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Clara Callan

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Q: Was there any especially challenging aspect of writing letters and diary entries from the perspective of a woman?

A: The especially challenging aspect of any novel for me is establishing the main character. Once I have that character's "voice", I feel the book begins to live. I had to imagine what it was like to be a woman like Clara in the 1930s. But that's what novelists do—imagine what it's like to be someone else. The letters and diary entries seemed a natural way to tell her story.

Q: Clara Callan is set in the 1930s. What kind of research did you do to make this era so vivid?

A: I read a great deal about the period, and I remember things my parents had said about the 1930s. It's always been a special interest of mine and the period has always seemed to me to be a pivotal decade in the last century.

Q: In this novel, characters seem concerned with their own sexual morality. Is this a function of the era or the nature of small towns?

A: Yes, this is a function of the nature of small towns where everyone is concerned (and were more concerned 70 years ago) with personal reputation. Our tolerance for more liberal sexual attitudes nowadays is very new in North American life. It probably began around the end of the 1960s.

Q: Why did you decide to introduce Clara to the Europe of the 1930s? What were some of the challenges for you of conjuring up that period?

A: The 1930s was probably the most politically interesting decade of the 20th century. Ideologies—communism, socialism, fascism, liberal democracy—they were all clashing and much of this was going on in Europe. Clara is an intelligent woman, and I wanted her to see a part of all that as it was unfolding in Italy where Mussolini had taken control.

Q: Does Clara Callan share any qualities with any of the other characters you have written about?

A: Yes, I suppose she does. Clara is thoughtful, sensitive and intelligent; a bit of an outsider. Other characters in other books both male and female are somewhat like her.

Q: Were there any special challenges you experienced in creating two main characters who were sisters?

A: Not as sisters, but as women. The problem was to create convincing female characters, especially in a novel which explores their intimate lives. The fact that they were sisters almost made it easier, but only after I saw them both clearly in my mind.

Q: How would you describe the significance of Clara's loss of faith in this book? Why did you decide to treat this subject in Clara Callan?

A: Her loss of faith is crucial; once she no longer believes in God (a huge admission for the time in which she lived) she felt cut off from others, and was troubled by the narrowness of her life.

Q: What is your next project?

A: It's bad luck to talk about what you are currently working on.