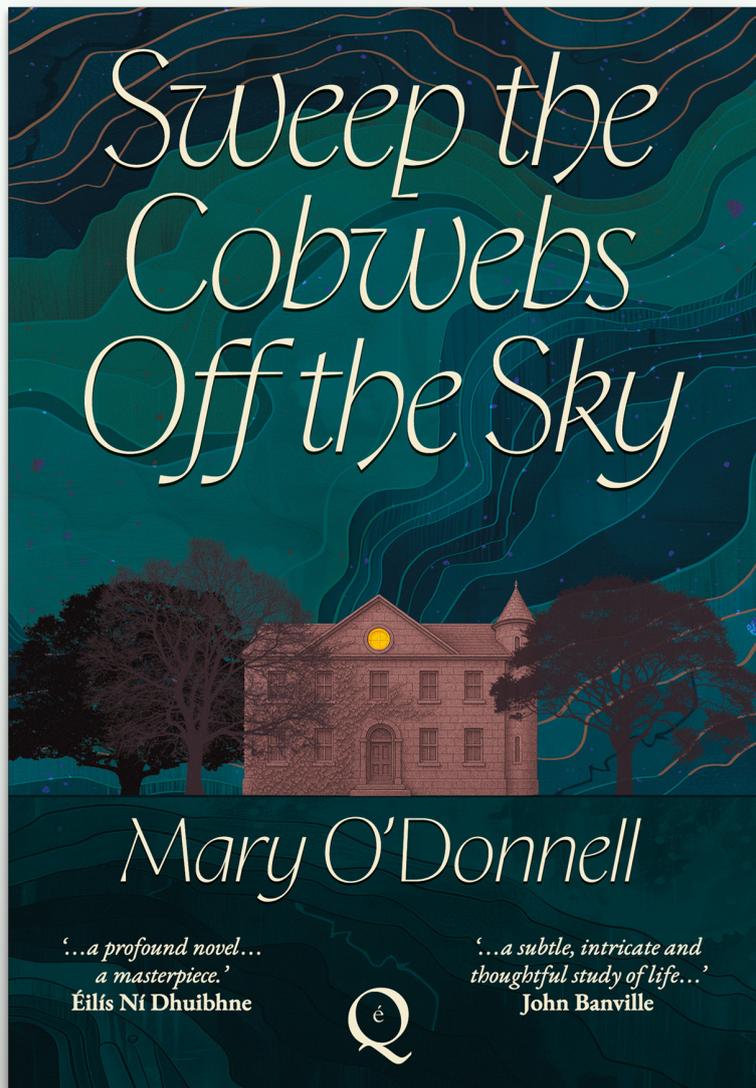


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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A
SWEEP THE COBWEBS OFF THE SKY
BY MARY O'DONNELL



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Please see detailed below some questions and answers provided by the author in relation to their book.

1. How would you summarise the book and your motivations for writing it?

At first, this was to be a novel with comic observations about an older woman facing age head on. But quickly I realised it was going to become something else as feelings of many kinds began to emerge, among them frustration, memory, anger, love. On a functional level, my protagonist Frankie is a healthy person, but inside, she's broken. Her soul is dented with the fears and menace of her early years, when her mother Elma abused her younger and adopted sister Tess. Physical abuse and neglect of many kinds which Frankie now recalls. A victim of survivor's guilt, her memories have mushroomed just when she needs to look after her ninety-three year old dying and eccentric mother Elma.

Frankie loves Elma. Sometimes she hates Elma. Frankie rarely cries and has rarely allowed herself to. As a child, nobody noticed the things she did to draw attention to herself. She smashes a greenhouse and nobody comments. She sprays weedkiller on her mother's flowers and gets away with it. She grows up, and somewhere in between, constructs a life, a career, a marriage. Now a successful writer, just as Lockdown begins and the country shuts for Covid, she is caring for the person she saw abusing her sister Tess, in a house that seethes with memories she doesn't always welcome.

Once silent at school, mistaken as 'slow' on account of her occasional muteness, Frankie harbours many secrets.

Unresolved problems from the past come in the form of a poltergeist in Frankie's childhood bedroom. It kicks up, but she's not frightened of it. How could she be when it represents her own inner disturbance, when she has always lived with it?

In between, she has kept a marriage going to her loving German husband, she has an ambivalent relationship with her melodramatic sister Tess—who arrives home suddenly from New York—and she is mentoring a young and attractive male author who also arrives at the house during this time.

Until now, Frankie has never quite recognised that sometimes, adults live on without ever getting a clear picture of what really affected them in childhood. She is modern and self-aware, not afraid of her sometimes transgressive sexuality. Gradually though, Frankie breaks silence in the closing days of her mother's life.

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2. What is the significance of the title?

The title refers to a folksong or nursery rhyme common in Ireland and England and sung to the air of 'Lillibulero' which Elma, the old mother in this story occasionally sings. The idea of sweeping cobwebs off the sky struck me as the kind of thing that the three female characters in the book needed to do in order to unscramble their messy emotions. It is also quite poetic, and I didn't want to pin the novel down to a title which referred to either mothers or daughters in any way, because this novel is also about the mysteriousness and enduring nature of love.

3. What are the main themes of the book? What do these themes mean to you as the author?

The themes that interested me most were the role of memory, as in what we remember and how we remember; the question of ageing also seems pretty important. There is such a lot written about younger women who care for their children, but very little that relates to the women (and sometimes men) who care for quite aged parents when they themselves are getting old.

4. Did you decide on a specific style of writing for this book, and if so, why? What are you trying to convey through your style?

Absolutely! Because I'm really interested in style and voice I wanted a taut, spare style in which the sentences didn't 'sink' softly or tranquillise the reader. There is nothing easy about my subject (a child who witnesses violence towards a sibling; that grown child's ambivalence now as she cares for her dying mother) and so the voice underpinning the writing needs to ring true to the reader. Some things are outside all of our experience, yet when the style the voice are right a reader can say to themselves that yes, this could have happened, or this is happening to someone right now.

5. Was the structure and layout of the book an important consideration? If so, why?

Early on, I took a decision that the narrative would move between present and past as a method of revealing events. It begins in the past, but it decisively ends in the present. By setting it during Lockdown I felt that this period was ideal for a particularly fraught family situation to grind on to its inevitable conclusion.

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Covid and Lockdown provided me with a social and emotional capsule into which to place these characters, set them in motion, and see what happens.

6. What would you highlight as some of the pivotal scenes of the book, what is their importance to the narrative and to you on a personal level?

Pivotal for me is a scene on page 57 in which Frankie sees her mother staggering towards the bathroom on her walking-aid, 'naked but for her sanitary ware. God help her, I think despite all, God help my darling mother. It no longer startles me to see her like this, with white, dishevelled hair, the unneeded mask dangling off one ear, a twisted back with many collapsed vertebrae, breasts long and loose with purplish nipples.' This brief scene was difficult to write, because on some level it reminded me of my own mother in old age. Pages 59 and 60 outline a severe beating which the child Tess receives from Elma when the three holiday in Dun Laoghaire in 1964. It shows a mother completely out of control for reasons not clear to us, lost in her own misunderstood life perhaps, with two children at her mercy. This is pivotal to an understanding of how and why the grown-up Frankie remains at the age of 66 in a state of emotional distress.

7. How important was the time period or the setting to the story? What were you looking to evoke through this?

The time period tracks the life of a mid-20th century woman who becomes a writer herself and her struggle to hold her nerve as she faces the turbulent past of the 1960s and 70s, as she is challenged continually by the presence of both her mother and her sister. By setting the story during Covid, I was seeking to 'contain' the action within a socially tense and dramatic period. These characters are surviving in a different kind of emotional bubble along with the Covid one most of us went through. Another aspect of the time period which interests me is my protagonist Frankie's sense that she is now 'invisible', something which some contemporary women feel as they age. In Frankie's case, this is something she doesn't mind, she finds it liberating.

8. Which location in the book would you most like to visit and why?

The book is set in my home county of Monaghan, and I retain a great affection for the drumlin hills and the absolute wooded beauty there. It's an in-between, liminal world—part of Ulster, yet in the Republic—so I grew up looking in both

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directions, and affected by the Troubles in the North even though we lived in the south. When Frankie's sister Tess recalls going bareback horse-riding in the Bragan mountains, she is recalling a bogland high wilderness which connotes both freedom and the concealment of bodies by the IRA. By using this place within the novel, I hope I built on the atmosphere of mystery and strange beauty that surrounds Kilnavarn House.

9. What emotions are you hoping to evoke in the reader?

My hope is that readers might feel compassion for Frankie. Although a survivor, she's an awkward enough person behind her bright and educated ways. Compassion for Elma also—portrayed at times as extremely difficult, challenging, and negative—but also damaged during her childhood. Perhaps some readers might recognise the sense of wrongness being handed down by virtue of previous generations.

10. As an author you are very close to your characters. Reflecting back on the book, which of your characters would you like to meet in real life and why?

I might enjoy meeting Christoph, Frankie's German husband, in real life. He is reasonable, logical, rational, he stands in contrast to many of the less rational episodes and off-kilter conversations in the narrative. Also, he is solid, dependable, he has a well-stocked mind and he loves Frankie. I'd also like to see Frankie being far less tolerant of Tess, and finally, I would wish to meet Elma in the earlier part of her life and go out and have fun with her!

11. Other relevant questions: are there archetypes in this novel?

Depending on your brand of psychology, the novel hangs on certain archetypal characters. Frankie's unexpressed 'shadow' side has dominated her life at the expense of realising what she has to confront through memory. Her husband Christoph is an archetypal saviour figure who caught her when she was young and vulnerable. Her sister is an archetypal narcissist who lives in a state of arrested emotional development, and Elma is also narcissistic, but creative (as we see from her cooking in the opening scene). In another way, she can be viewed as an undeveloped feminist.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mary O'Donnell has been publishing novels, short stories and poetry since 1990 and her work is regarded as key in expanding the horizons of Ireland's traditionally male-dominated literary world. 'The Light Makers', Mary's debut best-selling novel, received the Sunday Tribune's Best New Irish Novel 1992 Award and her other published novels include 'The Elysium Testament' and 'Where They Lie'. Her most recent and highly praised collection of short stories, 'Walking Ghosts' was published in 2025.

Mary has taught Creative Writing at the universities of Galway, Maynooth, University College Dublin and University College Cork, as well as for the University of São Paulo. She has also held several prominent international writing residencies including at the Princess Grace Irish Library Monaco, the Irish College in Paris, and the Irish College in Leuven and she is a member of Ireland's affiliation of artists, Aosdána.