

## Nora

Harper Perennial

By Nuala O'Connor

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### Introduction

**Acclaimed Irish novelist Nuala O'Connor's bold reimagining of the life of James Joyce's wife, muse, and the model for Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* is a "lively and loving paean to the indomitable Nora Barnacle" (Edna O'Brien).**

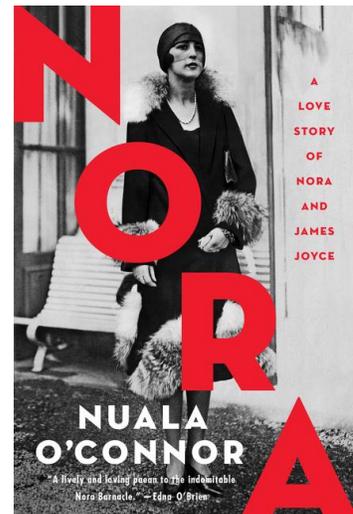
Dublin, 1904. Nora Joseph Barnacle is a twenty-year-old from Galway who left school at twelve, is a chambermaid at Finn's Hotel, and has all but given up on a happy ending. But on June 16—Bloomsday—her life is changed when she meets James Joyce, a fateful encounter that turns into a lifelong love. Despite his hesitation to marry, Nora follows him in pursuit of a life beyond Ireland, and they surround themselves with a buoyant group of friends that grows to include Samuel Beckett, Peggy Guggenheim, and Sylvia Beach.

But as their life unfolds, Nora finds herself in conflict between their intense desire for each other and the constant anxiety of living in poverty throughout Europe. She desperately wants literary success for Jim, believing in his singular gift and knowing that he thrives on being the toast of the town, and it eventually provides her with a security long lacking in her life and his work. So even when Jim writes, drinks, and gambles his way to literary acclaim, Nora provides unflinching support and inspiration, but at a cost to her own happiness and that of their children.

With gorgeous and emotionally resonant prose, *Nora* is a heartfelt portrayal of love, ambition, and the quiet power of an ordinary woman who was, in fact, extraordinary.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Nora Barnacle and James Joyce were from different social backgrounds. Joyce's family were the fallen genteel, keen on schooling, for boys at least; Nora's people were working class and education was not a priority. Despite their differences, their relationship worked. Why do you think that was? What attracted them to each other? What united them?
2. Nora was fostered to her grandmother at a young age, a common practice in twentieth century Ireland. Do you think this may have affected her family relationships and subsequent ones too? In what ways did Nora bond with those closest to her?
3. "I can muddle through with most people and, I think, life's easier on those who can," Nora says. Jim, on the other hand, can be odd around people. What does friendship mean to



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Nora? Is she a good friend? A competent host? Why does the Joyce's friend-group change so often, even when they live for long periods in one place?

4. Nora and Jim, judging by their letters when apart, had a frank, open sexual relationship. Discuss whether you feel this might have been the norm for the era, or if the Joyces were unusual. Who do you feel was driving this openness – Nora or Jim? In what ways did they use intimacy as a way to bond? What did Jim want from the other women he fantasized about?
5. Why do you think Jim won't marry Nora? Is it anything to do with his status as a lapsed Catholic? Why does Nora want to marry? Do you think Nora is happy with the circumstances of her marriage, when it finally happens, after twenty-seven years with Jim?
6. The Joyces' financial situation is, often, precarious. Nora says Jim "sees money only as something to be got rid of." Are the Joyces irresponsible around money? What do you make of Jim's money-making schemes – the cinema in Dublin? The idea to import Irish tweed? Why do you think the Joyces spend so freely? What is Giorgio's relationship with money in his adult life?
7. Joyce is supported by women, both emotionally and financially. Nora, Miss Weaver, and Sylvia Beach all play their part. Does Joyce appreciate their help? Does he acknowledge it? What is Joyce's attitude toward women?
8. Nora warns Jim: "If you want to write, you must make the time to write. Boozing and carousing will get you nowhere." Why do you think James Joyce drinks to excess? What damage does it do to his relationships? Is he an alcoholic? Does his devotion to alcohol hinder his writing life? Does Nora aid his drinking in any way?
9. Nora enjoys opera and certain kinds of books, but Jim says that she doesn't "care a rambling damn for art." Is that true? Is Jim snobbish when it comes to literature and art? Is that his right, considering the types of books he writes himself?
10. Giorgio and Lucia both end up as lost souls in many ways – Lucia in an asylum and Giorgio in a bad marriage and then career-less. Lucia was diagnosed with schizophrenia, but do you think any of her other problems were a result of Nora and Jim's style of parenting? What about Giorgio? Do you think the Joyce children's uprooted childhood may have affected them? Were other factors at play?
11. What does Nora want from life? Does she get what she wants and needs? Is James Joyce a help or a hindrance to Nora's hopes and dreams? What rewards in life does Nora enjoy after Jim's death?
12. Home is important to Nora. In what ways is this obvious in the novel? Is Nora adaptable to each new circumstance and, if so, why and how? Does Nora ever find the home she yearns for? Do you think she had a happy life with James Joyce?