



## GIRL

# INTERVIEW WITH EDNA O'BRIEN

**What made you want to write the violent story of Maryam, a victim of Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram?**

**Edna O'Brien:** It started with a short article I read in 2014. It briefly mentioned a young woman walking through the Sambisa Forest with an infant, in the middle of the mountainous Gwoza region in northeastern Nigeria, known as a hiding place for terrorist group Boko Haram. The article described both mother and child as starving and unable to remember where they were or even their names, wandering about in a daze. I knew right then that I had to tell that story, because it found a deep echo within me. During the writing process, you sometimes find yourself mysteriously opening up to things you didn't know. I let the images come to me, I lived through every moment of violence as I wrote it. The stoning scene is but one example: from the power of the stones being thrown to the excitement of the men and to the pride of the woman before she is disfigured. This experience of violence, I didn't learn about it in a book, it was something I carried deep within me. That's the whole mystery of writing, which can often be a laborious process, but can also sometimes open your eyes to unexpected revelations. *Down by the River*, which I wrote in 1998, already opened with an act of great cruelty, the rape of a young girl by her father. Though I haven't personally experienced the ordeals my heroines go through, I am not unfamiliar with violence against women. A writer only needs to catch a glimpse of violence—or of beauty—to absorb it and use it to recreate a deeply unsettling story. I don't write about violence in an exploitative way, I want it to be raw and fierce and with, almost ironically, a form of poetry. Feminists have often accused me of writing exclusively about women as victims, to which I say that my heroines aren't just victims but women who fight through and manage to overcome their painful past. And that there are different ways of fighting. Which is why the protagonist of *Girl* experiences at the end a true and intense sensation of calm and hope.

**You've also been asked why you, as an Irish writer, decided to write the story of a young Nigerian girl.**

I wrote the story of this young Nigerian girl because I love the Greeks, Greek tragedies. In this story, I try to capture this primal and primitive emotion anyone can feel when going through a crisis such as the one experienced by the Boko Haram girls. I made several trips to Nigeria to meet dozens of young women who'd managed to escape the terrorists. Some of them were friends, others were sisters, or mothers. I also met with people working in associations that aim to help the victims of kidnappings, with doctors and therapists who specialise in trauma, and with villagers. I ended up with a lot of material, a very large canvas, enough to paint many portraits, but it seemed essential to me to tell this story through a single protagonist, so that she could be believable and authentic. French tragedian Jean Racine was himself inspired by Greek myths; those tragic destinies touch us all, in a similar way. It's not geography that matters, but what we imagine when we hear those stories, and the empathy they create. I open *Girl* with a quote by Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*, who says "*Thy wounds in part will I bind up with bandages.*" Although a book cannot heal wounds, it can at least suggest the possibility of healing. I want to insist that *Girl* remains first and foremost a work of fiction. My writing process is long, with many drafts and moments of revising and rewriting. Writing a book is a little like a long and mad recitation in your own head, you're talking to yourself from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep, sometimes even while you sleep. To write this book, I had to get rid of all my usual trappings, of my country Ireland, of its geography and of my memory, of my usual team and companions, of my loves. It turned the writing process into an obstacle course, as if I'd never written a book before. Two books were my constant companions in this journey: every day I read passages from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for its sensation of Africa, its darkness, and the feeling of infinity it conjures, as well as John Maxwell Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

**You've said of the main character's voice that it haunted you as you wrote the book.**

It's a complex process of merging, I can't say I wrote from the point of view of a single young Nigerian girl, but rather from that of all those young girls, mixing their feelings and voices to mine to give them life. It's the inexplicable feeling of identification I experienced for the tragic fate of those girls that allowed me to write this book. When I met them in the flesh, they were uncertain, their stories were short and laconic, sometimes incomplete. I had to reach their imagination, the world of their dreams, that's where you have to invent things as a writer. Fiction allowed me to reach the limits of endurance and resistance, that's where the power of poetry resides. In her diary, Maryam writes "*I am asking God to please give me no more dreams. Make me blank. Empty me of all that was.*" Dreams have a huge presence in our lives, we spend 6 to 8 hours dreaming every night, and sometimes during the day, too. They are often more inspiring and creative than the conversations we have during the day. I learnt to love dreams. Most of the victims of Boko Haram either forgot or suppressed theirs, so I had to imagine and dream them myself. Early in the book, Maryam dreams about a school report about the history of trees she wrote as a child, and this chapter allows the reader to understand the character's affinity for books, to the point that they can imagine her as the author of her own story. Her description of the magical dimension of trees and of their extraordinary capacity for resilience is very poetic. This druidic and prophetic aspect of trees is something I'd felt as a child in Ireland, and the trees I saw on my trips to Nigeria really impressed me. They're scattered throughout the landscape, almost isolated, as if they were characters in their own stories.

Interview conducted by Marie Richeux for France Culture

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