

READER'S GUIDE



Oonagh by Mary Tilberg

Cormorant Books Inc.

INTRODUCING *Oonagh*

In 1833, eighteen-year-old Oonagh Corcoran immigrates with her sister to Upper Canada from southern Ireland to start a life far from the depravity and injustice faced in her once prosperous homeland. She believes she has entered paradise in the deep folds of cool green forest off the vast inland sea of Lake Ontario, however, she finds that the New World harbours its own horrible injustices when she meets Chauncey Taylor, a fugitive slave from Virginia.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Dreams

The three main characters subsist on dreams. The voyage that Oonagh and her sister take to Canada is based on the dream of finding a new, prosperous life. Chauncey shares the same dream, of a life away from violence and persecution, and of bringing his family to him and living as a truly free man. Daniel, on the other hand, does not dream of new lives, but of the fruition of current ones, occupied as he is by the idea of bringing Oonagh and Chauncey together.

Prejudice

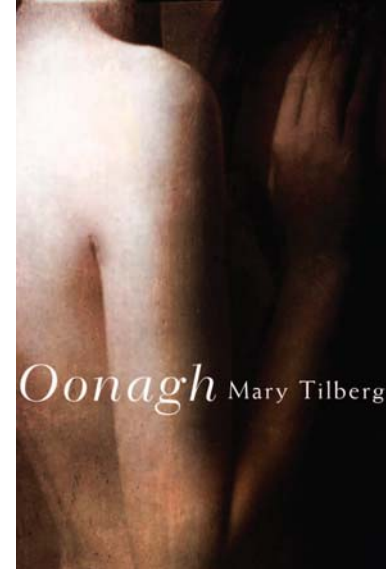
While Chauncey's life as a slave and his treatment by some of the townsfolk in Canada are the most obvious examples of prejudice in the novel, injustice is also a major theme in Oonagh's life. For instance: at the beginning, Oonagh relates the story of how her brother Johnny was executed for resisting the persecution of his fellow Irish. Additionally, Oonagh herself remains defensive about expectations placed on her and her role in the community as an unwed woman. In each instance, the characters must endure and overcome hatred and bias for things they cannot control.

Nature

Nature plays the role of protector and nurturer for Oonagh and Chauncey. Both have an indelible connection to the natural world around them and use the forests surrounding their town as their place to safely meet and be together. Individually they each use it as a place to be alone and enjoy peaceful contemplation. Chauncey uses the protection of trees and rivers to move quietly through the south and eventually north to Canada. And when Chauncey decides to move away from bustling Cobourg for safety, it is also for the deeper cover of the forests inland.

Family

For Oonagh and Chauncey, family is the tie that binds. Oonagh is able to go to her family for understanding and acceptance when she decides to marry Chauncey. For Chauncey, his family becomes his goal and motivation as he dreams of buying their freedom and ensuring their safety. Conversely, the people in the novel who do not value family are shown as spiteful and violent, such as Chauncey's former owner, who denies fathering Chauncey's brothers and sisters.



Q&A WITH MARY TILBERG

1. What inspired you to write *Oonagh*? Can you outline some of the details in the novel that are based on fact?

The novel is actually based on an anecdote in Susanna Moodie's book, *Roughing it in the Bush*. In a chapter entitled "The Charivari," a neighbour tells Susannah about the tradition of charivaris in the area and how this wedding night frolic sometimes has bad consequences. One of the anecdotes is about a "runaway nigger from the States," Tom Smith, who married a "not bad-looking Irishwoman." For "his presumption and her folly," the young men of the area decided to punish them both. The charivari got out of hand and Tom Smith was dragged out of his house and beaten to death. Susanna's neighbour relates a number of other anecdotes of violence but it's this story that stayed with me. I wondered who the black man and the Irish woman were who would have defied the prejudices of the community. But in researching the archives for any actual facts relating to Moodie's story, I found nothing in the local contemporary papers or records. After all, "Tom Smith" is a common name and he was a fugitive slave. The Irishwoman was unnamed. Were records even kept of such people at that time? Moodie does say that the sons of "several respectable families" had been involved and that the matter was hushed up.

In my research, I found an ad in the form of a charming little verse in the 1831 *Cobourg Star and Newcastle General Advertiser*, in which a Chauncey Taylor was advertising his new barbering business in Cobourg. The ad concludes by stating that "CT" is also talented in cleaning clothes, something Moodie notes that Tom Smith did in addition to his barbering. This verse and the Chauncey Taylor it described absolutely resonated in me. I realized then that I would have to invent the story of the fugitive slave and the Irish girl to do them justice. Finding "Chauncey Taylor" helped me to begin.

The details of daily living in that era, the emigration from Galway (yes, there really was a ship named *Elizabeth*), the way of life in Upper Canada, all were based on details I gleaned from numerous accounts. But the story of Oonagh and her family, and her relationship with Chauncey, and Chauncey himself are fiction. While the character of Chauncey is fiction, the details of what he and his family experienced are based on historical records of slave life. I read through many accounts that are available (listed in my bibliography) as I wished to be as accurate as possible.

2. With all of the research you did in creating the novel, did the characters develop over time through the research, or did you know who they would be beforehand?

It was only through the writing and research that I began to know the characters. I had the germ of the couple from the Moodie story, but I wanted to know who they were, what drew them together. I visited Ireland and spent time in Connemara, and there in that powerfully evocative landscape, Oonagh's character had her start. The more I researched into Irish history, the stronger her voice became in me. I had no idea at the onset how strong-minded she would be. But I began to imagine how her early experiences could have shaped her thinking and attitudes that allowed her later to connect with Chauncey.

Chauncey's character also evolved through the research and the writing. Moodie's "Tom Smith" was a "quiet, good-natured fellow, and so civil and obliging, that he soon got a good business" and he persuaded the white girl to marry him. My task then was to cut through the mystery created through this perspective and find the human. When I discovered the "Chauncey Taylor" ad in the 1831 Cobourg newspaper, I realized I'd found the fugitive



ABOUT MARY

Mary Tilberg grew up in Morocco and Liberia before moving to Toronto with her family as a teenager. She has a BEd and an Honours BA from York University in Creative Writing. Her poetry and short fiction are regularly published in Canadian literary journals and her first collection of poetry, *The Moon Knows No Boundary*, was published by Guernica Editions in 2004. She now lives on the coast of British Columbia.

slave character. My research indicated that it was quite often very bright, skilled, and determined individuals who dared to escape slavery, an escape that was often a matter of life or death. The more slave narratives I read, the more Chauncey emerged in my mind as a young man of wit, determination, fine intellect, and compassion. Although literacy was deliberately withheld from slaves, many managed to learn to read, and many of those who did learn could no longer tolerate being held in chains. The first thing many ex-slaves wanted to do in their new freedom was learn to read and write.

3. What sort of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this book? Was there a learning curve in writing your first novel compared to writing poetry and short fiction?

The pleasure in writing a novel as compared to poetry or short fiction is like that of taking a long, leisurely journey through fascinating and ever-changing landscapes instead of a short and intense visit to a particular vista. I learned how to pace the story, creating rest stops and lookout points, and, not to belabour the metaphor, difficult climbs and swift descents, or vice versa.

Oonagh is actually the second novel I've written. The first remains to be re-written. In the process of writing the first novel, I managed to use up much of the autobiographical material that often emerges in a first novel. When the idea for *Oonagh* came to me, I was delighted to be working on something quite apart from my personal history. Nevertheless, when I was working on *Oonagh* initially, I was living in Northumberland County, Ontario, on our sheep farm close to the very area of Susanna Moodie's accounts. Much of the setting of that area found its way into the novel.

4. Oonagh is independent, headstrong, and confident, obviously a woman who is living generations before her time. How is she able to contend with living in a world where everyone tries to have a say in how she should be living?

I imagined Oonagh as someone whose spirit and intelligence refused to be compromised, a woman engaged in a time of great ferment and social change that was the 1800s. Until she meets Chauncey, she never has a chance to fully explore the ideas that she has that frighten her. She knows she is quite different from her sister Mairi. At the time when Oonagh is writing the book, she has already spent years working in the Underground Railroad; she's a woman who has encountered the most progressive ideas of the time: abolitionism and women's suffrage. Frederick Douglass was popular with progressive women in America as well as in England because he also stood for women's suffrage and made this position quite clear in his speeches.

Oonagh learns early that her ideas can bring rebuke and to keep her ideas to herself. On the voyage, for the sake of peace, she has to obey her brother-in-law as head of the household. But in her new life, because she increasingly refuses to compromise herself, she begins to look ahead to a life without marriage. Perhaps she can make it on her own. When she meets Chauncey (an outsider like herself) and begins to share ideas with him, she gains the confidence to express her thoughts.

5. The scenes set in Ireland with sloping, rocky fields dropping into the sea are visually very different from those set in the dark, protected forests of Upper Canada. Can you describe how this change in scenery changed Oonagh and the rest of her family?

Oonagh moves from a landscape in Ireland that is open to the sky with very little tree cover, but which is essentially closed to her and her family. They own little and the rocky land often fails them, life being precarious. So much around them is enclosed in tiny fields and most of it belongs to a landlord who really doesn't care about their well-being. On the other hand, it is home, it is beautiful and familiar, every stone wall and small house is known, every plant. When they first encounter the dark forests as their ship makes its way up the St. Lawrence, they can't help feeling apprehensive. But quite soon they discover that the newly turned soil can grow abundant food, and they realize the dream of actually owning land. The work in the forests of Upper Canada is very difficult, the weather much more extreme than anything they've experienced in Ireland, and often people find they need to work together to ensure survival. In this new environment, their sense of themselves changes. They become masters of their own destiny to a much greater extent. Here in the forests of Upper Canada, their hard

work can result in a measure of well-being and the real promise of future prosperity, regardless of “social class.” Indeed, it is those who labour and can solve the gritty problems of survival who thrive.

6. Out of all of the characters in the book, who has changed you the most?

In the process of researching the novel, I came across accounts of such heroism, compassion, and high principles, all in determined opposition to the law of the land, the fist of the state. It was perhaps in developing Chauncey’s story that I was most struck, because the issues still resonate today. The greatest heroes of American history were men and women who dared to oppose the very laws passed by Congress, people who spent their whole lives working underground to free slaves who were risking torture and death to make that break for freedom. What was astonishing for me was to realize that many of these people committed their entire lives without any real reason to believe that the end of slavery was imminent. There are stories of slaves themselves who remained in bondage so that they could continue their underground work freeing others, every day risking torture and death. Their amazing stories deserve much greater prominence in the annals of American history.

I think this sort of commitment in the face of terrible persecution and the threat to life and liberty made the greatest impression upon me. So, in answer to your question, perhaps it is no one character in the book, but the many characters I met in the research itself, that have a lasting effect on me. In developing Oonagh’s character, I was impressed again and again with the history of women’s living conditions in the past and today. So many fearless women worked hard (and continue to do so) to create the conditions that we too often take for granted in our own country.

7. Essentially, this is a story about Chauncey, narrated and collected through the eyes of Oonagh. Would you have been able to approach the novel from the viewpoint of Chauncey as the narrator of his own story?

Although I did use Oonagh to tell the story, I hoped that my first-person narrator would be read as quite reliable so that Chauncey’s story emerges in his own words in the many conversations she quotes. I wanted a very personal voice, a first-person account of this tragedy and injustice. I could have written the story from Chauncey’s point of view, but effectively it would have had to be in third person and a limited omniscient narrator, unless I wished him to be speaking from beyond the grave. Chauncey died brutally, and the story comes down to this: a terrible injustice based on racial hatred in the country where such a thing wasn’t supposed to happen. After all, it was Canada where the fugitives sought freedom from slavery. I decided almost immediately to tell the story from the point of view of the woman who was widowed, who had loved Chauncey. How did this experience affect her, change her life? I wanted her story to be a “correction” of the historical record, which can often be too sanitized and glossed over, smug and self-righteous in its revisions. The truth is that yes, Canada was a place of freedom as compared to the United States, but black fugitives still had enormous challenges and racism was (and is) a terrible barrier to overcome. That they did overcome much and thrived for the most part is a testament to the human spirit.

8. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

I hope *Oonagh* creates interest in readers to explore further the history of the slavery era, the consequences of which we are still experiencing. I would hope that I have illustrated here what I think is true, that love is more powerful than hate. Although it is hate that kills Chauncey, love for him changes Oonagh into a woman who realizes that she can act in the world, as her future activity in the abolitionist movement implies (one of the reasons for her writing her account of Chauncey). In this way love defeats hate. We have a great deal of hate fuelling the war machines in the world today and sometimes things can look very hopeless and depressing. It is useful, then, to look into history. Not even a hundred and fifty years ago, in the America where men had been declared “created equal,” a huge part of the population were subjugated horribly, cruelly treated, and often murdered, all sanctioned by that very State. Ordinary men and women, most often motivated by their sense of justice and fuelled by love and compassion, dared to lay their lives on the line to oppose that injustice. I hope readers may go on from reading *Oonagh* to search out for themselves these wonderful people in history. I believe they continue to be models for our time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel is set both along the cliffs of Ireland, and in the forests off of Lake Ontario. What kind of symbols in the novel relate to these two disparate settings?
2. How do the other women treat Oonagh? What is the cause of such treatment?
3. How does Chauncey's past come to affect Daniel? Does he understand the implications of slavery at such a young age?
4. How must Oonagh contend with identity throughout the novel?
5. How do you think Oonagh's life would have been different if she had remained in Ireland? Would she have made the same choices?
6. Mary Tilberg wrote the scenes about Chauncey's beatings from actual researched accounts. How did you react to these scenes? What was the purpose of their graphic nature?
7. What is the significance of Chauncey becoming a barber and washer once he is free?
8. What parallels are there between Oonagh's brother Johnny and Chauncey?
9. What does Oonagh's stone signify?
10. Were you surprised by the ending of the book?