



The Charwoman's Daughter

James Stephens

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"The Charwoman's Daughter is the strange wistful story of sixteen-year-old Mary, the only child of her fiercely protective, widowed mother.... Mary and her mother live in a one-room tenement flat that is home to the rituals of their bitter love. By day her mother cleans the houses of the Dublin rich, while Mary makes observations as she walks through the city. The imaginative richness of her insight makes the city come alive as a place that is both strange and wonderful, remote yet friendly. It is this sense of discovery and the bittersweet richness it brings with it that makes this such an unusual but compelling Dublin novel."

--Dr. Patricia McManus, 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die

The Charwoman's Daughter Details

Date : Published September 1st 1998 by North Books (first published 1912)

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Author : James Stephens

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From Reader Review *The Charwoman's Daughter* for online ebook

Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Sixteen-year-old Mary Makebelieve resides in the slums of Dublin with her mother, who works as a charwoman cleaning the homes of the wealthy. All her life, Mary has lived in a small room with a cracked ceiling, mildew-spotted walls, and one grime-covered window. She and her mother dream of a better life, often imagining for themselves alternate lives filled with riches and splendor. The only way Mary can improve her circumstances in real life is to secure a good marriage, but how one goes about finding a husband is something beyond Mary's comprehension.

[Mary] did not yet understand the basic necessity that drives the male to the female. Sex was not yet to her physiological distinction, it was only a differentiation of clothing, a matter of whiskers or no whiskers: but she had begun to take a new and peculiar interest in men.

Stephens paints a stark portrait of a life lived in squalor, often contrasting the soot-covered city and cramped confines of the Makebelieves' small apartment with resplendent descriptions that showcase the wonder and openness of nature.

In these passages one can walk for a long time without meeting a person, or lie on the grass in the shadow of a tree and watch the sunlight beating down on the green fields and shimmering between the trees. There is a deep silence to be found here, very strange and beautiful to one fresh from the city, and it is strange also to look about in the broad sunshine and see no person at all, and no movement, saving the roll and folding of the grass, the slow swinging of the branches of the trees, or the noiseless flight of the bee, a butterfly, or a bird.

Mary's complicated encounters with men lend themselves to revelatory moments about relationships, moments that the author capitalizes on by injecting the narrative with words of wisdom – many of which have a timeless quality (despite the book having been first published in 1912).

Love and hate are equally magnetic and compelling, and each, being supernormal, drags us willingly or woefully in its wake, until at last our blind persistency is either routed or appeased, and we advance our lauds or gnash our teeth as the occasion bids us.

In her quest to secure an advantageous marriage, Mary's convictions are tested. A choice befalls her – one that could change her future forever – and, resolute in her beliefs, she makes an unorthodox decision, one that speaks volumes about the life she dares to envision for herself.

With eloquent prose and universal insights, *The Charwoman's Daughter* brings to life two characters who rely on imaginative language and daydreaming to endure the reality of their difficult circumstances.

Karen Hogan says

Seemed like a children's book. Read first several pages.

Guille says

Ha pasado por mis manos sin pena ni gloria: no pasa el corte. Y no digo que la ternura, el humor o la crítica social de una época no tengan su puntito. Pero igual que no digo esto, sí digo que ese puntito no es muy grande y que es incapaz de tapar otros defectos entre los que no es el menor ese final tan deslavazado, tan avercomodemoniosmequitoestanoveladeencima.

Megan Baxter says

Sometimes, my lists just throw the strangest books in my lap. Mostly, if I'm pulling from one of the many editions of 1001 Books to Read Before You Die, I get why they're on the list, whether or not I like them. (I'm around 20% done with that one.) This book, though, I am a little baffled by. It's not very long, and it feels like there's not a lot too it. As a look at poverty, it's no Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. As a slice of life in Dublin, it's no Ulysses. As a novel about the plight of women, it's...well, it's just a bit strange.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Mariana Santos says

Loved this book... Beautifully written, full of tenderness and quite funny at times. One immediately empathizes with the character of Mary Makebelieve, it was an absolute joy to read...

I also read "The Crock of gold" and loved it, but this one I think I liked even more. Really recommend it!

Travelling Sunny says

Mary Makebelieve is a sheltered young lady - sixteen years old.

Mary Makebelieve is very poor and lives in Dublin with her widowed mother.

Mary Makebelieve likes to listen to her mother's stories of what they would do if they were rich.

Mary Makebelieve does not keep secrets from her mother.

Mary Makebelieve meets a man. A grown man. A policeman.

Mary Makebelieve keeps secrets from her mother.

Monty Milne says

What a delight this turned out to be. The charwoman, up to her elbows in soap suds, is strangely compelling, and her fresh and innocent daughter all the more so. The creepy, lugubrious policeman with his mournful whiskers who courts her is horrible but fascinating. And just when you think you are being set up for an awful tragedy, you get a really enjoyable and life-affirming ending. This is a vanished Dublin brought vividly to life: I'd rather read this than anything by James Joyce.

Deanne says

At last a book on the 1001 list with a happy ending, worth a look for that alone. Not just that but this short little book has a small cast of characters, all essential to the plot and not just window dressing. Wasn't a book that needed a great deal of minute study, just a couple of hours or so of my time.

Kristel says

James Stephens, an Irish poet and novelist was reared in the slums of Dublin. He writes about the claustrophobia of the city, the small rooms the crowds and the loneliness but also of the liberation of the open streets. This is a story that is almost fairy tale like in quality. Mrs. Makebelieve (the charwoman and Mary's mother) has to work as a Charwoman but she embraces her freedom and strongly believes that her "ship will sail in" and she will be rich someday. Mary is her only daughter and she is very protective. There is some very good things about this mother daughter relationship. She holds on to her daughter and maybe keeps her young but she also prepares her for her future marriage. Mary is nearing 16 or turns 16 during the story and she is just becoming aware of her body changing into a woman's and she is also becoming aware of men. Stephen's picture of Dublin (often described as a man's town) is presented to the reader as both domestic and urban. This city comes alive in Mary's eyes as she wanders through the city during the day while her mother is working. The author is known for his retelling of Irish myths and fairy tales. This felt like a retelling of Cinderella who worked like a charwoman for her stepmother only Mrs Makebelieve is quite proud and will be no one's slave. A couple of quotes from the story that I liked and describe the Dublin and the second one demonstrates the lyrical quality of the words;

"She wanted to walk in the solitude which can only be found in crowded places."

"Young girls dance by, each a giggle incarnate."

Book Wormy says

161) The Charwoman's Daughter

★★★

This is a short story set in the slums and tenements of Dublin detailing the relationship between Mary Makebelieve and her mother the Charwoman of the title.

Makebelieve is an appropriate name for the family as they use made up stories to escape the drudgery of real life.

While her mother spends her days cleaning for the rich of Dublin, Mary wanders the city observing other

people and finding beauty in the gardens with laid out flower beds and families of ducks.

In the evening the exchange details of their days and indulge in stories of a better future.

While the setting for the story is at times bleak, the relationships shown are uplifting, among the poor you only have to ask and help is given, there is a real spirit of community shown.

While I enjoyed the story I am not entirely sure what to make of the ending for me it was in conflict with the rest of the novel.

Paul Bryant says

One of the most peculiar novels I have read, half curdled cutesy sentiment, half meticulous exposure of the way poor people lived in Dublin in the 1910s and half a bizarre series of pompous semidemiphilosophical ramblings about life and love and men and women and cats and dogs and little pink sugar mice. Three halves, you see.

The two main characters are Mary Makebelieve and Mrs Makebelieve - believe it! - and none of the other characters have names, except one. That's enough to set your teeth on edge straight off the bat. But we don't just read a novel to find out the characters' names. No.

James Stephens does have an arresting way with words at times. Discussing why Mrs Makebelieve has had quite so many different charwoman jobs he explains:

On [her employers] attempting (as they always termed it) to put her in her proper place, she would discuss their appearance and morals with such power that they at once dismissed her from their employment and incited their husbands to assault her.

So 16 year old sweet lovely Mary lives in a crummy single room in a tenement with her mother. Mary is what we here in Britain call a NEET –not in education, employment, or training. (The government here is at war with NEETS.) Whilst her dear old ma skivvies away, Mary walks the streets (literally, not metaphorically). And comes into the purview of a big policeman. Who strikes up an acquaintance. He is not named, naturally, but his size is expounded upon at length. Mary cannot get over his size :

Her vocabulary could not furnish her with the qualifying word, or rather epithet – for his bigness. Horrible was suggested and retained, but her instinct clamoured that there was a fat, oozy word somewhere which would have brought comfort to her brains and her hands and feet.

Yeah, you think that's a bit odd? Try this. On the problems of a woman trying to find work :

The number of women who are prepared to make ten million shirts for a penny is already far in excess of the demand, and so, except by a severe undercutting, such as a contract to make twenty million shirts for a halfpenny, work of this description is very difficult to obtain.

Almost Dickensian. Mr Stephens spends a lot of time on the delineation of Mrs Makebelieve's moral universe. Here she expatiates upon the what is expected of a man within his own household:

A great many people believed, and she herself believed, that it was not desirable a man or boy should conform too rigidly to household rules. She had observed that the comfort of a home was lost to many men if they were expected to take their boots off when they came into the house, or to hang their hats up in a special place. The women of a household, being so constantly indoors, find it easy and businesslike to obey the small rules which comprise household legislation... A man, she held, bowed to quite sufficient discipline during his working hours, and his home should be free from every vexatious restraint and wherein he might enjoy as wide a liberty as was good for him.

Our author also imbues his big policeman with disturbing attitudes. This is he after Mary has given him the elbow :

He would gladly have beaten her into submission, for what right has a slip of a girl to withstand the advances of a man and a policemen? That is a crooked spirit demanding to be straightened with a truncheon : but as we cannot decently beat a girl until she is married to us, he had to relinquish that dear idea.

Well, I think that this is all to be taken as satire of course, but that kind of stuff, plus the vaporising waffling ethereal rambling never-use-one-word-where-a-bucketful-will-do meditations on life and the universe which wrap the non-story around like jungle vines so it's hard to make out that a story is actually being told make this only intermittently weirdly entertaining, like watching a man juggle six porcupines illuminated only by flashes of lightning.

Two final points – a tip of the hat to the *1001 Books* guide, where I found this title. It shows they like to unearth oddities as well as bashing us over the head with Ian bloody McEwan and JM bloody Coetzee.

And – a hip of the hop to General Books LLC of Memphis, Tenn who specialise in reprinting old stuff like this. They use OCR software and they make an elegant apology right there on page one about the typos you are bound to find. (They weren't especially annoying). The format they end up with is more like a pamphlet than a book but hey, we will cock no snook.

Rating : a slightly bewildered what-just-happened 2.5 stars

Celine says

I read this in school and remember loving it. Re-read it this week as research for my current project (which is set twenty or so years before this was written) I was nervous that it wouldn't live up to my warm memories, and so was delighted to find that I still love it!

This book is really a long, gentle love song to Dublin and its working poor, written by James Stephens who grew up in the tenements of the late 1800's, was orphaned at a young age and educated as a clerk. His use of language is beautiful (as you might tell from the quotes) and his love of people evident. There is a real tenderness to his work, yet a great deal of honesty and an acute social bite.

A lovely, gentle, yet acute book. I love this writer's style.

I'm very interested to track down his short story 'hunger' which follows the same themes as 'Charwoman' but sounds darker indeed.

Perry Whitford says

Mary Makebelieve is a sixteen year old girl who lives with her poor but hardworking mother in a single room infested with rats and cockroaches, spending her days daydreaming around the Dublin streets and parks.

The only hope they have of a better life is itself a dream, that her mother's brother Patrick will return from America and lavish riches on them. Unless that happens Mary, approaching womanhood, will continue to learn that *'there is really only one grave and debasing vice in the world, and that is poverty.'*

This is a somewhat unusual little book from poet and folklorist Stephens. Grubbily realist in places, threatening to veer into fairy tale at others, the author occasionally supplements his little heroine's dreams with some large, philosophical ones of his own, not entirely effectively either.

A quick read and a bit of an oddity but of some interest if, like me, you have visited Dublin a few times and have always enjoyed reading about the city from a contemporary of Stephen's, James Joyce.

Max Nemtsov says

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Dree says

An unusual little book. A story of Dublin, it starts off being almost twee. I'm not 100% clear why this book is in the 1001 Books--but I have not read a lot of Irish lit, and certainly not of urban Irish lit. Per the text in 1001 Books, this is an unusual book about Dublin--it is female, it is poor, it is claustrophobic.

Teen Mary Makebelieve (really) lives with her charwoman mother in one room in a Dublin boardinghouse. While her mother goes out to work every day, Mary wanders the city, observing. She makes their meals and cleans their room, but does her first paying job when her mother is very ill (and she takes her place). A story of the poor in Dublin, who window shop for entertainment and pawn what they own when they are broke. Neighbors can be trusted to help out in times of need. Perhaps, even dreams can come true--if you let them.

A very quick read.
