel the love that bound these two.

There is humor. Maybe half of it made me laugh.

The setting is Clare, Ireland, after the bust, but the stories of her ancestors go back to the First World War.

The narration of the audiobook by Jennifer McGrath was lovely. Her Irish dialect is beautiful, lilting.
