



1949: A Novel of the Irish Free State

Morgan Llywelyn

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Morgan Llywelyn's masterly epic, *The Irish Century*, continues in *1949*, a sequel to *1916* and *1921*.

The struggle of the Irish people for independence is one of the compelling historical dramas of the twentieth century. *1949* tells the story of Ursula Halloran, a fiercely independent young woman who comes of age in the 1920s. The tragedy of Irish civil war gives way in the 1920s to a repressive Catholic state led by Eamon De Valera. Married women cannot hold jobs, divorce is illegal, and the IRA has become a band of outlaws still devoted to and fighting for a Republic that never lived. The Great Depression stalks the world, and war is always on the horizon, whether in Northern Ireland, Spain, or elsewhere on the European continent.

Ursula works for the fledgling Irish radio service and then for the League of Nations, while her personal life is torn between two men: an Irish civil servant and an English pilot.

Defying Church and State, Ursula bears a child out of wedlock, though she must leave the country to do so, and nearly loses her life in the opening days of World War II. Eventually she returns to an Ireland that is steadfastly determined to remain neutral during the war.

1949 is the story of one strong woman who lives through the progress of Ireland from a broken land to the beginnings of a modern independent state.

The Irish Century Novels

1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion

1921: The Great Novel of the Irish Civil War

1949: A Novel of the Irish Free State

1972: A Novel of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution

1999: A Novel of the Celtic Tiger and the Search for Peace

1949: A Novel of the Irish Free State Details

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Data says

For some reason I have been putting this one off; it's been near to hand, and I just didn't pick it up to read. That was really a mistake. I forgot that I loved this book, even though it tells a WWII story (not my favorite era). It is the reality of Ireland leading up to, during and culminates with the official establishment of Republic of Ireland, told through the heart and eyes of Ursula Halloran. A primer on how to be a human in a Catholic world,

Paula Dembeck says

This is the third book in the Irish Century Series and I was pleased to see that this one did a better job of balancing the fiction in the context of history. The first book in the series "1916" belonged to Ned, the second "1921" to Henry Mooney and the third "1949" belongs to Ursula Halloran formerly called "Precious" or "Little Business".

Llywelyn brings us up to date, quickly reviewing where she left off in the last novel. The Civil War is now over and Eamon de Valera is now in charge of a repressive Catholic state. Divorce is illegal, women cannot hold jobs and the IRA continue to roam the country as outlaws, devoted to an independent republic and committed to protecting Catholics trapped in the Protestant North. There is much unfinished business and terrible violence as many men still need or want to fight and the lust for blood always seems to lie just beneath the surface.

Ursula has gone to Switzerland to attend school, a gift from Ella the wife of Henry Mooney. She stays for two years and is exposed to a completely different world. It opens her up to new ideas, questions her values and prejudices and teaches her how to conduct herself among polite society. Returning to Ireland with a new vision of the world, with international friends and more tolerant ideas, she is distressed to see that Ireland has not changed. There is still the grinding poverty, the diets based on cabbage, potatoes and bread and a troubling lack of sanitation. And she also returns to people with fixed ideas of good and evil, Catholic and Protestant, and Republic and Free State. Dublin remains much as she had left it, rowdy and idiosyncratic, a place where people lived and died impoverished and where tuberculosis, typhus and enteritis cast long shadows. There seem to be no long term plans, and although economic recovery is the goal, with bridges and roads blown up and never repaired, the country still looks desperately to Britain.

Eventually Ursula is able to get a job with the Irish radio service, but she is not considered for anything but a menial clerical position. All the other jobs are reserved for men. She considers herself a career woman, is not interested in dating or marriage and she even drinks the occasional Guinness in the pub. She remains a committed Nationalist, doing whatever she can to help the Republican cause.

There are two men in her life, one who adores her and who she considers a comfortable friend and the second, a dashing and handsome English pilot who captures her heart, but does not know about her past.

Meanwhile Ned continues to appear and disappear like a ghost. He was angry at Ursula's decision to go to school outside the country and does not answer her letters. He remains a bitter man whose health is failing. His sight is growing dim, his body is frail, he has constant headaches from his old wounds and his mental

health is fragile, yet he remains indifferent to death and continues to devote himself to a war that cannot be won. Ursula believes he will probably die somewhere in battle and perhaps that is the only proper end for a warrior. It seems he has just left her to her own devices and although this breaks her heart there is nothing she can do. He has never repaired his friendship with his best friend Henry Mooney, who has now left for America with Ella to build a new life for himself. Ned decides to leave for Spain to assist in the Spanish Civil War and there are long periods of time when Ursula does not know if he is alive or dead.

When Ursula becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she goes to Switzerland to work with the League of Nations and to deliver her baby. She loves being in the midst of all the exciting action generated by international affairs as the world ramps up for the war. And all the while, she is learning important lessons about leaders from the examples of Hitler and Mussolini. Hitler has quietly morphed from the legal German Chancellor of Germany to the legal German Dictator. The Gestapo encourages informers and any threat to the new order is dealt with quickly. Thousands are sent to concentration camps. Ursula now more clearly understands that there are no perfect leaders and no perfect parties. And everyone gets a look at the nightmarish vision of a totalitarian world when H.G. Wells publishes his novel, "A Brave New World".

As things heat up with war about to be declared in Europe, Ursula returns to the safety of Ireland, a country determined to remain neutral in the conflict. Shortly after her arrival she learns she has inherited the old farm which is now in terrible condition. But she works hard to bring it back to life, converting it to dairy cattle and horses. Meanwhile back in America, Henry and Ella suffer through the Crash and the Depression and although they have lost a lot of money, they are holding on.

Ned returns to the farm a changed man. His experience in Spain and several months spent in an English hospital have transformed him. He is no longer bitter nor does he hate everyone. He has come to realize that the fighting was becoming more important than the winning and that everything has been on a downward slide since the rebel's victory in 1921. He knows now that violence and fighting had just become a part of the culture. Deaths on both sides have continued to climb but nothing has really improved, the hatred, excised in blood has just grown deeper. He wonders what would happen to his comrades in the IRA if peace were declared, believing they would not know what to do with themselves. He also wonders why it has taken him so long to realize all this. And so he reconciles with both Ursula and Henry, focuses on his grandchild and tries to write about his experiences despite the fact he is now almost totally blind.

It is sad but also interesting to see how the passionate dreams of the early rebels in the 1916 Rising have had to be moderated. Leaders had to learn to play the game of politics, to make compromises and take what they could. Continued fighting only led to little progress and more death and destruction.

I am finding this series fascinating.

Llewellyn has tried to reconstruct the past for us by piecing together many different people's memories of what actually happened. There are fragments of hundreds of different lives woven into the fabric of the narrative and so these books provide the details lacking in most history books.

I enjoyed this installment of the series much more than the last one, and will move on to the next one which picks up the story from here. It is titled 1972 and covers the period up to Bloody Sunday and The Troubles. Llewellyn has even left us with an intriguing hint of who will be the character featured in the next book.

David Anderson says

Morgan Llywelyn's continuation of the Irish Century series, this time covering the years between partition and the declaration of the Republic of Ireland, when the 26-county Free State was still part of the British Dominion, years which included the rise of fascism in Europe and WWII. This time the focus is Ursula Halloran, the adopted daughter of Ned and herself an ardent Republican. A strong-willed young woman determined to make her own way in the world, she despises the conservative turn Irish govt. and culture takes under the influence of the Catholic Church, as married woman cannot hold jobs and divorce is illegal. It's sad to see what the Government of the day had become, compared to the dreams that Eamon de Valera shared with Padaric Pearse in the 1916 Rising. It was as if the inspirations, dreams, and idealism of the past had been deflated only to be replaced with reality of politics. The IRA still exists but its main focus is trying to defend Nationalists and Catholics stranded in Northern Ireland. Ned Halloran spends most of his time in this effort, only occasionally returning home, and finally goes off to Spain to fight in the International Brigades in their valiant but failing effort to defend the Spanish Republic. Meanwhile, Ursula manages to get with a job with the fledgling Irish broadcasting service, 2RN. But she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and rather than suffer the fate accorded to such women and their children in Ireland at that time (Magdalen Sisters home and their ilk), she uses her govt. contacts to get a job with the League of Nations and flees to a Europe on the verge of its greatest conflagration. Llywelyn's series is among the best historical fiction I've read. Once started, I can't put her books down as I can't wait to see what happens next to her characters as they navigate the currents of history. I'm looking forward to her novel covering the years leading up to Bloody Sunday and the Troubles, 1972: A Novel of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution.

Douglas Hayes says

I actually quite enjoyed this, the third book I've read in the series. She does a good job at developing the same character through the decades of the story/history. I believe that I am coming to a greater sense of the modern Irish conflict as a result of these novels, in combination with the other histories I'm reading. The benefit of a historical novel is that it provides what feels like an inside view of the events.

The only thing that I didn't really like about the book is that it only comes to 1949 in the last pages of the novel - and ends abruptly. The culmination of the story of Irish independence in 1949 was related as an afterthought, rather than the goal of the book.

On the whole - a good read.

Alma Ramos-McDermott says

With Ned off fighting for the Republic and Henry living in America, it is up to Ursula Halloran to take up the story of Ireland and her struggles for freedom in this newest edition to the Irish Century series. After two years at a Swiss finishing school, Ursula arrives back at the home of Louise Hamilton determined to get a job at a radio station and become more heavily involved in Ireland's quest to become a Republic. Read the rest of the review on my blog: <https://shouldireaditornot.wordpress....>

Sara says

Set against the backdrop of a world still reeling following WWI and headed toward another, 1949 is the third book in the Irish Century series. This time the story focuses on Ned Halloran's adopted daughter Ursula, who had once run messages for the Republicans through the streets of Dublin under fire during the Rebellion. Still a staunch Republican, Ursula longs for more and gets that chance when her father's one-time friend Henry Mooney and his wife Ella offer to send her to school in Switzerland. Despite her father's objections she goes and her eyes are opened to a whole new world. When she returns to Ireland, Ursula is a new person, though her passion for a free Ireland is still unquenched.

Like the first two novels in this series, 1916 and 1921, 1949 tells the history of Ireland as it struggles for freedom and a chance to join the rest of the nations on the world stage. Llywelyn deftly weaves fiction and history, setting characters of her own making right in amongst the real men and women who fought, and died, for something worth dying for. What I truly love about these books is the passion with which they are written. Llywelyn is clearly an expert on the history of modern Ireland, all of her books include comprehensive lists of all those who play a role in this story, fictional and historical, even if their name is only mentioned in passing. At the end of the book are a complete set of source notes and bibliography and whenever necessary, especially for Gaelic language words or phrases there are footnotes with a translation or explanation. The books are detailed and historically accurate, but as works of fiction she is able to tell the story through the eyes of someone who was there. These books are a great introduction to the troubles that have plagued Ireland over the past century or more. They do have a very strong pro-Fenian bent, but that notwithstanding they are an excellent way to educate oneself on a war that is still being fought in a deeply ravaged Ireland.

Tom Garland says

Loved 1916, sequel 1923 and the next book 1949. You'll bet I will read the last 2 books 1972 and 1999.

Make sure you read them in order. Nice mix of historical fiction and Irish history.

Superbly written.

Katrina says

This book has been the best so far of the series! It read a lot faster than the first two and I don't know if that's because it's more in a time frame that I'm more familiar with or because WWII is a passion of mine or what, but it did. In addition to learning about Irish history, I learned stuff about WWII that I didn't know which is really fascinating!

Karen says

Fascinating story & history of Ireland during WWII. Strong characters during difficult times

Jim says

Good historical piece

Scattered writing but the history was the primary focus anyway. I did not like how the subject changed with each paragraph. The author seems to have trouble with focusing on one thing at a time. The scattering of thoughts made it hard to read for me. I enjoyed the fiction as well as the facts but didn't enjoy the jittery nature of the writing. I would recommend the book with the understanding that it may not be a smooth reading experience.

Amanda says

A great continuation. I have learnt more about Irish history by reading this series than I have ever learnt before.

In this installment of the Irish Century series, we follow Ursula Halloran after the Irish Civil War and into the aftermath of WWII. Since this book spans so many years, the reader is inundated with history. I loved Llywelyn's ability to draw you into the action of the moment. I was taken with the time period. The setting was fascinating.

It was so sad to see what the Government of the day had become, compared to the dreams that de Valera shared with Padraig Pearse in the 1916 Rising. It was as if the inspirations, dreams, and idealism of the past had been deflated only to be replaced with politics, reality, and cowardice. It was unsettling. It is obvious, that when Governments are involved, one can not always follow their heart but instead must comply with what their mind is telling them is their best bet. However, I much prefer to be inspired. I respect someone that does what they truly believe to be right (unless it is hateful, discriminatory and violent. I am thinking more of Pearse here), no matter the political consequences. Yet still, they built themselves into a Republic and managed to achieve what had been fought for 33 years earlier. Those last pages with Ned gave me the chills. I was inspired by what the nation of Ireland had achieved.

I loved the idealism present in the 1916 novel. However, the history and international context present in 1949 was much more involved. Another worthwhile read. Ursula was very entertaining, although her two suitors in this novel really held no interest for me. I felt like both men wanted to change her, so that she would conform to the wife that they could admire. But that wasn't her, so I am happy with how it turned out in the end.

Ursula was a strong and independent woman in a time when this was almost impossible. I am glad that she did not conform to what the religion of the day was dictating. Faith can inspire and spread love and peace, but religion can foster violence and repression...how is that right? You started to see in this novel how religion can become distorted and manipulated by the few so that it infects the many. A faith that teaches love can not breed hate unless something was lost and turned around somewhere along the way. It was sad to see this beginning to happen in Ireland after the Civil War. It is unfortunate, but a lesson that one should learn from history. Tolerance is key.

...I like that Llywelyn's novel can make you think about what history has to teach us. I think that everyone who reads them can learn something from them.

On to the fourth book now :)

Gina says

I very much wish I had realized this was a part of a series before I started it. Not because the novel doesn't stand on its own but because then I would have known I would have more to look forward to.

Not only has Ms. Llywelyn created an excellent story; she has interwoven so much factual history into her tale that you get a lovely history lesson as you read. I learned a lot about the country of my great grandparents and I look forward to learning more in the other books.

Ursula is a fascinating character who has depth, courage, and a strong sense of self that makes her a great character for any woman to read about. I would absolutely recommend 1949.

J.S. Dunn says

Llywelyn's Century series is a departure from her usual fantasy novels. Having now read selectively in this series, have been pleasantly surprised. Thankfully this is not the usual sanitized version of the Rising and aftermath nor is it partisan.

Though most of the characters are a bit flat, the author throws in plot twists commensurate with what was happening in the new Republic and tells the wider story in a fairly evenhanded manner. All the novels read to date from 1921 forward throw in lots of factoids, usually without being tedious though some of the dialogue info-dump is tedious.

Overall, this series is a good intro to 20th century Irish politics for readers who have not themselves read primary source nonfiction, history, and the biographies and memoirs of those who were there as written by and about the likes of :

Kathleen Clarke, Countess Markievicz, Michael Collins, Ernie O'Malley, Dan Breen, and many others. If you like this series, the original material awaits your discovery.

Tom says

I read 1916, but could never find a copy of 1921, so I skipped right to this one. I was not at all impressed with 1916, but I liked the idea of the series so much I decided to stick with it. I think the writing and character development in this story are actually pretty shallow, but the historical aspect of it is so intriguing that I could not stop reading it. I really like the use of the League of Nations, especially, as I knew Ireland was really tied to that, but never really understood the reasoning until now. Based on this one, I will probably read the final installment, and may even go back to read 1921.

Laurie says

I enjoyed this delightful third book of the series told from a woman's point of view, using most of the main characters from the previous book, 1921. The main character, Ursula Halloran, is an extremely independent and plucky young woman who is caught up in the political events and issues of Ireland. This book covers a great deal of time and geography making it difficult for the author to cover the world events in depth, even at 400 pages. However, Morgan Llywelyn's writing is wonderful and her inclusion of the important historical facts and political figures within the story is truly appreciated. Once again I am looking forward to reading the next book in the series.
